

# The Mighty Midget

Sports cars for all or sheep in wolves' clothing? Peter Garnier, former Editor of *Autocar*, looks back with affection at the T-series MG and recalls their impact at the time.

IN ANNOUNCING the first-ever, M-Type MG Midget in the autumn of 1928, *The Autocar* said "The MG Midget will make sports car history". When one looks, today, at this seemingly mundane little car, with its humble Morris Minor origins, it is hard to see what prompted this most accurate of all motoring predictions. Yet it was perfectly true — because, for the youth of the day, the M-Type was the sports car personified. It wasn't in the Alfa Romeo or Bugatti class, of course; but neither were most of the young people in 1928 — it was in their class, though.

As a boy of 10, I watched three M-Types climbing Bluehills Mine in the 1929 Lands End Trial. They looked, and sounded, the part as they climbed neatly and fast. I talked my father into driving out to Lands End early on the Sunday morning — just in case they were still there. They were; and I still have the photographs we took of them, one in the frame in which it hung for years on my bedroom wall. I had become one of the thousands of young men and women — some already in the right age group, others like myself who had to wait — who were to swear during the ensuing 40-odd years that they would one day own an MG Midget.

Whatever it was in a sports car that young people looked for, it was certainly there in the M-Type. It makes me mad that there should be motoring journalists who have forgotten their youth and decry this forerunner of the world's most available, and popular sports car. It's so

easy, now, when one can relate it to the infinitely better handling and performance of run-of-the-mill family saloons, to talk about "bowls of soup" and suchlike. In its day, when we knew no better, it was safe enough — and those who now decry it sang its praises!

The M-Type came at a time of change — when the popular concept of a sports car was turning to the Le Mans, slab-tank style and away from the pointed-tail, track-racing configuration used on Grand Prix cars. Nothing daunted, Abingdon complied — and produced the J-, and then the P-Types, for which you could get everything: centre-lock, knock-off hub nuts and spoked wheels; slab tank with protecting, wire-mesh stone-guards at the sides and below; similar guards for the radiator, head-lamps and, if you really wanted to live-it-up, for the windscreen (which folded flat, leaving little mounting brackets for two aero screens); a strap round the bonnet, in case the clips failed; quick-action filler caps for the radiator and fuel tank; even an outside exhaust system (discouraged by girl-friends, who preferred to clamber through, rather than over, their door). What Abingdon didn't fit, Vic Derrington could supply.

At this time too, there was a school of thought that laid great score on long-stroke, slow-revving engines, delivering their power in large lumps at relatively infrequent intervals. Originally, this had been dictated by the materials available for bearings — but by the time the M-Type appeared it was principally the RAC

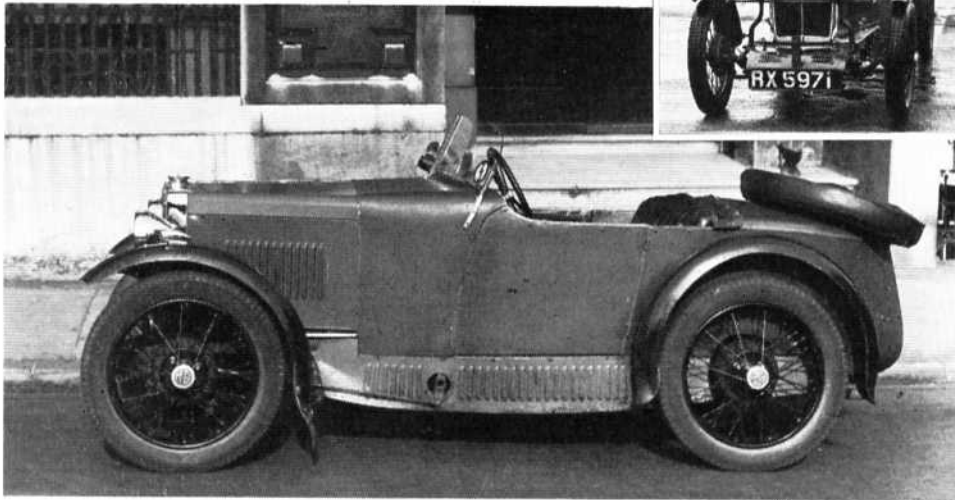
horsepower formula, on which the Road Fund tax was based, that encouraged designers to keep their bores as small as possible relative to their strokes. Though the M-Type bore/stroke ratio (847cc; 57 × 83mm; 4-cyl) was in keeping with these principles, and the small bore didn't allow anything special in the way of valve sizes or breathing, it produced its 27bhp at 4500rpm, a relatively high engine speed which caused the diehards to call it a "buzz-box" and to write rude rhymes about it! In this sense, too, therefore the early Midgets were showing the shape of things to come — further confirming *The Autocar's* prediction.

