

MG Maestro: An Appreciation after 25 Years

Part I by Roger Martin

Twenty-five years ago in March 1983, the MG Maestro was launched along with the other members of the LM10 model family. This followed the 1982 launch of the MG Metro, the unexpected success of which resulted in the MG version being somewhat hastily added to the Maestro model range.

Unfortunately, like the MGA Twin Cam and MGC before, this resulted in the MG Maestro appearing in dealer showrooms in somewhat under-developed form. However, unlike these predecessors, at least the MG Maestro benefited from subsequent development so later variants were progressively improved but, as before, the damage to its reputation had already been done. As a result, less than 44,000 MG Maestros were manufactured, compared to more than 120,000 MG Metros. As an aside, this relativity was mirrored at the range level whereby during 1985 Metros overall repeated the British car sales chart-topping performance of the BMC ADO16 1100/1300 cars two decades earlier, whereas the Maestros barely made it into the top ten. This at a time when the 23-year-old MGB was still in the top ten most sought after used cars.

The Maestro 'making-good' process resulted in the initial R-Series 1600-engined model being replaced by the S-Series 1600-engined version after just a year, which in turn was replaced by the 2-litre Efi model after only a further six months. Later changes were largely cosmetic plus a name change to 2.0i, with the notable exception of the legendary Tickford finished MG Turbo 'road rocket' (no 'Maestro' in its official designation).

For the record, the total numbers of these Cowley manufactured MGs are as follows:

R-Series 1600 – 12,398

S-Series 1600 – 2,762

Efi/2.0i – 27,800

Turbo – 505*

(*The official Turbo figure was 501 but when Roger Parker examined the VIN records at the Tickford works he discovered that 505 cars were in fact produced.)

All of these models were in production at a time of my life when my wife Fran and I had three growing sons who had ceased to fit into her MGB GT. So, in 1984, she took over the sensible family cars and I was able to drive S-Series 1600, Efi and Turbo MG Maestros as company cars for the following ten years.



Original Maestro Brochure Cover and Rogers Maestro 1600.



My 1600 experience

I might not have considered the MG Maestro at all were it not for my mother purchasing one of the first MG Metros. I had been pleasantly surprised by its performance, seemingly as good as our MGB GT and with better handling, but the back was a little too small for our three boys. Therefore, the prospect of the larger, 5-door MG Maestro suddenly seemed to make a lot of sense so I took a trip to my local Austin Rover dealer. Unlike the press, I didn't dislike the look of the car and the dealer responded to my concerns about the reported poor starting and over-heating behaviour by lending me his personal car for the weekend. In very few miles I was convinced I wanted one.

I ordered a silver model as I liked the colour coded effect with respect to the grille, which was silver on all models regardless of colour, but I had to wait four months for delivery. I was told this was because it was a 'special build'; me having specified a sun-roof together with clear (not-tinted) glass and with manual (not central) door-locking as in the 'standard' high specification builds. I think it was no coincidence that the early publicity materials always showed the MG in silver.

I impatiently endured the wait pondering the question of differentiation, always a problem with badge-engineered MGs. I spent some time designing potential side stripes but in the event I only added DIY MG insignia to the wheel centres. My Austin Rover dealer told me that other customers had seen them and requested the option, assuming it to be dealer fit! Interestingly, having discussed differentiation, he later advised that Austin Rover were offering side-stripes at c.£50 a time.

First drive in the car had frightening 'graunching' noises coming from the suspension. These turned out to be wooden blocks inserted by the factory to prevent the spoiler skirt being damaged on the delivery transporter, but nobody had warned the dealer. I was also not enamoured with the car bearing a road tax disc stating it to be an Austin.

Running in – remember that – was tedious, being at a maximum of 3,000rpm with an engine beginning to come on song at 2,800rpm. However, once run in the car became quite enjoyable and hinted at the 'boy racer' stimulation that my later cars would fulfil. I say hinted as the acceleration was only 'reasonable', even contemporary non-GTI Golfs could out-drag the Maestro at most speeds, but its road holding was pretty good. Nonetheless, I could easily lift a front wheel accelerating out of certain bends where the camber was against me. My notes record that I found the ride on undulating roads 'rather floaty'.

