

AUTO TEST

MG Midget 1500

1,493 c.c.

Smallest British Leyland sports car given much more punch by bigger engine. Quick, accurate steering but handling throttle-sensitive and inclined to oversteer. Harsh ride, excessive wind noise with hood up. Undergeared. Limited range

The Midget rolls considerably when cornered hard and the outside front wheel becomes heavily loaded as seen here. If at this point the steering wheel is held steady the car increasingly oversteers as the corner continues; lifting off the accelerator causes the tail to twitch sharply outwards

THERE was an outburst of lamentation from MG enthusiasts when the Midget 1500 was announced, apparently because the A-series engine had been replaced by a Triumph-designed unit. From an engineering point of view the change was almost inevitable. The Midget needed a bigger engine to counteract the effect of safety and antipollution equipment in America, where it sells in its greatest numbers; and at 1,275 c.c., the A-series unit was at the end of its "stretch potential". The answer was to instal the Triumph engine which, while of similar design and vintage, had long ago been given a longer stroke to bring its capacity to 1,493 c.c., its first application being the now-defunct front-drive Triumph 1500.

The purists may decry the move, but Triumph is a name long respected in the sports car business and there is no reason to suppose the Spitfire engine should be unsuitable for the Midget. It might be more in order to complain that a considerable increase in swept volume has resulted in a negligible increase in quoted power, from

64 bhp (net) to 66 bhp (DIN). On the other hand torque, a more important part of a sports car's character than most people realize, is increased by a greater margin. Against all this has to be balanced the greater weight of the new car, with a kerb weight (our measurement) of 15.3cwt compared with the 13.8cwt of the last 1,275 c.c. Midget we tested.

Performance and economy

The proof of the Midget 1500 is in the stopwatch, and there is no doubt it is substantially quicker than the late-series 1,275 c.c. car. Comparisons are valid because the final drive ratio remains unchanged at 3.9 to 1; the adoption of the single-rail "corporate" gearbox has meant some change in internal ratios, which are wider than before. Tyre size likewise remains the same.

The Midget 1500 is a genuine 100 mph car, and this represents a great advance on the 1275 which managed only 94 mph mean when tested in 1971. Unfortunately maximum speed takes the car over the red line on its rev counter, which over-read by a modest 100 rpm at maxi-

mum speed; clearly, therefore the Midget is substantially undergeared to make best use of its peak power, which falls at 5,500 rpm. Higher gearing would not only improve economy, but also permit higher speeds in the intermediate gears.

Although we ran the Midget beyond the 6,000 rpm red line to attain its ultimate maximum speed, we stuck to the limit in the lower gears with the result that first gear would not quite take the car to 30 mph, and third stopped just short of 70 mph. Our figures point up the considerable gap between second (47 mph maximum) and third, which is felt on the road to some extent but is disguised by the spread of useful torque.

Open sports cars always suffer in performance at the top end when they are run with the hood down, and the Midget was no exception. Lowering the hood took the maximum speed down to 94 mph - apart from making life very uncomfortable at that speed. We took no acceleration figures with the hood down, but there is no doubt they would be inferior to those obtained with the hood in place.



AUTOTEST

MG Midget 1500

All the Midget 1500 acceleration figures are far superior to those of the 1275, whether from a standing start or in any particular gear. Standing starts are best accomplished without a surfeit of revs and sudden

engagement of the clutch, which tends to produce strong and uncomfortable axle tramp. A more gentle procedure, feeding in the clutch fairly fast from a 2,000 rpm starting point, trims half a second off the 1275 time

to 30 mph, giving a respectable 3.7sec to this speed. The 1500 proceeds to 60 mph in 12.3sec (a 1.8sec improvement), and to 90 mph in 35.3sec, a better time by no less than 16sec. In like fashion, the standing quarter-mile

now takes 18.5sec compared with 19.6 before.

In the gears, every single feature claimed by the 1275 is bettered by a substantial margin. Not only is the torque curve flatter; the 1500 does not run out of breath so quickly at the top end, while flexibility is improved to the extent of being able to pull away from 10 mph in top, which the 1275 would not tolerate.

