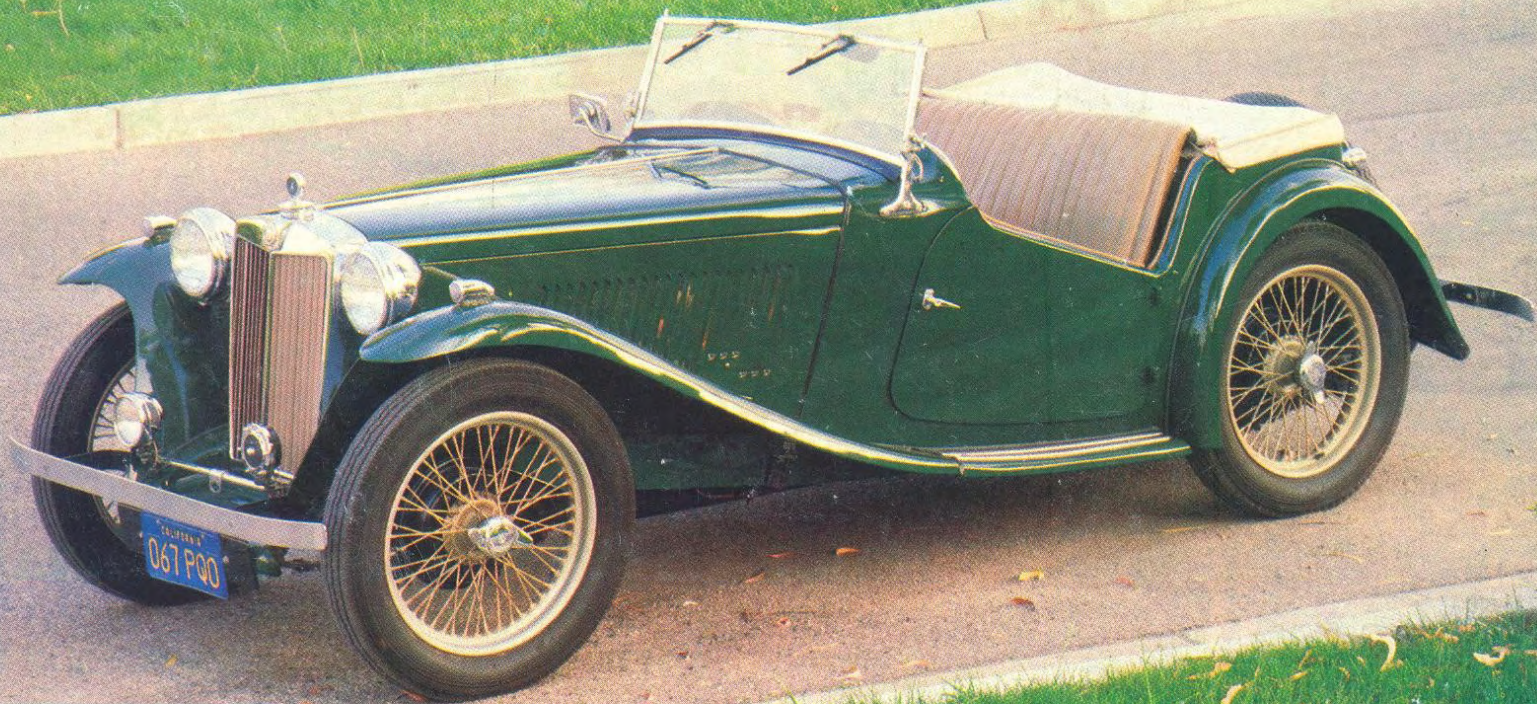


# Car Collector

## and Car Classics

49348K NOVEMBER 1980/\$2.00

**MG-TC: The Car That Started The Boom**  
**A Duesenberg Built For A Maharajah**  
**A Stroll Through A Maine Junkyard**  
**Rain, Like Pain, Is Soon Forgotten**





# MG-TC

# As British

# as roast beef

by Graham Robson

You feast your eyes on an MG-TC, parked at the curb, and you can nearly taste the character. In some ways it resembles the others sports cars of its era, but you'd never mistake it for one of its rivals. There is something about the lines of a TC

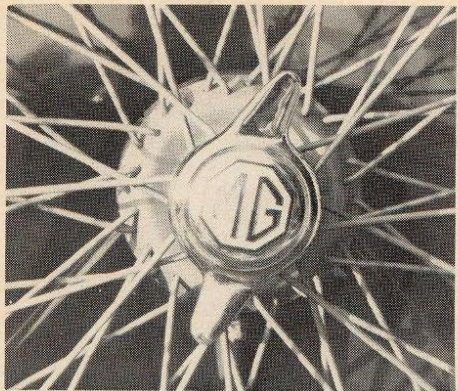
which many others tried to imitate when the car was new and since but none have succeeded. At first, then, driving a TC isn't necessary — just to look is quite enough.