The outdated RAC rating died, as it were, with the war, so it is surprising the TC-Type Midget (late 1945 to late 1949), and the first of the post-war Midgets) should not have taken advantage of the situation and used a more nearly square engine. The TA (production, 3003; mid-1936 to early 1939), with its 63.5 × 102mm, 1292cc, 4-cyl engine, had had a stroke/bore ratio of 1.6 to 1. This was followed by the nearer-square TB (379; early 1939 until the outbreak of war) with its 66.5 × 90mm, 1250cc 4-cyl unit and a stroke/bore ratio of 1.3 — and these dimensions were to continue right through to the last of the T-Type cars, the TF in its smaller, 1250cc form. The 1½-litre TF engine (72 × 90mm) was nearest square of all the T-Type cars, at 1.25 to 1.

The T cars, starting with the TA, set a new standard of comfort for MG Midgets, with their appreciably wider bodywork. The track went up from the 3ft 6in, front and rear, of the P-Types to 3ft 9in; and the wheelbase from 7ft 3 5/16in to 7ft 10in, these new figures holding right through to include the TC. It was thus a fairly comfortable sports car on which return-

*Right: Brooklands, 1930. Staff members of The Autocar, H. S. Linfield (later Editor) and Donald Scutts road-testing an M-Type Midget.*

*Already, in October 1930, The Autocar had tested a used version of the M-Type Midget. First registered in November 1929, the car had covered 11,200 miles, was selling for £130 (£185, new), covered a timed ¼-mile at 62.7 mph, and did 38.3 mpg.*



*One of the many that crossed the Atlantic — a youthful Phil Hill, before he became a Grand Prix star, drives a TC Midget on a poorly surfaced circuit in the US of A.*



ing Servicemen cast an envious eye — and it was, like the M-Type before it, the personification of the sports car, standing unique as a sporting type retaining the outward appearance of a "real" car, dear to the hearts of enthusiasts in years gone by. What's more, it had taken on added lustre during the war years when many examples were in use by service personnel — left lying at dispersal points on RAF aerodromes while owners went off on "missions", or awaiting the return of some warship to one of H.M. Dockyards. Everyone knew it and loved it, especially the Americans, who took many examples home with them — and subsequently imported many, many more, half-a-million Midgets going to the States between the end of the war and 1971.

By the time the TC appeared, I had done an enormous mileage in the "family" PA (1934), and in retrospect I can't honestly say I recall anything unhappy about it. It ran almost entirely without maintenance throughout the war, and for some time afterwards — so far as I can recall, virtually trouble-free save for truly frightful rusting of the wings which, being non-structural, didn't matter; eventually they might as well not have been there. The much maligned camshaft drive, which doubled as the dynamo armature, carried on its dual role happily enough.

Obviously, the most striking thing about the TC was its increased width, and general pandering to creature comforts — which prompted accusations of "pansiness"; but this has been the case with every new sports car model through the years — the TC addicts said so of the TD ... and so on. Certainly the TC's suspension was a great improvement — though still by  $\frac{1}{2}$ -elliptics all round. One of my

memories of the P-Type was the amount of time it spent with its bonnet pointing upwards, and front wheels bouncing clear of the road on rough-going.

There was none of this about the TC — which was beginning to accept that spring movement was an asset. Though the heavier car didn't quite have the "sharpness" of the P, the engine revved just as freely — a feature which was an essential part of the "true" Midgets. Although one probably didn't need to use the gearbox to the enormous extent one did, it just asked to be used — the stubby, handy gear-lever, the big rev-counter with the red sector starting at 5500 (above which it would rise remarkably easily), and the 60mph in third, 40 in second, they all added to the fun. There must be few cars whose transmissions alone have given such driver-satisfaction in return for a job well done!

This was, however, to be the last of the traditional Midgets. The TD, which followed the 10,000th TC late in 1949, to make its debut in January 1950, had independent front suspension by wishbones and coil springs. Spring movement had come to stay, and to prove it you could press downwards on a front wing — and observe the result. A new box-section chassis frame, upswept over the rear axle, replaced the old design with straight side-members running beneath it. And the body had become even wider, with a roll-over bar beneath the scuttle. In appearance, though, it was still the logical, 1950 development of the stark little J-Type of mid-1934 (of which, astonishingly, only 380 J1s and 2083 J2s were built).

