

WHY SO RARE?

MG thought they were onto a good thing when they produced the Tourer version of the sporty Y-type, but few bought it. Alistair Meldrum's concours YT shows what the world missed out on

Words and photography: Bob Weir



There are many classic MGs living north of the Border, and the Scottish Vintage Vehicle Federation circuit occasionally uncovers a real gem. The judges at the recent 'Champion of Champions' show obviously felt the same way, when they voted Alistair Meldrum's MG YT as their car of the year.

The YT was launched at a time when the country was in dire financial straights, and teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. Although Great Britain had emerged victorious from the Second World War, it was still in the vice-like grip of rationing and crippling austerity. Along with other home manufacturers, the motor industry was soon engaged in an 'export or die' campaign to pay off the nation's debts and attract some much-needed foreign currency.

On paper, MG's decision to proceed with the launch of the YT seemed a good move. Open four-seat touring cars had been very popular before the war, and it was widely believed there was still a market out there waiting to be tapped. The Swiss coachbuilding firms of JH Keller and Reinbolt and Christie had already set the ball rolling, by experimenting with open-top chassis conversions based on the existing Y-type saloon. In 1948 Abingdon finally came in on the act, producing a factory-built model using a steel open body and the TC version of the XPAG engine.

Launched at the Earls Court Motor Show later that autumn, the YT tourer went on sale at a retail price of £525. The new car was equipped with the 1250cc overhead valve unit, along with twin SU carburettors. The engine had a bore and stroke of 66.5mm x 90mm developing 55bhp, and delivering a performance that was a modest improvement over the existing saloon.

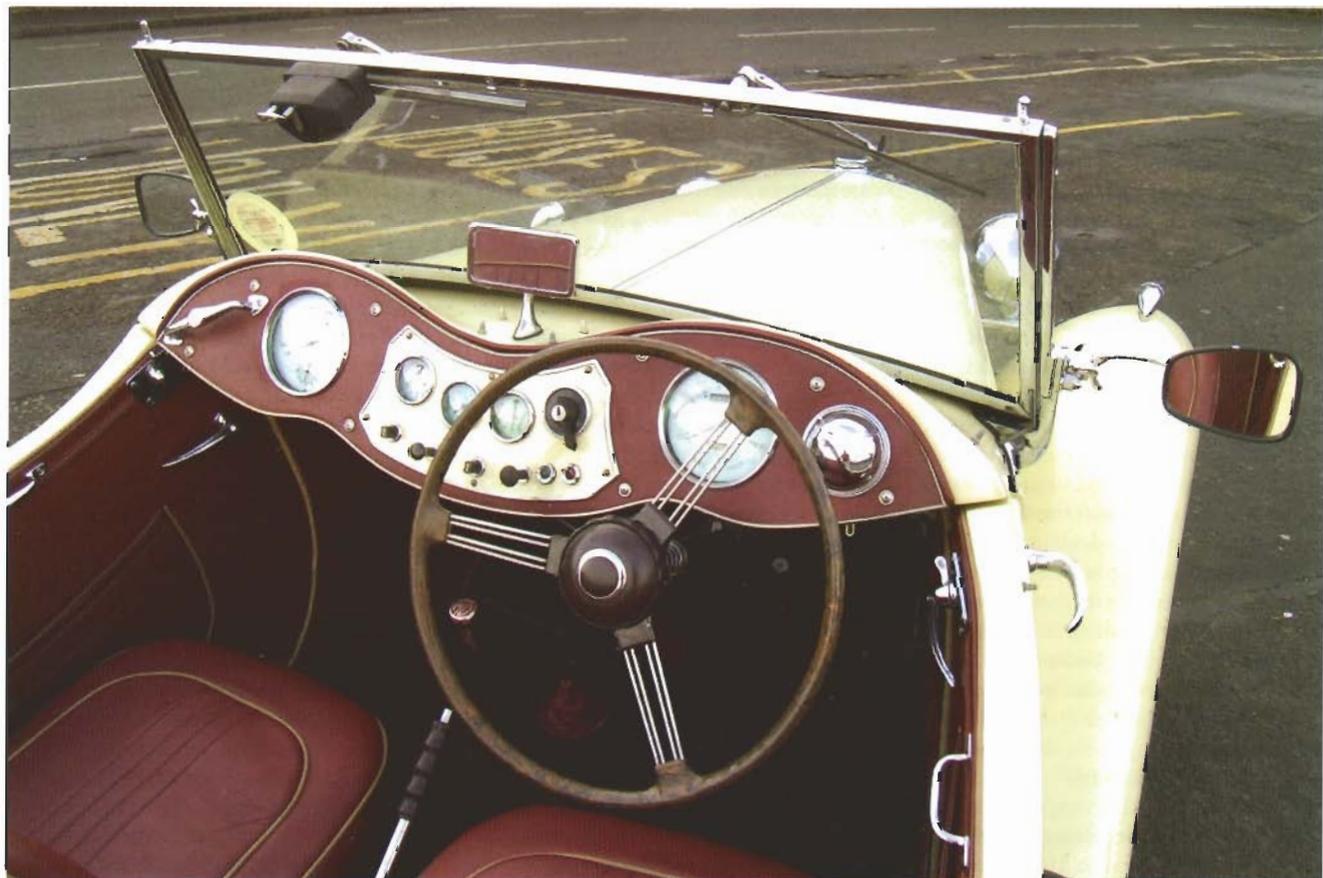
Transmission came courtesy of a four-speed gearbox with synchromesh on second through top, using a Borg and Beck clutch and reaching a top speed of around 70mph.