It's all a question of *character*. But you can't give character to a car by talking about it, and you certainly don't buy the stuff in spray cans in a supermarket. Character comes already locked into the design, the style, the noise, and the road behavior. It also comes from the men who conceived it, and the workforce who built it, and it is not always due to rapid acceleration or a high top speed. After all, lots of the fastest Mustangs were really very nasty indeed, and you'd have to be a real motoring philistine to be repelled by that slowest of all cars, the Citroen 2CV.

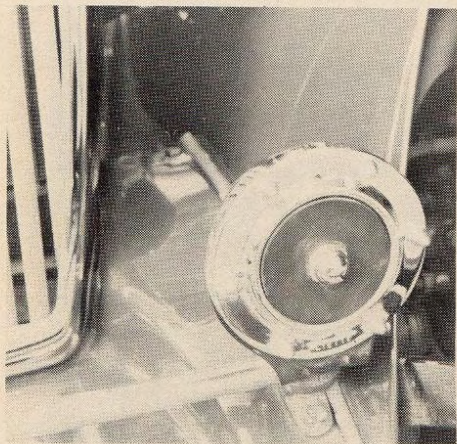
Time, now, to get into the car, and that isn't easy. There are sharp corners and odd angles. This, then, could only be a thoroughbred British sports car. There is a right way (the easier way) and a wrong way. Even the right way, for a truly modest girl, can be something of an ordeal; the wrong way, for anyone, could inflict as many bruises as a brisk workout with an American football team. Remember this: open the door and hold it (there are no door 'keeps' on such a machine), move backwards into the car, and settle your backside on the seat at once. Duck your head to avoid the hood irons (if the top is up), then swing your legs inboard without clouting the door pillar, and thread them down the narrow well past the gearbox tunnel.

Slam the door, flex your shoulders, and shuffle around. You don't have an independent seat adjustment, by the way. If you are a very different shape from the passenger, then the passenger has to suffer. With two people on board it's cozy — very cozy indeed. But as there isn't a heater, not even as an option, and the sidecurtains let in the wind, you won't mind that. Somehow, in the last thirty or forty years, people seem to have grown bigger, and the cars grew along with them. Getting back into a 1930s design (for the TC is really just a 1936 model slightly updated) brings instant nostalgia, and probably a bit of claustrophobia. From door to door, across the seat cushion, you have to share a mere 44 inches with your companion. (With a PA of 1934 it was even tighter. There were only 35 usable inches.) What was that about making friends in a sports car? With this model, you'd have little choice.

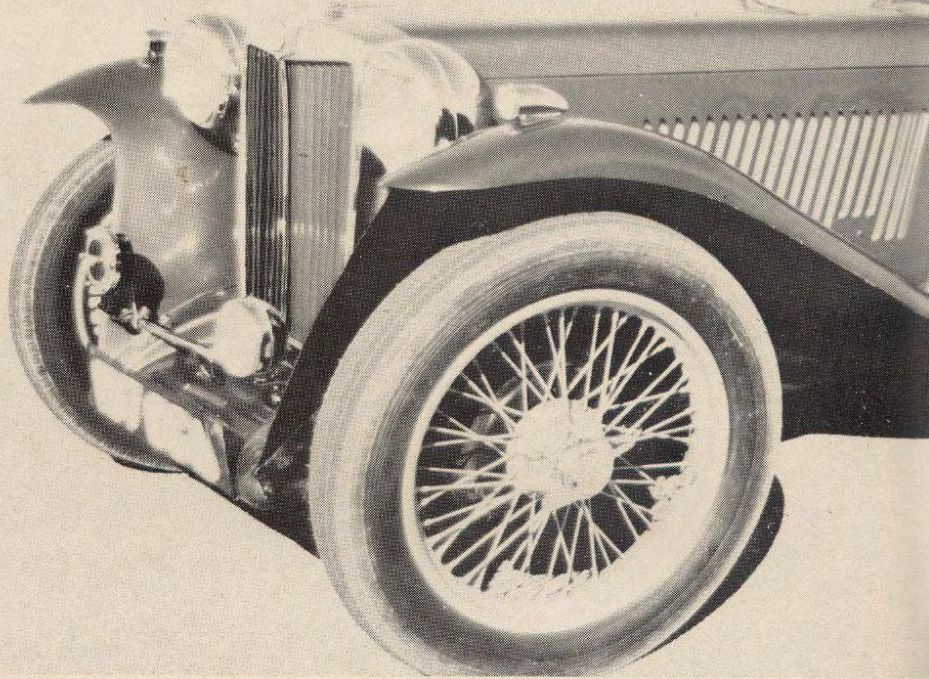
It may look cramped now, and to many people it always looked old-fashioned, but it was never a joke. In marketing terms, the traditionally-styled TC was probably the last car which the British would have chosen to head their postwar export drive to North America. It was, after all, the last of its type rather than the first of a new breed; it was a throwback to the 1930s rather than a visionary look forward to the 1950s. It seems, however, that the TC started to sell so well in North America because of MG's British wartime reputation.



