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The Costello has a very distinctive matte black, aluminium, egg crate grille

MGB GT V8

Costello



Around 60 Costellos are known to exist today with some languishing in barns or garages awaiting restoration, others used as daily drivers



Automotive heaven, for many, is the sound of a howling V8 combined with the invigorating chassis of a classic British sports car – that's as true today as it was back in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

It's a pity that in its glory days MG came rather late to this conclusion: the understated MGB GT V8 was eventually launched just as the Arab-Israeli war caused an international fuel crisis and sales never really took off. The V8 cause wasn't helped by a lack of investment in refining the basic MGB structure: there were complaints about poor handling and a harsh ride as well as the lack of interior comforts that customers wanted from a premium priced product.

Between 1973 and 1976 just over 2,500 were sold, all in right-hand drive for the UK market. There wasn't even time to perfect the installation for a roadster until, of course, 16 years later with the launch of the RV8.

Although a few left-hand drive examples were built, the official line was that the MGB GT V8 was never homologated for the USA (where it would have been hugely popular) because of the demand to crash test models.

However, some observers have suggested that a few did pass the US Department of Transportation Type Certification, but British Leyland bosses (MG was then under the wing of BL which was created in 1968) chose not to market it in America for fear of upsetting sales of its Triumph models, especially the TR7 which was set to be launched in the USA in January 1975, more than a year before it went on sale in the UK.

MG probably wouldn't have even thought of the idea of a V8 for the MGB in the first place had it not been for the genius and foresight of an independent technician who saw the potential four years earlier.

Former Mini-racer Ken Costello from Farnborough in Kent was well versed in making cars go quicker and, one day in 1969, came up with the idea of shoehorning a V8 into an MGB having seen a lightweight Buick V8 in a friend's garage.

Ken sourced an aluminium Oldsmobile V8, re-worked the engine bay of an MGB Roadster and crafted his own glass-fibre bonnet with a central dome to allow for the height of the inlet manifold with its twin SU carburettors.

Jensen alloy wheels were bolted on and a matte black aluminium egg crate grille was fitted to make it distinctive and, so that no one got it confused with the factory cars, Ken clipped on special V8 badges carrying his name – the Costello V8 was born and first saw the road in 1970.

The car was 90lb lighter than the standard MGB, offered 155bhp at 5,000rpm and had a claimed top speed of close on 130mph. When road tested by *Autocar* they got it up to 128mph and recorded a zero to 60mph sprint time of 7.8 seconds.

Ken's creation attracted a lot of interest among his friends and acquaintances: enough to encourage him to start his own production company.

For his next examples Costello approached British Leyland for access to the 3.5 litre Rover P6 215 cubic inch V8 – a block which BL themselves had acquired from General Motors to be used in the Land Rover line-up, ultimately powering the 1970 Range Rover.

This 155bhp 3531cc engine was, by then, well tried and tested having been fitted into more than a million Buicks between 1961 and 1963. In Rover guise, it has since appeared in many capacities from 3.9 to 4.2 and 4.6 litres and from twin SU carburettors to multi-port fuel injection.

The 3.9 and 4.2 litre options were subsequently offered on the Costello MKII together with an injection plenum, K&N Filters and a remapped ECU, while new inlet manifolds allowed the bonnet to revert to its original MGB shape.

Having completed a few examples, Costello had perfected the heart transplant re-profiling the rear bulkhead and inner front wings to accept the Rover V8, fitting specially fabricated tubular exhaust manifolds and holding it all in place with cast alloy mounts.

The remote radiator expansion tank was centrally mounted, with the top hose passing underneath the fan belt and the larger capacity radiator moved forward with a remote oil filter located on the inner front wing and a thermostatically controlled electric fan used in place of the belt driven original. The steering column was modified to have two universal joints for added clearance.

The adapted bell housing for the transmission used an uprated clutch and the final drive ratio from the MGC – a Costello five-speed gearbox became optional on later MKII models.

To cope with the additional power, the front suspension received uprated anti-roll bars, and lever arm dampers (MKII models offered cast alloy front suspension with tubular dampers) while the rear suspension featured anti-tramp bars, Panhard rod and uprated lever arm or telescopic dampers.

To bring everything to a stop Ferodo DS11 pads were fitted to the front brakes and servo assistance was included as standard.

Wheels and tyres varied but included Dunlop 14inch alloys or Minilites – 15inch alloys eventually became an option.