The dimensions of the car also differed from the other Y models, being 3in longer at 13ft 8in and 1½in taller with the hood up at 4ft 10½in. The car was also 74lb lighter than the saloon, weighing in at 2110lb dry.

The front suspension featured the latest MG wishbone technology, using independently sprung wheels with rubber-bushed mountings and coil springs. The rear end was fitted with half-elliptical springs interleaved with rubber that included a lateral control link to stabilise axle movement. The dampers came courtesy of Luvax-Girling hydraulics, and Lockheed made the all-round drum brakes. Lucas supplied the electrics, including the control unit, starter switch, distributor, dynamo and windscreen wiper.

In common with many British post-war models the YT was built with the overseas market in mind, and was designed for easy conversion to left-hand drive. Among other things, this meant relocating the battery box. The oil pump was similarly adjusted so that it did not foul the re-positioned steering column. Export models were also fitted with a more efficient air cleaner to combat dust in warmer climates.

A lot of thought had gone into the coachwork, which was significantly modified from the parent saloon. The new model was fitted with a folding windscreen of Triplex safety glass, and the two doors were made out of pressed steel fastened onto wooden frames. Both front seats were fully adjustable, and there were nice little touches like map pockets inserted in the doors. »



MG YT



'THERE ARE AROUND 100 SURVIVORS, OF WHICH PERHAPS 40 ARE ROADWORTHY'



The boot lid opened flat to form a useful surface, while the spare tyre and tool kit were kept in a separate compartment, which could be accessed even when the boot was loaded with luggage. The rear seats were also narrower than on the saloon model to accommodate the folded hood that could then be stored out of sight. The front seats also tilted forward to allow easy access.

The dashboard and instrument panel had been specially designed. This included a large tachometer, which on left-hand drive models was positioned directly in front of the driver. This was a throwback to the heady days when serious aficionados preferred to judge speed by reference to the rev counter as against the speedometer. There were additional gauges for ammeter, fuel and oil pressure.

Direction indicators were omitted on all models except those destined for the USA, where they were obliged to be fitted as a safety requirement. Most present day survivors have been similarly modified. YT bodies were assembled at Abingdon, where they were also supplied with their upholstery.

Although there were high expectations for the new model, sales were disappointing. Far from being a success, the new MG ushered in

the end of an era. It soon became obvious to all British manufacturers that the days of the open tourer were over, and the car turned out to be one of the last of its breed.

Despite the fact it was a worthy design, the YT's cause was not helped by its lack of availability on the home market. Virtually the entire production run of 884 cars was earmarked for export, and the damage to buyer confidence was considerable. After only two years the model was withdrawn in 1950 with no obvious replacement.

