

The MG 1¼-litre – or Y-type – had a messy birth, and replacing it was no more straightforward, as **Jon Pressnell** explains

MUDDLING THROUGH

The T-type sports car excepted, the models MG was offering in the second half of the 1930s were very different from those of the previous five years. Based on Morris and Wolseley components, the VA, SA and WA were bigger cars with bigger engines, softer in character and occupying the same sector of the market as Triumph and SS-Jaguar.

Clearly, though, parent company Morris thought that abandoning buyers of compact sporting saloons had been inadvisable, as by 1939 it had decided to introduce a smaller model to sit below the 1548cc VA. Intended for a 1941 launch, the proposed MG Ten was testimony to the Morris combine's ill-conceived product planning in these late pre-war years.

Chaos at Cowley

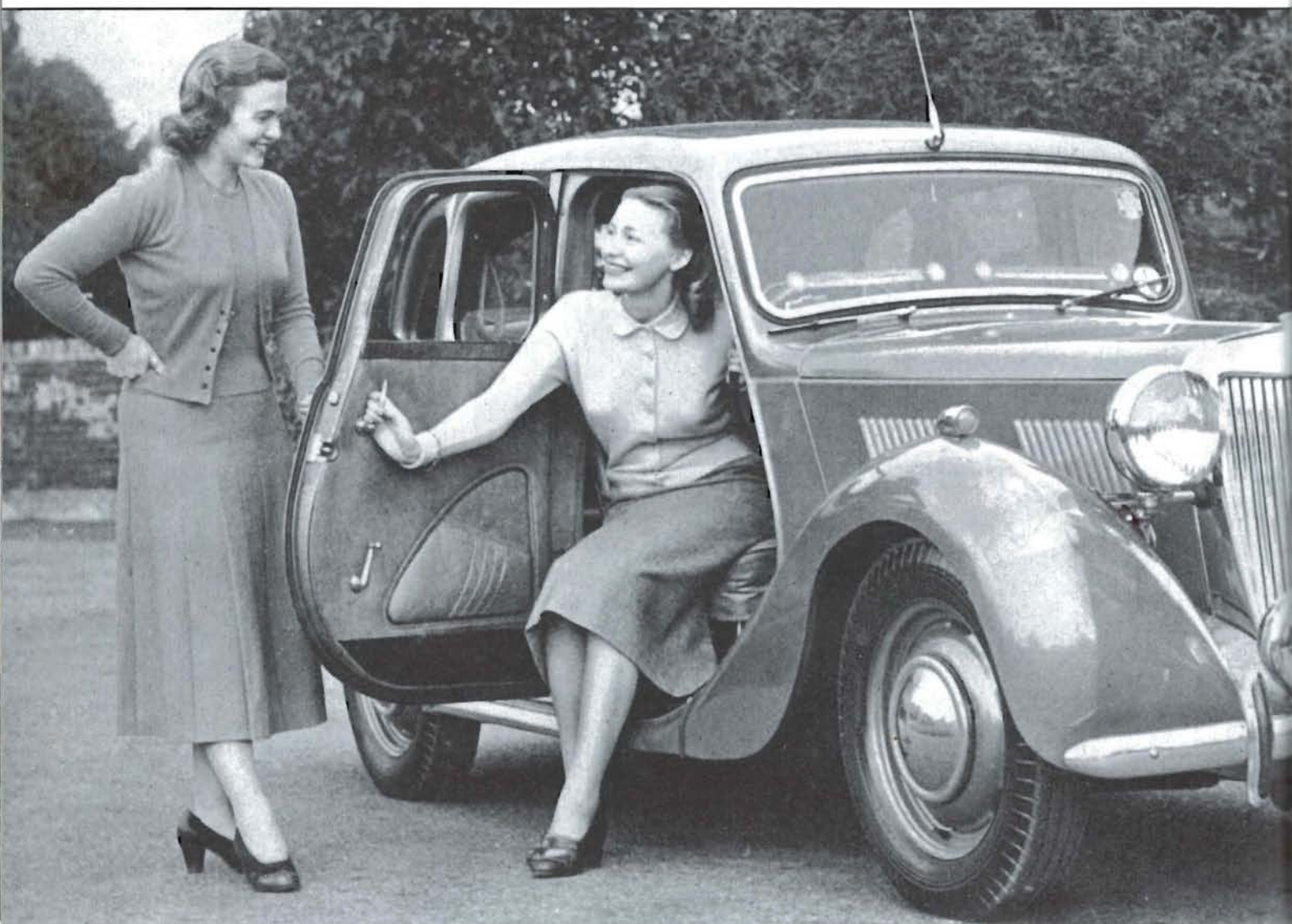
Morris was already offering three unrelated 8hp, 10hp and 12hp models. Then there were 10hp and 12hp Wolseleys that had precious little to do with their Morris siblings, or with each other. Finally, following the purchase of Riley the previous year, in 1939 a new 12hp Riley arrived, sharing only a few components with other Nuffield products.