The spare on the TC was carried in the continental style.



The horn was usually mounted on the right-hand side of the badge bar.



The MG-TC is universally acknowledged as the car that started the sports car craze in America. Ex. England, factory, but only 2,001 found their way to the United States as new cars. Many more exaggerate their impact on the American consciousness.

From 1942 onward, don't forget, Britain was a vast stepping-off base for US and Canadian servicemen. No matter how short a stay they enjoyed, part of the scene, even in spite of very restricted petrol supplies, was the tiny British sports car, zapping from air bases to British pubs, from a barracks to a girl friend's place, or from the PX to a dispersal area. That sports car was often an MG, usually overloaded, and sometimes below its best, but always loved with the intensity which only nerves tuned to a war-zone pitch could achieve. Once home, and frequently appalled by what Detroit had to offer, the GIs looked around for fun, and found it again with their MGs.

But if the MG was new to North America in the 1940s, it was not new to Europe. There had been MG sports cars in the fun business since 1923, and there had been MG Midgets on sale since 1929. The Midget story began with the tiny M-type of that year, which was nothing more than a Morris Minor chassis and running gear topped by a cheap, rakish, and attractive little two-seater sports car body. The man behind the Midgets was Cecil Kimber, who designed (or influenced the design) of every

prewar MG sports car. The money behind MG came from Lord Nuffield personally until 1935, and from the Nuffield Group thereafter. After the M-types came the J2, which was followed by the PA and PB models. All had four-cylinder engines and the distinctive single overhead camshaft layout, in which the cam drive doubled as the spindle for the generator, vertically mounted at the front of the engine.

The trouble was that as performance (and price) went up, sales went down. For all that MG was a famous marque by the mid-1930s, it was also losing money, and Lord Nuffield (who was a reluctant but nonetheless card-carrying capitalist) did not like that. In 1935 his patience finally gave out, MG, which had been his personal baby, was sold to the Nuffield Group, the industrial corporation he controlled. Worse, he told Cecil Kimber that Nuffield, at the huge Cowley factory, would design a new car. Kimber, who had been the kingpin at Abingdon, was demoted to general manager, and had to answer to the abrasive but redoubtable Leonard Lord.

The sports car which evolved from this shakeup in MG policy was the TA. It

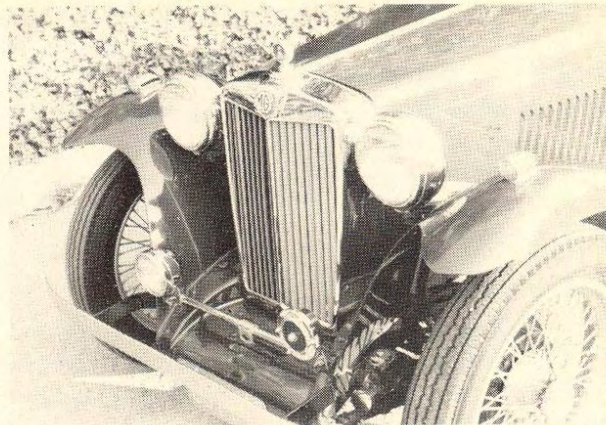
was designed, developed, and put into production in just twelve months, which was remarkable enough, but it was also bigger, better, faster, and no more expensive than the PB it replaced, which was quite sensational.