Comparisons

MAXIMUM SPEED MPH	
MG Midget 1500	(£1,560) 101
Ford Escort 1600 Sport	(£1,860) 100
Triumph Spitfire 1500	(£1,689) 100
Fiat 128SL 1300	(£1,791) 99
Renault 15TL	(£1,969) 94

0-60 MPH, SEC	
Ford Escort 1600 Sport	10.3
MG Midget 1500	12.3
Fiat 128SL 1300	13.1
Triumph Spitfire 1500	13.2
Renault 15TL	13.6

STANDING 1/4-MILE, SEC	
Ford Escort 1600 Sport	17.9
MG Midget 1500	18.5
Fiat 128SL 1300	18.8
Triumph Spitfire 1500	19.1
Renault 15TL	19.3

OVERALL MPG	
Renault 15TL	31.8
Triumph Spitfire 1500	29.1
Fiat 128SL 1300	28.5
MG Midget 1500	27.9
Ford Escort 1600 Sport	27.5

Performance

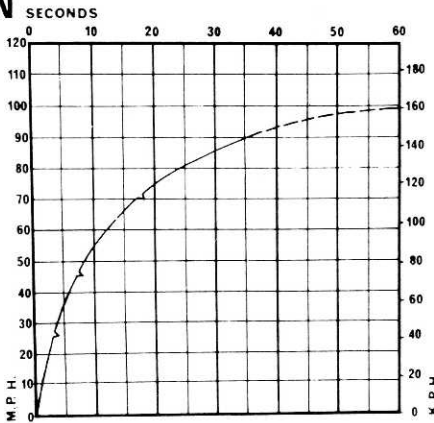
ACCELERATION

True speed in mph	Time in Secs	Car Speedo mph
30	3.7	30
40	5.8	40
50	8.5	50
60	12.3	61
70	17.0	71
80	24.0	82
90	35.3	92
100	—	102

Standing 1/4-mile
18.5sec 72 mph

Standing kilometre
34.9sec 90 mph

Mileage recorder: accurate



GEAR RATIOS AND TIME IN SEC

mph	Top (3-90)	3rd (5-58)	2nd (8-23)
10-30	9.8	6.2	3.9
20-40	9.2	5.8	4.0
30-50	8.7	5.8	—
40-60	9.6	6.7	—
50-70	10.2	7.9	—
60-80	12.5	—	—
70-90	19.3	—	—

GEARING

(with 145-13in. tyres)
 Top 16.44 mph per 1,000 rpm
 3rd 11.50 mph per 1,000 rpm
 2nd 7.79 mph per 1,000 rpm
 1st 4.82 mph per 1,000 rpm

MAXIMUM SPEEDS

Gear	mph	khp	rpm
Top (mean)	101	163	6,140*
(best)	102	164	6,200*
3rd	69	111	6,000
2nd	47	76	6,000
1st	29	47	6,000

*See text

BRAKES

FADE (from 70 mph in neutral)
Pedal load for 0.5g stops in lb

1	35	6 45-65
2	40-45	7 50-65
3	40-60	8 50-65
4	45-65	9 50-65
5	45-55	10 50-60

RESPONSE (from 30 mph in neutral)

Load	g	Distance
20lb	0.22	137ft
40lb	0.46	65ft
60lb	0.70	43ft
80lb	0.96	31ft
Handbrake	0.33	91ft
Max Gradient	1 in 3	

CLUTCH

Pedal 42lb and 4 1/2 in.

Consumption

FUEL

(At constant speed - mpg)	
30 mph	48.8
40 mph	44.5
50 mph	39.2
60 mph	34.2
70 mph	29.8
80 mph	26.2
90 mph	22.1
100 mph	17.6

Typical mpg 30 (9.4 litres/100km)
 Calculated (DIN) mpg 32.5
 (8.7 litres/100km)
 Overall mpg 27.9 (10.1 litres/100km)
 Grade of fuel Premium, 4-star (min 97RM)

