

## Restoring MG YB 438LRM

A good quality pair of shoes are excellent value, comfortable, well made and last for ages. But when they eventually wear out do you throw them away or get them repaired? Do you stick on a pair of DIY rubber soles or take them to a decent cobbler? Depending upon your individual views, your pocket and skills, any could be the correct answer.

When you have had a car for a good number of years you get to know its foibles, quirks and faults like the back of your own hand. When you wash and polish it you get to know its whole surface area, every nick, dent and scratch. You also get to see things develop that should not be there and you can follow areas that are beginning to corrode. Today a motorcar is just a tool, something to abuse and use, go shopping in, drive to and from work, and transport the family about. Many people today change their cars quite frequently and never bother to service it themselves as the vast majority would not know how to. After about 10 years the car has become a bit of

an old banger and by 15 years the majority have been scrapped. So to try to explain to such people why anyone would spend good money on an old car, in fact, well over double the car's value as a classic so probably never being able to re-coup the cost, is not going to be easy. Again, most people would probably condemn the owner of such an old car as mad. It is hard to realise that once a car was a treasured possession, something to be proud of and to look after, unlike the throw-away item it is today.

Unlike the sporting T Types the post-War MG saloons do not share high monetary values. To get a TD fully restored with its lightweight wooden body-tub would cost a lot less than any Y Type and probably be worth almost the cost. Not so with a Y alas; not yet anyway. The Y Type is almost two cars in one. It has its chassis and running gear but mounted atop all that is a well furnished, full four-door, six light, heavy steel saloon body, itself almost weighing as much as the whole TD. So to do a *full* restoration on a Y Type would be like

restoring two cars, an MG TD and a Morris Eight Series 'E' all at once.

What these people are doing is measuring everything by its monetary worth but not its actual value. Value can mean different things to different people and probably only another owner of a similar old car and model will ever really understand. In my own case I purchased my 1952 MG YB back in 1995. It was in quite reasonable condition, having never been restored. It had of course had lots of work done on it over the years and had been very well looked after by the previous (and who was also the first) owner. I am the second owner of the car (though it did belong to the first owner's daughter after his death as part of his estate) and have also looked after it well. My forte is mechanical engineering and I pride myself on the fact that there is little on a YB that I cannot fix myself, other than actually reboring the engine or regrinding the crank. 'YB322' (439LRM) left the factory in January 1952, and a Mr Bliss who had recently qualified as



New near-side sill all fitted.



The dodgy metal has been cut out ready for the repair panel.



Delaminating o/s windscreen pillar.

a solicitor went to Abingdon to collect it. It was registered in Wigton in Cumberland where Mr Bliss lived with his wife and young family. Ann Bliss, his wife, used the car up until 1962 when she had an accident damaging the nearside front. The car's original registration number was then transferred to a brand-new MGB, the number meant for the MGB being allocated to the YB, hence the '438LRM' being a 1960's number. (It would have been 'LRM438' if it was a 1950's number.) It was easy to swap numbers in those days as you only had to deal with the clerk at the local council offices; DVLA had not even been thought of. The car was then stored in a dry barn until 1983 when it was repaired, resprayed and had an exchanged/reconditioned Gold Seal engine fitted. The original had seized up in storage. The work was done by Mr Peter Hutchinson of Dalston near Carlisle, a local garage. No one was 'restoring' Y Types in 1983. In 1995, Mr Bliss passed on and his car was sold from his estate. I was unable to discover the original registration number even with the help of Cumbria's old records. When I gained ownership of the car it had only done 54,000 miles from new.

In my ownership the mechanical side was kept in good condition, worn items were renewed or repaired as required. My youth and early married years had been spent as an impecunious motorist who ran ancient Wolseley 4/44s because they were cheap and scrap yards were full of spares for them. Most of them I hand-painted with cheap 'household' gloss paint from Woolworths. The 4/44 has the running gear of the MG YB. On my 1952 YB, since its purchase in 1995, I have rebuilt the gearbox twice due to worn bearings, new clutch once, new/second-hand rear axle as the diff was getting very noisy, hardened

exhaust valve seats fitted for<sup>2</sup> lead-free petrol, electronic ignition and solid state petrol pump, stainless steel exhaust, new timing chain, new pair of U/j's for the propeller shaft, new set of cross-ply tyres every 6,000–8,000 miles, and so on. The only obvious modern fitment is a high level LED brake light in the rear window otherwise the car looked as it did in 1952. I rebuilt the front suspension with MGB V8 rubber bearings as those from the MGB 1.8 seemed to last only a few years. I relined my own brakes and fit new brake cylinder seals with new fluid every three years. Oil and filters get changed every 3,000 miles, which equates to once a year on average. Greasing is the biggest chore as kingpins require lubricating every 1,000 miles and one has to grovel about under the car.

