



Photos 1, 2 & 3: Three different body styled Mark II 18/80s. GO 12 the four door metal panelled De Luxe Saloon, MG 993 the Carlton Drop Head Coupe and AYU 812 the Mark II Speed Model.



Photos 4 & 5: The unmistakable 18/80 MK I four door fabric bodied saloon with its luxurious interior.

# SO, YOU WANT TO BUY A VINTAGE MG?

By Doug Harris

## Definition of a 'Vintage' car

The classification of cars as 'Vintage' dates back to the formation of the Vintage Sports-Car Club (VSCC). The VSCC was established in 1934 to promote the sport and pastime of motoring, principally for cars manufactured before 1931. The VSCC also has a category of Post-Vintage Thoroughbreds – cars built between 1931 and 1940 but adhering to earlier standards – plus the best post-war racing and sports cars of the 1950s.

The Veteran Car Club of Great Britain (VCC) was founded in 1930 after the London to Brighton Run of that year. The VCC embraces Veteran cars built up to, and including, December 1904, and Edwardian cars built between January 1905 and December 1918.

It may therefore be said that the Vintage car era is from January 1919 through to the end of December 1930.

## Types of Vintage MG

The formative years of Morris Garages and MG are 1924 and earlier. Indeed, Morris Garages, a subsidiary of Morris Motors Ltd., were mounting special bodies on the Cowley and later the Oxford, chassis as early as 1921. For the purposes of this article 1925 is taken as the start of MG production with significant sales of the MG Super Sports (the MG 14/28 Bullnose) in that year.

The Vintage Register embraces MG cars from 1925 through to 1931. The six types are listed below in year of production sequence:

**4-cylinder cars:** MG 14/28 Bullnose; MG 14/28 Flatnose; MG 14/40 (also known as the Mk IV).

**6 cylinder cars:** MG 18/80 Mk I; MG 18/80 Mk II; MG 18/100 Mk III (also known as the Tigress).

**Note 1:** The MG M Type Midget was introduced at the 1928 London Olympia

Motor Show alongside the prototype MG 18/80. The M Type is therefore contemporary with the cars in the Vintage Register but it is placed in the Triple-M Register as it is the first of the family of MMM cars.

**Note 2:** The MG 18/80 Mk I, as it was later to be called, has had various names. While in prototype form it was called the 'Mystery Six', at the 1928 October Motor Show it was called the 'Quick Six' but by the time of full production in early 1929, it was called the 'Six Sports'. The nomenclature was changed again in the summer/autumn of 1929 when a decision was made to produce a modified version of the Six Sports. The new car was named the 18/80 Mk II and the original car, the Six Sports, which was manufactured in tandem until the summer of 1931, was referred to as the 18/80 Mk I.





Very similar in appearance, but these cars are two different models of MG. On closer inspection you will notice that the car on the left is a 1927 14/28 two-seater and has a blanking plate just below the radiator shell. The car on the right is a later 1928 14/40 Mk IV with a front apron fitted.



A 14/28 'Bullnose' Super Sports, Four-Seat Tourer. With its raked windscreen, lowered suspension, disc wheels and altered steering arrangement, these vehicles supplied good handling and a sporty feel that endeared them to young bucks of the 1920s.

**Note 3:** The MG 18/100 Mk III Tigress is a machine developed specifically for road racing and long-distance circuit racing. Whilst having general similarities to the MG 18/80 Mk II Speed Model, the Tigress is in fact a significantly different car. Only five Tigress cars were built and we are fortunate that two of these survive. These two survivors are used regularly, both on the road and in competition. The MG 18/100 Mk III Tigress is outside the scope of this article.

### Body styles

A feature of the Vintage MG period is the variety of body styles and finishes that were offered in relation to the small number of

cars being made. Carbodies of Coventry was the main supplier of fully finished bodies and records show that small batches were often the norm in response to customer preferences and firm orders. The chassis were driven to Coventry for the bodies to be fitted and then driven back to Oxford or Abingdon for final checks and adjustments prior to delivery to the customer or the dealer.

