

Postwar Sedans From

For anyone who along with the sports car, came of age in the America of the Forties or Fifties, the spectacle of the MG name being cast off by BL is a sorry sight. Both MG and its thousands of loyal supporters deserve far better. The treatment of a marque with a great heritage as little more than excess, worn out luggage will not be recorded as one of the more honorable moments of British automotive history.

It's only proper to remember the MG as primarily a two-seater sports car. MG's from the postwar TC models through the early B models were wonderful sports cars. With low price tags, excellent road manners, and durability they served as the backbone of the American sports car movement.

Less well known, but also of interest were the MG sedans that were also built at Abingdon during the golden age of the MG. It was not until May 1947, some 18 months after production of the TC had begun, that MG introduced its first postwar sedan, the 1¼ liter Y-type. The style of the Y-type was decidedly British which is a polite way of saying it was out-of-date. This is not to say the approximately 8,700 Y-types built through 1953 were ugly or even homely. On the contrary a Y-type was pleasant to look at, particularly when finished in blue, black or green. Yet 1947 was not 1937 and the age of sedans with a relatively narrow body and fenders that really were fenders belonged to the past. The future clearly favored the fully integrated body, and any new car not in tune with the times was destined for almost instant obsolescence.

The Motor for May 14, 1947 did its best to defend the Y-type's styling. It admitted that the trend in Europe and America was towards the envelope body, but "In England" it observed, "there is a very strong body of opinion which adheres to the more classic line – the car which may be said to 'look like a car'". Therefore, *The Motor* concluded, the new MG sedan "represents the modern development of a theme rather than any break with tradition".

The Autocar expressed a similar sentiment, describing the MG sedan as "a typical, good-looking British sports



saloon, making no concessions to transatlantic styling trends."

It would be misleading however, to simply dismiss the Y-type as out-moded since it was the first production

By Robert C. Ackerson

MG to be fitted with independent front suspension. It's readily admitted that this wasn't exactly an earth-shaking event since i.f.s. had been common on American cars since the Thirties. In 1936 MG had also used i.f.s., but only on the R-type racing MG Midget. During the Second World War

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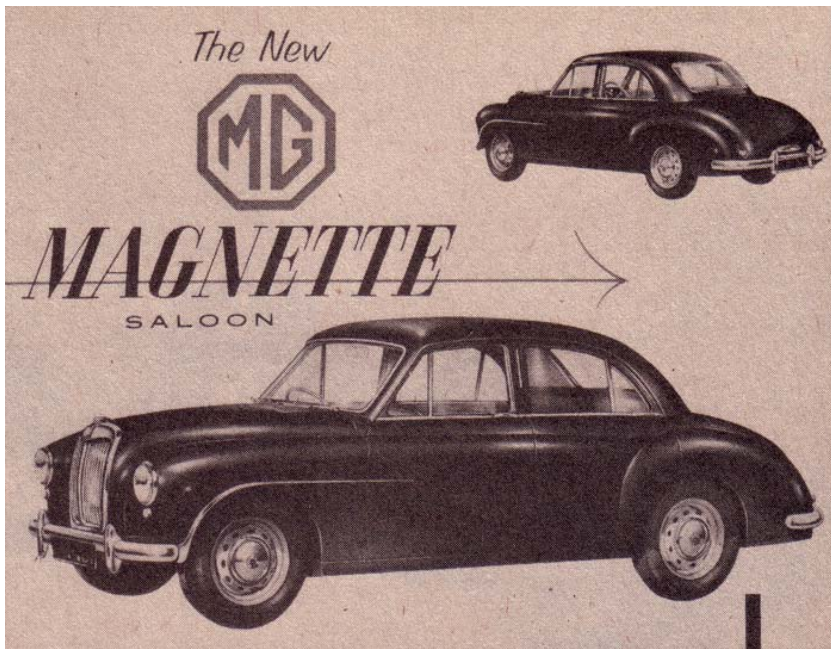
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The Y-type sedan, already obsolete at the time of its 1947 introduction.



The MG Magnette with an envelope-type body ... at last

the Nuffield Group, which then produced MG's, tested the Y-type's front suspension and it was well proven when production began. This feature plus rack and pinion steering actually made the Y-type technically more advanced than the TC, which carried both a solid front axle as well as cam and lever steering. Not until the introduction of the TD in 1950 did the MG two-seater feature front suspension and steering similar to that of the Y-type.

