

Sporting CHOICE



Brian Cox compares two Nuffield luxury sports saloons from the 1950s that are rewarding to own and drive.

During the early 1950's when the major manufacturers were striving to fulfil the demand for their popular family cars, Nuffield (and later BMC) produced two upmarket models in relatively small numbers - the MG 1¼ litre sports saloon and the 1½ litre Riley RM.

Then, as now, both were highly regarded by their owners for their character, performance and handling.

The MG gives away 250cc in capacity, but at just over a ton is 5cwt lighter than the Riley, which has the edge when it comes to performance; however it loses out in the economy stakes.

The MG is slightly cheaper buy to, better equipped, more responsive and easier to restore. The Riley has sleeker styling, is roomier, more comfortable and built to a higher standard. So which would I choose? Well I already have an MG YB, but I would quite like a Riley! Now read on and make your choice.

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The MGYB



Although they are clothed in conservative pre-war style bodywork, the MG was technically advanced when introduced in 1947 as the YA model. The coil-sprung independent front



The MG power unit is easy to service. Average mileage between major rebuilds is 70,000.

suspension and rack and pinion steering layout had been designed by Issigonis before the war and was to have featured on the Series Morris Ten in 1939.

The Y-Type is extremely well equipped, with leather seats, a opening windscreen, sunroof, adjustable steering, built-in hydraulic jacking system and walnut veneered dashboard and door cappings. There is also a rear window blind to prevent dazzle from following drivers. A heater was one of the few optional extras. Power is provided by a single carburettor version of the 1250cc overhead valve XPAG engine used in the MG T-Type sports models, giving the car a top speed of about 70mph and a fuel consumption of around 30mpg.



The MG isn't so well instrumented as the Riley, but the walnut fascia adds a touch of class.

The suspension allows little roll, but the ride feels decidedly firm on by-roads. When pressed hard, oversteer sets in, but handling remains predictable. Incidentally, YB models (built from 1951-53) have 15in. wheels and a front anti-roll bar and are reckoned to handle better than preceding YAs (1947-51), which have 16in wheels and Panhard rods to stiffen their rear suspensions.

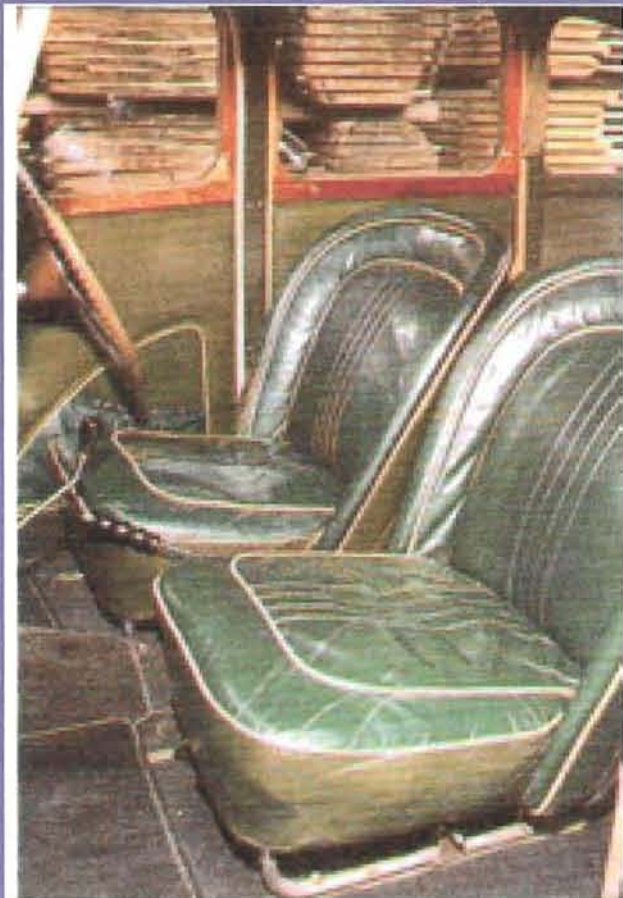


Built-in jacks makes wheel changing easy on the MG.

By the early 1950s, the MG was virtually alone in offering external styling regarded as typically British, as fashion had begun to dictate slab sides and faired-in headlamps.

The MG I tried belongs to Richard Dick who lives near Warwick. This 1953 YB model settles down to a 55-60mph cruising speed, thanks to a tough overhead valve engine, which seems to thrive on revs.

The rack and pinion steering is light and accurate and a compact turning circle of 33ft coupled with the car's overall length of 13ft 5in, makes manoeuvring and parking easy.