OIL

Consumption (SAE 20W/50) 1,000 mpp

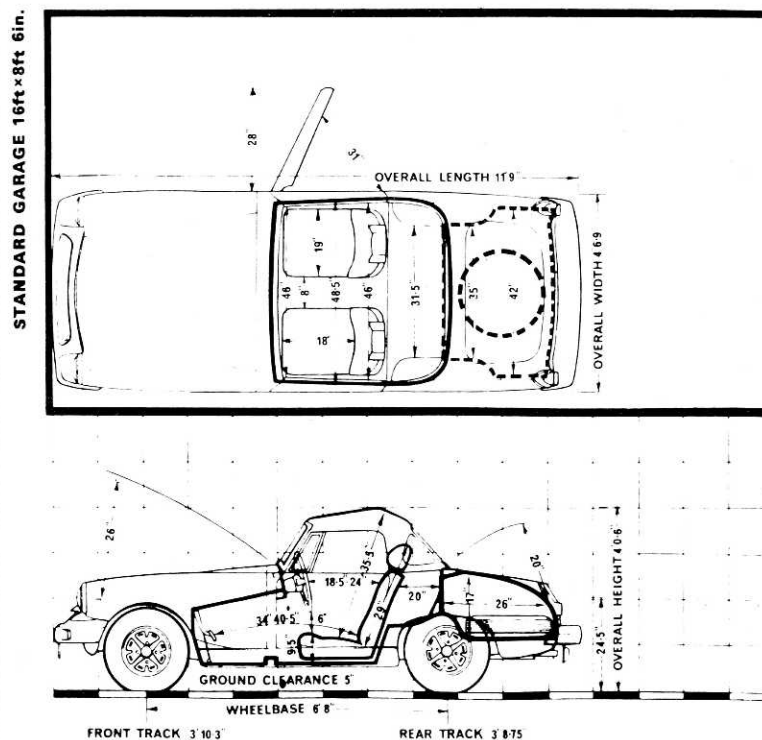
TEST CONDITIONS:

Weather: Fine
 Wind: 0.3 mph
 Temperature: 15deg C (58deg F)
 Barometer: 29.95in. Hg
 Humidity: 65 per cent
 Surface: Dry concrete and asphalt
 Test distance 883 miles

Figures taken by our own staff at the Motor Industry Research Association proving ground at Nuneaton.

All Autocar test results are subject to world copyright and may not be reproduced in whole or part without the Editor's written permission.

Dimensions



TURNING

CIRCLES:
 Between kerbs
 L, 30ft 10in.; R, 31ft 11in.
 Between walls
 L, 32ft 2in.; R, 33ft 3in.
 Steering wheel turns,
 lock to lock 2 1/2

WEIGHT:

Kerb Weight 15.4cwt
 (1,720lb-780kg)
 (with oil, water and
 half full fuel tank)
 Distribution, per cent
 F, 53.7; R, 46.3
 Laden as tested:
 18.0cwt (2,020lb-
 917kg)

Where economy is concerned, one might expect the 1500 to be less economical because of its larger engine. On the other hand its economy should at least be comparable, because the car remains the same size and there is no reason why any more power should be needed to push it along. Two factors upset this tidy calculation. One is that the Midget in its new form

is a good deal heavier; the other is its extra performance, which is used some if not all of the time. As a result, our overall fuel consumption emerged as 27.9 mpg compared with 29.6 mpg for the smaller-engined car. This is not a particularly good figure – worse than the Spitfire 1500 for instance, but then the Spitfire has higher gearing and, for our test, overdrive as well. It

was noticeable, though, that the Midget's consumption stayed almost constant whoever the driver and whatever the journey, and at no time did it record a brim-to-brim figure of better than 30 mpg.

This is not to say that 30 mpg is unattainable. Our steady-speed figures show that cruising at a constant 60 mph (with the hood up!) enables the driver to

better that figure with ease. If this limit were observed and fierce acceleration avoided, the Midget would prove quite economical; but it is not inherently so, still less the way it is likely to be driven.

