

Classic cars

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All time Greats Unsung Hero

The first real MG has been passed over by history, concludes Brian Palmer who has driven an immaculately restored MG 18/80

I SUPPOSE it could be said that some cars are born to be great, others achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them. I do not intend, in this series, to create greatness where it does not properly belong. However, there are cars which may not have been wildly successful sales material — for a whole variety of reasons — but which we can see today were significant in shaping the history of a particular marque.

One such car, the MG 18/80, has been largely ignored because, fine car though it was, it was launched at an inauspicious time and became totally eclipsed by a baby car called the MG Midget. The Midget changed the course the company had been painstakingly treading; from coachbuilt middle-rankers like the 14/40 and 18/80 to cheap small sports cars built in volume. Within a year over 50 per cent of MGs would be Midgets — it has been said that if Austin brought car ownership to the masses with the Seven, MG provided the cheap motoring thrills.

The significance of the 18/80 is that it was, perhaps, the first real MG. Earlier Bullnose and Flat Rad MGs bore a close and obvious affinity to the equivalent Morris — Cecil Kimber's task had been to dress them up a bit to sell to a wider clientele. The 18/80 saw an attempt by Kimber to produce a car which could be classed as a marque in its own right by virtue of its mechanical components being demonstrably different to any current Morris.

It has been said that the engine of the 18/80 is identical to that of the Morris Isis or, conversely, that it was a Wolseley design. Neither is true. William Morris had, indeed, purchased Wolseley Motors in February 1927. Wolseley had been known for their overhead camshaft engines which they had developed at great expense following their experiences during the First War when they manufactured Hispano-Suiza engines under licence. When Morris brought out an ohc engine eight months later it was natural to assume that there was a link. In fact it came about when Morris bought the Hotchkiss factory

in Coventry in 1923 to create the Morris Engines Branch. Cecil Kimber had recommended to Morris Frank Woollard as its manager: it was again Kimber who suggested later to Woollard that the ancient Hotchkiss-designed side-valve four used in Morris cars might be bettered.

The 2468cc overhead-camshaft six-cylinder engine that resulted must have seemed totally alien to the ultra-conservative Morris yet, surprisingly, he sanctioned its production. Its first manifestation was in the Morris Light Six shown at the 1927 Motor Show. While the Press raved over the new engine, its chassis was not sufficiently rigid to cope safely with the power. So before anyone killed themselves, Morris Motors revamped the chassis and renamed the car the Morris Six. Alas this was little better and about eighteen months later (late 1929) the Morris Isis appeared, a car so utterly substantial that its 0-60mph time was in the order of 40 seconds and above which it steadfastly refused to go.

Morris Garages, however, purchased a Light Six fabric saloon in December 1929 as Kimber was convinced that something could be made of the engine. A completely new chassis frame was fabricated (the first time this had deviated from standard Morris on a production MG) and by the time the car was announced at the 1928 Motor Show, it had a newly cast cylinder block allowing for two carburettors. The crankshaft was notably strong and shell-bearing big-ends and mains provided a modern touch. The overhead camshaft was driven by long duplex roller chain with spring-loaded eccentric tensioner.

The 18/80 was beautifully constructed with fine attention to detail. For instance the bulkhead was supported by cast-aluminium brackets incorporating a fretwork MG motif, all hidden from view when the bodywork was attached. Two tanks were fitted to the bulkhead — one as a petrol reserve and the other for engine oil topping-up. For the first time a racing-type 'fly-off' handbrake was used as were Rudge-

Whitworth centre-lock wheels. Pedals and steering were adjustable and quality Jaeger instruments featured. Most noticeable was the distinctive new radiator design, incorporating the MG Octagon, the basic design of which MG used right to the end of the T-series and beyond. The badge preceded the radiator by about a season, though.

