

# BUYING AN MG MIDGET

By Richard Ladds

Reprinted, with permission, from *Enjoying MG*, October 1997



## Buying An MG Midget

Evolved from the Healey Sprite MK I launched in May 1958, the MG Midget version was announced in June 1961. The MG was distinguishable from its sister car the MK II Sprite only by its MG badges, chrome slatted grill, extra chrome trim strips on body sides and bonnet as well as slightly improved interior.

## Production History

### Midget MK I

The first Midget had a 948 cc engine, drum brakes all round, a lockable boot lid, detachable Perspex [Plexiglas] side-screens, but no exterior door handles or door locks. In October 1962 the engine was enlarged to 1098 cc and disc front brakes were introduced.

### Midget MKII

In March 1964 a MK II model was announced, with new doors complete with wind-up windows and quarter-lights, accompanied by a new windscreen frame assembly with a center tie rod, and the rear quarter elliptic springs were replaced by semi-elliptic springs. The engine kept the same bore but the main bearing was enlarged to 2" or 50 mm, making it stronger and more reliable. The dashboard was also changed from a flat panel to a more complex curved steel molding, incorporating an instrument housing and a fiberboard parcel shelf on the passenger side. In August the design of the seating was revised and the handsome bucket seats were replaced by a similar style to the MGB with thicker, flatter backrests.

### Midget MKIII

The Midget MKIII was introduced in October 1966 with the 1275 cc engine, along with a revised cockpit featuring a new rear panel incorporating a permanently attached folding hood [top]. In 1967 the vertical radiator was changed to a cross-flow design, which meant the addition of an expansion tank and the necessary relocation of the windscreen washer bottle.

In December 1968 the seats were redesigned again, with horizontal fluting and a reclining facility. In September 1969 various cosmetic changes followed, such as the substitution of

the chrome slatted grill for a black recessed grill with chrome insert and surround. For a short while, the windscreen frame was also finished in black but soon reverted back to the previous bright finish. It was on this model that the first design of rostyle wheels were fitted in place of the plain steel wheels.

The new rostyles had rectangular cut out slots unlike the spoke design of the later wheels which were introduced in October 1971 when the rear wings [fenders] were restyled with round wheel arches. Wire wheels remained an optional extra on all models.

### Midget 1500

In 1974 British Leyland felt that they had to revise the Midget to meet emissions and safety regulations of the North American market. The 1275 cc A series engine was considered to be at the end of its development and so the Midget was fitted with the Triumph Spitfire's 1493 cc engine. This required a suitable gearbox, which was developed from the Morris Marina and had synchromesh on all four gears.

Externally, the most obvious changes were the fitting of energy absorbing black rubber covered bumpers, at the same time the ride height was increased and the square wheel arches were reinstated to increase body strength for crash testing. The changes in ride height altered the feel of the car and the Midget's agility and predictable handling suffered. The 1500 engine was not as free revving nor as durable as the original A series but soldiered on until the last Midget came off the production line on Dec 7, 1979.

## What To Look For

The most important consideration when viewing a Midget to buy is the condition of the body-work. The Midget's tight dimensions make it quite difficult to restore. Repair panels are readily available and relative cheap to buy which is a boon to the professional but an encouragement to the botcher. It is therefore important to check any prospective purchase very carefully.

First of all, look over the car as a whole, check that all the panels line up and that the gaps are even and look out for dents, ripples or creases in the bodywork. Areas of the paintwork that appear to be a different shade may be covering up repairs made with glass-fiber and filler. If the soft top is in poor condition then it is possible that the floor of the car may be corroded.

### Front Apron

Often neglected front valences suffer from considerable stone damage and are frequently the first casualty in minor accidents. Examine the seams where the front wings [fenders] join the apron and the inside of leading edge. Look behind the bumper mountings for any sign of collision damage. Check the condition of the bumpers themselves, rubber bumpers are expensive to replace and the supporting armatures are susceptible to rust.

## Buying an MG Midget

### Front Wings [Fenders]

These panels tend to rust along the bottom seam where the lower part of the wing meets the top of the sill [rocker panel], because this area often becomes a trap for dirt and moisture. Corrosion can also occur around the headlamp. There is a drain hole at the bottom of the lip on the front wing, if this is allowed to remain blocked, dirt and sludge can build up and corrode the panel.

### Doors

Check that the doors fit correctly with even gaps all round. If the doors are a tight fit at the top and prone to stick at the top, then they are being pinched in by a folding body tub or the tub has been repaired unsupported. Examine door seals and make sure the window winders work smoothly. Check the drain holes and look for signs of corrosion along the door bottoms.

