

MG V8
GROUP TEST

THE BEAST WITHIN

There's a fascinating story lurking behind the lairiest of all the MGs. John Simister drives five takes on the V8 theme and tells the tale...

1974 MG SUPERSPORT

ENGINE 3947cc/V8/OHV/
Edelbrock carburettor

POWER 265bhp@5750rpm

TORQUE 270lb ft@3750rpm

GEARBOX 5-spd man

0-60MPH 5.0sec

TOP SPEED 150mph

MPG 28



1974 MGB COSTELLO V8

ENGINE 3528cc/V8/OHV/
twin SU carburettors

POWER 144bhp@ 5000rpm

TORQUE 197lb ft@2700rpm

GEARBOX 4-spd man + O/D

0-60MPH 8.0sec

TOP SPEED 125mph

MPG 23

1992 MG RV8

ENGINE 3947cc/V8/OHV/
electronic fuel injection
POWER 190bhp@4750rpm
TORQUE 235lb ft@3200rpm
GEARBOX 5-spd man
0-60MPH 5.9sec
TOP SPEED 135mph
MPG 25

**1975 MGB GT V8
SEBRING**

ENGINE 3528cc/V8/OHV/
twin SU carburettors
POWER 175bhp@5200rpm
TORQUE 215lb ft@3200rpm
GEARBOX 5-spd man
0-60MPH 6.5sec
TOP SPEED 120mph
MPG 18

1975 MGB GT V8

ENGINE 3528cc/V8/OHV/
twin SU carburettors
POWER 137bhp@5000rpm
TORQUE 193lb ft@2900rpm
GEARBOX 4-spd man + O/D
0-60MPH 7.7sec
TOP SPEED 125mph
MPG 20



WORDS JOHN SIMISTER PHOTOS RORY GAME

It's 40 years since the MGB V8 was launched. Or is it? Four decades ago did see British Leyland launch its official, Rover V8-engined version of the MGB GT after too long trying to explain why it hadn't done so before. But had a former racing driver turned tuning specialist not showed BL how to do it, the factory B V8 might never have happened.

That specialist was Ken Costello, still revered in MG tuning circles today, still busy designing and developing, and currently associated with Frontline

Developments, which created the Mazda-powered MG LE50 we raved about last year in a modified MGBs shoot-out.

Costello, now 85 years old, first experimented with the idea of dropping a Rover V8 into an MGB in 1969, having seen the all-aluminium engine on the floor in a garage near his Farnborough, Kent, workshop and experiencing a eureka moment. The combination worked well enough for Costello to decide to market the conversion from 1971, eventually selling around 225 new, converted cars up to the project's end in 1974. So for a

couple of years, both Costello and factory MGB V8s were available, the former costing around £300 more after its £975 conversion of a standard B but typically offering more power. Clearly the situation couldn't last, and BL helped end it by refusing to supply Costello with engines unless there was an old unit to exchange.

Yet BL ended MGB V8 production in 1976, most likely because the increasingly Triumph-flavoured management saw it as competition for the Triumph Stag.

But the idea's appeal never went away. Other specialists continued to offer

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conversions, and still do. In the 1980s the MG Owners' Club devised its own V8 roadster package (the SEC, or Special Edition Classic), and today it offers its various Supersport Bs, including a highly-developed V8 roadster with about 265bhp from its 3.9-litre engine.

To celebrate both the official 40th anniversary and the clever engineer without whom it wouldn't have happened the way it did, we've brought together five variations on the MGB V8 theme. There's a factory GT, an early Costello roadster and that MGOC Supersport. Representing the RV8 is the first-ever example, still with its prototype body parts and built in 1992 as a development car. And finally, to show how fierce a track-flavoured B V8 can look and sound, we have a modified GT with Sebring wheelarches, a stripped-out cabin and a plea for sponsorship from an earplugs manufacturer. The test track beckons.

MGB GT V8

This is a standard car belonging to MGOC member Al Gisby. Actually it's not quite standard, the clue being the mix of its chrome bumpers and its 1975 registration date. It is, of course, an originally rubber-bumpered car which has been retro-engineered to make it look proper, which it most certainly does in its fresh and flawless Nightfire Red metallic paint (a much later Rover colour).