Even so, in 'pedigree' terms, the TA didn't deserve to be so good. It had a special, very simple and flexible, ladder-style frame, and it had a wood-frame two-seater body style very much like the superseded PB, but it used mildly-modified engines, gearboxes, and axles from one or other of the new range of Morris and Wolseley models then being introduced. The engine, in fact, was a long-stroke 1292cc unit with design ancestry stretching directly back to the 'bullnose' Morris engine of 1919, and indirectly to the North American Continental 'Red Seal' design, from which that unit had been copied. There were no synchromesh gears in the gearbox, and absolutely no sophistication in the leaf-spring suspension. Brakes were hydraulic, and smaller than those of the PB, while the weight was way up.

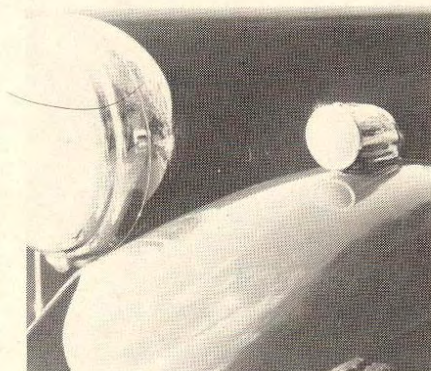
In summary, the TA should have been a dog, a real lemon, something to be confined to the average historian's 'derision' file for future reference. But it



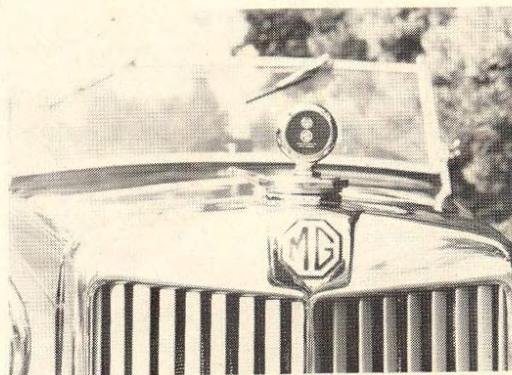
10,000 cars were built in the Abingdon-on-Thames, have been imported since by collectors. It is hard to



The horn and driving light were standard equipment, but the motometer and the rudimentary front bumper were after-market items.



Battery and lighting, including this wing-light, were by the ever-popular Lucas.



Folding windshield was standard on the TC; motometer, though, handy, was not available from the factory.

wasn't. Kimber's chief designer, Hubert Charles, had been transferred from Abingdon to Cowley to take charge of the rushed job, and coped magnificently. To everyone's amazement, including Kimber, the TA was the best Midget yet built.

Nuffield, however, meant to do better. Three thousand and three TAs were built between June 1936 and April 1939, at which point the TB took over. The TB was really an updated TA, with the short-stroke 1250cc Nuffield XPAG-type engine, and with top-third-second gear synchromesh. There was also a rare and costly Tickford drop-head coupe body, heavier, smarter, and better equipped. The second World War put a stop to TB production, after only five months and 379 cars.

In 1945, therefore, with Abingdon looking very different, Nuffield had to get private cars back into production where aircraft fuselages had been built for years. Cecil Kimber was gone — he died in a railway accident four years after being sacked from his MG job — and no new model had been designed during the war years. The TC, then, was born of expediency and need. It was the only car Abingdon *could* make without taking

18 months to develop a new one. It was nothing more than a slightly-modified TB — a TB in which the cockpit had been widened by four inches, leaf-spring sliding trunnions were replaced by conventional shackles, and the battery found a home in a case under the bonnet, rather than (in two six-volt cases) on the chassis frame ahead of the back axle.

No matter, for in those car-starved days the British could sell almost *anything* which could be delivered and, since the TC was a good deal better than 'anything', its future was assured. MG built them in relatively small numbers, more-or-less by hand (no moving assembly lines then or for many years afterward), almost entirely from purchased components. Chassis frames came from a supplier in the British 'Black Country' near Birmingham, the wood-and-steel paneled body shells from the Morris Bodies branch in Coventry, engines from Morris Engines in Coventry, and the rest of the transmission from Nuffield factories in Birmingham. The only Abingdon-manufactured items were the seats and trim, but it was the 'Abingdon touch' which ensured the character and the behavior of the car.

