MG
MEMORIES

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MG

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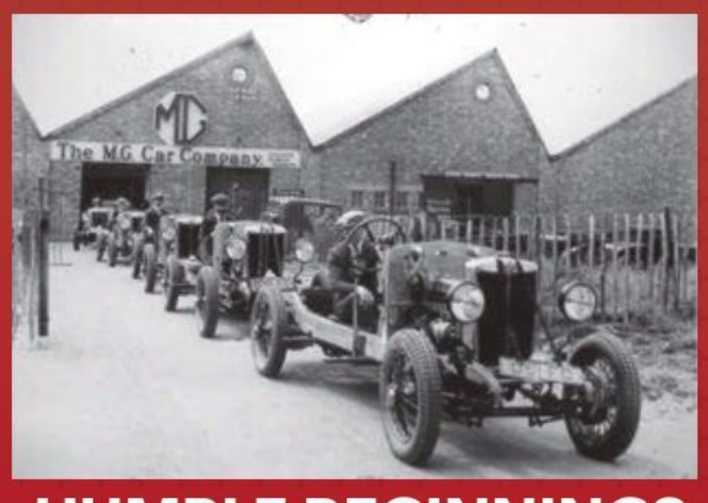

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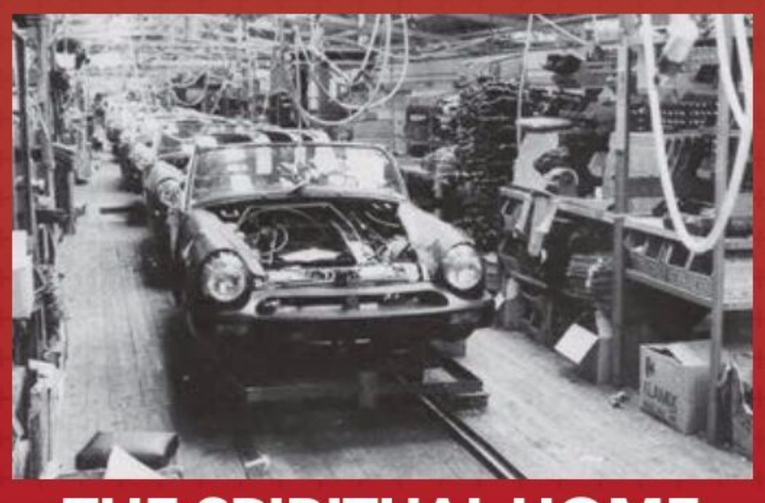

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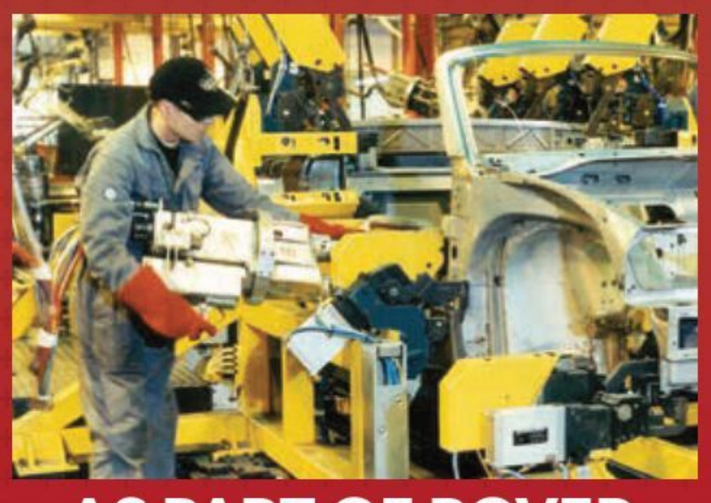

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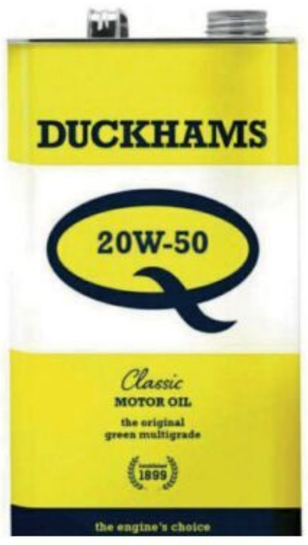

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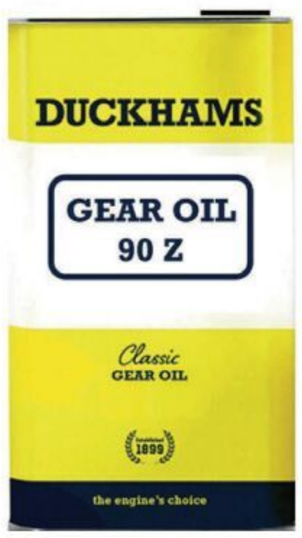

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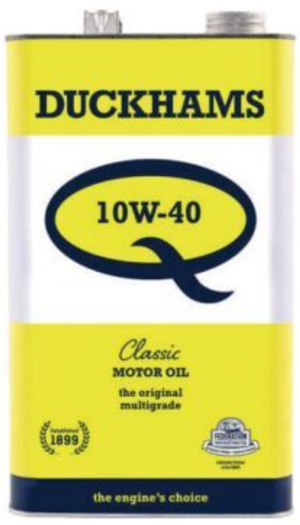

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WELCOME

In car enthusiast circles the MG marque will forever be associated with the Oxfordshire town of Abingdon where the cars were made for nearly half a century, but it's easy to forget that there were other centres of production just as significant to the MG story.

The famous octagon-badged cars were first produced in several locations in the nearby city of Oxford and it was these which established the MG brand sufficiently to justify its move to a factory of its own.

The firm's long history in Abingdon saw the glory days of US-bound exports during the 1950s and 1960s, followed by the dark days of the British Leyland years when in fact the Abingdon facility was one of the best-performing BL plants with the least industrial unrest. No wonder then that BL chairman Michael Edwardes's famously ill-timed decision to close the MG facility was felt to be so very unjust.

it wasn't to be the end for MG though, which was kept alive via badge-engineered sporty versions of mainstream Austin Rover products at the Longbridge plant, once home to MG founder Morris's arch rival Austin. Ironically, it would be at Longbridge that the MG brand would emerge victorious once again, first with the cleverly reimagined MGB which was launched as the RV8 and then with the radical MGF. Created using Metro running gear and some very clever lateral thinking, the mid-engined sports car would prove as popular as the MGB and Midget had been back in the Abingdon days and would re-establish the legend for a whole new generation.

The debacle of BMW ownership would then leave MG in the surprise position of being the dominant brand at Longbridge and once the Phoenix Four had disappeared, MG would emerge as the sole survivor of the once-mighty BL combine.

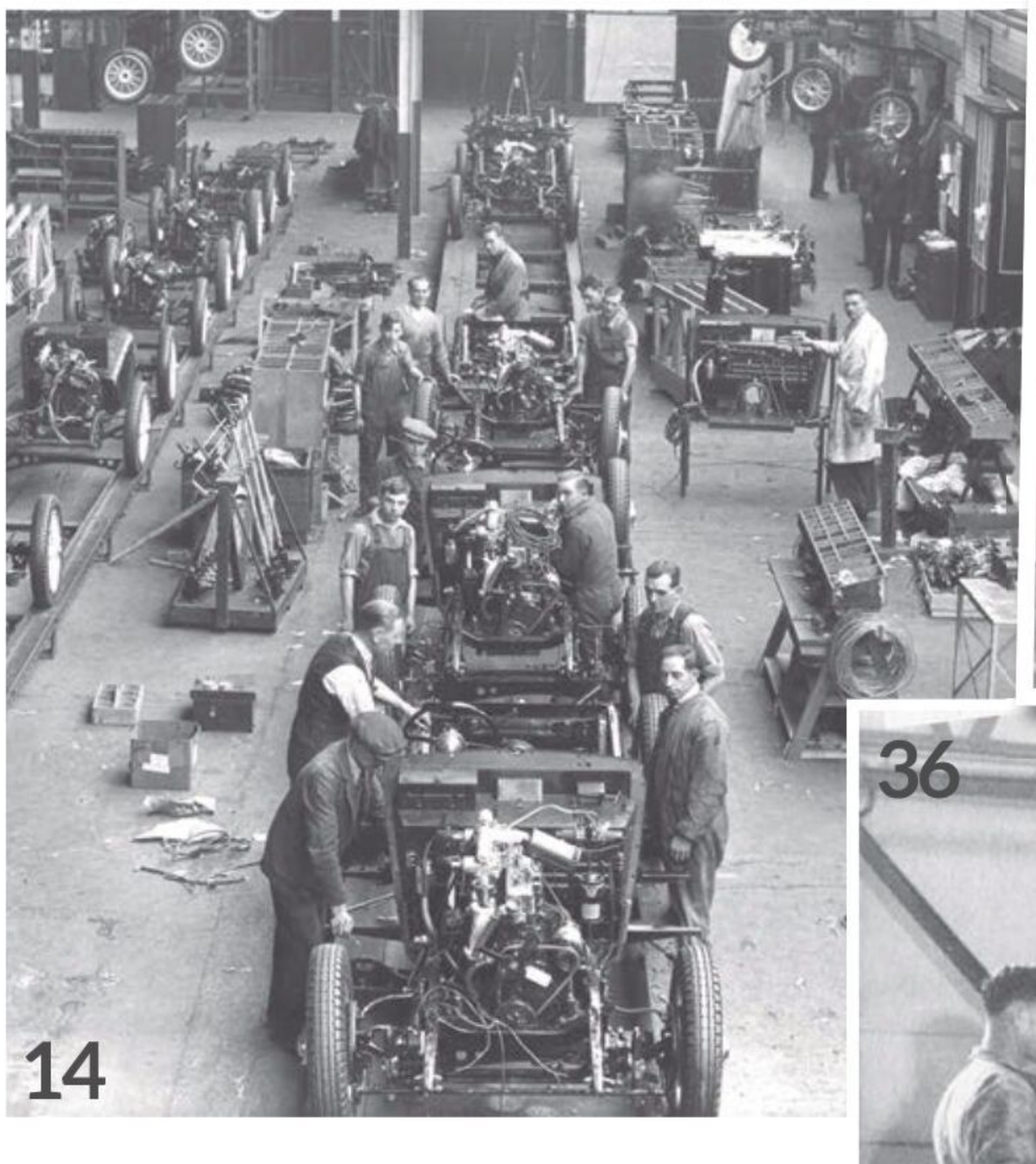
Today the cars may be made far from Oxford, Abingdon or Longbridge but MG is enjoying another resurgence thanks to being ahead of the curve when it comes to EV power.

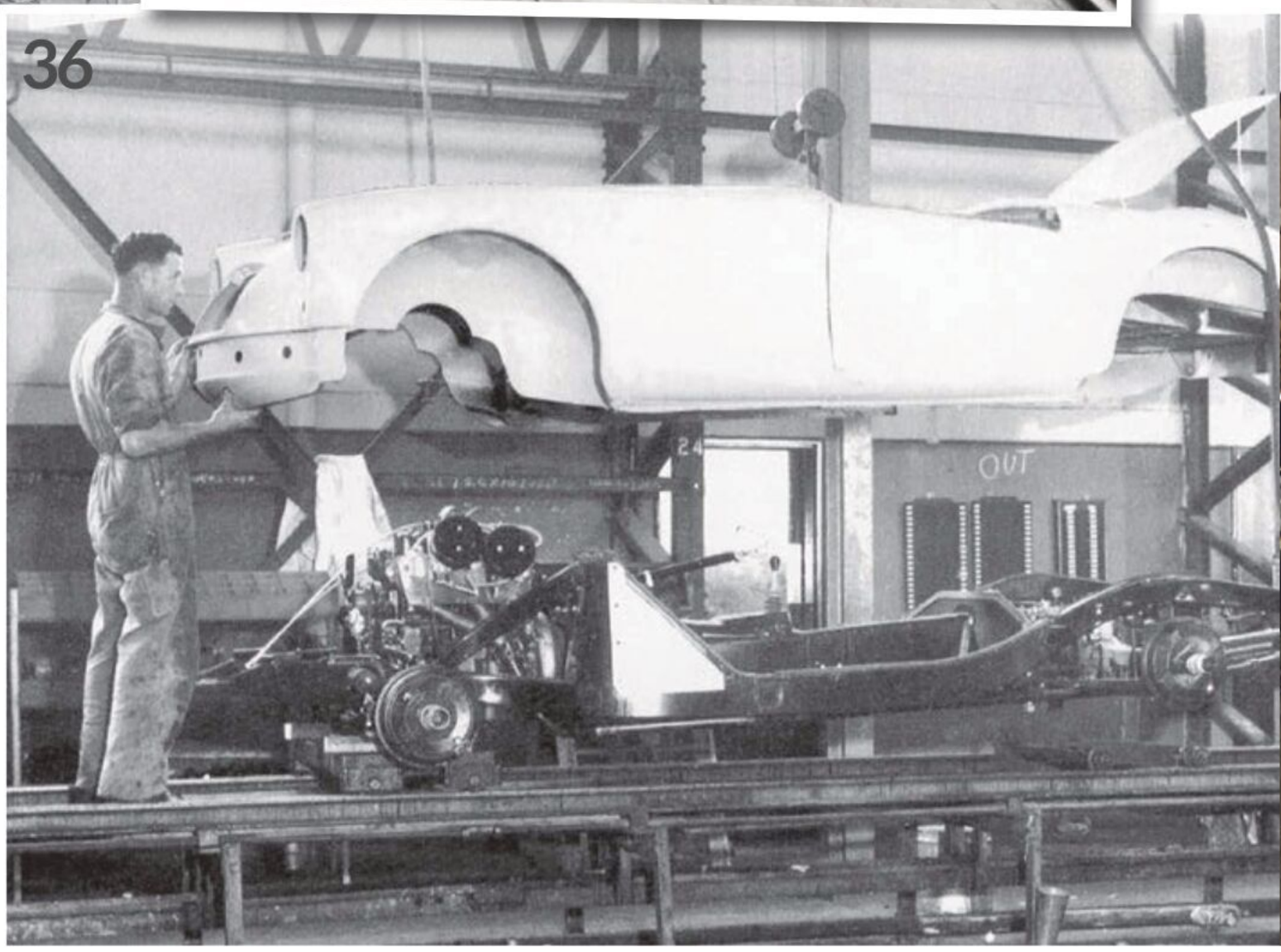
In this forth issue of our MG Memories, we chart the history the factories and facilities which gave us some of the most enduring automotive icons out there. Along the way we include the Australian MG connection, the last-of-the-line TFs and the Chinese-built models, while also interviewing a 'Longbridge lifer', Malcolm Oxborrow, who gives us the inside track on the transition from Rover Group to MG Motor. It's a story which has all the best ingredients, so read on as we make the journey from Oxford to Shanghai.

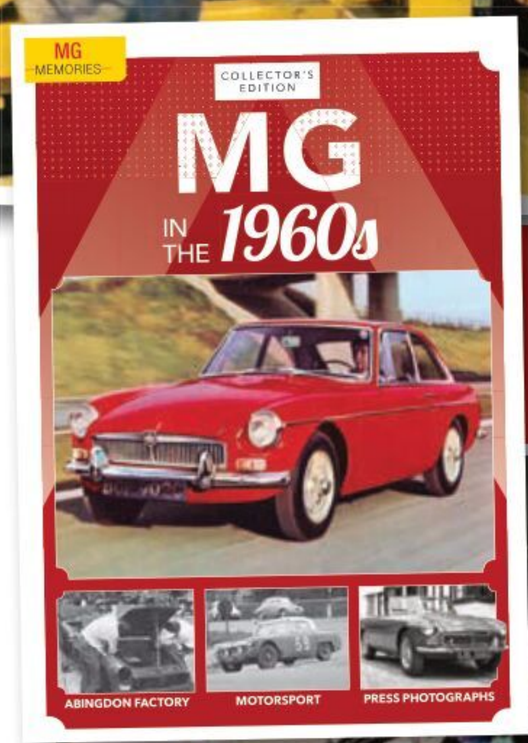
Paul Sander
Editor, MG Memories

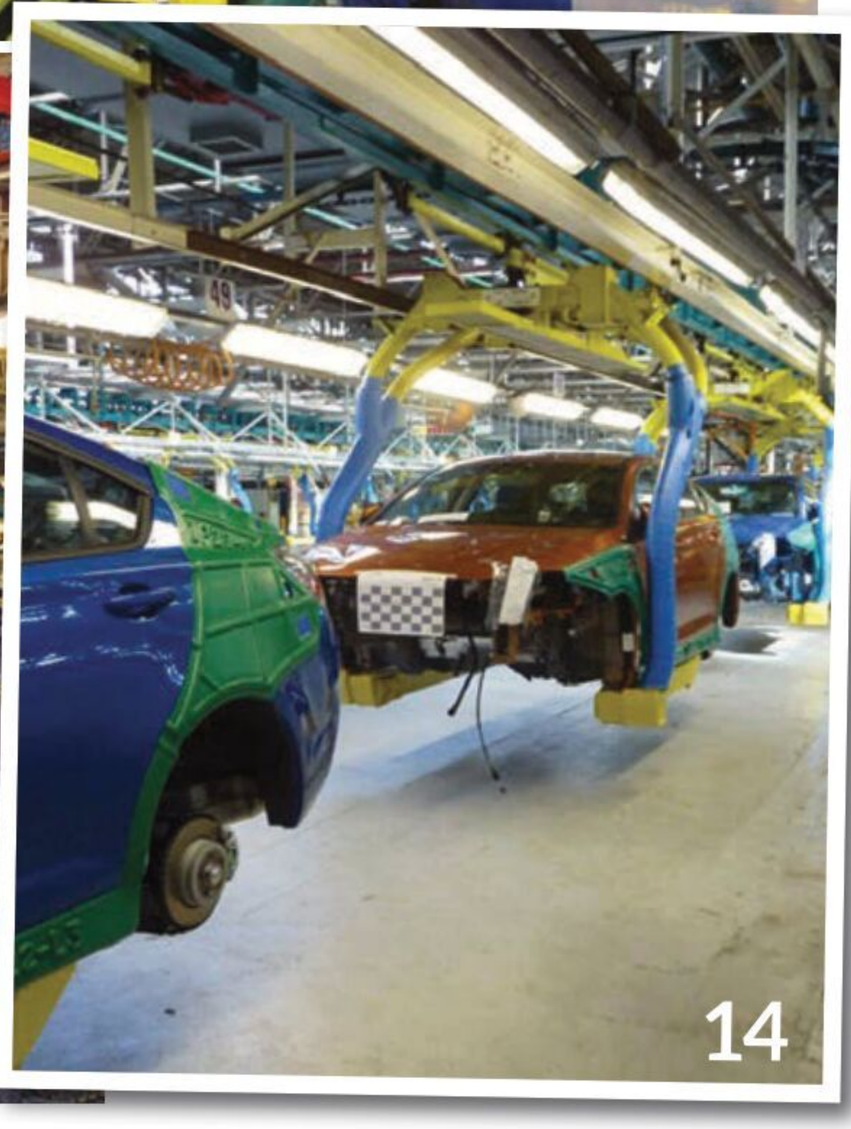
THE MG FACTORIES

A look at the factories and some of the people involved in creating the famous octagon-badged motor cars









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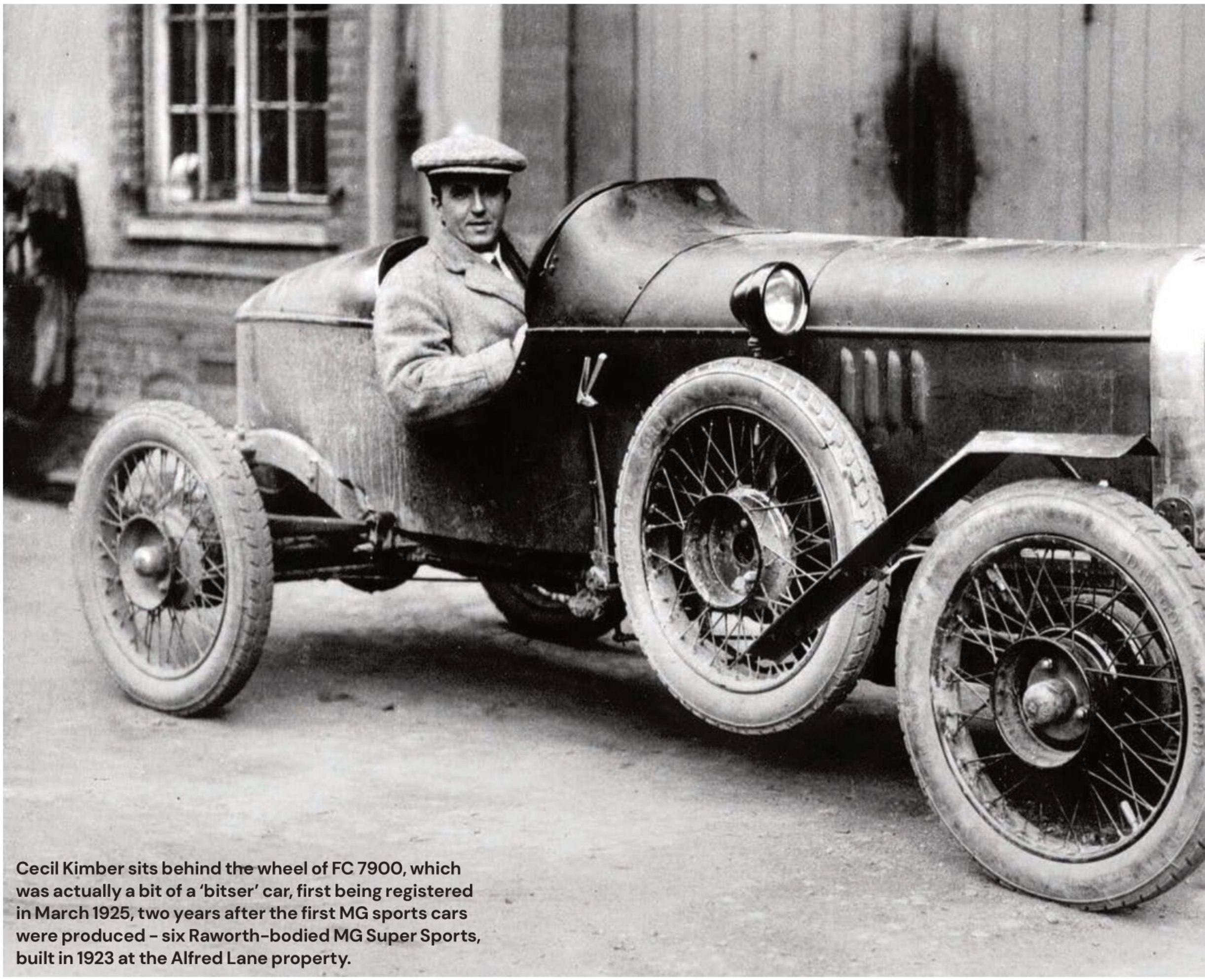


Cecil Kimber sits behind the wheel of FC 7900, which was actually a bit of a 'bitser' car, first being registered in March 1925, two years after the first MG sports cars were produced – six Raworth-bodied MG Super Sports, built in 1923 at the Alfred Lane property.

Where it all began

Words: Chris Keevill

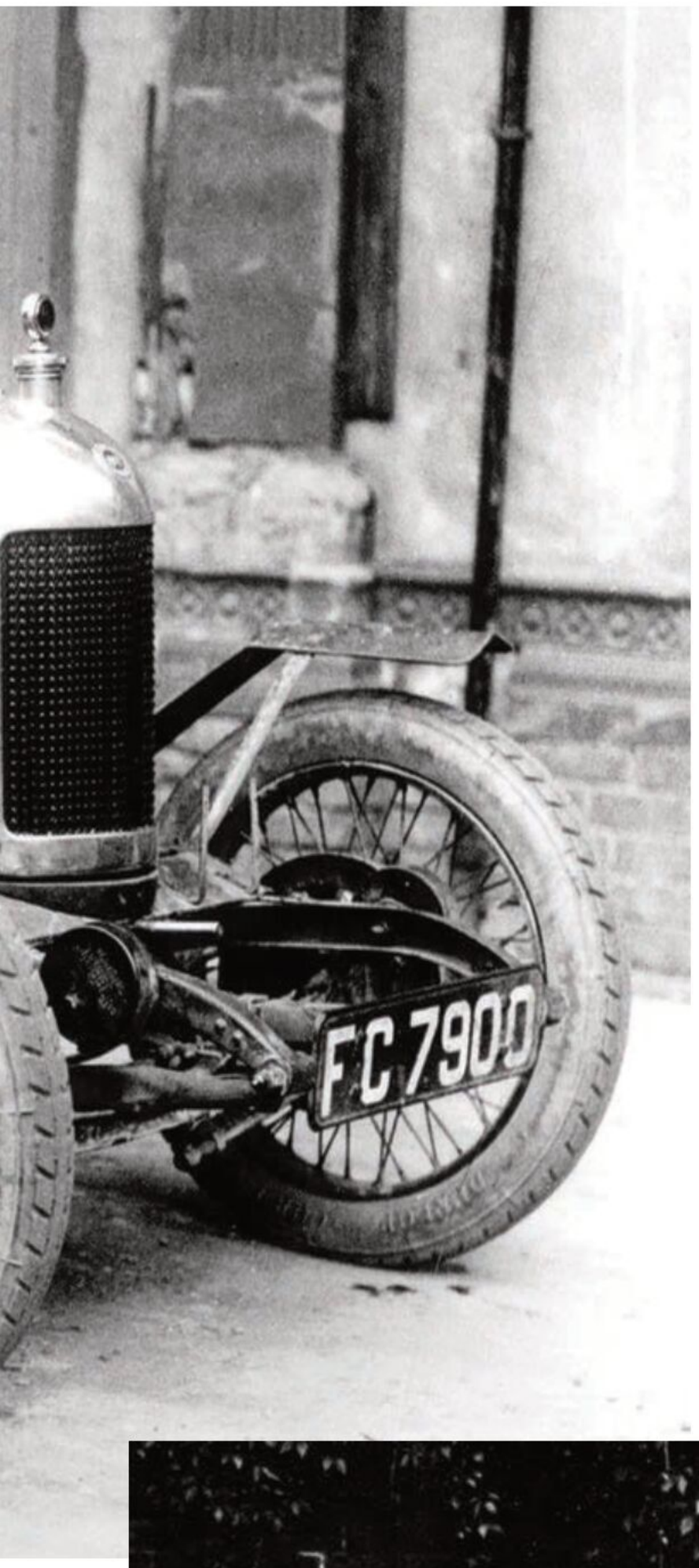
When Cecil Kimber joined The Morris Garages, Oxford, as Sales Manager in 1921, apart from the standard range of Morris Cowley and Oxford models, The Morris Garages also produced up-market saloons with bespoke coachwork.

Then in 1922, they began to sell Morris Cowleys with coachwork that they named the "Chummy Body"

Morris Garages Chummies featured a small four-seater body, wherein all passengers enjoyed the protection of the hood. Over 100 of these cars were sold. These cars were never marketed as MGs and had no sporting pretentions. However, Kimber modified his own Chummy and in March 1923 won a gold award with the car in the London to Land's End Trial.

Kimber's success in this event led to William Morris sanctioning an order for six sporting two-seaters to be produced – and these were to be the very first MG sports cars and were marketed as 'The MG Super Sports Morris".

The coachwork for these six two-seater sports cars was made by the Oxford firm, Charles Raworth & Sons. Kimber's design incorporated various

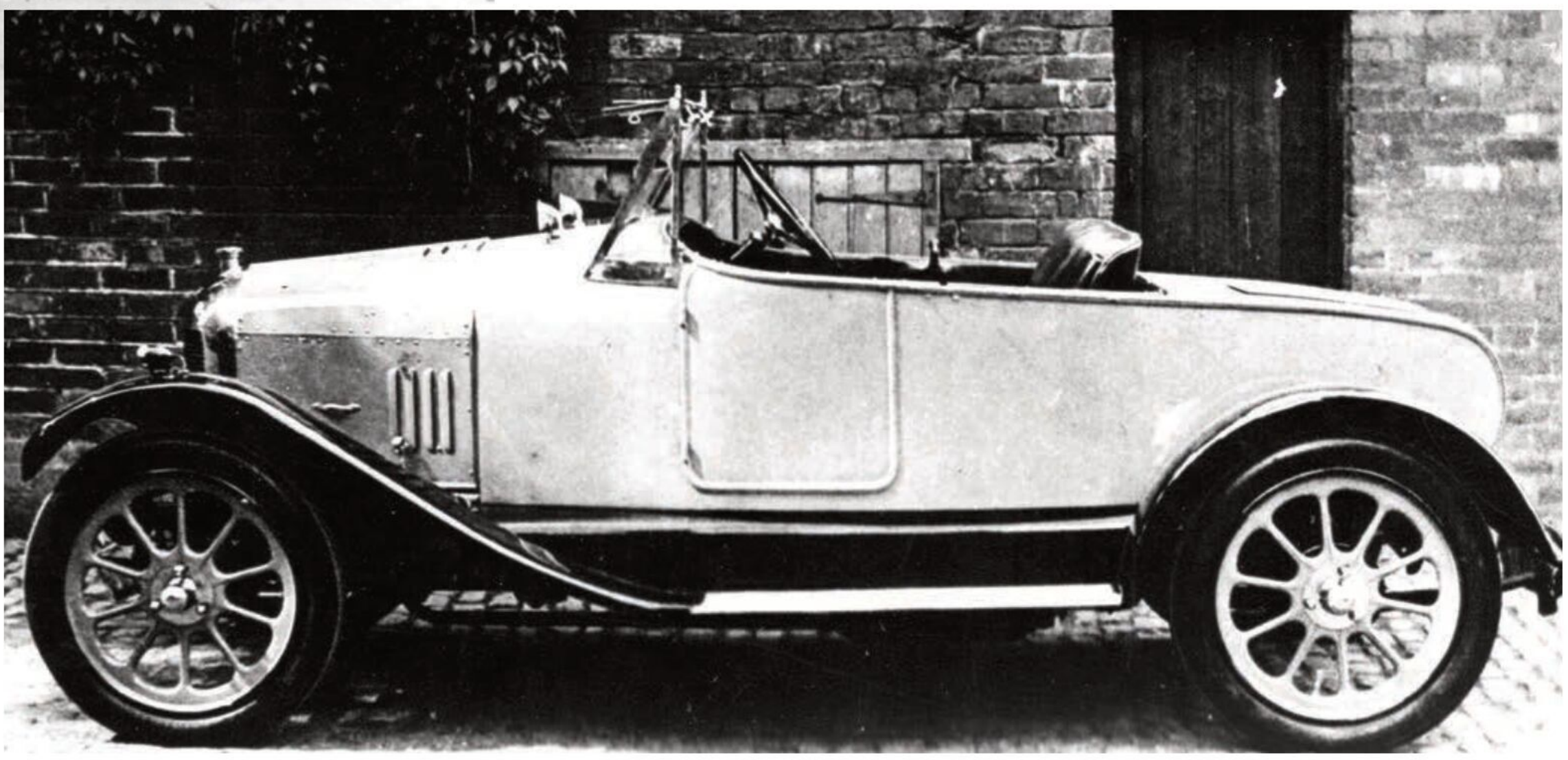


A Morris Garages Chummy.

improvements in handling and performance which enabled the car to do 60mph on the flat!

The styling of the cars included several features which were to be iconic on MGs for several years – rakish swept wings, a sloping windscreen with triangulated end frames and 'marine style' air ventilators on the scuttle.