Now, with the intended MG, there was to be a further model with not enough in common with its sister cars. Yes, the body was to be based on that of the Morris Eight Series E – as would be that of a future Wolseley Eight – and the engine would be the same basic unit as used for the Morris and Wolseley Tens and the MG TB. But the chassis was to be an all-new underslung design, with the independent front suspension that had been rejected for the Series M Morris Ten on grounds of cost. By 1939 all former Cowley MD Leonard Lord's work rationalising the product line had been undone.

Perhaps this needless duplication of design effort explains why the 1¼-litre MG was still in mock-up form in 1939. By 1941 a

prototype had been built, and was used by Miles Thomas, vice-chairman of what was now named the Nuffield Organization. In January 1944 Thomas wrote that the car would be offered as both a two-door and a four-door, and later the same year there was talk of a twin-carb option.

At a board meeting in June 1945 it was decided that 500 1¼-litre MGs would be made in the first year after the end of the war in Europe. This figure was revised a month later to 300 cars for 1946, after government manufacturing permits had been issued. By the close of the year the MG's planned introduction had been delayed: it was minuted that the car would now be launched at the putative – and in fact never-held – 1946 London motor show.



Staggering towards production

Miles Thomas meanwhile continued to sample a 1¼-litre prototype from time to time. 'I am not at all favourably impressed with this car,' he wrote in January 1946 to Morris chief engineer Vic Oak. He went on to speak of 'so many ridiculous faults'. He cited uncomfortable seats – 'a fine posture for indigestion' – that were too close to the centreline, heavy steering, squeaks and rattles, a poor rear door opening angle, a rear blind that could not be operated with gloves on – 'the ring and string gadget is more suitable for a baby's dummy than a modern sports car' – and a dip switch under the clutch pedal so that shoes became scratched. The car 'scuttles about the road at over 60mph,' he complained, saying that 'much more attention is needed from what I would call the user angle, as distinct from the academic engineering aspects'. Evidently matters improved, as Thomas wrote in May that his experience of the car was now 'wholly delightful'. It was, he said, 'an astonishing performer, and very well turned-out'.

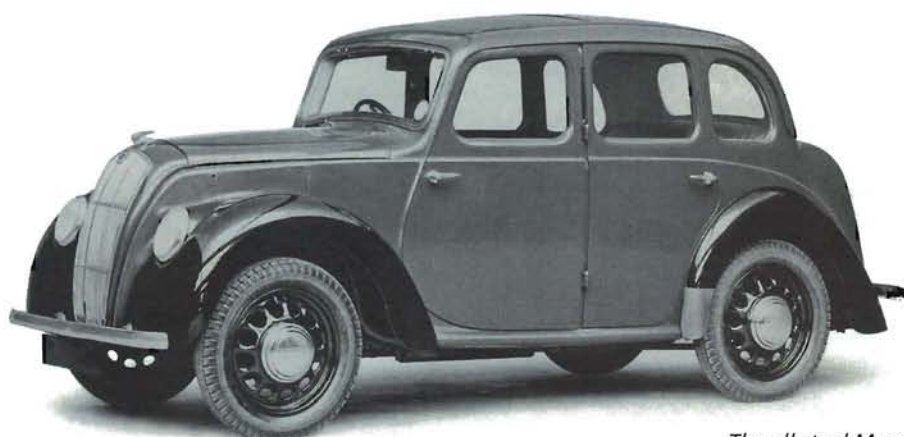
But by February 1947 the Y-type was still not in production, and Thomas vented his frustration in a note to Vic Oak. 'Are we to gather that it is going to take five years to develop new models? I suggest that, if normal production had been proceeding, this model would have been put into and taken out of production in a period shorter than that which is apparently necessary to

get the design satisfactory,' he caustically observed. 'This is a severe criticism of the policy of centralising design,' he commented – a tacit recognition that Abingdon would most likely have been quicker on its feet than the Cowley colossus.

