

Out of My Comfort Zone

Philip Shoulder ventures out of his comfort zone when he drove the Club's MG Y Type. Will he be smitten by classic motoring?

The sweeping curves of the wings, upright radiator grill, letterbox windscreen and narrow wheels hark back to a bygone era. Even in 1953 – the year of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation – it was considered old. The world was a different place back then. Cars were very different too.

"It's perfectly straightforward to drive," said *Safety Fast!* Editor Andy Knott, as we walked around the immaculate black 1953 Y Type saloon.

Despite this and other assurances, the feelings of apprehension didn't dispel. Yet I felt this too good an opportunity to miss... to finally drive a classic car. If nothing else, I told myself it would be an education.

Yet the deep-seated fears engrained into my psyche from tales of how old cars demanded a high level of skill and were a handful to drive, from unwilling engines and agricultural gearboxes, to non-existent brakes

and safety features, were still resounding in my head. Only Andy's encouraging words and my inherent curiosity edged me on to get behind the wheel. Make no mistake; I was well and truly out of my comfort zone. Talk of suicide doors and lack of seat belts only serving to fuel the apprehension.

Just getting into the Y Type required me to engage my grey matter. This necessitated me lowering myself backwards and then swinging my legs into the cabin. Sitting in the Noddy-sized cracked leather antique driving seat seemed a world away from my regular car – a 2004 Vauxhall Astra.

I found that the cosy atmosphere and upright dashboard evoked feelings of a vintage light aircraft. For someone only used to modern cars, the closeness of the windscreen also seemed unnatural. The dashboard switchgear held a few surprises, with unlabelled switches dotted all over the place and gauges with alien words like amperes. I searched for the radio but instead all I could find was an empty wooden glovebox. Without Andy's helpful assistance and the dashboard photograph layout I would have been lost and probably tried to start the car using the



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MGCC's Little Gem – donated by Tim Pennicott

The MG Car Club acquired the Y Type from member Tim Pennicott, following his sad death at the age of 60. Tim had a great affection for MGCC. So-much-so that he bequeathed his beloved Y Type and MGB GT in his will.

From the vast amount of documentation that came with the Y Type, it shows that no expense was spared in maintaining it to the highest standards. Following a £4,000 full body restoration in 1996, the engine was rebuilt in 1999 at a cost of nearly £1,000.

All this care and attention means that it's arguably one of the nicest examples around, which led members of the Club's Y Type Register christening it Little Gem after coming to see it at Kimber House.

The car now resides in the John Thornley Suite at MGCC with a plaque situated next to the car – a dedication to a true MG enthusiast.

key. But the Y Type uses a pull-starter, so I would have been waiting quite some time! Naturally it also had a choke, although this wasn't difficult to use and reminded me of my first car – a 998cc Austin Metro.

Yet alongside this culture shock I was simultaneously impressed with the

car's feature list: a sunroof, tiltable front windscreen, walnut dashboard, octagonal gauges, adjustable steering column, rear window blind and leather upholstery with contrast-colour piping.

The Pièce de résistance had to be the Smiths Jackall built-in jacking system. It comprises four hydraulic jacks permanently attached to chassis, allowing the car to be quickly lifted by operating a lever attached to the pump housed in the engine compartment. How many cars today can boast that feature?

As the little 1250 XPAG engine burst into life I was surprised at how modern it sounded, not the pop, pop, splurt, splurt of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, but a sweet burble more akin to an A-series engine found in a Mini or Austin Metro. Pulling away wasn't the drama I was expecting either, with the throttle being progressive and smooth. The modern diaphragm clutch did seem a bit springy, but certainly wasn't the lead weight I was expecting. Perhaps most significantly, out on the road there weren't any mechanical issues to contend with, such as overheating. This was confirmed by the optional radiator mounted thermostat, visible from the driver's seat. Its needle had shifted from Cool to Norm within minutes, but reassuringly it stayed there for the duration of my trip.