That retro-engineering has not extended to the suspension which still sits at the later, higher ride height to the likely detriment of the handling. The height was raised to comply with US bumper-height regulations; why European-spec MGBs had to suffer similarly remains in the archive of British Leyland mysteries.

Inside, it's all refreshingly similar to the way Abingdon made it, apart from a rather nice leather re-trim. Under the bonnet, too, it's authentic, apart from its pair of K&N filters on the SU carburettors that sit right in the back of the engine's vee. This leads to a tortuous intake path, but it does mean the bonnet needs no clearance bulge. The exhaust manifolds are quite constricting, squeezed between heads and the inner wings, even though the latter were re-shaped to maximise clearance.

This unpromising pipework and a low state of tune – it's effectively an early Range Rover engine with a compression ratio of just 8.25:1 – leads to an unimpressive-sounding 137bhp, despite the hefty 3528cc capacity. The peak torque

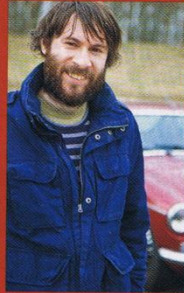
output of 193lb ft, reached at just 2900rpm, makes better reading and is the key to this B V8's keen pace. To hit 60mph just 7.7sec after a standing start was quite a result in 1973, outgunning a Datsun 240Z, a Ford Capri 3000 GT, a Triumph Stag and a Scimitar GTE. It feels effortlessly quick today, with a delicious surge of thrust from the softly-beating V8 and an easy, positive gearchange augmented by overdrive that's controlled by a switch built into the wiper stalk. But there's something strange going on with the handling, with a gentle fishtailing even at speed on the straight.

Arrive quickly at a corner and you'll discover that a little turning of the steering wheel has a delayed and then exaggerated effect as the body heels over. It's as if the rear suspension has no damping.

A glance underneath reveals a Spax telescopic damper conversion. This has eradicated the choppy ride criticised in the original road tests, but has replaced it with something worse. A tweak of the adjusting screws will fix this, but lowering the ride height should also be a priority.

This car is for sale, so call the MGOC on 01954 231125 if you're interested.

DESIGNATED DRIVER

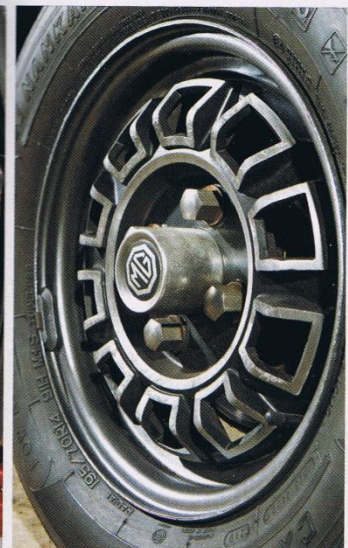
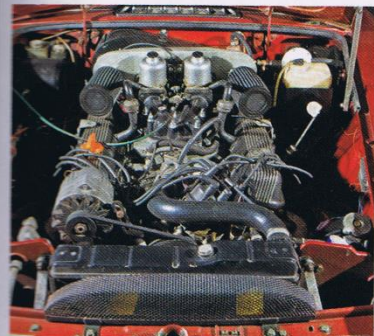


Neil Campbell
Our own Neil brought this privately-owned B GT V8 to the photoshoot and comparison test from the MG Owners' Club base in Cambridgeshire, travelling in convoy with the MGOC Spares

director Chris Bentley in the club's Supersport. 'It's had a lot of work done to it in the MGOC workshop,' says Chris, 'and it's a very nice example. Oh, and it's for sale.'

SPEC AT A GLANCE

- Chrome bumper conversion
- Original SU carbs with K&N air filters
- Spax telescopic damper conversion



Black and crackly – the B V8 cockpit is understated and businesslike, as are the alloys. When new, the V8 out-accelerated the Scimitar, Capri, 240Z and Stag.



MGB GT V8
Great straight from the box. The GT V8 got a lot right from the moment it was launched. Interestingly, there is said to be only one factory-built V8 roadster left. That survivor is owned by MGB designer Don Hayter.