BL bosses (who had previously discounted installing a V8 in the MGB because they were told the body would need widening) were intrigued by the concept: BL technical director Harry Webster is recorded as having asked chief engineer Roy Brocklehurst what he knew about Ken Costello and his V8 conversion, as he was asking for a warranty on the Rover engines they were supplying to him.



The MKI Costello has the distinctive bonnet bump which appeared on the first 50 cars



Brocklehurst replied that he had seen one when Costello was at Abingdon sourcing parts from the special tuning division.

Ken was asked to bring one along to Abingdon and it was paraded before chief design engineer Charles Griffin and Harry Webster who, it appears, were impressed: one was eventually shown to BL chairman Lord Stokes, whose positive response prompted Webster to ask for a factory prototype to be built.



This was completed in a month and it didn't take long to decide that this was a route they should be investigating. The green light was given for the MGB GT V8 and, after some rather hurried development (including moving the carburettors to the rear of the engine bay to obviate the need for a bonnet bulge, moving the radiator forward, modifying the engine mounts, fitting twin cooling fans and shortening the steering column), it was officially launched on 15th August 1973.

While MG went on to make a total of 2,591 MGB GT V8s (launch price £2,293) and Costello's modest output between 1970 and 1974 has been estimated (because the works records no longer exist) at 225, of which around a quarter were roadsters – something like 60 Costellos are known to exist today. Some languish in barns or garages awaiting restoration, while others are used as daily drivers.



Long-time MGOC member, Colin Archer, acquired his MGB GT V8 Costello two years ago

Most examples were MKII versions fitted with rear-facing Weber carburettors which eliminated the need for a bonnet hump – a feature you either love or hate.

There were other versions of the Costello GT such as an MGC V8 (only two were built) and there was even a five-litre, eight-port injected model.

Although the Costello was lighter and faster than the BL version it was more expensive (£2,443 without overdrive, alloy wheels or radial tyres – almost double the cost of an MGB. This was, in part due to having to source V8s from overseas using Oldsmobile and Buick blocks: Rover had restricted supply, preferring to retain the engine for their own use.

One of these increasingly rare original MKI GT Costellos is now in the hands of long-time MGOC member Colin Archer from Dorset who admits that he didn't set out to acquire a Costello V8.

Colin, who first joined the club in 1978 has, over the years, owned and driven numerous MGs including an MGB GT (which was a replacement for a company car), MGB Roadster, MG Metro Turbo, MG Maestro and a trio of Austin Healey Sprites, plus a 1960 MGA and an MGA Twin-Cam.

It was two years ago that he sold his last MGA and started the hunt for something a little more energetic: having missed out on an MGC at auction, he set off in pursuit of other MGCs that were available at the time.

It was while on a visit to an Oxfordshire specialist, to look at his selection of MGCs, that Colin spotted an unusual GT sitting in the corner of the showroom - it turned out to be one of the first 50 MKI Costellos with the distinctive bonnet bump.

"It was a bit of love at first sight. I am always interested in more unusual cars (demonstrated by the fact that he also owns and regularly drives a Messerschmitt) but at the time I certainly wasn't looking for something like this," recalls Colin.

The Tahiti Blue Costello V8 with just over 15,000 miles indicated on the clock and nine previous owners was first registered on 21st February 1972 and for many years in the early 90s had languished unrecognised in the open air, before Brian Davey, the father of the then owner, decided to have a go at restoring it.

Even he was unaware of its origins, and it was only when he started to do some investigation and mentioned the non-standard bonnet bulge and grille that it was pointed out to him that he had his hands on a rather rare Costello.





Brian enlisted the professional services of Devon Classic Cars who removed the engine, gearbox and overdrive for refurbishing.

This allowed the very poor condition of the bodywork and chassis to be addressed. They were stripped back to bare metal, corroded sections were replaced and then the whole thing was reassembled and repainted – a process Brian started in 1993 but only completed in 2010.

An idea of the appalling state of the car when he started can be judged from the extensive list of parts he had to source which included floor pans, boot floors, outer wheel arches, castle sections, inner door skins, a tailgate and a wiring loom.

Even the Rover V8 was in a non-running condition and the work to bring it back to life included removing seized bolts, reboring the block, re-grinding the crankshaft and re-cutting and re-facing valves and seals. Also replacing the pistons, camshaft, damaged conrods, worn camshaft timing gear, rocker shafts and covers, and re-conditioning the carburettors and machining the flywheel.

The total restoration exceeded £21,000 – and that's just the bills that remain in its history file.

With the structure sound again and the engine ready to drop back in, the reassembling process could begin. After the V8 was installed the entire car was re-wired, brakes refurbished and the body resprayed.