Being the driver of a modern automatic car, I didn't find the Y Type's four-speed gearbox offered the smoothest of changes – but after a few crunches, it was evident that

Living with the Y Type

Modern car mechanicals can be taken for granted. You just get in and drive. This isn't the case with a classic, there has to be a change of mindset and certain level of understanding if you decide to own one.

The Y Type requires regular maintenance, but much of which is within reach of the DIYer. Things like misfiring and poor running can be sorted out easily by getting a new set of leads or replacing parts around the distributor cap. Day-to-day running is as simple as with an MGB or Midget. Mechanical parts are widely available and easy to get hold of, via a large number of specialists such as Brown and Gammons, Moss and NTG, who specialise in 1950s saloons. Spares are often cheaper if supplied from the manufacturer instead of the supplier. For more information on this, please visit the MG Y Type Register website www.mgcccregister.com.

However, big overhaul and restorative work will require a specialist. It certainly pays to shop around as prices can be high. The same goes for body parts, which can be expensive and difficult to get hold of with replacements having to be hand-manufactured.





in full anchors-down stoppage... this would take some getting used to.

Yet despite the antique brakes, I cannot deny that I found the Y Type enjoyable to drive. It did require more focus and effort than a modern car, but I was beginning to see the appeal, as your mind is focussed on the one task of driving, with no time for idle daydreaming or other distractions. Perhaps owning classic has the added bonus of making you a better driver.

My fears and pre-conceptions of what driving a 'classic' entailed washed away with every passing mile behind the wheel of this old MG. Save for the big spindly steering wheel and spongy brakes, it was little-different to driving my old Austin Metro.

Back when the Y Type was in production, the little MG earned strong praise from the motoring press. In 1947, 'The Motor' magazine concluded that the "MG 1 ¼ litre is an extremely creditable car, which although conservative in appearance offers good performance and the benefits of a modern design of chassis."

Later in 1951, Autocar said of the Y Type: "It has its definite appeal to the seasoned motorist who appreciates the better things in cars, and also it is remarkably easy to handle and not in the slightest degree tricky for the type who may be called the more ordinary motorist."

It goes without saying that old artefacts and relics are a key part of cultural history and give people today the chance to look back in time to how things were. But surely such things stay within the confinements of a museum or specialist heritage centre?

My little spell with this 1953 MG Y Type has well and truly changed my pre-conceptions of classic cars. Far from being static historical museum exhibits of a by-

gone era, classic cars can still be driven and enjoyed today, by everyone. To think that you required a pair of Biggies goggles and expert knowledge of all things antique... couldn't have been more wrong. If you hold a driving licence, you can drive a classic.

From the outside, this 1953 MG Y Type appears incredibly antiquated – a product of the 1930s. Yet under the skin lies an overhead valve engine, rack and pinion steering and front independent suspension... looks certainly can be deceiving.

Fact File:

ENGINE	1250cc inline-four, pushrod OHV, single 1.25 in SU carb
POWER	46bhp @ 4800rpm
TORQUE	59lb ft@ 2400rpm
TOP SPEED	70mph
0-60	28.2 sec
ECONOMY	28mpg
GEARBOX	Four-speed manual, no synchro on first
SUSPENSION	Independent front via coil springs and wishbones, live rear axle with semi-elliptic leaf springs and Panhard rod
SECOND-HAND VALUES	£3,000 (project), £21,000 (Concours YT)
PRICE WHEN NEW	£671
PRODUCTION	1947-1953, 7,459 built

Y Type history:

In the years running up to the Second World War, MG was looking for a new smaller-engined model to complete their range of saloon cars. This work culminated in the MG Experimental Ten Saloon. Designated Prototype EX.166, the car was to use advanced independent front suspension, newly designed by the now legendary Alex Issigonis and MG draughtsman Jack Daniels.