For years popular myth suggested

that the MG took North America by storm after World War II. The fact is that the first official export did not come until 1947, and only 2,001 TC's were sent to the United States, all with *right-hand-drive!* More TCs stayed in Britain than any other T-series model, 3,408 in all.

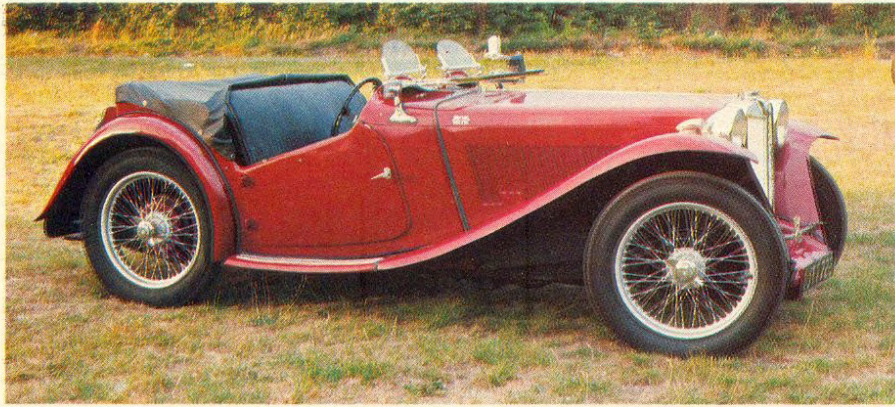
By Detroit standards, of course, production was a mere trickle. Only 81 cars were made before the end of 1945, but the 1,675 1946-model TCs were an Abingdon record for a single model. They improved on it in 1947 (2,346 cars) and yet again in 1948 (3,085 cars); 1949 might have seen a further record achieved, except that the TC was phased out in November, 1949, when exactly 10,000 cars had been built. During its most popular period, therefore, no more than 60 or 70 TCs were ever built in a week.

In absolute terms, the TC might have been a great success for MG (and it certainly did their reputation no harm at all), but it hardly set the sporting world on its ear. The good publicity it gained, however, was out of all proportion to its sales, and obviously helped launch the car which replaced it, the TD.

*Continued on page 48*

## MG TC

Continued from page 27



The MG-TC sports cars were the fuse that ignited the postwar sports car boom in America. Note the twin racing screens mounted on the lowered windshield. They were surprisingly effective, and kept many bugs out of the occupants' teeth.

By 1949, in fact, the TC's popularity had begun to peak out, and MG at last got approval for a new design to replace the 1935-pedigree TC. The layout and evolution of the TD, which took over from the end of 1949, is quite another story. It's enough, at this point, to say that the TC's engine and gearbox were used again, but that almost everything else was new. The style might still have been traditional, but there was, at least, a modern chassis with independent front suspension.

The TC, of course, was as traditional as they come, which is to say that it was not only slim and rakish, but it was low and very spartan. Every TC enthusiast, in most weather, ran his car with the top stowed, and with the sidecurtains tucked away behind the seats. In that state, and helped by the cutaway doors, you could touch the ground from a normal sitting position.

'Tradition', too, meant that the suspension was very firm, not to say rock-hard (that distinction is reserved for the pre-war J2s and P-types), that there really wasn't much wheel movement, and that the cam gear steering was very direct. After noting that 4.50-inch section tires are fitted on 19-inch wheels with 2.5-inch wheel rims, you'll agree that a run in a TC can be remarkably stimulating, if not mind-blowing.

For that trial run, take a good look at the weather, and dress accordingly. If you live in Los Angeles, or on Miami Beach, the T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers kit is fine. If you live anywhere north of a line through Chicago and New York, you'd better think carefully. Even with the top and sidecurtains up, there are piercing little drafts of air all over the place. Those wooden floorboards don't fit too well and, if the TC you try is quite old, they could also be rather poorly

matched to the aperture.

The problem is that if you close up the car to keep warm, your vision — particularly to the rear — is very restricted. On the other hand, to see all around you have to drive a TC with everything down and stowed. The wipers are small, very simply designed, and work the wrong way up, with pivots at the top of the screen. That screen, incidentally, can be folded flat if conditions are right for it.