Handling and brakes

The Midget sticks to its simple suspension arrangement with double wishbones at the front

Specification

MG Midget 1500

FRONT ENGINE, REAR-WHEEL DRIVE

ENGINE

Cylinders	4, in line
Main bearings	3
Cooling system	Water; pump, fan and thermostat
Bore	73.7mm (2.90in.)
Stroke	87.5mm (3.44in.)
Displacement	1,493 c.c. (91.1 cu. in.)
Valve gear	Overhead: pushrods and rockers
Compression ratio	9.0 to 1. Min octane rating: 97RM
Carburettors	2 SU HS4
Fuel pump	SU mechanical
Oil filter	Full-flow, replaceable cartridge
Max power	66 bhp (DIN) at 5,500 rpm
Max torque	77 lb. ft. (DIN) at 3,000 rpm

TRANSMISSION

Clutch	Diaphragm-spring, 7.25in. diameter
Gearbox	4-speed, all-synchromesh
Gear ratios	Top 1-0 Third 1-43 Second 2-11 First 3-41 Reverse 3-75

Final drive	Hypoid bevel, ratio 3.90 to 1
Mph at 1,000 rpm in top gear	16.44

CHASSIS AND BODY

Construction	Integral, with steel body
--------------	---------------------------

SUSPENSION

Front	Independent: double wishbones, lever arm dampers, anti-roll bar
Rear	Live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, lever-arm dampers

STEERING

Type	Rack and pinion
Wheel dia	15½in.

BRAKES

Type	Disc front, drum rear
Dimensions	F 8.25in. dia R 7.0in. dia, 1.25in. wide shoes
Swept area	F, 135 sq. in., R, 55 sq. in. Total 190 sq. in. (211 sq. in./ton laden)

WHEELS

Type	Pressed steel Rostyle, 4-stud fixing, 4in. wide rim
Tyres – make	Pirelli Cinturato (on test car)
– type	Radial ply tubeless
– size	145-13in.

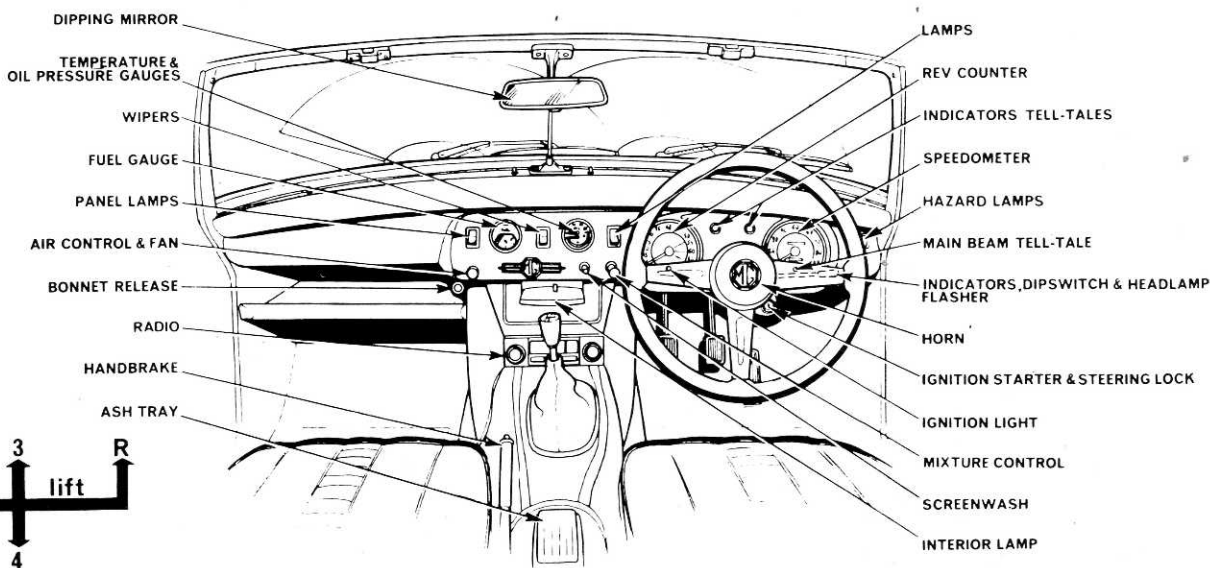
EQUIPMENT

Battery	12 volt 40 Ah.
Alternator	28 amp a.c.
Headlamps	Sealed beam, 120/90 watt (total)
Reversing lamp	Standard