The variety of styles and the semi-bespoke nature of the MG business must have been a key selling point. Independent coachbuilders did occasionally build their own body designs on to MG chassis. The range of body styles is as follows:

2-seat tourer with dicky seat

- 2-door saloonette
- 4-seat tourer
- 4-door saloon (fabric skin)
- 2-seat drop head coupé
- 4-door saloon (metal skin)
- 4-seat speed model (narrow- and wide-bodied)

These hand-built, wooden-framed bodies were assembled from shaped ash timber sections with extensive use of joints secured by tailored metal brackets, as well as using some traditional precision wood to wood joints. The body frame was designed to flex in sympathy with some unavoidable twisting of the chassis frame. The body frames could be skinned in any combination of steel, aluminium or fabric. Bonnets and wings were usually made of steel. The bright work on the pre-1929 models tended to be a mixture of chromium-plating and nickel-plating; indeed, the earlier varieties of the 18/80 Mk I were fitted with solid nickel radiator shells. After 1929, chromium-plating was the norm. Taken overall, these MGs were expensive cars and the standard of finish was high. Top quality trim materials and leather seats were the norm, and fittings and instrumentation were always to a high standard. The saloon bodies were particularly well appointed. Paint finishes could be in bright colours and were occasionally two-tone; on the earlier cars, body panels were sometimes in polished aluminium which had an engine-turned finish.



## Technicalities

**4-cylinder cars:** The MG 14/28 and the MG 14/40 trace their parentage back to the Morris Oxford and, before that, the Morris Cowley. Cecil Kimber joined Morris Garages as General Manager in 1921. He and his colleagues transformed the performance and visual appeal of the basic Morris vehicles. This development work started well before 1925 and continued through until the end of 1928, prior to the finish of MG 14/40 production in early 1929.

**Engine:** 4 cylinders

Capacity 1802 cc

Bore 75 mm;

Stroke 102 mm

RAC rating 13.9 horsepower

Side valves

Compression ratio 5.0:1

Single carburettor – Smith, SU or Solex

Power – early cars maybe 30+bhp, later cars maybe 35+bhp at 3,500rpm

Engine refinement continues to this day and it is certain that some of our present-day survivors have higher power outputs.

**Transmission:** Wet twin plate cork-faced clutch running in engine oil  
3-speed, non-synchromesh gearbox  
torque tube to rear axle

**Suspension:** 14/28 Front springs ½ elliptic  
Rear springs ¾ elliptic

14/40 Front and rear springs ½ elliptic

**Steering:** Early cars had a Morris steering box; later cars used a Marles box.

**Brakes:** 12-inch drums front and rear, cross shafts and rods

Perrot system to front shoes, some cars are fitted with Clayton Dewandre servo assistance

The handbrake operates separate shoes in the wide rear brake drums

**Wheels:** 14/28 Bolt-on artillery

14/40 Bolt-on wire spoke

**Dimensions:** 14/28 Wheelbase 8ft 6in and later 9ft; Track 4ft

14/40 Wheelbase 8ft 10 ½in; Track 4ft

**Weight:** 14/28 chassis 13cwt 1qtr

14/40 chassis 15cwt 3qtr

**Electrics:** 6/12-volt system  
magneto ignition

18mm sparking plugs

Dynamotor dynamo/starter motor

**6-cylinder cars:** The MG 18/80 engine is derived from a 6-cylinder unit of the same capacity that was designed and produced by Morris Motors Engine Division, circa 1926/27. It is probable that Cecil Kimber had some part to play in the decision by William Morris to proceed with this engine. The engine was installed in several



The most talked about attribute of both the Mk I and Mk II 18/80 is there ease of driving. The engine has very good torque, steering is excellent and the interior is comfortable, an ideal combination for reliable continental touring and rallying.

unsatisfactory Morris cars but it eventually confirmed its potential in the Morris Major of 1928, and later the Morris Isis. Cecil Kimber chose this engine for his new MG and made significant changes to the design, which required investment in the production of a new cylinder block and a new cylinder head. The MG 18/80 engine was scheduled for the prototype car at the October 1928 Motor Show.

