

BUYING AN MG IN 1929 BY JOHN DAY



IF YOU WERE LOOKING to purchase a car in January 1929 and you quite liked the idea of buying one of those "go-faster" Morris cars from MG in Oxford, you would have been in for a surprise at the local dealership because there were two new kids on the block!

The flat radiator 14/40 had been in the showrooms for over year and was still available new but its specification was now looking a bit dated for a car with sporting pretensions. However MG had been working on two big surprises for 1929, the MG Six Sports and the new MG Midget. The motoring press at the time were both amazed and delighted by these completely new MGs being exhibited for the first time at the Olympia Show in late 1928. Motor magazine staff were the first to try the MG six and reported with fulsome praise on the performance of a four door saloon, registration WL6484 on 12 March 1929. Their headline was, "A fascinating car with a speed range of 5mph to 78mph in top gear." It went on

to say,

"Few cars created more interest at the Olympia Show than the MG Six Sports, which is in every way a noteworthy production from an engineering and coachwork standpoint. Only a cursory examination of the chassis was necessary to show the design had been very carefully thought out, while the bodywork was of an exceptionally high order; especially when it is taken into consideration that the complete price of the saloon model, for example, is only £555."

Motor's test staff particularly liked the statically and dynamically balanced six cylinder engine with valves operated by an overhead camshaft. There is no doubt that the new engine of the Six Sports must have seemed like a giant leap in technology compared with the 14/40 engine. This was a four-cylinder, side-valve engine, borrowed by Kimber from the pedestrian Bullnose Morris. The new car, now known as the 18/80 was equipped with powerful brakes, excellent steering

and all the testers commented on the above average handling and comfort.

At the other end of the scale the 847cc MG Midget was a totally new concept for a British manufacturer. In the 1920s car ownership was still only for the well off and companies like Austin were trying to break into a mass market by producing small cars like the Seven for those on a more limited budget. Here was a car that was designed for sporting motoring. It only had two seats but was competitively priced and as such was a ground breaking concept for the average car buyer. It would appear MG was somewhat surprised by the interest shown in what we would now call a 'concept car' and production did not commence straight after the show. The MG Company initially ordered 498 bodies from Coventry and set up a production line in their factory in Edmund Road in Oxford and the first car was not finished until March 1929.

In 1928 the fledgling MG Company was also working on the 18/80 prototype for



the Olympia Show. Wilson McComb, in his book 'MG' writes, So it was that three MG models were seen at the 1928 Motor Show, the first in which the Company had their own stand at Olympia. There was the 18/80 MG Six at anything from £480 to £555, depending on coachwork; there was the faithful 14/40 at £335 to £445; and there was the Midget, carrying a price tag of £175, which was exactly £50 more than the new Minor on the Morris stand. With its hotter-than-Morris engine and all-up weight of just over 1100lb., the little midget turned out to be almost as fast as the 14/40 two-seater in all gears, with better acceleration all the way. And it cost hardly more than half as much. No wonder the new MG baby attracted attention, but The Autocar were being more prophetic than they could possibly have imagined when they said, 'The MG Midget will make sports car history.'

Looking back today it is hard to imagine the impact that the MG Six and the Midget had on the motoring public. If we wind the clock back seven years to 1922, Kimber was employed by William Morris as General Manager of Morris Garages in Oxford selling the worthy but dull Bullnose Morris. Kimber began to create Bullnose Morris specials, the most famous of these being Old Number One. This hotbed-up Bullnose Cowley, modified in the spring of 1924 was fitted with a spartan sports body and entered in the Lands End Trial at Easter 1925. Kimber won a Gold Medal in this trial and the success of this venture led him to modify more cars for sale as Morris Garages

Super Sports. A steady stream of cars were sold to those who appreciated the blend of style and functionality being offered. In truth the alterations to the overall package were more about style than performance but the idea of the affordable sporting car was born. This philosophy of modifying standard Morris cars continued when the Bullnose was changed to the Flat Nose radiator and was marketed as the 14/40.

One can only speculate what Kimber and his small team of designers had in mind when they set out to produce the Midget and the 18/80 in 1928. With the benefit of hindsight it is clear now that MG would probably have gone bankrupt in the early 1930s if the company had developed only the 18/80 range. The tiny and affordable Midget sports car turned out to be what the sporting motorist was looking for in a car and the concept epitomises today affordable fun motoring.

Today we can look back to January 1929 and see it as a watershed for MG. The company had suddenly 'grown up' from modifying Morris cars and was now selling a range of sporting motor cars. This started with the tiny but quick Midget through the more conventional 14/40 to the powerful and luxuriously appointed 18/80. In this period it was common for a manufacturer to sell the same chassis with the option of several different body styles. The 18/80 for instance was sold with two and four-seater touring bodies, a four-seater, two door saloonette (what we would call today Coupe) and a four-seater, four door saloon.

The latter was also supplied with a metal or fabric covered body, the fabric giving a significant weight saving over the metal. In fact there was so much choice of models and body styles one can imagine the prospective buyer making a number of visits to their local MG showroom and pondering for some time over the sales brochures and colour schemes.

Later in 1929 the MG Company made an even more dramatic announcement when it revealed its plans to move to Abingdon. Here it took over the old Pavlova Leather works and became the largest factory dedicated to the manufacture of sports cars. This then led to the most exciting period in the long history of MG when the factory was making, racing and selling a range of sports cars but I will leave that story to our colleagues in the MMM register.

The photographs which accompany this article feature the 18/80 4 door saloon UU2506 owned by Doug Harris who restored the car at home over a long period and this car is now something of a reference for how an 18/80 saloon car left the factory in early 1929.

Doug went to extraordinary lengths to skilfully reproduce the way the fabric covering was applied on the outside and has recreated the interior as closely as possible using the remains of the original as a pattern. If you spot this car at an MG event it is worth looking at in detail to fully appreciate the style of the period and the opulence of the vintage saloon.