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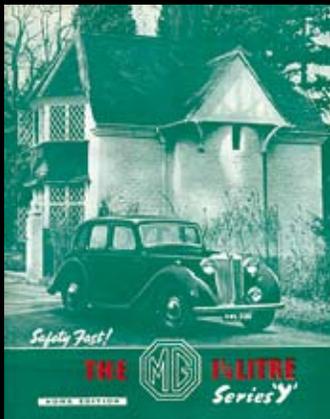
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1940s HOT WHEELS

It might look sedate now, but the Y-type was the first of the affordable MG family saloons and parts of its design were used right through to the MGB

Words & photography: Andrew Roberts



Understated might be the best word to describe the MG Y-type saloons, which took to British roads in the austere post-war year of 1947. The UK's economic state was parlous and in many ways the country was experiencing conditions worse than the war years. Hardly, it would seem the most propitious of moments to launch a new saloon MG.

In fact, the Y-type was anything but new as its design had essentially been completed in the immediate pre-war years. As the MG Ten it had been designed at Cowley without any Abingdon input and the prototype was seen in the Spring of 1939. Had different circumstances prevailed, it would have been launched at that year's Motor Show and gone on sale in 1940.

The market for a well-specified four-seater saloon was a steadily growing one in the 1930s. Basic 10HP models with engine capacities ranging from 1100-1300cc were available from Austin, Ford, Morris, Hillman, Standard and Vauxhall. Performance was competent rather than outstanding, the Morris Ten for example having a top speed of just 63mph. Singer, Rover, Lanchester and Sunbeam-Talbot all had more highly specified models available and this was a potential gap for the Nuffield



MG Y-type



organisation, which had assumed control of MG in 1935. The existing Morris Ten would become the basis of a new car, positioned beneath the S, V and W ranges.

A key element in the new MG saloon was its engine, which was the 1250cc unit as used in the TB. This had originally started life as the 1140cc unit of the Morris Ten, but it was bored out to the familiar 1.25 litre capacity, which would serve MG so well as the XPAG engine. Output in the Y-type was down to 46bhp, a single SU carburettor being considered sufficient.

The body was visually similar to the monocoque tub of the Morris Eight Series E, but the Y type was no badge-engineered copy. The chassis was unique to MG, with boxed side members, triple cross-members and underslung at the rear, following the current Midget. The rear springs were semi-elliptic and a Panhard rod was fitted.

But it was the front suspension that would set the Y-type apart, for this was the first time that MG had used independent suspension on a production car. Originally destined for the Morris Ten Series M but never used because of its cost, it was the

work of a young Alec Issigonis, then at the start of his career as a suspension engineer. Jack Daniels, a former MG draughtsman, assisted him in the first of many collaborations, which would eventually culminate in the BMC Mini.

The coil springs and wishbones system was to not only prove its worth in the Y-type but also in the TD, to which it lent its chassis. Incredibly, the same basic front suspension would continue to be seen on subsequent MG sports cars including the TF, MGA and MGB. In modified form it was also used on the MG RV8 in 1992. Another innovation from the Issigonis drawing board was the adoption of rack-and-pinion steering. This moved the Y-type into a different league, for the well-balanced system gave drivers precise and responsive steering which set the Y-type apart from its opposition. Few cars in the same market segment made any pretensions as to their handling, giving the MG the opportunity to dominate in this area.

The Y-type design in true Nuffield tradition was to raid the Cowley parts bins for its components. From the Morris Ten Series 'M' were also to come the gearbox,

brakes and rear axle. An all-round hydraulic jacking system, controlled from under the bonnet and normally only found on much more expensive models, was standard on the Y-type. MG was in no doubt as to where to position the Y-type, also known as the 'One and a Quarter Litre MG Saloon'. It boldly described the new addition to the MG range as 'a car with the utmost luxury per horse power – a new standard...'

MG needed to adopt such a stance, for the much more modern opposition of the new Standard Vanguard with its overtones of transatlantic style and the futuristic Jowett Javelin of Gerald Palmer made the One and a Quarter Litre look decidedly pre-war. What made the car competitive was the driving experience, the combination of rack and pinion steering and IFS leaving more prosaic opposition in its wake.

The luxury claim was no empty boast either, for the smallest saloon MG to date was highly specified. Walnut was much in evidence in the decidedly spacious interior that sat four comfortably, with ample leg and headroom, even for back seat passengers. A sliding steel sunroof added to the upmarket



atmosphere, while the windscreen folded outward in the style of the time. Instrumentation was good, with combined speedometer and odometer, ammeter, oil pressure and petrol gauges neatly set in octagonal style in the walnut dashboard.

Suspension and steering aside, the Y-type broke no new ground on the mechanical side. Brakes were conventional Lockheed hydraulic fayre while the gearbox was four-speed, with synchromesh on second, third and top. The clutch was a conventional dry Borg and Beck design.

In performance terms the Y-type was no slouch. Out and out acceleration was not the predominant performance issue, any more than top speed was. Drivers were far more impressed by the ability to cruise comfortably at 60mph or more and by the mid-range flexibility the engine torque permitted – gear changing was for keen sports car drivers! The 0-60mph time was 28.2s and the top speed 71mph. To put these figures into perspective, the 1.2 litre Austin A40 Devon/Dorset, a much newer design introduced the same year as the Y-type, could only manage a top speed of

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67mph and a 0-60 time of 34.8s.