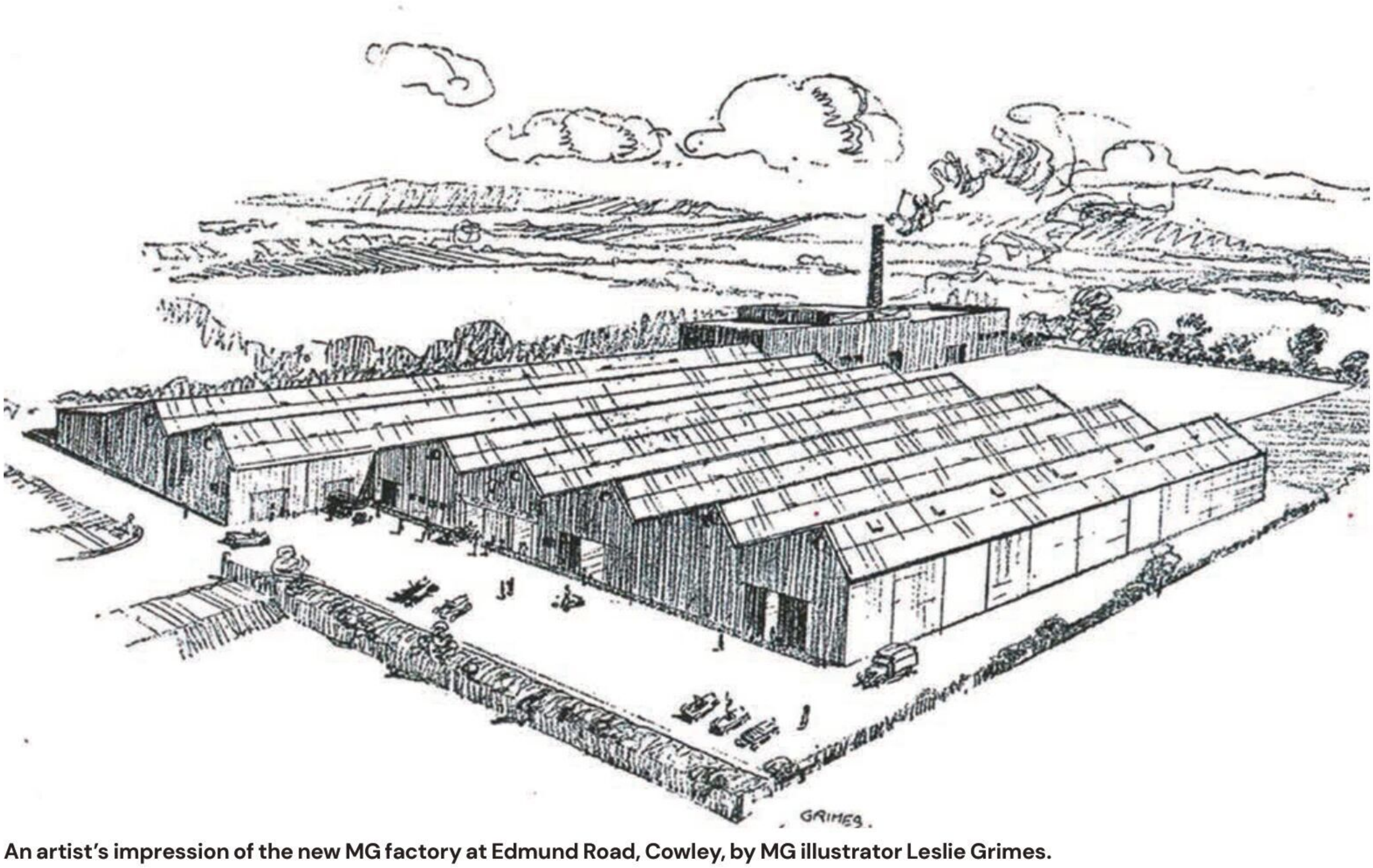
The main Morris Garages depot in Longwall Street, Oxford, had no space for the manufacture of MG cars, so in 1922 they acquired mews premises in Alfred Lane (now Pusey Street) in Oxford, close to the Ashmolean Museum. These were the very first MG production premises and were used for the production of MG Super Sports models in 1923, 24 & 25.



A 1923 MG Super Sports, parked outside the MG premises in Alfred Lane, Oxford.

IN THE BEGINNING: 1923 – 1929

A 1925 MG Super Sports parked outside the original MG manufacturing premises in Oxford.



An artist's impression of the new MG factory at Edmund Road, Cowley, by MG illustrator Leslie Grimes.

An MG 14/40 leaves the Edmund Road factory en-route to Carbodies in Coventry to have its coachwork fitted.

A row of MkI MG 18/80s leaving the Edmund Road factory for Carbodies, Coventry.

IN THE BEGINNING: 1923 – 1929

MG TIME-LINE – PRIOR TO, AND INCLUDING THE MOVE TO ABINGDON

1898: W.R. Morris acquires some old livery stables in Longwall Street, Oxford.

1910: Longwall St. premises rebuilt and trading name changed to The Morris Garage.

1921: Cecil Kimber joins The Morris Garage.

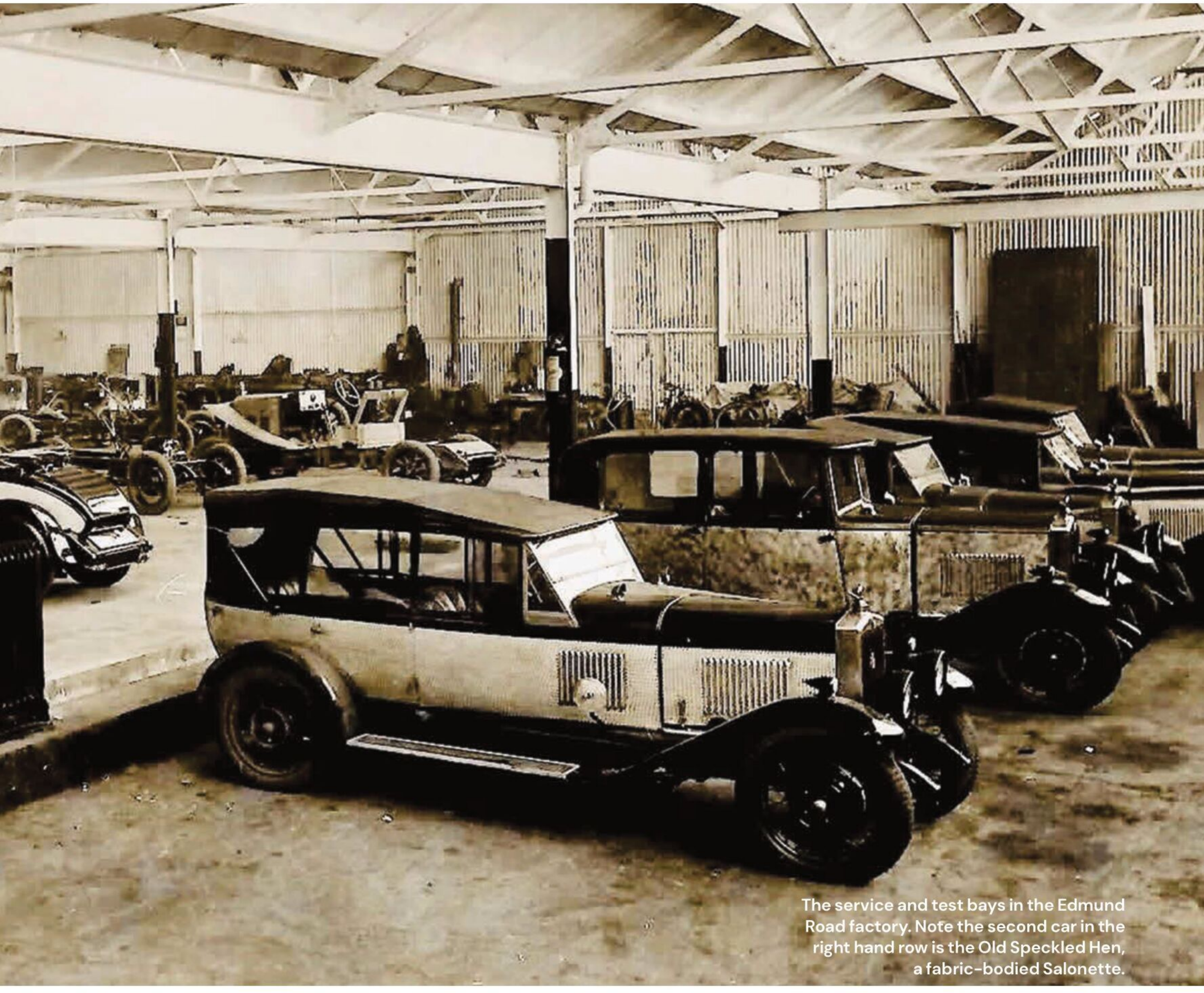
1923: Premises acquired in Alfred Lane, now Pusey Street, Oxford, for the production of the first MG sports cars – marketed as 'The MG Super Sports Morris'

1925: Production of MGs is transferred to some rented bays at the Osberton Radiator company in Bainton Road, Oxford.

1926/27: Whilst waiting for the new MG factory to be built at Edmund Road, Cowley, extra production areas were acquired at Merton Street Garage and at Leopold Street Garage, Oxford.

1927 (Sept): MG production is transferred to the new factory at Edmund Road.

1929 (Sept): MG production begins at the newly acquired factory in Abingdon, which was previously the Pavlova leather works. MG rented space at the Abingdon factory prior its acquisition.



The service and test bays in the Edmund Road factory. Note the second car in the right hand row is the Old Speckled Hen, a fabric-bodied Salonette.

Production numbers

MODEL	TOTAL PRODUCTION	SURVIVING	PRODUCTION
Cecil Kimber Trials Special a.k.a. 'Old Number One'	1	1	1924 to 1925
Raworth-bodied MG Super Sports	6	0	1923
Bullnose MG Super Sports, Saloons & Salonettes	336*	8	1924 to 1926
MG 14/28 Flat Rad	290*	10	1926 to 1927
MG 14/40 Flat Rad	486	21	1927 to 1929
MG 18/80 Mk I	502	33	1928 to 1931
MG 18/80 Mk II	236	27	1930 to 1933
MG 18/100 Mk III "Tigress"	5	2	1930 to 1931
Overall Totals	**1862**	**102**	

* *Approximate numbers*

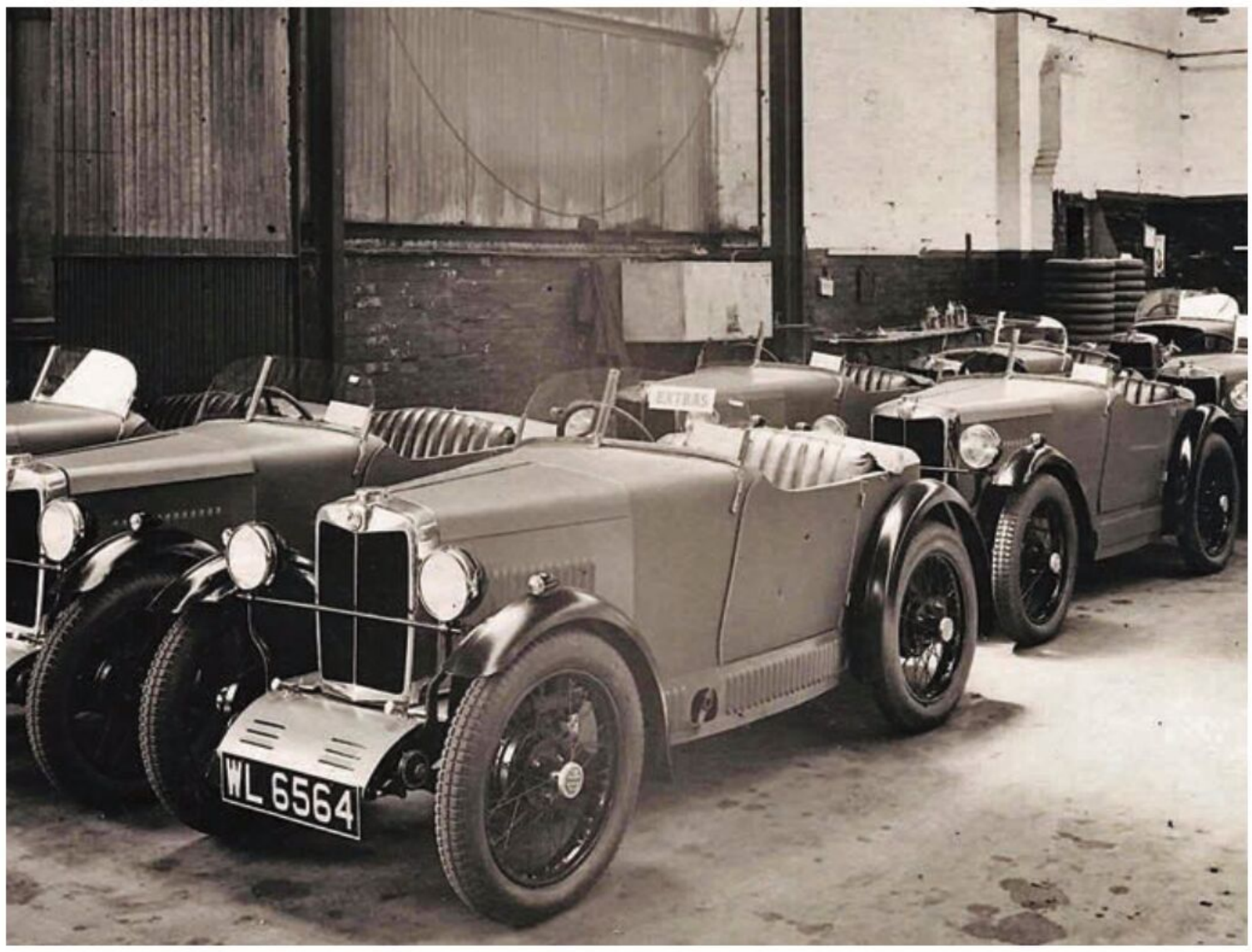
IN THE BEGINNING: 1923 – 1929

A Mk II 18/80 saloon prepared for the Monte Carlo Rally in the Edmund Road factory. W R Morris, forth from right.

Up to 100 MGs were produced at the Alfred Lane premises between 1923 and mid-1925, but in June 1925 some spare bays were rented at the Osberton Radiator factory in Bainton Road, Oxford, and were used for MG assembly until September 1927. Rumour has it, that within weeks of moving into the Osberton factory, many of the MG employees took advantage of the electroplating plant there and were soon making their peddle-powered commute to work on nickel or chrome plated bicycles!

MGs were made in those factory bays in Bainton Road until a brand new M.G factory was built in Edmund Road, Oxford, in time for the introduction of the MG 14/40 models in 1927.

When MG moved to Abingdon in September 1929, production of MG M-Types continued at the new factory.



The first MG M-Types were made at Edmund Road.

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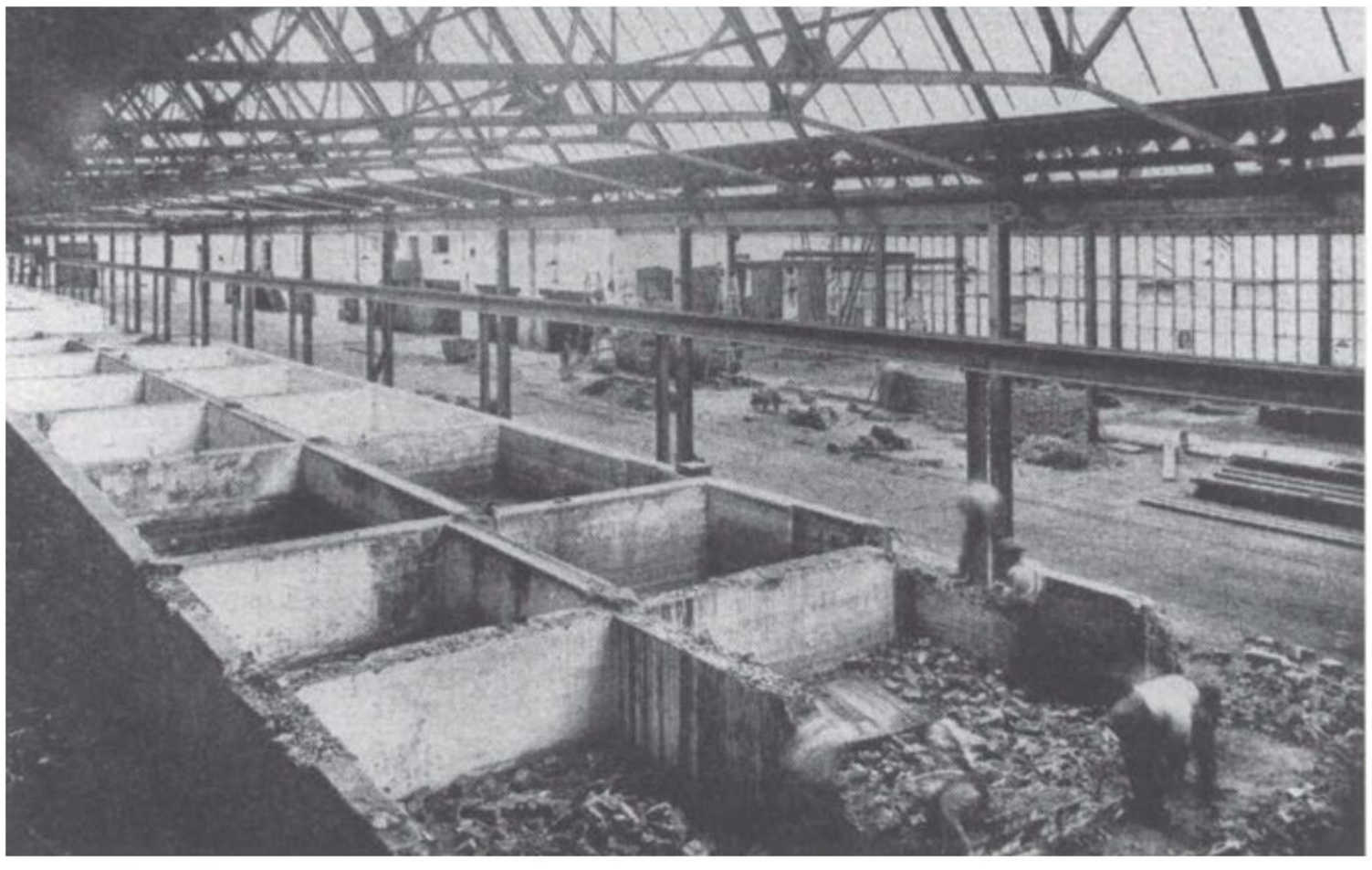
A new home

Mention the name Abingdon to most people and their sole thought is of a town in Oxfordshire attractive placed on the banks of the Thames. However, for generations of sports car enthusiasts the name of Abingdon was inextricably linked to the cars built in the small factory on the outskirts of the town. For a marque that had been established only in the early 1920s it is remarkable just how well known by the succeeding decades had become the small cars that carried the MG badge. Success on the track and in record breaking made headlines in both motoring publications and in daily newspapers, fuelled by the flair for publicity exhibited by the man who started it all, Cecil Kimber. The last MG rolled down the Abingdon production lines in 1980 and yet the cars still attract the affection of a very great many enthusiasts and even those who last owned one half a lifetime ago still think fondly of their ownership and some even try to find out if their car still exists. So what is it about the cars, the small Abingdon factory and the men who built them that made them so special?

The factory had been for over fifty years one of the major employers in the town, but a visitor now would find few tangible reminders of what was at one time the biggest producer of sports cars in the world. So perhaps here we should try to give some idea of what used to occupy an area that now resembles many other industrial estates in the country. Prior to the launch in 1928 of the first of the small, affordable MG sports cars, the M-type Midget, production had been limited to relatively small numbers. Two years previously, the company had moved to a new factory at Edmund Road, Oxford purpose-built with every modern convenience in the firm belief that it would serve them for many years. Had MG continued to build the low-volume 14/40 and 18/80 models this would have been the case. Those cars were sent to outside coachbuilders for body fitting and, bearing in mind that in 1927 just 341 MGs were built and sold, the available room would have been adequate.

The immediate appeal of the new Midget meant that a large number



When The MG Car Company took over the factory from Pavova Leather it had been unused for over ten years, but still contained the vats used in the tanning process.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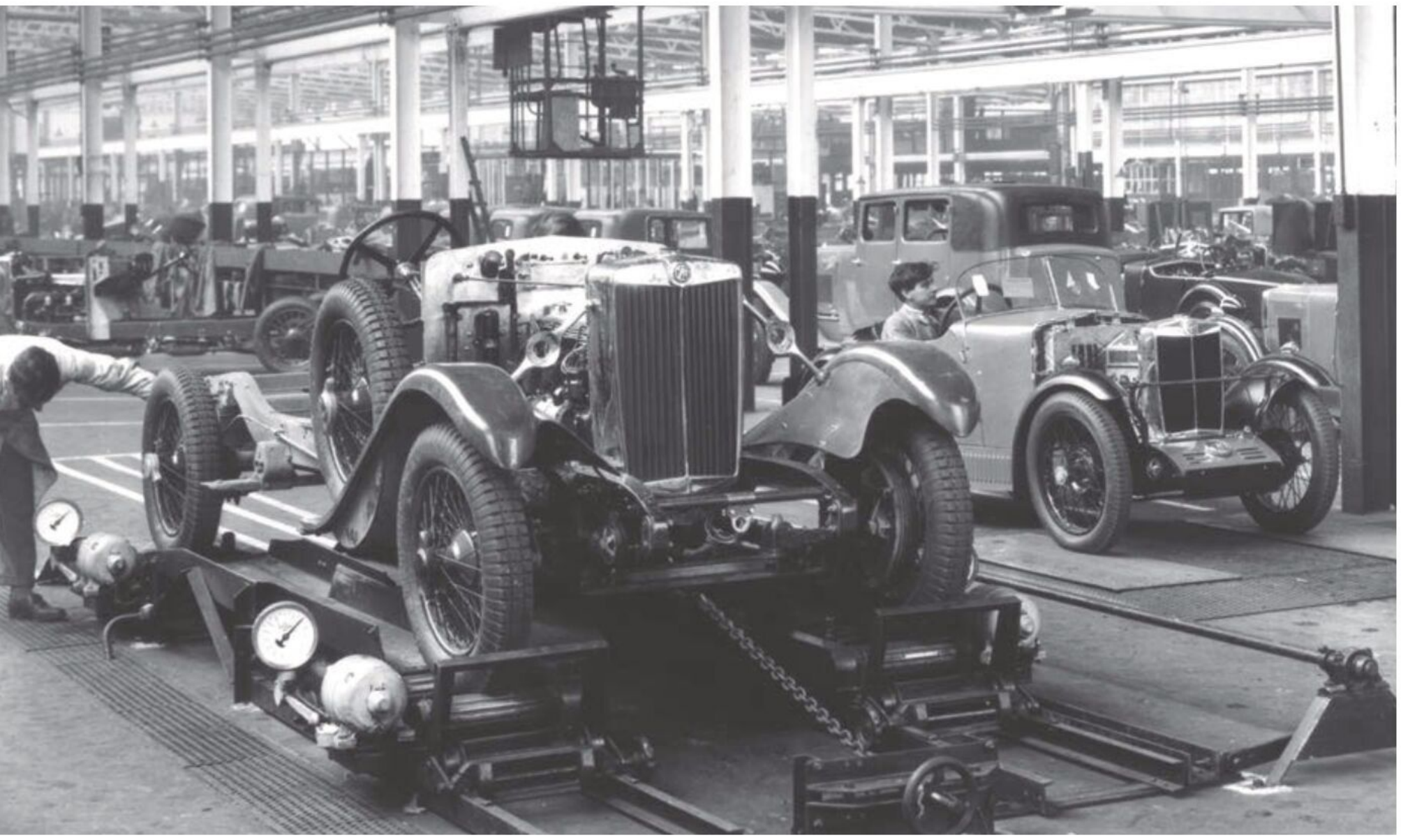
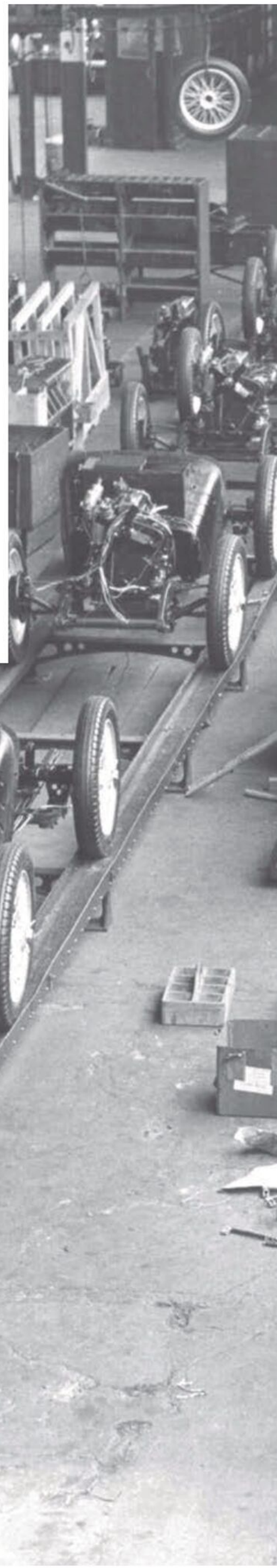
MG AND ABINGDON

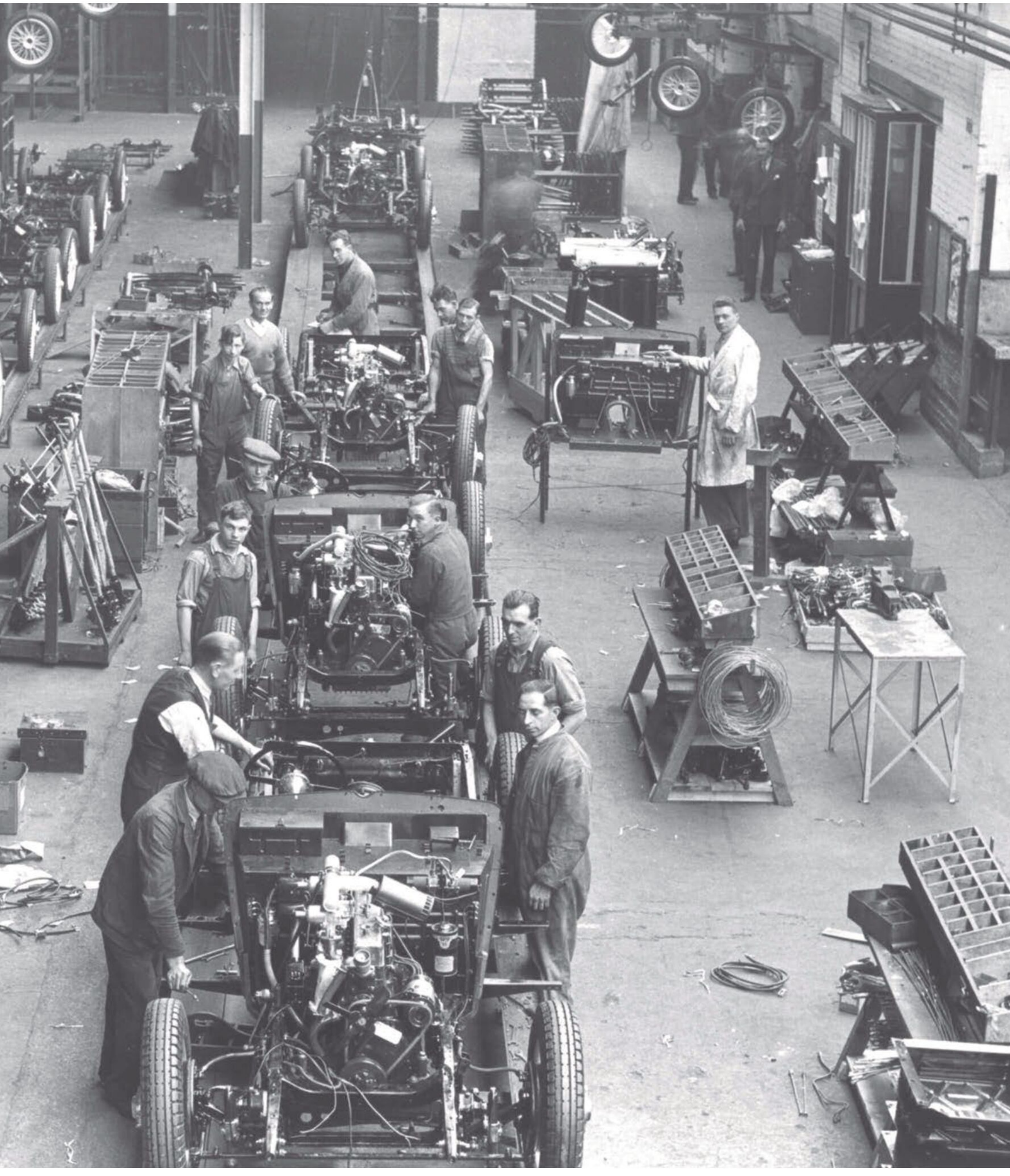




Above: For its time, despite the lack of a moving assembly line, the factory was well equipped and here brakes are being adjusted on an electric-powered rig. Main: Improvements were made at Abingdon in the mid-1930s to speed production, including this conveyor belt to transfer wheels and tyres to the lines. TAs and SAs are being assembled here.

of orders were taken and once production began in the spring of 1929 they had to press into service as a temporary measure the spare space available at Morris Garages premises in Leopold Street, Oxford, cars usually going to Edmund Road for final completion. A permanent solution to the problem had to be found and the only answer was yet another move of premises and a search of the local area led to the nearby market town of Abingdon. The leather industry had been established in the town in the early years of the nineteenth century and reached a peak in the 1914-1918 war when the Pavlova Leather Company increased production to accommodate the huge demand for military coats, boots, belts, harnesses etc. To cope they had enlarged the premises and built a new administration block. The declaration of peace in 1918 led to an inevitable fall-off in work and in consequence there was redundant factory space. The area alongside the Marcham Road remained unused for many years and in 1929 MG leased this site, together with the administration block in Cemetery Road.

The move to the area was announced in the press in July 1929 when the local paper printed an article under the heading 'New Industry for Abingdon' and in this the land acquired by MG was said to be around five acres. However, considerable work was needed before the new factory could be brought fully into use. There were a large number of brick-built vats that had been used in the leather tanning process and these had to be demolished and large areas of concrete floor re-laid. It was also necessary to construct partitions for the stores, offices, etc. and it was September before all the car assembly work could be transferred from Oxford to Abingdon. Luckily Kimber was able to persuade the key MG personnel to make the move, these included Hubert Charles as chief designer and George Propert as general manager. Additionally, most of the original work force also went to the new factory.



MG AND ABINGDON

The C-type racing cars for the 1931 Double Twelve-hour race at Brooklands were assembled in a very short time, necessitating a lot of hard work and overtime for those involved.

Although it took some to set up the new production lines and transfer the necessary tools, equipment and spares to the renovated factory buildings, by January 1930 the company were sufficiently established for an inaugural luncheon to be held. With a larger factory and the degree of autonomy afforded by the separation from the parent Morris Garages, the business set out on what was to be the most exciting and innovative period of MG history. Production of the M-type Midget and the 18/80 took just part of the new premises and there was room for the competition shop, stores and other departments within the main buildings taken over from Pavlova. For the Midget, assembly methods had been adapted to suit the new situation and a production line was established that saw the cars being put together in much the same way as was to be the case for all the cars built there over the next fifty years.