I was proud of the car because it always looked clean and sharp, but the last five years the running boards have needed work and painting as they crumbled away. Then the odd very faint bubble appeared on the doors and between the boot sides and the rear wings. The paint on the roof was lifting here and there, and that on the bonnet top was crazing badly with years of XPAG engine heat. So after nearly 15 years of all-year-round use I decided in January 2009 to have the car resprayed. The cellulose paint applied in 1983 had lasted very well indeed, 26 years in fact. The news that I had delivered the car to MG Specialists Brown and Gammons of Baldock raised a few eyebrows and brought forth a number of emails asking why? Nearly everyone said they thought the car looked excellent, which of course it did to their eyes. Surely, as a practical chap why was I not doing the work myself was also repeatedly asked. Back in my youth and middle years I would have done most of the work myself, but the car would have

disappeared into my garage for ages and may not have seen the light of day for perhaps five years. I am now retired and want to use the car, also my skills with body panels is at best very average and I have not the room to paint a whole car. This is more the case today as health and safety get to grips with painting cars and the paints we use. It would also be much quicker and a million times a better job if I paid the experts to fix the MG. We old car owners must all be aware of the 'Iceberg Principle' where what you see is only a third of what surfaces and needs doing and so this was to prove correct.

So, after a chat with B&G over the phone, I drove 438LRM over to Baldock in January 2009 for the garage to assess the car, what work was required and to give me a quote. The quote nearly stopped me breathing but when all that was required was explained it seemed fair. It was hoped to finish the car by May, so this was not one of your quick £1,000 three-day respray jobs. The car was to be carefully taken to bits, damaged and corroded areas repaired, all paint stripped and then repainted, and carefully re-assembled. Lots and lots of photos were taken during the stripping down so as to get the assembly correct.

The Y has its very own chassis, which on my car is excellent. The little MG's body is borrowed from the 1939–47 Morris Eight Series 'E' which is a chassis-less monocoque car. Remembering that most of the car was original and that, back in 1983, the garage had resprayed the car but not prevented rust inside the already 31-year-old box sections, it was no surprise to find the sills though looking sound being found to be very, very thin indeed. Whole new sill sections were needed. The running boards were just lacework under my filler so new running boards can be added to the list. Luckily I actually had a good/second-hand

## Y TYPE



The professionally welded repair of the windscreen pillar.

pair in my garage. The doors were sound but had been cheaply repaired with pop rivets under the filler, they required partial re-skinning. The sunroof aperture had cracks at the corners and the earlier 1983 boot lid repairs needed welding and lead filling as well as the hinge spacers under the skin extending to stop it 'dimpling' when the hinges were re-fitted. Both rear inner wheel arches needed lots of work where the wing bolted on. The Morris Series 'E' and the Y Type suffer a similar fault to their windscreen pillars. There are about four layers of metal in them folded over and spot-welded together, see photos. The sun-roof drain tubes run down them as well. So if there is any leakage from these tubes rot sets in and delaminates the pillar. This shows up as the rain drain channel is forced away from the body and it is a real pig to repair. My offside pillar needed lots of work here. The chromed, cast Mazak brackets that hold the front wings apart and support the headlamps are known to crumble into white powder. These were to be re-cast in brass.

Unlike your 1960s/70s/80s MG sports car, no one makes new panels for Y Types, so any restorer has to either adapt what he

can find or make from scratch any panel or repair, so it takes a long time and lots of skill to sort out an old MG saloon. Brown and Gammons used a kit supplied to repair the sills as this seemed a quicker way than to make a pair from scratch. However, the 'new sills' required a great deal of fitting and fettling until they were happy with the finished result. The sill inner faces support the ply-wood floor outer ends, so you actually sit 'on' the car's chassis but 'inside' the body, see photos. The very low build of the Y Type is because the rear chassis legs go under the back axle, termed 'under-slung', not over it as on the TD (which shares a lot of its components with the Y).

Once the welder had completed the structural work he then set about lead-filling the repairs. Because of the welding required to the rear inner wheel arches the lead filling applied by the Abingdon Factory had all melted where the 'MG' boot fits to the 'Morris' hull. Evidence of the 1962 crash was found behind the rear near-side door where the body had been dented. All panel fits were checked, re-checked and checked again between each repair. One odd thing I requested was that the windscreen aperture had a rather proud bit of the inner

steel frame 'planished' (panel beaten) so the screen's frame would not hit it. For 15 years we had suffered a slight water leak during heavy rain (on her-in-doors' side I might add) all because the screen's seal could not be wound up tight against the body there.