At launch, the UK price was £672 including Purchase Tax (Basic £525), which demonstrates how taxation was being used as a disincentive for domestic sales. Certainly this placed the Y-type as the most expensive of the old 'Tens', although in specification terms it was way in front. Its natural competitors were the Sunbeam Talbot 10 at £620 and the Riley 1½ litre at £710. It was therefore little surprise that initially most cars were sold overseas.

Reading the road tests of the day it seems that the car was generally well received. But much more relevant is to drive an example today and the 1950 YA photographed after its total restoration by Naylor Brothers of Shipley in West Yorkshire, must represent the nearest possible to an Abingdon time

warp. On the road this car was a delight to drive, belying its pre-war looks. The immediate response was how the rack and pinion steering and the independent suspension made the progress of the Y-type both smooth and rapid on roads that had seen the harshness of a Yorkshire winter. Long before its restoration a previous owner had changed the single carburettor originally fitted to twin SUs, very much a period modification, the result being discernibly greater urge. This restored the XPAG engine to its state of tune in the TC and was the course that the MG Car Company would take with the later YT Tourer. The only other modification was the addition of a brake servo, providing a more responsive retardation on the Yorkshire hills, together with wire wheels. Overall, the impression was one of a very well conceived design, whose levels of comfort and refinement were well ahead of their time – the comfortable cabin was, quite obviously, well suited to the kind of relaxed long-distance touring that MG extolled in their sales brochures.

The Y-type would continue unchanged until 1951, by which time a little over 6000

MG Y-type

Right and below
Body was styled at Cowley; engine was the XPAG that would serve MG so well; interior was very well-appointed for the class.



'THE CHANGES WERE TO IMPROVE A GOOD DESIGN, ALTHOUGH IT WAS OBVIOUS THAT THE Y-TYPE WAS NOW LONG IN THE TOOTH'



examples had been sold. It was the first LHD MG to be built (from 1948), as befitting a car with such high overseas sales. A number of modifications were made to the MG YB as the revised model was called, the earlier car becoming the YA. Price had now risen to £989 including Purchase Tax (Basic £635).

The changes were to improve a good design, although it was obvious that the Y-type was now long in the tooth. The changes saw the wheels shrinking from 16in to 15in to allow a wider tyre section to be used in the interests of better roadholding, with the rear wings being slightly modified to accept them. Other changes were the adoption of the same hypoid rear axle as used in the TD Midget, the fitting of a front anti-roll bar to dial out the oversteering tendencies of the earlier model and a change to the latest Lockheed twin leading shoe brakes, with combined brake drums and hubs.

In performance terms the changes made little discernible difference, the slightly higher final drive ratio of the new axle being effectively nullified by the smaller wheels. The improvement in braking performance however was marked. But none of the changes could conceal the ageing nature of the design and the YB was to sell only 1301

examples before production ended in 1953, when the model was supplanted by the new Z-type Magnette.

The YT Tourer, launched at the 1948 Motor Show, continued MG's pre-war policy of providing a four seat roadster in its range. Using the same mechanicals as the One and a Quarter Litre Saloon, but with the twin carburettor layout of the TC, the new model had a top speed of around 75mph, despite being over 80lbs lighter than the saloon. Whether the UK visitors to the Motor Show had rubbed their hands in glee at the prospect of the new MG was to little avail, for it was intended for export only. Disappointingly, it was not a runaway success and just 877 were produced. Today, surviving examples are sought-after and the model is more familiar in the UK as examples have been reimported.

The Y-type may not have seemed the most suitable of competition cars but, in reality, it proved more successful than might have been hoped. The Y-type was to commence its international rally career in 1950 with a Works-supported entry for Betty Haig and Barbara Marshall in the Monte Carlo Rally. Although the event finished in retirement, Len Shaw was to acquire the car

and finish third overall and first in class in the 1950 Daily Express 1000-Mile Rally. A Works team of three YBs were prepared for the 1953 RAC Rally, with Len Shaw finishing sixth overall and MG taking the team prize. The Y-types took the team prize once again on the 1953 Daily Express rally.

On the circuit, the MG YB had an extraordinary success record. In 1952 the highly successful MG driver Dick Jacobs acquired a new example and prepared it for the 1952 Daily Express Touring Car Race at Silverstone. Against strongly favoured Jowett Javelin opposition, Jacobs brought the YB home as the class winner, a feat he was to repeat in both 1953 and 1954, when the model was no longer in production.

The final production YB was acquired in chassis form by Dick Jacobs and built into a lightweight fibreglass coupe. This car survives, as do both the Len Shaw and Dick Jacobs YBs, reminders all of a model that did much to build MG's reputation in the post-war decades.

Production/performance/price figures from *MG* by McComb, *Cars in the UK* by Graham Robson and *MG Saloon Cars* by Clausager. Period photos are courtesy of the MG Car Club and the Malcolm Green archive.