Separate seat cushions with a bench backrest sound strange for a sports car, and so they are. MG didn't sort that one out until the TD Mk II came along, but at least the seating position is right. You sit low, with legs stretching forward, not down, and your eyes look out along a straight bonnet to the radiator cap. Praise be, in those days a radiator cap was for real — you actually unscrewed it to check the water level. The TC, you see, is all

about driving. . . and easy ownership. Once in that cramped driving seat, you'll feel comfortable and ready to rush off into the sunset. That exciting stubby gear lever is just *there*, high on the tunnel where your hand naturally falls away from the steering wheel. The wheel itself is nearly vertical, and you'll soon find the close-to-the-chest position is fine because the steering is so direct. With a TC, after all, there's no need for cross arm shuffling to go round any corner, especially with a turning circle of no more than 37 feet, and with little more than one-and-one-half turns of the wheel from lock to lock.

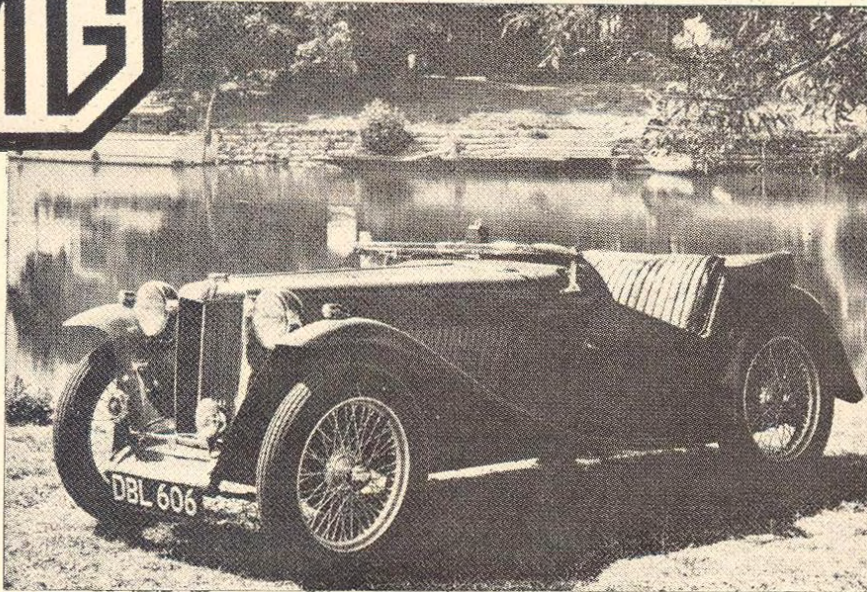
How well do you know your companion? You should find out, right now, because the TC's fly-off handbrake is over on his (or her) side of the transmission tunnel, just where your hand might brush against a knee. . . There's no nonsense about the instrumentation, either. It's the driver's privilege to watch the engine rev-counter, which is ahead of his eyes. The passenger, amazed, terrified, or impressed, as the case may be, has the speedometer straight ahead on the other side of the dashboard.

In absolute terms the TC isn't fast, nor was it fast when currently in production. Flat out it was good for only 75mph, and rushing up to 60mph from a red light took about 23 seconds. That sort of performance can be beaten by every VW Rabbit or Ford Fiesta you've ever seen, and they have four seats and good heating. They are not, however, built and badged as MG's, which makes a great deal of difference.

The TC was a rorty little car to drive,

John Fergus' TC has an appropriate 1974 Ohio license plate and is set up for racing. Note the number on the door, flattened windscreen, and taped headlights and driving lights.





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This advertisement appeared on the inside front cover of the February, 1950, issue of Road & Track (Volume 1, Number 8). R&T was the sports car buff's bible in the early days.

MG-TC — Origin and Statistics

The design of the MG-TC is based on that of the MG-TA, which was developed in 1935/36, and built from mid-1936. The TA was succeeded by the TB in the spring of 1939. The TB had the same chassis and body, but a new short-stroke engine and more power. The postwar TC was, in effect, a 1939-model TB with a slightly widened cockpit and detailed chassis improvements.

The first TC was built in November, 1945, and the last rolled off the assembly line in November, 1949, to be replaced by the very different TD. Every car was assembled at the MG Abingdon factory, a few miles south of Oxford.

Official statistics quote a total TC output of exactly 10,000 units, though this precise figure is sometimes queried by semi-official sources. A total of 2,001 cars were sold in the US and Canada between 1947 and 1950 (the last few 1949 calendar year cars did not reach the continent until the first days of 1950).