**Engine:** 6-cylinders

Capacity 2468 cc

Bore 69mm

Stroke 110mm

RAC rating 17.7 horsepower

Compression ratio 5.75:1

Four main bearings

Fully machined crank

Single OHC driven by chain with automatic tensioner and gearing to camshaft

Cross flow head

Twin 1 3/8-inch horizontal SU carburettors

on the on-side feeding across within the block into an inlet manifold on the off-side within the head

Full pressure feed lubrication

Internal gauze filter/strainer

Coil ignition with twin contact breaker distributor

18mm sparking plugs

Dynamo shaft driven

Pumped cooling (the iconic MG radiator shell was first seen by the public on the MG 18/80 and the M Type Midget at the 1928 Motor Show)

Power – maybe 65+bhp at 3,500rpm, the

18/80 engine has also been subject to owner improvements and some of these cars are possibly producing 80bhp

**Transmission:** Wet twin plate cork-faced clutch running in engine oil

18/80 Mk I has a 3-speed non-synchromesh gearbox

the Mk II has a pleasant 4-speed non-synchromesh gearbox with a constant mesh silent third

Torque tube to rear axle

Mk I rear axle is similar to the 14/40, the Mk II rear axle has a wider track and is a stronger design.

**Suspension:** Semi-elliptic springs all round; the front springs are shackled at the front with side bearing faces to control lateral movement of the front axle. The Mk I's springs are located in line with the chassis frame. The rear springs on the Mk II are mounted outside the chassis line. Heavy duty Andre Hartford lever arm friction disc dampers all round.

**Steering:** Marles steering box

The king-pins are fitted with ball-bearing thrust races to carry the vertical loads and to reduce steering effort

**Brakes:** 12-inch finned drums front and rear. Early Mk I 18/80s have cross-shafts and rods with Perrot shafts to the front shoes. Later Mk Is and all Mk IIs have cross-shafts and cables. Fly-off handbrake on all 18/80s (first use by MG) with separate linkage and brake shoes in double width rear drums. Some 18/80s are fitted with Clayton Dewandre servo systems.



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The engine compartment of a 14/28 Super Sports, almost identical to its Morris counterpart which means that even today, spares are plentiful and mechanical restoration easy.

### Wheels:

Rudge Whitworth 19-inch centre lock  
Tyres usually 4.75/5.00 by 19

### Dimensions:

Wheelbase Mk I and Mk II 9ft 6ins  
Track Mk I 4ft; Mk II 4ft 4ins

### Weight:

Mk I chassis 18cwt 2qtr  
Mk II chassis 21cwt 2qtr

### Electrics:

12-volt system  
Twin 6-volt batteries under the front seats  
Winter and summer charge settings.

### On the road

A characteristic of Vintage MGs is their ability to cover considerable touring distances at a commendable average speed and to do this without undue stress on the driver, the passengers and, of course, on the car.

**4-cylinder cars:** The 4-cylinder cars are happy to cruise for long periods at 50-ishmph. They will, of course, go faster than this but sustained 60mph is pushing it a bit. Driving fast is not the reason for owning one of these cars. The pleasure lies in the total experience of motoring with a viable machine that is more than 80 years old. The engine is smooth with good torque but carrying two people with luggage will mean a loss of speed on long up-hill drags. The non-synchromesh gearbox has three speeds; middle gear is a bit low so double declutching requires some revs when changing down from top to middle; equally you need some revs in middle before deciding that it is a good idea to change up to top for the rest of the hill ahead.

The brakes are very much of their time and come as a bit of a shock to first-timers. They can be made to do a good job but when they are in poor condition or not set up properly, then life behind the wheel can be a bit tricky. The safe driving of cars of this era is all about extreme anticipation and taking full account of the fact that few, if any, of the drivers in your vicinity have the slightest idea of the limitations of your car. The consequence of this is that the actions of others will frequently compromise your situation (this isn't really their fault). Sorry if this sounds a bit scary and I don't want to discourage anyone, the reality is that our Vintage cars are driven for thousands of miles each year in the UK and Europe and, touch wood, we do this without too many exciting moments.

