BUYING AN MGB

By Richard Ladds

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There are always a great many MGBs available to choose from, but it is important to ensure that you are fully aware of the condition of the car you want to buy.

Inspecting the car

Once you have found an MGB you like, you must decide if it is worth the asking price. Adopt a consistent methodical approach when inspecting all prospective cars.

Useful items of inspection equipment are; a powerful torch [flashlight] a magnet, something to lie on, overalls, a good quality jack and a pair of axle stands.

Torch [Flashlight]

This will enable you to examine the underside clearly and look up inside the wings [fenders] to seek out signs of rust, poor repair work or incorrectly fitted panels. Also check around the rear spring mounting points, the castle rails beneath the sills [rocker panels], and along the underbody seams.

Magnet

Place this gently against the body panels to detect the presence of plastic body filler. A steel panel will attract the magnet and you will feel it pulling towards the sound metal beneath the paint. Areas of plastic filler will not draw the magnet and it will slip off.

Jack and axle stands.

To make full inspection, take a good quality jack, a block of wood to rest it on and a pair of axle stands. Never crawl under a car which is only supported by a jack. If you are buying from a dealer he should be happy to put the car up on an inspection ramp to assist you.

Overview

Before making a detailed close inspection, stand back and look over the car as a whole. Look for any strange ripples in the body sides. Scan along all seams and trim lines to see if they are all aligned. Panel gaps should be even all the way around and doors should fit flush with the rest of the body.

This initial overall visual inspection is most important and can tell you a great deal about the condition of the car. An ill fitting door is often a clue to a misaligned sill.

Good example of even gaps and straight panels

Condition of bodywork

Unless you are a skilled welder, bodywork repair will be expensive in terms of labour costs. Unitary construction gives the MGB its structural rigidity and good handling, but the combined body chassis unit is vulnerable to rust damage.

Checking for corrosion and poor repairs

It is unlikely that you will find a car that has not suffered from corrosion or had some repair work, but do ensure that any repair panels have been fitted correctly.

Work through the following list of check points.

1. Front valance

Look under the front valance for corrosion and signs of accident damage. Rubber bumper support armatures on later models are prone to rust; also look for bends or creases which may be the result of collision damage.

2. Front wings [fenders]

Check inside the wings at the area behind the headlight. Mud can build up around the bowl and corrode the wing along the top and side. Using the torch [flashlight], look carefully inside the front wing, above the suspension and right along the seam to the back of the wing. Examine the wing reinforcement panel, especially the top shelf where mud can build up and hold moisture until corrosion attacks the inside.

At the rear of the inner wing is a removable splash panel, bolted to the wing reinforcement and lined on its outside edge with a rubber seal. If the seller is claiming the car has had a full restoration, both these splash panels should be present, complete with all bolts and seals.

If the car has been fitted with plastic inner wing shields, you will be unable to judge the condition of these concealed panels.

Rust damage to lower bolt-on splash panel, corrosion may have also spread to the sill sections.

3. Doors

Rust can break out along the bottom edge of the door and also beneath the chrome trim a split may develop in the door, which begins at the quarterlight and creeps down the panel. Look for signs of a poor repair in this area.

On a roadster, sticking doors can be an indication that the sills are weakened by rust and the car is beginning to fold in the middle. If the sills have been replaced but the fit of the door is still suspect, then it is probable that a repair has been made without supporting the body correctly.

4. Sills [rocker panels]

The most important structural components of the MGB are the sill sections. These panels act as a main support for the monocoque body and their condition is vital. Rust invariably attacks from the inside and it is rare for an MGB not to have had at least one set of replacement panels fitted. Each sill section is a combination of three panels; outer sill, inner sill and castle section. Examine the outer sill and the castle section beneath. If there is any sign of surface corrosion, then there will be more serious rust inside. Large corrosion holes in the sills will result in an MoT [Ministry of Transport annual safety test] failure.

Stainless steel covers can hide corroded sills.

The necessary repair panels cost around £50 [$75] a side, but fitting requires the removal of the front wing and cutting off the lower section of the rear wing. After removing wings, it is possible that further corrosion may be discovered in the inner wings or in the cross member around the jacking points. Rusted sections must be completely cut off and

ground back cleanly. While the sills are being replaced, the body must be supported to prevent distortion. Repair panels require very careful and accurate re-assembly to ensure that all gaps line up and that the body is not distorted.

5. Bonnet [Hood]

Bonnets are often poorly aligned, check for even panel gaps and signs of repair. As the panel is double skinned, dents can be difficult to repair.

6. Rear wing

The seam at the top of the rear wings is prone to rust; look for evidence of repair. Run your fingers around the inside lip of the rear wing, feel for any lumps of filler or repair patches. If lower wing repair panels have been fitted check that they are secure and smoothly joined.

7. Rear valance

These can rot if not washed regularly and mud has been allowed to build up.

Look at the fuel tank, which is prone to rust at the top, and will then leak when full. Stains on the sides of the tank and a strong smell of petrol indicate corrosion around the top of the tank.

