



Comfort Fast: M.G.'s Postwar Sports Sedan

By Robert C. Ackerson

This factory publicity photo of a new Y Type was taken outside a typical Berkshire country home. The car, of course, is as steeped in tradition as the house

Critics of M.G.'s postwar strategy had a field day when the 1250 cc TF was announced. It was, as far as they were concerned, a car whose engine was both too little and too weak. Furthermore, as seen from this rather hostile perspective, its styling was out-of-date even before the first example left the Abingdon works. Nowadays, we see matters a bit differently. The TF, regardless of engine displacement, is a desirable possession. But back in 1953, even with Anglophilic a common characteristic of American sports car enthusiasts the rapidity with which TR2 Triumphs and Austin-Healey 100's accelerated from zero-to-60 mph made it painfully obvious that M.G. was a bit slow in realizing that the mid-fifties were just around the corner. Making matters even worse for M.G. types (people, as well as cars) was the astounding performance of that strange little rear-engined, air-cooled German car whose name, at least as far as M.G. drivers competing in Class F racing were concerned, was an unmentionable P-word.

In sharp contrast to M.G.'s backburner attitude towards development of a model to replace the basic TD (a perspective traceable directly to the office of Leonard Lord) was its pioneering efforts in bringing a quality small

sports sedan to the market beginning in 1947. Granted, the 1.25 liter Y-Type of which we are speaking was styled in an extremely traditional British fashion. This doesn't come as much of a surprise since work on the Y Type had been completed eight years earlier. If the Y-Type had been introduced on schedule as a 1939 model it would have surely been regarded as having contemporary styling. But with World War II preempting its scheduled debut, production of the Y-Type didn't begin until 1947. By then American designers, having moved one full styling cycle ahead of the British had either finished or were busy putting the final touches on their new postwar models. Viewed in the context of that styling environment the Y-type was a dated design. But in terms of its bodywork, appointments, technical details and performance it's not unfair to depict this relatively obscure M.G. as a forerunner of today's modern small displacement-high output sports sedan.

At the same time the Y-Type (more commonly identified as the M.G. One and a Quarter Litre back in those days) possessed a heritage rooted in such prewar M.G. sedans as the SA and WA models of the mid and late thirties time span. Those were big (125 inch

wheelbase) cars with engines displacing, depending upon the particular model under examination, 2288, 2322 or 2561 cubic centimeters. Nonetheless M.G. noted in May, 1947, when the Y-Type was announced that "This new One and a Quarter Litre car perpetuates the outstanding characteristics of its successful predecessors- virile acceleration, remarkable road manners, instant response to controls and superb braking." At the same time, *The Autocar* May 9, 1947, reporting that the M.G. sedan had "much of the zip of the Midget, discreetly concealed in a most cosy little sedan" offered the opinion that "this is a new conception of M.G. altogether, with marked differences from its forerunners, the cumulative effect of which should be to widen the appeal of the car."



This jungle-like setting is in Florida. Tom Bowman's Y Type is in close company with Jerry Keuper's P Type.

To American eyes already exposed to the lines of the "New Look" 1947 Studebakers, the appearance of the M.G. was at best, quaint. As far as devotees of the Detroit school of automotive design was concerned, it seemed to be yet another illustration of just how out of touch England was with contemporary automotive styling trends. After all rear-hinged doors had last been seen on General Motors cars back in 1935 and any car entering production in 1947 with a windshield that opened outward was suspect.

But happily, for M.G. this was not a universally-held viewpoint. There were plenty of new car buyers in 1947 who remained unconvinced that a brave new motoring world occupied by slab-sided, chrome laden cars represented an improvement. *The Autocar* (May 8, 1947) left no doubt in the view of its readers as to its position on this issue. "The general appearance", it noted, "is not of the ultra-modern style, instead it suggests a true-blue M.G. with the familiar radiator and the general atmosphere which is so characteristic. The car is a good looker in a reserved way; it has individuality without looking flamboyant." Similarly *The Motor*, (May 28, 1947) observed "The four-door body of the 1 1/4 litre M.G. has been designed on conservative lines. The car is a typical, good-looking British sports sedan, making no concessions to transatlantic styling trends."

How times have changed! In today's world of look-alikes, it's a rare occasion for any automotive journal to be able to depict a new model in words even remotely approaching those used by *The Autocar* and *The Motor*

in regard to the M.G. It's also worth noting that M.G. was far from alone in being reluctant to give up on what can be regarded as a neoclassic styling format. For example, Rolls-Royce was bowing to the inevitable by promoting the postwar Silver Dawn as an owner-driven car. But not for a minute was it abandoning the "look" that instantly said "Rolls-Royce." Indeed, it doesn't require a great deal of imagination to regard the Y-Type as a small car that captured the "Best of Britain" by approximating the form and character of the larger and, of course, far more expensive Rolls-Royce.

