

Originally published in *The Independent Newspaper*, UK Tuesday 1 June 2004

Classic Cars MG YA/YB

The
INDEPENDENT



Minor contender of modest charms

[The Y-saloon was part of a generation of gutless and over-bodied British cars with snob appeal](#), says [Brian Sewell](#)

Tuesday 01 June 2004

Long before MG and Rover came together in their current seemingly improbable coupling, there was a small MG that perfectly represented the family values of the traditional Rover - the Y-saloon in variations A and B.

I am, perhaps, not alone in my irredeemable confusion with MGs; those few measured in litres and dubbed with names such as Midget, Magna, Magnette and Montlhery. I manage well enough, even with T-Types. But with the plethora and proliferation of Types J, K, N and P, the SA, VA and WA, which all appeared in the 1930s with engines ranging from 847ccs to 2,561ccs, I lack the nerd's enthusiasm to distinguish one from t'other. The Y-saloon I remember only as the 11/4-litre, which I am certain was its name when I was a spotty boy.

Even on its introduction in May 1947 it was described in *The Motor* as "designed on conservative lines" - yet a whole decade earlier MG had built a saloon to rival the early Jaguar: long and low with swooping lines and parti-colours that marked it as Art Deco, flamboyant and exuberant, yet with a hint of the real upper-crust traditions of the larger Alvis and the Derby Bentley. Its body was daring as a coachbuilder's dream, not the commonplace of mass production.

Nothing of this survived in the Y-saloon - a car entirely without sporting aspirations in looks or engineering; a car that on the boulevards of southern France would raise only the eyebrow of ridicule and a mocking smile, a particularly, obstinately British car, too small and underpowered to do what it set out to do, a Morris of a car.

But weren't all MGs a Morris of some sort under the skin? Had they not been from their very beginning, in the early 1920s, put together from the parts bins of Mr William Morris and his Wolseley subsidiary? Wasn't the 2.6-litre of the swish WA-saloon a boxed-out version of the straight 6-cylinder that powered the staid Wolseley 16, the smallest of the marque's so-called Super Sixes? Yes, indeed, bored-out and tweaked to give 95bhp and match the performance of the 2.5-litre Jaguar. And, by the way, wasn't the Jaguar's engine the good old 20hp Standard's lump with a revised cylinder head and other transformations? Truth to tell, both engines were old mutton in bodies dressed to look like lamb.

With the Y-saloon, MG's stylists didn't even try to make it look like lamb. An entirely new car, we thought in 1947, it had been developed in 1939 for the 1940 Motor Show, but the Second World War had intervened. This makes its dullness still more inexcusable, for when it was on the drawing-board, the elegant WA of August 1938 was on the streets, new, sparkling, brilliant, carving through traffic with aplomb.

How could they fail to translate such character into the smaller car? Fail they did, and the dead hand of William Morris, by then Lord Nuffield, dictated that it should be even more a parts-bin hybrid, with body panels from his favourite car, the Morris 8 of 1939; the engine came from the MG TC two-seater, but reduced to a single carburettor and down-tuned from 55bhp to 46bhp.

With a little magic-wand waving by a draughtsman the bits were packaged in a saloon that, at a pinch, could be described as having classic lines - *Autocar*, hard-pressed by disappointment, damned it with faint praise as "a nice little car". And so it was, in its way, nicely made in detail, its paint a proper cellulose, its upholstery leather, its dashboard and door fillets in traditional walnut. But it was little too, with scant room for four adults and their luggage, yet it weighed a ton.

A sometime MG racing driver took one at once to Italy, where engineers were teasing 100mph out of 1,100cc Fiat engines and screaming round the Mille Miglia faster than big Bentleys, and wrote that the Italians "specially liked the fine leather upholstery, the sunshine roof, the hydraulic jacking system and adjustable steering-wheel. They have none of these good things." How smug we were.

The Y-saloon was very like the Rover 10, which, though larger by an inch or two all round, an extra 140ccs and 25 per cent more weight, was smart enough to win a coachwork prize or two (no MG ever won a Grand Prix d'Honneur in a Belgian Concours d'Elegance) and sport a now very rare 2-door close-coupled coupe. Both could be persuaded to reach 70mph and cruise at 55mph; both might just manage to average 30mpg - the Rover with the benefit of free-wheeling (yes, free-wheeling, with clutchless gear changes); and both had acceleration and hill-climbing abilities that *The Motor* critic kindly described as "inconspicuous". The MG's suspension, engineering and steering, he observed, were "anything but untried ... an unhesitating affirmation of the orthodox school of thought." He used the word orthodox in almost every paragraph.

I confess that I have only once driven a Y-saloon - London to Aldeburgh and back. It went very well with 20th-century English music and the revival of folk-song - other manifestations of the orthodoxies that afflict us. It is a thing of modest charms, a minor classic sprightly enough for urban traffic now - the sort of car that inspires old codgers with rheumy eyes to murmur: "They don't make them like that nowadays."

Well, no they don't, and thank the Lord for that - nowadays they give us engines powerful enough to draw the weight and we are not smitten hip and thigh every time we squeeze ourselves even into Smarts and micro-cars. But the comforts and efficiencies of today's small cars are banished from immediate memory when we encounter this MG - it revives recollection of thatched cottages, Copper Kettle tea-rooms and the bright optimism of the post-war years.

Were the Y-saloon a dog, every passer-by would pause to pat it. They would pat the Rover too, and the Lanchester, and the Sunbeam-Talbot -- a whole generation of gutless over-bodied Tens with snob appeal. Perhaps we are a little less deluded now - labelling the dreadful Montego, Maestro and Metro with the MG octagon surely cannot have convinced anyone that they had bought a better car.