But there were other factors at play. These were hard times for the British motor industry, with supply difficulties, labour problems, and to cap it all a shortage of coal that limited steel production. Worse, the Morris conglomerate was in a mess. A convoluted range of future products and new engines was forever being argued over, fundamental engineering decisions had not been made, and Lord Nuffield was obstructing the introduction of new designs. Although this seems to have been a question that was not asked, was there even any point in putting the 1¼-litre into production, when its replacement, a new

MG saloon based on the mid-sized Morris (the future MO Oxford), was intended to be available from early 1948?

In the end Thomas was sacked, a boardroom purge took place, and the mad product plans were shredded. Meanwhile the first MG 1¼-litre left the Abingdon factory in March 1947, ahead of the car's formal launch in May. There was no two-door version, and no twin-carb option – although there was a short-lived open tourer, given the YT appellation, that did have a brace of SUs as standard equipment. Compared with the Jowett Javelin or even the flashily modern Ford Consul introduced in 1950, the Y-type was a throw-back to pre-war years, and sales were relatively modest. But with the proposed Morris-based MG models never happening, the car did at least keep Abingdon in the saloon market.



The all-steel Morris Eight Series E body was adapted for the MG

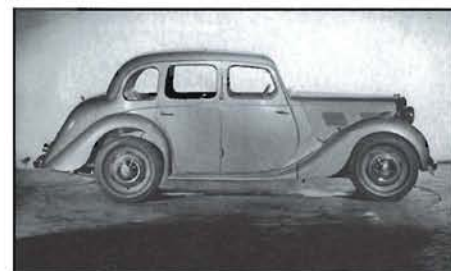
Documentation suggests that the two-door Morris body was also going to be used



Meanwhile the Wolseley Ten used the same powertrain with a separate chassis different from that to be used on the MG



The Morris Ten Series M donated its engine to the Y-type but had a unit-construction body



The MG's Series E parentage is evident; contrary to what has been said, Gerald Palmer was not responsible for the lines



From Bletchley to Palmer

No sooner than the Y-type was in production than thought was again being given to its replacement. The project – this time no longer a warmed-over Morris Oxford – was the work of Cowley. Tapping into the themes for various stillborn proposals for models loosely based on Morris Minor styling themes, the lines were the work of Nuffield designer Stan Bletchley, assisted by a former Vauxhall man by the name of Welton. A working prototype was built, as a two-door saloon with a fabric-covered roof, as on the RM-series Rileys. Given the Cowley Drawing Office code DO 965, it was intended to be accompanied by a drophead (DO 967) and a roadster (DO 963), but these never progressed beyond quarter-scale models. It is possible to date the saloon to 1948 at the latest, as former Cowley and Abingdon body engineer Denis Williams remembered Bletchley using the car, and recalled that he left Cowley at the end of that year.

Painted pale metallic green with the roof in cream, the car used the twin-cam 1½-litre Riley engine. It remained in the picture until 1950. By this time Gerald Palmer was in

charge of MG design, having returned in July 1949 from Jowett, where he had designed the Javelin. Reading between the lines, it seems likely that Palmer already had his own ideas of what a new MG saloon in the small-to-medium class should be. At the same time Nuffield management was trying to work out how to replace the Wolseley 4/50, which was proving to be a sales turkey.

Boardroom minutes make it clear that discussion stumbled along for some good while before a decision was finally reached. The first casualty was the Bletchley saloon. 'The experimental 1½-litre Magnette with Riley engine was fully discussed, and as a result it was agreed that the project should be held in abeyance indefinitely,' the minutes of the 3 February 1950 board meeting recorded. This decision was confirmed three months later, by which time a new Palmer design was clearly in prospect. 'It was resolved to cancel the proposed new 1¼-litre saloon, Series Y... Engineering Department to plan production of an entirely new MG 1½-litre model to replace the 1¼-litre, and to be introduced at the 1952 show,' read the minutes of the 10 May 1950 meeting.