The chassis price alone was £420 — fitted with tourer coachwork, another £65, which sounds ridiculously cheap today (saloons cost £555). But the tourer was a fairly light and simple affair and this endowed the 18/80 with excellent performance for its day. A top speed of around 80mph was possible and the MG could out accelerate contemporary Alvis and Lagonda models which already carried an enviable sporting reputation. As well as speed, the MG had fine steering and roadholding while the flexibility of its engine prevented the three-speed gearbox from being a handicap.

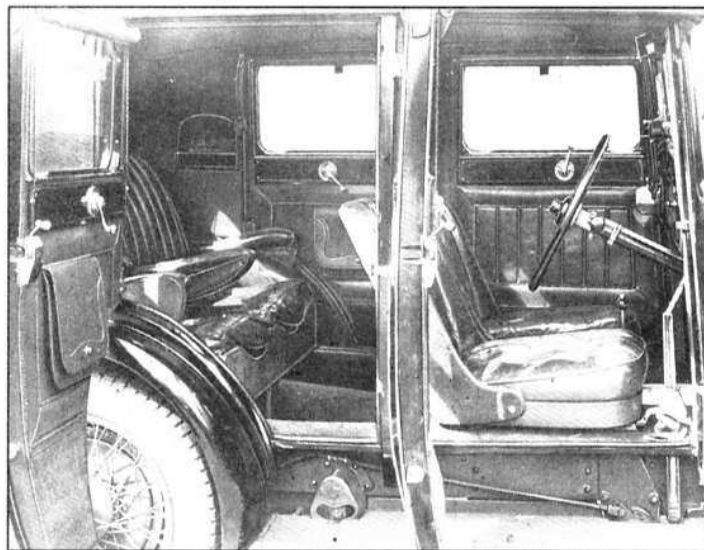
A new version, the 18/80 MkII appeared late in 1929 not to replace the earlier car but to sell alongside it, which really must have confused the market. The MkII endeavoured to overcome some of the earlier car's deficiencies — largely Morris orientated. The narrow 4ft track was a Morris legacy which limited the type of coachwork which could be fitted, so this was increased by 4ins. However the chassis itself was pretty robust and yet the extraordinary decision was taken to make it stronger and heavier still. By the time a four-speed gearbox and stronger final drive had been added, the rear springs, shock absorbers, steering and axles all beefed-up, the poor car weighed some 330lbs more. As the engine was given no extra power the result was that the MkII was considerably slower than the MkI. Then it was priced about £100 dearer which hardly helped it to sell.

A further bad decision, in retrospect, was to attempt to turn the 18/80 into a racing car. The ensuing *débâcle* probably delivering the *coup de grace* to whatever lingering sales the model could muster. Taking the MkII chassis, the MG men installed a more sophisticated engine which, as well as having a new crankshaft, camshaft and pistons, featured dry-sump lubrication and a cross-flow head with twin sparking plugs. With its outside exhaust ending in a fishtail, the strap over the bonnet and the cycle wings and louvred chassis the 18/80 MkIII looked the part but, again, excessive *avoiropo* hardly gave it a chance. Sometimes the car was known as the 18/100 because of attempts to produce 100bhp which it never quite made, and at other times it has been known variously as Tiger, Tigress and even Tigresse.

The MG made its first appearance at the May 1930 Brooklands Double Twelve 24 hour event driven by Leslie Callingham and HD Parker. But after only a few hours the car expired with serious engine trouble. To make matters worse, a last minute Midget entry not only stayed the course but came away with the team prize. No great interest was shown by the buying public in the ready-to-race MkIII and only five were built out of the 25 hoped for by Kimber. Hardly surprising given the sale price of £895. A Speed Model MkI was introduced at the 1930 Motor Show and by the time the MkI ceased production in the summer of the following year, 500 had been built. Yet the MkII sold only 236 units even though it could still be had well into 1933.

Not then a seemingly conspicuous success story. But the MG 18/80 sold well enough for the standards of the day. Just as the Vintage 30/98 Vauxhall was really an Edwardian survivor which sold on its quality and reliability, so the MG 18/80 was really rather old fashioned but beautifully constructed. And that was what sold it.