The steering, which was not power-assisted, was direct but heavy at low speed despite being quite low geared, no doubt due to the engine sitting over the fat Pirelli P8 tyres. My notes also say that the VW sourced gearbox was 'squelchy', presumably compared to the crisp gear-change of our older MGs. I also found the headlamp power output poor compared to our Rover SD1 at the time, Austin Rover did offer a twin spot-lamp grille option but I felt it looked ugly so lived the standard candle power that in truth was no worse than our MGB GT.

Unlike the universally poor reviews, I rather liked the solid state trip computer/tachometer and the voice synthesis warnings voiced by New Zealander Nicolette McKenzie. I made a point of not completely releasing the hand-brake whenever I took a first-time passenger to demonstrate the car's high-tech. abilities! This and the "lights on" warning were probably the most useful and, perhaps as a result of reviewer dislike of the test cars, my car's vocabulary did not have a seat-belt warning. I also liked the continuous and instantaneous fuel consumption readouts now quite common on modern cars. The Maestro also anticipated some modern-day downsides, like the digital clock being unreadable in direct sunlight. However, for me, the signature feature of the MG Maestro interior was the red seat belts – perhaps because they were analogous to the ubiquitous red braces in the City of London in the 1980s.



My 1600 never suffered over-heating, either belting up and down motorways or sitting in traffic jams. Clearly the little cooling fan in the offside front wing of the S-Series solved this R-Series problem. Starting could be tricky, however. Whether hot or cold there was a black art to churning the starter and/or priming the Weber carburettor and/or using the choke, as conditions dictated. As the S-Series was reported as being a great improvement over R-Series – the latter must have been bad!

The engine went off song some time before the first service after a year and 8,000 miles, then did it again within six months afterwards. My Austin Rover dealer responded, "They all do that every 5–8000 miles"! At least the second tax disc specified MG.

MG MAESTRO

Reports of poor build quality were entirely true. Early on, the interior mirror glued on windscreen fell off, the sun-roof handle sheared off at the base (the replacement was beefed up but didn't match interior colour) and the driver's door window collapsed into the door. Also, the window glass seals permitted rain to flow through the doors, causing condensation, so I had to de-ice the inside and the outside of the windows on freezing mornings.

I had engine malfunctions due to firstly a cracked distributor cap and then a faulty rotor arm, an exhaust bracket detached itself from the body and the spring in the fuel cap rusted, which allowed fuel to spill out of the tank. Towards the end of my three years and 24,000 miles, engine fan ducting screws had gone missing, the air cleaner hose had split and the clutch was slipping. Also, the fuel sender was sticking – which was a real worry to poor Nicolette and her 'fuel used' button had also fallen off the trip-computer. Oh, and the paint was starting to fall off the rusting doors and I was plagued with slow punctures due to the lacquer separating from the alloy wheel rims.

To sum up, my S-Series Maestro had adequate (rather than impressive) performance, was temperamental to start and was pretty poorly put together. However, it was enjoyable to drive, did the job (i.e. got me to work and the boys to their recreations) transported tumble driers, building supplies and classic MG spares AND it was an MG. Also in its favour, I remember it being confidence-inspiring in snow so I enjoyed playing with it on a snow-bound local airfield. I was just glad that it was a company car as I could not in all honesty recommend it as a 'wise buy'.

My DVLA search shows that the last 'date of liability' for the car was June 1994 so it managed to survive another seven years, perhaps helped by it being retained by the Austin Rover dealer for staff use when I traded it in. My only Maestro 1600 souvenir is a yellow Corgi model that I purchased at that time.

My EFI experience

Whilst my time with the 1600 Maestro had its tribulations, its successor, which was launched not long after I took delivery of the 1600, received much better reviews. As I liked the idea of an MG Maestro with all the good points of the 1600 but without all the bad points, I prevailed upon my Austin Rover dealer to lend me his personal EFI for a couple of days. Once again, he wasn't stupid and I was easily seduced. It even had MG wheel centres! I ordered another silver one and put a racy MG back-flash on the rear hatch window to increase differentiation.

I cannot deny that it was the better performance that hooked me. The EFI's acceleration seemed a particular improvement over the 1600, feeling much greater than the on-paper figures of an additional 12bhp would suggest. I guess this was really due to the massive increase in torque up from 100lb ft to 134lb ft. Whatever it was, the car flew, being very competitive (when one up) against the opposition. The suspension seemed better sorted, by anti-roll bars, I think, so the handling was nothing short of excellent. One could have serious fun in an EFI and I often did. I even caught myself thinking that a sports car built on the Maestro floor-pan and EFI mechanicals would be a great machine. Come to think of it, wasn't the Metro 6R4 based on the Maestro floor-pan?

