

Building MG's in Australia

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Background

Successive Australian Federal Governments from the early 1900's pursued protectionist tariff policies to encourage the development of local industries and infrastructure. (In fact, favourable rates applied for Commonwealth countries, especially the UK, or at least until Britain "turned its back" on Commonwealth member nations and joined the EEC in 1973.)

Following the Second World War, the then Labor Federal Government's advice was that a further world war within 20 years was probable, and that, without a substantial increase in the country's population and its industrial base, Australia was likely to face an Asian invasion from the north. In the jingoism of the late 1940's this was commonly referred to as "The Yellow Peril".

"Populate or Perish" became the guiding political motto. Consequently a massive immigration policy was instituted, predominantly from the UK, Ireland and Europe.

Simultaneously, major encouragement was given to overseas motor vehicle manufacturers to establish production facilities in Australia.

General Motors and BMC were the earliest to proceed with local manufacturing. General Motors- Holden released their first Holden in 1948.

Victoria Park, William Morris and the Nuffield Group

The Nuffield facilities (later BMC Australia and later still, BLMC and then Leyland Australia) were located at Victoria Park, just 5.8 km from the centre of Sydney. The adjoining suburbs here were Zetland and Waterloo, (and hence the business address changed, depending which frontage the administrative offices occupied!)

The area was originally a swamp, and then from 1900 a horse racetrack. A speedway track also occupied the site from 1908 to 1920.

Interestingly the first powered flight in Australia was made from this site, in 1909.

William Morris had come across the Victoria Park site in 1945 on one of his visits to Australia. As a patriotic British subject, Morris was eager to see the Australian market remain substantially British. He recommended



to the Nuffield Group Board that they purchase the Victoria Park site for an Australian factory. The Board considered and rejected this proposal, whereupon Morris purchased the site himself.

Morris subsequently sold the property to Nuffield a matter of months later, and what's more, at a considerable profit!

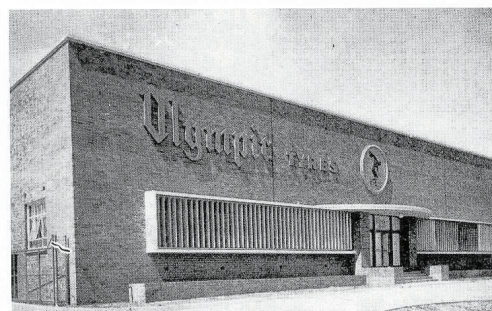
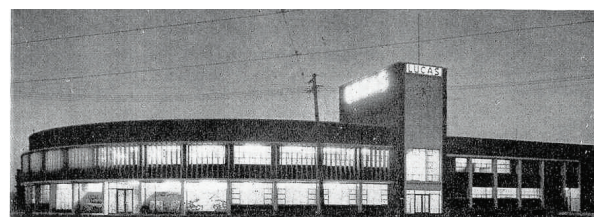
However Morris only sold about half of the approximately 115 acre site to the Nuffield Group for their Australian factory.

Morris sold off parts of the rest of the site to support industries and feeder companies, such as to James N Kirby, Joseph Lucas Ltd, Champion Spark Plugs, Olympic tyres etc.

Clearly William Morris was an extraordinarily astute and successful entrepreneur.

Nuffield Australia commenced operations in 1950. The first factory was completed in 1952. By 1957 BMC in Melbourne had been shut down, and all assembly moved to Sydney.

The factory site was later named BMC (Australia) after the merger in 1952 of Nuffield and Austin. From 1968, it became The British Leyland Motor Corporation of Australia and Leyland Australia in 1971.



The factories for companies supplying BMC (and other Australian manufacturers), all located adjacent to the BMC plant. Note the appearance of the Lucas factory belies its (most unfair) pseudonym of "The Prince of Darkness"!

BMC (Australia)

Most people overseas were and remain quite unaware of just how large a venture BMC (Australia) was. The factory employed about 5,000 people, and by the late 1950's was producing a car every 4 minutes.

Apart from extensive and progressively expanded factory floor area for assembly, the factory, on its 57 acre site, was equipped with its own panel pressing facilities, (the largest presses in the Southern Hemisphere).

Engines, transmissions, axles and bodies were all cast, assembled and/or pressed locally. (Major castings were supplied by "Australian Forge and Engineering" and others in NSW, Victoria and South Australia).

Heat treating of components for hardening, and metallurgical control was in house.*

The "Unit Plant" was where engine, transmission, axle and suspension components were manufactured, ready for vehicle installation. The transfer machines in the unit plant machined cylinder heads, engine blocks and gearbox casings. These transfer machines could index the part automatically from station to station, allowing 30 sets of operations to be performed on three faces without any human intervention. *

The Paint Shop included a "Rotodip" where all assembled vehicle bodies were located onto a frame and rotated through a series of baths and ovens.