Electric fuses	4
Screen wipers	Single-speed
Screen washer	Standard, manual plunger
Interior heater	Standard, water valve type
Heated backlight	Not available
Safety belts	Static type
Interior trim	Pvc seats
Floor covering	Carpet
Jack	Screw pillar type
Jacking points	One each side
Windscreen	Toughened
Underbody protection	Phosphate treatment under paint

MAINTENANCE

Fuel tank	7 Imp gallons (32 litres)
Cooling system	7½ pints (inc heater)
Engine sump	8 pints (4.5 litres)
	SAE 20W-50. Change oil every 6,000 miles. Change filter every 6,000 miles
Gearbox	1.5 pints. SAE 90EP. Check every 6,000 miles
Final drive	1.75 pints. SAE 90EP. Check every 6,000 miles
Grease	8 points every 6,000 miles
Valve clearance	Inlet 0.010in. (cold) Exhaust 0.010in. (cold)
Contact breaker	0.015in. gap.
Ignition timing	10deg BTDC (stroboscopic at 650 rpm)
Spark plug	Type: Champion N9Y. Gap 0.025in.
Tyre pressures	F 22; R 24 psi (normal driving) F 26; R 28 psi (high speed) F 22; R 26 psi (full load)
Max payload	420lb (190kg)



Servicing

	6,000 miles	Routine Replacements:	Time hours	Labour	Spares	TOTAL
Time Allowed (hours)	3.5	Brake Pads – Front (2 wheels)	1.00	£4.30	£3.80	£8.10
Cost at £4.30 per hour	£15.05	Brake Shoes – Rear (2 wheels)	1.35	£5.80	£3.80	£9.60
Engine oil	£2.50	Exhaust System	0.85	£3.65	£19.50	£23.15
Oil Filter	£2.15	Clutch (centre + driven plate)	8.00	£34.40	£12.83	£47.23
Air Filter	£1.08	Dampers – Front (pair)	1.55	£6.65	£28.88	£35.53
Contact Breaker Points	£0.52	Dampers – Rear (pair)	1.00	£4.30	£25.52	£29.82
Sparking Plugs*	£1.48	Replace Half Shaft	0.55	£2.35	£13.80	£16.15
Total Cost:	£22.78	Replace Alternator	0.70	£3.00	£27.00	£30.00
		Replace Starter	1.60	£6.90	£15.86	£22.76

*when required

and a live rear axle located by semi-elliptic leaf springs with no other form of assistance. It worked well enough in the past, given the Midget's very limited wheel travel, but there are signs that the latest car needs something more sophisticated to cope with its greater torque and performance.

Part of the trouble lies in the fact that the Midget, like the MGB, has been given increased ride height at the back to compensate for the greater weight of its "5 mph" bumpers and associated structure. As a result, roll stiffness at the back end has been reduced and there is much more tendency to oversteer. This is despite the heavier engine which means the front wheels bear a greater part of the total weight.

The best feature of the Midget, as always, is its very quick and accurate steering. With less than three turns of the wheel between extremes of an average 32ft turning circle, the driver never has to tie his arms in knots to turn a corner or rescue a situation. Inevitably, there is some kick-back on rough surfaces, but this is by no means the most tiring feature of the car.

Straight-line stability is no better than average, except on ultra-smooth surfaces. Normally, the Midget feels willing enough to keep to a straight course but if the wheel is released for a moment it soon reveals its willingness to wander off-line. The feeling of stability is actually due to the driver



Massive front bumper makes the whole car look bigger than before; inset lights are well protected by lipped extensions. Door mirrors are part of standard equipment. Headlamps are sealed-beam units, not halogen



Standard number plate is mounted beneath the new "5 mph" bumper, rather than below the boot lid as in previous Midgets. Reversing lights are standard and boot lid can be left unlocked if the driver wishes

being barely conscious of the tiny but constant corrections he is applying.

The handling, as we have already said, holds the promise of oversteer. It is not evident at first, for in gentle driving the Midget stays very close to neutral. When driven harder into a corner, if the driver holds the wheel and accelerator steady, the tail will come out steadily until some of the lock has to be paid off before the car gets too sideways. In itself this is no bad thing, for it enables the Midget to be driven in distinctly sporting fashion by someone who knows what he is doing. At the same time it holds the seeds of danger for anyone less clever.