As a relatively new marque with a nucleus of workers that had been with the enterprise from the earliest days it isn't surprising that there existed a sense of loyalty and commitment to the company. This manifested itself in the pride felt when the cars they built achieved success in motor sport. An example of this can seen following a lunch party held at the Abingdon factory at the end of February 1931 to celebrate George Eyston's tremendous success in being the first to achieve 100mph in a 750cc car. At that event Kimber announced the production of the

C-type, 750cc competition car. Having generated enough interest to ensure sufficient orders, the factory were then given just over two months to hand build some dozen cars in readiness for the Brooklands Double Twelve race in early May.

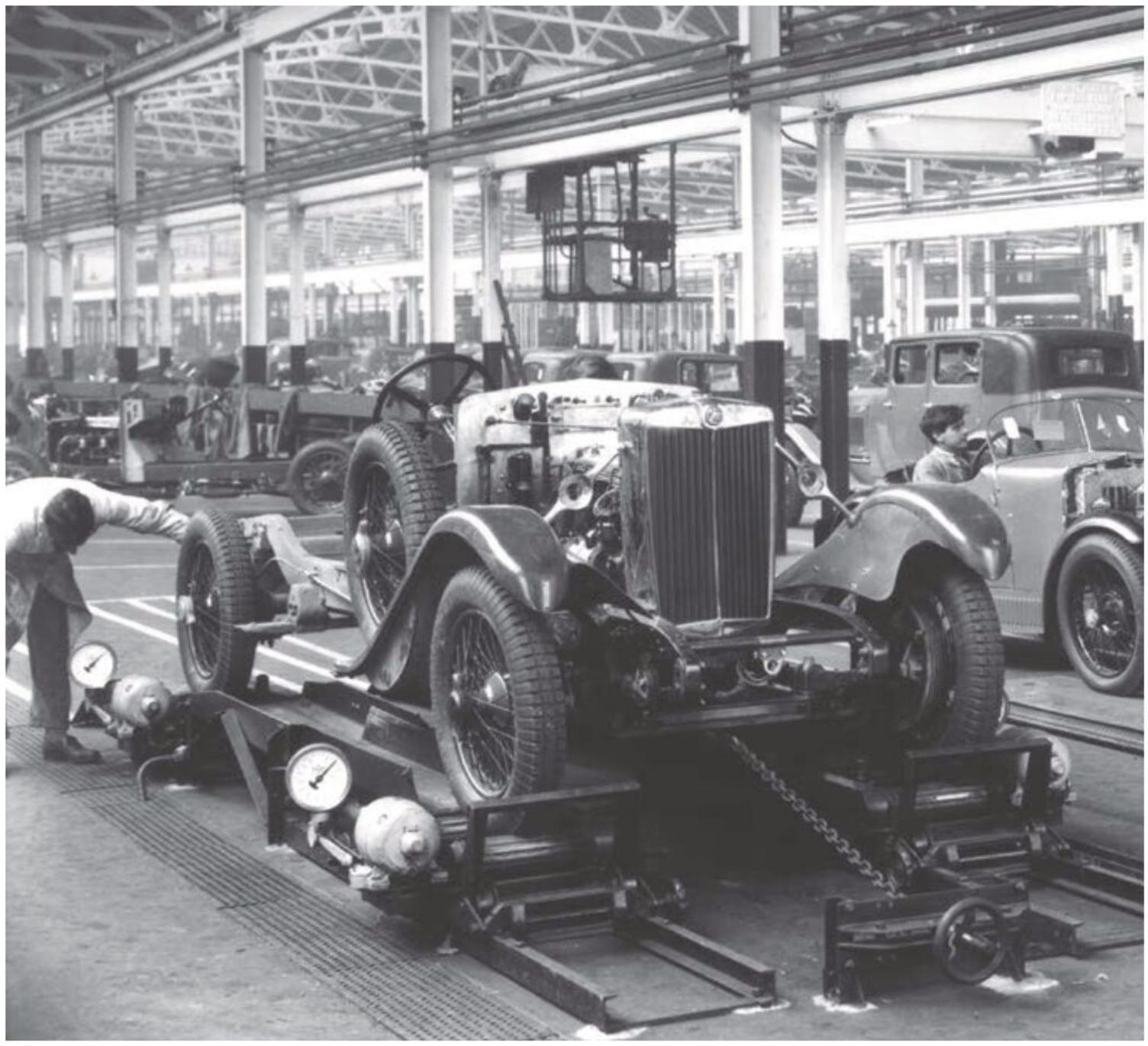
In recognition of their efforts almost two hundred Abingdon employees were taken to Brooklands for the two-day race and some of these, unable to contain their excitement when their cars won, swarmed over the barriers at the end of the race and carried their fellow mechanics shoulder high. These scenes were to be repeated on the Monday following the race when three of the winning cars returned to the factory. Arriving back in Abingdon at about four o'clock in the afternoon a brief stop was made at the Red Lion Hotel in the High Street to give the townsfolk a chance to see the cars. Back at the works all three hundred employees gathered outside by the Cemetery Road gate and cheered enthusiastically as the cars entered the factory. It was this spirit that made the Abingdon factory a special place to work and a modern equivalent may perhaps only be found in the factories designing and building successful Formula One cars.

Over the next four years the pace of development at the Abingdon factory was frenetic. New production models arrived at frequent intervals with the D-type and F-type in 1931, the J-type in 1932, the K-type and L-type in 1933 and the P-type and N-type in 1934. In addition there were

MG AND ABINGDON

An aerial view of the whole Abingdon factory site taken in 1966.

the pure competition cars, the J4, K3, Q-type and R-type. The latter was of a very advanced design and Kimber was determined to transfer features like the all-independent suspension to a new production model. However, whilst all of this was going on at Abingdon the main board of the parent company, Morris Motors, planned some fundamental changes to the organisation. Sir William Morris, or Lord Nuffield as he had become in 1934, was keen to go public with a large quantity of Morris Motors ordinary shares. Before he did so he wanted to integrate the various bits of the group he personally owned into the parent company. Therefore on July 1st 1935 he sold his interest in both the MG Car Company and Wolseley Motors to Morris Motors Limited. As the result of these changes Abingdon suffered a number of significant developments. The racing shop was closed, as was the drawing office where the work on new models was transferred to Morris



One of the areas created during the leather factory alterations was a main stores area for the assembly lines.

Main: On the TD assembly line Bert McIntyre is carrying out the final jobs on the leading car.
Top right: During the war women carried out many jobs in the factory, including those that by their nature would have previously been considered only suitable for male employees.

Motors at Cowley with Bill Renwick and the brilliant Syd Enever from development acting as the Abingdon factory liaison engineers.

Another major change had occurred some time before this. When the P-type appeared at the beginning of 1934 it was fitted with a body manufactured by Morris Bodies Branch of Quinton Road, Coventry. Carbodies who previously made the majority of MG coachwork was no longer to be a major supplier and was not used after the final KN saloons were completed in the autumn of 1935. William Morris used the Coventry firm of Hollick and Pratt to supply him with bodies and to cope with the increased demand for Morris cars persuaded them to build an additional factory at Cowley. Morris later bought the company and when he sold it in 1926 to Morris Motors (1926) Ltd. it was renamed Morris Bodies Branch. Following a change by Morris Motors to steel construction Morris Bodies Branch lost significant amounts of work and Abingdon was persuaded to change suppliers and so began an association with that

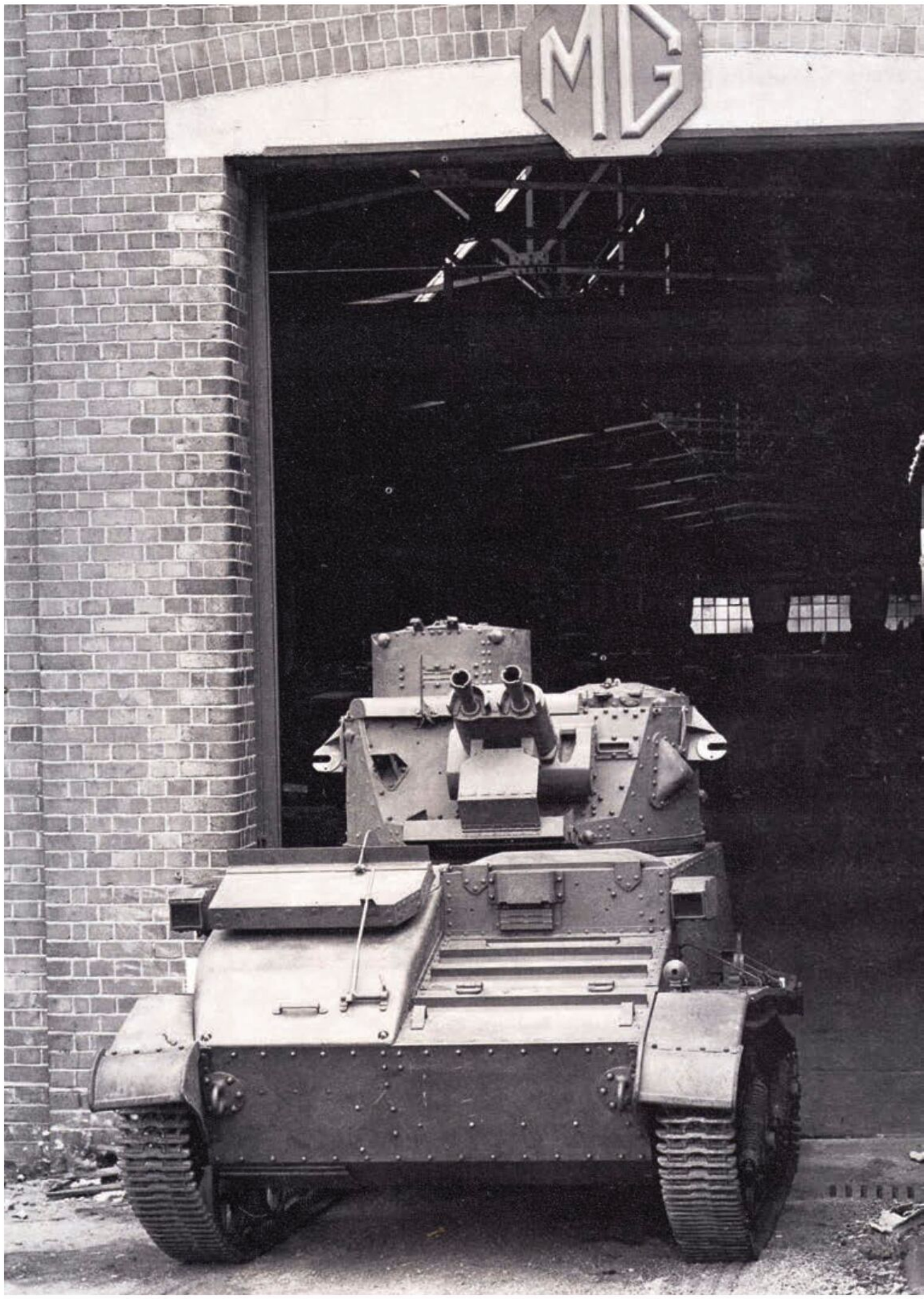
MG AND ABINGDON

concern that was to continue right up to the end of MGB production.

A number of other changes were instigated at the factory. There was no automated production at Abingdon and the cars were pushed from station to station along the production line and this system to remain the norm until closure. However, approximately half of the upper floor from the Marcham Road end of the factory was dismantled and re-erected to create an upper decking on the Northern end of the building, over what had become the engine storage area. This new mezzanine floor was to be used as an extension to the production stores for the purpose of serving the needs of new chassis lines installed in place of the closed race and experimental shops.

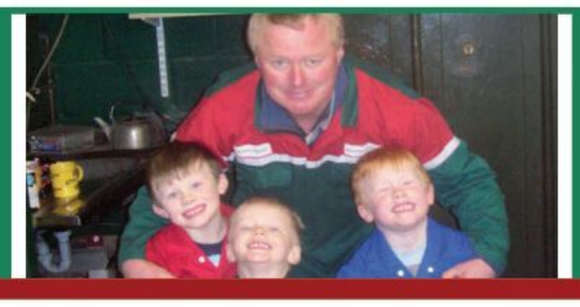
In May 1936 The Light Car magazine reported that they had visited Abingdon where over the previous six months some £20,000 had been spent rearranging the shops and installing new plant. Four assembly lines were provided, a doubling of capacity, and a new paint shop had been built that was capable of handling 200 cars a week. This operated in two sections, one to apply priming coats and the second for the wide choice of finishing colours. There was also a new conveyor system to deliver the wheels, fitted with tyres, direct to the assembly lines that by then were building TA Midgets and the large SA saloons and tourers.

The system at that time was to build the cars to order. This obviously meant that as demand fluctuated so did the need for assembly line staff. As a result many employed there lacked any real job security, but as wages were higher than could be earned locally in, say, agriculture many were prepared to put up with this at a time when any job was hard to find. The weekly build requirement would be chalked up on a board and as soon as the orders were completed the men were finished for that week. The working week at that time was 44 hours, but many weeks of the year there was only sufficient work for three days and pay was made up by signing-on the dole for the other two days.



Of course, the major change to both the factory and to all who worked there came at the end of 1939 as a result of the declaration of war with Germany. It is difficult now to imagine the effect on every aspect of everyday daily life that period introduced.

The effect on industry of the war was equally dramatic. At Abingdon the vehicles already in the pipeline were completed but records show that after war was declared only a few dozen cars were built and, for some reason, the actual build dates of these were never recorded in the ledgers. Government required that the car factories be turned over to essential war work, and this applied to all of the Nuffield Group establishments. Plans had been formulated a few years previously and component manufacturers,



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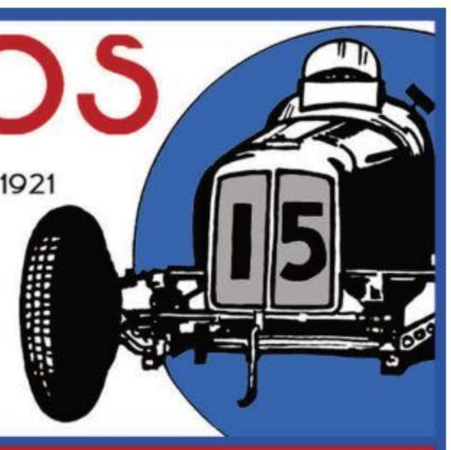

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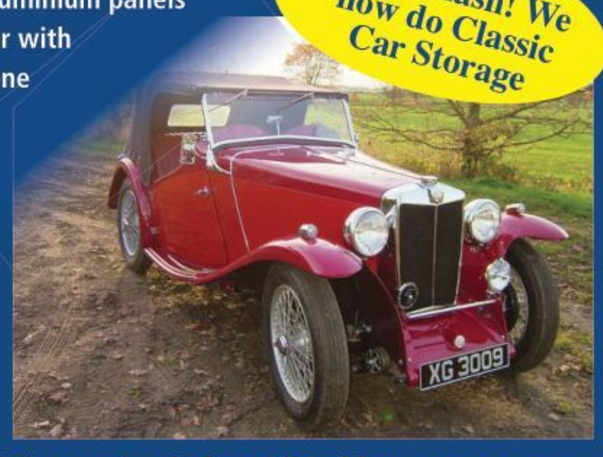

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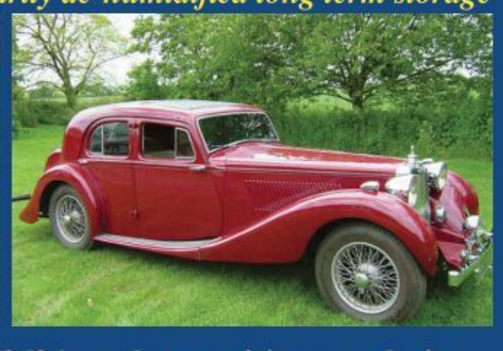

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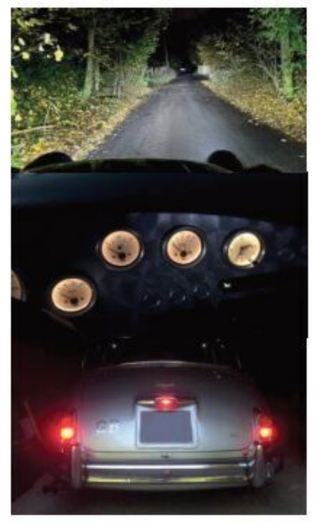

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MG AND ABINGDON

Body and chassis are united on the MGA production line. That model was the last MG sports car with a separate chassis.

Magnette and MGA production line running side-by-side.

such as SU Carburettors and Morris Radiators, switched to making similar parts for military vehicles and aircraft. A specially constructed factory at Castle Bromwich built Spitfire fighter aircraft and others were already working on military contracts before the outbreak of hostilities.

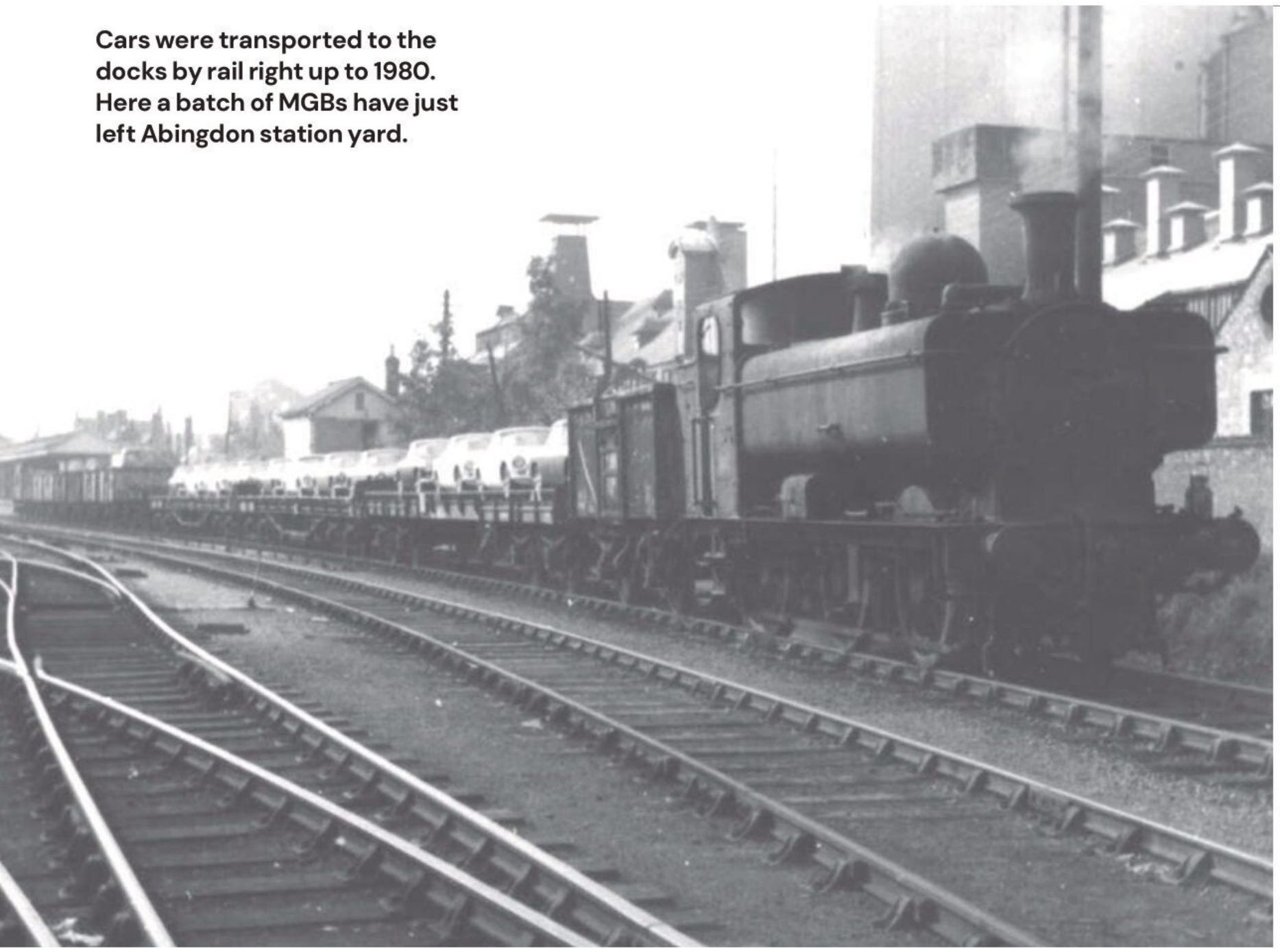
In a manner familiar to anyone who has seen the way government officials attempt to run anything, plans for some factories, like MG at Abingdon, had not been properly thought out and once car production ceased there seemed little for them to do. Obviously the first job was to remove all the machinery, fixtures and fittings of sports car production. The assembly lines were easily cleared, but there were also a large quantity of spare parts for current and obsolete models to house. Luckily, Managing Director, Cecil Kimber found an old clothing factory situated in West St. Helen's Street in the heart of Abingdon. Although not ideal, being very neglected and sub-divided into small offices and workshops, after some demolition work and strengthening and re-laying of floors they had suitable storage for factory equipment and spare parts.

Having discovered that there were no plans in place to use the factory, Cecil Kimber and George Propert, the works manager, had then to spend a considerable amount of time finding contracts for work, any kind of work. Having found some, there was then the problem of re-equipping. Abingdon was an assembler of cars and the vast majority of the components used were manufactured elsewhere. In consequence, they had few machine tools and those they had were largely unsuitable for producing items to the tight tolerances necessary for military contracts.

At first the orders obtained were for shell racks, small bins and other similar items that could easily be made up using the existing facilities in the press shop. This department was to be utilised for the duration of the war producing short runs of items in urgent demand elsewhere in the works, and also for other companies. For the main factory Kimber obtained

MG AND ABINGDON

Cars were transported to the docks by rail right up to 1980. Here a batch of MGBs have just left Abingdon station yard.



a contract to renovate light tanks that were suffering from wear and tear, rather than damage in battle. A system was evolved to deal with these that proved more efficient than the complete dismantling called for in the Ministry specification. This led to the factory being awarded a contract to renovate much heavier tanks. A 20-ton gantry crane able to lift complete vehicles was fitted and, for the first time at Abingdon, a night shift was instituted. Kimber's tireless efforts to keep the factory running were for some reason not appreciated by his superiors, who eventually gave him the sack.

As well as carrying out tank repairs, the factory also assembled new tanks and commissioned lorries shipped over from the United States. These arrived in packing cases, which provided the necessary material for the maintenance staff to construct an extension to the press shop. This department was in constant demand to produce small runs of components, but control on supplies of building materials by government made it difficult to construct extra space in a more conventional manner.

The contracts that caused most problems for the MG team were those for aircraft parts and sub-assemblies. These had to be manufactured to the highest standard and were rigorously checked by government-appointed inspectors. As there was very limited manufacturing capacity at Abingdon, the management team looked around the engineering industry to see if they could have the necessary tools and jigs built by sub-contractors. Because everyone was working on the war effort, they found little spare capacity anywhere and had to make themselves much of the necessary equipment, including a fifteen-foot-long main assembly jig. In spite of this the complete bomber fuselage sections were built and tested at Abingdon, before going to another factory for final assembly. Abingdon also manufactured parts for other aircraft and constructed aircraft engines from components made elsewhere.

Some of the pre-war workers had not been called up to join the forces, but these were too few in number to manage the big contracts undertaken. With so many men in uniform, the work force had to be

Here a LHD Midget 1500 destined for North America nears the end of the production line. *(Copyright Magna Press)*

MG AND ABINGDON

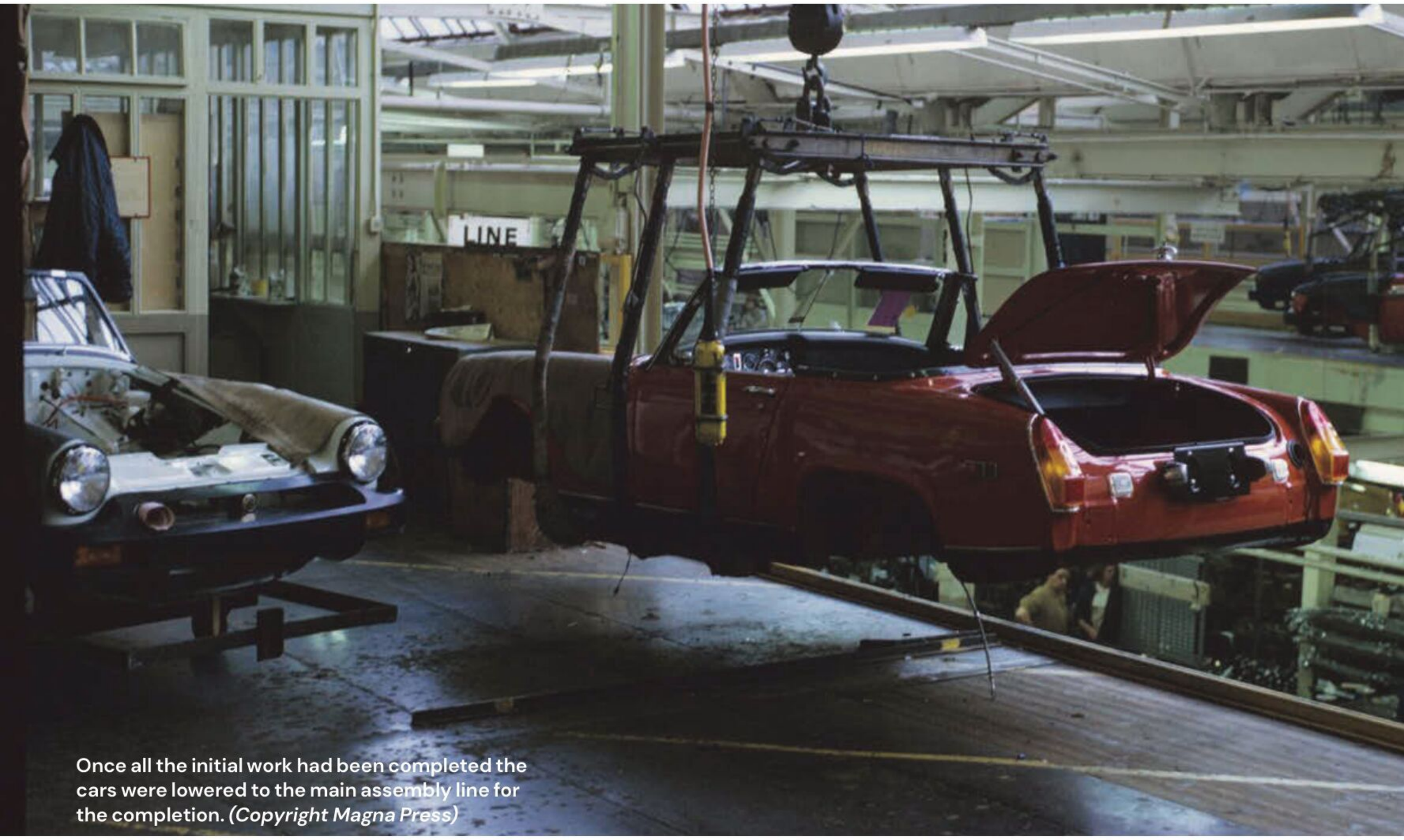
augmented by women recruited locally, and also from other parts of the country. These were mainly unskilled and had to learn to work to the high standard necessary for aircraft production. Employing a great many women brought problems that managers had previously not encountered with the local male workers. They had to establish a training school and also deal with an accommodation shortage.

Despite all these difficulties, the small factory at Abingdon managed to deal with the disruption of their normal business in the same efficient manner as they had previously developed the MG marque into one of the best-known sporting cars in the world. During those difficult times they kept in touch with their customers by means of a series of advertisements in which they depicted service personnel driving tanks, flying fighter aircraft and sailing in fast motor boats under the slogan 'It reminds me of my MG'.

The long awaited arrival of peace in Europe saw the Abingdon factory trying to return to something like its pre-war state. The first cars to appear were TCs and although the public announcement of the new model was not made until October 1945 work on the new car had started back in 1944 when it appeared that the war in Europe was going the right way and that victory was only a matter of time. When fighting finally stopped, there was an urgent need to return to car production as soon as possible. The factory had been considerably modified for wartime work and much of the specialised machinery had to be removed as soon as the contracts for armaments had been completed.

In 1945 there were only a very few cars assembled on a makeshift production line, some sources give this as around eighty, and all the cars were painted black. Many of the original 1939 workers had been called up for military service but their jobs at the factory were held available for them when they returned. The personnel department kept in contact with those in the forces and most were offered jobs

Midget bodies arrived at Abingdon painted, but not trimmed. The work to install the trim, instruments and electrical systems was carried out of the top floor of the assembly building before the cars were lowered down to ground level to have the engine, transmission, wheels, axles, etc. fitted. *(Copyright Magna Press)*



Once all the initial work had been completed the cars were lowered to the main assembly line for the completion. *(Copyright Magna Press)*

if they wanted them. Some of those employed specially for the war work, including some of the ladies, joined the returning employees as car production increased, and many stayed on until the closure of the plant in 1980.

Amongst the changes made to the factory during the war was the addition at the Marcham Road end of the main assembly block of a single story building for use as a decontamination unit in the event of an air raid gas attack. When no longer required for this purpose it was converted into a fully equipped medical centre. Other facilities, like the air raid shelters and the areas built to test the abilities of tanks, were progressively demolished. It is interesting to see that the work for the military did not cease immediately peace returned and that some continued as late as 1948. However, the main focus was on increasing car output and this received a boost when the TC was joined in May 1947 by the Y-type saloon.

As part of the rationalisation of the various marques and factories within the Nuffield Organisation there was a proposal that the MG plant should close with the cars being built elsewhere. Intensive lobbying resulted in the retention of Abingdon and the transfer there in May 1949 of Riley production and the factory then became known as the MG and Riley Works. Production methods at Abingdon were suited to building the current RME and RMF saloon models as these, like the MGs, had a separate chassis frame.

Exporting was a prime requirement for industry and the situation was improved by the devaluation in September 1949 that saw the rate alter from just over four dollars to a pound to 2.8 dollars. As a result MG easily sold the final TCs, now being built with features to suit the US market, and later picked up a lot of orders for the TD model that was announced in January 1950. The factory was being slowly expanded with new units being built progressively in a block on the other side of the entrance from Marcham Road. These housed eventually competition department, the tyre fitting area, paint repair ovens, rectification, finishing shop, final inspection area, despatch and also the design and development department. Many of these functions had been carried out in areas of the original buildings but as more room was needed for assembly and stores to cater for increased production they transferred to the new buildings. Output rose to a peak of over 55,000 cars in 1972. Space then was at a premium and, in addition to the site originally leased from Pavlova and later purchased, the company had also acquired further parcels of land, much of which was needed to both store completed vehicles prior to despatch and to provide staff car parking.

As we have seen, Riley production had been transferred to Abingdon and in 1957 they assembled the first one hundred and fifty examples

MG AND ABINGDON

of the then new Riley One-Point-Five saloon before production moved to Longbridge. They also built the Patherfinder and the first few examples of its successor with the BMC engine, the Riley Two-Point-Six. In the autumn of 1957 production of the Austin-Healey 100/6 was moved from Longbridge to Abingdon. This concentrated sports car building at one site and used spare capacity in the MG factory. The move there made even more sense once the Austin-Healey Sprite was launched. Because the Austin plant at Longbridge was to be fully employed in the future assembling the Mini it was decided that the cars would be built alongside the MGA and the Austin-Healey 100/6. The Healey Motor Company at Warwick and the engineers at Abingdon were to be jointly responsible development of the Sprite/Midget. In 1961 the more civilised Sprite Mark II, and its close cousin the Mark I Midget, replaced the initial Sprite. Production rates saw a new car leave the line every four-and-a-half minutes of the working day – not bad for a factory without an automated production line. Unfortunately, when the Abingdon-built MG saloon, the Z-Magnette, was replaced in 1959 by the Mark III Magnette this was assembled at Cowley.