Both the MG sedan and the TC two-seater used the XPAG 1250cc, four cylinder engine. With a single SU carburetor and either a 7.3 or 7.5:1 compression the Y-type's engine developed 46hp at 4800rpm.

The Y-type's zero to 60mph time of 28 seconds and top speed of 70mph doesn't sound terribly thrilling today but in 1947 when respective data for a TC was 21 seconds and 78mph, the Y-type was considered a reasonably lively sedan. MG, at least, felt secure enough about its performance to apply the "Comfort fast" slogan to it and *The Autocar* (May 9, 1947) concluded after road testing the Y-type; 'It has much of the zip of the Midget, discreetly concealed in a most cozy little saloon.'

With only modest changes the Y-type MG continued in production until late 1953. In time for the famous October 1948 Earls Court motor show a Y-tourer, open four-seater was introduced. Only 877 of these very pleasant cars were built. Since they were intended for export they were equipped with left hand steering. To spruce up their performance the

engines of the open Y-types used the TC camshaft and dual SU carburetors. This brought their output up to 54.4hp, the same as the TC's. Other sporting features of the Y-tourer included a windshield that could be folded flat, and cut away doors.

By the end of its production run, the Y-type sedan was decidedly obsolete with its severely dated styling and windshield that could be cranked open.

Its replacement, on the other hand, was an extremely attractive automobile whose name, "Magnette" had last been applied in the 1930's to a 1280cc, single overhead cam MG. The unit-body of the new series ZA Magnette had first been used by the 1953

Wolseley Four Fourty-Four. In its MG format it was decidedly more attractive.

Like its immediate predecessor, the Magnette enjoyed a technical advantage over its two-seater counterpart. In this case it was the new XPEG, 1489cc engine. Not until late 1954 was the MG-TF powered by this unit. In acceleration and top speed the Magnette, with only 60 horsepower to propel its 2500 pounds, was not overly impressive. But its zero to 60mph time of 22 seconds and 83mph top speed combined with fine road manners to create what Tom McCahill described as "a low calorie Ferrari". In slightly less graphic language *The Autocar* (April 15, 1955) concurred with this view, observing "the road holding of this car... is remarkable indeed."

The styling of the Magnette had strong Italian overtones but it was an all-British effort (and certainly one of the better ones of the fifties) credited to Gerry Palmer of the British Motor Corporation.

During its production run which ended in 1958, the Magnette's basic personality remained constant. The last models featured a larger rear window and an optional two-tone color scheme. More beneficial than either of these changes was the use of a 4.55:1 rear axle on the post-1955 Magnettes. The earlier models had been geared at 4.875:1 and this switch helped make the MG somewhat less of a buzz box at American highway speeds.

The Magnette, in its final ZB form was still a stylish, attractive sports sedan when it was replaced by the



Magnette Mark III in February 1959. BMC had commissioned Pininfarina to create a new body design for its mid-sized sedans, and it appeared with superficial changes, both as an Austin and a Wolseley, as well as an MG sedan. The styling of the Magnette was a fairly successful blend of a traditional MG front end with the then, almost mandatory rear fender fins. Less pleasing were the results of a shorter, by three inches wheelbase and a nine inch length increase. In the process the Magnette lost its taut, thoroughbred appearance and became instead, an automobile with some uncomfortable overtones of Detroit influence.

BMC had some difficulty deciding how much horsepower the new Magnette's 1489cc engine developed. The initial press releases credited it with 66.5hp at 5200rpm but most showroom literature lists it as 68. In either case the Mark III's acceleration and top speed were on a par with those of the older Z-series Magnette. The same could not be said of its steering and handling. Both cars did have similar coil-spring-wishbone front suspensions and solid rear axles with semi-elliptical rear springs. But whereas the earlier Magnette was often lauded for its precise rack and pinion steering, the Mark III received low grades for its less precise cam and lever system. When pushed in the corners the Mark III's narrower, by 2½" front and 1 ⅛" rear, tread contributed to a deterioration of its road manners.

