

Guide to buying a classic MG

Checklist 3 - Test driving a classic MG offered for sale

You should never buy a car without first driving it. Make sure you are fully insured to drive the seller's car and take evidence of your motor insurance cover with you so the seller can be reassured you are covered. A prudent seller should be in the car whenever the prospective buyer has possession of the keys and should never let the buyer go on a test drive alone – the buyer might never come back leaving the seller a stunned observer. The fear of an unaccompanied prospective buyer simply driving-off is not a fanciful possibility – it does happen so beware!

If you have not driven a classic MG for some years and approach buying one with fond memories of driving the same or a similar MG in earlier years, do remember a car that is 35 years old or more will have a suspension package and handling which is of that period – and there are no anti-locking brake systems! For some prospective buyers used to driving modern cars, driving a classic car of the fifties or sixties will come as a shock today – driving a T-Type and pre-war MGs even more so. Classic cars have to be driven within their capabilities which may mean, until you are very familiar with its handling and characteristics, you will need to drive at slower speeds and leave more braking distance than you would in a modern car!

- **Start the engine from cold.** Starting problems and exhaust smoke are easier to spot when an engine is started from cold. Most sellers will have prepared the car for your visit which will often include running up the engine. So check to see if the radiator or the bonnet area over the radiator is warm. If it has been run recently before your arrival then you may have to wait until it has cooled to make your cold start checks.
- **Turn the steering wheel from lock to lock before you set off.** There should be no squealing, clonking or knocking noises. With the MGB and its derivatives fitted with wider tyres than originally fitted, the combination of more rubber in contact with the road and grippier rubber may result in very heavy steering when stationary. Other than a moderately heavy resistance, it should be smooth.
- **Test the effectiveness of the handbrake.** By applying the handbrake and trying the drive away with the gentle engine effort – if the car is not held back, the handbrake will need attention. Also check how far the handbrake lever has to be pulled up to apply the brakes.
- **Check you know where the indicators and windscreen wiper controls are.** The steering column stalk controls for the indicators and wipers are very often on the opposite side to modern cars, so your reflexes will need adjusting otherwise when you signal to turn right you will find the windscreen wipers come on! Having that confusion on a test drive can distract you and add to the seller's sense of concern as passenger – even a change of trousers!
- **Take care not to be distracted by the seller.** Most sellers of classic MGs are enthusiasts and will want to talk about the car and probably the fun they have had driving the car. If they are wise and aware of the risks of allowing a prospective seller to test drive the car alone, then they will accompany you. Naturally they will tend to be nervous with a stranger driving their car and may chatter as a consequence. Do try and ignore the chatter and concentrate on the essential checks you need to make. The seller may turn on the radio which may be to mask noises you will need to pick up.
- **Check the temperature gauge has come up to normal operating temperature.** This will usually be midway on the scale.
- **Check the oil pressure when cold and later when the engine is warm.** You will need to check the pressure at moderate engine speeds and at idle.
- **Check first gear selection.** It is not unusual for an MGB gear lever to balk occasionally when you try and select first gear. The trick is to pull the lever back into second gear and then forward into first.
- **Check there is no play in the steering as you set off.** The steering should be direct and positive.
- **Check the gear change once on the move.** Selection of the gears should be smooth and slick and the clutch should “take up” between the top (at rest position) and middle of the travel of the pedal. It should disengage cleanly. A few classic MGs have automatic gearboxes – check for any undue operating noise or banging. Remember to select and test reverse gear. If the car has overdrive, remember to de-select overdrive before selecting reverse gear.
- **Select a variety of road surfaces for the test drive.** It will enable you to see how the suspension copes with uneven surfaces. Check the shock absorbers damp any suspension bounce effectively.
- **Accelerate hard and check for any blue smoke from the exhaust in the rear view mirror.** If there are signs of blue smoke that will be oil burning in the combustion process which would point to engine wear.

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- **Brake firmly and check if the car pulls to one side.** Clearly you will need to check there are no cars behind you for that test. You will also need to check the effectiveness of the brakes too – for example if the rear brake slave cylinders were leaking there could be brake fluid on the rear brake linings reducing the braking effect. On return to the seller's house, check the brake fluid level for signs of a less than topped up fluid level.
- **Ensure the test route is sufficiently long so the prospective buyer can carry out a thorough test drive.** Whilst the seller is likely to select the route, the prospective buyer will need to ensure it is sufficient and if necessary extend the test drive. Drive the car with consideration.
- **Check the operation of any air conditioning system fitted to the car** that it operates correctly. Examine the service records to see when the air conditioning system was last serviced and the description of the work carried out. Has the system been recharged for example?
- **Invite the seller to drive the car towards the end of the test** so you can get an idea of their style of driving and the sense of feeling they have for their car. An enthusiast will be able to drive the car well – a smooth take off and acceleration, no scrubbing or squealing of tyres in corners and a smooth use of the gearbox.