The engine dilemma

Further detail was to follow. To feature 'modern Italian styling', the new MG 'might require an engine of 1½-litre capacity' according to the minutes of the 21 June 1950 boardroom meeting, these going on to say that there was 'very strong sales resistance' to using the Riley 1½-litre engine. It is interesting that the Riley engine was apparently deemed unacceptable for sales reasons, rather than because it was old-fashioned, expensive to make and overweight. More fundamentally, talk of use of the Riley engine hinted at a fundamental problem within the Nuffield Organization: a lamentable lack of decent power units.

Despite the recent investment in a new series of engines – the ohc designs used by Wolseley, and the associated MO Oxford sidevalve – there was no 1½-litre unit in production that was suitable for the proposed MG saloon. Bear in mind that this was in the days before an enlarged 1466cc version of the Y-type's XPAG engine was on the radar. It was also before a new pushrod version of the leaden 1476cc Oxford sidevalve had reached production-ready status.

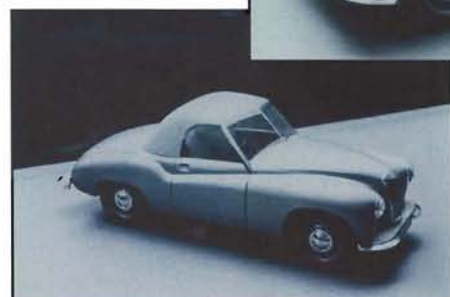
Senior Nuffield draughtsman Jack Daniels recalled what he thought was a 1750cc version of this engine being fitted into an Oxford and development engineer Charles Griffin harrassing Mercedes-Benzes on the autobahn, five-up on the way to the Frankfurt motor show. Evidently the unit had promise, and a twin-carb version would have been an interesting prospect for the MG, but the engine was to be an understandable victim of the future Austin-Morris merger.

Not only was there fog over the choice of engine for the MG: at this stage even the construction of the body had not been finalised. 'Owing to the present lack of tooling and bodymaking capacity in this country, it was confirmed that the design of the new MG Magnette could not be of all-steel construction, but would be of a type suited to the manufacturing capabilities of [Morris] Bodies Branch,' said the minutes of the 2 August 1950 boardroom meeting. The same decision was made with regard to the proposed bigger Riley and Wolseley models, which would indeed emerge – as the Riley Pathfinder and Wolseley 6/90 – with a substantial separate chassis.



A model of the Bletchley saloon, of which a single Riley-powered example was built

The roadster version was more tourer than sports car; there was also a model of a four-seat drophead



The styling was late 1940s 'generic Nuffield', as demonstrated by this scale model of a big Wolseley from the same period



In all this, a new Wolseley to replace the 4/50 had still not taken definite form, and was talked of as being a small saloon based on the Morris Minor, presumably in its intended restyled form that never came to fruition. By February 1951 there were at last signs of joined-up thinking, when Vic Oak was tasked to 'ascertain the extent to which the MG saloon might be commonised with the Wolseley Ten'.

He was almost certainly pushing at an open door, as Palmer had been thinking along exactly these lines. So it was that in August that year Oak was able to tell the directors that the two cars were 'to be commonised as far as possible'. The notion of the future Wolseley 4/44 saloon and the Magnette Z-type being closely related had been accepted; what is not recorded in the boardroom minutes is that both cars would now be of unit construction.