Motorway driving is just about possible but you will usually be travelling slower than the trucks in the inside lane. This situation is OK for a short while but long periods of motorway use will be unpleasant, tiring and potentially dangerous since trucks will be causing problems to other drivers when they pull out to overtake you.

Two hundred miles in a day is top end for a good car. Average fuel consumption on mixed town and country journeys should get close to an average of 25mpg. The fuel tank holds 5 or 6 gallons, so a stop for fuel every 100/120 miles or so is required; this will coincide with the 'best practice' of the driver and passenger taking a break every two to three hours.

**6-cylinder cars:** The MG 18/80 range was the first opportunity that Cecil Kimber

had to design, produce and develop cars of his own creation rather than making the best he could of existing Morris parts. The end result was the 18/80 Mk I, a car with the same track as the MG 14/40, with a wheelbase only 8 1/2-inch longer and weighing only 3 cwt. more, yet with 65bhp compared with the 35bhp of the 14/40. There was a step change increase in performance with chassis bhp/Ton increasing from 46 for the MG 14/40 to 72 for the MG 18/80 MK I.

The 6-cylinder, 2 1/2-litre, OHC, long-stroke engine gives high torque throughout its range and this enables driving which is enjoyable and relaxing at both high and low speeds. A speed of 70mph is easily reached and approaching 80mph is achievable but there isn't much point in doing this. It is possible to potter through town at 20-ish in top gear without any protest from the engine. A good 18/80 is able to sustain 60mph cruising for hour after hour on good quality undulating roads and to do this without any sign of distress. 250 miles and more is an achievable daily target on good roads providing breaks are taken. On a varied cross-country journey 18/80s average about 20mpg (a tourer a little more) and so with a 10 (Mk II 12) gallon tank, refuelling and resting stops are usually taken every 120 to 140 miles. Motorway and Autoroute driving is perfectly possible with an 18/80 and it is the low stress way (for man and machine) of putting down the miles/kilometres when necessary. The comfortable cruising speed places the car on the inside lane at the same speed as the trucks, you don't bother them and they don't bother you. When the trucks slow down on the hills then you can always overtake them!

The 18/80 Mk I uses a 3-speed gearbox similar to the 14/40 but with a higher middle gear which is still not quite as high as it should have been. The high torque engine allows many hills to be taken in top gear but, on a long hill with a gradient of more than 1:10 then, depending on the load on board, the speed will drop towards 40mph at which point it is a good idea to change down into middle gear. A higher axle ratio crown wheel and pinion (3.9:1) has been fitted to many 18/80s; this is a useful modification as it gives more relaxed cruising and better fuel consumption. The downside to this modification is some loss of acceleration and hill-climbing performance in top gear.

The 18/80 MK II has a smooth operating, strong (heavy) 4-speed gearbox with well-chosen ratios. The power outputs of the



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standard engines in the Mk I and the Mk II are the same. The MK II chassis is stiffer and of heavier construction, with a 4-inch wider track than the MK I. The Mk II chassis weighs 3 cwt more (62bhp/Ton) than the Mk I (72bhp/Ton). On the road there is little to choose between the cruising performances of the MK I and the Mk II but the Mk I is usually more sprightly up hills and off the mark.

The brakes on the early Mk Is are rod and Perrot shaft, with similarities to the MG 14/40. When in good condition and well set up they provide adequate but not exceptional stopping power. Later MK Is and all Mk IIs are fitted with cable brakes which are up to the job, the Mk II has larger 14-inch brake drums. It is possible to fit a Clayton Dewandre servo to improve the system and some of the known cars are so fitted with good results. As with so many cars of this period, it is a challenge to balance the brakes fore and aft and side to side, heavy braking will inevitably lock a wheel, especially in the wet. We were all told not to brake in a corner and especially not to do so in the wet, when driving a Vintage car this is something that you very quickly learn to remember!