In addition, the fuel-injected and engine-managed EFI started on the button and had perfect engine tick-over, when hot or cold. I found the Honda gearbox much smoother than the allegedly stronger VW one in the 1600, and the gear positions (i.e. reverse to right and back – left and forward on the 1600) more natural. The EFI had power steering, which I felt lost 'feel' but was much lighter and definitely appreciated by Fran.

I remember the car introduced the so-called 'dim-dip' feature, whereby the car could not be driven (or even the engine run) with just sidelights on, the dipped headlights being switched on automatically. The car still had the red seat-belts that I loved but

“ I cannot deny that it was the better performance that hooked me. ”



The only reminder of Rogers 1600, a yellow Corgi model and pictured right is the car that replaced the 1600 a Maestro EFI.



“ One could have serious fun in an EFi and I often did. ”

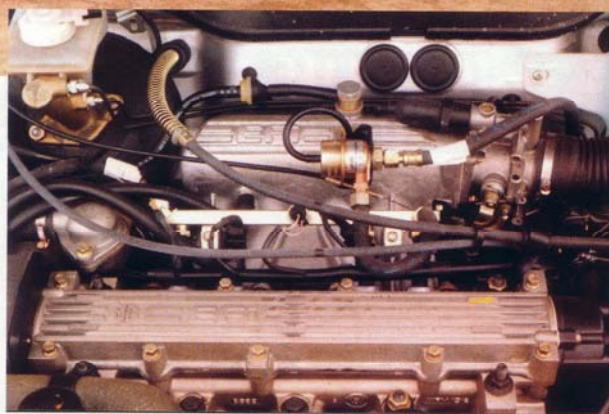


EFi and I600 Maestros - spot the detail differences.

the upholstery was a more muted herringbone pattern which, together with the then standard tinted glass, made the cabin seem more gloomy compared to its bright and airy I600 predecessor.

What Car magazine stated that 'few will miss the solid-state dash'. Well, I was one of the few who did and regretted its deletion from the specification. I also preferred both the I600's traditionally-shaped gear knob to the EFi's 'ergonomic' one as well as the I600's steering wheel. Also, the EFi had a shallow storage recess above the dash out of which, irritatingly, rolled almost everything I put in it when the car was under acceleration. However, the glove-box was more capacious and the rear shelf straps didn't fall out the shelf when they were unclipped from the hatch, so it was no less enjoyable to live with.

But what, I hear you say, about the quality? Well, the window seals had not been improved and on delivery there was a screw missing from the rear shelf strap bracket, hardly big issues but not what one would find in a German or Japanese car. Then, over the three years I had the car, my notes say that the wiper motor became noisy, the power-assisted steering pulley came loose and the aerial started to rattle in the wind. The rear hatch release button kept getting stuck in dirt I guess, and the rear number plate illumination lamps kept popping out of the bumper. I also had a couple of 'funnies' that seemed to cure themselves. The oil warning lamp came on once at 750 miles after a fast run, but the oil showed high on the dip-stick. Having stopped and restarted the engine, it didn't do it again. On another occasion I feared a head gasket failure when the engine started misfiring and pumping steam from the exhaust, but as I attempted to limp to a place to park up it cleared.



The Maestro EFi engine bay.

Maybe it was contaminated fuel.

After two years, the petrol tank developed a leak, which took about three weeks to fix due to unavailability of a replacement tank. I told the garage that I could get one for a 30-year-old MGA in 48 hours so it was pretty poor that one for a current MG took so long. The whole exhaust needing replacing after 23,000 miles.

So, some niggling problems that show quality was still not brilliant but, all-in-all, I enjoyed my EFi years, I was relaxed about Fran using the car and I did recommend it to others (even if some of them did get MG Montegos instead).

My DVLA search on this car shows a last 'date of liability' of December 2004, so it managed at least a 16-year life that may reflect the relative improvement of the EFi over the S-Series I600.

In the final part next month Roger recounts his experiences with the MG Turbo and takes a final look back over the Maestros he has owned.