The real snag to the Midget's handling in 1500 form lies in its sensitivity to the throttle. Given the previous situation where the car has been wound hard into a long, tight bend, any sudden re-

lease of the accelerator will bring the tail out very smartly, calling for opposite lock to pin it down. Again, this is a situation beloved of some drivers but it means the Midget is much less predictable, and certainly calls for more skill, than many small saloons of equal performance and cornering ability. The drawback is compounded by limited roadholding, which can leave the car well-balanced fore and aft, but skittering sideways onto a wider line than desired. Despite the increased weight and torque, the tyre section remains the same at 145-13in., and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the 1500 is somewhat under-tyred.

In the wet, the roadholding is considerably reduced and the Midget tends to skate around on smooth-surfaced corners. In this case, however, it is much more forgiving and the quick

steering really comes into its own.

The brakes need moderate effort and generally work well, giving a well-controlled ultimate stop of 0.95g for a pedal effort of 80lb - well within reasonable limits. The brakes have good "feel", with no sign of sponginess, and no tendency to snatch when cold. Their fade performance is less reassuring with a near-doubling of effort for a 0.5g stop during our ten-stop test, and some smell of linings towards the end; but even then there is no increase in pedal travel.

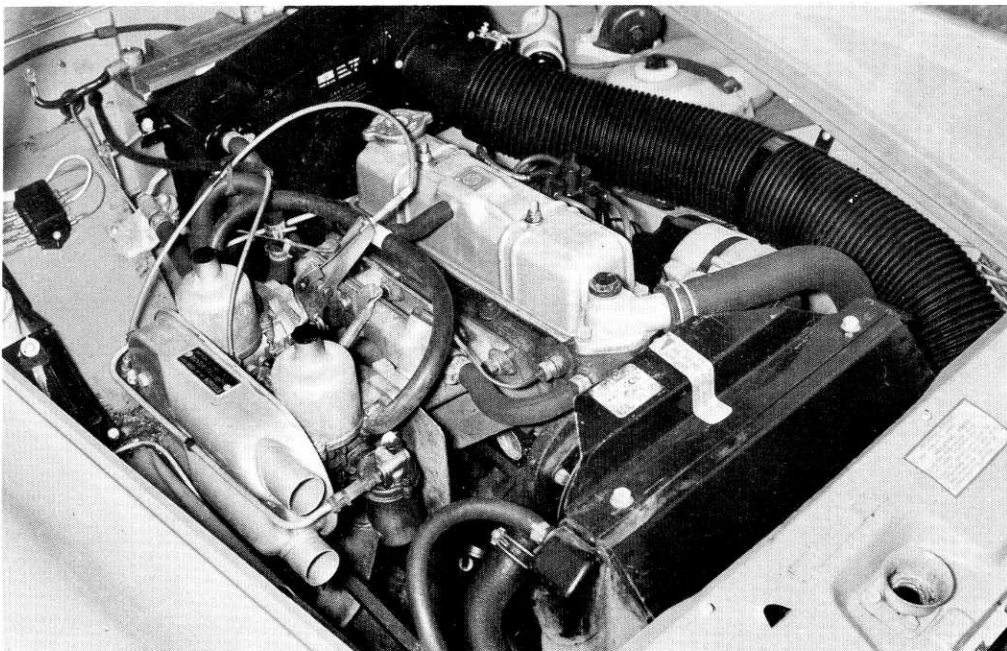
The handbrake works well, our test car recording a 0.33g stop when the handbrake was used alone on the level. It also held the car well facing either way on the 1-in-3 test hill, on which a restart was easily achieved thanks to the low first gear - but not without a smell of clutch lining.

