

MG TF Headlights Show the Way Ahead!

By Mike Hughes, edited by Bob Vitrikas

In our last MG Centenary history article we explored MG's post World War II expansion and the modernizing of the T Series body shape to keep MG production lines rolling until a thoroughly modern MG could be introduced. It is commonly held that MG was ready to introduce the MGA but was stymied by BMC management who had just approved the Austin-Healey which closely resembled the MGA body shape. MG needed to improvise, so a new body shape was hastily designed that incorporated integral headlights to keep up with MG's rivals, Austin-Healey and Triumph. As is so often the case, there is more to the story. Thanks to my long time (nearly 50 years!) MG friend and SVBCC member, Mike Hughes, here's the rest of the story. Thanks Mike!



UMG 400 or project number EX176, was built for the 1951 Le Mans 24 hour race and showed the way ahead for the MGA as did the faired in headlights for the TF that came along three years later. The streamlined body was a big improvement over the TD on which it sat but unfortunately the narrow TD chassis forced the driver to be perched high above the cowl. A new chassis for the MGA with wider side rails allowed the driver to sit lower in the car and out of the wind stream.

Hi Bob -

I read with interest your most recent article about the post-war progression of the pre-war M.G. T-series from TC through TF. The popular narrative that the introduction of the TF was the result of falling TD sales in 1953 and the new BMC management nixing Abingdon's plans to produce the MGA in favor of the Healey 100 are only part of the story. The real reason can be found in your description of the Abingdon plant as being an assembly plant reliant on outside suppliers.

During the New England MG T Register (NEMGTR) Circuit of Britain tour in 1990 Lucy (Mike's wife) and I were hosted for dinner one evening by a retired 2nd generation Abingdon worker and his wife. He told us about TD and Y headlamps being the reason for their eventual replacement with more modern designs.

It seems that Lucas, maker of the famous "King of the Road" headlamps that had adorned countless M.G. models and other British cars since before the War, had come to the conclusion that worn-out stamping dies were responsible for ever increasing numbers of reject headlamp buckets marred in stamping such that they couldn't be chrome plated. So Lucas announced in early 1952 that they would cease production. John Thornley had just become General Manager and immediately went to Lucas and secured all remaining stocks of "King of the Road" headlamps plus all related spares and all of the rejects as well. EX 175, inspired by the sleek '51 Le Mans racer UMG 400 with its faired-in headlamps, was still mostly on the drawing board, and it was vital to maintain Export sales of TDs until it was ready for production.

Over the lifetime of the TD there were three distinct versions of Lucas "King of the Road" headlamps: Chrome plated buckets with chrome plated "King of the Road" medallion inserts and chrome finishing ring, body-color painted buckets with chrome plated "King of the Road" medallion inserts and chrome finishing ring, and plain body-color painted buckets with chrome finishing ring, lacking the stamped orifice into which the chrome plated "King of the road" medallion could be inserted.



As production rolled on all TDs received chrome plated headlamp buckets until stocks were depleted. At that point reject buckets with stamped orifices were painted body color, received chromed "King of the Road medallions" and were sent to the assembly line.

A 1952 MG TD painted headlamp bucket. Notice the chrome "King of the Road" medallion behind the screw.

When those ran out the last of the reject buckets that had not gone through the final stamping to receive the "King of the Road" medallion would be painted body color and sent to the line. When those ran out TD production would effectively cease. (Ed note: Per The Original MG TD Midget web site (https://www.mg-cars.org.uk/mgtd/mgtd_finishes.htm#ChromeHeadlamps), "on later TD's (late 51, 52 and 53) the headlamp bodies were painted the body color. Some very late 53s had chrome bodies again." Mike surmises the reason for this. "In 1953 Abingdon executed a "Hail Mary" play and sent out a parts request to domestic M.G. agents and overseas distributors to return any chrome headlamps in dealer parts departments."

With this in mind, John Thornley went in late 1952 to Leonard Lord, head of newly merged BMC, seeking permission to execute plans to replace the TD with the MGA and was turned down, although not completely. MGA production might begin in 1955 after the Healey 100 had established itself in the market.

The problem was that there were not enough headlamp buckets on hand to sustain TD production through 1954, let alone 1955. What to do? Produce a sleeker TD with modern style faired-in headlamps! Cecil, Alec, Syd and Billy were tasked with the job and produced a running prototype in just two weeks. It was driven up to BMC headquarters, approved, and turned over to the design office for engineering drawings to be generated for distribution to suppliers to produce the components for Abingdon to proceed with production.

In addition to fairing in the headlamps, they also lowered the body lines a bit, introduced a pressurized cooling system and redeployed the fuel pump to a cooler, lower location per future MGA specs, and adapted the TD center cluster panel to accept the pretty octagonal gauges from the Y-type saloon, simplifying assembly of right and left-hand drive vehicles on the line. When the last of the TD headlamp buckets were depleted, there were TF components ready on site for what was effectively face-lifted TD

production to continue almost without a break.

Thus was born what many would agree was the prettiest pre-war M.G. Abingdon produced in the post-war period.

Thanks for your "illuminating" insight, Mike! Once again



I've learned something about MGs from you. Please keep those cards and letters coming!

Mike and Lucy are long time MG enthusiasts. Mike joined the MG Car Club in November 1971 and the New England MG T Register in fall of 1973 after purchasing his first T Series. Despite not owning an MGA at the time, Mike was a founding member of the North American MGA Register having been present at the initial organizing meeting in July 1975. Fast forward 40+ years, and they now have a beautiful MGA coupe in their garage. Mike and Lucy recently joined the Shenandoah Valley British Car Club. Their stamina for long journey's in their MG TF is legendary. The Circuit of Britain Mike mentioned above was one such example. Check out this 12 minute video of that epic trip. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVtmYmmewxE> Prior to the Circuit of Britain, the NEMGTR also sponsored other journeys of Biblical proportion such as the 1986 Ocean to Ocean T Tourist Trophy event celebrating 50 years of the T series MG. Incredibly about 50 T series MGs drove from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast and **BACK AGAIN** in just 18 days! Two years later in 1988 about 25 T series MGs drove the Kimber Alaska Challenge from Syracuse, NY to Alaska and across the Arctic Circle. Wow, consider me impressed!

Safety Fast!

Bob