8. Floor pan

Lift carpets and check the floor pan, particularly the driver's side and behind the seats. Look for damp and signs of rust. Damp may be caused by a leaking soft top but GTs are not immune to water leaks.

9. Interior

If the seller is asking top price then originality is important and all fittings and trim should be appropriate for the year. A worn or shabby interior can be retrimmed, but the cost of replacing all carpets and trim can be quite high.

The colour of the paintwork and specification of the engine should also be correct for the year. Certain good quality trim changes, such as leather upholstery and walnut dashboards, may be considered desirable by prospective buyers.

10. Engine bay inspection

Open the bonnet and inspect the engine bay, there are a number of things you can check visually.

A clean engine suggests careful ownership. Oil leaks will show up more clearly on a clean engine. If the engine is dirty look for any traces of fresh oil tracking across the surface.

Pull out the dipstick and look at the oil, see if it has been kept at the correct level. If the car has been recently serviced, the oil will be clean and clear.

Remove the oil filler cap and look at the inside for oil sludge deposits, a lot of sludge indicates that the car has been mostly used for short trips. A creamy mayonnaise effect in the oil indicates water contamination and that the engine has head gasket problems.

Remove the tops of the carburettor dashpots; see if they are correctly filled with oil.

Examine all rubber hoses and look for leaks, antifreeze leaves tell-tale stains on the block, check around the hose joints and the heater tap.

Check that the coolant in the radiator is topped up to the correct level.

Look around for new components or any signs of recent work, such as paint flaked off by recent spanner [wrench] contact, ask the seller to explain what has been done.

Start the engine

Listen carefully to the sound of the engine. Clatter from the tappets at the top of the engine is not unusual, but they should not be too noisy. Rumbling noises, knocking and clonkings are all potential causes for concern.

Oil pressure

As the engine warms up the reading on the oil pressure gauge should read 10-25 lbs/sq" idling and 60 lbs/sq" when running.

Water temperature

Should read N for normal, once the engine has warmed up and may rise slightly above this when stuck in congested traffic. A reading of H for hot indicates cooling problems such as low coolant, loose fan belt, faulty thermostat, faulty temperature sender (later cars) or faulty electric cooling fans (later cars).

Shock Absorbers

To check the performance of the shock absorbers, push down firmly at each corner of the car. The car should spring back up to its correct ride height and stop, if it continues to bounce, then the shock absorbers need replacing.

Road testing

Make sure that you have appropriate and adequate insurance cover before driving any vehicle.

There is no need to thrash an engine to determine its condition, drive gently but listen out for suspect noises. Gear changes should be precise and easy to select without crunches, although early models had no synchromesh on first gear. Difficulty in selecting gear could be caused by worn synchromesh or problems with the clutch or its hydraulic operating system.

Steering should be sharp and precise although heavy at parking speed; it should lighten up when on the move. Vibration through the steering could indicate wheels out of balance or wear in the front suspension.

At 30 mph listen for axle whine, change to 3rd gear and apply power and then lift off the throttle. Listen for any clonks from the transmission, prop [drive] shaft splines or universal joints.

Drive at 50 mph, lift off for about 50 yards and then accelerate again, look for excessive smoke from the exhaust.

Smoking can be an indication of worn valve guides or even more serious engine wear.

If the car is fitted with overdrive take the opportunity to try it out. The overdrive is operated by a switch on the right hand side of the dash on early models; by a combination wipers/ washers/overdrive stalk on the steering column on early rubber bumper cars and a switch on file top of file gear lever for the last of the series. Overdrive should engage and disengage promptly and smoothly.

Wind noise from the hood [top], or even around the windows on the GT is not unusual but could indicate missing hood clips, worn door seals or a badly fitting sunroof.

Some owners will not be prepared to let you drive their car but they ought to take you for a short test run. In this situation you can still get a good impression from the passenger seat and you can ask the seller to perform some of the above manoeuvres while you listen and observe.

Restoration

If you want to restore an MGB yourself there are many worthwhile projects available and the spares situation is excellent. Before you buy a car for restoration make a realistic list of the cost of any specialist work, such as welding and spraying that you may need to commission. Only take on a restoration project if you really enjoy the type of work involved and you want to keep the car to drive yourself. It is very unlikely

that you will be able to buy a car, restore it properly and then sell it on at a profit. If you do undertake a restoration yourself always keep all paperwork and make a photographic record.

Conclusion

When viewing any MGB it is necessary to keep a sense of proportion. It is unlikely that you will find one in perfect condition; bear this in mind when looking around. What is important is that you are aware of any significant faults and how much it will cost to rectify them, then you can negotiate a realistic price that takes these factors into consideration.

The best buy would be a structurally sound car with some evidence of good care, such as receipts for parts and work done, along with copies of past MoTs to support the mileage claimed.

A good original or a well restored MGB will give you great satisfaction, pride in ownership and reward you with many years of driving pleasure.

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Richard Ladds has written a series of buying-tips articles for *Enjoying MG*. As space permits, over the next few months we will reproduce his “Buying” articles for MGA, post 1958 Midget and for the TF.