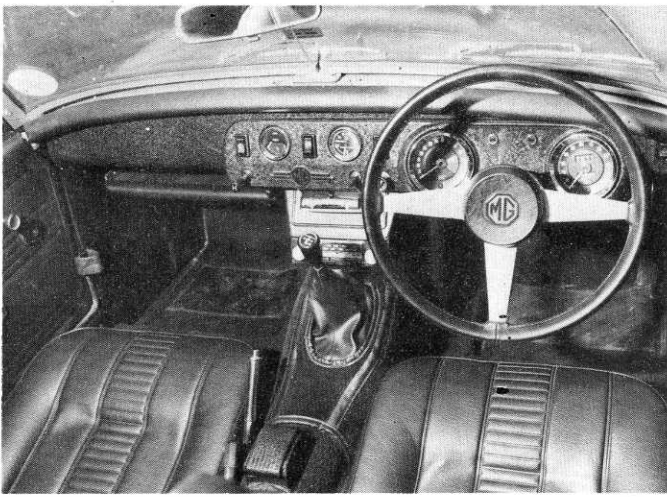
Comfort and convenience.

The Midget could hardly be described as anything but cramped, with difficult entry and exit. It has always been so, and buyers have accepted it. But the statistics tell us that Britons are getting bigger - not to say Americans - and we are surely approaching the point where it may be too small for its own good. In fact our largest staff members (the largest of all scaling 16½ stone and 6ft 2in.) found the interior space just sufficient with the driver's seat moved to its back stop, but complained of their inability to shift position to relieve numb spots. More serious were the contortions involved in getting in and out, even with the hood down.

The seats do not look especially inviting, reminding one of the shapeless BMC equipment of a few years ago. This is doing them less than justice. Together with the generally tight confines of the interior they locate driver and passenger well, and they do their best to damp out the effects of the generally mediocre ride. The ride itself will not disappoint Midget enthusiasts and could only be described, euphemistically, as "good for the liver". The limited wheel travel and high spring rates give the Midget no chance of offering a comfortable ride and the result is misery when the car is driven quickly on any uneven surface, let alone a really rough one. On the credit side it is very rare for the suspension actually to bottom, and the 1500 is notably free of the crashes and bangs which afflicted some earlier Midgets, especially when their dampers were past the first flush of youth. Nor is the handling very much affected by suspension movement, so a driver fit enough to withstand the battering can make rapid progress along almost any British road.

Bigger Triumph 1500TC engine does not look unduly large under Midget bonnet, with plenty of length to spare and room for the massive heater trunking. Access to some items is good, but others (such as battery behind heater blower unit) are difficult to reach

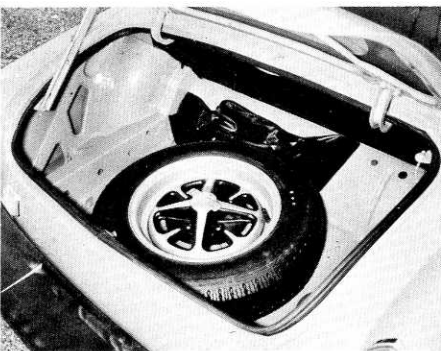




Above: Black crackle-finished fascia panel gives slightly vintage air to the interior. Rev counter and speedometer are widely separated but can still be seen inside rim of large steering wheel. Minor dials are less easily read



Left: Midget seats look rather stylized but not very well shaped; in fact they are quite comfortable, damping out the worst effects of the ride, while the small size of the interior ensures good location. Note the awkwardly-placed door handle by the occupant's shoulder



Boot lid is supported by a single self-locking strut. Capacity is strictly limited and there is a low sill over which luggage must be lifted. Spare wheel and fuel tank lie flat on the boot floor and beneath it respectively

The controls are not well laid out, but at least they are easy to understand and are clearly labelled. There are signs of penny-pinching in the single (too slow) speed wipers, the manual-plunger washer, the primitive heater control. Of the major controls, the steering wheel is larger than one might expect and close to the chest by modern standards; the pedals are understandably close together in their narrow tunnel. Clutch effort is high but pedal movement limited, though the clutch takes up sweetly enough. In the test car, however, the accelerator linkage was rather "sudden" and no help to gentle driving. The gearchange is precise but not as quick as some of its rivals.

