

The First MGB-GT

from Enjoying MG

When the MGB was launched in 1962 it was only available as an open two-seater and there was nothing to replace the popular MGA coupé that had satisfied the needs of those preferring closed cars. Shortly after the MGB went on sale the company did make a good hardtop available but plans for a fixed-head version were still at the drawing board stage. One enterprising Brussels-based coachbuilder realised a demand existed for a proper, closed MGB sports coupé and exhibited an extensively modified car at the 1964 Brussels Motor Show. This attractive car created a lot of interest and he decided to go into series production of his MG Berlinette.

Brussels-born Jacques Coune had trained as an interior designer, but through his father he became involved with selling surplus military vehicles and establishing a small garage. This brought him in contact with other dealers and one of these, the local Ferrari importer, provided him with the chance to attend many of the major European motor shows. As a result he became the Belgian agent for Arbarth bolt-on tuning kits and exhaust systems and for Iso, who started by producing the Isetta bubble car and went on to build the Iso Rivolta and Grifo.

Coune established a coachbuilding arm to his business using people from around Turin in Northern Italy where there were many skilled metalworkers. He developed a drop-head version of the Volvo 122S and also a luxury Mercedes, based on the 220SE, but both were only produced in small numbers. It was partly as an exercise to display their skills that the special MGB was designed. The bodies of the first six cars were constructed of metal, but when series production became a reality they turned to glass-fibre, a material that they had become used to handling.

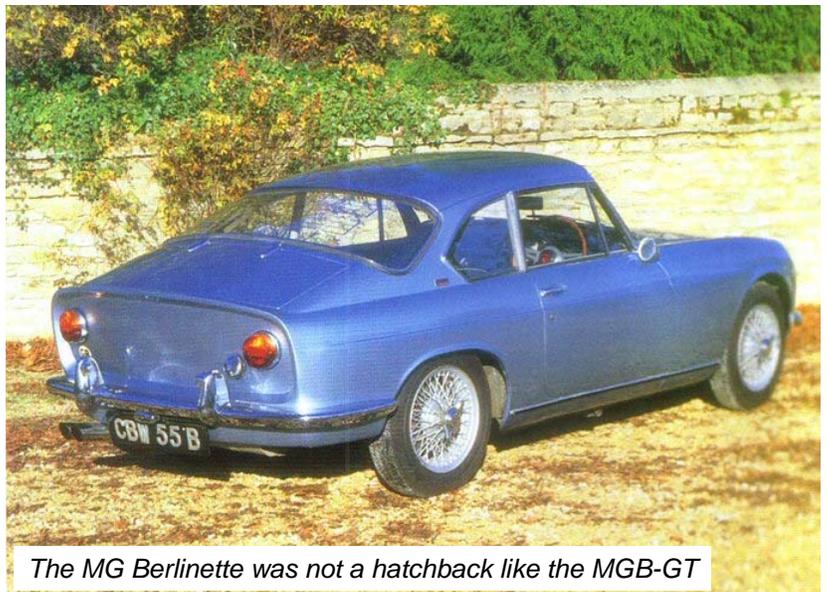
The main MGB chassis structure and mechanical components remained unchanged, but the conversion process was extensive and involved removing items like the windscreen, trim, rear wings, boot lid, plus the deck and rear panels. After reinforcing the chassis a large glass-fibre roof section was bonded in place and this accepted Renault R8 front and rear windscreen glass, the new windscreen being taller than that used for the roadster. Details like interior trim, special steering wheels, etc. varied from car to car.

In April 1964 the only right-hand drive example ever built was delivered to Walter Oldfield, the managing director of Nuffield Press, but the story goes that this was as a result of a meeting between Jacques Coune and Alec Issigonis [designer of the Austin/Morris Mini]. The roadster used was sent from the factory to Belgium, minus hood and the other parts that would not be needed.

When completed it was delivered to Abingdon where it was driven for the purpose of evaluation by a number of the top management at BMC. Despite the Coune Berlinette's appeal, the arrival of the Abingdon built MGB-GT eventually killed off the pricier Belgian version.



The only right-hand-drive MG Berlinette



The MG Berlinette was not a hatchback like the MGB-GT