To its credit, BMC in late 1961 upgraded the Magnette into Mark IV form returning at least part of its former sports charter to the Magnette's performance. A modest 2.875" to 3.0" bore increase raised its engine displacement to just over 98 cubic inches. With a little more horsepower (68 instead of 64) and torque up to 89 lb. ft. from 82, the Magnette needed just 19.5 seconds to reach 60mph from rest and had a top speed of 86mph. More important than these improvements were the revisions made in the MG's suspension. A slightly longer, 100.2" wheelbase, plus wider front and rear tracks were big steps in the right direction. To them were added front and rear anti-roll bars and dual-valve Armstrong shock absorbers. While it was still not a sports car, "the transformation" noted *The Autocar*, (September 14, 1962), of the Magnette's ride "has been remarkable." *The Autocar* was still not



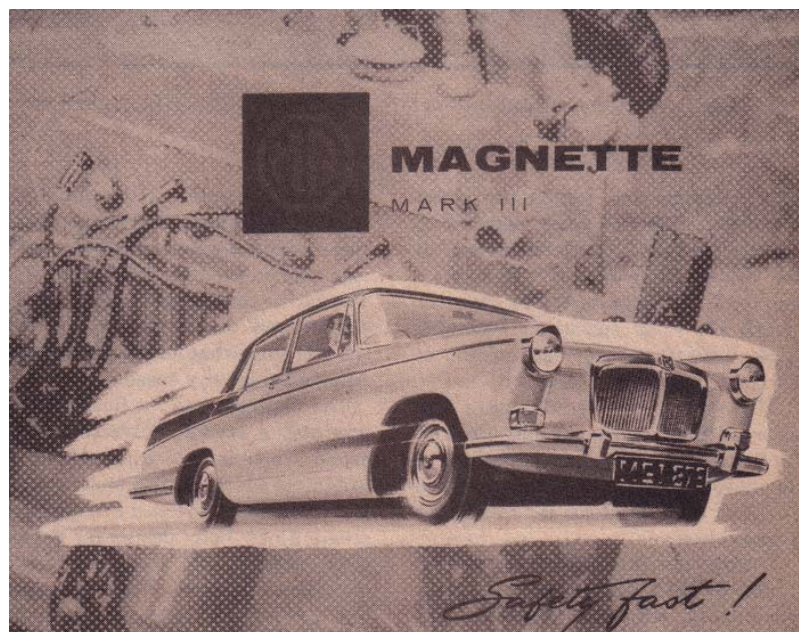
The 1963 MG 1100, with a transverse four-cylinder engine, FWD and front disc brakes

totally ebullient about the Magnette but it could at least conclude that while it was "not perhaps in the mainstream of MG tradition, the Magnette nevertheless gives the family man the chance to own a car with one of the most exciting names in British motoring history."

No such faint hearted praise was called for when MG introduced an automobile to the U.S. market that a representative of its importer described as "the car that is going to clean Volkswagen out of this market." Automotive history contains no reference to *any* MG that pushed VW out of the American market, but that's the irony of the MG1100 Sports Sedan's

career. In 1963 it had a tremendous amount of sales potential. In terms of styling it was one of Pininfarina's best non-Ferrari efforts, a fine example of how to give a small four seater sedan a trim, crisp and distinctive appearance. Even today a well preserved MG 1100 looks good in the small car crowd.

The brainchild of the great Alec Issigonis, the 1100 was a logical development of the earlier Austin/Morris Mini. With front wheel drive, a transversely positioned engine, front disc brakes and a unique Hydrolastic rubber and liquid system, it forced virtually every automotive authority to revise their views about the overall performance of a small car.



Styling of the 1959 Mark III Magnette was inspired by Detroit.

Unfortunately for MG, BMC, and many of the faithful who purchased an 1100, it was also a car that reflected some of the worse features of the post-war British automobile. Its construction fell far short of even reasonable expectations. Poorly fitted carpet and wide gaps between trim parts were uncalled for in a car that at \$1898 was some \$250 more expensive than a Volkswagen. There was also the issue of the 1100's final drive ratio of 4.13:1. With this gearing the little MG engine was turning some 4000rpm at 60mph. Granted that the BMC engine used in the 1100 was tough, the resulting noise level plus the knowledge as *Road and Track*, (January 1963) noted that the engine was "nibbling away at its own innards at a somewhat suicidal rate" weren't points in the 1100's favor.

What a pity! A great name and a grand design flawed and maimed by a modern version of the old kingdom being lost by the lack of a nail theme. British Motor Holdings, BMC's successor, later tried to salvage its shrinking portion of the U.S. small car market with a revised version of the MG 1100 known as the Austin America. But having fumbled its best shot with the MG Sports Sedan, BMH's success with the Austin in the face of the continued strength of Volkswagen and the growing presence of the Japanese in the American market was limited.

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