An important improvement over the TC cars were the two-leading shoe brakes on the front wheels — though the 9in drums had been standard, back and front, on all the T-Type

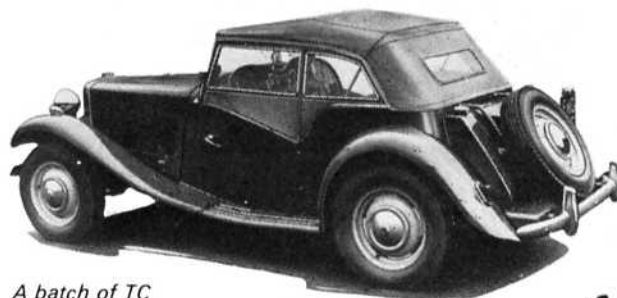
series since its introduction in mid-1936. The result was the brakes were extremely good, with a 96% efficiency for a pedal pressure of 130lb, 78% for 95lb, and 35% for 53lb. Unfortunately *Autocar's* Road Tests prior to the TD published no comparable figures on brake performance.

Using the same pushrod-ohv 4-cylinder (66.5 × 90mm; 1250cc) that had powered the TB and C, with the same 54.4bhp at 5200rpm, the TD suffered a weight penalty, with 1.9lb per cc compared with the TC's 1.45. Performance figures were thus slightly down on the TC's, which are shown in brackets: from rest through the gears to 30mph, 6.3sec (5.7); to 50mph, 15.6sec (14.7); to 60mph, 23.9sec (22.7). I seem to have monopolised *Autocar's* Road Test TD, back in 1953, for I see that I not only did the Test itself, but used the car as personal transport, competing in an MCC Edinburgh Trial and popping down to Cornwall in it.

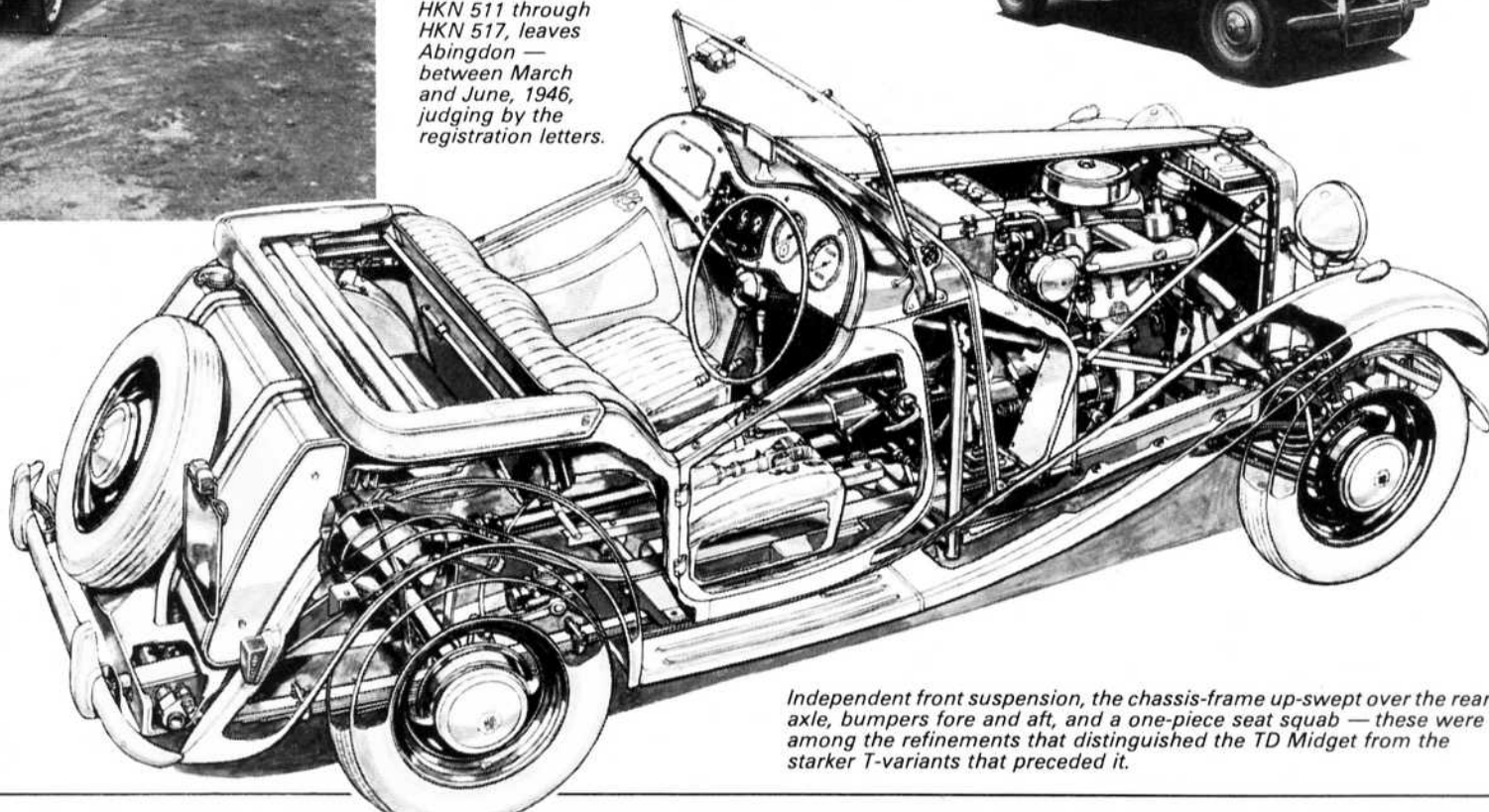
Principal impression was that, even though the classification embraced such machinery as Ferrari and Alfa Romeo, the TD Midget was still a sports car — if such a term meant it was light-hearted, tractable, fast, lively, cornered and braked safely, and above all was a pleasure to drive. It was all these things, and more; and it achieved sports car status for as little as £530 (plus the dreaded Purchase Tax at £221 19s 2d). If the "It's getting pansy", diehard MG enthusiasts are to be given their say — perhaps they had something. It was certainly comfortable enough to sit in for a day and a night, without getting stiff and sore — which you couldn't say for the PA — so I'm for the softer living.