The new sports saloon would use an MG front end, with swept tail and rear wings being added to a Morris Eight Series E four-door pressed-steel bodyshell. The car was to be an interesting mix of old and new, as a separate chassis was opted for, rather than the more sophisticated

unitary construction. Power was courtesy of the 1250cc engine from the latest MG TB midget sports car – albeit in single carburettor form.

Then as final design work was nearing completion, the war intervened, halting the beginning of production, so it wasn't until April 1947 that the MG 1 ¼ Litre Y Type finally went on sale. Despite boasting modern mechanicals and further technical improvements throughout its life, traditional looks hampered its popularity with the fickle car-buying public being seduced by fresher post-war models. After a mere six years, in 1953 production of the Y Type ended, giving way to the brand-new unitary construction Z Type Magnette saloon.





unrushed, gentle shifts were more effective. I later learnt that double de-clutching gave better results. No doubt further time spent driving the car would have enabled me to overcome this slight difficulty.

The 1250 XPAG impressed with its smooth and eager delivery, as did the car's notable driveability at slow speeds – it is possible to go 20 mph in top gear. This being down to the engine's wide torque curve – a result of having a small bore, but long stroke. On A and B roads, the Y Type kept up with the flow of traffic without drama, although I feel that it's fair to say it was less happy on dual carriageways – the high level of both engine and wind noise proving rather wearing.

Thanks to the independent front suspension, and rack and pinion steering, I found the Y Type's ride and handling to be surprisingly good and had no difficulty threading through narrow Oxfordshire lanes, the car being composed and eminently wieldy and driveable at all times. The ride was also compliant and comfortable, with road bumps and potholes well suppressed. It was certainly more comfortable than a Mini.

Unfortunately the brakes left a lot to be desired. As someone only used to the responsiveness of servo assisted discs, the lack of progressiveness of the non-power assisted Y Types all-round drums did come as something of a shock. Whereas a light touch on disc brakes gives you immediate feedback and bite, here it did nothing. A hefty shove of the right foot then resulted

Considerations/top tips:

Engine:

- Y Type XPAG engine requires leaded fuel, or use of an additive. Alternatively modified cylinder heads are available to allow running on unleaded.
- Y Type comes with a starting handle – useful for when battery flat.
- Once the engine is hot, at idle the oil pressure gauge will read between 15 to 60 psi depending upon the condition of the engine. At 30mph it shouldn't read lower than 40psi.
- It's normal for XPAG engines to use oil, so a puff of blue smoke on start up is no cause for concern. Equally an oil stain on the drive is a normal part of Y Type ownership. Because of this it's important to check the dipstick every couple of journeys.
- XPAG engine is a tough unit but suffers from a high wear rate of the camshaft, cam-followers, rocker arms, rocker shaft and valve guides. The timing chain will rattle if oil pressure gets low.
- Engine rebuilds cost more than for A or B Series.
- Being a classic, service intervals are much more frequent: oil every 3,000 miles and a large number of grease nipples that require attention every 1,000 miles.

Gearbox and running gear:

- Noisy transmission means gearbox

rebuild. Parts available, but expensive.

- The Y Type has no synchromesh on 1st gear, so don't try and select while on the move unless you're adept at double de-clutching.
- Brakes have no servo and are drums all-round, so a hefty shove is needed to stop.
- Trouble with the braking system is invariable down to seized or leaking cylinders.

Bodywork:

- Check for rust. Hotspots are the sills, running board mountings, lower edge of inner wings, the bottom of all doors, spare wheel tray and rear spring hanger mountings.
- The majority of Y Types will have either been partially or fully restored. Ensure the quality of the bodywork by using a magnet to check for filler. All restorations should be accompanied by photographic documentation.

Interior and Electrics:

- Octagon-themed walnut dashboards are expensive to refurbish, as are reupholstering or replacing the leather and Rexine surroundings.
- Have a good look at the wiring – check for rotten wire insulation. Good examples will have had a new loom fitted.