### Hinge Pillar Or 'A' Post

Corrosion can strike here and when it does it is difficult and expensive to repair. Check this out very carefully.

### Sills [Rocker Panels]

These panels are the most likely site of corrosion and when it strikes here they must be replaced because they provide vital structural support for the body. Surface corrosion on the outside of the sill panel usually betrays much more damage beneath. To examine them thoroughly lay down on an old coat or similar and shine a torch [flashlight] along the underside. There may be drain holes in the sills (not always) but there should not be any corrosion holes. The sill jacking points, or two jacking points on the 1500 Midget, allow some access to the inside of the sill to check for corrosion. Replacement of the sills is a complex job and requires the complete removal of the corroded panels and the precise refitting of the new inner and outer sills. During this process it is essential to support the body correctly to avoid distortion

### Bonnet

The leading edge of the bonnet is double skinned and water can become trapped and rust through the panel. Repair sections are available but require some skill to fit. Dents in this area can also be extremely difficult to repair because of the double skin and it is often cheaper and easier to replace the whole panel.

### Rear Wing [Fender]

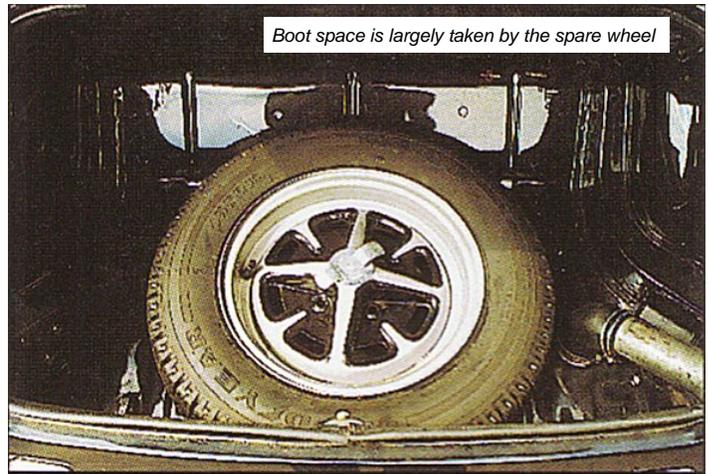
The top of the wheel arch inner and outer panels can corrode, the square wheel arch models seem particularly prone to this. The lower rear wing immediately behind the door where it joins the sill is another area liable to rust. Check these areas and rear quarter wing for corrosion or body filler.

### Boot

Open the lid and examine the lip of the lid for corrosion. Examine the boot floor for rust or tell tale signs of dampness. While you are in the boot check the condition of the spare wheel and that the original jack and wheel-brace are present.

### Floor Pan

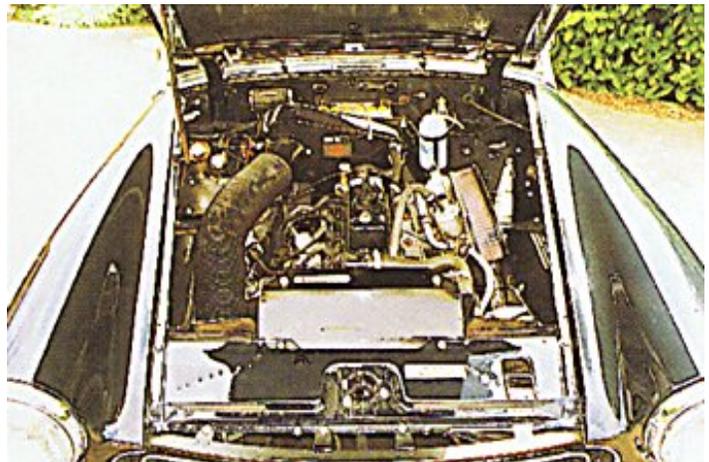
Although the floor pan is a flat panel it is still vulnerable to corrosion. Lift the carpets and examine the floor, particularly the area behind the seats where the spring hangers for the rear springs are mounted. This area is susceptible to



considerable stress and is also vulnerable to the build up of deposits of mud and road salt.

### Underside

If possible jack up the car and support it on purpose built axle stands, never crawl under an unsupported vehicle. Use a powerful torch [flashlight] to examine the underside of the car, pay particular attention to the cross members, rear suspension mountings, as well as the fuel tank and its fittings. Beware of patch repairs and any corrosion in the floor areas adjacent to the suspension mounting points.



### Engine Bay Inspection

Lift the bonnet and examine the engine for oil leaks, especially around the filter housing, at oil cooler unions (if fitted) and around the gaskets. Look out for tracks of anti-freeze or rust stains on the block indicating water leaks.

