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Palmer's 'traditional' MG roadster for the US market on the turntable at Cowley.

from Cowley, while secretly hoping that HMO 6 would become the new model.

The Palmer car was still at the drawing board and rough mock-up stage but was due to be ready for production by March 1954. This was alarming news for Enever and Thornley, who were convinced that HMO 6 was the car they wanted.

"Undoubtedly these motor-cars, or something like them, provide a very suitable long-term development from the TD", wrote Thornley, "but bearing in mind what was said about the need for sending to the USA only well-trying designs, we must be extremely careful not to place ourselves in the position where we are utterly dependent on the

continuance of the market upon the premature introduction of an untried motor-car".

Abingdon doubted whether the new car could be ready by March 1954 and, if it were, would it be reliable and satisfactory, given the unorthodox design? The sensible course, therefore, they thought, was to introduce the face-lifted TD in September 1954 and let it run for 12 or 18 months: "during which time Mr Palmer's new motor-cars can be fully-developed and tried and all the bugs taken out of them".

This unenthusiastic welcome for the Cowley car was a strategy to play for time, while pushing the cause of what was described as "a fully-stream-

lined car, tentatively called the Series UA". This was, of course, nothing more than a euphemism for HMO 6, the rejected MGA prototype. It was intended to fill a gap in the US market between the TD and the Jaguar XK 120, and would be sold as a competition car and to those who wanted a really fast British car for long-distance travel. Produced in limited quantities, said the Abingdon submission soothingly, its price need be of no great concern and if introduced at the time of the TF, it would not lead the market to believe that it represented the ultimate shape of the quantity-produced MGs of the future. Years later John Thornley admitted that this was an attempt to get the MGA in by the back door.

Events elsewhere favoured his

The all-enveloping body was for continental markets. The windscreen had a clever swivelling mechanism which enabled the bottom of the screen to slide downwards and forwards over the bonnet rather than folding down flat.



Jack Hawkins takes a break from filming The Man in the Sky to pose with an early 1500.

the British Triumph TR2.

All in all, wherever it was tested, the verdict on the new MGA was immensely favourable. As *Motor* said, the famous MG slogan "Safety Fast" was never more aptly applied.

Production picked up to 13,410 cars in 1956 and 20,571 in 1957, when the roadster went up £35 to £995 including tax, and the new coupé rose by £37 to £1087. Production dropped back to 16,663 in 1958 and 7644 in 1959 as the Twin Cam and new 1600 came on stream.

The last 1500, a left-hand drive car in Island Green, chassis 68850, was completed on June 3 1959, while production of the 1600 was already going ahead.

The MGA 1500 was a great success, cornering the market in its class. Its only competitors, said *Autocar* in May 1957, were the Volkswagen Karmann Ghia and the Simca Weekend and Oceane. (Whatever happened to these last two?) This statement was more than passing strange, since MG believed the car's chief competitor to be the TR3 and said so in notes marked "Confidential" which were circulated to sales staff, defining the MGA roadster in an excruciating cliché as "the car for the young executive or the executive who is young at heart". This was accompanied by a drawing of the mythical figure - a serious chap with pipe and glasses. If this mythical potential customer were to point out that performance of other sports cars was better, the sales staff had to reply that the MGA's was a SAFE (in capital letters) performance, thrilling enough to sat-



isfy most enthusiasts. This was perhaps to make the most of the TR's reputation of having unusual handling characteristics.

The secret briefing, headlined "It's their sort of car - sell it to them now", conceded that the TR3, with its larger engine of 1991cc, was able to return what was called "slightly better figures", especially with overdrive fitted. (The MGA was never offered with overdrive, though some engineering drawings were done in May 1957). In fact, 0-80mph in the TR took 20.7secs compared with the MGA's 32.1secs, and the top speed of the Triumph was 107mph, whilst the 1500 roadster could not reach the ton.