The small leather-faced bucket seats of the MG are firmly sprung and piped in a contrasting colour.

The Lockheed hydraulic drum brakes inspire confidence, but a heavy prod is needed for an emergency stop.



The MG's rear seats are comfortable and there is a pull-down centre armrest, but legroom is restricted.

A long gearlever sprouting from the transmission tunnel gives a pleasant change, but the synchromesh doesn't like to be hurried. The ratios are nicely spaced, third being good for 45 – 50 mph when in a hurry and second takes the car up to 25 – 30 mph and is low enough for starting off on the flat without abusing the clutch.



The MG has an opening windscreen and sunroof as standard.

The windscreen can be wound open to provide a cooling breeze on a hot summer's day if the sliding steel sunroof doesn't provide enough fresh air.

Leather faced seats with piping in a contrasting colour are fitted and the leather cloth covered door panels have useful pockets for oddments.

Larger items can be stowed in a lidded glove pocket on the fascia.

Rear seat passengers can pull down a centre armrest and there are elbow rests on the wheel arches.

However, legroom in the rear is barely adequate.

Walnut veneer door cappings and fascia add a touch of class and the instruments have octagonal dials. An electric clock is incorporated in the speedometer, and other instruments indicate speed, oil pressure, fuel level and charge rate. Surprisingly, there is not a temperature gauge for the unpressurised cooling system.



The MG's boot space is limited, but extra luggage can be strapped to the lid.

All the push-pull control switches look identical and as they are unmarked it takes a stranger some time to find the starter and choke. A knurled ring in the centre of the adjustable steering wheel operates the semaphore indicators on a time switch, but many owners have chosen to fit additional flashing indicators for added safety. The standard specification also includes a Smiths Jackall four-wheel jacking system. By operating a pump handle under the bonnet, front or rear wheels, or all four, can be raised with the minimum of effort.

The engine is an instant starter from cold but like many elderly cars it can falter on modern four-star fuel through vaporisation in the carburettor when re-starting with the engine

hot. Richard has fitted an alloy heat shield to overcome this.

The MG, with its less complicated body structure, was cheaper to build than the Riley, and sold for £525 plus purchase tax in 1953, whereas the basic price of the Riley was £860.

Production delayed

The Y-Type was on the drawing board in the late 1930s, but the war delayed the start of its production run until 1947. It was the first post-war MG to have a fully boxed chassis, and this can rot through where it sweeps under the rear axle. The outriggers to which the body is attached can fail too, those at the rear of the sills usually being worst affected.

Although a modified version of the Morris Eight Series E body is used, the only readily interchangeable parts are the doors.

The base of the central door pillar and sills often attract the metal weevil. Other vulnerable areas are the rear wheelarches, the floor of the spare wheel compartment and lower parts of the rear bodywork. This is usually because the sunroof drain tubes have perished and allowed the area to flood.

Doors and the boot lid often need new metal letting in along their lower edges, and the detachable running boards and wings often need patching too.

The three-bearing engine is very robust and tuneable. It is not a particularly quiet unit, tending to suffer from noisy valve gear, and to be prone to oil leaks from the timing cover, rear main bearing, rocker cover and tappet covers on the side of the block. Engine life is around 70,000 miles between major overhauls. Gearboxes (shared with the TD and TF) are not so robust as those fitted to the TB and TC sports models and become noisy in first and reverse. Worn synchromesh is another failing. Remanufactured parts are available but a full rebuild is expensive if new gear clusters are needed.

The hypoid rear axles of YB models are reckoned to be more trouble-free than the spiral bevel type fitted to YAs, which are prone to break halfshafts.

The rack and pinion steering seldom gives trouble, and the threaded swivel pins and bronze links have a long life too - but only if they are greased every 500 miles.

Obtaining mechanical spares for these cars should present no problems, as many common

parts are being re-manufactured for the more valuable T-Type sports models.

NTG Motor Services of Ipswich (Tel: 01473 211240) have a wealth of experience with Y – Types (speak to Dick Bird) and carry a wide range of parts, including repair panels for rust-prone areas. Sound second hand wings and running boards are advertised occasionally in MG club magazines.