It had all the things that help one in a competition, however unambitious: its handily-placed fly-off handbrake lever, which easily held the car on the precipitous stop-and-restart tests; the light and accurate steering, with virtually no roll when cornering fast — though we made the comment in *Autocar* that "... the oversteer experienced with the recommended tyre pressures was greatly reduced by a slight increase all round". After losing time for some reason, in the Edinburgh, we covered the last 37 miles into the Carlisle control in 41 minutes — which can't have been hanging about on the give-and-take roads of 1953.

14



A batch of TC Midgets, with consecutive registration numbers from HKN 511 through HKN 517, leaves Abingdon — between March and June, 1946, judging by the registration letters.



Independent front suspension, the chassis-frame up-swept over the rear axle, bumpers fore and aft, and a one-piece seat squab — these were among the refinements that distinguished the TD Midget from the starker T-variants that preceded it.



# The Mighty Midget

As we so often said of the TD at the time, if you wanted to make a start in competition driving, through races and rallies at Club level, you couldn't do much better than a TD Midget, as it was so essentially safe, and so forgiving. And, if the performance was not up to the ability of some sporting owners, as they began to improve, this too could be coped with by means of the stage-by-stage tuning that could be carried out under the guidance of (or by) Abingdon. Considered in terms of what the car set out to do, it achieved its purpose to a surprising degree; and it was capable of standing up to consistent over-revving and other harsh treatment without any lasting deterioration. It was not difficult to understand why the Midget, produced in an unbroken series for a period of 25 years, should still have held its appeal — nor that such an astonishingly high percentage of Abingdon's output should be exported to America.

Though we had covered almost 3000 particularly active miles in the car, including 460 on the Edinburgh, 600 to Cornwall and back, and the rest on the Road Test, the overall fuel consumption worked out at 26mpg — including taking the performance figures. This particular car, incidentally, was a Mark II TD, with two semi-down-draught SUs — larger than on the Mark I — and perforated bolt-on disc wheels, as distinct from the earlier unperforated. In all, 29,664 TDs were built between late 1949 and late 1953.

I have already said they were the last of the traditional MG Midgets. There will be — indeed, are — those who disagree with me, and reckon the TF, which followed, was the last. It is

a matter of opinion — and adjustment to change. If the owner of a contemporary J-Type were to see no other Midget until the TD, he *might* be expected to recognise it — even without its octagons. But not the TF — at least, I don't think so; it was a different concept. One needed to have watched the whole development — M, J2, P, PB, T, TB, TC, TD — to be able to identify the final stage.

