

MG: The Ultimate Survivor, 1980-?

By Bob Vitrikas

This will be the final installment in the MG Centenary Series of articles, commemorating 100 years of MG history ... and still counting! I hope you enjoyed the ride! We left off last time with the completion of the last MG on 23 October 1980 and seemingly the end of the line for the MG car. Well don't ever count MG out! In mid-1980 Aston Martin was aghast at the thought of the revered MG brand being banished to the dustbin of British sports car history. By this time that dustbin was pretty much filled to overflowing. The Aston Martin Lagonda board, and like minded investors, made a 30 million pound (about 120m pounds today) offer to British Leyland to buy MG. The whole package: production rights, the Abingdon plant and the rights to the M.G. brand name. The business case was that Aston Martin would have an entry level sports car at a bargain price. In May 1980 Aston Martin acquired a new Russet Brown MGB roadster and on 19 June sent it off to Aston's Special Projects Department at their Newport Pagnell headquarters for a hasty makeover to show what could be done with 18 year old MGB design. The design was handled by famed British designer William Towns. A team of talented AM workers; four sheet metal workers, one trimmer, two fitters and a project lead engineer. Their charge was to modify the front bumper and grille, re-do the rear license plate surround, fit the taller windscreen from the MGB GT, relocate the fuel filler rear fender and cover it with a door, install an Astrali steering wheel and Wolfram wheels and seats. On 25 June, just 6 days later, the modified MGB, now sporting a fresh coat of Metallic Oyster paint, was completed. It was to no avail when talks with British Leyland broke down and four months later the MG Abingdon plant was closed. The one-off car, deemed 'surplus to requirements,' was sold to a Mr. Ian May in July 1984. Swing and a miss. Strike one for MG's revival. This modified MGB recently came up for sale at a classic car dealership in Germany. You can read about it in the Classic Driver magazine's January 2022 article: <https://www.classicdriver.com/en/article/cars/meet-one-aston-martin-mgb-never-was>



Not bad for a 'One week wonder' but I'm not keen on the high windscreen.

The uproar from MG enthusiasts, dealers, workers, clubs and customers that protested closure of the MG factory on 24 October 1980 was heard round the world but it didn't change BL management's decision. BL head Sir Michael Edwardes later said he regretted his decision to close the factory. Small consolation to MG lovers.

From 1982-1991 the MG badge was hung on Austin Rover's rather ho hum Metro, Maestro, and Montego cars. Oh dear me!

Significantly, in 1989 Mazda, rising from the ashes of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, launched the Miata which hit the market with a splash. Suddenly the Japanese were doing what British Leyland failed to do, manufacturing small, cheap and cheerful two seater sports cars by the boatload. Over 1 million Miatas have been sold and top everyone's top 10 list of desirable sportscars.



But wait, there's more. Following closure of the MG factory in 1980, demand for the MGB on the used car market continued strong and many owners found themselves needing a replacement body shell due to 'demon rust' ravages of time. An enterprising group of former MG plant workers and managers led by British Motor Heritage Limited rounded up the old tooling and began producing reproduction MGB bodies and parts.

Never before has the restoration of a classic car been so easy —

BRITISH MOTOR HERITAGE LTD proudly announces a brand new MGB bodyshell built to original specification.

QUALITY — The body is identical to that used in the MG Works at Abingdon during the period when the vehicle was still in volume production.

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MGB REBORN

TECHNICAL DATA

Each bodyshell produced will be as per the illustration and will well include Wings, Doors, Boot Lid or any tool on Works or Body Lines Doors.

They will be supplied Electrically primed and sealed ready for your colour coat application.

No undercoat or Waxed will be applied. Bodies produced will carry the seal of quality that every British Motor Heritage Approved part guarantees.

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Immediately or to order from your nearest Heritage Specialist.

By happy coincidence these were late model MGB bodies that accommodated the Rover V8. An instant market for these bodies sprung up, especially in the States, and soon V8 engined MGBs were seen at British car shows everywhere. Oh happy day for those fortunate and industrious few. Hmm.... Rover saw what was happening and in 1991 they decided to have a go at resurrecting the MG marque.

It was a straightforward rebirth. Rover used the new body shell, dropped in the Rover V8 now producing 190 hp, updated the MGB suspension, brakes and smoothed the body a bit for a cleaner, more modern appearance, install some spiffy wheels and do what the British do best, install a luxurious leather lined and wood paneled interior and voila the MG RV8 was born! The RV8 debuted at the British International Motor Show in October 1992. IMO it was a beautiful looking piece of kit but unfortunately it competed with more modern marques such as TVR. Of the 1,983 RV8s produced, ironically 1,579 went to Japan, home of the Miata! Just 330 were sold in the UK. No left drive models were built and none were sold in the U.S.. RV8 production ceased in 1995.