All trim was locally sourced and fabricated on site.

There were production engineering offices, drawing and design facilities, a service department and research laboratories, and a department termed "Experimental".

There was an active apprentice training program with related facilities.

As a result of the highly developed engineering facilities and capabilities available, in addition to the various mainstream vehicles produced by the parent company in the UK, suitably modified for Australian conditions, a number of vehicles unique to the Australian market were constructed here.

The original prototype MGC, incidentally, as conceived by Sydney Enever, employed an Australian produced 2.4 litre 6 cylinder engine based on "one and a half" 1622cc 'B' series engines, named the "Blue Streak 6". This was a much lighter and much more compact engine than the Morris C-series engine ultimately used. This engine could potentially have been manufactured as a relatively small lightweight 2.7 litre 6 cylinder engine. Even the 1622 cc version of the B-series engine for that matter was conceived and produced in Australia, long before its UK counterpart; the parent company engineers initially claimed that 1500 cc was the practical limit of the B-series engine.

MG Assembly in Australia

Despite the highly developed significant local manufacturing facilities available to Nuffield-BMC, because of the smaller production volumes of MG models, prior to 1957, MG cars were shipped to Australia completely built up, (CBU) but partly disassembled. Wheels/tyres and bumpers for example were removed and stowed in or under the cars.

The MGA in Australia

As the MGA, which had been introduced in 1955 was proving to be in significant demand, and there remained encouragement through tariffs to assemble motor vehicles in Australia, a decision was made to commence local assembly in Australia of the MGA.

Due at this stage to having insufficient spare capacity at the Zetland facility, this task was subcontracted by BMC (Australia) to Pressed Metal Corporation, which like BMC was based in Sydney, in the suburb of Enfield.

Consequently shipments of batches of Completely Knocked Down (CKD) MGA cars commenced to Australia in 1957. Until the later part of 1962 these were assembled



Pressed Metal Corporation factory, (spacious, light and airy compared to the dark cramped confines of the Abingdon factory). Showing L to R, lines constructing medium sized commercial vehicles, MGA line and "Ute" assembly. ("Ute" is short for utility vehicle. In American parlance, pick-up trucks) Note these vehicles are on temporary chassis called "skuks", moved along a track.

at Pressed Metal, with ever greater local content.

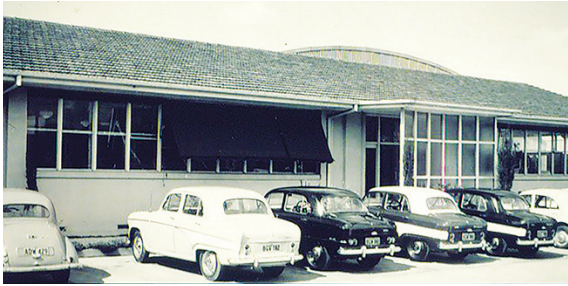
Indeed, the degree of assembly of these cars here in Australia was very much greater than at the MG factory in the UK, where in contrast to Australia, MGA bodies were received at Abingdon already fully built up and already painted.

Ultimately 2,040 MGA roadsters were built in Australia. (The Coupes and the Twin Cam models remained fully imported due to their lower numbers).

Again because of the production volumes, major mechanical components such as engines, transmissions and chassis were imported (though in the case of the MGA 1500, the engines were built here from imported components).

Pressed Metal Corporation

Pressed Metal Corporation was a joint venture established in 1930 between the Larke Hoskins group, the Austin agents for NSW and Larke, Neave and Carter, the Chrysler distributor. The PMC factory after WW II occupied a 22 acre site, and had extensive capability for the complete assembly of motor vehicles. A number of the assembly buildings were redundant aircraft construction hangars, imported into Australia from the UK after WW II.



Pressed Metal Corporation offices in Enfield, Sydney in 1950's you can see the roof of one of the factory buildings, clearly showing its aircraft hanger origin

Apart from assembling a range of sedans, light commercial vehicles, utes & panel vans, trucks & buses, Pressed Metal Corporation also assembled a very significant number of sports cars on behalf of BMC. Between the years of 1957 & 1967, inclusive;

Pressed Metal Corporation assembled:

MGA roadster: (1500, 1600, 1600 Mk II) : 2040 vehicles.

Austin Healey Sprite : Mk I (Bugeye) through to the **Austin Healey Mk 3A:** (approx) 3,600 vehicles.

MGB roadster : Mk I (approx) 4625 vehicles. Based on VIN plate images, somewhere between 4600 and 4650)

TOTAL: 10, 265 sports cars, in a little over 10 years.