'It still feels effortlessly quick today, delivering a delicious surge of thrust'



MGB SUPERSPORT



RV8



COSTELLO V8

By the time Richard Fairclough's Costello was registered, BL was already making its factory GT V8s. But Richard's car is a roadster in the original Costello 'Mk I' form, with the Rover P6-type of twin-SU induction mounted at the engine's mid-point and calling for a large bulge in the glassfibre bonnet.

Thirty-five Costello V8s were roadsters, an engine and body combination never produced by BL in the 1970s. That company's curious reluctance to make such an appealing derivative vanished only when it, by then known as the Rover Group, rekindled the V8 MGB idea in the 1990s to create the open-top RV8.

Here, the engine is nominally in P6 3500S guise with 150bhp, but the more-constricting manifolds, originally designed and made by specialist Mike the Pipe, probably reduce that figure to something like the 144bhp of the regular 3500, whose exhausts were more restrictive to fit round the automatic gearbox. The inner wings still had to be modified to accommodate those 'block-hugger' manifolds (although this car's manifolds are different again, their pipes initially curving upwards from the exhaust ports). So did the steering column, which incorporated an extra universal joint from the Triumph parts bin.



Costello wears Mercedes Jasper Blue and DIY wheelarches in steel to house the Wolfrace wheels.

It's interesting to see that most of these Costello installation ideas, which also included a remote oil filter and a modified radiator ducting panel, are replicated on the factory V8, along with the long-legged 3.07 differential. What the factory cars didn't have, though, are this car's flared rear wheelarches that first owner Richard Archbell had created in glassfibre to cover the wide Wolfrace wheels. These arches were remade in steel as part of a major restoration in 1996. There's a Costello V8 badge on the tail, but no Costello 'eggbox' grille up front. Some buyers preferred the standard look. To drive, the Costello is exactly as you would expect. The way it

goes and sounds is similar to the factory car, apart from the welcome breeze around the head and unobstructed view of the sky. It should feel faster but the difference is minimal; in fact *Motor* magazine's road tests of the factory B V8 and a GT-bodied Costello Mk I fractionally favoured the former's pace.

However, with a proper ride height, 185/70 tyres and Koni dampers on the front (and lever-arms still on the rear), the Costello steers much more accurately than our GT and has terrific bite from the front end without ever pitching the tail into waywardness. This is a thoroughly entertaining sports car, and one which BL should have made. Which brings us to...



Standard grille is not the distinctive Costello eggbox, but was specified by the first customer. Costello badge is classy and the commission plate makes it official.



Standard dash and wood rimmed wheel, connected to a column with an extra universal joint.

OWNER



Richard Fairclough
'My friend Richard Archbell bought the Costello new in 1974 and we went round Europe in it that summer. He sold it then in 1985 I saw a Costello for sale. It was the same car, so I just had to buy it. I share it with my daughter Helen.'

SPEC AT A GLANCE

- Rover P6 twin-SU induction
- Long-legged 3.07 differential
- Flared rear wheelarches
- Koni dampers front (lever arms rear)

'The Costello roadster is what you would expect... a thoroughly entertaining sports car and one which BL should have made'



JOHN BELL: COSTELLO'S FIRST CUSTOMER



'I had a 1966 B roadster with a hot cam, but one day I was stopped by two coppers in a Daimler SP250 in Kent. I knew Ken Costello, who then worked at Cripps in Sidcup and was British Saloon Car Champion, so I asked him what he could do to make the B quicker. He reckoned a small American V8 would go in – he'd already seen the Rover one – and he found a Buick version in Suffolk from a car left behind by an American serviceman. So he fitted it to my car at his home.

'That was the first Costello MGB V8, but it was his next, more thoroughly-engineered one that convinced him to set up a company to make more of them. BL had earlier had the same idea but concluded that the conversion wasn't feasible owing to the lack of underbonnet width. However, once engineering chief Charles Griffin had seen Costello's cars he thought again, and we know the rest.'



The very first production Costello V8 is rolled out. It started here.

MG V8 GROUP TEST

MG SUPERSPORT

So far we've had two very different interpretations of the V8 roadster idea. Here's another, developed a decade ago but which still represents today's state-of-the-art V8 art. It's a mobile showcase for much of what the MGOC Spares operation can offer and would cost around £35,000 to replicate from scratch, but you don't have to have everything. Not even the black-lacquered walnut trim...

