



An MG publicity photo about 1938 of the big 2½-litre six-cylinder WA saloon—MG's largest car ever. The pretend golfer is George Tuck, MG'S publicity manager.

MG Saloons *...with particular reference to the Y Type*

by Dick Knudson

MG did sports cars right. If you did not believe that, then you would not be reading this magazine. Whatever the time, those gutsy two seaters from Abingdon were the right car at the right time. When the buying public wanted spartan, MG gave them a harder ride with more wind (and rain) in the face than all the rest of the competition put together. And later, when sporting motorists wanted more in the way of creature comforts, MG gave them full weather equipment right down to wind-up windows and heaters. Yes, MG built its reputation on sports cars made for enthusiasts. What, then, was a sports car company doing building saloons?

Rest assured that MG built their saloons with the sporting tradition upmost in their minds. To that sporting tradition was added a consciousness for luxury, comfort, and elegance that made the MG saloons very desirable cars.

All of the saloons manufactured prior to the 1950's were instantly identifiable as MGs; that is, they had that familiar square radiator which served as immediate recognition. Since these saloons were manufactured by MG, it should come as no surprise that they handled and performed well. Living up to the "Safety Fast" motto was not difficult for these cars. The surprise came, however, in the elegance and luxury departments: all of the saloons oozed space, grace, and pace.

Maybe I appreciate the attention to personal comfort in the MG saloons because I grew up with the Ford, Chevrolet and Plymouth sedans of the 1930s. These products of American assembly lines had neither elegance nor luxury: they provided cheap basic transportation. In their favor also was their rugged reliability; that, combined with a low price made America the world's leading automobile manufacturing nation.

As a person used to tinny bodies, cloth upholstery, and a minimum of dressy details, I was overwhelmed when I encountered my first MG saloon (one just couldn't use the word *sedan* for an MG, could one?), a Y Type. I just was not ready for it.

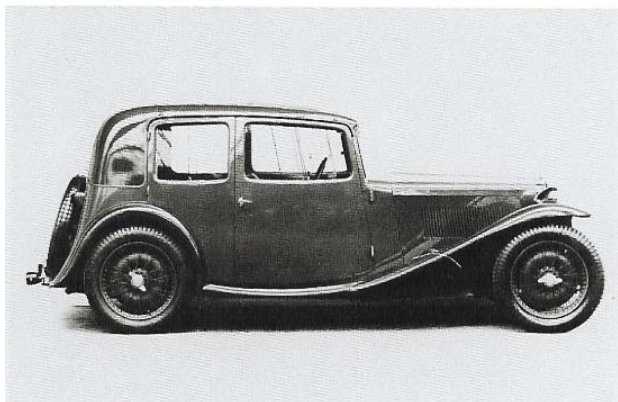
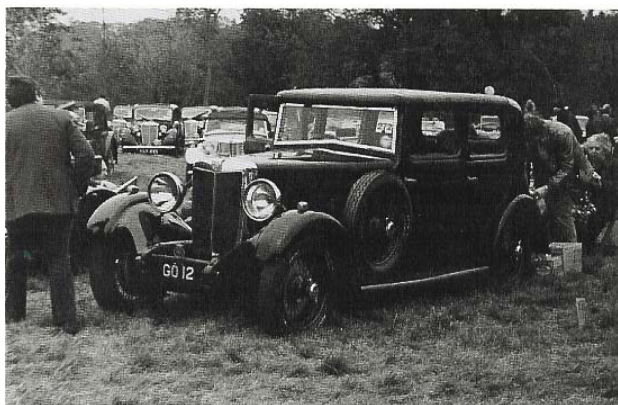
Leather & Wood Veneer Interior

First, was the leather interior. It looked beautiful — and expensive. When I opened the door, the smell of that Connolly hide hit me and I knew that this was a car to be appreciated. And the comfort of those seats, front or rear, was outstanding.

Second, was the use of wood in the interior. The dash and window frames were so tastefully done that the car became almost irresistible. Finish on the trim reminded me of fine furniture. The grain and texture complimented the leather in a way that showed the company appreciated its customers.