Late in 1962 the most successful sports car ever built at Abingdon was launched. In its various guises the MGB and MGB GT were to stay in production until the factory closed in 1980. Along the way the closely related MGC and MGB GT V8 models came and went and the Midget staggered on selling in reasonable number until 1979. In order to meet ever more stringent crashworthiness and pollution tests a new building was erected to test exhaust emissions and a rig was installed where cars could be launched at a fixed barrier to see how they would withstand the impact. As a result a great many changes were incorporated in the later versions of both the MGB and Midget.

The axe finally fell on the Abingdon factory with an announcement that coincided with the celebration of fifty years of MG car production in the town that plant would close the following year. Despite a vigorous campaign to save both the factory and the MG marque, the last MGs left the line in October 1980.

Taken in the Abingdon factory, this picture features former MG director and general manager, John Thornley, with his MGB GT (MG1) and MGA designer Syd Enever, stood next to an MGB GT LE (one of the last cars to be build at Abingdon). Between them in the background is cheif engineer, Don Hayter.


inspection station
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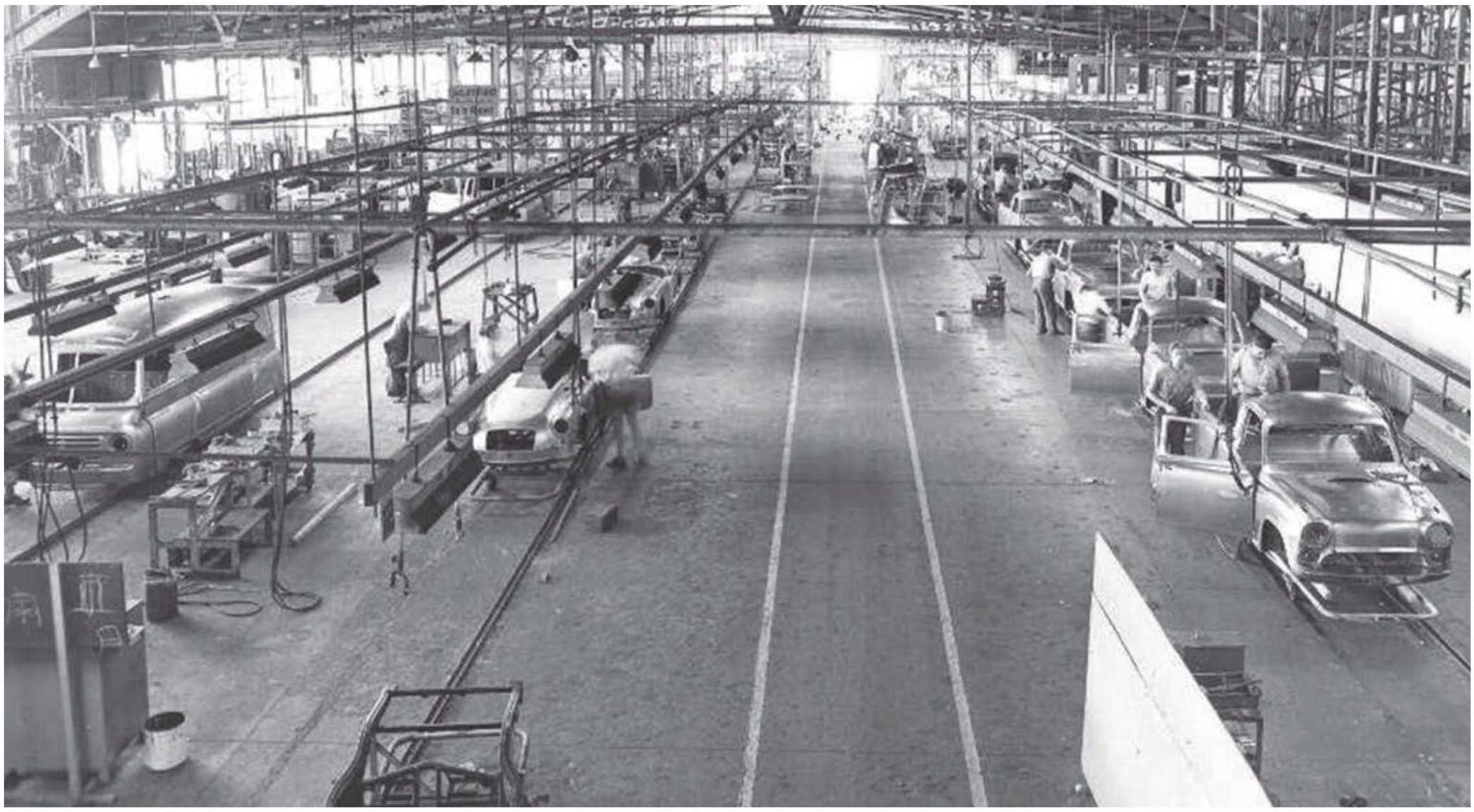


Inside the main Car Assembly Building at Pressed Metal Corporation, Enfield, c1959. On the left are Morris JB vans, then comes the MGA line, and on the right are Austin A55 utilities (pick-ups) which were unique to PMC. The A55s and MGAs are mounted on skuks – temporary chassis on trolleys for moving the vehicles along the line until painted – the Paint Shop is located beyond the toilets on the far right. Final assembly was in the other end of the plant, behind the camera.

Building the MGA in Australia

Australia was an important export market for MG, but with the US dominating post-war exports and incentives from the Australian government to increase local content, BMC Australia's best option to keep the MG brand competitive was for local assembly.

Prior to World War Two, Australia was the largest export destination for MG cars, though overall numbers were still quite small. For example, 113 TA/TB models came to Australia between 1937 and 1940. That doesn't sound like a great deal, but it was 24% of all exports from a total production run of 3382 – and ten times the number of cars exported to the US.

With the US becoming the dominant export market after the war, Australia still remained an important destination. While 1820 TCs were shipped to the US, 1774 came to Australia. By the time of the TD, with mass production getting underway and the US taking just over 20,000 in four years, Australia had dropped to fourth behind West Germany and Canada, but retaining a still reasonable number of 904.

Development of the MGA was stalled due to the release of the Austin-Healey in 1952 and MG was ordered to continue with the T-series. The replacement for the TD was therefore the TF, which was released late in 1953. While the US and European markets didn't respond well to the facelift, the TF still sold well in Australia, with 813 coming here in two years, being only second again to the US which took 3731 over the same period.

According to *Wheels* magazine's new car price guides, in May 1953 an MG TD would set you back £1025, while in October 1955 a TF was down to £982, indicating the slowing sales as the model reached the end of its life. However, by mid-1956 the MGA was available for £1256 – if you could find one! Production had commenced in late 1955, with up to 80% exported to the US in the first year and Australian supply substantially down. Waiting lists for the MGA in Australia stretched to months, and when *Modern Motor* magazine wanted to get hold of one for a road test in early 1956, BMC Australia was unable to oblige. Instead, the magazine used a privately-owned example. Bryan Hanrahan declared in the magazine the car was '*as good as it looks*' and said: '*Gearbox, steering and*

This Australian-built MGA 1500 is painted in its original shade of Bardiman Grey, which is almost white.

suspension combine to make the run sheer delight.'

In the 1920s and 1930s, while most MGs were imported Completely Built Up (CBU), some bare MG chassis were imported, with bodies built locally. This included ten of the 113 TA/TB types and a small number of the S/V/W class cars. After the war, MGs were only brought in CBU by the newly established Nuffield Australia Corporation, but by the 1950s Australian government incentives for local assembly and restrictions on the number of imported cars made the import of cars CBU far less attractive than it had been previously.

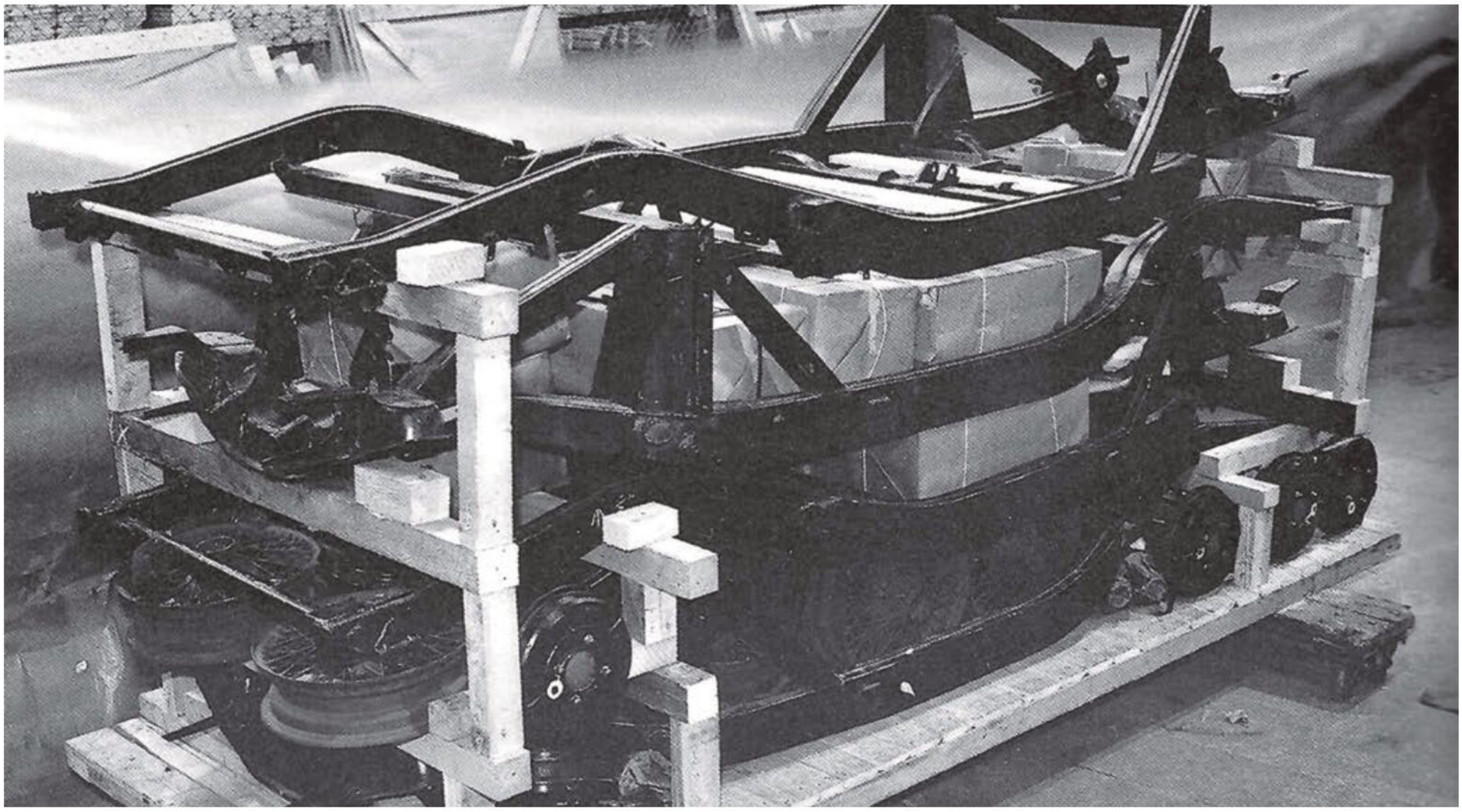
Many companies began assembling complete cars, either from Completely Knocked Down (CKD) or Semi Knocked Down (SKD) kits. The majority though were saloon cars, with very few sports cars being locally assembled. The one exception in any sort of volume was the Triumph TR3 (£1630), which was being assembled by Standard in Melbourne and, according to *Sports Car World* magazine, barely trickled off the line.

Writing in *SCW* in August 1957, Pedr Davis bemoaned the difficulty in getting any sports car in Australia – and not only the MGA – saying: '*Today it is almost impossible to buy a new sports car off the peg anywhere in Australia... For example, a Triumph TR3 takes six weeks for delivery and a Berkeley is quoted at something over 10 weeks. The other makes have waiting lists ranging nine months for a Bristol 405 to indefinite for the MGA and Austin-Healey.*

'If Rover, Renault and Peugeot can economically use Australian assembly labour, it seems inconceivable that one sports car manufacturer at least could not market sufficient vehicles to keep an Australian assembly plant in swing.'

Davis also took direct aim at BMC, saying: '*Look at the giant BMC firm. They assemble a range of vehicles, from the Nuffield tractors to Austin A95 sedans. Could not a quarter of the factory space and a fraction of the import quota be used to build up MGA components? The MGA is one*

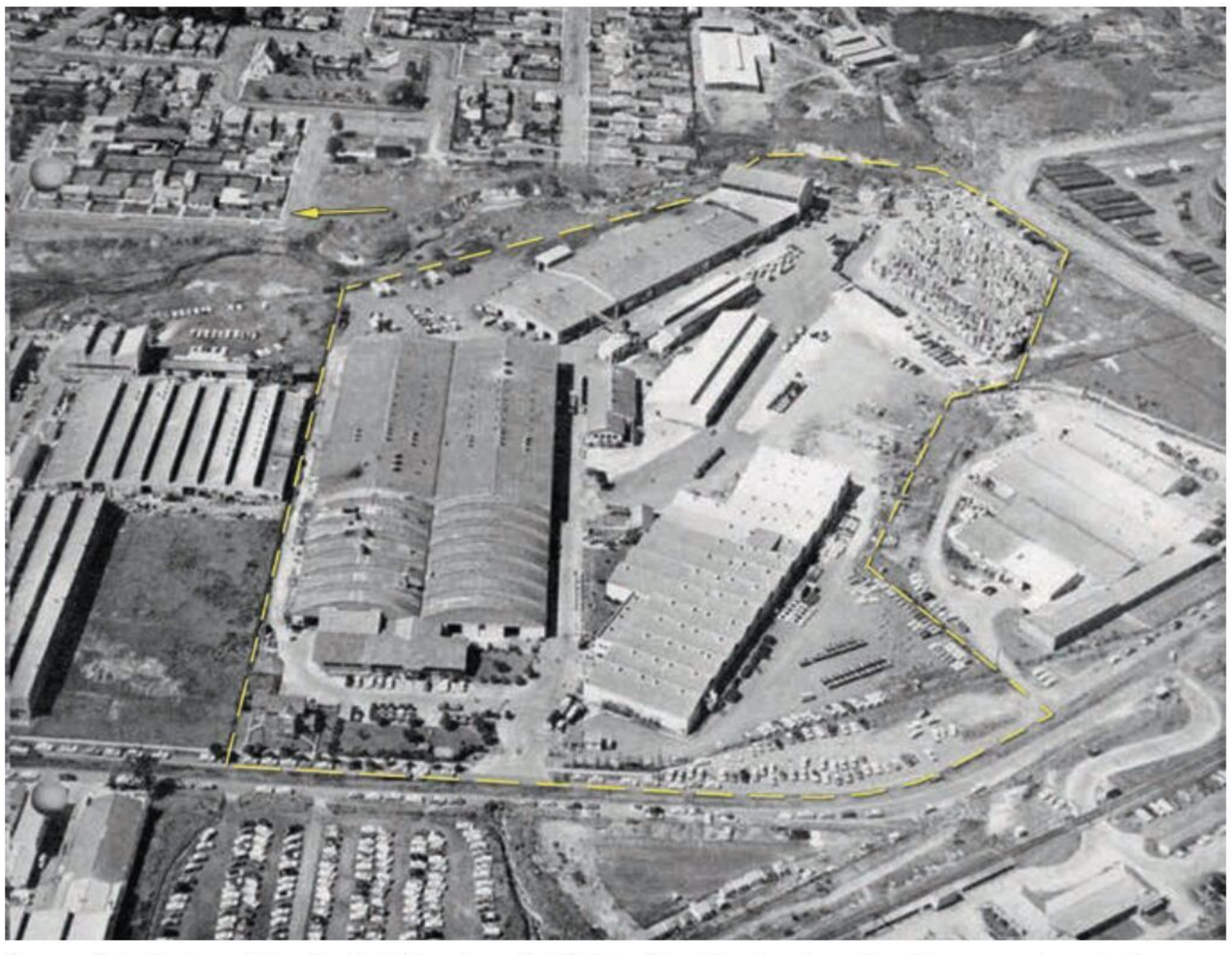
These photos are from the comprehensive CKD assembly guide sent out from the Knock Down Department at Abingdon and were intended as part of the training for workers on the CKD assembly lines in Australia and elsewhere.



Four MGA chassis and other components packed ready for boxing up and shipping to one of the overseas assemblers. Other packs would contain body panels and mechanical components. Trim, tyres, batteries and more were added in Australia.

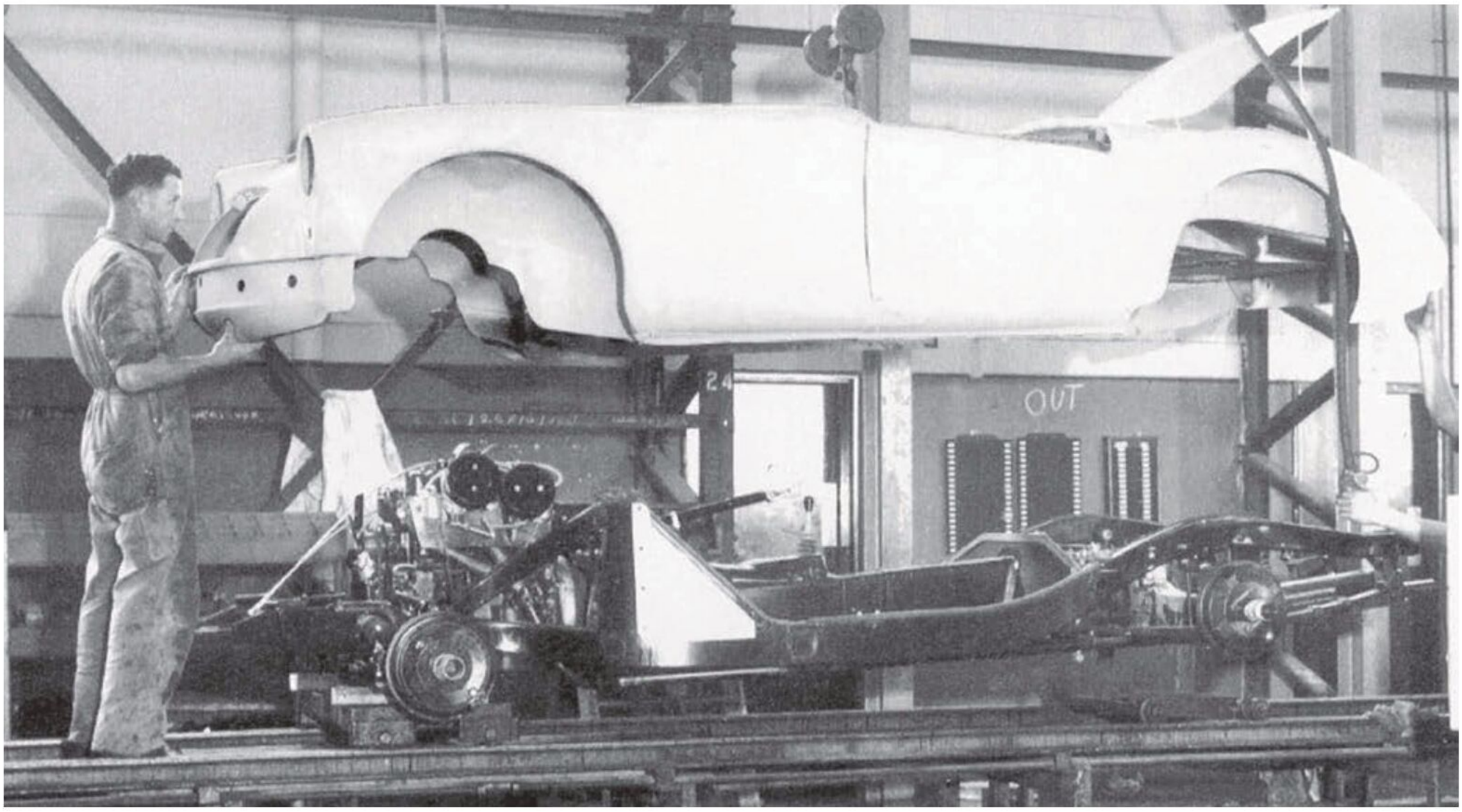
car we honestly believe is a natural for Australian assembly... Could not one manufacturer at least recognise the growing demand... by assembling and marketing a sports car in Australia for less than £1200?'

It turns out that BMC was in harmony with Davis' thoughts, but was actually more than one step ahead. A small batch of eight CKD sets had been dispatched from Nuffield's KD department at Cowley on 27 July 1956. Allowing for two months on the water and delays in getting from the wharf to BMC Australia, they would have been ready for assembly before the end of the year – several months before Davis' article. These would almost certainly have been to try out the body jigs, to test assemblies and practice the techniques, and make sure everything was going to fit and work the way it should before full production began.



An aerial photo of the Enfield factory in 1975, after the factory had been extended slightly to cater for Mini and Moke production after the closure of Zetland (Victoria Park) at the end of 1974. The yellow line shows the boundary of the factory site. The yellow arrow indicates the direction of north.

It is here that we need to make an important point, namely that the MGA was not assembled at BMC's main plant at Victoria Park (Zetland), but on a contract basis by Pressed Metal Corporation (PMC) at Enfield, in Sydney's western suburbs. The CKD packs containing chassis and body parts would have been sent directly to PMC at Enfield, while engine, gearbox and possibly some suspension parts were sent to BMC at Victoria Park as CKD. This would explain why engines



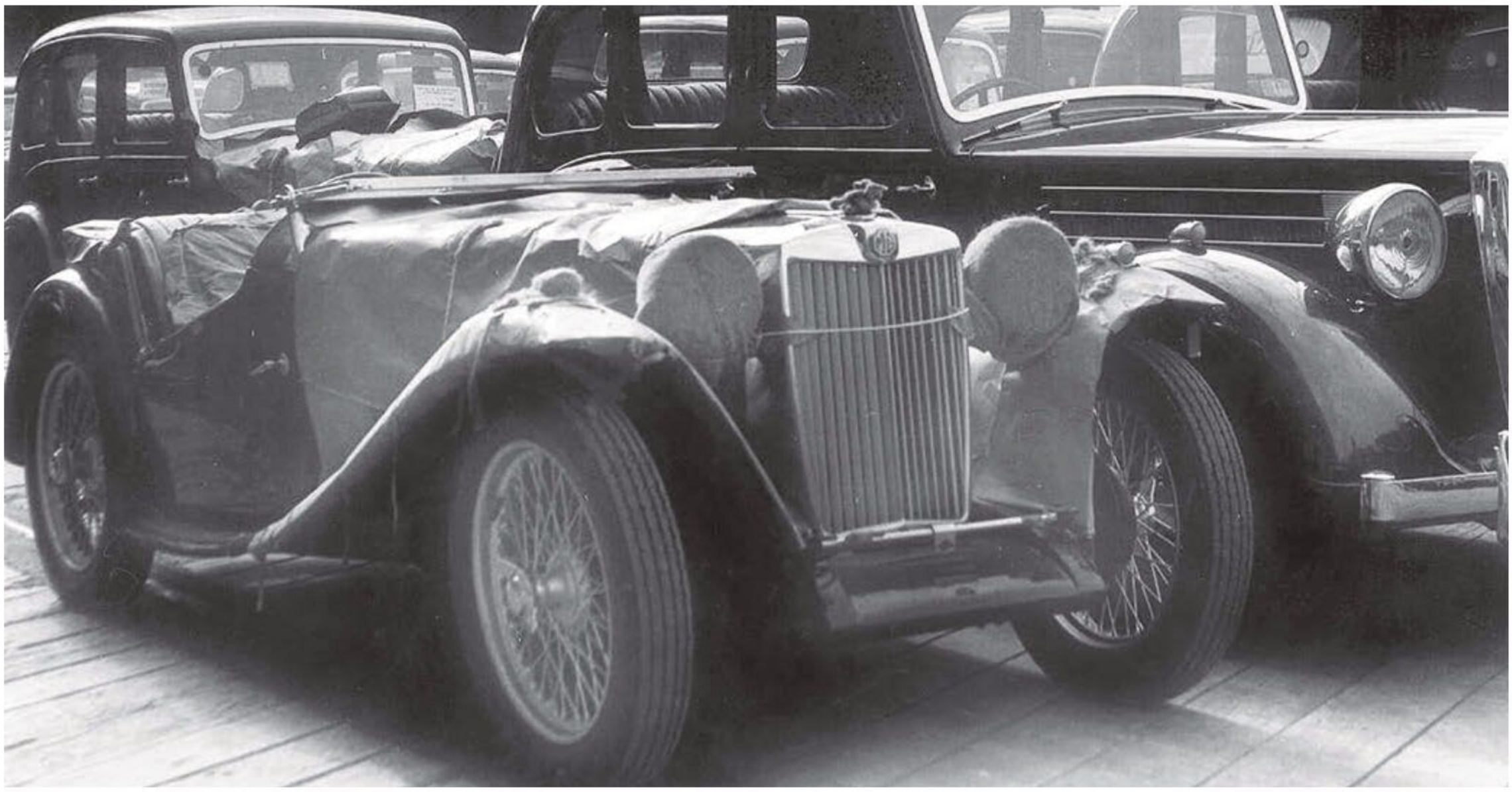
An MGA Roadster body is united with its chassis on the final assembly line in the southern end of the Enfield factory. All Coupés were imported ready-built.

were not delivered with the initial batch of eight cars, and were subsequently supplied later when production got underway. This is also evidenced by the fact the engines in these eight cars are numbered some 6000 later than would be expected for July 1956, and that the cars were sold with the early production cars in late 1957.

Many people would be forgiven for assuming the MGA was assembled at Victoria Park for two reasons. The first, and most obvious, is that the identifying plates for the cars were supplied from BMC and bore the company's name and Victoria Park address, without any reference to Pressed Metal Corporation. But a more subliminal suggestion that the cars were built at Victoria Park comes from the film *From Horses To Horsepower*, made by BMC to promote a major expansion of the factory in 1958 from CKD-only to a complete production facility. The opening shot of the film shows a blue MGA. Then, after showing the entire production process in the factory with not an MG to be seen, the MGA is shown leading a procession of the company's products out the gate of the factory. The closing shot shows the MGA at the head of a great line-up of all the cars available from BMC at the time, including some that were CBU imports.

ABOVE LEFT: These CKD packs at Zetland may have contained parts to build Morris Minors, but the MGAs would have been received in much the same way. Engine components would have been assembled at Zetland, while chassis and body panels would have gone straight to Pressed Metal Corporation at Enfield.
MIDDLE: 1st March 1950 and the official opening of the Nuffield Zetland CKD assembly plant. Most of the vehicles on display were still being imported CBU. At that time only Morris Minors were being assembled, but Oxford and Isis would soon be added. A lack of available space meant MGA assembly had to be contracted out.
RIGHT: The marshalling area at Zetland where components were stored pending production of the cars.

MGs DOWN UNDER



Australia was an important destination for CBU exports immediately after the war, but with government import quotas and tax incentives for local assembly, Nuffield was soon building its own CKD assembly plant at Victoria Park in Zetland, and would farm out assembly of MGs to PMC until 1968.

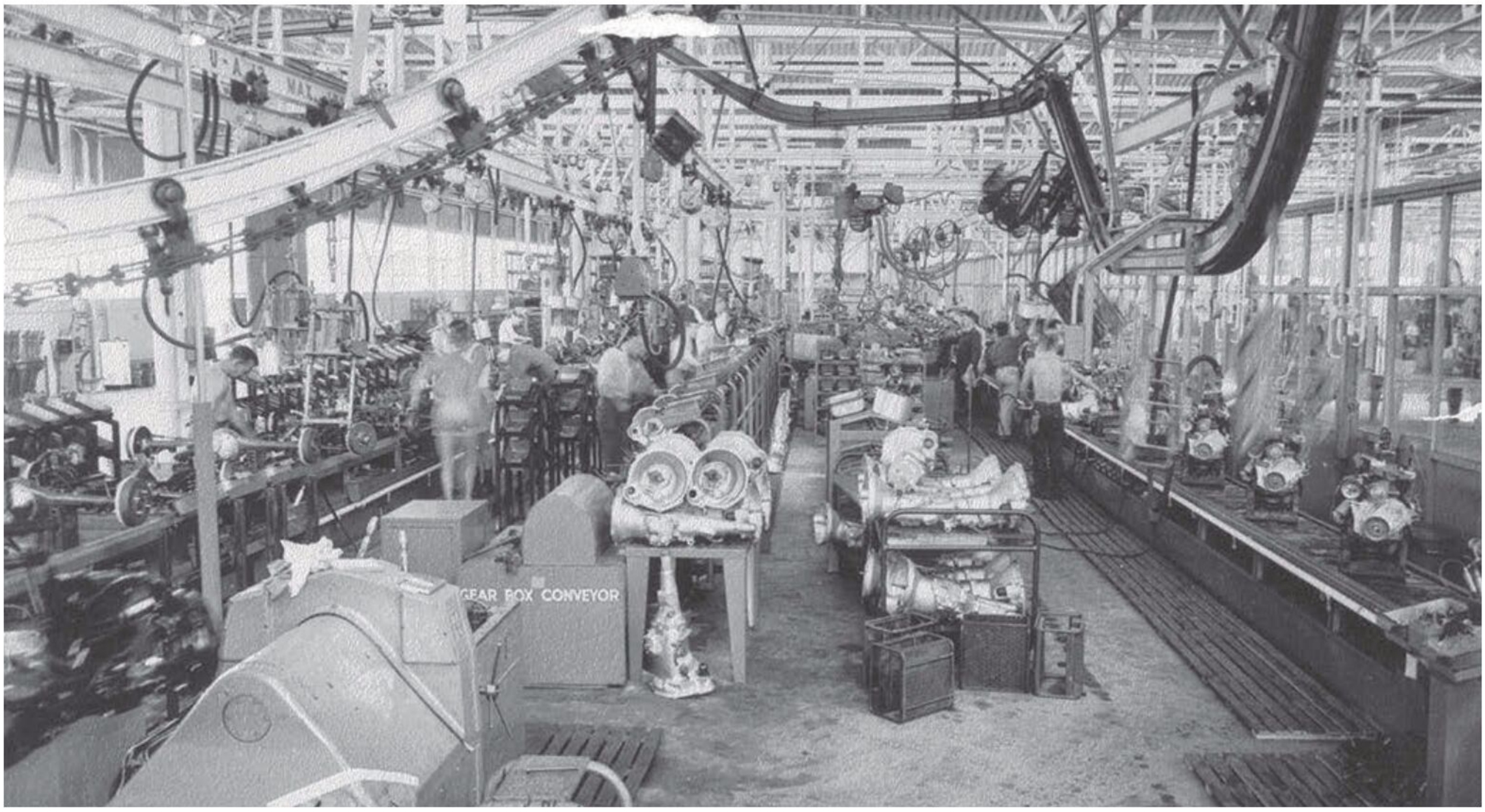
However, despite this first expansion of the Victoria Park factory (which was not completed until the end of 1957), production space was limited and the MGA's assembly had to be out-sourced. At the time, the PMC factory at Cosgrove Road, Enfield, was producing Land Rovers, Morris J2 commercial vans and Austin A40, A50 and A55 utilities – designed in-house at PMC – as well as Leyland bus chassis, with the bus bodies and final assembly taking place at PMC's plant in Marigold Street, Milperra.