MG Maestro: An Appreciation after 25 Years

Part 2 by Roger Martin

MY MG TURBO EXPERIENCE

In 1988 I happened to take my sons to the NEC Motor Show, not really expecting to see anything particularly special. Imagine my astonishment when we wandered on to the Rover stand and saw what looked like a striking customised MG Maestro with the evocative word 'Turbo' on the rear hatch. Having experienced the performance of a friend's MG Montego Turbo, I had always imagined that the same drivetrain in the lighter and more nimble MG Maestro would be the ultimate 1980s MG. However, market gossip had always suggested that Rover had vetoed such a proposal. Yet, here it was – not exactly good looking but to hell with that, the performance would more than make up for it.

So, despite not being due for a company car change for 18 months I almost ran to the nearest MG rep to ask for details of the car. Cue second surprise of the day – there weren't any! I had to leave my contact details for some to be forwarded later. I subsequently learned that the 'MG Turbo', as it was named, was a limited edition, with only about a 500 examples to be constructed, so I was then worried that they would sell out before my car change date. In the event, I needn't have been concerned as the Turbo was a slow seller due to hot hatch insurance costs rocketing as fast as the cars on the road, so there were still plenty of examples unsold in 1990. I ordered a red one, to match my MGA.



Roger's Turbo G625 EPH at MGA Day Waddesdon.

My Turbo, number 460, was due for delivery in early May so without even knowing what the registration would be I entered it for the Regency Run, and the car arrived a week or so before the event. It stuck out like a sore thumb, lined up with its classic predecessors for the start in Battersea Park. By chance we followed a vintage MG through the finish on Madeira Drive at Brighton and I recall Bill Wallis on the PA system drawing attention to the oldest and newest MGs as we drove past.

What was the Turbo like to own? Well, I am not the only one to remember it as a 'Jekyll and Hyde' car. Pootling around town below 2,800rpm it was not unlike the EFI, quite flexible, if a little rougher at idle, indeed it could stall at idle when cold. However, spin the engine above 3,000rpm and the boost would kick

in and the 152bhp and 169ft lb torque would transform it into a total hooligan of a car, well worthy of the 'road rocket' label. Better still, it didn't jump one lane to the left due to torque-steer, like my friend's MG Montego Turbo, when the throttle was floored on the motorway. It certainly brought out the dormant 'boy-racer' in me! I recall particularly enjoying out-dragging a show-off in a (presumably smaller engine) Mercedes SL from the Dartford Tunnel toll-booths on one occasion. Of course this sort of bad behaviour was only possible in the dry; in the wet one just remained stationary with spinning front wheels. All this fun had to be paid for, of course, average fuel consumption being c.25mpg and I once got below 20mpg on a particularly 'progressive' drive across country on old-fashioned A-roads!

I took it camping at MGCC Silverstone just after the Regency Run where it again stood out. I was forever opening the bonnet to let people view the engine bay. That same year Motobuild, which specialised in Maestros and Montegos at the time, fielded a DIY Maestro Turbo race-car but it was totally outclassed by the Metro 6R4s and Class D BV8s that it was racing against. I later took some photos of my Turbo outside its place of birth at the Cowley Rover manufacturing plant, little knowing that the factory bridge over the Oxford Bypass would soon be demolished.



Motobuild DIY Turbo at MGCC Silverstone, 1990.



Roger's MG Turbo at the Rover plant, Cowley.



MG MAESTRO

The body spec was slightly different to my EFi. Not only did it have the signature Tickford applied body-kit and decals but the sun-roof was clear glass with a blind and the windows and mirrors were electrically operated. For some reason the red seat belts had been deleted in favour of boring grey but the speedometer was calibrated to an impressive 150mph. I never 'maxed' the car but it was still accelerating strongly at an indicated 130mph when I did give it its head. I would not be surprised if Rover had understated the power in deference to the politically correct brigade.

Quality and living with the car? Well, apart from the poor fitting window-seals – yup, rain still drained through the doors, the only failure I had in four years was when the power steering pulley broke up on the M6 one day. The car was still driveable but the journey home was quite muscle-building! However, I was meticulous with the Turbo warm up and cool down routine, which may have helped. Also, unlike the EFi, it consumed oil, about 1 pint in 6,000 miles. Other 'consumables' wore more quickly too, like tyres and brake pads but, happily, I didn't have to pay for them. Throughout my Turbo years the dealer's mechanics would always crowd around the car whenever it was serviced, which was very pleasing.