The MG Midget in Australia

In the latter part of 1967 Austin Healey Sprite production ceased at Pressed Metal Corporation.

The model was replaced by the MG Midget. Unlike the UK & world markets, the Australian market was not large enough to run the two similar models in parallel.

The MG Midgets were assembled at the BMC (Australia) plant, again from CKD packs.

Building the MG Midget commenced at Zetland in November 1967, with the vehicles offered for sale from early in 1968. Features and changes in the series generally reflected those in their UK assembled brethren but again with a significant inclusion of locally produced components, including electrics, paint and of course local labour, which constituted a significant proportion of the overall vehicle production costs.

Approximately 788 MG Midgets of the series YGGN4 and YGN4 were assembled in Australia. (As with all Australian BMC vehicles, "Y" indicated Australian assembly.

It has been said that the "Y" was meant to represent an upside down "A", A for Australia. Some with factory first hand knowledge dispute this as the reason for the choice of Y in the series nomenclatures).

October 1969 saw the introduction of the "Facelift" model; GAN5 for the Abingdon assembled MG Midgets, and typed YGN5 for the Australian cars. These cars reached the market about 6 months earlier than the similarly revised black recessed grille MGB models.

A total of 788 MG Midgets were assembled prior to the final Facelift model, of which 396 were built; 1184



Australian built MG Midgets in total, until production was wound up in December 1971.

The MGB in Australia

The MGB was assembled in Australia from 1963 to 1972. A total of something in excess of 9000 examples were built over this period. The Australian content was ultimately 45% of the car's value.

As with the MGA, the Mk 1 MGBs were constructed at "Pressed Metal Corporation" in Enfield, commencing in April 1963. At the time the BMC plant at Zetland were fully occupied with the production of the Mini and preparations were under way for the upcoming introduction of the other FWD models, in succession, the Morris 1100 and later the Austin 1800.

The MGB Engines and gearboxes were received already mated at the BMC Zetland works. They were hot run tested, and then transported to Pressed Metal. Suspensions were assembled and painted at Zetland, and similarly transported to Pressed Metal.

Springs, electrics, paint & gradually larger proportions of the trim were locally sourced. As a result, and as had occurred with the MGA, local body colours, though similar to their UK counterparts, were unique to Australia. Early colours included colours such as 'Sky Blue', 'Monza Red', 'Nurburg White', Katoomba Grey, and of course, British Racing Green. (The last had been also available on locally assembled MGAs, unlike their UK counterparts).

Overdrive was not available in Australia, even as an option until the last of the MGB Mk1 vehicles were assembled, between late 1967 and August 1968.

Because of the relatively small production numbers compared to more mainstream BMC models all Australian MGBs were similarly specified. Only roadsters were ever built locally. All cars had wire wheels and (until 1970), pack-away style tops only. Oil coolers, front sway bars, front overriders and ash trays were standard fittings. Like the preceding MGA, the interior trim was, for both cost reasons and because of the harsh local climate, always in vinyl. Contrasting piping disappeared after 1964, and progressively thereafter ever more of the trim became black only. The only options were (an initially rarely fitted) heater, and the dealer fitted radio. Overdrive was not available, even as an option until the last Mk 1 vehicles assembled during 1968.

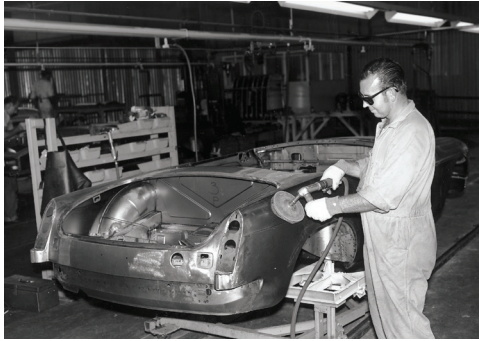
As with the MGA, and in contrast to the MG cars emerging from the MG factory in Abingdon, the Australian built MGB bodies were locally built up from their most basic pressed components on locally created jigs, whereas the Abingdon factory received the MGB bodies completely painted and assembled.

Rust proofing on these earlier Enfield assembled cars

was unfortunately rudimentary at best, with the bodies just "slipper dipped" in primer.



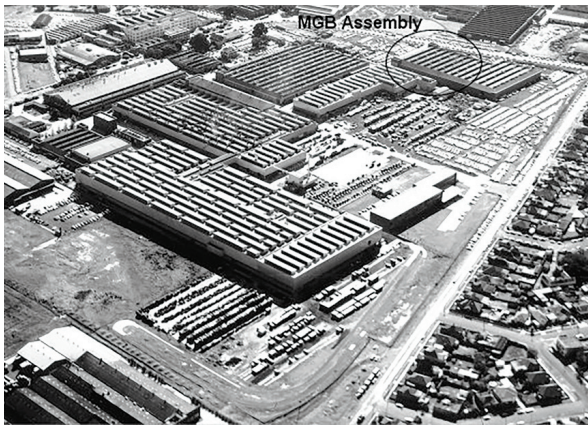
The author's own Mk1 MGB was already visibly rusting by the time it was five years old!