The model was available in both right- and left-hand drive format, and the majority were exported to Australia and the United States. There are believed to be around 100 survivors, of which perhaps 40 are roadworthy. It is thought that the situation has been aggravated by some amateurish restorations, which has led to a number of cars being sidelined while they are refurbished again from scratch.

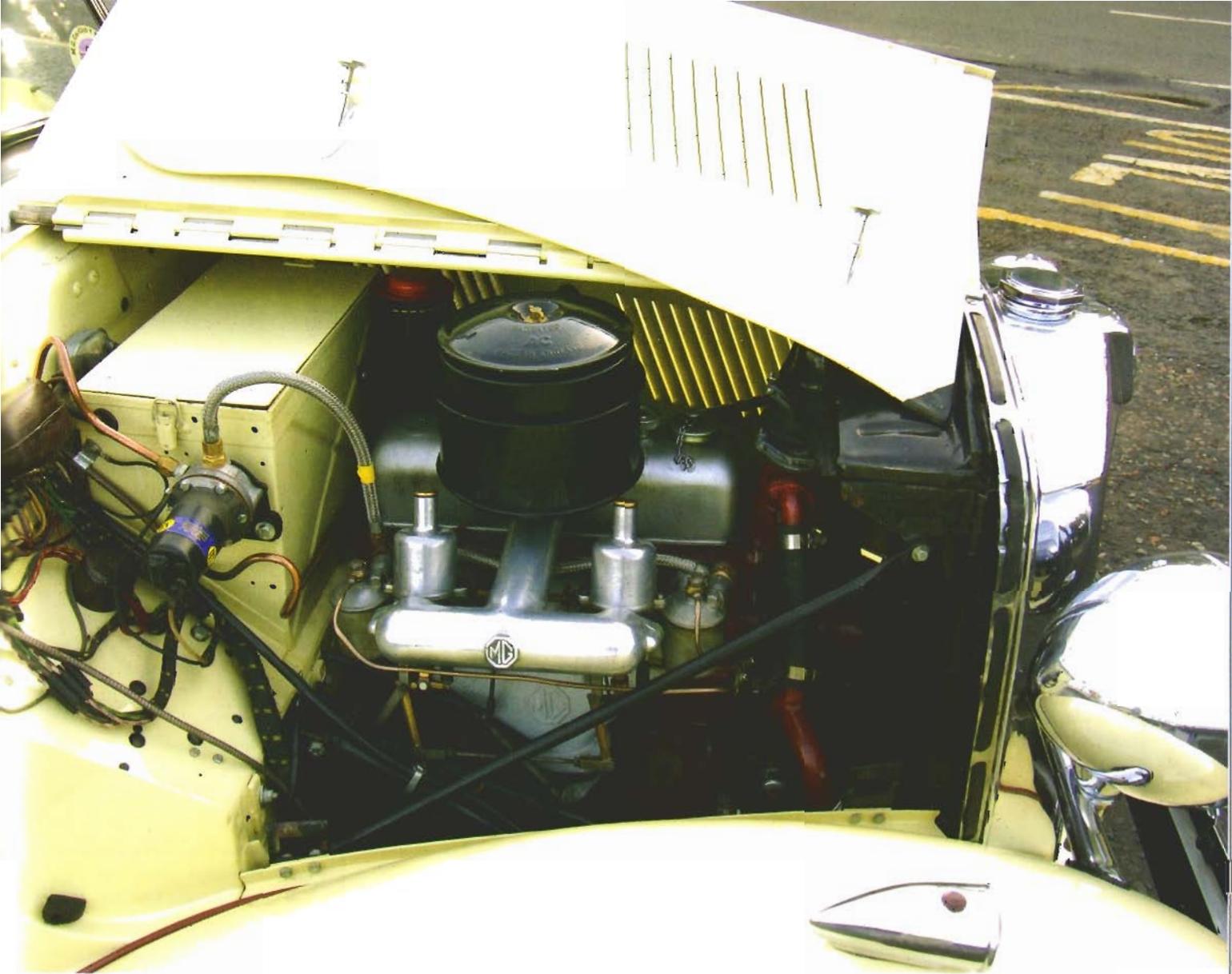
Owner Alistair Meldrum is a retired bank manager. He bought his YT with the distinctive number plate back in February 2001. The vehicle hails from California, and had been completely restored. 'I've always been a big MG fan, and particularly wanted to own a tourer,' he explained.