At its heart is an MGOC version of a Heritage roadster shell, strengthened and tailored for a modern V8 conversion with, among other things, RV8-like reinforced holes in the inner wings through which freer-breathing, more opened-out exhaust manifolds can pass. The shell also has RV8-like mounts for rear anti-tramp bars.

The rear springs are single-leaf composite items, no longer available, while the front suspension is the RV8 arrangement with balljoints instead of kingpins (the MGOC now sells its own version). Dampers are telescopic, steering is mechanically power-assisted, and the wide wire wheels bear 185/65 R15 tyres. The rear wheelarch lips are rolled back to clear them.

Under the bonnet lurks a 3.9-litre V8 tuned to a predicted 265bhp and breathing through an Edelbrock four-barrel carburettor which, on its Offenhauser manifold and under its 'low rider' filter, fits



A Heritage shell with just about every V8 added extra the MGOC can find in its stores. Fast as you like.

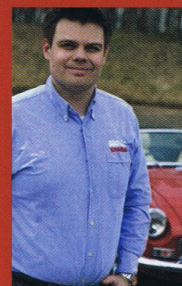
under the bonnet with no bulge required, as long as the bonnet's crossbrace is repositioned. Spent gases spurt out of twin tailpipes, and the power produced in the process is channelled through a Rover five-speed gearbox and the V8's usual 3.07 diff.

It's brilliant. All that power and not much weight makes this a properly fast car, and it sounds magnificent with its high-revs howl. Not that you need to rev it, because this engine is a true torquehouse, well able to pull from the very high fifth gear.

Getting beyond an indicated 140mph is easy, if draughty, given the unnaturally high driving position on as-yet-unsquashed leather seats, but the power steering feels unsettlingly light and feedback-free as the pace rises. MGOC's new system has been developed to return feel at speed.

Steering apart, this is a properly-sorted car which works superbly, clearly has rigid structure and feels unbreakable. Lovely.

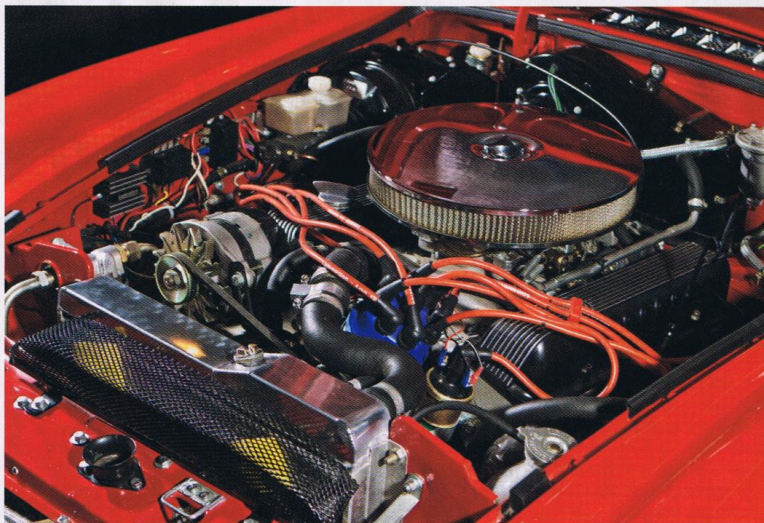
CUSTODIAN



Chris Bentley
'MGOC Spares developed this Supersport nearly 10 years ago but it's still at the top of its game for performance. It always attracts interest at car shows. We're now working on an aluminium brake caliper and additional rear suspension developments.'

SPEC AT A GLANCE

- Telescopic dampers
- Electric power steering
- 265bhp V8 with Weber four-barrel carb
- Four-pot calipers and vented discs



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MGB V8 SEBRING GT

Owner John Griffiths calls it Krakatoa. He's wanted a Sebring-look GT ever since he was racing MGs back in the 1990s, but with V8 power rather than the straight-six that powered the works Sebring MGCs. He was planning to build one of his own when this blue beast came up for sale at a tempting price.

Krakatoa started life as a standard GT in what Maurice Nixon, a Carlisle-based engineer and enthusiast, described as 'a vile purple'. Maurice turned the B into a wide-bodied Sebring, and its fresh paint job in bright blue caught the eyes of Andrew Monkhouse and Alan Walker whose Complete Engineering Services company was just across the yard from Maurice's workshop. They fitted the lightly tuned V8, currently thought to give around 175bhp via the mid-mounted SUs that nestle under the bonnet bulge, and having bought the MG from Maurice they did road rallies in it.