Listen to the engine running, check for blowing around manifolds and between the manifold and down pipe. Tappets are noisy on A series engines, particularly the 1275 unit, but you should not hear the timing chain tinkling or deep rumbles from the bottom end. A 1500 cc engine that knocks or rumbles is probably due for major repair work.

Examine the clutch and brake master cylinder and surrounding paint-work for signs of fluid leaks or spillage.

The battery is located right at the back of the engine bay and it extremely difficult to check the levels of the distilled water, some owners have resorted to using a small hand mirror to ease this task. The battery should be correctly secured, examine the area around the battery as occasionally acid corrosion can attack the surrounding body work.

### Interior

Despite being small on the outside the interior of the Midget provides ample space and comfortable seating for two. The rear bench provides extra luggage space and the boot will hold a few squashy bags, if extra carrying capacity is needed a smart chrome rack can be fitted to the boot lid.



Wear on the carpets and seat coverings is not uncommon but there is a wide choice of replacement trim panels available. It is possible to upgrade the specification of carpet and seat covering, leather faced covers are a popular choice for the later models. The car featured has excellent dark blue leather seats which are both comfortable and attractive.

Originality can become an important issue on early models, so check that instruments and trim are correct. If the owner has fitted a non-standard steering wheel or other accessories, it is worthwhile to ask them if they still have the original parts. Some items such as steering wheels and bucket seats are now only available second hand.

### Driving impressions

The 1275 cc Midget with its hood down is a delightful little car to drive. The simple suspension provides deft and safe handling with little roll, only poor quality surfaces upset the car and throw it off line. The tiny dimensions of the body in combination with very high geared steering lend the little MG a great feeling of maneuverability. It can also seem twitchy on first acquaintance but one quickly gets used to the sharp and responsive steering. The monocoque body is tight and rattle free, if the car wallows and pitches then it is usually the shock absorbers that need replacing.

### Handling And Performance

The sure-footed handling makes the very best of the performance from the little A series unit. The gear change is excellent although the lack of synchromesh on first gear can occasionally catch you out until you become used to the box.

The gearing is well spaced and provides good acceleration but top seems too low geared for comfortable motorway [highway] cruising. Acceleration is brisk with a top speed of 94 mph but the Midget is not ideal for high speed cruising; it is much more about fun than high performance. Around town the Midget is absolutely ideal as it will sprint away from the lights swiftly and make the best of any gaps in the traffic. Parking is delightfully easy with this little car.

### Weather Equipment

When the hood [top] is up the cockpit is cozy and draught free. The Midget is fitted with a crude but effective heater with



a complex operating system. The heater copes well with demisting the tiny windscreen, the blower fan is operating by twisting the pull out control. In hot weather you can opt to turn off the heater supply in the engine compartment and there are fresh air vents in the foot-wells.

Soft tops seldom leak unless damaged but it is not unusual for water to find its way into the foot-wells during heavy rainfall. It is important to fold and store the hood carefully when packing it away under the tonneau cover. Rough handling will damage the hood fabric and folding the clear plastic windows can result in them becoming cracked or split. As far as possible avoid scratching the windows as visibility will be greatly reduced. If you use the car throughout the year a hardtop can make winter motoring in a Midget much more comfortable and some hardtops will have the considerable benefit of a glass rear window which is much easier to keep clear on frosty days.

### What To Pay?

The cost of your MG Midget will depend as much on its condition as its age. A top condition MK I from 1961 can fetch as much as £6,000 [USD\$9,400 or CAD\$14,900] whereas the same model requiring full restoration may be bought for just a few hundred pounds. It is worth noting that if you undertake a restoration project the total cost will invariably be greater than the vehicle will fetch when the car is completed, therefore only restore if you enjoy the work.

Currently the most prolific Midget in the For Sale columns is the 1500 model and prices start at around £1,500 [US \$2,250 or CAD\$3,700] and can rise to or as much as £4,500 to £5,000 [USD\$7,000 to USD\$7,850 or CAD\$11,200 to CAD \$12,400] for a car in first class condition. Slightly, rarer are the earlier chrome bumper Midgets such as the car featured in this article but again, prices peak at around £5,000 to £6000 [USD \$7,850 to USD\$9,400 or CAD\$12,400 to CAD\$14,900].

However, a good drive-away example can be bought for £2,500 to £4000 [USD\$3,900 to \$6,300 or CAD\$6,200 to CAD\$9,900]. The older cars are becoming increasingly rare and this can add to their value, but to be worth the money, it is essential that they are completely sound and original.

### Conclusion

Overall the MG Midget has got to be the best value sports car ever built. The Midget provides all the fun and thrills of open sports car motoring for a relatively modest outlay in purchase and very reasonable running costs.

*Richard Ladds*