

How's Your Swingletree?

Rick Astley May 2003

In spite of the fact that my MGB-GT handbrake pulled up really tightly and I had adjusted the rear brake shoes, it still would not hold the car on even a moderate slope. The main handbrake cable from the driver's lever to the back of the car was brand new, so what could be causing the problem? Investigation under the car showed the cable going to the left brake drum was tight as well a drum, but that going to the right was slack. I knew the problem right away, my swingletree had seized.

I don't remember from which of the numerous British cars I owned in my youth that I had learned the term "swingletree", but it is a delightful name and one I never forgot. It describes the device that translates the force of the cable from the brake actuator into equal forces that are conveyed via cables to the brake drums.

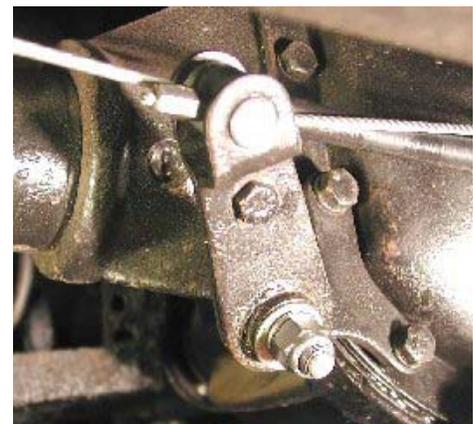
The one I remember from my old British cars was an elaborated device, a multi armed lever with a centre pivot. The one on the MGB was disappointingly simple, the main brakes being hydraulic and so only the handbrake requiring balanced cables. Furthermore, someone at MG had remembered Newton's law about "every action having an equal and opposite reaction" and had realized that a handbrake cable sheath could carry that opposite reaction. With that in mind a simple mechanism had been devised. Nevertheless, the device required a pivot to operate it in one of the most inhospitable parts of the car, underneath and at the rear.

When I studied my newly acquired GT's swingletree, I was surprised that I was surprised. I have owned a roadster for many years and couldn't remember ever paying any attention to this mechanism. Now I must crawl under that car and check it out. The device had seized and failed to pivot so that handbrake effort was only being applied to the left wheel. Unfortunately, corrosion was so bad that the pivot pin sheared when I tried to remove it. A replacement pin was, however, inexpensive and the newly well-greased assembly was easy to install.

MGAs and Bs have identical mechanisms whereas Spridgets use a more complicated assembly far more deserving of the epithet swingletree. If you own any of these cars and have below par handbrake performance, it would be worth checking out this device. If you own a TC, TD or TF, then you have separate handbrake cables to each rear brake drum and no need for such a device.



The old and new pivot pins



The assembly reinstalled on the car.