Only six months after airing his concerns on the sports car industry in Australia, Pedr Davis was congratulating BMC for taking the initiative, saying: '*...we could hardly have guessed that the mighty British Motor Corporation was already on the track, swinging into action with plans to assemble... the MGA in Sydney.*' The first production cars had rolled off the PMC line in October 1957 and, according to Davis, were coming off at a rate of three per day. Former production engineer at PMC, Brian Gymer, wrote in 2012 that later production peaked at about six or eight per day – although over the five-year run production averaged only about ten per week. Importantly, it was only the pushrod Roadsters that were assembled locally, in 1500, 1600 and 1600 MkII forms. Twin Cam MGAs and all MGA Coupés, regardless of engine type, were imported CBU.

CKD cars were shipped in crates containing four sets of components, but not all the components for any one car were to be found in one crate. Components were packed together to ensure best-fit to reduce the amount of wasted space. As such, one crate might contain four chassis and four sets of other parts packed around the chassis. The next crate might contain four sets of body panels; the next, suspension parts; and so on. Shipments were therefore based on multiples of four vehicle sets, with eight being common but batches of up to 16 or 24 at a time recorded.

From the beginning, though, not all components came in the packs, with some supplied locally. Initially this included tyres, batteries and some items of trim, but later included all trim. Some sources also suggest the rear leaf springs were sourced locally. Peter Davis – former Product Engineering Manager and not to be confused with Pedr Davis – says he is not sure about the springs, but they were allocated a local part number. However, this may only have been for use by the Parts & Accessories department.

Although the Australian government's Local Content Plan did not come into being until 1964, there had been much encouragement for local production with the introduction of import quotas and increased tariffs since WW1. Thus, for every component that could be made or sourced locally there was a tax benefit in terms of reduced tariffs. 1489cc B-series engines for the Morris and Austin saloon cars of the day were being machined and assembled from rough-cast components in the Victoria Park factory. The same-size engines for the MGA were supplied from the UK with the block and head machined, but not fully assembled. Also supplied from



The final assembly of major mechanical components took place at Zetland, and here we can see (from left to right) rear axles, gearboxes and engines.

the UK were the twin SU carburettors, camshafts, conrods and crankshafts.

The engines were assembled in the Unit Factory at BMC's Victoria Park plant and, as with all the B-series engines, were mechanically bedded in for about 20 minutes. Every day, two or three engines were then taken at random – not necessarily MG types – and hot-run tested for 40 to 60 minutes. They were then stripped and checked for signs of foreign bodies, such as machining swarf, dirt and improperly fitted parts.

The MGA engines were painted dark red to distinguish them from the similar engines for saloon cars, which in this period were painted grey. Prior to painting, the distributor caps were removed along with the plug leads, then masks put over the open distributor and the spark plugs. As the starter motor and generator were already on the engine, they were also painted red.

The gearboxes were not attached to the engines at this time and were left in their raw aluminium state. MGA gearboxes were also assembled at Victoria Park, but all other procedures on the cars, including painting and trimming, took place at Enfield.

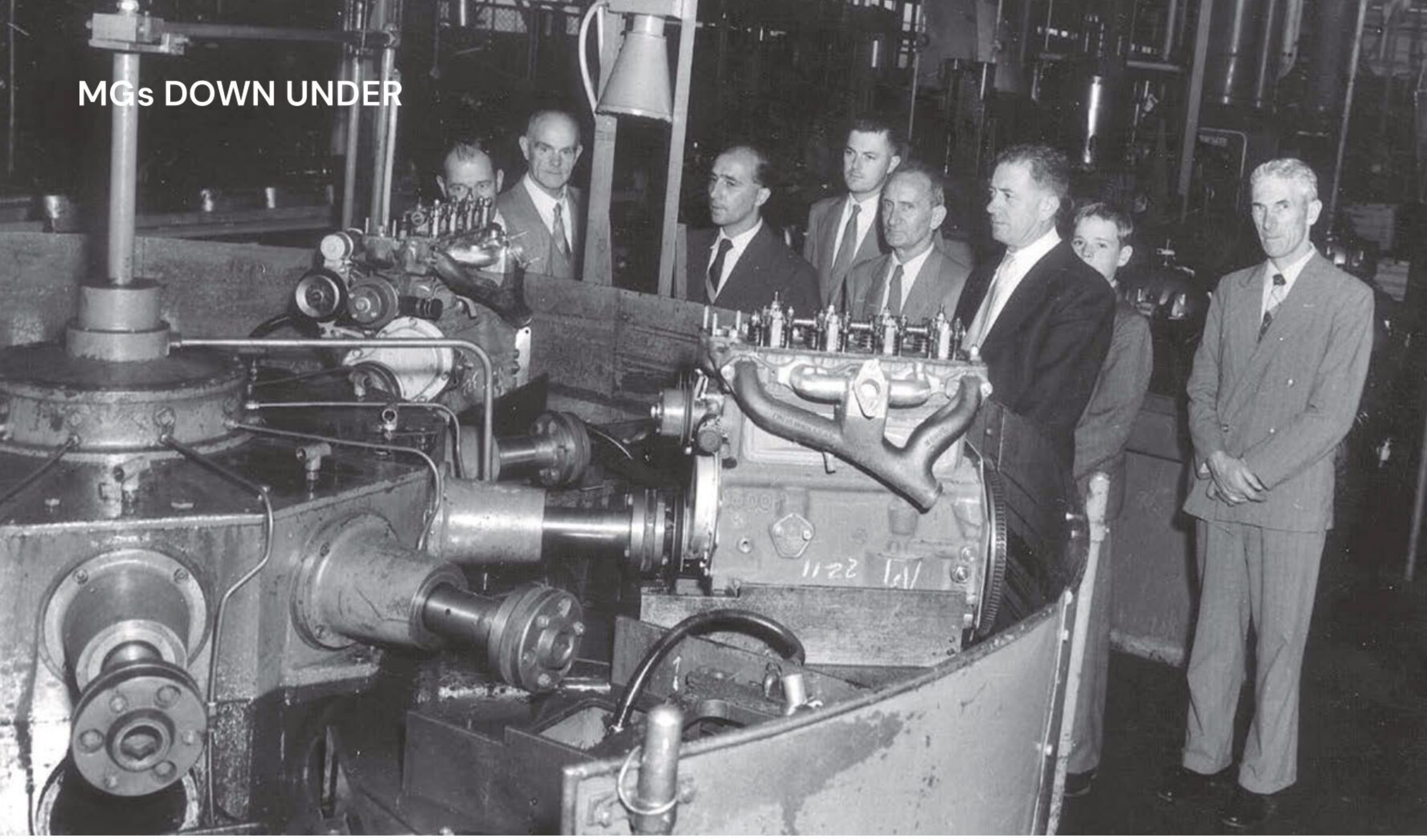
After final testing and adjustment, the MGA engines and gearboxes were trucked from the Victoria Park plant to Pressed Metal Corp at Enfield for fitting into the cars. With assembly of the engines and bodies, the fitting of locally sourced parts and the local labour, the MGA 1500 Roadster (not Twin Cam) achieved a local content of around 50%. However, all engines for the 1600, introduced at the end of 1959, and the 1600 MkII (1961) were imported CBU.

As we've seen, the number of locally sourced items increased over time to include all interior trim, batteries, tyres and tubes, and the hood material from about October 1958. To ensure continuity of supply, sometimes more than one supplier would be used. A perfect example is the tyres, which were variously supplied by Olympic (which had its factory next door to BMC's Victoria Park plant) and Goodyear.

Garry Kemm, an MGA enthusiast who has been researching the cars for 30 years, has copies of many BMC warranty cards for MGAs, from which a number of patterns (or just as often a lack of pattern) can be recognised. Interestingly, these cards show that there appears to be no pattern to the fitting of tyre brands and it was probably just a case of taking whatever was on hand at the time. For example, chassis number 56991 was originally fitted with Goodyear, while the very next car, chassis 56992 received Olympic tyres.

Although the Australian-assembled cars were mechanically identical and visually very similar to their UK-built cousins, there were many detail differences in numerous areas. While all UK-built MGAs featured leather upholstery, from about March 1958 Australian cars had vinyl – partly to reduce costs and partly for the longevity of the material in the Australian sun. There were also different paint and trim colours available, wire wheels were fitted as standard (UK cars had wires only as an option), heaters were rarely fitted and were a dealer-only option.

On the Twin Cam and the 1600 MkII from the UK the dashboard fascia



B-series engines being bedded in. Every engine, whether imported CBU or assembled locally, was mechanically bedded in on this machine. Every day, sample engines were also hot-run tested to check for build quality or any problems.

was covered with Vynide (leather-look vinyl), and on the latter model the scuttle panel was also covered. However, this Vynide fascia covering was not included on the Australian-assembled 1600 MkII.

The 1600 MkII cars assembled locally also came with the ten-row oil cooler as standard, fitted just ahead of the radiator. There were other minor differences, which would take up more space here than they are worth, but one that is of some interest relates to the location of the chassis identification (ID) plate. The ID plates on all models, both UK and locally-built, were screwed to the horizontal shelf behind the engine (in front of where the heater would be, if fitted). According to Anders Dietlev Clausager in *Original MGA*, the plates could face either side of a UK-built car, but it is believed that they face the left (or passenger) side on all Australian cars. The location for the plate is also slightly closer to the left side of the car and the original holes for the plate were welded over and can sometimes still be seen under the paint.

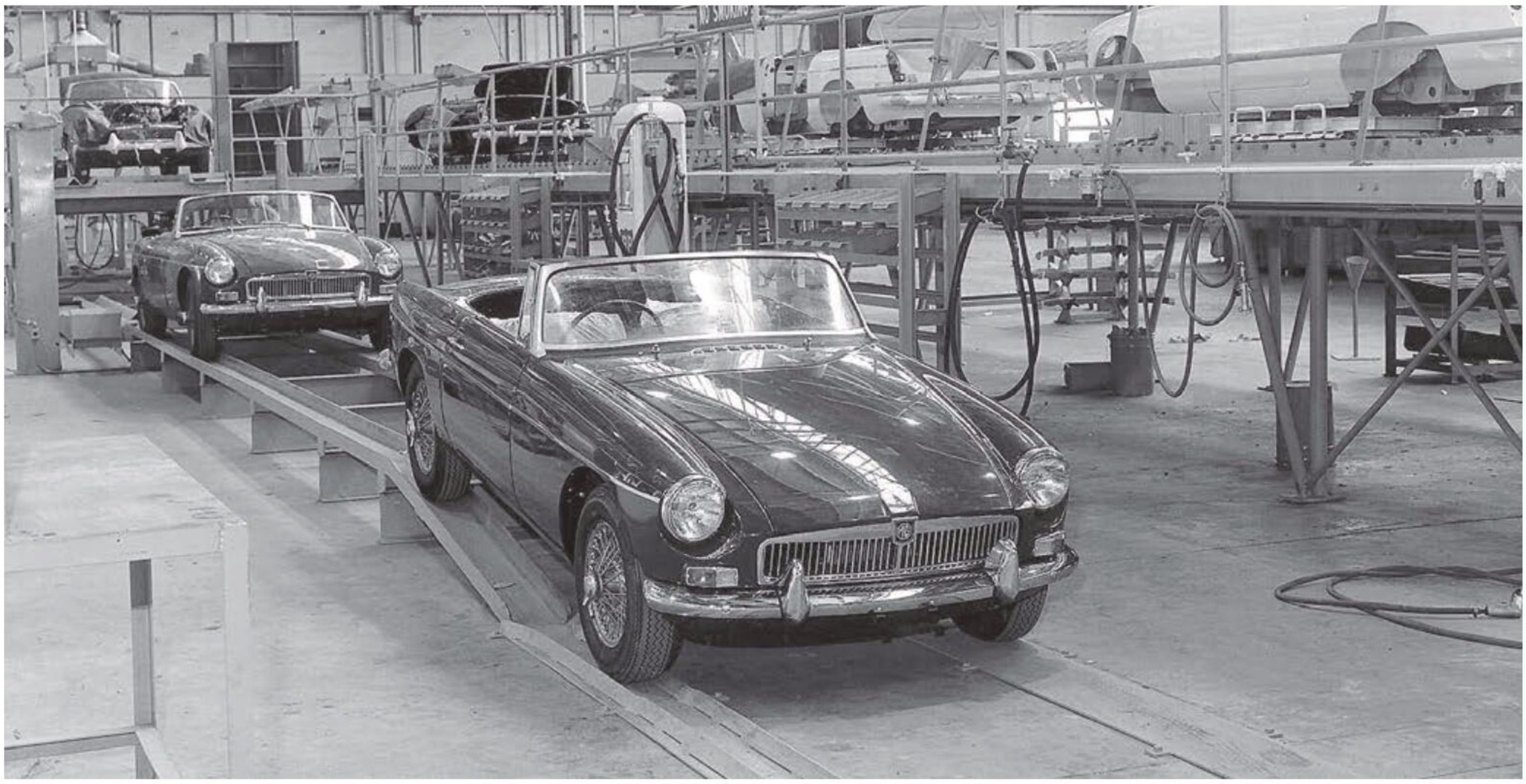
Another small detail that may be of interest was that on the Australian cars where the top of the door hinge pillar was welded to the scuttle, the resulting weld was lead-wiped to smooth it out. This was not done on the UK cars, and it is interesting that the Aussies would go to the trouble.

There were a couple of other places where lead-wiping was used, but this was kept to a minimum, according to Sydney-based MGA restorer Greg Keenan on the US-based mgaguru.com website. '*Reports of Australian built MGAs having copious amounts of lead added are not correct*,' Keenan wrote. '*The other place was where the door met the rear guard. This was done for two reasons, to improve the gap between the door and the guard or bring the guard up to the level of the door. Also, the cars were lead wiped under the rear corner cockpit rail.*'

Pedr Davis reported in *Sports Car World* that every MGA was road tested after assembly, for up to 20 minutes, along a four-mile route around the Enfield site on public roads, '*which rolls over a wide range of road surfaces. During the run the tester will re-set the ignition to its optimum point and then check the brakes, steering, suspension, engine tune, gearbox, axle and accessory equipment.*' It would stand to reason, then, that all Enfield-assembled cars should have come with at least four delivery miles on the clock.

By 1961, sales of the MGA in Australia were slowing considerably and stocks of CKD packs at Enfield were building up. The 1600 MkII was released in the UK in March 1961, with the first CKD packs for Australia shipped on 5th April. With the normal two-month voyage at sea, the cars should have been assembled by July at the latest. However, due to excess stocks of the 1600, the first 1600 MkII was not assembled here until February 1962. Production of the MGA in Australia ceased in July or August 1962, with only 148 of the 1600 MkII made locally. In all, some 2040 MGA roadsters had come through the Enfield plant.

In April 1963, assembly of the MGB began at Enfield. This delay could partly be attributed to running out unsold stock of the MGA, and partly to the normal time required to set up and test production for the new model.



The first completed MGBs at Victoria Park come off the line in about August 1968. Note the incorrect position of the indicators, being outboard of the sidelights rather than on the inside.

Building the MGA in Australia

Australia was an important export market for MG, but with the US dominating post-war exports and incentives from the Australian government to increase local content, BMC Australia's best option to keep the MG brand competitive was for local assembly.

The history of the MGB in the UK is well documented. Not so well recorded is the history of the MGB in Australia. Many car makers, Austin and Nuffield included, began assembling complete cars in Australia after WW2, to take advantage of tax concessions for local production. By the time the MGA was launched in the UK in 1955, the 43-acre BMC assembly plant at Victoria Park still only consisted of one CKD assembly building, the Unit Factory (for assembling engines, gearboxes, axles etc) and a handful of smaller administrative buildings.

The CKD building was assembling Series II Morris Minors in two- and four-door saloons and convertible, Traveller, utility and van versions, Series II Morris Oxford and the short-lived Morris Isis. There were also around a dozen models of Morris and Austin commercial vehicles, from small vans to 7-ton trucks, being assembled in the CKD factory.

In short, space was limited and it simply wasn't practical to take on another model at the time, so assembly of the MGA was contracted out to Pressed Metal Corporation (PMC) in Enfield, about 14km to the West of Victoria Park. (See our story in the September 2018 issue for full details of that MGA assembly.)

Enfield Assembly

With the introduction of the MGB in 1962, it was a natural progression that it would be assembled at Pressed Metal. At this time, Mini production was in full swing in the CKD assembly building at Victoria Park and commercial vehicles were still also being assembled there. Meanwhile, production of Austin Freeway saloons and station wagons, Wolseley 24/80s and Morris Major Elites was taking place in the new Car Assembly Building (CAB1), which had been completed in 1957. Tractors were also being assembled, from Semi-Knocked Down packs, in the company garage.

So MGB assembly began at Enfield in April 1963, under similar circumstances to the MGA. It is likely that the decision to assemble the MGB in Australia was made very early in UK production, or possibly beforehand, but there are a number of reasons why it took almost a year for local production to get under way. Production in the UK began in May 1962, and of the first 500 built only two were righthand drive. The vast majority of early production was for the US market: 3978 (88%) of the 4518 built in 1962. Secondly, there was always a time lag of at least a couple

A publicity photo taken in mid-1963 at a Sydney Travelodge motel.

of months between CKD packs being shipped from the UK and arriving in Australia, which translated into a delay of up to four months between any production change in the UK and the same change taking place in Australia.

Thirdly, stocks of MGAs at Enfield (usually a full month's production on hand at any time) and on the water from the UK were sufficient for MGA assembly to continue until early 1963. Time was also required for setting up the assembly jigs and equipment and generally fitting out the factory for the change from the MGA, which had a chassis, to the monocoque MGB.

Although the Unit Factory at Victoria Park had state-of-the-art transfer machines for working on B-series engines, all engines for the MGB came in as Completely Built Up (CBU). This continued on from the MGA 1600 engines being imported CBU, while A-series engines for the Mini also came in CBU at this time.

Initially, virtually everything came in the CKD packs from the UK, but local input quickly grew. Even from the beginning, though, items such as batteries and tyres were locally sourced. Interior trim was also locally made at Enfield from very early on, perhaps even from the beginning of production. Again, this followed on from practice with the MGA.

In order to reduce costs, assembly was standardized as much as possible and some items that were options in the UK were either not offered or were standard on Australian cars. For example, all locally-assembled MGBs came with wire wheels, usually painted grey but with chrome as an option. All Australian MGBs also included an oil-cooler, mounted ahead of the radiator, and a front anti-roll bar. The fold-down hood was not offered on Aussie Bs until 1970, with all earlier cars receiving the pack-away hood, and only in black.

Two views inside CAB3, showing the MGBs being assembled and the racks and trays of components filling every spare inch of available space.

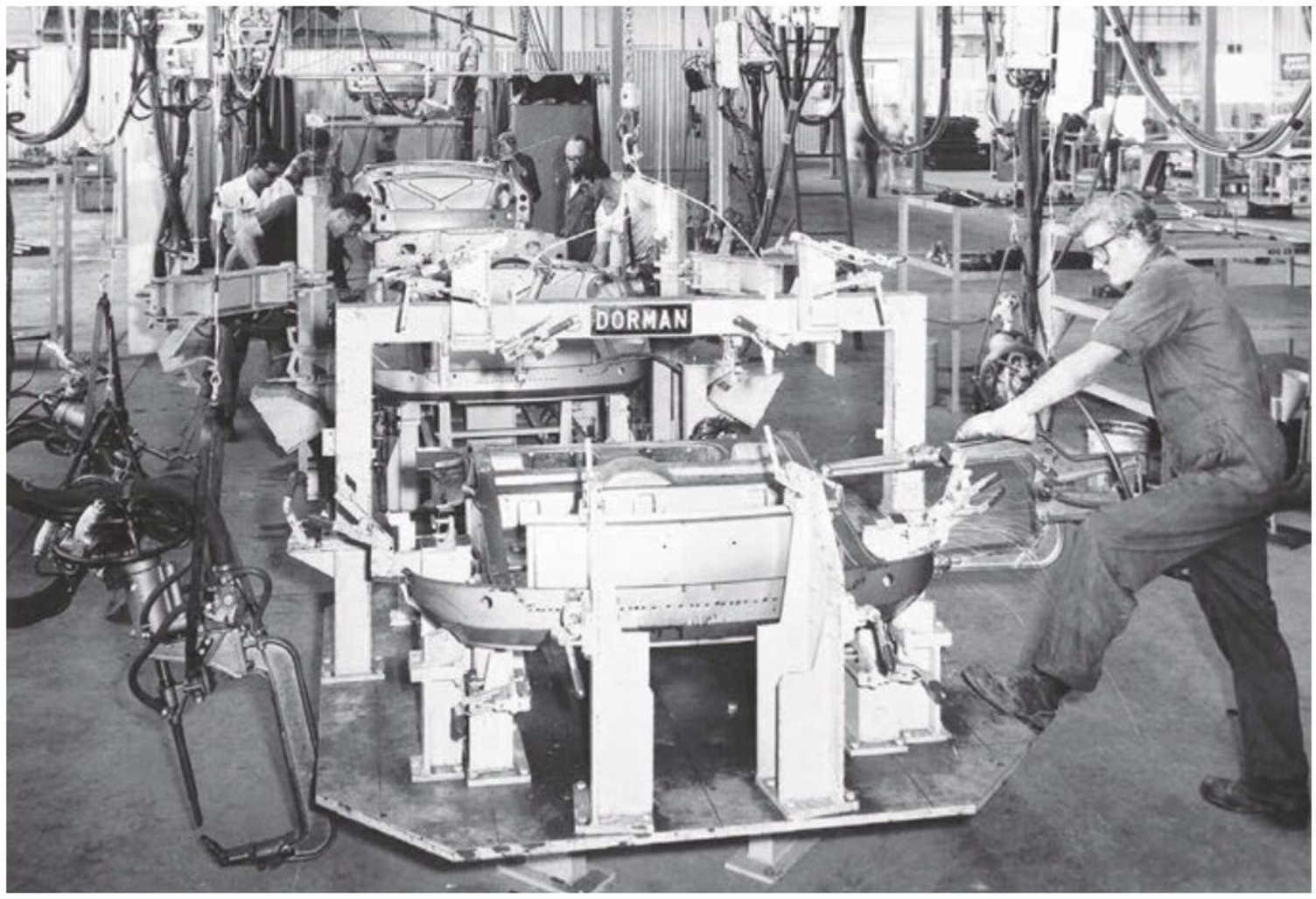
ID confusion

A couple of interesting problems regarding identification arose when assembly began, which have latterly served to cause considerable confusion to historians and restorers. The first relates to the car identification numbers. While the MGA 1500 used the previous Nuffield numbering system, the 1600 introduced a new BMC format, with a letter Y at the start to denote Australian production. Thus the MGA 1600 in the UK was type GHN and in Australia should have been YGHN. The 1600 MkII was therefore GHN2 and in Australia should have been YGHN2. But at BMC Australia, they considered the MGA 1600 to be the second version of the MGA so gave it the prefix YGHN2, while the 1600 MkII became, logically, YGHN3. However, with the release of the MGB, GHN3, BMCA was instructed to bring their numbering in line with the UK, so the Australian-assembled MGB was also YGHN3.

The other problem that occurred is that many of the early MGBs assembled locally were fitted with ID plates identifying the manufacturer as *Nuffield (Australia) Pty Ltd, Zetland (Victoria Park)*, and also carried the

MGs DOWN UNDER

Morris Motors emblem. How or why this happened is a complete mystery and it appears there were well over 100 cars affected. Car numbers started at 501 and car 614 has the Nuffield plate, while car number 689 has the BMC plate. It has been suggested that Pressed Metal may have had Nuffield plates left over from production of MGA or earlier model cars assembled in the factory and that a shortage of the correct plates supplied from Victoria Park meant the old plates were fitted to early MGBs.



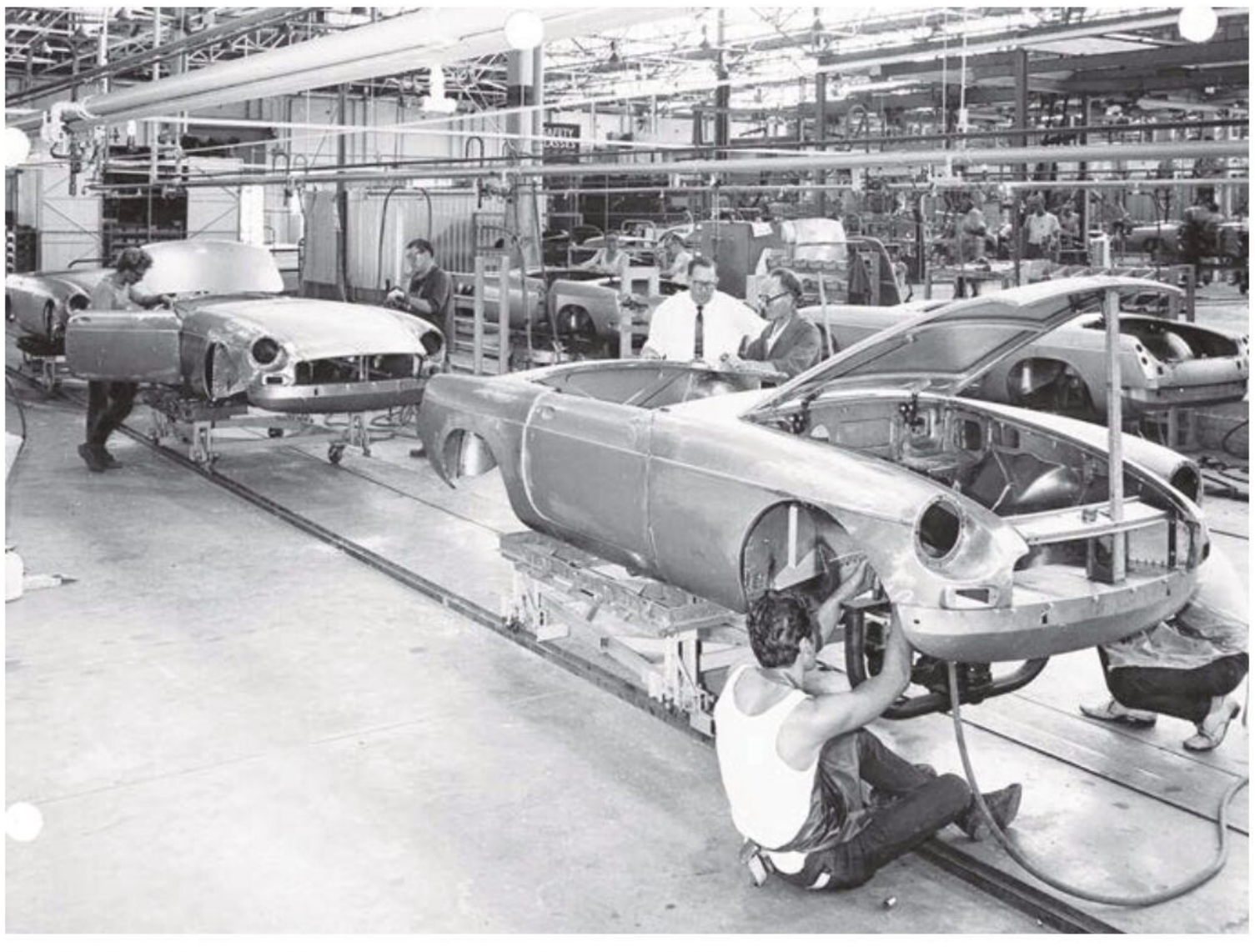
The infamous Dorman assembly jigs, which required significant modification when it was found that they hadn't been designed to allow the removal of completed assemblies.

Delayed Changes

It terms of specification, because the major components were supplied from the UK, Aussie MGBs received the same production body, chassis and mechanical changes as the UK cars, though some months behind because of the same delays that affected the MGA and all CKD imports. For example, Positive Crankcase Ventilation was introduced in the UK in February 1964, but this change, identified by the engine prefix changing from 18G to 18GA, did not take place in Australia until August. Similarly, the five-bearing engine arrived in the UK in October 1964 and in Australia from about March 1965.

Where UK MGBs had a variety of interior colour options, in Australia the choice was originally limited to black with contrasting white piping on the seats and door cards, or red with white piping. By late 1964 the red option consisted only of the seats in an otherwise all-black interior, and the following year the contrasting piping was deleted. By 1966 only black seats were available.

Although overdrive was available in British-built MGBs from early in 1963, this feature was not offered in Aussie cars until June 1967 for the last 200 or so MkIs. These cars are often called Mk1½ cars, because of the number of MkII improvements that were included from late 1967: radial tyres, a stronger anti-roll bar, reversing lights, laminated windscreen, headlamp flasher and a larger oil cooler.



Bodies in white nearing completion prior to painting.

A New Home

Big changes were in the wind for 1968 as BMCA, which had taken a 30% stake in 1958, bought Pressed Metal in its entirety. Prior to this, though, it had been decided to move MGB assembly to Victoria Park. To facilitate this change, a new Parts & Accessories division had been built in the outer Western suburb of Moorebank, and the former P&A building at Victoria Park converted to become Car Assembly Building 3 in late 1967 (CAB2 being the former CKD plant which from April 1964 assembled the locally-pressed Mini and Moke bodies). A new container receiving and

Above left: Bodies return from the paint shop, mounted on skuks. Above right: An MGB body is lowered onto its suspension units. These were assembled off-line in another part of the same building.

storage building was also completed in 1968. MGB assembly was moved to the Victoria Park factory in February, with just a handful of cars built to 'productionise' the line – although full production did not get under way until about August due to three problems that arose with these initial cars. The first was a major embarrassment, as John Lindsay, formerly in Quality Control in CAB3, revealed.

'When they transferred MGB from Enfield, for some reason they (BMC) didn't buy the jigs. I think they must have thought we'd build a better MGB, so we'll build our own jigs,' he said. 'It was Dorman, the people who built spot-weld guns, who were given the task of building these jigs, and they looked beautiful. So we set up all the sub assemblies into it, made sure everything fit. The big day came when we actually welded the first floor panel together and so on, and then it struck us that although it fitted in the jigs, no-one had thought about getting a complete assembly out, because no-one had welded anything together. We had to dismantle the jigs to get the floorpan out!'

On top of this, the first 12 or so cars assembled had to have their door openings changed and the cars sent back through the paint shop again, as detailed by Roger Sharpe on www.mgbsmadeinaustralia.org. 'Feeling they could improve on the doors being produced in the UK, Victoria Park workers set about creating their own templates in order to improve the fitting of the doors, reducing the size of the gaps. The doors were a much improved fit – except, when the vehicle was lowered to the ground under its own weight, the slight movement this caused was enough to render the doors unopenable!'

The third mistake was less serious, but merely adds to the confusion for historians and restorers of early cars assembled at Victoria Park, with the indicator/parker lights fitted the wrong way around – that is with the indicators on the outside of the sidelights. This was rectified by the time the new bodyshells, with these lights placed closer to the grille, started arriving from the UK in 1969 and it is not known how many cars were affected.

Victoria Park MGBs benefitted from the plant's Rotodip rust prevention and pre-treatment facility – see facing page for details. Following assembly of the body-in-white in CAB3, the bodies, mounted on temporary wheeled chassis (or skuks) were manually taken over to CAB1 and put through the Rotodip for anti-rust treatment and priming, then went through the Paint Shop where stoving enamel was sprayed and baked, before being returned to CAB3 for final assembly.

Meanwhile the engines, still received CBU, were all hot-run tested for about half an hour, undergoing

MGB Leading Hand David Goodsir with a freshly completed B, circa 1971.

MGs DOWN UNDER

A publicity shot for the MkII MGB. It was fortunate that the car benefitted from the comprehensive Rotodip protection if it was to be parked on the beach!

29 checks and adjustments, in the Unit Factory. This was facilitated by an expansion that had taken place in 1964 to coincide with full production of the Mini. According to former MGB Leading Hand David Goodsir, suspension assemblies were now built up in an off-line area of CAB3 before moving onto the main assembly line to be united with the bodies.