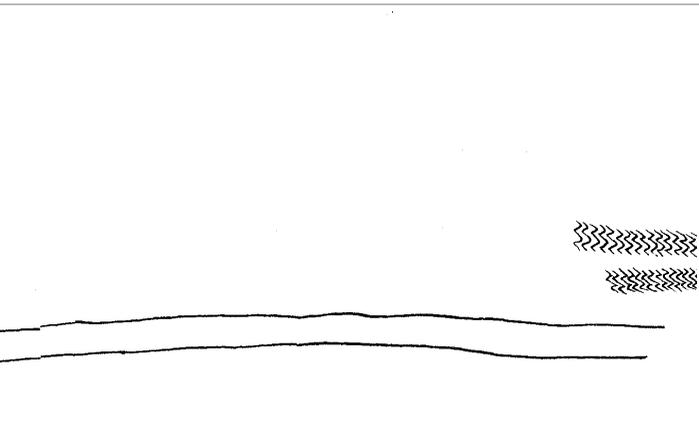
Sales staff were told to emphasize the MGA's other plus points: leather upholstery instead of the TR's leathercloth; a turning circle of 29.25ft against 33ft; the optional heater being the fresh-air type rather than a recirculatory unit, and an inch more headroom.

There was, however, no mention of brakes; in 1956 the TR3 was the world's first series production car with disc brakes, which the pushrod MGA did not acquire until the 1600 model in 1959.

Competition for the MGA's market at home was limited, unlike North America where the potential market was enormous and disposable income far greater. Italian and German exotica, such as the Alfa Romeo Giulietta Spyder and Porsche 356 have been mentioned as rivals in the UK, but these cars were far more expensive and lacked the huge dealer network that BMC had. The Alfa, for example, cost £2248 in 1958 - about double the price of a Twin Cam. The Porsche 1600 convertible cost marginally under £2000, as did the home-grown Lotus Elite.

The MGA's like-for-like rivals were the Morgan Plus Four, built in tiny numbers and retailing in 1958 at £968 and, from the following year, the Sunbeam Alpine - £971 at that year's London Motor Show, compared to the MGA 1600 at £940. The Alpine was to blossom briefly, then fall prey to the MGA's successor.

Making the MGA
As 1955 ended, the two production lines continued to gather speed and, some 18 months after manufacture began, nearly 100 MGAs a day were being made. Production of the MGA



Two who did it the hard way ... David McMillan and Norman Tosh took their car to Australia when they emigrated there. Towing a trailer and having the spare wheel on the bonnet must have made the handling unusual to say the least.

parts were welded together on a jig, the shell lead-loaded and painted, then carried on a slave chassis to the line to be dropped on to the chassis which, by now, had the engine in place.

Paintwork was in baked enamel, rather than cellulose, to cope with the Australian heat. The colours were different to those of the UK cars, and also offered something as standard that Abingdon did not - British Racing Green. Far more colours were offered than the standard British six or so, and they were exotic in name and tint:

1500

- Alpine Green
- Bardiman (Lark) Grey
- Billeroy (Lightning) Blue
- Carnation Red (engine red)
- Connaught Green
- Guan Green
- Mamba Black
- Nurburg White

1600

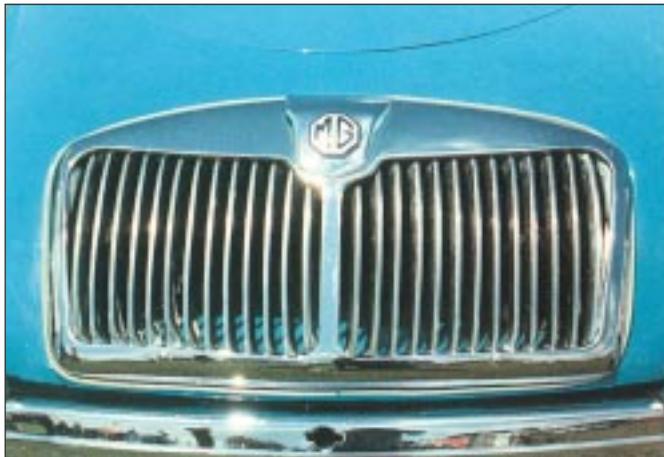
- Araluen Blue
- Hawthorn (British Racing Green)
- Camden Cream
- Cherry Red
- Cheviot Fawn
- Crocus Yellow
- Cumulus Grey
- Empire Green
- English Grey
- Gampian Grey
- Inca Yellow
- Kerrim (royal) Blue
- Monza Red
- Nurburg White
- Orchid



The first Twin Cam coupé assembled in South Africa was delivered to racing driver Bob Olthoff. He modified it heavily and it was campaigned successfully in southern Africa before he brought it to England in 1960.



Colour Gallery



The original grille.

The change on the last cars to a recessed pattern for the grille.



The first brochure referred to the MG series MGA, a description not generally used to describe the car.