Finishing an MGB body shell. The leaded join between the mudguards and the tonneau panel was problematic, with lead tending to bubble up in the paint ovens. Note the area of this join has been sanded well back.

MG Assembly at BMC Zetland

BMC ultimately purchased Pressed Metal Corporation, and production of the MGB & MG Midget was transferred from the PMC factory to a dedicated production facility in the CAB 3 building (Car Assembly Building)at Zetland.



New jigs were commissioned from Dorman's in Victoria. Bodies were here far more elaborately rust proofed, going through a "Roto-Dip" process as described earlier.



Even though the MGB Mk II had been introduced in the UK from November 1967, between January and August 1968 it was still the MGB Mk I being assembled at Zetland. The MGB Mk II was finally built and introduced in Australia 9 months after its UK debut.

It is difficult not to draw the conclusion that left over redundant superseded stock of MGB Mk I car components was offloaded by the British parent company for sale to their less important colonial Australian customers to make way for the MGB Mk II in the UK for the home and other export markets.

A very similar situation had occurred in 1961, immediately prior to the introduction of the MGA Mk II in the UK, when suddenly a large volume of MGA 1600 cars for assembly arrived here, far in excess of the volume needed to fulfill immediate Australian market demand.



Posed photo of early completed MGBs at Zetland. (No workers, air hoses rolled up and not connected to tools).

Note that these cars are Mk I cars, which were assembled at BMC, Zetland from January to August 1968.

Note also how the front side light lenses (parking lights) and indicator lenses are reversed in orientation from the Enfield/Pressed Metal built cars and their Abingdon assembled brethren.

The Zetland staff were determined to make the MGB to as fine tolerances as possible, and "show those Brits a thing or two about car building". Unfortunately as these first few MGBs came off the line and onto their own wheels, the door gaps closed up, making it impossible to open the doors!! Hurriedly new slightly smaller door skins were drafted up to make these cars usable and saleable.



Building MG's in Australia.

As a result, the MGA Mk II was first assembled in Australia from February 1962, nearly a year after its arrival in the UK. The intervening period was required to build and sell the excess volume of already shipped MGA 1600 cars. The MGA Mk II consequently had a short run in Australia of just a few months prior to the arrival of the MGB, with a mere 148 MGA Mk II roadsters assembled in Australia.

From August 1968 onwards, the models and changes were again more in line with their UK counterparts, although these running changes always generally arrived three to four months later than in the Abingdon cars because of the time needed for shipping and the sourcing of components.

The "automatic" option was also offered in Australia, from 1969, and though well received by the press, it was, as in other countries, not especially popular, though sales continued right through to 1972.

Unlike their British counterparts, the Australian assembled MGB vehicles carried 'Mk II', 'Overdrive' and 'Automatic' badges whenever applicable.



In the above photo, the MG logo on the headstone is a hexagon, and not as an octagon, perhaps indicative of the little interest the new Triumph/Leyland management had in the history and tradition of the MG brand.



Unique to Australia badges for the MGB "Mk II", "automatic" and "overdrive".



The Australian version of the (debatedly termed) "Facelift" model was assembled from April 1970, and reaching the dealer showrooms from about June 1970.

Unique to Australia, this series of the MGB was ascribed the model description of MGB BL (for British Leyland). Unlike the Abingdon MGB, these black recessed grille models in Australia also had the area forward of the radiator diaphragm painted black to hide this area as seen through the grille in the lighter coloured cars.

Australian assembly of the MGB ceased late in 1972. The Federal Government had announced a restructuring of the tariff arrangements, whereby an 85% local content was to be required for a favourable import duty.

In any case, by this time sales of the MGB had dropped to a trickle. The buying public's interest in small, responsive but relatively low-powered sports cars was waning, with a growing interest in high powered sedan derivatives (the local equivalent of the American 'Muscle cars'). Cars such as the Holden Monaro and Torana XU1, the Ford Falcon GT/HO and Chrysler Valiant Charger were extremely fast cars. (The Ford Falcon GT HO was in its time, the fastest four door sedan produced anywhere in the world). These locally built power-houses could be seen competing most weekends on the various circuits around the country (most famously at Bathurst), and it was these cars that now fired the imagination of the young (and young at heart). These two factors, along with the impending P76 large sedan's introduction requiring freeing up of production space led Leyland Australia, to take the decision to wind up local assembly of the MGB.

Tom Aczel

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