The steering and king pin assembly on both the Mk I and the Mk II is a good design. The directional stability and self-centring castor action are good; the steering effort is not too heavy when on the move. The turning circle is large and this has to be taken into account in limited space situations. The amount of toe-in and the correct placement of the front axle castor wedges is critical for directional stability, get these items right and then these cars are very nice to drive.

### Spares

The 4-cylinder cars have a strong Morris pedigree and this widens the source for mechanical spares. Many owners have accumulated their own stocks of old and new spares which they have purchased as and when they turned up. The policy is always to buy anything useful that comes your way, hang on to the bits you might need and then trade with the leftovers. The Vintage MG/Morris network always strives to help a fellow enthusiast in need but it can take a little time to find the part that you need. When buying a car, you may be lucky enough to find that boxes of old and new spares come with it, this is good news so take up the offer.

The Vintage Register does not itself manufacture or trade in spare parts. Occasionally, individual owners, who have appropriate knowledge and manufacturing



The engine bay of an Mk I 18/80. All of the components are easy to reach for adjustment, the OHV engine is easy to service and with the auxiliary petrol tank filler (unseen in this image) means that you can carry a backup supply of both fluids with ease.

contacts, produce small batches of items that are sufficiently in demand. There is always a minimum economic batch size and the actual number of items made usually matches the number of pre-paid deposits. There is no funding available for putting new items into stock and then holding them for future demand. Most members take advantage of these manufacturing initiatives and place an order even though they don't have an immediate need. Manufacturing new mechanical components is a costly business, but in the long run it will be the only way for our cars to be kept in running order. The expense of funding the manufacture of spare parts is a part of the responsibility that goes with the custodianship and ownership of a Vintage MG.

Consumables, such as tyres and lubricants, are not a problem. Tyres and tubes are usually available 'off the shelf' from specialist suppliers. Eight to ten thousand miles seems to be the average life for a set of tyres with normal road use. A full range of engine, transmission and chassis lubricants is available from a choice of specialist manufacturers and suppliers.

The 6-cylinder cars have little in common with Morris parts. The main overlap is the gearbox, torque tube and rear axle assembly on the 18/80 Mk I, which are similar to the MG 14/40 (Morris Oxford). The Morris 6-cylinder Isis engine has the same overall dimensions as the MG 18/80 engine and may be substituted for it; however, it is a significantly different design having the entire induction system on the off-side of the engine.

Replacement body parts and fittings for these cars are hard to come by and may require one-off or small batch manufacture.

### Maintenance

Most Vintage MGs have an abundance of greasing and oiling points that require periodic routine attention; every 1,000 miles or at least annually is a good target. Mk II 18/80s have a Tecalmit centralised lubrication which makes life easier; providing it is working properly. King pins and shackle pins do work hard and they must be lubricated regularly. Engine oil filtration is basic on all models; some cars have been modified with the addition of modern external cartridge filters. Dirty engine oil needs to be completely drained every 1,500 miles or at least annually. The fact that the engine uses or loses oil and needs frequent top up does not mean that the oil does not need to be changed. Gear box and rear axle oil levels should be checked for leakage loss. Free play on the clutch pedal is essential and this is a fairly clean and simple job to do and it only takes a few minutes. The lever arm shock absorbers have oil impregnated friction discs that don't need much attention, occasional adjustment may be required. Occasionally, depending on use, it is a good idea to remove the brake drums in order to see the condition of the linings and to clean out the dust. Tyre pressures need to be checked regularly since inner tubes don't hold their pressure over long periods. Plugs and points and tappet/rocker clearances also need to be serviced if good performance is to be assured. The above list may seem very



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One of the selling points of Early MGs when new and an aspect that is very popular today are the well detailed and appointed dashboards. A fire extinguisher is also an ideal accoutrement and the glove pockets are very useful for those bits and bobs which always seem to be part of enjoyable motoring.

daunting but I have to say that it goes with the territory. Bodywork cannot be taken for granted and door hinges, locks and striker plates need periodic inspection to ensure safe operation. Unleaded regular fuel dosed with additive is the norm. An increasing number of Vintage MGs are running successfully with valve seat inserts. Vintage MGs are not really high maintenance and the essential jobs mentioned above are an integral part of the joys and tribulations of owning and using a Vintage MG!