In any case, an enormous change had taken place in the rules for international sports car racing, and in the concept of a sports car, between the J-Types and the TDs and TFs. Most of the bolt-on bits no longer meant anything — either as status symbols (few people still knew what they implied, so were unimpressed) or for their practical value, which had once been considerable. Brooklands had gone, and with it the regulation silencer (or "can") and outside exhaust; sports car circuits no longer broke up after a few laps, showering rocks at the cars' fragile glassware and vulnerable fuel tanks — so all those handsome grills were pointless; and the fold-flat screen was no longer necessary since a backward slope and curved glass were achieving the same effect — and protecting the occupants too. The post-war Ts — including the TFs — were virtually anachronisms, based on a style that had passed but was still much loved by the diehard enthusiasts — proof of which lies in the fact that the Morgan, 27 years after the final traditional Midget was built, perpetuates the style with great success to this day, but without the bolt-on bits and pieces which, like the sprag, have vanished.

The TF (late 1953 to early 1955) received a curious reception among MG enthusiasts at the time, for it was neither a true MG Midget nor a modern, streamlined, all-enveloping sports car. It was the outcome of a brief from BMC to rejig the TD, sales of which had dropped by roughly half, at home and overseas. Yet today, when one can look at the entire Midget story, from the M to the Spridget, the TF stands out as a very handsome car — whether or not one accepts it as a true successor to the Js, Ps and early Ts.

It certainly broke new ground in front, with its restyled wings, sloping (imitation) radiator grille, and faired-in headlamps. Yet one wonders how much of the TF was intentional — and how much *Faute de mieux*. At roughly the same time, Peter Morgan, too, changed over to faired-in headlamps — but not because he wanted to. Lucas no longer produced the stand-on-its-own type. And was the family likeness to the TD and earlier cars simply because Abingdon wasn't allowed to do more than a "re-hash"? Certainly the new car was different, with a reduction in overall height of 1½ in, and 3½ in in radiator grille height, so that there was a fairly acute slope on the bonnet. Though the rear wings were probably TD, the

tail of the car was considerably revamped and tidied up.

Again, the familiar 4-cylinder, 66.5 × 90mm (1250cc) engine was used — with larger valves, stronger valve springs, compression ratio raised from 7.25 to 8-to-1, and using twin 1½ in SU carburettors. These modifications raised the output to 57bhp at 5500rpm (from 54.4 at 5200). A year later, and initially for export only, a 1½-litre version became available, with bore increased from 66.5mm to 72mm for the same 90mm stroke; this version gave 63bhp at 5000rpm. The standard, 1250cc TF unit, incidentally, represented Stage 2 in the manufacturer's stage-by-stage tuning recommendations for the TD.

The principal purpose of the TF was to keep the American market happy (which it completely failed to do) until the MGA was unveiled in 1955 — a car that already existed in prototype form. At the Earls Court Show of 1953, where the TF made its debut, there were also the Triumph TR2 and the Austin-Healey 100, both of them 100mph cars — to the TF's 80-odd. It must have been very depressing for the Abingdon works to know that they could have come out with the all-enveloping, modern MGA instead of the stop-gap TF, if Leonard Lord hadn't felt that the MGA and the Healey 100 were too similar to co-exist beneath one roof. In consequence, BMC were not anxious for TF publicity in the Press, and neither *Auto-car* nor *Motor* (nor anybody else) were allowed to publish road tests of the car — in 1½- or 1½-litre form. No performance figures exist, therefore, for the TF; so no comparisons can be made with the TD. By the early part of 1955, when they went out of production, only 6200 1½-litre cars, and 3400 1½, had been produced, most of them for export.

It felt what it was — a facelifted TD with a rather nicer driving position and added refinement, notably in the more comfortable, bucket seats that replaced the TD's one-piece squab, and the Italian-looking leather-covered protective roll along the top of the dashboard. With its solid roll-over bar in the scuttle, and the much stiffer, boxed chassis-frame designed to take independent front suspension, it was a rigid-feeling car that accentuated the precision and lightness of the controls. Handling and brakes were predictably good and safe, and the 1½-litre engine option gave appreciably improved performance — though one wondered, at that 1953 Earls Court, why the 1½-litre engine of the ZA Magnette, which also made its debut, could not have gone into the TF from the beginning, to bring it nearer the performance of the TR2 and Healey 100.

But now, 27 years later, all is forgiven; its stop-gap specification, so significant at the time to MG enthusiasts, no longer matters. Now they love it for what it is, not what they hoped it might have been . . . if . . . ●



Above: The TF — elegant in its own right, and beautifully balanced, but not quite an MG Midget. Below: Historic round-up, pre- and post-war: Fabric-bodied M-Type Midget and large, handsome 18/80 Speed Model beyond; T-type Midget to the right; blown 1100cc K3 Magnette (centre) and N-Type 4-seater Magnette (with hood up).