Mike McCarthy described the assembly process in *Sports Car World* magazine's October 1968 issue. 'Passing along the initial stages of the assembly line, each G is accompanied by its own multi-shelved bin containing much of the paraphernalia that goes into a car. As it is moved successively through each of the 14 stations on the assembly line it becomes more complete. In practice it travels an S-shaped route. Along the first leg most of the minor items (head and tail lights, dash panel, wiring loom, hydraulics, windows) are fitted. Moving across to second leg, the shell is lowered onto its complete front and rear suspensions, after which it receives the engine/transmission and remainder of its running gear. By the time it reaches the end of this track the headlights have been aligned, the suspension geometry adjusted and the engine started. The piles of formerly inanimate parts have now given birth to a mobile machine that is driven the short hop to the third leg. Here the car is driven on a set of rollers to check that everything in the drivetrain is operating according to plan. A very thorough final inspection follows before the car is allowed out the door to be tested on a wavy and corrugated strip that is designed to reveal any rattles or other loosenesses that may be present. When everything checks out satisfactorily the MG is taken to the car park to await delivery to a dealer and then to its buyer.'

Enter The MkII

With assembly at Victoria Park, local content in the MGB was 45% on value,

The mock funeral on 6 November 1972 attracted print, TV and radio media, while staff wore black armbands.

Leyland Australia management with the last Aussie MGB and its 'tombstone.' Note that the MG letters are in a hexagon, not an octagon.

but major changes still followed on from UK changes. The MkII, YGHN4, which included a larger transmission tunnel to accommodate a different overdrive, was introduced with the start of production at Victoria Park in late 1968, with the official launch in February 1969 – a full 14 months after the UK. Part of this delay was due to the problems with starting production, while part of it was due to all cars at Enfield having MkI bodies, evidence that surplus MkI bodies were shipped to the former colonies after MkII production had begun in the UK.

It seems that some MkI (YGHN3) bodies were welded together, painted and partly assembled at Enfield before production changed over, and were completed at Victoria Park. It also appears that MkII cars with overdrive continued their numbers on, but with a change in prefix from YGHN4 to YGHN5. This was contrary to the normal Australian practice of reverting to number 501 for the start of any new model designation. For example, the non-overdrive MKII was designated YGHN6 and reverted to car number 501. Car numbers in the UK were continuous, through all model designation changes.

Other changes with the MkII included recessed interior door handles, as used on the 1800 (ADO17) saloons and shared with all Australian Leyland cars of the period, anti-burst door locks, softer rear suspension, a negative-earth alternator (negative-earth dynamos having been introduced earlier), a heater fitted as standard and many minor changes to the engine. Because of the larger transmission tunnel, MkII MGBs were also available with automatic transmission (YGHN7) using the Borg Warner Type 35, with some 228 automatic MGBs assembled in Australia.

Although there was no external identification of the MkII on UK cars, it was thought important enough in Australia, and to help identify the Victoria Park-assembled cars, that a MkII badge was fitted just below the boot lid on the left-hand side. Overdrive or Automatic badges were also included, fitted to the bootlid just above the release button/lock. The MkII and Automatic badges were shared with the Austin 1800 MkII of the same period, but the Overdrive badge was unique to the Australian MGB.

It was in mid-1969 that the company name changed to British Leyland Motor Corporation (Australia) and the G designation in the number prefixes was dropped. Also around this time, ID plates were discontinued. New Australian Design Rules were introduced from 1 January 1970 and ADR compliance plates were fitted to cars sold from this date (assembled from December 1969).

The MGB was face-lifted in 1970, YHN9 for manual and YHN10 for automatic, but often referred to unofficially as the MGBL (for Leyland), with a black recessed grille, fold-down hood (finally), smaller steering wheel, changes to some of the badges, the bonnet changed from aluminium to steel and overdrive becoming standard on manual cars. Then 1971 brought squared-off tail lights, rubber-faced bumper over-riders and self-propping boot and bonnet struts.

The Axe Falls

While the MGB had maintained around 1000 sales per year in Australia since 1965, a drop of nearly 20% in 1971 combined with proposed changes to the local content rules – requiring 85% local content to gain the tax benefits – saw the end of local assembly on 6 November 1972. The occasion was marked with a mock funeral for the last car off the line, attended by media and the NSW Government Minister J. L. Waddy. Leyland Australia's Sales Director, John Kay, was quoted in that month's *Leyland Parts News* saying: 'It's a tremendous pity that the B cannot survive. But we have to be hard headed. Regulations require 85 per cent local content after 1972. The present sale potential of specialist cars like the MGB is too low to make production feasible.'

Australian MGB enthusiast and historian Tom Aczel wrote of the occasion recently, saying: 'Perhaps symbolic of the lack of interest in the MG brand's tradition and history held by its new owners (British Leyland), the letters 'MG' in the headstone at the 'funeral' were surrounded by a hexagon rather than the traditional octagon.'

The MGB had been assembled in two factories over nearly ten years, with 9085 completed (though this figure is disputed in some sources). At its height it held 50% of the Australian sportscar market.

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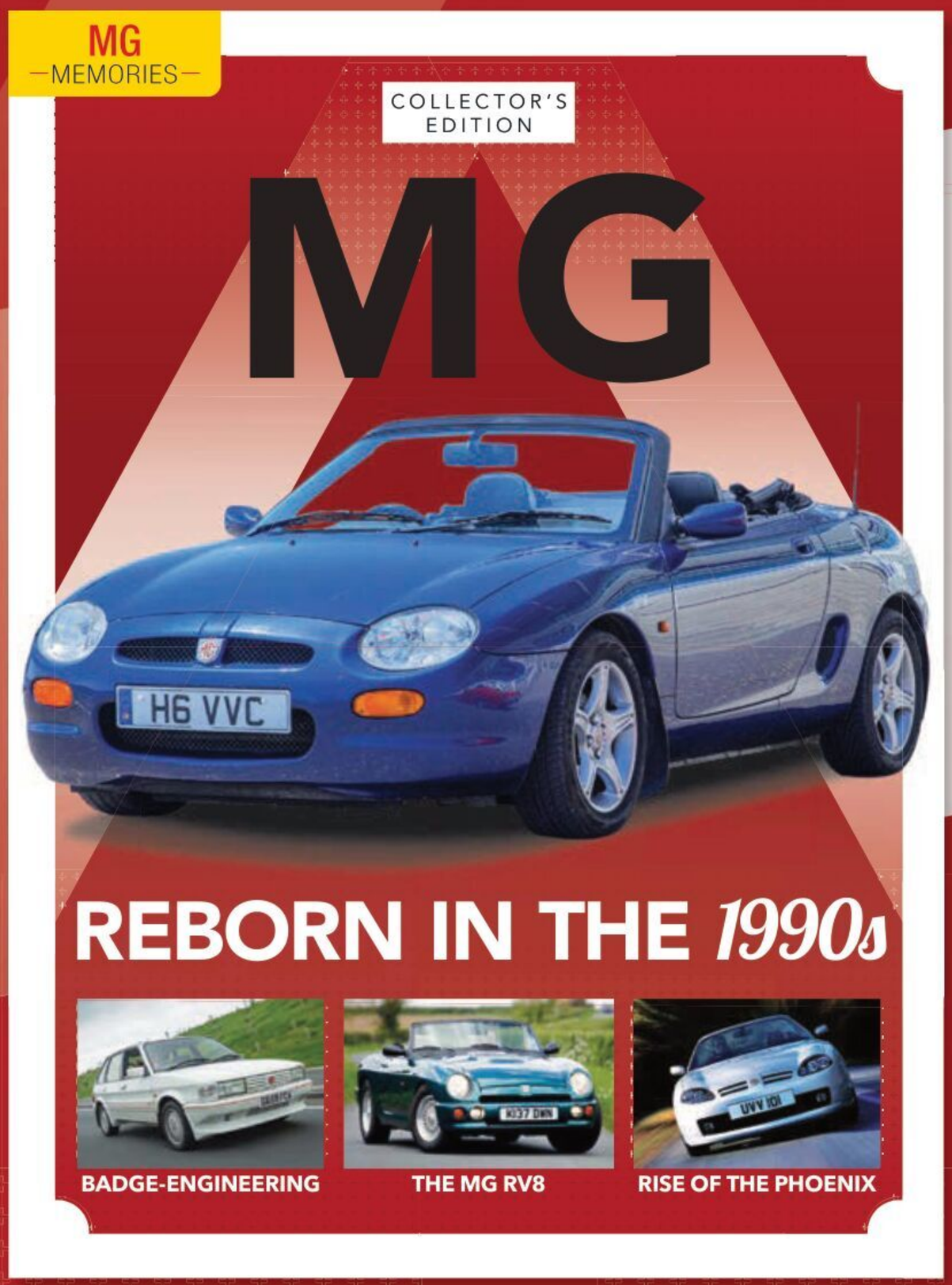

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MG AND LONGBRIDGE

MGF and TF bodies were built by Stadco, through a very novel contract where that company shared the development costs of the body for a return on the sales of the cars, rather than being paid up front by Rover. Bodies were built in Coventry before being shipped to Longbridge.

House share

Words: Ian Pogson

Where a vehicle is made seems to be relevant to many people, although it can be on many different continents and locations around those land-masses. So it appears to be with MG, where the cars have originated in Oxford and then production made its way to Abingdon, viewed by many enthusiasts as the 'home' of 'real' MG's. Many people take a different view, however and feel that the 'DNA' injected into a vehicle or design is the real essence of that machine. This means people and design intent, the emotion, the whys and wherefores of design, it's principles and philosophies.

The last Abingdon-built MG left the factory in 1979 and as Chris Harvey1 wrote of the closure in his excellent book "The MG A, B & C" – "What a way to repay the dedicated workforce at one of British Leyland's happiest, most loyal and most efficient factories. And then to suggest that the all-hallowed MG octagon badge might appear on a British version of a Japanese saloon. No wonder the MG enthusiasts howled with rage...."

Well, that octagonal badge hung around for a while with BL wondering what to do with it and so it found a home on the front of Longbridge and again Cowley products. The 1982 MG Metro, Maestro and Montego were thus recipients. The plant at Longbridge is the key focus of this chapter, but it has to be mentioned that Canley in Coventry, a hub of car manufacturing for decades, had a big hand in the future of MG. For it was in this ex-Triumph cars factory, having built its last Triumph Spitfire in August 1980, that Engineers, Technicians, Clay Modellers and others engineered, developed and built prototypes, models and parts of cars. The MG E-XE had been shown at the Frankfurt Show in 1985 and so with the volume cars mentioned previously and such show cars, the MG name was kept alive.

With the purchase of a Mazda MX-5 in 1989 from its first launch

MG AND LONGBRIDGE

Sharing the production lines with Rover.

Dick Evans of British Aerospace and BMW's Bernd Pischetsrieder shaked on the £800m deal which saw the Bavarian firm acquire Rover.

in the US, the team at Canley knew that they had to re-create an MG two-seater sports car that would have the instant appeal of the MX-5, but with the long MG heritage. Other projects, politics and a severe shortage of capital meant that it was not until 1995 that the MGF finally appeared. It was to be built at Longbridge as part of that factory's "Portfolio" set of products. Very few companies have ever mounted such a set of co-incident vehicle launches as was the case here, with eleven major programmes debuting across 1994-1995. This was a massive undertaking, but one to which the teams on the south edge of Birmingham rose to meet.

Longbridge in particular and Austin Rover was incidentally chosen by Honda to be its partner as it entered European manufacture and volume sales, not the other way round. Since its creation out of the ex-White and Pike tin printing works in 1905, Herbert (later Lord) Austin had been pushing the boundaries of automotive technology and manufacture. His first car, launched in 1906 was not quite the first British car – that honour for four wheels, pneumatic tyres and a petrol engine went to the genius that was

MG AND LONGBRIDGE

A late model MG ZT makes its way along the line.

MG AND LONGBRIDGE

Top: MGF shells were painted and stored in the upper area of CAB1 (Car Assembly Building 1) before being lowered onto the start of the first production line. The use of space in CAB1 was a work of art with intertwining conveyers as well as storage.

Dr. Frederick Lanchester and his brothers Frank and George in 1895, but again in Birmingham.

Longbridge, on the edge of the city and bounded by the 135 acres of Cofton Park has almost been obliterated as these words are being written, but Austin grew the skills and family atmosphere of a huge industrial concern. At its height, the factory employed 25,000 people, but in the mid-nineties, this had shrunk somewhat. Nonetheless, the plant had its own full medical facilities, including a dentist and physiotherapy department, the latter with useful feedback from the factory ergonomist regarding sections of the plant that regularly sent patients and therefore some investigation was required into the processes. It made economic sense to avoid workers leaving site for appointments and to look after its employees. Especially in pre-NHS days, this was more than just a welfare issue.

The factory had many unofficial ‘shops’ and ‘services’ within its

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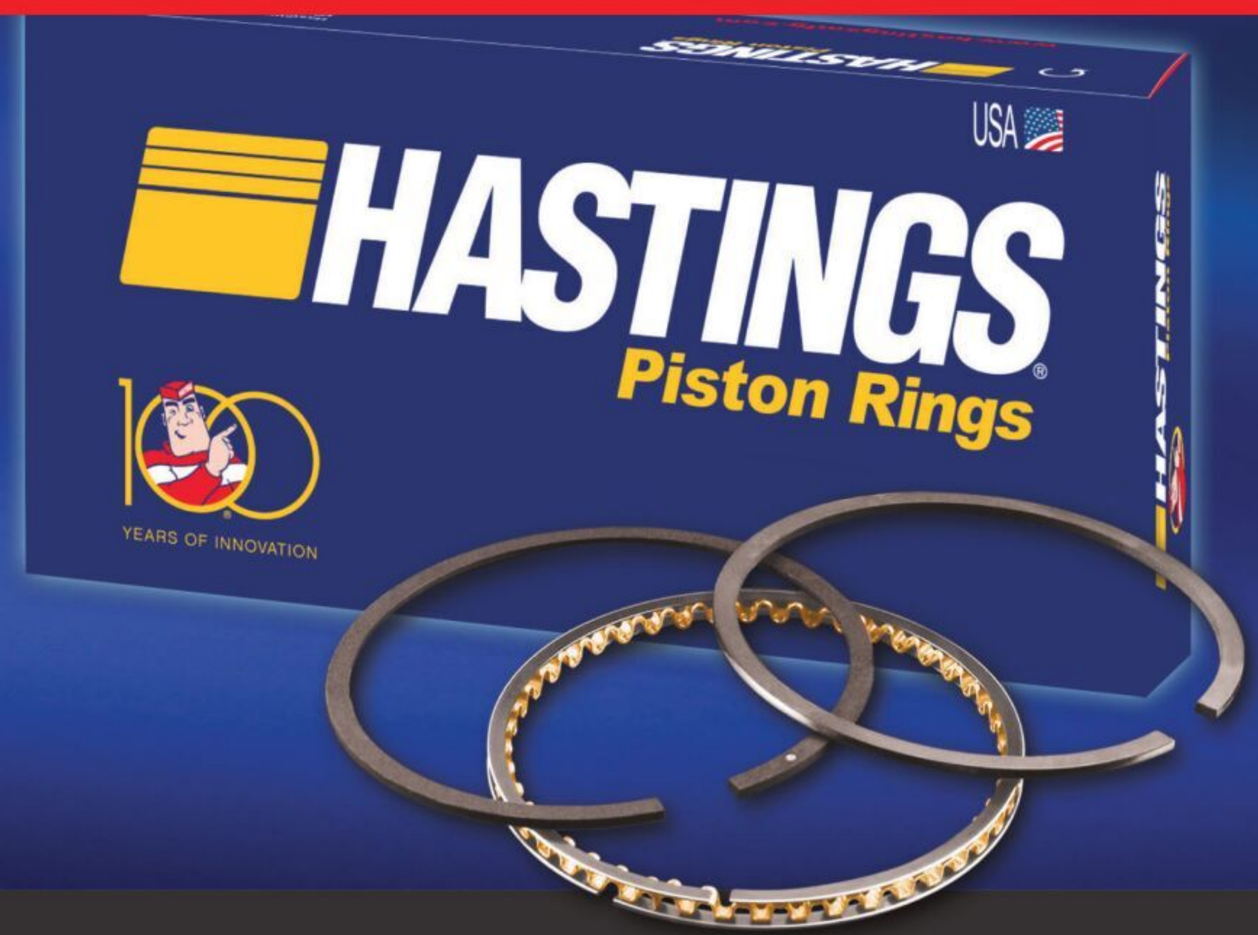

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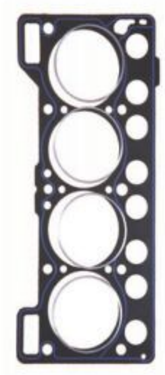

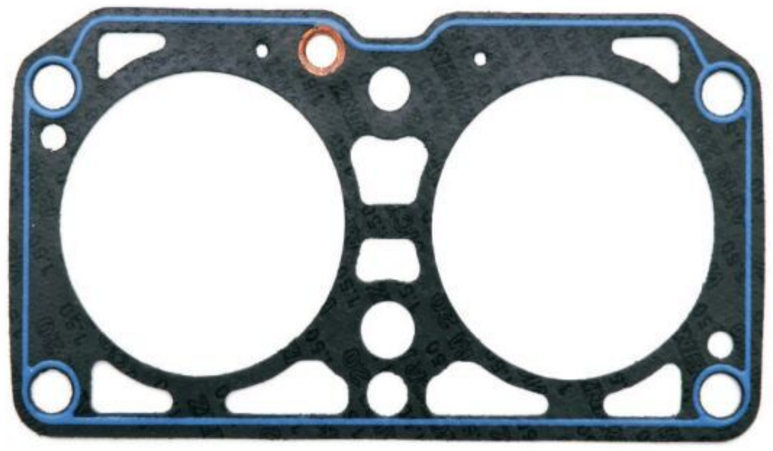

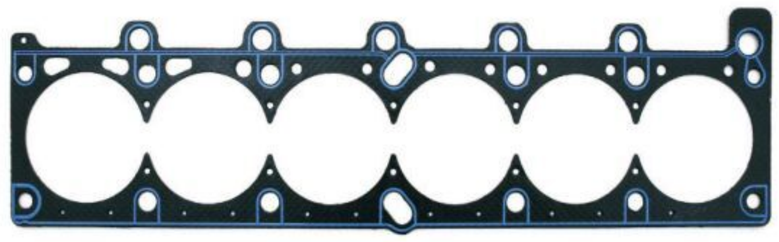

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MG AND LONGBRIDGE

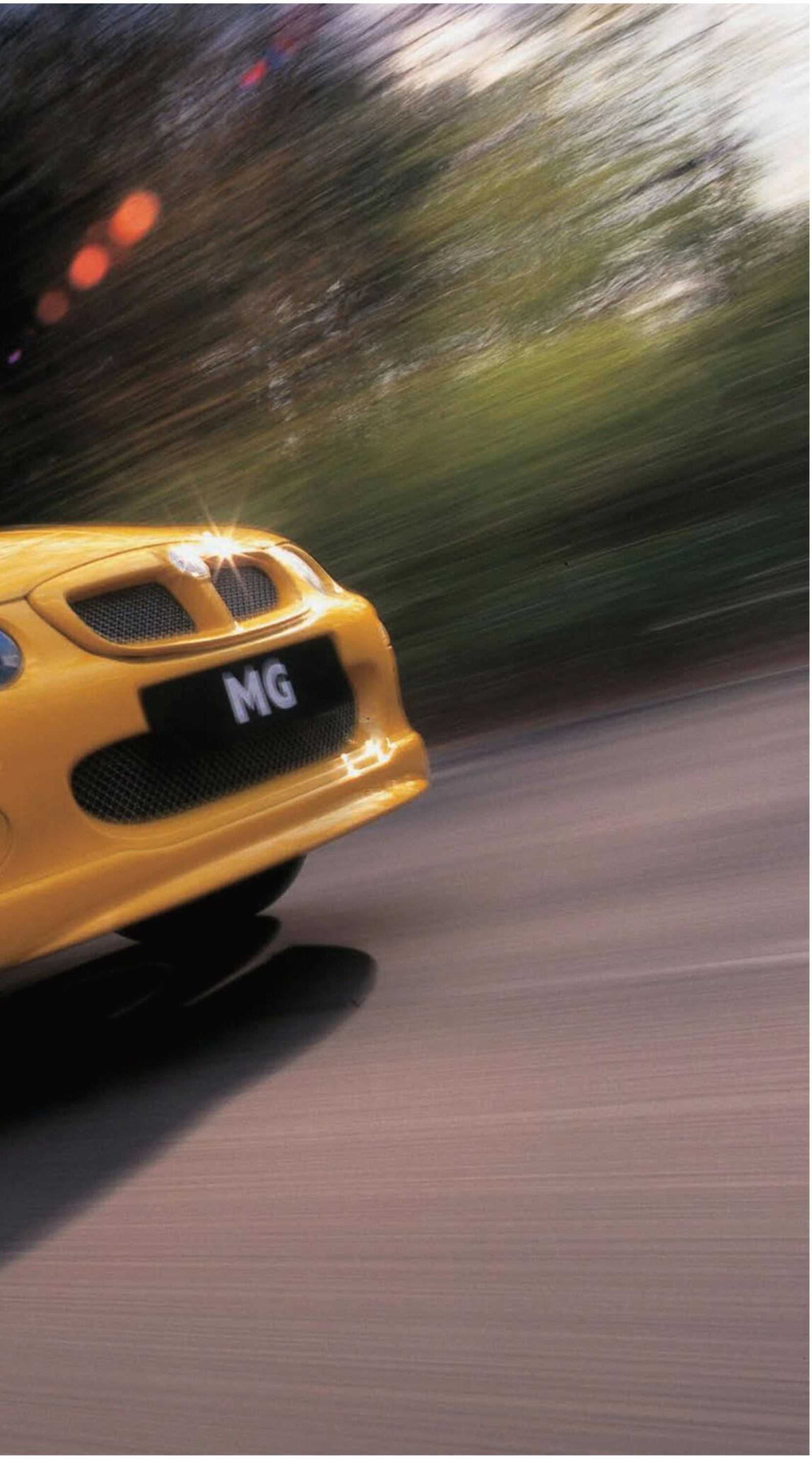
walls and a feeling of being part of something really huge, yet personal, prevailed. Once Canley was emptied in 1991/92 prior to its demolition under BAe ownership, Longbridge became the real focus for MG and Rover products. The MGRV8 was a notable exception, the circa 2,000 cars being made in a Low Volume Assembly facility at Cowley from August 1992 until December 1995, thus paving the way for the launch of the MGF at Longbridge in summer 1995.

Longbridge used to boast on huge hoardings outside the plant that it was "The largest self-contained car factory in Britain". Nissan at Washington used to claim it was the most efficient car factory in Britain, but that was comparing apples with pears, as the Tyne and Wear facility did not have three foundries, machines and build its own transmissions and engines or host a huge non-production staff of Product Planners, Sales and Marketing teams, for example. Anything that needed to be made, could be or was made on site. For example, Austin at one time made its own machine tools. The ensuing years had meant more and more was outsourced to specialists, but even up to its closure in 2005 under MG Rover, it still made its own powertrains and still had one on-site foundry.

A veritable plethora of skills and talents existed at the plant and with the local colleges feeding in high quality apprentices, there was nothing that could not be attempted by the plant. With two huge paint shops and what was at one time the most robotised body plant in Europe, production was all under self-control. With its own railway locomotive fleet and even a station to bring workers in, the site was huge. Trains of body panels from presses in Swindon were shunted inside the vast West Works complex and car transporters left by road and rail across Europe. Enterprising apprentices would sometimes stow away in the rail wagons to raise money for charity by seeing who could manage the furthest distance from home in the charity week. Trains would leave with CKD (Completely Knocked Down) set of car parts to satellite plants as far

MG AND LONGBRIDGE

The petrol-engined ZR line-up was all K-Series powered: the ZR 105 with the 102 bhp 1.4-litre, the ZR120 with the 115 bhp 1.8-litre and the ZR 160 with a 159 bhp VVC version of the engine as used in the MGF Trophy.



away as Belgium and even Australia. It was the centre of a global operation.

As an employee working on a project, there were always the skills in house to support the work and create at least the first prototypes, or to give technical guidance on any aspect of the job. There was always someone "who knew". This did not preclude using outside specialists or one of the army of suppliers, such as the factory in Bargoed, South Wales which made pressings and fabrications, as well as Austin J40 pedal cars! This was a plant created by a philanthropic Austin to employ ex-miners who were too old unwell or unfit to work down the mines. As did many factories of its time, Longbridge consumed vast quantities of coal for its power and for firing the furnaces. Again demonstrating forward thinking, in a product-busy 1995, the plant set up a huge CHP (Combined Heat and Power) facility on site, to improve on factory emissions and save energy and money (about £1m p.a.).

There are many untold stories of the factory with the late, great John Baker (ex-factory photographer) having set up a superb website on which to record them. "Austin memories" is a huge repository of site information and history. With so many people working there, millions of memories and recollections exist, and some have been explored in books such as "Living in a Plant" by David Caffrey, an every-day tale of working in the vast West Works Body Plant in the 1990's. What these sources and any romp through social media will tell you is that the people really enjoyed working there; they enjoyed good pay, conditions and opportunities to better themselves inside and outside work. RLB, or Rover Learning Business, awarded grants to employees to learn new skills and develop themselves. Good courses were in plentiful supply and life-long friendships were cast. Many senior people, who went on to have long and illustrious careers, cite projects like the Rover 75 (originally built at Cowley, but sent up north as BMW carved up what they once had owned) as professional high-points.

Social media also brings up comments showing great respect for

those who have passed on, intense ribaldry for those passed and still living, of days spent with "great mates" and yet the actual news media always seemed to focus on the past black side, the strikes, lacklustre management and tension. A personal tale from this author would never feature on the 10 o'clock news: this is a short example of Trade Union forward thinking and commitment.

It had been decided that cost must be cut (again) as the bean-counters struggled to make such a huge and old plant make money. Whereas Honda, Toyota and Nissan had all been given huge sums of money to build new facilities on mainly flat ground, purpose built to make cars, Longbridge was a site that was a) built partially on a hill and b) had grown over the years. Yes, the Company had also been given government money, but some of the buildings were erected in the 19th century. The place had produced arms and equipment for two world wars. It was old and sprawling. So any "efficiency" figure of cars per man or cars per square foot was never favourable. So heads had to be cut.

The heads were in the logistics teams in the East Works Powertrain (engines and transmissions) plant. Logistics is the art and complex mathematics of ensuring that quality parts are available trackside to build product at the right time in the right quantity. To do this efficiently takes mathematical skills, but also product and area knowledge. The management were tasked to look outside to see if a specialist logistics company, such as the ones who trucked in our parts could do the job with fewer people at lower cost. This was (as many outsourcing projects) going to fall to the lowest bidder, who would pay people peanuts and later recoup their low tender by other means.

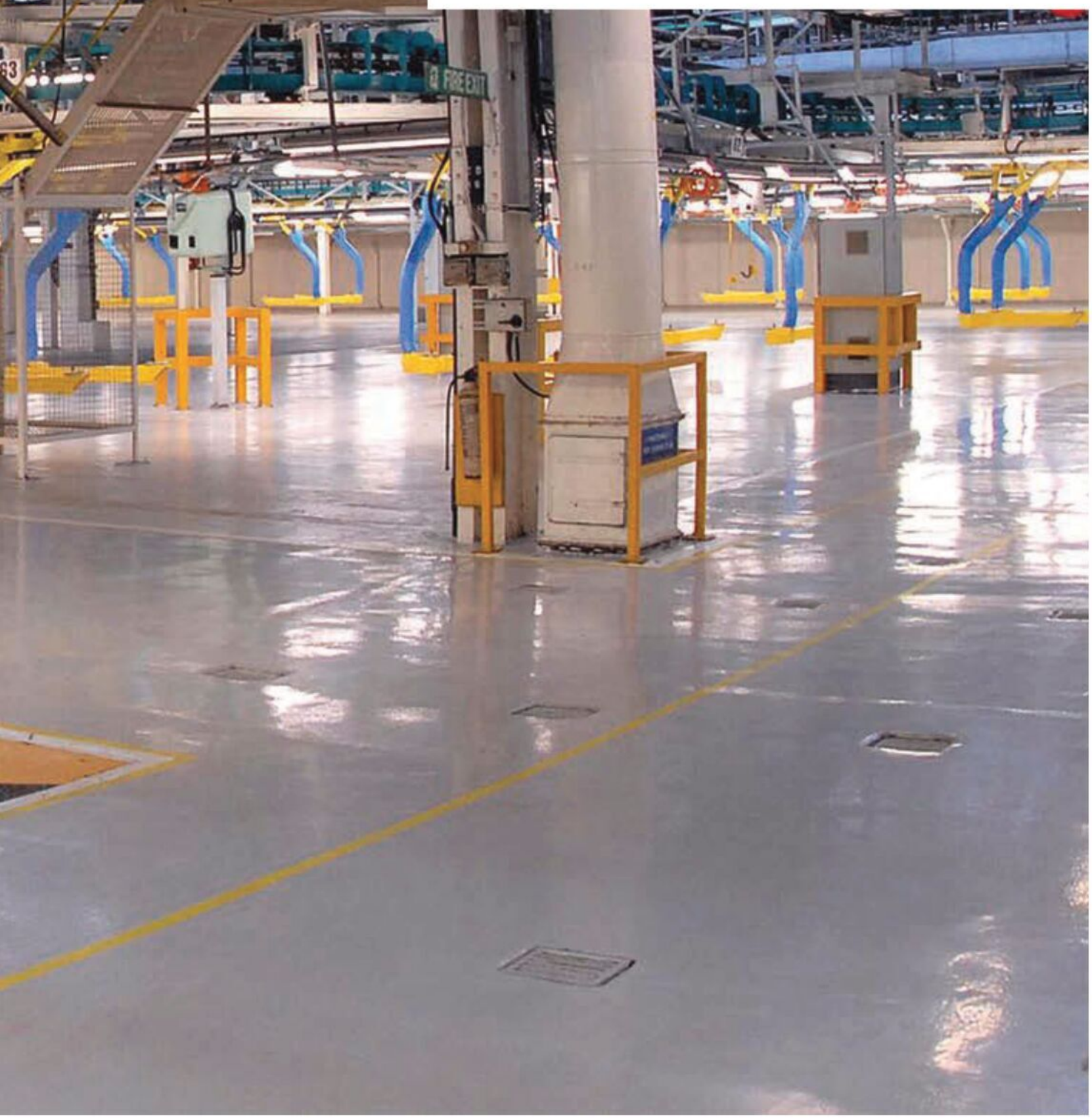
Our local trade union wondered what to do. They were concerned about the loss of heads, but also knew that the job was so much more than just dropping parts line-side. As mentioned, local knowledge made the job run smoothly. They asked how they might combat the threat and it was suggested that they submit a tender. Having never done this sort of work before the TU was at a loss, but when offered unofficial "help" from a logistics manager keen to maintain the smooth operation, they set to and created a tender of their own, "lost" the heads by internal transfer, win the contract and kept the job where it should have been, inside East Works, with the skills and knowledge intact. Smooth running ensued.

It was not, however all plain sailing. Not every employee was perfect, aligned to the end goals or as hard-working as the majority. Not every manager would win a single point in a child's version of "Mastermind". Some

It may use a Rover 45 as a base but with a sprinkling of MG's magic dust and the 2.5-litre KV6 engine, the ZS became something quite unique.


MG
ZS

MG AND LONGBRIDGE



arguably appalling product planning and marketing decisions (and expenditure) were made. If the place was as good as the foregoing suggests, perhaps it should still be in business. Other writers such as Lance Cole have examined the evidence in a very articulate manner. No motor manufacturer is perfect, as any glance at the product recalls database would show, or covered by such amusing tomes as "Crap Cars" by Top Gear.