Long before automobile air conditioning, MG made sure their owners enjoyed a comfortable climate. In the winter, an adequate heater kept the chill off. Summer heat was combated with roll-down side windows, a sunroof, or an opening windscreen: any combination of these insured the proper amount of cooling.

To all this was added any number of pleasing details: rear window curtains, door pockets, hidden ashtrays, passenger assist pulls. The overall effect was that of the complete car. Driving ease, handling, and performance were strictly MG, so the combination with comfort details meant that the family could enjoy motoring.



The most successful pre-1930 MG saloon was the good looking 18/80. This is a 1931 model.

The impressive 2-litre SA from 1936 was a very big car with over 10 ft wheelbase.

The very pretty Pillarless 4-door saloon body on the 1932 K chassis, with its huge brake drums.



MG Saloons, pre-1930 to 1939

Almost from the beginning, MG offered closed cars. These were generally saloonettes and were covered in our previous article about Grand Touring Coupes. Of the pre-1930 saloons, the most successful would have to be the 18/80. The 18/80 was more pure MG than the others; as such, it was based upon an existing MG sports car. Even so, the 18/80 was more saloon than it was sports car.

It was not until 1932 and the K1 Pillarless Saloon that we find the sort of sporting saloon we generally associated with MG. The Pillarless Saloon was extremely handsome with flowing lines. Any enthusiast can appreciate the unique design which had the front and rear doors close on each other without the benefit of a center pillar. No doubt Ralph Nader would have raised some questions about the strength of the construction. Looks often deceive, and this was the case with the various versions of this handsome car. It just did not have the performance to match its looks. By 1934, the N Type had replaced the K Type, but MG was left with a large supply of Pillarless Saloon bodies. These leftovers were fitted with the N Type 1,271 cc engines, and the resultant KN had most acceptable performance.

Up to 1936, MG saloons had been based on an existing sports car. The SA marked an abrupt change in that policy. Cecil Kimber was the man responsible for the body design and you can judge for yourself if he was successful or not. The SA was a big car. The wheelbase exceeded ten feet. Yet, the graceful lines of the car gave it an almost delicate, rather than massive, appearance.

Fitting in with the post-1935 company decisions, the two litre (2,062-cc) engine featured pushrod operated valves instead of the fussier overhead cam. There was enough power for enjoyable motoring.

The SA proved to be popular. MG coined the advertising theme 'For Space ... For Grace. . . For Pace' about their big saloon long before Jaguar stole it for their own products. All of the traits I admire in the Y were present in the SA. It was an elegant motorcar in an age when there was ample competition.

The SA remained in production from late 1935 until late 1939; during that period, 2,738 were manufactured. That is a healthy production figure, especially when you consider that they also built 2,407 VA saloons and 369 WA saloons during the same period.

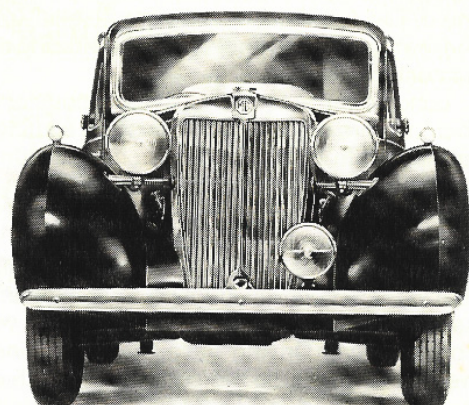
Introduced in the middle of 1937, the VA is easily mistaken for the larger SA. Overall size was not the only way it was smaller, as the engine only displaced 1,548 cc.



A pre-war shot of the prototype Y (note blocks under the car). It waited seven years for production.

When Abingdon started Y Type production after the war, all the finishers were women.

Coming down the line at Abingdon. Ys with TCs, circa 1947.



The smaller engine meant that performance did not measure up to that of the SA.

The largest car MG ever built was the WA. Like the VA, the WA did not differ all that much in looks from the SA. But under the bonnet, however, things were really different. The engine compartment was filled with a 2,561 cc unit that produced 95.5 bhp — almost a twenty-five percent increase over the SA. The coming of World War II shut down all car production at Abingdon and an era of big saloons ended.