Riley RME

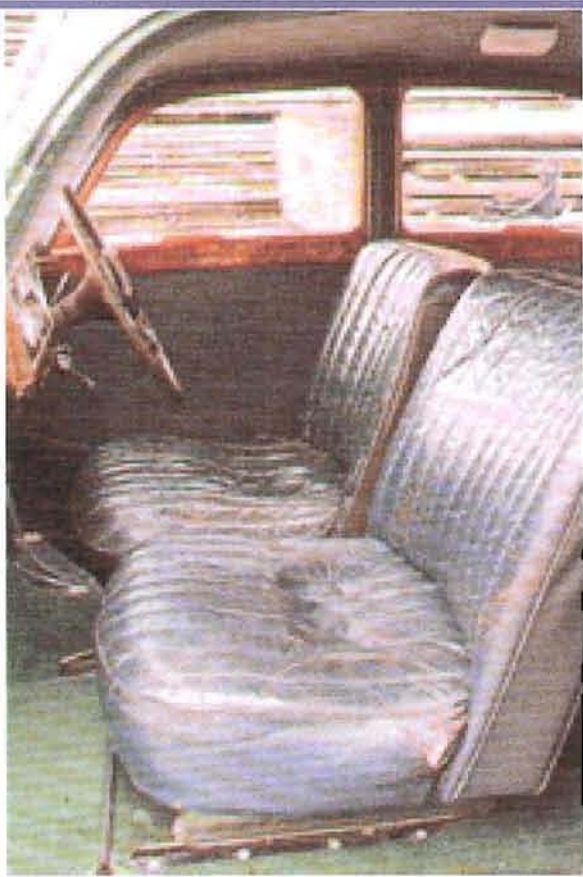


When the Riley RMA was announced in late 1945, it retained a link with the past by having ash framework under its steel-clad bodywork. But in other respects it was ahead of its time, being the first production Riley with independent front suspension and a sturdy boxed chassis.



The twin-camshaft Riley engine sits behind the front suspension. It is expensive to rebuild

The Riley's 1496cc twin-camshaft engine, fed by a single SU carburettor, is based on a pre-war design, and the RMA models and early RMEs (introduced in mid 1952) shared the same type of torque-tube transmission and a spiral bevel rear axle fitted to pre-war cars. However, by 1953 a lower ratio hypoid rear axle and open Hardy Spicer propshaft were being fitted.



The Riley's front seats are to be refurbished shortly. They are larger and more comfortable than the MG's.

The change in ratio to 5.125: 1 from 4.89: 1 resulted in a lower top speed (75mph instead of 78mph) and a slight reduction in economy, but a useful increase in acceleration.

The 1952 RME 'running board model' I drove belongs to Malcolm Lomas who lives near Uttoxeter. Later RMEs have domed front wings, no running boards and rear wings with spats.



Post 1949 Riley's have square-faced instruments. Earlier cars have a different fascia with round instruments.

Rack and pinion steering provides sharp handling. There are only two turns from lock-to-lock and a compact turning circle of 33ft, but the car's greater length and weight make it more difficult to manoeuvre than the MG.

The torsion bar independent front suspension and long semi-elliptic rear springs keep the car on an even keel, even when cornering briskly. The hydraulic brakes (hydro-mechanical on RMEs) need a firm push for emergency stops, but respond to moderate pressures for normal driving.

The Riley power unit inherited features first found on the Riley 9 of 1926 inclined overhead



Seating within the wheelbase is a Riley feature. There is generous legroom for rear-seat passengers.

valves in hemispherical combustion chambers, the valves being operated by pushrods and rockers from two chain-driven camshafts in the cylinder block.

The engine was long stroke for its day (100mm with a 69mm bore), but it is happy up to around 4,500rpm at which speed it develops 55bhp. It is flexible too, and the car will trickle along at 10-12mph in top gear.

Control of the four-speed gearbox is by a centrally-mounted remote control gear lever and with over 1 ¼ tons to move it has to be stirred freely for quick progress. Maximum changing up speeds in normal use are 30mph in second and 50mph in third.



The Riley has a flat floor and is a generous size.

The individual front seats give good lateral support and there is a good view ahead over the long tapering bonnet.

The sharply-raked steering wheel has a telescopic adjustment for column length. The pedals are close together, so anyone with size tens has to be careful where he puts his feet.

The instruments are set in a walnut veneer dashboard and include an ammeter, oil pressure and water temperature gauges and well as the speedometer, fuel gauge and clock. Controls include a hand-throttle and manual advance and retard. The lights are dipped by a button on the right of the dashboard. As in the MG, *switches are unmarked and confusing to a strange driver.*

The rear seating is comfortable and wells provide ample foot room, but knee room is limited if a tall driver needs his seat set back.

The boot is large and fillers either side feed the 12.5 gallon tank, which at an average of 25mpg gives a useful range of just over 300 miles.

A Radiomobile radio with dual speakers, and a heater were optional extras when the car was new.

Points to check

The 1½ litre RM Rileys are the same from the windscreen back as the 2½ litre RMB and RMF models, which have a longer bonnet and a longer wheelbase.