Alistair has been collecting cars for years, and in his early days specialised in Morris Minors. He has owned several Cowley classics since the late 1960s, and was treasurer of the Scottish Morris Register for 25 years. During this time he also dabbled with a Mk6 Bentley, and a number of period caravans.

The YT is his first MG, although in hindsight he wishes he had got involved with the marque earlier in his classics career. As is often the case, he stumbled across the car almost by accident. 'I had become good friends with one of the bank's customers, and it turned out he happened to own one of the finest stable of MGs in Scotland,' he recalls.

His friend had been an MG enthusiast for many years, and over time had built up a formidable fleet of cars. But he was looking to downsize his collection, and this presented Alistair with an ideal opportunity.

Things finally came to a head over the Millennium when Alistair was rushed into hospital with a life-threatening illness. He was already in tentative negotiations to purchase the YT, but this close shave with the Grim Reaper spurred him into action. He decided to opt for early retirement, using part of the lump sum from his pension to buy the car.



Once he was finally on the mend, Alistair was able to devote all his spare time to the YT. Although he is a self-taught mechanic and happy to handle most restoration projects, this time around he was in luck. The YT had already been restored to concours condition by his friend, although the substantial cost of this work was obviously reflected in the purchase price.

The MG also came with an interesting history, although with a 50-year-old car there are inevitably some grey areas. YT1977 (engine number XPAGTL12765) was originally a left-hand drive model. The car was one of the first to be built in 1948, a fact confirmed in writing by the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust in Gaydon. This probably makes it the oldest roadworthy YT left in Britain.

The car was first exported to the USA. The documentation in Alistair's possession includes a 1958 State of California registration card, showing the owner to be James Mayers of Yerba Buena Avenue, San Francisco.

The vehicle was then sold on to George Edward Wilcox Jr in February 1960, by a company called British Motor Car Distributors based in Pleasanton, California.

The sale price was \$900. Interestingly, the sales contract document also shows that the cost of insuring the MG for comprehensive cover was a paltry \$12 a year. This at a time when the sterling/dollar exchange rate was significantly more generous than it is today.

Mr Wilcox went on to own the car for over 30 years. Sometime during this period, the Californian state registration number was also changed from DWT 238 to AFL 989. Alistair also has a couple of mid-1960s repair receipts, as well as an affidavit for sale in Mrs Wilcox's name confirming her husband's death in 1992.

There is then a gap of five years until April 1997, when the MG was returned to these shores by a couple of enthusiasts. It was then registered by the DVLC in Swansea as ASJ 750. The car was also partially restored, before being sold on. The Tourer then made its way north to Scotland, where it was re-registered by Alistair's friend with the eye-catching number 3 YT.

Once Alistair had bought the car, he was determined to enjoy it. 'Some owners with classic cars in concours condition are frightened to take them out in case they get a little mud on them,' he says. And although the YT has

already won its fair share of rosettes, this is more by accident than design.

Alistair and wife Marion have had a passion for vintage vehicle shows going back many years. The appeal is not the prizes, but the friendship and tyre kicking. The YT has already travelled to events all over Scotland, and his favourite venues include Glamis castle, Kelso, and the September climax to the Scottish season at Selkirk in the Borders.

He also recently took the car on a driving holiday down to the Lake District, where true to the area's reputation it rained almost every day. Owners will know only too well that open top cars are especially vulnerable to bad weather, and Alistair admits that all the moisture took its toll on the MG. It also didn't help that one of the specialist tyres punctured on a side road, involving more expense.

With spring on the way, the YT is scheduled for a good spruce up. Meanwhile, Alistair's restoration instincts have returned to the fore. He recently agreed to buy a Model YA from his friend, and is currently helping with the restoration. 'We hope to complete the work some time during the summer,' he finished with a broad grin. A true enthusiast if ever there was one!