I was fortunate in being able to take my Turbo to the Maestro 10th Birthday Party event at Rockingham Castle in 1993, shortly before I parted with the car. This had an amazing turnout of over 100 MG Maestros including no less than 20 MG Turbos, perhaps the largest ever gathering of the model.



Maestro 10th Birthday Party at Rockingham Castle, 1993.

I heard that my Turbo was advertised for sale in September 2000 for £2,000 and was sorely tempted to recover it but sanity (and the threat of divorce) prevailed so I passed it up. A recent DVLA search showed the last 'date of liability' as July 2002 but I hope that it still exists, perhaps awaiting restoration. So, all I have left is my memories and my MG Turbo pewter models. Well, that is not strictly true as my eldest son, Tim, still owns red MG Turbo number 219, which whilst in dire need of some TLC is still capable of giving that memorable 'push in the back' when pedal to metal.



The two Pewter MG Maestro Turbo models.

MG MAESTRO

IN RETROSPECT

Looking back, I can quite understand that younger buyers preferred the sexier looking Escort XR3 and especially the RS Turbo that was similarly priced to the MG Turbo and I don't think the prototyped 3-door Maestro would have made much difference to relative sales. However, for a family man wanting a sporting 5-door hatch, a 1980s equivalent of the ADO16 MG 1300 was ideal for me and that was the MG Maestro.

Many press reviewers reported the MG Maestro as not being 'chuckable'. I disagree entirely, especially with regard to the later 2-litre cars. I threw them around with as much abandon as our Minis of old and never came to grief. The early use of CAD/CAM in the Maestro design resulted in a body with very high torsional rigidity. As a result, quite a few competitors put MG Maestros to more extreme use until well after production had ceased, as did numerous 'joy-riders'.

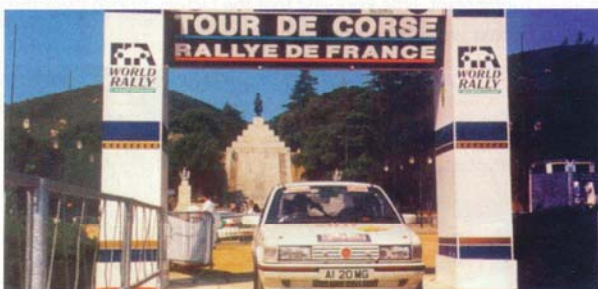


Joy-riders in an MG Maestro.



One of three Rally Maestros at Rockingham 10th Birthday Party.

In rallying, MG Maestros competed in the 'RAC' Rally, with Pablo Raybould and Ben Coles finishing in the model's last outing in 1991. John Dalton and Michael Roe achieved an amazing 7th in Class and 36th overall on the tough 1993 Tour de Corse World Championship Rally and Alan Holly won the Association of South-West Motor Clubs Autocross Championship in an MG Maestro EFI as late as 1999.



Tour de Corse Maestro.



William Sharpe's Maestro. Photo: Kelvin Fagan.

“Sadly his super Maestro was another that ended its days being stolen...”

In other fields of motorsport, Adrian Brown and George Mackmurdie both campaigned c.270bhp Maestro Turbos at Santa Pod, achieving standing quarter miles in about 14 seconds, and MG Maestros are still circuit racing today in Class B of the MGOC Race Championship, the 2007 champion being William Sharpe.

As recently as 2002 a letter to a daily newspaper motoring section read "Thinking back over the many cars I have owned, the best was probably an MG Maestro 2.0 EFI" and asked what modern cars most closely matched it. The response was the Honda Civic Type S and the Ford Focus ST 170 – not a bad reflection.

So, I have fond memories of MG Maestros – nostalgia is a wonderful thing – and I am not alone. When querying some information with ex-FWD Register *Safety Fast!* scribe, Roger Parker, he confessed to missing his 250bhp turbocharged T16-engined MG Maestro, despite now owning a V8 ZT and an MGF. Sadly his super Maestro was another that ended its days being stolen and torched so, with many others simply succumbing to the rust bug, I wonder if there will be any MG Maestros at all left in another 25 years. I for one really hope so.

Grateful acknowledgements: Roger Parker (ex-FWD Register) The www.austin-rover.co.uk information archive website David Knowles' book 'MG – The Untold Story'.



Another MG Maestro destined for the scrapyard. Photo: Martin Woods.