Up front a delightfully classic MG grille was embraced by two headlights mounted on tie rods spanning the fenders and hood in a fashion not unlike that found on the M.G. TC. Included in the M.G.'s standard equipment was a purposeful looking fog lamp, reversing lights and directional signals. These later devices were of the semaphore type and operated on a timed sequence. In addition the Y-Type's base price of £525.0 (plus a purchase tax of £146.11.8) included a small, but efficient, sun roof, a telescopically adjustable steering wheel with a three inch range and a built-in hydraulic jacking system. The front units of the latter feature were secured to the frame just behind the front suspension units. The rear jacks were attached to the rear axle. The jack controls were located on the firewall. Whereas the M.G. TC had a 13.5 gallon tank, the Y-Type's had a capacity of just 8 gallons. This wasn't so serious a shortcoming as it first appears since the Y-Type had no difficulty in delivering 30 miles to the gallon.

The view from the driver's seat was impressive. The flat windshield provided a distortion-free view of the road that took on a dimension of adventure thanks to the large chromed headlight shells and the uncompromisingly angular form of the bonnet which led to a narrow grille topped by a functional radiator cap.

Interior appointments were in line with those of other quality British sedans of the time. Seating was provided for four occupants with the front seats patterned in line with what Americans loved to call "buckets." The more staid British preferred to consider them in less vulgar terms as simply "separate." Regardless of what they were called, these adjustable seats, with well-curved backs, were extremely comfortable on long trips. In addition, their position on raised steel runners provided for extra foot room for rear seat occupants who also enjoyed the convenience of a folding center arm rest. Both the front and rear seats were finished in pleated leather trim. The pull-up handle for the mechanical hand brake, which operated on the rear wheels, was located between the front seats. Not surprisingly, the cane-type shift lever was curved to fall "readily to hand." As expected, most drivers derived considerable satisfaction from using the M.G. transmission to best advantage. As with the TC's, the Y-Type's gears meshed together in what one driver described as a "neat snick-snack."

All interior trim such as the window fillets and garnish rails as well as the dashboard was finished in walnut. The easy to read black and white instrumentation consisting of a speedometer, clock, ammeter and gauges (but not an engine temperature gauge) was positioned in what was often referred to as the "Kimber octagons." A 16.5 inch diameter steering wheel with thin spring-

spokes, carried controls for the directional signals and horn on its center hub.

The Y-Type secured a place in M.G. history by being the last M.G. sedan to use a separate body-chassis design. Its successor, the Magnette, may have borne a traditional name but its integral construction was a break from past practice.

The Y-Type frame (which was to serve as the basis for the yet-to-be M.G. TD, TF and A models) was constructed of box section, light gauge steel side rails connected by tubular cross-bars. It was, as expected of a

smooth operation of its Borg and Beck clutch in combination with a 4-speed gearbox having synchromesh on its top three gears.

Powering the Y-Type was what was essentially a detuned M.G. TC engine. With a single SU carburetor and a milder cam than that used on the TC, the Y-type's engine developed 46 horsepower at 4800 rpm. Peak torque was 63.75 lb-ft. at 2600 rpm. Customers could select either a 7.25:1 or 7.4:1 compression ratio. The sedan, at 2262 pounds, weighed nearly 450 pounds



One of the first Y Tourers off the line at Abingdon. Only 877 were built making it quite rare today. Note the Rileys in the background.

The Y Type chassis was substantially more robust than the previous TC's. This frame became the basis for the TD, TF, and MGA.

design dating back to the mid-thirties, extremely rigid. In contrast, its suspension was relatively soft. The conventional wisdom was that this combination in conjunction with a good front-rear weight distribution provided a high level of handling and cornering without recourse to more expensive arrangements. But while the Y-Type had underslung semi-elliptic leaf springs not unlike those found on many other inexpensive British sedans, it made automotive history by coming to market with the first independent front suspension ever installed on a production M.G. There wasn't anything especially startling in the layout of this arrangement. Triangular upper and lower control arms were used as were coil springs and Luvax-Girling hydraulic shock absorbers. Along with light and responsive rack and pinion steering this setup provided the M.G. with excellent road manners. *The Autocar*, May 9, 1947, said that a quite remarkable compromise has been achieved between, on the one hand, the best points of the sports machine in accuracy of handling and road holding, and on the other, comfort, ease and lightness of control...". Concurring with this view was *The Motor*, which in its road test of the M.G., published in its May 28, 1947, issue, observed The rack-and-pinion steering of the 1 1/4 liter M.G. is in the best race-bred tradition, absolutely positive, and free from play, yet extremely tight.. The M.G. can be driven extremely fast over rough roads..."

Other mechanical virtues of the Y-Type included its nine inch Lockheed hydraulic brakes (*The Autocar* noted that they "match well with the performance") and the

more than the TC. Yet, its performance was quite acceptable, not only when compared to the TC but to other contemporary small cars.