If you attend the MG Car Club Washington DC Centre's MG '94 celebration, you had a chance to see the only (at that time) MG RV8 in North America courtesy of Roche Bentley, head of the MG Owner's Club. He kindly shipped his personal RV8 to our show. Even better, he tossed me the keys when he left for home giving me instructions to use it and enjoy it until it had to be shipped back to the UK in a couple of month's time. Thank you Mr. Bentley! I made sure that I followed his instructions to the letter and gave every MGCC board member (and others) a ride. My good friend Jonathan Stein, then Editor of Automobile Magazine and avid MG enthusiast, was at MG '94 and together we gave Roche's RV8 a thorough road test on the roads around Dulles Airport. Wheee! What a wonderful ride that RV8 is. Would you like to have one? Thanks to a change in the U.S. importation law, any car over 25 years old can get a waiver on the safety and emissions requirements, be imported into the U.S. and parked in your ga-



E&R Classics has this Caribbean Blue beauty for sale. Excuse me while I call my bank...

rage. I am so tempted...

Meanwhile back at the corporate boardroom, in 1986 BL begat the Rover Group, in 1988 Rover Group sold the MG marque to British Aerospace (remember the Concorde?), in 1994 British Aerospace sold the MG name to... gasp, BMW. Encouraged by the reception of the RV8, the MG F was initially designed and sold by the Rover Group from 1995-2000. The four cylinder, 120 hp or 145 hp (a special edition 160 hp version was available in 2000), transverse mid-engine two seat roadster was very popular, re-

ceiving kudos for its excellent handling and ride. Depending on the engine choice, 0-60 mph performance ranged from 9 to 6.9 sec and top speed from 116-137 mph. Not too shabby in the late 1990s.



The MG F is a nice looking piece of kit, eh?

If you thought that was pretty good performance, fasten your seatbelts because the next chapter in the MG F story is a humdinger! Remember how MG set a boatload of international speed records from 1930 to 1959 culminating in American Phil Hill (not Sir Stirling Moss) setting the record for the fastest ever MG at the Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah at 254 mph? That history inspired a group of enthusiastic MG engineers from Drovers Group's Gaydon Design and Engineering Centre to take on another record breaker project. Project EXF kicked off in May 1997 with the objective of mildly modifying a stock MG F to attain a top speed of 200 mph. The MG F body was lightly modified to attain an impressive drag coefficient of 0.25. The four cylinder K-series engine was down-sized from 1.8 to 1.4 litres due to its lower compression ratio which was friendlier to turbocharging. Power output was an impressive 329 hp @ 7,000 rpm. Amazingly all the work was completed in time for a run at the record on 20 Aug 1997 half way around the world at Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah. The result was a record run of 217.400 mph!



Reprising the iconic photo of Sir Stirling Moss taking a much deserved drink, modern driver Terry Kilbourne has earned his drink too!

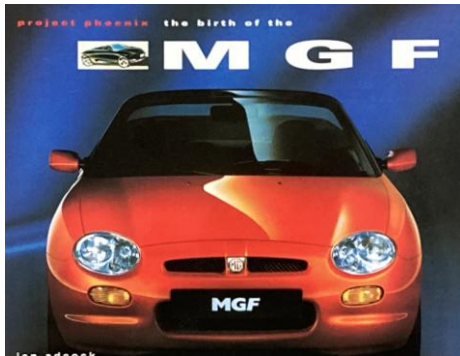
Meanwhile back again at the corporate boardroom MG machinations continue. This is a bit tricky so stay with me. In 2000 BMW dismembered the Rover Group selling Land Rover to Ford and carving off MG and Rover to form a separate MG Rover business. MG Rover manufactured the MG F largely unchanged until January 2002. Despite all these corporate shenanigans, the MG F was Britain's most popular convertible, selling 78,968 of these little mid-engine jewels when in 2002 it morphed into the substantially updated MG TF which continued on until 2005 when MG Rover went bust. Blimey! What remained of MG Rover was sold in April 2005 to the Chinese auto manufacturer Nanjing Automobile. With an infusion of Chinese cash, and reorganized as MG Motor in 2007, a new MG factory was built in, can you believe it, China, and MG production again began in this far away land in March 2007. Aided by British manufacturing experts from the UK Longbridge plant, the new factory was said to be capable of producing 200,000 MG TFs a year. Wow! Meanwhile back in Blighty, in August 2008, three years after closure of the Longbridge factory as a result of the bankruptcy of MG Rover, MG production took a 180 degree turn about when complete knock down (CKD) MG TF kits were shipped from China to Longbridge where blokes once again were assembling MGs in Oxfordshire. Ahhhh. Now don't get too excited. Production of the Chinese MG TF at Longbridge staggered on until March 2011 when production ceased for the second time. Just 906 MG TFs were built in Longbridge. Now what?



A 2022 MG 6 on the show stand at the Thailand International Motor Expo 2023.

The modern day TF looks pretty spiffy in its hardtop guise.