Power by Austin – and a delayed launch

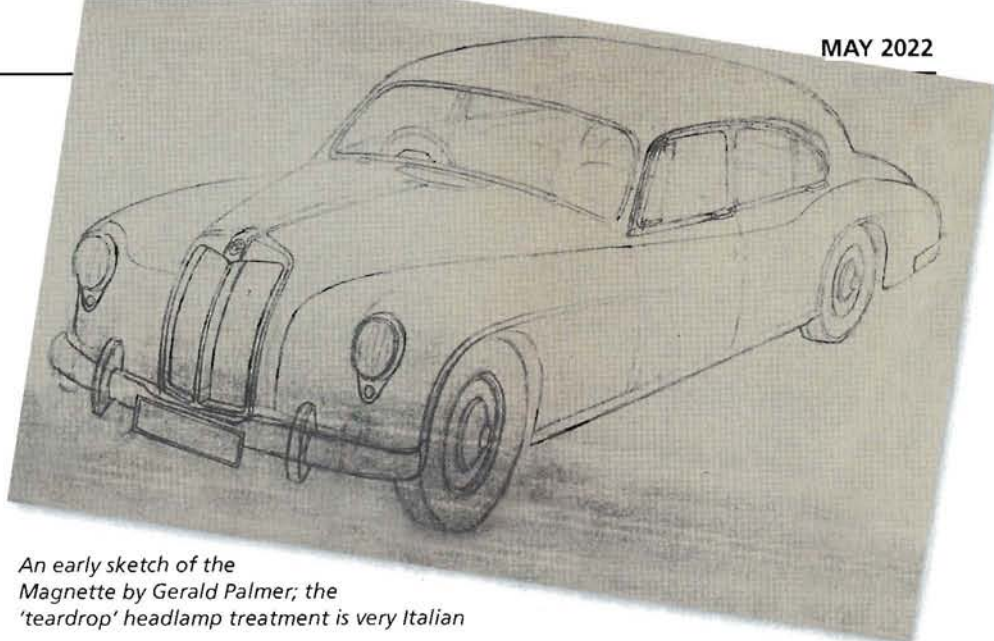
When the directors met on 14 November 1951, the production schedule was laid down: the Magnette would have its launch at the 1952 motor show and the Wolseley in March 1953. In fact, what happened was that the Wolseley was announced at the '52 show, entering production in spring 1953, and the MG was delayed until the 1953 Earl's Court show, with series production beginning in February the following year.

The principal reason for the delay was that the engine problem was on the way to solving itself. With the merger of the Austin and Morris businesses underway at the end of 1951, it was soon decided to standardise Austin power units across the new British Motor Corporation. A version of the 1489cc B-series was earmarked for the MG, but there was an enforced wait before the Austin pushrod engine became available. The 4/44, however, could be launched earlier, with the old 1250cc ex-Morris unit used in the Y-type, as sprightly performance was not deemed necessary for drivers of a sedate Wolseley.

This switching of launch dates had one unfortunate consequence. It made it appear as if the MG were an adaptation of the Wolseley rather than the other way round. This was admittedly a point of semantics, but it gave the rabid traditionalists free rein to castigate the Magnette as a Wolseley in a party frock in the correspondence columns of *Motor Sport* magazine.

Loved and successful... eventually

As we know, the Magnette ended up being one of the most highly-regarded of MG saloons, dubbed 'the poor man's Bristol' and much mourned when it was eventually discontinued. It had been a bumpy ride from the inception of the Y-type project in 1939 to the end of Magnette production in early 1959, but out of the managerial mayhem and the challenging industrial landscape of the time had emerged two charming and able sporting saloons bearing the MG badge. Somehow it adds to the interest of the cars when you understand the travails behind their conception. 🍷

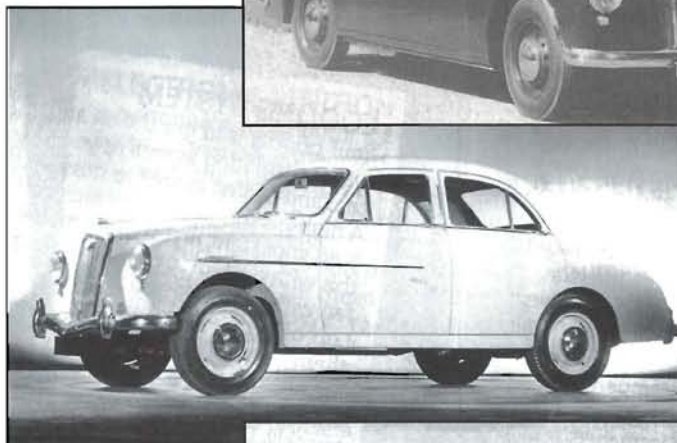


An early sketch of the Magnette by Gerald Palmer; the 'teardrop' headlamp treatment is very Italian



Palmer was influenced by Italian designs such as this Touring body on a Lancia Aprilia chassis

Possibly the first running prototype, this Magnette lacks the overrides and foglights of production cars; early ZAs did not have front quarterlights



The Wolseley 4/44 used the same basic body as the MG, but sat higher and had swaged-out sills

A later ZA: the hockey-stick side mouldings were replaced by straight chrome strips for the ZB