To complete the project a new interior was installed including biscuit brown leather seating and trimmings, a full length Webasto roof slotted into place and, as a finishing touch, a set of Wolfrace alloys were bolted on.

A few more owners were to take possession of the Costello before it was added to Colin Archer's collection.

Although pleasantly surprised by the handling and performance of the Costello when he acquired it, Colin decided he wanted to make it a touch more manageable and reliable so he bought a £500 electronic power steering conversion kit from eBay for the rack and pinion steering, and installed it himself.



The torque of the V8 is an increase of 80 per cent over the standard four-cylinder, making it easy to drive with performance being available from low engine speeds in any gear.

KEN COSTELLO

Born in Kent, at the age of 18 Ken Costello graduated from Woolwich Polytechnic where he studied mechanical engineering and started work at the Motor Industry Research Department on the Great West Road in Brentford, Middlesex.

In 1959 a friend offered Ken a Mini for him to tune and race at the weekends. On his first debut at the Castle Combe circuit in Wiltshire he won straight out of the blocks and set a new lap record for the Special Saloons Group 3.

This encouraged him to develop Minis further, rebuilding an 850cc from scratch and lightening it with fibre-glass doors – he used this to set lap records at Brands Hatch, Mallory Park, Castle Combe, Crystal Palace and Snetterton.

In 1961 he was invited to run the Special Tuning Division for Lady Peggy Cripps who owned a Leyland dealership and Crippspeed, the firm's racing arm in Sidcup, Kent. He also raced Minis for the company over the next ten years, taking part in over 400 races with great success.

His racing career eventually spanned 12 years and included taking victory in the Redex British Saloon Car Championship in 1967 in his self-prepared Cooper 1275 S.

He followed this up with racing in Formula 3 driving a Brabham BT20 with a Cosworth engine, and was even hired to drive a Brabham in the hugely popular film *Grand Prix*.

Legend has it that, while visiting Monza for a sequence in the film, Ken came across a small block Maserati V8 which inspired the idea of creating his own compact V8 sports car.

Back in the UK he borrowed a red MGB roadster from an insurance assessor friend and purchased an Oldsmobile 215 V8: just six months later in November 1969 he had a running car.

His employer, Lady Cripps, was impressed and he built her the first of the GT V8s with improvements including the rear axle from an MGC.

Encouraged by the success and interest from others, Ken took the plunge and opened his own business in Farnborough, Kent with eight employees. Customers supplied a donor vehicle and his team would fit the V8 and make the other necessary modifications.

After the first 50 conversions were made, the V8 Costello was recognised by the British brand licensing authority as a marque in its own right.

In the late 1970s Ken sold the V8 conversion business to set up a new enterprise manufacturing a five-speed manual gearbox which coped better with the power of the V8 and could also be used in conjunction with the four-cylinder 1800cc unit – but this never entered full-scale production.

In the late 1980s Ken turned his attention to fuel injecting the V8 to fit into an MGB and also an ABS braking system. For a time he ferried light aircraft across the Atlantic from the US and sold them for a profit in Britain.

In later years, prior to his death in August 2015 at the age of 88, Ken was in regular demand to talk about his exploits at MG functions.

Despite its performance advantages, the Costello was more expensive than the BL version and demand petered out fairly quickly once the official MGB GT V8 was launched.

The factory version didn't last much longer, but these days it's the Costello that commands a price premium.

There is a dedicated website for Costello cars at www.mgcostello.com where there is much more information for anyone who is interested.



He then added a Bilstein telescopic front suspension kit and fitted 123 electronic ignition so that the car fires up spot-on at the first turn of the key.

Leaving everything on the outside pretty much as he found it, Colin's only other major contribution to the colourful history of the car has been the installation of a Walnut fascia (to replace the standard MGB black finish dashboard).

"Don't tell anyone" says Colin, "but this is one of the best cars I have ever driven. The power delivery is smooth, it is very tractable in town but then when you put your foot down it just goes - it's a real pleasure to drive. You can do 80/90mph without a worry (where speed limits permit)".

This is, of course, made possible by the fact that the torque of the V8 is an increase of 80 per cent over the standard four-cylinder, making it easy to drive with performance being available from low engine speeds in any gear.

Colin found this particularly useful when he drove it to spectate at the historic Angoulême street racing in France, a journey which proved a great shake-down.

Even on short journeys Colin says it still returns between 24 and 25mpg. Insurance is no problem and on a classic policy is very reasonable for a V8. 🚗