Ron Gammons is well known to MG enthusiasts all over the world for his MG spares



Left, period shot shows sumptuous interior fittings and trim in saloon 18-80. Note armchair comfort, rear companions, inlaid wood, roller blinds on doors. Knob on top of gearlever guards reverse, that on steering column the horn and dipswitch. Right, in colour, dawning of the classic MG radiator. Inset, hood in three-quarter position looks good and allows draughtless fresh air





Unsung Hero

Left, the MG 18/80 is undeniably impressive looking from the front. Right, happily, MG had avoided an excess of octagons — the 18/80 sports good quality Jaeger dials



and restoration company based in Baldock in Hertfordshire. He's known as something of a flyer on the track too! So it comes as a bit of a surprise to find him waxing lyrical over a car as stately as your great aunt Maud. His 18/80 is a MkII registered in April 1931 and fitted with a Carlton drophead coupé body with three-position hood — Carlton did a lot of work for the University Motors group. Originally it appears to have been painted a rather lurid lime green with bright red upholstery, then passed through a variety of hands donning a battleship grey livery which, apparently, attracted a couple of naval officers until Ron discovered it in an orchard near Crawley in 1974. By then painted green to which mother nature had added her own matching mould, Ron surveyed the sorry sight (and the engine sitting in a shed with an earth floor) and decided he could live without it after all. Some six years later he found himself drawn, once again, to this grand old lady which was currently residing in Dublin. Alas the Emerald Isle's 'soft' weather had done no favours to madame's complexion but in a weak moment Ron decided to rescue her from further decline.

After some hilarious times at Holyhead, where Ron was delivering one car to the 18/80's former owner in exchange and found the big MG on a trailer sans wheels without any apparent means of unloading, (and Ron hobbling about with a broken leg) the whole sorry cargo was transported home. I dare say some people would have scrapped the body but it is to Ron's credit that he decided to renovate it. Though it was in a sorry condition, everything was there on which to model new materials. He might have regretted the decision when he discovered that the body could not be lifted complete but had to be dismantled in reverse order to the way it had been built. Despite Ron's broken leg the restoration was completed in 12 months between July '81 and July '82. Obviously having his premises and some skilled assistance helped but Ron is at pains to point out that it was all done at weekends and after working hours.

There is nothing remotely dramatic about the big MG from behind the wheel but it simply exudes quality. With its commodious coachwork it offers the sort of clubland comfort that is light years away from the average Vintage tourer or sports car. Its performance may not be electrifying but it is steady and of the kind which suggests you could drive all day without either of you tiring. Ron proved it, too, when he drove the car to an MG rally in Hausach in West Germany when the newly restored 18/80 had only 500 miles to its credit.

The engine is silky smooth, pulling easily from modest revs. You just let in the clutch, and off she glides like a liner down the slips. The MG's four-speed gearbox, with its handy remote lever and reverse gear pattern, is a delight, snicking easily into each gear so long as you do not rush it. There's little lost motion in the steering and the

ride is so well controlled that you wonder what improvements have been made in the intervening years. Once you're used to it, it is possible to push the staid-looking MG through corners faster than you feel is really decent. Because few cars of the period had outside locks, MG fitted a Yale lock on the gearbox which traps the lever into neutral. That gearbox, incidentally, is so beautifully worked in polished metal that the carpet is neatly cut around it.

But for the coming of the Midget, who knows, MG may have continued to produce cars in the Alvis, Lagonda, Talbot mould in which case the 18/80 may have been regarded as the first of a line instead of the concluding chapter in one volume of the MG story.

Specification

Make: MG
Model: 18/80 (details as for MkII)
Year: 1931
Capacity: 2468cc
Bore & Stroke: 69×110mm
Cylinders: 6 in line
Valves: Overhead, single overhead cam
Bhp: 60bhp at 3200rpm
Forward speeds: 3 (4 MkII)
Carburettors: Twin SU horizontal
Max speed: 80mph approx.
Wheelbase: 9ft 6in.
Suspension: Semi-elliptic front and rear
Brakes: four wheel cable operated drum
Coachwork: Carlton

