M.G. Magnette ZA

WHEN BMC introduced the MG ZA 1½-litre saloon at the 1953 Motor Show, pre-war MG diehards were soon muttering about the misuse of the famous Magnette name. How could this, mass produced, chassis-less, modern looking car with a dummy radiator cap and lift up false radiator grille, possibly be associated with the race-proved pre-war machine? Even so, it was not long before the traditionalists discovered what a good car the new MG was. Twenty-five years later the MG Magnette is a firm classic, and we appreciate its handsome but restrained styling, its pleasant road manners, and its (for the time) luxury fitments for the price tag.

It was designed by Gerald Palmer, who already had the Jowett Javelin to his credit, and later went on to design the Riley Pathfinder and Wolseley 6/90. Whilst the Palmer designed BMC cars retained an overall "house-style" they differed considerably in detail, making interchangeability something of a problem for the enthusiast today. Originally the MG and Wolseley 4/44 were to share the MG Y type's 1¼-litre engine. The Wolseley was the first to come out and duly received the engine intended for it, but the merger between Austin and Nuffield, to form BMC, resulted in the adoption of the Austin conceived 'B' Series engine for the Magnette. Another cause for moans from the diehards, perhaps, but we all know the virtues of that sound unit, its reliability and tuneability, not to mention the easy parts supply situation.

Now let us look at the MG Magnette in detail.

Engine and Transmission

As introduced the car had a four cylinder 73·025mm × 89mm ohv engine of 1489cc capacity, which developed 60bhp with a 7·5 compression ratio. Two S.U. carburettors were employed which resulted in a top speed of around 80mph, a 0–60mph time of 22·6secs and fuel consumption averaging 25mpg.

One of the great attractions of any classic with a BMC heritage is its engine, whether A series like the Minor or A30/35, or B series as in this application. The B series had a long production run (they are only now being replaced by the new O series unit) so parts are plentiful and cheap, and if critics some twenty-five years later say the units lack sophistication, they were honest, steadily developed to iron out any snags and therefore reliable. What more could one want? However, for would-be restorers it is worth mentioning that in this case both the scavenger pump and sump casting are peculiar to the Magnette. Early cars had a by-pass oil filter while later cars had an improved full-flow type. Other than this there are no serious vices to bother the newcomer to the model and only the usual checks for oil burning or nasty noises need to be made.

The gearbox was also of Longbridge origin and possessed a handy remote-control lever and four reasonably close ratios. The main problem here is the inevitable one, weak synchromesh – in this case second gear being particularly vulnerable because it was not especially strong even when new.

The hypoid rear axle was a product of the BMC combine too and whilst it displays no serious vices I am told that gaskets can be difficult to obtain if you are rebuilding the unit.

Steering and Suspension

The Magnette owner is, again, fortunate that the designers chose rack and pinion as the steering medium. It is rated at 2¾ turns lock to lock for a turning circle of approximately 36ft. The steering column is noticeably offset and the steering wheel rather on the flat side in its position which was unusual for the day but will, no doubt, please those who these days prefer a straight-arm driving position. The steering is quite light (less so where radial ply tyres have been fitted subsequently) and accurate – so many otherwise good collectable cars are spoilt by vague steering – which means that one can make full use of the performance offered by this car.

Problems? Generally no, but if you come to change the racks it is as well to to know that the ZA and ZB racks are different. The steering rack gaiters, as with all cars employing this system, are liable to perish and split between the convolutions. As this is a potential M.o.T. failure point and the life of the component is lengthened by ensuring that foreign bodies do not get trapped within, it is obviously better to replace them. Look too, at the rubber mounting bushes for the rack as these can perish – you will not get the best from the system unless you replace them. Kingpins can wear but the bronze bushes can be rebuilt or replaced; the track rod ends too are subject to wear, but they are readily available. Less common, the steering column has two felt bushes top and bottom which are meant to be lightly lubricated, but as most owners are unaware of their existence they are generally neglected. The result being that as they dry out movement occurs between the inner and outer steering column tubes; they *can* be re-oiled but replacement would be a sound solution. Still at this end of things the steering wheel itself is a plastic rimmed affair with sprung steel spokes. Unfortunately years of flexing are now showing up on such cars and the spokes are breaking away from the captive plastic rim and all too readily springing out. Thus M.o.T. men are turning their attention to such things, and a hastily added leather glove does not, in their eyes, constitute a proper repair or deter them from failing the car any more. So it's a case of a new wheel or, at least, a repair with a suitable resin.

The suspension medium is by coil springs and wishbones and the springs themselves can settle after a high mileage has been clocked up. New or re-tempered coil springs are the answer. While you're doing this pay attention to the suspension bushes – they're rubber and, naturally, perish or go hard. You will never get that "as new" feel if they are sub-standard. At the rear, straightforward leaf springs are to be found – these too, can sag with age but can be re-tempered successfully. The shackle bushes are, again, rubber, so when the springs are off don't skimp 'em, replace 'em! And if you're doing this you might as well renew the telescopic shock absorbers – it's more work and more expense but it really does make sense to renew components on a car which have a direct bearing upon the performance of another. After all, weak shockers on good springs are about as useful as stove enamelled wheels on flat tyres!