The Riley is well built, with part timber construction in the screen pillars, sills, door frames, front of the rear wheelarches and roof.

These have become common problem areas over the years.



Like the MG, the Riley can be started on the handle in the event of a flat battery.

The fabric roof covering tends to split at the seams, letting in the water. Many roofs have been re-covered; pimples in the new material indicates that there is rust on the expanded metal underneath.

Water leaks round the rear window play havoc with the surrounding timber, and a discoloured headlining or dampness inside the boot is a sign of trouble.

The timber in the screen pillars suffers at the top from roof leaks and at the bottom from getting wet where they protrude below the wings and running boards. Replacing the pillars and wooden sills (which secure the running boards) is a major job.

The boot floor and wheelarch around the rear body mounting can corrode, allowing the rear body to settle and rest on the bumper irons. The centre body bracket carries the door pillar with its two centrally-hung doors. This bracket can deteriorate, allowing the doors to sag. Uneven gaps along the top of the doors is a sign of this. On the front wings, there is a mud trap between the crown of the wing and a supporting bracket. This causes holes between the top of the wing and the headlamp nacelle.

There are no major weaknesses in the running gear. Engines have a long working life up to 100,000 miles between major overhauls if the work is done properly. Oil pressure with the engine hot should be around 45 – 50 psi,

although it can rise to 100 psi on a cold morning until the engine has warmed up. High pressure when hot is a sign that sludge in the crankshaft oilways is restricting flow, which may lead to big end failure. During major overhauls, plugs at each crankpin journal should be removed and the oilways cleaned out.

The majority of RM models started out with white metal bearings, but many have since had

their con-rods modified to take MGB shell bearings.

The torsion bar front suspension seldom gives problems. The threaded trunnions seem to have a very long life, even if they haven't been lubricated regularly. Cars built after 1949 occasionally suffer from front hub wear, caused by the bearings fretting in the housings. If the cars tend to pitch, tired rear leaf springs and weak dampers may be the cause.

CLUB TOGETHER

- Clubs catering for the RM Rileys are the Riley RM Club and the Riley Motor Club.
- Catering for MG Y-Types are the MG Car Club, Octagon Car Club, the MG 'Y' Type Register and MG Owners Club. Please see the Club Talk section for addresses.

WHAT TO PAY

- Riley RM5 are expensive to restore - a full engine rebuild can cost around £1,000 - and replacing rotten ash ls very time-consuming, so you're unlikely to show much of a monetary gain by paying £1,000 for a wreck and attempting to turn it into a Condition One car worth around £5,000.
- The MG Y-Types are easier and cheaper to restore, but as with the Riley if the interior leather needs replacing you'll have a nasty pain in your wallet. Prices start at around £1,000 for a car needing a full restoration and £4,500- £5,000 should buy a very good example.

My thanks to MG YB owner Richard Dick and to Riley RME owner Malcolm Lomas for making their cars available. I am also grateful to Eddie Smith (Riley RM Club Technical Adviser) and to Dennis Doubtfire (MG Car Club Y-Type Registrar) for their assistance. Our photographs were taken in the yard of Whitmores Timber Co Ltd at Claybrooke Magna, Leics. They have a good supply of ash suitable for body frames. Tel 01455 209121 for details.

OWNER PROFILES



RICHARD DICK regretted selling the MG Y-Type (PKJ 570) that he bought new in 1952 and after fruitless attempts to trace the car assumed that it had been scrapped. In the end he settled for USV 420

(originally registered LED 51) as a replacement. This car is believed to have covered only 35,000 miles, having been laid up for much of its life.

Richard has had the car resprayed and rechromed, but the engine and interior have had little attention. Now retired, Richard worked as a consultant for companies supplying materials to the aircraft industry. He was a pilot in the RAF during the last war and still flies light aircraft. He is also keenly interested in motor sport and has raced and rallied many interesting vehicles, including MG Z Magnettes.

MALCOLM LOMAS is Midlands area secretary of the Riley RM Club (contact him on 0889 566363) and before acquiring the Riley four years ago had owned and restored three Ford Classic Capris.

The Riley has covered over 5,000 miles since the restoration was completed in June 1993 and has recently won the B.J. Palmer award for the best presented Riley after restoration. Malcolm, a builder and double glazing specialist, carried out about 75% of the work himself including replacement of most of the ash in the frame and fitting a new roof. Friends assisted with the interior trimming and spraying and now only the original leather seats remain to be refurbished this winter. Malcolm estimates that he spent £4,000 on the restoration and his car is now valued at £5,500.