A major drawback of the Midget is its high interior noise level. For the most part it is made up of wind noise, which drowns the other components to the extent where one is unsure how much contribution the engine is making until one switches off and coasts at high speed. The wind noise itself comes from the hood, and while this may seem inevitable there are other soft-top cars which do not suffer in the same way (or at least, not to the same extent). In the Midget's case it is noticeable that the car is much quieter with the hood down, and the radio easier to hear, at speeds as high as 70 mph. Indeed, with the hood up the radio is almost inaudible above this speed. The

engine actually makes a lot of noise at higher speeds – it simply can't compete with the wind roar. Induction and exhaust noise is high when the car is accelerating hard, at anything over 5,000 rpm; but when the car is driven more gently the 1500 unit is quiet and refined. Noisy or not, it is very smooth right up to the red line and beyond, in a way that may surprise MG diehards.

Even with the hood up, visibility is not bad. At first sight the windscreen is shallow but it seems to provide sufficient view for short and tall drivers; the hinged quarter-lights obstruct the front-quarter view a little, but the "over-the-shoulder" blind spot is cleared by two extra windows let into the hood. Two door mirrors are standard, but on the test car they continually flopped down to a useless position. The wipers clear only a small area of screen and are too slow to cope with heavy rain. Sealed-beam headlights give good illumination at night but the driver's low eyeline prevents him making the most of it. Reversing lights are standard.

The heater is a primitive affair with a single push-pull control for temperature, and a single-speed fan which can only be switched on when full heat is selected. There is no means of selecting airflow to screen or floor, the output being shared arbitrarily. However, the fan is quiet and the heater clears the screen quickly even in humid conditions. There is no direct-flow ventilation other than via the quarter-lights.

Living with the Midget 1500

By comparison with Midget hoods of a few years ago that of the 1500 is easy to contend with. It is not yet a simple one-handed operation either to stow or erect it, though, and in particular it is much easier to fit its leading edge to the windscreen rail if four hands are available. With the hood down one does not get too battered by the airflow, even at high speed, but one driver found that when driving open in light rain the inside of the windscreen soon became covered in droplets and the occupants of the car dampened.

A basic appeal of the Midget is its simplicity, and this is still so with the 1500 which is no more difficult to work on than its predecessors. The most awkward servicing point is the need

to reach the battery at the very rear of the engine compartment under the hinge line of the bonnet; the dipstick is not easy to find, especially in the dark. A link with tradition is the need to attend to eight grease points during the 6,000-mile service – but there are no intermediate service intervals, so an average car requires only twice-a-year attention.

A main drawback of the car is its small (7-gallon) tank, which gives a safe range of less than 200 miles. It is filled via a simple cap in the rear panel, and unlike many modern tanks can be filled quickly to the brim with no danger of blow-back.

There are few accessories to be added to the Midget from the MG option list. A hardtop is expensive but might prove an investment in terms of reduced wind noise and long-journey comfort; wire wheels are available for those who can face the chore of cleaning them; and head restraints may be specified. There is no overdrive option, far less an automatic. Static seat belts are standard – apparently there is no room for inertia-reel units.

In conclusion

There is no doubt that the performance of the Midget has been greatly improved by its change of engine, and there is now a spread of torque which allows the car to be driven sportingly or to be lugged along all the way in top gear by a lazy or tired driver. At the same time the handling has suffered in some respects and the car is no longer as predictable or forgiving as it was.

People are bound to differ on how badly cramped they find the interior (though few will argue with the infuriating difficulty of reaching the interior door handles), but few would quarrel with the conclusion that the ride is harsh and the noise level over-high.

Now that the Midget and the Spitfire share the same engine, the question of their joint survival must arise. For our money – and there is scant-price difference between the two – the Spitfire is much more practical and civilized. There will always be those who will scorn it for precisely those reasons, but if further rationalization comes to pass it will be difficult to make out a case for the Midget vis-à-vis its stablemate. □

MANUFACTURER:

British Leyland UK Ltd., Austin-Morris Division, Longbridge, Birmingham

PRICES

Basic	£1,333.00
Special Car Tax	£111.08
VAT	£115.53
Total (in GB)	£1,559.61
Seat Belts, static type	(standard)
Licence	£40.00
Delivery charge (London)	£15.00
Number plates	£6.60
Total on the Road (exc Insurance)	£1,621.21

Insurance Group 5

EXTRAS (inc VAT)

Wire wheels	£56.12
Hard top	£112.09
Head restraints*	£18.27
*Fitted to test car	

TOTAL AS TESTED ON THE ROAD

£1,639.48