Brakes

The Magnette employed Lockheed hydraulically operated drum brakes, twin leading shoe at the front, which were considered light, powerful and fade-free in their day. Pierced road wheels helped to keep them cool. The handbrake too, was more than adequate with a pleasant to use floor mounted lever between the seats. Beyond normal maintenance, as with any braking system, there are no peculiarities or problems for a Magnette seeker to contend with.

Bodywork

So far the MG Magnette must seem to be the classic car buy of the century, little in the way of problems with engine, steering and suspension, or brakes and parts readily available. But before starting a stampede, read on . . . When new *The Autocar* wrote ". . . the designers of the Magnette have put a lot of thought into the finish and equipment. The exterior paintwork of the test car was above average for a large production car; there was no sign of objectionable "orange peel" and with this heartening start an owner should be able to maintain a showroom finish." Twenty-five years later some, still in the hands of caring owners, have maintained a showroom finish, but most will be suffering body rot in some form or other and in varying degrees. So what *can* go and what should one be on the look-out for when contemplating the purchase of the model?

Starting at the front, there's a spot welded area above the headlamps which is rust source number one; number two is the baffle-plate in the front wings which rust only too quickly, but I am told, NTG Services, 21 St. Margaret's Green, Ipswich. Tel: 0473 211240 may be able to supply these new. Another favourite place for rusting, common enough in other breeds, is the area to the rear of the front wing; the problem here is that the rust is attacking from behind the panel so that the tell-tale bubbling in the paint is not rust starting but finishing its passage through the metal. Alas, at present, it appears that there are no new metal front or back wings available and a source for fibre-glass replicas has dried up. Some second-hand panels may be availablle but this will involve consider-

/ZB

Classic Choice

In many ways a controversial car when it first came out, the ZA/ZB Magnette is now a firm classic favourite – **Brian Palmer** tells you why and discloses its failings.

This BMC publicity shot shows the 1955 MG ZA Magnette in lhd form.

A privately owned low mileage ZB Varitone looks good in its two tone colour scheme.

It was easy then! Most things under the bonnet were good to work on.

Above, rust has crept into the boot corner. Above right, polished wood fascia, quality carpet and leather seats are expensive to replace unless you do it. Right, a typical example of galloping body rot just about everywhere. Below, a well-cared for or restored example can look like this, though.

able ferreting about and they're *not going to be cheap!*

Doors can rust at the bottom but this is not as widespread as the wings – nevertheless owners would be well advised to look after their doors by checking that drain holes are clear, seals are in good order and a coat of protective paint mightn't come amiss on the inside surface of the door skins. Below the doors are the sills of which there are inner and outer ones each side. The M.o.T. regards a Magnette sill as structural and you may find that it will be failed during a test if this area is below par.

Potentially more disastrous is the floor's propensity to rusting – we don't want to lose any of you *that* way! The front part of the floor section is double skinned and water creeps in around the pedal area. I can remember travelling in Magnettes, a few years ago now, that had a musty smell and several layers of soggy carpet which would have been a jolly good medium for growing runner beans – another give-away was that sunshine after rain produced heavy condensation over the considerable glass area and a humidity inside which would have ideally suited the growing of orchids never mind runner beans! The area under the seats is especially vulnerable as it is single skinned – hence my opening remarks. All this is repairable with new sheet metal, though. Another rust area is that between the rear wing and boot floor; the rear wings themselves are also liable to attack and are double-skinned. Front engine bearers require a careful check too, as do the rear spring hangers. Potentially, the fact that the windscreen rubber seal is no longer available, could be a source of rusting troubles before long.

ZB differences

The compression ratio was raised from 7·15 to 8·3 in August 1956, the final drive from 4·9 to 4·55 and bhp rose from 60 to 68. Slight changes were made to the dashboard, a dished steering wheel was provided and a full-width parcel shelf under the dashboard found a place in the scheme of things. The front wing chrome strip lost its forward plunge down to meet the bumper. Two years later, 1958, came the "Varitone" which heralded a range of pleasing two-tone colour schemes divided by a chrome strip – at the same time a wrap-round rear window was introduced to take account of increasing pressure to provide improvements to rear three-quarter vision. Additionally a two pedal control version with automatic clutch became available, known as the Manumatic Magnette – it was *not popular!*

The model soldiered on until 1959 when the Magnette Mark III was introduced which was quite another vehicle, by which time 36,599 Z types had been produced. This breaks down into: ZA–12,754 : ZB–23,845.

Prices

An example worth restoring, but needing a lot of work, can be found in the £150–£250 price bracket, but if you want an average to good example not needing major surgery £500 to £1000 would be about the going rate. Tip top, low mileage, "showroom condition" examples can go soaring up to £1000 to £2000 or more for the right one.

Clubs

As with every classic car we feature we cannot stress too highly the importance of joining an appropriate club – in this instance you have a choice of two. First we have the MG Car Club, P.O. Box 126, Brentwood, Essex. My thanks should be recorded here to Bob Bonthrone who allowed us to take photographs of his two cars, and to Malcolm Eade, Secretary of the Z Register. The second club is the MG Owner's Club: Secretary, Roche Bentley, 13 Church End, Over, Cambs. Tel: 0954 31125, who have also been very helpful.

B.P.