There was only one body style — a two-seater sports tourer, with 'build-it-yourself' top and sidecurtains — on the TC. Prewar TA and TB models had also been available in a drophead coupe style by Tickford, complete with roll-down windows, but this version of the body was not marketed on the TC after the second World War.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Engine: Type XPAG, of Nuffield design. Four-cylinders, in line, in a three-bearing cast-iron cylinder block. Bore, stroke, and capacity, 66.5 x 90mm, 1250cc (2.62" x 3.54", 76.4cid). Cast-iron cylinder head, with push-rod operated overhead valve gear. CR 7.25:1. Twin SU carburetors. 54bhp at 5200rpm; maximum torque 64 lb.ft. at 2600rpm.

Transmission: Single dry plate clutch. Four-speed manual gearbox, with synchromesh in top, third, and second gears, with remote control change. Spiral bevel rear axle, ratio 5.125:1. Overall gear ratios 5.125, 6.92, 10.0, 17.32, reverse 17.32:1. 15.84mph/1000rpm in top gear.

Suspension and brakes: Beam front axle, half-elliptic leaf-springs, and hydraulic lever arm dampers; live rear axle, half-elliptic leaf-springs, and hydraulic lever arm dampers. Cam gear steering. Front and rear drum brakes, drum dimensions 9.0" x 1.5" center fly-off handbrake. 4.50" x 19" tires on center-lock wire-spoke wheels, with 2.5" rims.

Dimensions: Wheelbase, 7'10"; front track, 3'9"; rear track, 3'9". Length, 11'7.5"; width, 4'8"; height (with hood erect) 4'5". Unladen (curb) weight, 1,735 lb.

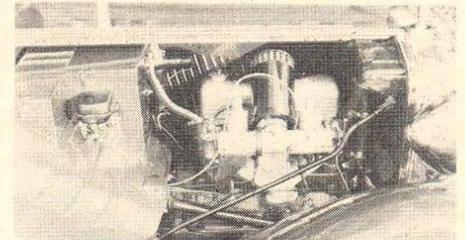
Base price: In Great Britain, £375 in 1945, £412.5 from mid-1946. In the United States, \$1,895 POE.

Performance summary: Maximum speed 75mph. Acceleration: 0-30mph, 5.7 sec.; 0-50mph, 14.7 sec.; 0-60mph, 22.7 sec. Typical fuel consumption range: 28 to 34mpg Imperial (approx. 23 to 28mpg US).

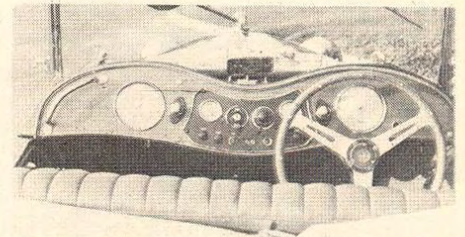
(These figures are taken from the Autocar test of 1947.)

and no self-respecting owner could resist using the gear lever as often as possible, to make sure of the right sort of noises, to listen with joy to the sheer symphony of TC engine and transmission sounds in concert, and to urge the little car along as quickly as he could. It was also a good excuse to test the roadholding and handling capabilities to the limit, which is where the TC's ultimate charm really lies. By 1980 standards the total grip is rather laughable and the ride is extremely hard, but you can forgive a TC almost everything for that fingertip sensitive steering, the instant response to a direction change, and the balanced way it tackles any series of curves.

The 'total package', if I'm allowed to use a term which is anachronistic when applied to an MG of the 1940s, means Motoring Pleasure in a big way, and it is the best proof I have of the existence of



The 1250cc engine had two SU carbs.



All TCs came with right-hand-drive.

the 'Abingdon Touch'. If you can forget the lawful speed limit (and, as a visiting Englishman, I often do) the TC is the sort of car which can be pushed along any number of winding New England roads at 60 to 70mph. Even over the frost heaves, where the little car bucks like a horse, I felt a whole lot safer than I had in hired Detroit wheels an hour or two earlier.

Best of all is the feeling that this is the real thing, a genuine example of the eccentrically British way of designing sports cars in the 1930s, when low cost and rakish looks were everything, and comfort and chrome-splattered styling were despised. Would you, like me, start out by wondering if this was really the stuff of which legends were made, and end up being sure that it was? Can you see, now, why people go out and spend \$10,000 or more for a car over 30 years old, for which spares are a great problem, and on which things like luggage space and air-conditioning are just a joke? I can.