### Availability

The availability of Vintage MGs today is naturally enough related firstly to how many were made and then how many are known to have survived until now in whatever condition. In the 7 years (1925–1931 inclusive) the total production of MG cars was circa 2,040; of these 1,300 were 4-cylinder cars (1924/5 until early 1929), and 740 were 6-cylinder cars (1929–1931 inclusive). Of these 105 cars, 74 are UK-based, 28 are 4-cylinder cars and 46 are 6-cylinder cars. Perhaps 46 out of the 74 UK cars are up-and-running and more or less fit for the road. From these figures, you will see that would-be purchasers have a small pool in which to fish and that this pool becomes even smaller if a specific type or body style is the preferred target.

### Finding a car

Vintage MGs are seldom advertised on the open market. In an average year only one or possibly two cars change hands. Information about cars for sale is spread by conversation between enthusiasts or by mention in one of the Vintage MG Club publications or possibly in the VSCC monthly Newsletter. The

MGCC Vintage Register publishes a bi-monthly, 32-page A5 Bulletin, and this is often the place where cars for sale are first listed. The *Vintage Register Bulletin* is available to enthusiasts who are not members of the Register or of the MG Car Club. Receiving it is simply a matter of becoming a 'Friend of the MG Car Club Vintage Register' for an annual fee of £10, the contact is John Day (mgcc@mgcc.co.uk). The Vintage Register is making increasing use of its pages within the MG Car Club website and we expect that cars for sale will occasionally be featured there ([www.mgcc.co.uk/vintageregister](http://www.mgcc.co.uk/vintageregister)).

### Values and prices

A word or so about car insurance is appropriate here. Vintage MGs are nearly always insured on an agreed value and agreed annual mileage basis. Agreed values require a written valuation statement from a recognised authority. This statement is required to headline the reasons why that specific car justifies its worth in the current marketplace. The MGCC Vintage Register is a recognised authority and it is able to provide MG Car Club members with impartial valuation statements for MG Vintage cars.

As with all Classic and Vintage cars there are many factors that affect the asking/selling price. Completeness, originality, rarity of model, condition, body style, provenance and the state of the comparable market are some of the key factors. At the time of writing (April 2009) we are in a deepening recession and it is too early to say how seriously, and in what ways, Vintage car prices, and Vintage MG prices in particular, are likely to be affected. All that can be said for now is that a 'first rate' 4-cylinder car can make £40,000, and that a 'first rate' 6-cylinder car can make

£60,000. It goes without saying that an up-together vehicle that has seen regular maintained use, looking smart and tidy, will be worth more than a vehicle that is poorly maintained and slumbering in a damp garage. It is generally accepted that a saloon version of a model which shares the same chassis, usually commands only about two-thirds of the value of a touring version. Vintage MG saloons tend to buck this trend and indeed, in recent years, delightfully restored and maintained saloons have commanded similar money to touring variants. Concours d'Elegance vehicles and true rarities are 'one-off' negotiations, but such vehicles are not always as desirable a car to drive and maintain.

It is sometimes possible to buy cars that are in a poor state or which are abandoned restorations. The time, the work and the associated costs required to complete a restoration project up to 'first rate' condition are invariably underestimated. It is only too easy to pay over the odds for such a project and it is a well-known truth that the final total cost often exceeds the realisable value of the finished product. A non-running, reasonably complete car that requires extensive work in most respects would be worth between a quarter and a third of the value of a 'first rate' example. Of course the risk of 'making a loss' may not concern you if your primary motivation and reward comes from the act of rescuing and restoring a lost treasure. The satisfaction and enjoyment of doing a lot of the work yourself brings its own rewards and is very much encouraged by the Vintage Register, whose members are a very willing bunch and are usually very friendly and helpful.

Happy hunting!