Then the business expanded and the MG had to go to help pay for it, which is where John came in. He has great plans for the B GT, involving a lot more power, but even in its current form it's a hoot.

The interior is stripped almost bare, with white-painted panels, lightweight door trims and a pair of racing seats. Turning on the ignition triggers the buzz of a Facet fuel pump; pressing the start button brings on a



'Krakatoa' is everything you'd expect but, thanks to the SD1 gearbox, revs run out at just over 120mph...



'Pitch it playfully into a bend, and enjoy its thrilling mix of grip and drift'

stereophonic eruption from the two exhaust pipes, one on each side exiting ahead of the rear wheels. It's the purest way to hear a V8's cackling beat; keep each bank's aural contributions separate. Krakatoa spits and crackles as the throttles are shut, bellows anew as they are blipped open again.

Uncontrollable savagery is the sonic promise. Actually it's a pussycat, albeit a dyspeptic one. It's quick, as a stripped-out lightweight B V8 should be, with very punchy acceleration thanks to a standard, short-g geared MGB differential which whines with protest at the excessive torque being channelled through it.

The gearbox is the oft-used Rover SD1 five-speed but even fifth sounds busy and the revs run out beyond 120mph. This particular 'box is a challenge, with inconsistent spring biasing making it too easy to wrong-slot, but soon you learn the knack and can trust it to give you the right gear as you commit to a corner.

Upon which you find that Krakatoa, with its enormous 235/60 R16 tyres on Minilite wheels, is much the most physical of the cars here today. Prime your muscles accordingly, though, and you can pitch it playfully into a bend and enjoy its thrilling mix of grip and drift. It even rides decently for such a competition-flavoured car, despite running on original-type lever-arm

OWNER



John Griffiths
'I made a 600-mile round trip to view this car, and bought it on the spot. I always thought Sebring GTs looked fabulous when I raced in the B/C/V8 championship [winning the modified V8 class

in 1994], and I'll do some events this year, including the Targa Newfoundland in Canada after it gets its well-tweaked 4.6. Around 300bhp should do nicely.'

SPEC AT A GLANCE

- 175bhp V8 with mid-mounted SUs
- Short-g geared MGB diff' and SD1 5-spd box
- Stripped-out interior, racing seats

dampers. John will change these as part of a forthcoming thorough suspension update, along with the brakes, which do go a bit soft with hard use. The car will be all the better for the near-doubling of power that he's planning... after which Krakatoa may not be quite so benign. You'd better stock up on the Red Bull, John.

Who's coming home with me?

That's a tricky one. Do I savour racetrack fantasies in a volcanic V8 with bulging arches, or a discreet cruise in a refined grand tourer as the factory intended? Or is the essence of MGB best enjoyed with a convertible top stowed and my ears connected directly to the exhaust pipes?

The RV8 here is a unique piece of history, but for me it's more an artefact to possess than a car for joyous drives. The Costello does that better, and much more handsomely, and is a piece of pioneering history in its own right. Maybe that would be the one to have... but I had such a great time in the MGOC's latter-day interpretation of the idea that I'd rather go that route. Same idea, more thoroughly developed thanks to all the knowledge since gained. Ken Costello himself may well agree, given that he continued to develop B V8s into Mk2 and Mk3 forms with his own ideas.

So, MG Supersport it is - with the proviso that when John Griffiths has finished Krakatoa's transformation into something even more volcanic, I'd very much like to have a go. Please. ■

THANKS TO:

All the owners, Chris Bentley at MGOC Spares (www.mgocspares.co.uk), John Bell for his insight, and Ken Costello for the idea in the first place.

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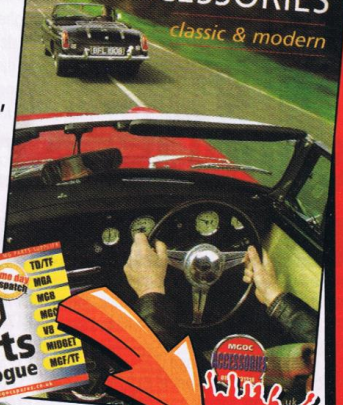
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