Watching others working on your pride and joy is a very strange feeling. You become so attached to a cold lump of mild steel it is almost part of the family. I have to say that B&G obviously tolerate and understand some quaint quirks of their customers as they did not flinch when I specified I wanted the original interior to remain that way. Though it will all have been stripped out and then refitted, I wanted to keep the 'old car' smell and look of age-worn leather. However, I have had instructions from 'she who should be obeyed' (note not 'must') that I am to tidy up the dash once the car is back home. I had also to give in to new carpets as someone was fed up with looking at the wooden floor through the holes in the old ones. Trying to claim it was all part of the 'interior's patina' failed miserably.

Once the welding and lead filling was completed, the hard work of rubbing down, filling slight dents, straightening and

checking panel fit and preparation for painting began, see photo. A really good respray is only as good as the preparation and as 438LRM was changing from a tidy but dowdy old lady into what was fast becoming a princess of her class, lots of hard work and hand preparation was being carried out. No machine can do this, it is all down to the skill and eye of the painter and to get the car into a condition where it was ready to accept such work had already taken two and a half months; not days, but MONTHS. I toyed with the idea of changing the car's colour, but very quickly dropped such a radical change when I tried out various colours on drawings of the car. Then I thought about splitting the car's colours top from bottom as many YA and YB owners have done. MG and Morris painted their bodies one colour and wings and running boards another. Morris wings were always black but MG, being more expensive, had a range of colours you could choose from. This way a two-tone colour car was easily produced by simply bolting on the required coloured wings and boards, no difficult masking off required during painting at all. The advantage of top to bottom splitting the colour is it makes the car look lower and longer. Eventually we chose the original split of wings and running boards as Rover 'British racing green', and the body as the lighter BMC 'Almond green'. During the paint stripping it was found the car had originally left Abingdon back in 1952 as BRG all over, it had been given the two-tone green treatment back in 1983. YAs seem to have been two-tone cars, whereas YBs seem more to be of one colour. In 1983, it was accepted practice to use lots of plastic filler during a respray, especially on an old car that was not worth a great deal in cash. B&G have returned the

body structure to a proper steel unit with correct-for-period lead filling as befits a car I hope will now last another 60 years before it requires such radical and serious surgery again. Perhaps I should not worry too much about that as I may not still be around then.

We spoke earlier of monetary worth and what an item is valued for. An item has value in what it means to its owner (or are we just custodians?). To my wife and me the car swiftly takes us from the mad hustle and bustle of modern road travel back to a much slower time. You cannot hurry a Y Type, though it will nip along quite well with its excellent handling and road holding. Suddenly upon starting the car you are back in the late 1930s, if the battery is low you are even starting the car using the handle. This is guaranteed to draw a crowd today along with bemused little children who enquire if you are winding the car up. Hand signals and semaphore trafficators really are a bit of history. You drive your Y Type on today's roads in the knowledge that you are one of very few Ys still seen on the road, part of an 'elite'. No one can just go to a car showroom and buy one as anyone else can with these common BMWs, Mercedes, Audis and the like. Then there is the clientele that the car enjoys, those slightly eccentric owners (of which I certainly am one) who will check the oil, water and tyre pressures often, if not every day. Who enjoy opening the windscreen, the sunroof and all the door windows for a good 30mph blast of fresh air and poke their tongue out at the cramped modern cabin of the air-conditioned, sound-proofed, 'euroclonemobile' passing them following the one in front of it only a few feet behind at 70mph. No, the Y owner does not use their mobile phone on the move, they are far too interested in their engine's oil

pressure, is the battery charging, why is the speedometer needle wavering again, is the fuel tank contents gauge correct or has it stuck, and so on. I should be able to do all this now in a gleaming old MG that will turn heads. Also there is to be added the memories of the 15 years we have owned the car, the holidays, rallies, meetings, trips and just simple days out. For me it evokes memories of my father's ancient cars he ran after the '39-'45 war (usually old Daimlers, Lanchesters and Humbers) where I sat in the front seat and watched the telephone wires rise and dive between poles as a reflection in the invariably highly polished black bonnet. Very few really good Y Types ever come onto the market, their owners cherish them and keep them to the very end. The only way to get a 'good' one is to either rebuild one yourself or pay a specialist.

Once 438LRM looks a million dollars, does this mean I will eventually have to 'restore' her interior? Will the smart exterior highlight the worn interior? Her engine is about half-way through its life, it runs well but is now beginning to use a little oil. Brakes, king pins and electrics are all very good and like all MGs of her era she handles and drives excellently.

All the expertise, skill and hard work were performed by Alf the fitter, Ian the welder, Denis the painter all managed by Tony Hotchkiss at B&G. I just provided the car! As the little MG Y Type passed from old banger to a classic car in the 1970s and '80s, is she now in the 21st century to enter the realms of the more exotic and desirable MG Sports Saloons? The B&G team certainly intend to ensure the quality of any car they restore will be well up with the very best, if not the best.

*To be continued...*



The repaired pillar all ready for painting.



The body all repaired and ready for the first coat of primer.