This section has been a very brief look at a part of Longbridge history, but would be in no way complete without reference to the site's demise and resurrection as it was disposed of by BMW and purchased for £10 by the infamous "Phoenix Four". Other sources and the DTI report have documented some of the excesses and shenanigans of these individuals, so will not be covered here. What will be mentioned, albeit briefly, is the MG Rover period, which spawned the "Zeds"; MG ZR, ZS, ZT and ZT-T and the Rover V8. We shall draw a veil over the awful City Rover, declared as the "worst car ever to wear a Rover badge" by an experienced and articulate fellow Engineer.

In truth, the KV6 2.5L engine had been shoe-horned into the Rover 45

MG AND LONGBRIDGE

during BMW's tenure as a "skunk" project by the supremely talented methods build team and did emerge as a 2.0L main-line product, but once such a team were given the chance to create something even more radical for this and each of the models, fun was starting to be created. Indeed, the V6 ZS is still a fine-handling car with decent performance, its "coffee-table" spoiler and side "gills" giving off the right messages of potency. During the MG Rover period and especially around the launch of the Zeds, there was considerable excitement around the site; we were on our own again, no interference from another owner like BAe or BMW. Anything seemed possible and a "can-do" attitude prevailed. Many employees would later cite these as some of the best times we had in those five years.

Tragically the search for a new partner failed to find one and the Chinese connection seemed to be just empty promises, flowers and expensive meals for the various protagonists. Vast sums were expended on the vital-for-survival NMC (new medium car) to replace the aging 45 and stem the flow of licence fees to Honda, who were allegedly snubbed by BMW and the UK Government years before. These fees were swallowed up by a crass decision to outsource (that word again) NMC to a company who themselves went into receivership, taking our engineering with them. The team (that this author was part of) creating the commercially suicidal V8 products should arguably have been engaged on NMC. One view is that MG Rover, looking for a hairy sports car should have scooped up TVR, rather than buy a half-baked Italian beast in the shape of the Qvale Mangusta, that became the (again commercially suicidal) MG SV-R. Working on these "halo" project was certainly fun, as was being asked in powertrain to create in record time a common-rail version of our then-current excellent L Series diesel engine, as all other avenues of buying one in had fallen by the wayside on cost/feasibility. Common-rail is a form of diesel fuel injection technology essential to meet tightening emissions regulations and improve performance. We made the engines in no time, installed them in test cars and then the end came in April 2005. Too late.

Some of us were in Shanghai when the end came and were informed by our wives ringing us up as the news broke in the UK first! Not a good time, but little did we know that a new beginning was to be in store for a few of us working for the new owners of the MG marque in China, but that is the next part of the story.

Working on pre-production MG6 models at MG Longbridge.

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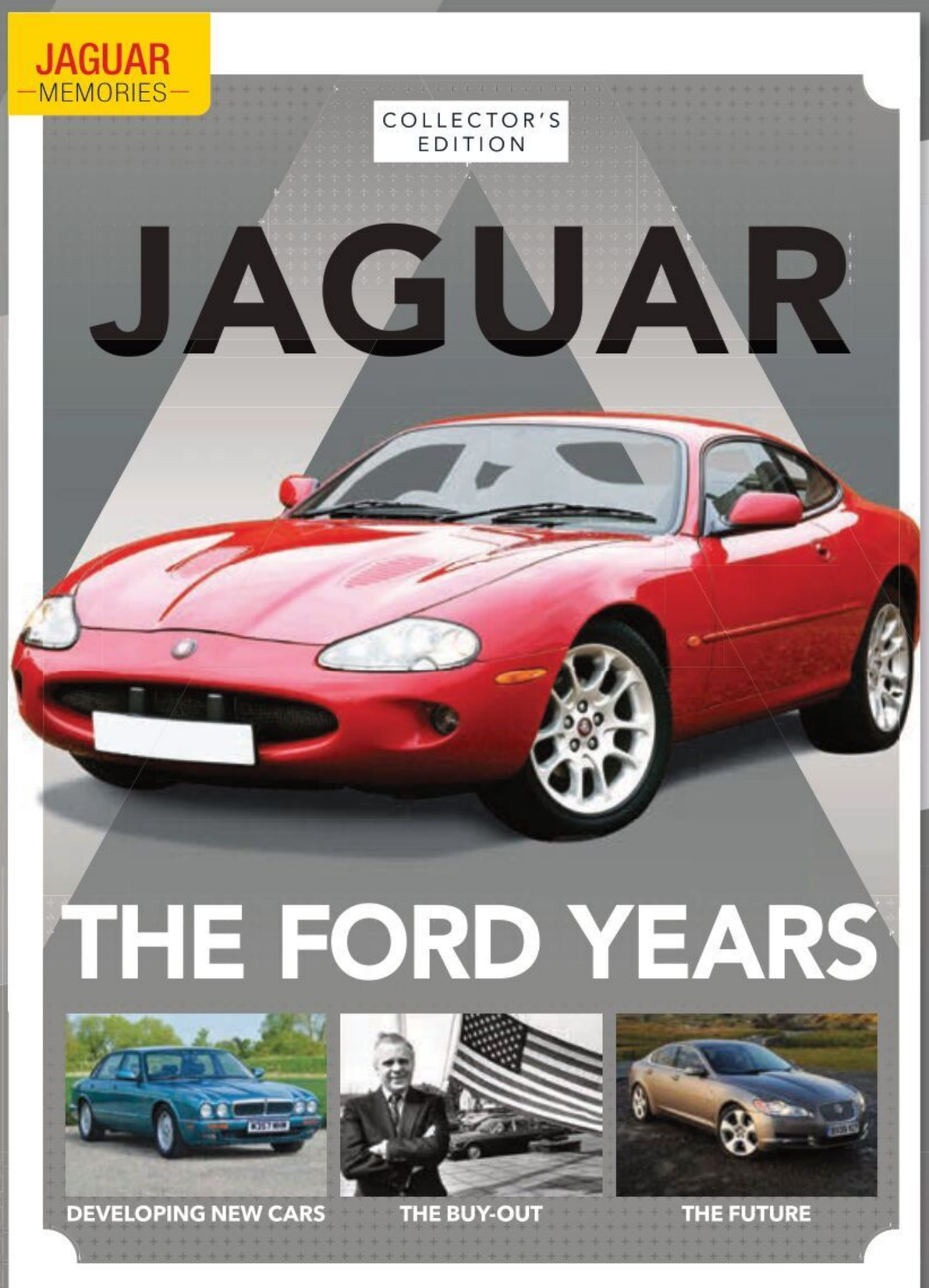

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Life at Longbridge

Longbridge 'lifer' Malcolm Oxborrow recalls what it was like to work at Longbridge, from starting as an apprentice in 1962 to taking early retirement in 1999.

Back in the January 2016 issue, we featured a purple MGF in Team Longbridge livery. That car now belongs to John Fry and is used for hillclimbs, but originally it was campaigned to good effect by Malcolm Oxborrow and Trevor Shakespeare in the British Tarmac Rally Championship. Indeed, Malcolm contributed to our earlier feature, explaining the background to the project and detailing the work that had been done to the car.

Malcolm also mentioned he'd started at Longbridge as an engineering apprentice straight from school. Given the importance of Longbridge to the MG story – both before and after the closure of Abingdon – we thought it would be interesting to visit Malcolm and find out more about life at Longbridge. We started by asking how he ended up there in the first place.

A: My parents pushed me in that direction, but I'd always had an interest in cars. I went for interviews in loads of small companies, but it was obvious all they really wanted was cheap labour. Then I got an interview at Longbridge. It took three days of testing before they offered me an apprenticeship in 1962.

For the first week they walked us round the factory – for a whole week because it was like a city, with 26,000 people working there. After that, they sent me on a block release to college for three months. Then when I came back, I got shuffled around the factory into different departments.

At the end of the year I was told my trade was going to be as a sheet metal worker. I was happy enough with that and spent a fair bit of my time in the Experimental Department. I can remember people like Alec Issigonis coming into the department for one thing or another. We had the 1100 just coming through when I started. The

Malcolm Oxborrow (left) spent his working life in Longbridge, and ended up campaigning an MGF with fellow-worker Trevor Shakespeare (right).

MGB was beginning at the same time over at Abingdon, but we built the engines for that at Longbridge.

Q: Do you remember what the first thing was that you made?
A: Not precisely, but I was helping make first-off body panels in Experimental, over wooden moulds. There was a pattern shop where they made up the pattern for the wing or door or whatever, then that would come into the tin shop and we'd make the panels to build the first bodyshell. This was basically drilled and pinned together using self-tapping screws, then welded up. We did all sorts, including lots that never went into production. Looking back it was quite a privilege, but of course when you are young you don't think about any of that.

Q: You didn't have to sign any official secrets act to work in Experimental?
A: No, nothing like that at all.

Q: Was it a close knit family?
A: Yes, it was. I still see some of the guys who worked there when I started, and I still go to the Austin Apprentices reunion – we had 150 or so there last December. It will die a natural death in years to come, but I didn't realise just how many apprentices were employed. Some went on to greater things and became captains of industry, others stayed at the shop floor level, which was all I ever wanted really.

Q: Issigonis was at the height of his power when you started. What sort of reputation did he have among the workers? He sometimes gets labelled as aloof or arrogant.
A: Oh he was very fondly regarded. He used to come through with the stylist Dick Burzi, and knew a lot of the guys by name. I don't think he was aloof. He was obviously a very clever guy, and those sort of people have an air about them, but I didn't see that side of him.

MALCOLM OXBORROW INTERVIEW

The Metro brought MG to Longbridge, but it was the Rover version that Malcolm campaigned with success in the Metro GTi Cup.

Q: How long was your apprenticeship?
A: The apprenticeship was five years. That may seem a long time, but back then you had a job for life. I never considered moving because I enjoyed what I did and I was reasonably well paid – what more could a man want?

Ultimately I got onto the production lines. When I finished my apprenticeship there was a new Quality Engineering Centre starting, and I became part of that. Basically we audited cars off the production line. We'd choose one, take it off the line and check everything was OK. With new models such as the Allegros, we ran the first of those on reliability trials for around 100,000 miles. I thought the Allegro was great – I've had three of my own.

Q: So why has it had such a bad press?
A: I honestly don't know. The E-series was a long-stroke engine and I didn't think it was smooth or nice to drive, but the A-series cars were fine. The Allegro suffered from water leaks in the early days (rainwater getting in, not coolant getting out) so we suggested certain modifications to cure that. We ran those cars for 24 hours, in shifts. That was a great job for me because I love driving, and I could go out into Wales on recces – we could take the cars pretty much wherever we wanted.

Q: Recces for your own rallying?
A: Yes, I always loved rallying. I started driving an A35 van, then a Wolseley 1500, followed by an 850 Mini. None of them were new cars, of course. I did OK, then I decided I wanted a Cooper S. I built one out of my apprentice wages. A dealership in Birmingham, Patrick Motors, they sold me a brand new MkII bodyshell for £119 delivered. I bought a lot of parts and refurbished a lot of others, and it was registered with a new number plate. When the authorities were checking it over, they pointed out that there was no chassis plate, so I made one up using my own initials – MRO 1. I sold that Mini when I needed to buy a house, but it is still going. It belongs to a doctor down London way, and he came up to see me last year.

Q: All of those cars had been built at Longbridge, hadn't they?
A: Yes, we had a real hotch potch of cars coming down the lines – all the Mini variants, Nash Metropolitans, A55 pick-ups, Wolseley 1500s and Riley 1.5s, all quite mixed up. Think of the stores capacity to make that possible! I don't remember building any Farina MG Magnettes at Longbridge, though I could be wrong. The first MGs I can recall us building there were the MG Metros. People

Malcolm campaigned a Mini Clubman during the 1970s.

were very pleased that MG was coming to Longbridge.

Q: The Metro was the big hope for the company, wasn't it?
A: Yes, it was. The big thing at the time was that the bodies were made by robots. These were secondhand robots from Japan – the Japanese went on to the second generation robots and we had all the old ones, which we thought were fantastic. It was all state of the art, and a new West Works factory was built especially for the Metro. I had a couple of ordinary MG Metros, but I wasn't too impressed with the Turbo because I didn't think it was very drivable – the ride quality wasn't as good because they had oversize wheels and low profile tyres. I like a more practical car.

Q: Yet you are into motorsport?
A: Yes, I always have been. This is now my 53rd year, though these days the rallies consist of regularity sections and little tests. When the Metro was launched, I was running a Mini Clubman, but didn't have the money to get a Metro. I don't think it would have been very competitive though, as it has the same power unit as the Mini but in a bigger car. I have navigated in a 6R4 though, for a chap called Bob Laurence, and that was awesome – the acceleration, the braking, the sheer strength of the thing. They counted us down at the start, and this thing just flew off the line with no wheel spin. The car was so strong, we just drove over boulders and everything.

Q: By this time, the collaboration that had led to the Triumph Acclaim had spawned further models, hadn't it?
A: Yes, we had the Rover 214 at Longbridge. They were lovely cars. We turned out 60 an hour, and the track never stopped. Three shifts, 24 hours a day – you work out those numbers. It was a really good car and justifiably very popular. I was in charge of the water testing then, and every car was tested. We had a black luminescent dye in the water, and we'd go over the car with black lamps at the end to see if any water had got in.

I remember on the prototypes we had a lot of trouble with the screens leaking, so we put a man on the line to add an extra bead of sealant to every car. We looked into this, got the drawings out and realised that Honda had made a mistake – there was a design tolerance mismatch between the windscreen and the A-pillars. I took all this up to their office, and they sent the info back to Japan where the windscreen was made bigger. The Japanese from Honda were brilliant. Their standards were so high and it was a proper joint venture.

MALCOLM OXBORROW INTERVIEW

I think we would have been so much better off going with Honda rather than BMW.

Q: Did you see much change when BMW came in?
A: I never saw anybody when BMW took over, there was no visual sign of their involvement. We had three new models – the R3 Rover 200, the second generation Rover 400 and the MGF – all in the same year, which must have been well advanced before BMW took over. I'd done a lot of water testing on the MGF. That was a very difficult car to seal! They were built by Mayflower and shipped to us as body-in-white. Their production facility probably wasn't as good as ours, but this was a very cost effective way of getting the car into production. Somebody told me – and I don't know how true this is – that the cost of developing the entire MGF was the same as the cost of developing the Rover's new dashboard.

Team Longbridge got support but no money from the factory, though some suppliers and would-be suppliers did sponsor them. Here Mowlem are handing over a cheque for £4000.

Q: Do you think the F suffered from this relative lack of investment?
A: No, not at all. I prefer the look of the later TF, but the F was a good car. It was nice to have a sports car coming down the Longbridge lines at long last. We couldn't make them quickly enough, and everybody wanted theirs registered in Glasgow to get an MGF number.

Q: And was it the MGF that got you back into rallying?
A: No, that was the Metro. I'd retired from rallying in 1982 after buying a house, though I did contest six RAC Rallies as co-driver to Phil Darbyshire in his Maestro. Then my old navigator from the Mini days, Trevor

Shakespeare, said: 'If I can fix a car, do you fancy having another go before we get too old?' At that point the Metro GTi Cup had started, a one-make series to promote the new K-series Metro. The series consisted of six races and six rallies. There was an average of about 20 cars, with decent prize money, and we contested that from 1991-1993. I'd never raced on a circuit before, but we won several of the rallies and had pole and fastest laps in the races, though our best finish there was second. We competed as Team Longbridge, with all our service crew also coming from the factory, but al of it was unpaid.

In 1994 we managed to borrow the ex-Tony Pond Tate & Lyle Metro from the factory and took that on several longer rallies, which seemed to suit us. We never damaged the car, but the panels were changed to the new style when the Rover 100 replaced the Metro at the end of that year.

When production of the Metro/ Rover 100 was coming to an end, we decided to give it one more try and looked for another car. The only one we could get was the pre-production MGF that was most likely going to be cut up and which you have already featured, so we went rallying in that. It was only really suitable for tarmac rallies, but we did well and finished 24th overall and third in class in 1996, this in a national series containing many serious entries.

After a couple of years the factory lost interest. I bought the car and competed locally for a couple more years before selling it to John Fry. By this time I had taken early retirement in 1999. The factory wanted to lose heads, I could get my package early and I figured that if I found a little part time job I could earn exactly the same for working much less... it was a no-brainer.

Q: What was the mood in the factory like at the time?

A: It wasn't a happy time; it was pretty stressful really. A lot of us didn't know where we stood from one day to the next, but I just carried on doing my best. After all those years, you can never walk away entirely, though. I lived in Bromsgrove and followed the company's fortunes even after leaving. The last few days when it all blew up and they locked the gates, we couldn't believe what was happening.

MG-Rover had a great range of vehicles, they just ran out of money. And they did waste some. What was the SV all about, for example? And they spent an awful lot on motorsport, which perhaps they shouldn't have done.

Q: Have you been back to the factory?

A: Only once. My wife Elaine wanted to go to the new Marks & Spencers in the Longbridge Village, so I left her there and took a walk round the area. I came up to Q Gate and decided to go into the Round House. I looked at the new MGs and I can't make my mind up about them to be honest. The MG3 is a lot of car for the money, but I think the styling is a little bit odd. If I were in the market for a new car, however, I would consider buying one. Either way, I'm glad there is still some life left in the factory and in the MG marque.

Roger in his brand new TF outside the upper entrance to the Heritage Motor Centre in Gaydon.

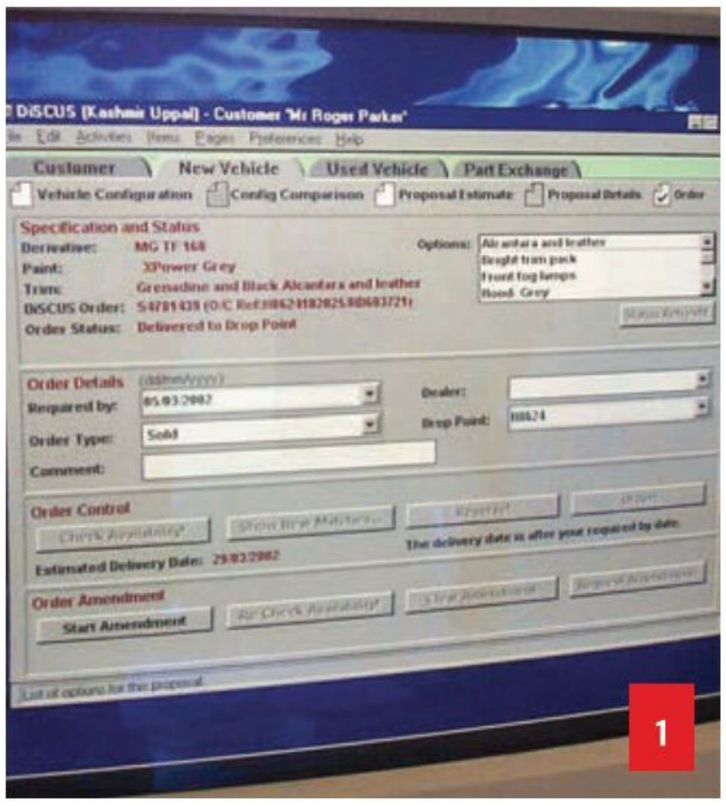
Building a TF

In 2002, Roger Parker decided to trade in his old MGF for a brand new TF. Perhaps uniquely, he was offered the chance to follow his new car down the line as it was being built. This is what he saw.

Like many MG enthusiasts I was eagerly awaiting the arrival of the MGF in 1995, but for various reasons didn't buy one until 1999. In January 2002 I was coming to the end of my three year contract with the MGF, and the launch of the TF raised the logical question of whether I should pay the residual figure for the MGF or trade it in for a new TF. Following my positive experience with the new TF at the press launch in Portugal, I decided to buy one.

My choice was a TF160 with the optional Sportpack 1 lowered suspension, basically because I found all cars to be equally firm riding, but felt that the lowered suspension gave a better stance. I also chose to follow the colour scheme and trim of one of the press cars that had attracted me with its XPower Grey paint, light grey hood and Grenadine (red) interior plastics plus Alcantara and leather seats.

I have always been interested in the historical photos of MG production at Abingdon and how, many years after the images were taken, the detail in them can deliver so much useful information to so many people. I felt that this would be equally true for what was then current MG production at Longbridge, and as a result I requested permission to follow my car being built down the Longbridge production line. The following images give a condensed view of this process in action.



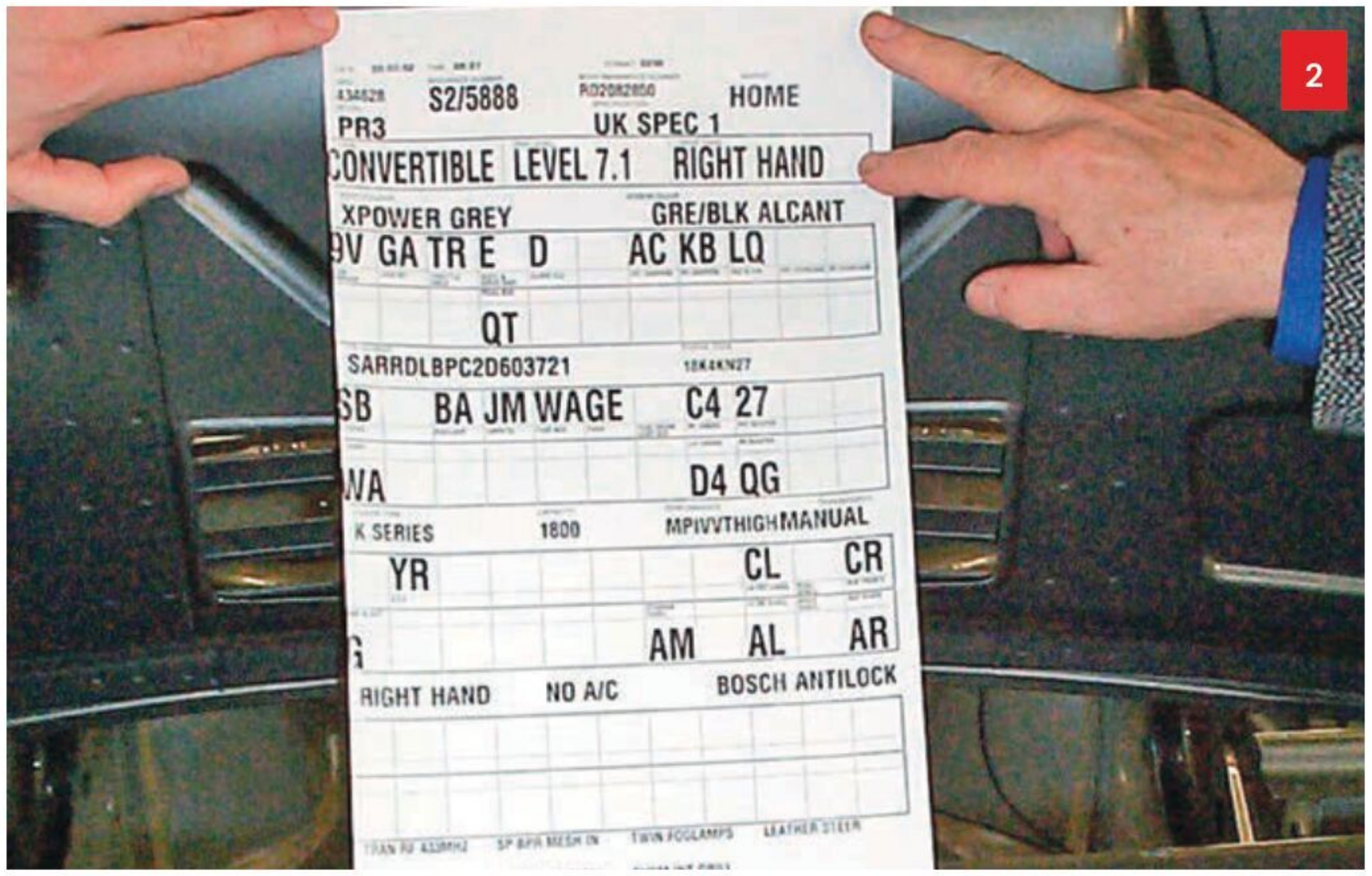
1. All new car orders were placed on the MG Rover DISCUS system, which showed all the details of the order and allowed dealers to track its progress and advise customers on the anticipated delivery date.

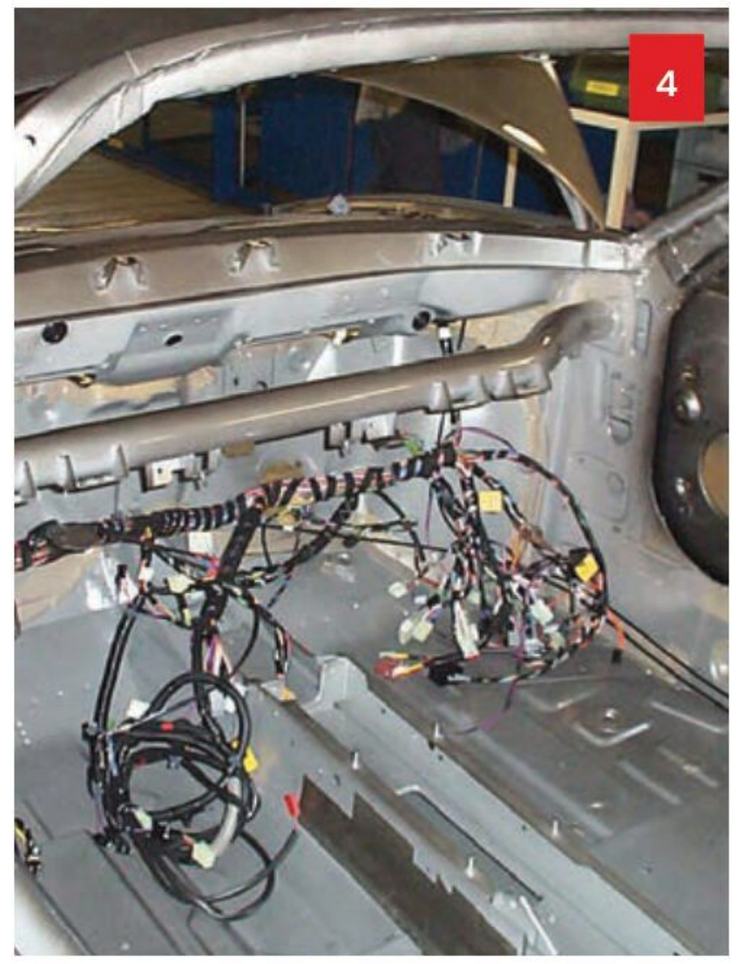
2. One of the first attachments to the car was this build sheet which listed all the detailed specification of the car so that correct parts and actions could be applied at the appropriate stations, which by the end of assembly saw all manner of stamps and labels being attached. I wonder whether these have survived?

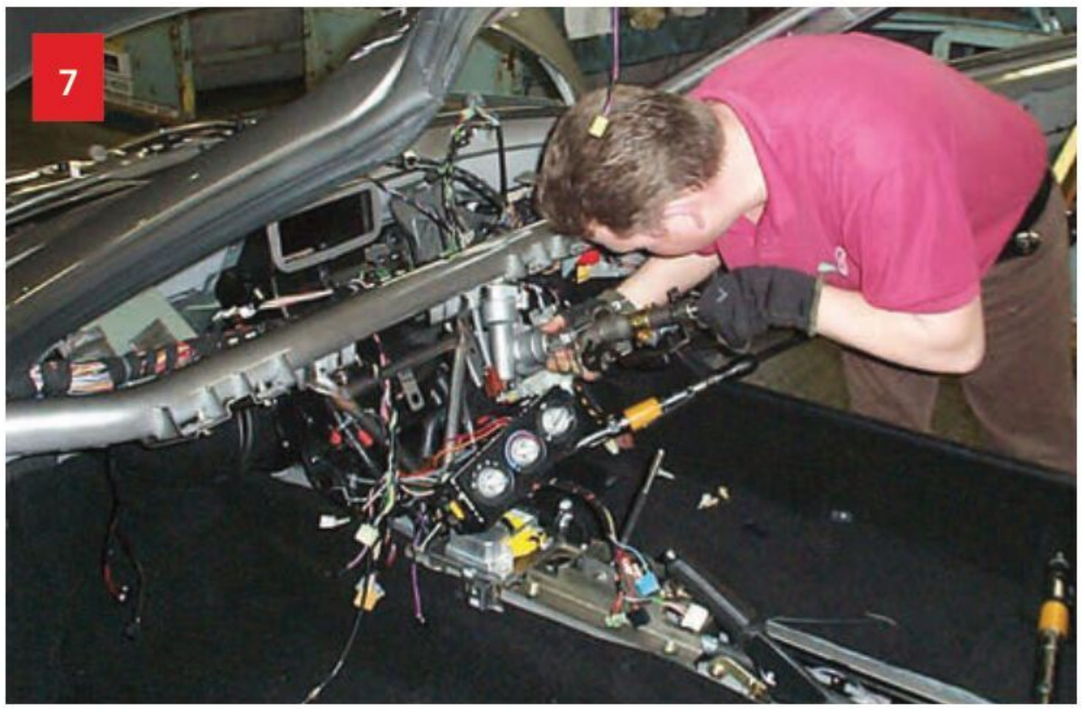
3. An early fit part was the fuel tank, which sits in a space between the passenger area and the engine bay. This area is later closed off from the passenger compartment by a substantial bolt-in steel bulkhead.

4. The main wiring loom was also an early fit before space became too congested. Note the very substantial cross beam tube that sits behind the fascia. On some early MGFs the welding on the ends of this tube was inadequate and it would move, creating creaks when driving.

5. The exterior body had protective panels fitted to reduce the risk of damage during production. These were a plastic moulding with a soft foam backing that was in contact with the body. Many workers wore soft gloves or mittens and many tools had soft covers for the same purpose.







6. The gear change mechanism with the two cables attached was installed so easily on the line when compared to the time and hassle that is involved in changing just a single cable on the finished car, should one break or fray in service.

7. Here the EPAS steering column was being fitted, and already many other parts were in place such as carpet, handbrake, airbag ECU, heater and controls. Note that the cross tube carried steering mountings on both sides, so the bodies were not handed.

8. Whilst interior fitting out was being done, others were active in fitting out the front and under bonnet areas. Here the brake master cylinder, servo and ABS module were already in place, along with the radiator and so far just the one headlamp.

9. One of the few two man jobs at this stage was the hood fitting, which came in as a complete assembly so it only needed the frame to be bolted to the body. Note that the rear speaker assembly and rear deck insulation was already in place.

10. One man rear bumper fitting was done after the rear lamps were in place. Note also that the boot wiring had been threaded through between the inner and outer boot skins and that the only exposed part was secured to the left boot hinge.

11. The fascia assembly being fitted – note the instruments were already in place. This is actually not as difficult an item to remove as it may appear when the need to get access behind it arises. By this stage the screen frame interior trims were already in place.

12. Seats arrived by conveyer that travelled through the roof section of CAB 1 to trackside 'just in time,' and this left only a few other parts to be fitted before the car came to the end of the first part of the TF assembly line.

13. From the end of the first part of the TF assembly line, cars were lifted into the roof section and stored until it was time for them to be conveyed automatically to above the start of the second part of the TF line...

14. ...which is where the main mechanical parts were fitted. Here at the beginning of the line, front and rear subframes were placed on accurately located jigs and then built up with suspension, steering, brakes...

15. ...engine, gearbox and most ancillaries.

Interestingly this image was taken just after a hectic eight minute subframe change when one of the captive nuts in the rear subframe was found to be misaligned. The line was then restarted just in time before...