The Post-War Saloons

After the war, the first cars off the line were the loveable TCs. Actually, the TC was an improved TB and the new car required little in the way of development. No saloon got into production until 1947 when the Y Type made its debut.

Interestingly enough, the prototype for the Y had been completed prior to the war. When it finally went into production, it was a six or seven-year-old design. The innovation on the Y Type was its use of independent front suspension. In addition, it utilized the four-cylinder XPAG engine from the TB.

The Y saloon continued through 1953 when it was replaced by the ZA (the British say “Zed”, not “Zee”). At this point, the MG saloons broke from Abingdon and they never were quite the same. Now, don’t think I’m an Abingdon-only purist. I’m not. In fact, I owned a very fine ZB. But truths are truths. The ZA was a Wolseley and not an MG. True, it had the badge, and the grille resembled a TF but it was a Wolseley.

Happily, a new engine gave the car some performance. Interior appointments were very nice, and the car did grow on people. But it was an abrupt change from the Y Type, and the general idea of a sporting saloon from Abingdon never recovered.

The ZA begot the ZB which offered some improvements over the original car. The Farina Magnette in two versions followed. This was a bitter pill for the enthusiasts to take, because this ashcan never deserved to be called an MG. The sport was put back into MG saloons with the 1100/1300 Mini derivatives. At least these econoboxes would handle like a sports car.

Now the octagon is on only one production car, a saloon. In the past, the MG saloon was secondary to the sports car; today, the MG Metro carries the badge by itself. From all reports, this new model is being warmly accepted in Europe. We shall have to wait to see one on this side of the Atlantic.



A typical MG period publicity shot of the Y Type, with the Brits optimistically catching a few rays of sun by the Thames.

The Y had carefully styled leather upholstery with wide pleating, side and centre arm rests, a pull up rear window blind, and veneer wood door cappings added to the elegance and comfort.

This photo shows the Y Type's elaborate use of burl wood veneer on the fascia, the octagonal instruments, adjustable steering wheel, and manual shift lever.





By 1953 the ZA, based on a Wolesley saloon, had taken over. That it was good-looking is seen from this photo in the courtyard of Abingdon's Crown & Thistle.

The ZBs duotone color scheme was not very successful, but it was the fashion in the fifties.

By the Sixties MG's saloons were based on the front-wheel-drive Issigonis-designed Morris cars from Cowley. This was the MG 1100.

There is no question that the MG saloon is an important part of the marque's history. And its nice to know the book is not completed yet.

Y Types In America

I doubt that Y Types were ever what we would call popular in America when they were new. Sports cars were being accepted by enthusiasts, but foreign sedans were not highly regarded - especially those in the non-luxury class.

Let's face it, in the early nineteen fifties, no foreign manufacturer had a strong dealer network. People buying sports cars expected to fuss with tuning but buyers of family sedans expected dependability. Foreign sedans just could not compete with domestic offerings in price dependability, nor in practicability for use on our open highways.

Y Types, then, were not big sellers here. Many of them were subsequently scrapped for T Type parts. Recently however, there has been a sharp increase in restored Y Types on the North American scene. Most of them belong to enthusiasts who have restored T Types and now want a family car within the MG family. The Y Type has proven to be ideal for this purpose.

Since few of the original Y Types exported to this country survived, people have had to go to England in search of a restorable example. Happily, Y Types seem to be realistically priced. Mechanical parts are virtually the same as TD and at least one company (N.T.G.) is providing many needed bits.

Although our feature is about MG saloons, we have emphasized the Y Type. It seems fitting, then, at least to comment on a Y saloon derivative, the Y Tourer. This was a two-door, four-seat open car with side screens rather than wind up windows. Originally intended to capture the hearts of American enthusiasts, it flopped and was with drawn from production after a mere 877 had been built. About half of these were actually exported to America and most suffered the same fate as their closed cousins. Today, like the saloon, the Y Tourer is sought after and some outstanding restorations are being done.

Since the Y Type is very much a TD under the skin, it is welcomed into full membership by The New England MGT Register (Drawer 220, Oneonta, New York 13820). The presence of these saloons and tourers adds a great deal to the Register's Gatherings.

**Originally printed in MG Magazine, Issue 11
Fall/Winter 1982/3.**