This is where the Chinese owners took MG away from the two seater sportscar model that had served them so well. On 26 June 2011, MG Motor leapt into the SUV market with the MG 6 in hatchback and four door saloon versions. Impressively Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao made the announcement at the Longbridge plant. By March 2012 the Chinese owners had invested over \$550 million in MG Motor. UK sales in 2012 were a meager 782 vehicles but MG was just getting started. Launch of the MG 3 in September 2013 really kick started UK sales boosting 2014 MG sales by 361%! MG sales continue to climb at a rapid pace including electric vehicles which make up 25% of their sales. It was encouraging to see so many modern MGs in the car park at the Centenary celebration at Gaydon in May! MG sold 115,000 cars in Europe in the first half of 2023, more than double the total for the same period last year.



OK, it's been 43 years since you could buy a new MG in a U.S. dealership and 12 years since the last MG soft top, the TF, was available anywhere in this wide world. Now what? Well next up on the MG hit

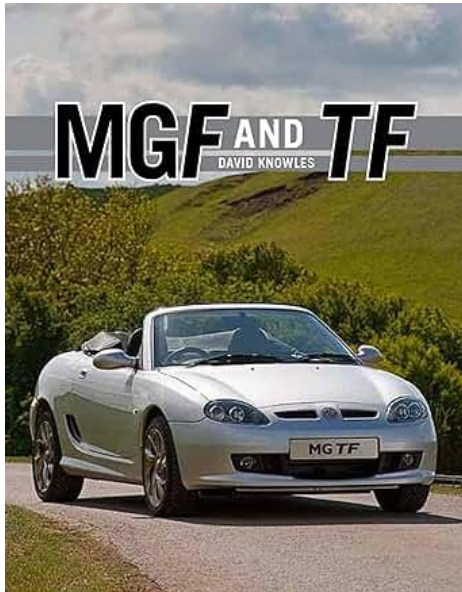


Sleek and modern looking with a 536 hp motor, this is not your grandfather's MG!

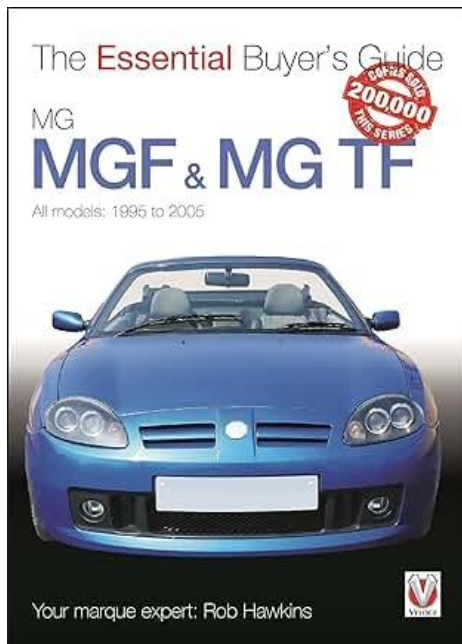
parade is the Cyberster which is due to launch in the UK next year. Having seen it in person at the MG Centenary I can say it is a stunner with Lamborghini like scissor doors and a very modern appearance.

Evo Magazine's road test was encouraging with an all important battery range of 360 miles, the Cyberster zooms from 0-60 in 4.6 sec with the standard 335 hp engine. An optional 536 hp monster motor slashes that figure to just 3.2 sec! The interior is as dramatic as the exterior which is to say "wow!" Typical of electric vehicles the Cyberster is heavy, very heavy, weighing in at around 4,225 lbs it weighs as much as the MGB and TF (modern one that is) combined! You might think the handling would suffer but that's not a problem thanks to former Ferrari vehicle dynamics engineer Marco Fa-nello. Now to answer the question you all have, "Will I be able to buy a Cyberster in the U.S.?" In a word, "No!" The reason, politics.

There you have it 100 years of MG history; yesterday, today, and assuredly tomorrow! "Project Phoenix, the Birth of the MGF" by Ian Adcock is a thoroughly researched and richly illustrated 256 page hard cover book on how the MG marque rose from the ashes to become a top selling two seater, convertible sportscar that propelled MG into the second millennium.



“MG and TF: The Complete Story” by my friend and noted automotive author, David Knowles, completes the story of the rebirth of the MG. This hardcover book tells the story of the MGF and the MG TF in detail, benefiting from David’s extensive research. Inside you will find detailed specifications for the MGF and the TF, accompanied by over 300 photos and drawings.



“MGF & MG TF 1995-2005: The Essential Buyer’s Guide” by Rob Hawkins, provides the prospective MGF and TF buyer the benefit of years of experience with these modern MGs. The author promises to help you spot a dud or a diamond, what it costs to run and specifications of the models. Available in paperback, it is reasonably priced and being published in 2019, it provides the latest information and opinions on these two gems from MG.