

MGA cozy when closed

1957 would see more than 4,100 of the new 'tin tops' produced

Story by Bill Vance

The English MG was the backbone of the post-Second World War sports car movement in North America.

The first to come in the late 1940s was the spider-wheeled TC Midget. Although its clamshell fenders and big wire wheels made it dashing, it was really just a slightly modified version of pre-war TA and TB models.

With 1930s technology such as hard leaf springs and a solid front axle, not to mention right-hand drive only, it wasn't very well suited to North America. The 1950 TD brought softened lines, independent front suspension and rack-and-pinion steering, although its power still came from the same pre-war, 1,250-cubic-centimetre, overhead valve in-line four.

The transitional 1954 TF featured a combination of modern and classic styling and, later, a 1.5-litre engine.

By 1956, MG finally caught up with its competition. The classically square T-type was replaced with a modern envelope body, which had been predicated by a custom-bodied TD that contested the 1951 LeMans 24-hour race. About the only things carried over from the TF were the front suspension and steering gear.

Power now came from the more modern British Motor Corp. (BMC) B-series 1,489-cc overhead valve four that powered the Austin A-50 and Morris Oxford. Along with its new chassis and engine, this more aerodynamic MG also offered greater comfort, larger luggage capacity, better handling and more performance. Since it was a fresh start, it was appropriately called the MGA.

As the quintessential sports car maker, the marque was known for its open-air models. Although closed MGs had been produced, the real image maker was always the roadster. But the snugness and comfort of closed cars had their devotees, too, and, for 1957, MG introduced the MGA coupe, the spiritual descendant of the beautiful MG Airline of the 1930s.

When the MGA roadster was successfully launched for the 1956 model year, company thoughts turned to a coupe model. The removable hardtop option that was available for the roadster turned it into a cozy closed car, and this no doubt influenced the decision to build a coupe.

Work began in the spring of 1956 when a roadster was taken from the assembly line and used as the experimental prototype for the fitting of a fixed metal top. Thanks to an accelerated development program, the coupe was able to make its public debut at the London Motor Show in Earls Court that



Doug and Aileen Butcher's 1959 MGA coupe is a beautiful example of the comfy and cozy tin top.

The coupe offered excellent visibility through a three-piece panoramic rear window and a windshield that was more curved than the roadster's. The doors were opened from the outside by small vertical handles that were almost invisible at the lower rear corners of the wind-up windows. These replaced the roadster's inside pull cord, accessible through a side-curtain flap.

Although priced a few hundred dollars higher than the roadster, the coupe was more luxuriously trimmed inside, and the solid top and windows gave it a warmth unmatched by any roadster. At times, there was too much warmth as the coupe could have benefited from better ventilation.

Only 16 coupes were built in 1956, but production was ramped up quickly -- 1957 would see more than 4,100 of the new "tin tops" produced. It would prove to be the coupe's best year.

Testers were delighted to report that this was the first production MG capable of topping 161 kilometres an hour. Road & Track magazine (7/57) recorded a top speed average of 163 km/h, up from the 153 it had achieved with the MGA roadster. The magazine attributed virtually all of this gain to the coupe's better aerodynamics, although it also benefited slightly from the extra four horsepower -- now 72 -- for 1957. And, because of its increased stiffness, the coupe was considered a better-handling car than the roadster.

Coupe improvements moved in step with the roadster's. In 1959, the 1600 version got 1,588 cc and 80 hp; for 1960, 1,622 cc and 86 hp. This was upped to 90 in the '61 Mark II. There was also a coupe version of the star-crossed 1958-'60 Twin Cam MGA. When the Twin Cam model was discontinued, the leftover parts were used to create an overhead valve model called the MGA Deluxe.

The MGA was built through 1962, when it was replaced by the MGB, which would develop the lovely MGB-GT hatchback. Of the approximate 100,000 MGAs that were built, 9,887 were coupes.

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