16. ...the body dropped from above onto the subframes which were then secured to the car. (Hence the common term 'Body Drop.') If only the subframe-to-body bolts would come out as easily now, especially the front ones that so often shear!

17. Wheels arrived trackside by one of the many conveyers, and when fitted they really did give a sense of near completion. Here the four wheel nuts were being automatically tightened by machine.

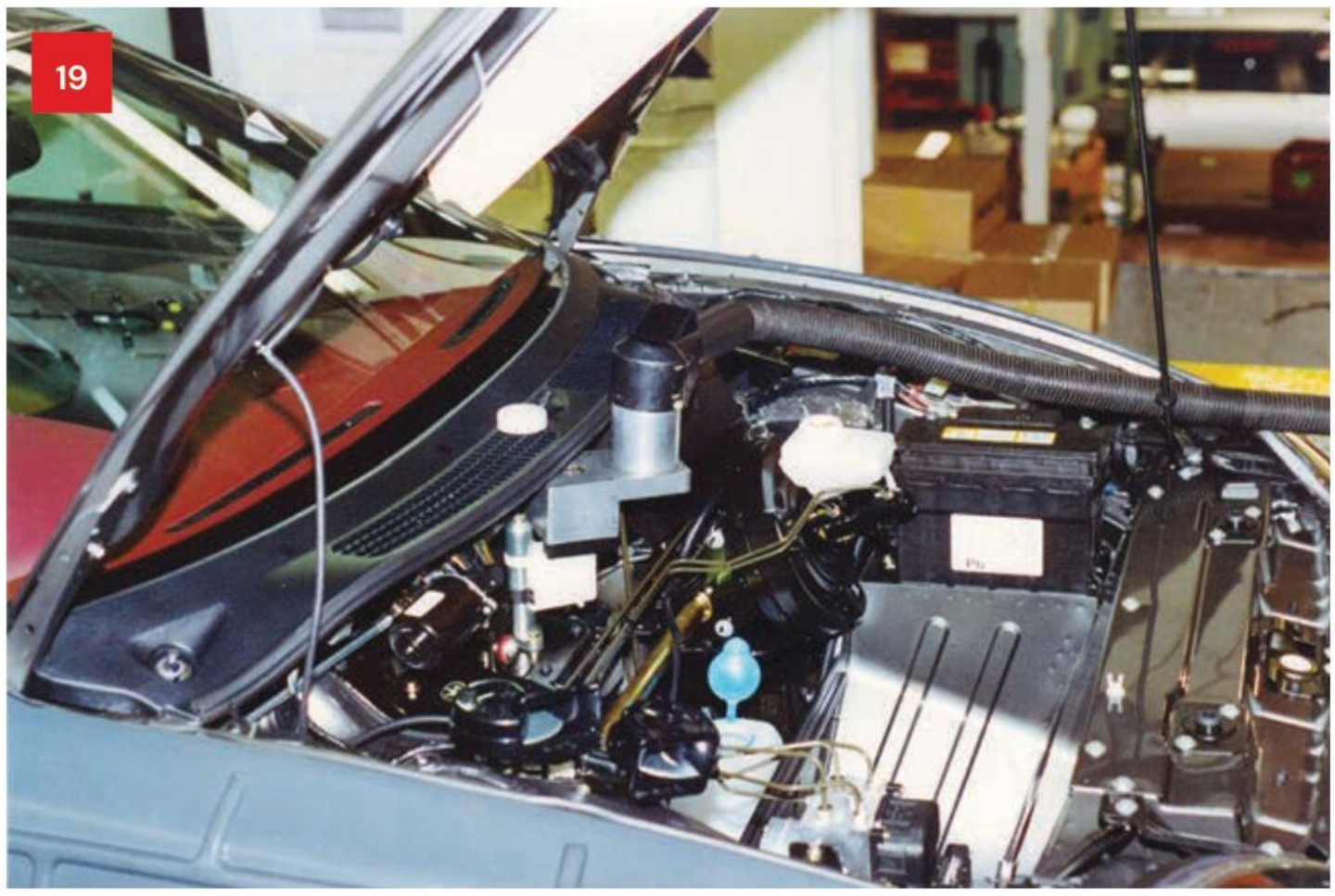
18. Once the wheels were on the car, it was dropped onto the line and for the first time the TF was sitting on its suspension and able to be rolled along the track. Here the interior door cards have been fitted, another element that added to the completed feel.

19. Fluids were added next, with brake, clutch and cooling systems all being filled using vacuum fill tools. The clutch master cylinder can be seen attached to the vacuum fill system here. Washer fluid was added by hand using a trigger-operated tap.

20. This was the engine ECU mapping station where a new ECU was placed in the docking port, a bar code scanned from the long paper record seen in image 4 ensuring that the correct mapping for the engine was loaded.

21. At the end of the line, all cars went through a rolling road check, suspension alignment check and adjustment.

22. Final quality inspections were done in a specially lit area where light came from multiple positions to make the area shadow free so that any imperfections were easily seen. Then the car was subjected to a very wet water test.



23. Once any quality issues had been dealt with, the car was driven out of CAB 1 to storage, pending delivery to the dealer. I was lucky enough to be allowed to drive my car at this stage.

24. Once at the dealers, a car would be prepared and then presented to its proud new owner. Very often the dealer used to make an effort to create more of an occasion for the handover of new cars to private buyers .

The China syndrome

Words: Ian Pogson

The end of MG Rover came, but not as a complete shock. Those of us working for the Company who had our eyes and ears open detected increasing desperation towards the end and knew that without a partner, the massive capital required for a new medium volume car – about £1bn – would not be forthcoming from any UK bank. Many suitors were courted, but in the end we simply ran out of money and time. It cost tens of thousands just to open the factory doors each day with rates, energy and salary bills alone.

Some of us had been working in Shanghai for MG Rover in its "partnership" with the state-run SAIC (Shanghai Automotive Industries Corporation) before the end in April 2005. Some were lucky enough to be offered jobs back in Shanghai when SAIC believed it had bought all the IPR (Intellectual Property Rights) for MG Rover products and this took some time to sort out with NAC (Nanjing Automotive Corporation), who had thought they had the MG IPR, as well as all the equipment on site at Longbridge. In the end, SAIC absorbed NAC and the two went on to build cars together.

SAIC had a long-standing JV (Joint Venture) arrangement with both VW and GM to build cars under licence but wanted its own brand and came up with Roewe, following some late-night wrangling over ownership of the name Rover, rightly claimed by Ford (who had bought Land Rover!). NAC had built Fiat/Iveco product, so both companies were well-versed in US/European standards and expectations.

The factories that both operated from were rather newer than Longbridge, built on the flat and with great transport links, much of which was government-supplied. Some impressive equipment and processes were installed and

MG6 production continued at Longbridge after the Chinese takeover.

MG AND CHINA

learning from the likes of VW and GM were in evidence. Outside the automotive circles, examples of working with German companies (who were seen to represent solid quality values) abounded, such as the Siemens contribution to the astonishingly quick (431 km/h or 268 mph) Shanghai Maglev (magnetically levitated train – a British invention by Professor Eric Laithwaite), running 29km from Pudong airport to Longyang Lu, still some way out of the city centre, but a worthwhile trip. US firm Westinghouse contributed much equipment to the massive Shanghai Metro underground system.

UK Engineers, some working in China and some in the UK, collaborated to design, develop and build a range of vehicles to wear both the MG and Roewe badges. Before this could bear fruit, and before the two companies were merged, the 2006 Roewe 750 (a simple resurrection of the Rover 75) came from SAIC and simultaneously NAC produced the MG7 (like a ZT!). The TF was reborn via NAC firstly in China to sell in tiny numbers and then made its production re-appearance in 2009 and run-out in the UK, built on the same line as it used to be in CAB 1, Longbridge (Car Assembly Building). NAC also re-hashed the Streetwise as the MG3SW(??!) and when the collaboration finally bore new fruit, it was in the shape of the 2008 Roewe 550 and the MG6. Based on the same platform, itself founded on a Rover 75 (some cars are just so good!) These were medium cars, as the Chinese home-market volume was thought to be strong for such product. For us in the UK, the MG6 debuted in April 2011. The car was painted and fully trimmed inside in China and a mere 17 stations in CAB 1 were tooled up to mate the engine to the gearbox, add the steering gear, cooling pack, stuff this up into the engine bay and then add exhaust system, wheels and fluids. Before the car left the track, where once Rover 75 had been assembled, it was given its software identity and the 1.8L turbo petrol (very K Series!) was fired up.

Initially, the car was three trim levels, all featured air-con, full Bosch

The launch of the 'new' TF under Chinese ownership.

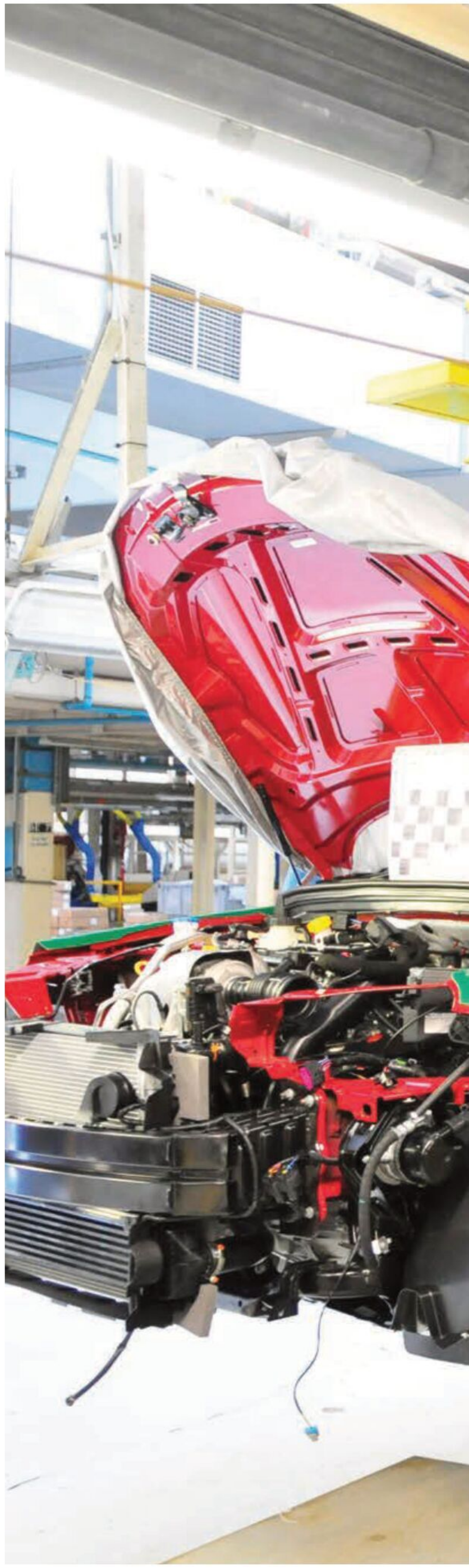
MG AND CHINA


Ian Pogson

traction control, power windows, and USB connectivity, with heated electric seats, sat-nav, Bluetooth and 18" wheels on the TSE top spec. 158bhp was quoted, although restricted by the weak gearbox and the ride was compliant, the steering accurate and handling was pin-sharp. Apart from a few early cars with weak clutch friction plates, a slightly confusing starter key-fob and some cars that had a hesitancy that we never truly fathomed, it was a good package. The UK team had a Fast Field Fix team that responded quickly and often directly to the customer to problems and with the exception of the hesitation, MG Motor (as the UK arm became) had these fixes in place quickly. Close contact between the UK Technical Centre and Manufacturing teams as well as in-house, on-site Technician training all contributed to a tight-knit community to back up the car.

Sales were, however, disappointing. Only some 2,000 cars were sold on account of poor marketing and lack of exposure to the public. A follow-up face-lift Mark II version tried to keep abreast of tightening emissions regulations and the stump-pulling diesel has a truly unburstable engine, a UK-designed high-torque capacity six-speed transmission and was even seen competing on the UK sprint racing circuits! The petrol car had also been campaigned in sprints by UK Technical Centre Engineers and acquitted itself really well for a four-door family saloon but turning up at a race meeting in an "oil-burner" was viewed by some competitors as slightly silly, until they were left behind smelling the diesel's rather clean exhaust. Both cars now represent exceptional value for money second-hand.

The MG3 was the next UK launch after MG6 and appeared in 2013. This was a supermini, but with a rather disappointing performance. The UK Engineering community was vocal in its advice to our masters to go for a combustion system that was more emissions and future-proofed, however we were ignored, and the regrets follow to this day. We could have done so much more with a very capable, experienced team of designers. My daughter's car has covered 70,000 miles quite reliably and is in really good shape, with a cam-chain replacement as the only major expenditure. It is a hoot to hurl around corners and features typically precise MG handling and stop-on-a-penny brakes.



MG6s make their way along the prodcution line.

MG AND CHINA

The MG5 petrol never made it to the UK sales pitches, and was a smaller car, but this time jointly developed by the Korean firm Ssangyong and SAIC. However, old cultural differences and a severe financial problem in Korea drew this collaboration to a close. This was a shame, as the UK Technical Centre had tried installing a number of different engines to see if it could be sold in UK/Europe. It was a handsome car with a more appealing interior that the MG6. However, changes in fuels, economic shifts, politics and the sheer rate of growth of China and companies like SAIC, meant that much engineering design and development was expended on hybrids, hydrogen storage/ propulsion, full BEVs (Battery Electric Vehicles) and SUV's (Sport Utility Vehicles). These activities were in addition to expanding the SAIC Roewe line-up in the home market to cover from mini-cars to full-size luxury saloons and large 4x4's.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MG AND CHINA

Unveiled at the 2017 Shanghai Motor Show, the MG E-motion concept is said to hit 60mph in less than four seconds, with 310 miles of range between charges.

All this was a world (and only 10 years) away from the early days of 2005 to 2007 working in rented offices in the outer reaches of Pudong, Shanghai (the new part, east of the Huangpu river) and building cars one at a time in a mosquito-infested workshop even further out of town. In those days, petrol was bought a gallon at a time and batteries were shared between prototype cars. By 2008, SAIC had a brand-new Engineering Centre formed by two MG-style octagonal shaped buildings linked together and with its own test roads, powertrain test-beds, Styling Studios and Electrical Laboratories, located near the Formula 1 race-track in Anting. Progress was fast and confidence very, very high. Huge prototype build shops now cover acres of the facility. It is very impressive. Having been taught their Engineering by ex-Rover Engineers, these young Chinese have cut their teeth on many, many vehicle projects now and are a force to be reckoned with.

The UK content and support to SAIC is now reduced to a bare handful of people, with the bulk of Technical Centre staff at Longbridge having been dispensed with in 2018. A walk through the closed, cold offices where colleagues used to sit and laugh, work and create was a sobering, empty experience. A similar stroll through the icy cold expanse of the CABs and Paint Shops would also evoke ghostly memories. However, progress is forward, apparently and as SAIC delivers more and more capable hybrids and all electric BEV's, with a forward-looking alternative fuel research agenda, we must be hopeful that at least one of them, like the MG-9 Concept will be a two-seater sports car.

The Cyberster concept car is a two-door, two-seater sports car recalling the brand's traditions. The all-electric architecture will enable an approximate EV range of 500 miles and deliver a 0-62mph of less than three seconds.

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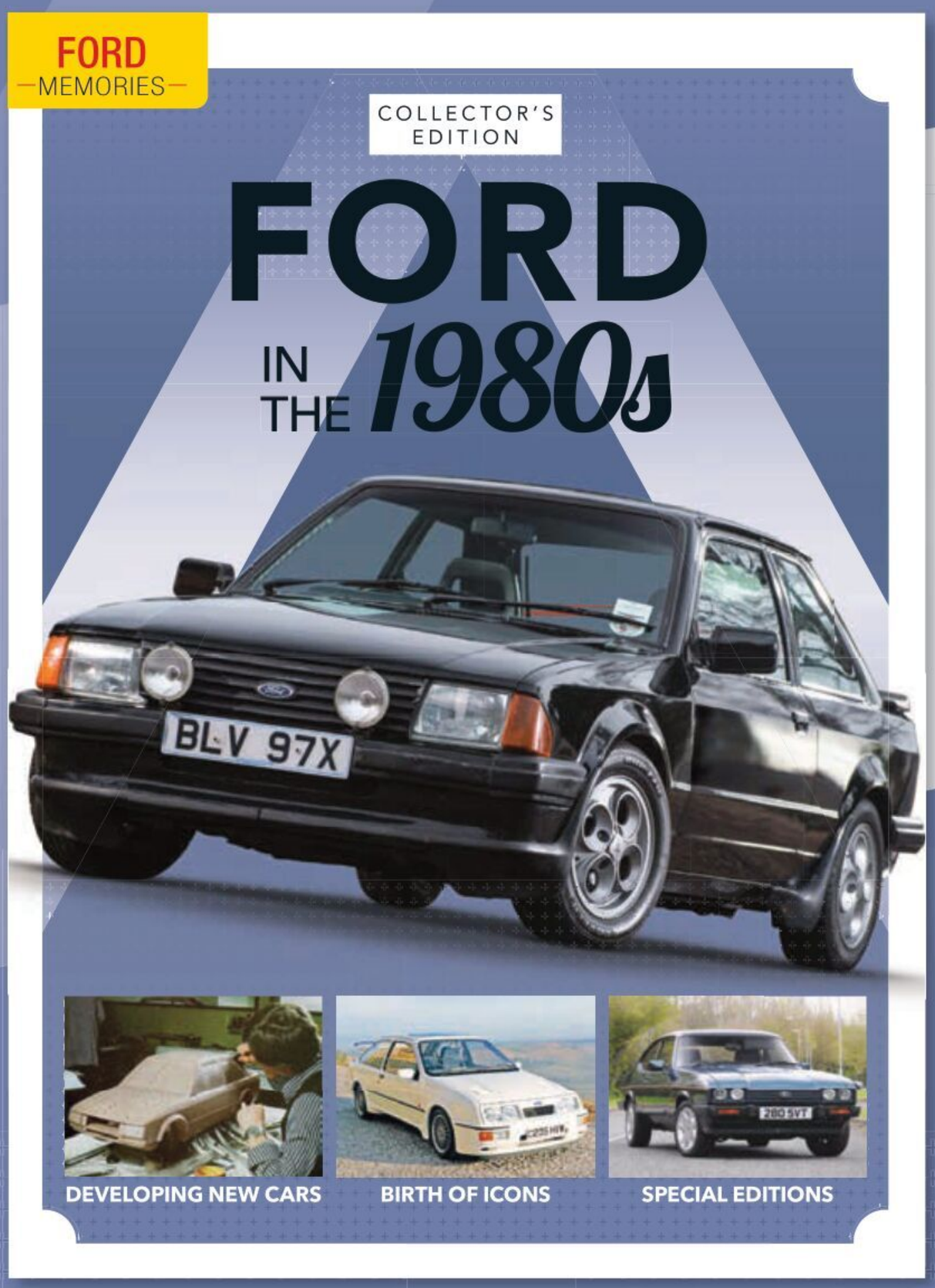

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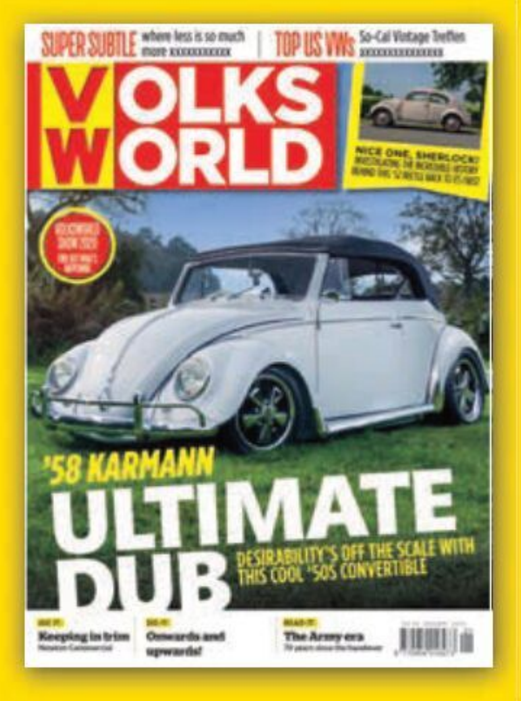

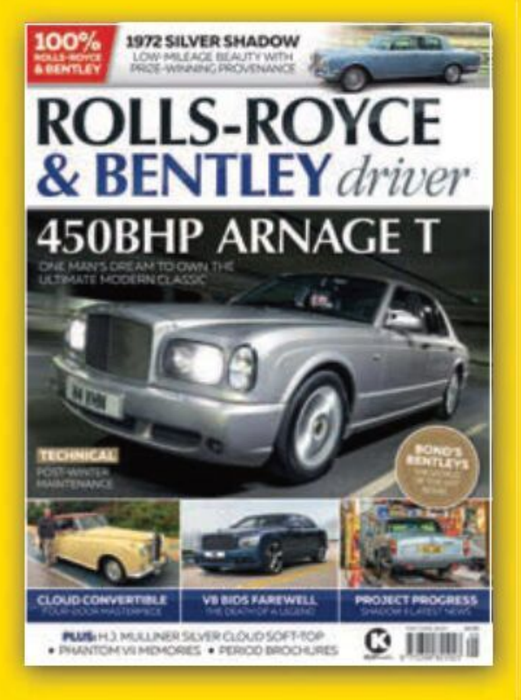

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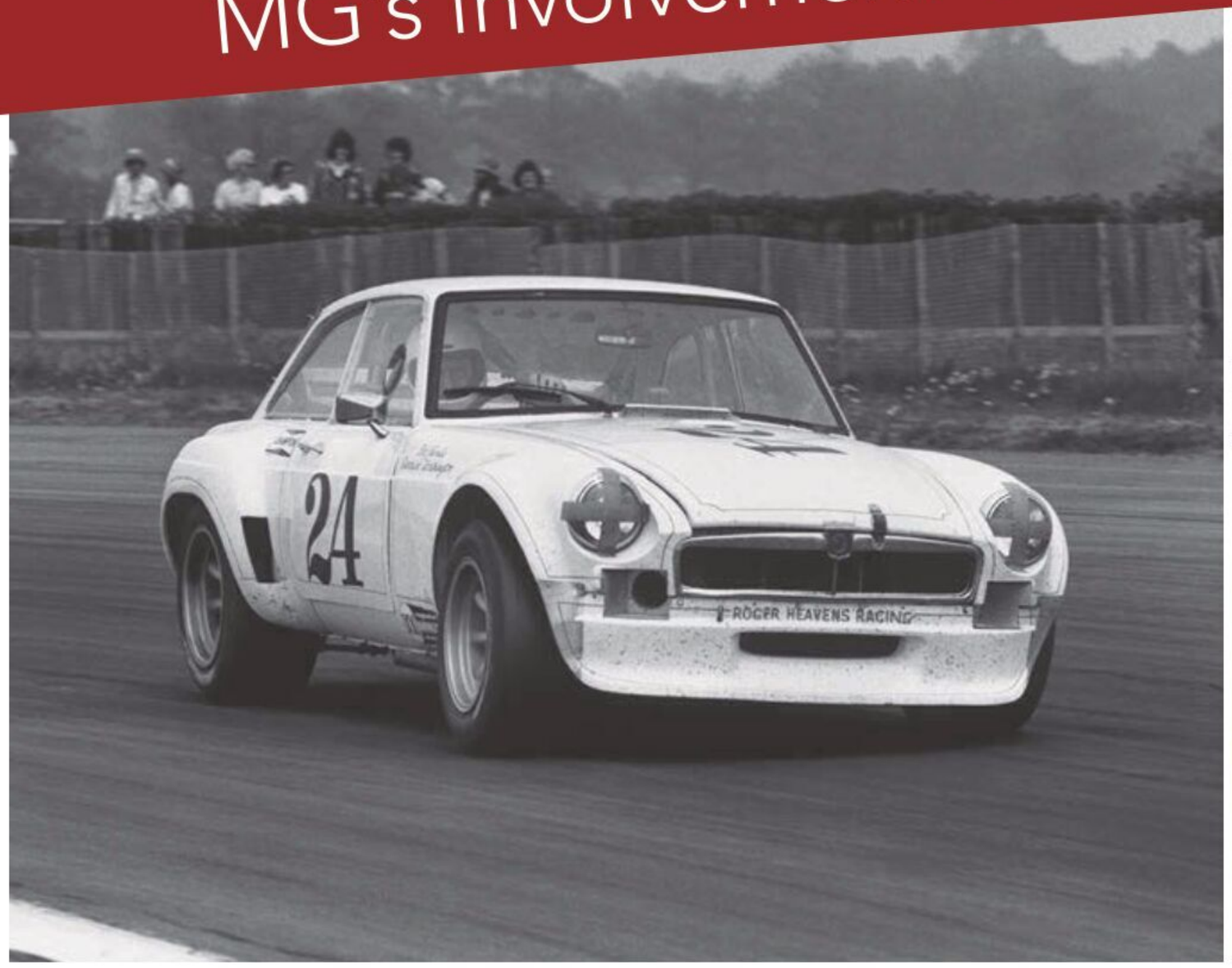
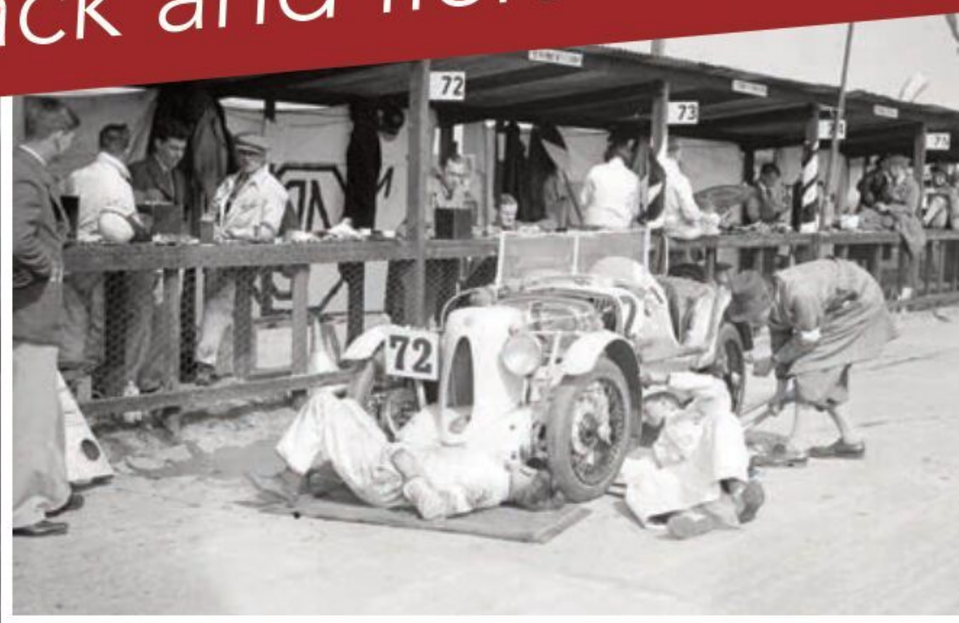
MG IN MOTORSPORT

The fifth issue of MG Memories takes a look at MG's involvement on 'track and field'





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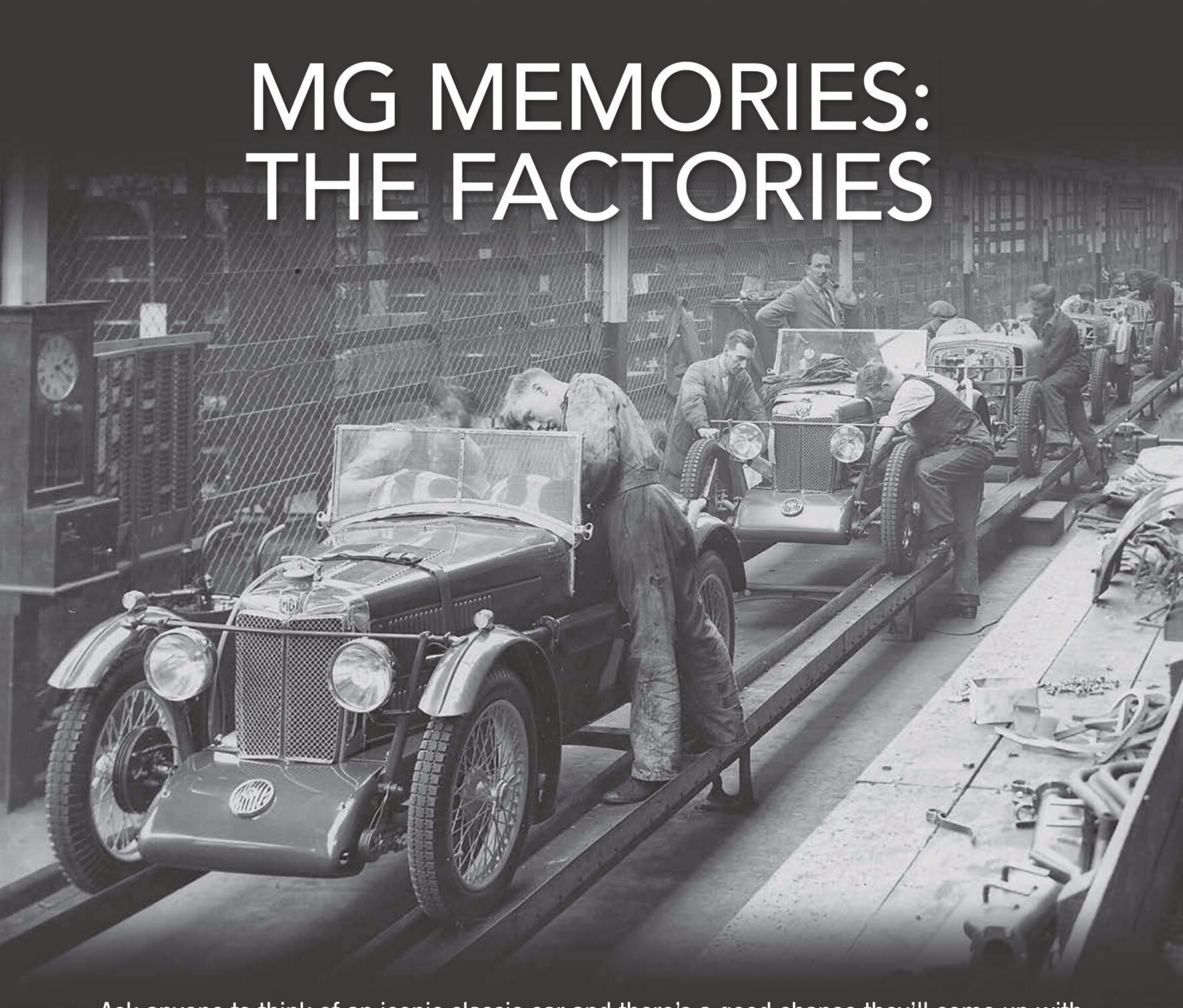

Ask anyone to think of an iconic classic car and there's a good chance they'll come up with MG. If pushed, they'll probably associate the town of Abingdon with the famous octagonal badge, but MG's long history has seen the cars produced in many locations worldwide. Production first began in central Oxford before MG's success was recognised by being given its own factory and then when the Abingdon facility was closed by BL nearly half a century later, the sporty MG-badged versions of Austin Rover cars would be some of the more popular products to emerge from the Longbridge plant.

It would be Longbridge where the MG brand would later be reborn as a sports car maker courtesy of the RV8 and then the MGF, before ultimately ending up in Chinese ownership where it looks to be enjoying another period of success with a very different range.

In this the forth issue of MG Memories, we chart the history of the places, factories and people which built the MG story, from Oxfordshire to Shanghai, via Birmingham and even Australia. From Cecil Kimber's first modified Morris to a mid-engined Metro-powered sports car, it's quite a journey.

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