Admittedly, the stock M.G. engine became noticeable at speeds approaching 70 mph. But as Michael Brown, an enthusiastic Y-Type owner who also served as a writer for *The Autocar* noted in that journal's August 4, 1950 issue: "From long record and racing experience M.G. engines have been given the ability to attain high revs, and to keep them going without protest. After prolonged spells at very high speed, the 1 1/4 engine seems even more keyed up to the job than when it started."

In America the Y-Type M.G. was offered at a rather pricey \$2658 in 1946. At that time the TC listed for \$2238. But whereas the TC had no domestic competition, the Y-type had to attract drivers away from strongly entrenched loyalties towards domestic products at a time when small size was not regarded as a virtue and fuel economy was of little importance to most American drivers. Adding to the Y-Type's problems were the comparatively low prices of American cars. For example, available at approximately the same price as the M.G. were the Buick Super Convertible (\$2518), Cadillac Series 61 Coupe (\$2728), Chrysler Windsor Limousine (\$2560) and the Packard Super Eight Sedan (\$2827). Obviously, this comes close to being a comparison between automobiles representing extremes in design and function. But the point is clear, the Y-Type, as a newcomer, was up against some very tough competition in the U.S.



The Z Type saloon was a popular successor to the Y Type. Today, these sleek cars are prized by collectors.

But the success of the TC in America suggested to Nuffield that the Y-Type might find more of a niche in America if offered in a somewhat more sporty, open model. Thus the Y-Type Tourer, or YT model, was announced in early October, 1948 expressly for the export market. Aside from the obvious body changes, the Tourer differed in several other significant ways from the Y-Type Sedan. The most apparent was a conversion to left-hand drive. Changes under the hood included the relocation of the battery to a more central location on the bulkhead and use of a modified oil pump to allow for the repositioning of the steering column.

With just two doors (that were suggestively "cut-out") plus a windshield that could be folded flat, the Tourer was clearly intended to appeal to drivers whose longing for a TC was overpowered by the need for room to carry more than a single passenger. To make certain that this strong selling point wasn't lost once a prospective buyer got behind the wheel, M.G. gave the Tourer's engine the TC camshaft and dual SU carburetors. These changes gave the Tourer the same 54.4 horsepower rating as the TC.

In place of the signal arm directionals found on the Sedan, the Tourer used conventional front and rear directional lights. To facilitate these changes small taillights were installed on the Tourer's rear fenders and double-filament bulbs were used for the front fender mounted side lamps. Not included as standard equipment on the Tourer was the sedan's large fog lamp. But giving the impression of being more capable of fending off the assaults of careless drivers were the Tourer's front and rear bumpers which were fitted with over-riders. M.G. priced the Tourer in America at the same price as the Sedan which rose in 1948 to \$2875.

Pre-dating the introduction of the Tourer by several months was a conversion of a Y-Type sedan into a rather trim two seater by the J.H. Keeler firm of Zurich, Switzerland. Body parts retained from the sedan included the fenders, running boards, rear deck and part of the hood. From the TC came the car's body, instrument panel, seats and top. Among the modifications required to make this a neat match up was a lengthening of the steering column, and the repositioning of the clutch and brake pedals, hand brake and shift lever. The Y-Type sedan engine was brought to TC specs and a Nordec

supercharger was installed to enhance performance.

The Autocar tested a Y-Type Sedan in August, 1951, and while depicting it as a "thoroughbred" observed in melancholy fashion: "Virtually alone is it now in offering the form of external appearance to which many keener motorists still cling in spite of the wider acceptance of shapes that have come to be called modern, but more than that, it represents the style of car which can be regarded as typically British, that is, before fashion dictated slab sides, faired-in lamps and radiators disguised to vanishing points."

M.G. did incorporate some styling and technical revisions into the sedan during its final years of production. Beginning in late November, 1951, production of the YB Sedan began. It was set apart from its predecessor, the YA, in a number of ways. The bumpers were fitted with the over-riders used earlier on the Tourer and the rear fender valance was deepened. Technical revisions consisted of a hypoid rear axle in place of the older spiral bevel unit, 5.50x15, rather than 5.25 x 16 inch tires and installation of a front anti-sway bar and larger shock absorbers. The front end suspension geometry was slightly revised. All M.G. engines now had a new cam. A larger, 8 inch, Borg and Beck clutch replaced the 7.25 inch unit found on earlier models. Although they were of the same 9 inch diameter, use of hydraulic brakes with two-leading shoes improved stopping power.

As laudable as these improvements were, they had, at best, a minimal impact upon the popularity of the YB which had a production run of just 1300 units. In October, 1952, when the Wolseley 4/44 model was introduced, it didn't take a great deal of automotive intuition to conclude that it would serve as the basis of a future MG. model.

This came to pass at the 1953 London Motor Show where the Z Type M.G. Magnette sedan was introduced. Bearing one of the most famous names in M.G. history, the Magnette, with its modern lines and unit-body construction brought the curtain down on the era of the Y-Type M.G.s.



In the immediate post-war years, not many M.G. factory workers were able to drive home in a new Y Type. This is the Cemetery Road entrance to the works with the administration building on the left.