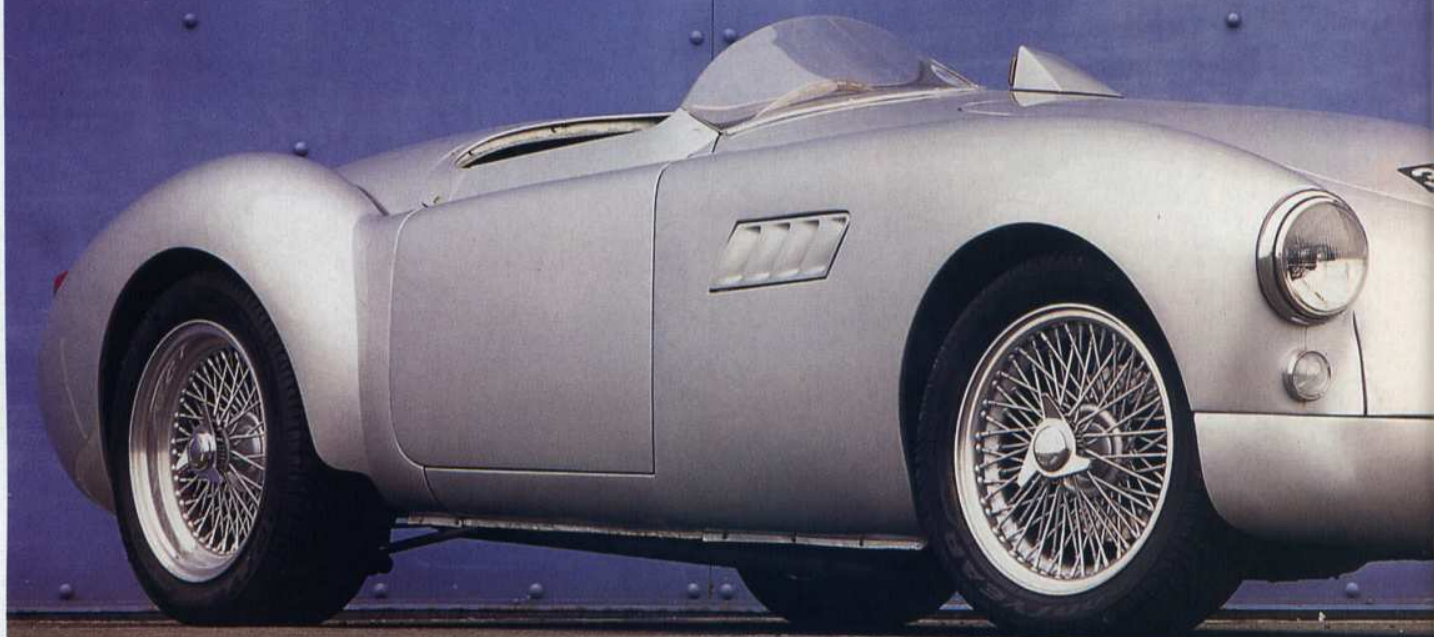


SILVER

machine





Words – Chris Rees
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They said it couldn't be done, but Warren Kennedy has achieved the impossible and shoehorned a V8 engine into an MGA. Add a Le Mans-style racing body and you have what is probably the most beautiful, and undoubtedly the fastest, MGA in the world

We all know about MGBs with V8 engines – sticking in a light-alloy Rover V8 gives the 'B' an entirely new character. But it can't be done with an MGA, can it? Warren Kennedy, of Bedfordshire-based Classic Restorations, thought otherwise. Not only has he succeeded in fitting a V8 into an 'A', he has also created a superb evocation of a 1950s Le Mans racer.

'The idea first came to me at the bar during the Valiant Run two years ago. I wanted something a little bit different that would attract the attention of the MG world. I'd always preferred the MGA to the MGB, and initially my thoughts had drifted towards putting an Alfa Romeo or Lancia twin-cam engine into one, but people – quite understandably, I suppose – frowned at that idea. So I suggested using a V8 and everyone told me that it simply couldn't be done. Imagine their surprise when, exactly one year later at the next Valiant Run, I turned up in my MGA V8!'

Warren attributes the inspiration for the 'A V8 to a Frazer-Nash owned by his father. It was the original 1956 Earls Court Motor Show car, which subsequently became the 1957 Le Mans car. Due to the quirks of the Le Mans organisers, however, the drivers were told that they were too inexperienced to race. At the 11th hour they relented, but by then one of the drivers was so infuriated that he refused to race, and the 'Nash never took to the grid. The car came into Kennedy Senior's possession and he replaced the original coupé body – an incontrovertibly ungainly shape – with a stark Le Mans replica body. 'I personally wouldn't have done it, but you can understand why he went that way,' says Warren. The magic ingredient of this particular Le Mans replica was that it had a BMW 507 V8 engine.

That car, therefore, together with his overall passion for the 1950s Le Mans era, led him in the direction of a V8-powered MGA with the flavour of the Mulsanne

flyers. So he has not only fitted a Rover V8 engine but has recreated some of the look and feel of the MG EX 182 cars that raced at Le Mans in 1955 before the official launch of the MGA.

'I wanted to create something with clean lines, a 1950s racing feel and modern equipment such as all-round disc brakes,' says Warren. The result has the beefy flavour of a Cobra, but the manners and presence of a modern car.

Kennedy began with a bog-standard 1500 left-hand-drive Californian import. A surprising amount of the original car is still left after the transformation, including the main body, sills, doors, boot, bonnet and wings. However, you can hardly fail to spot that certain parts of the MG have been heavily modified.

The whole car looks wider and more muscular than a standard MGA, and that's because the front and rear wings have been painstakingly reshaped to add width. They have been cut down their centreline and new metal grafted in, widening each wing by some two inches. The sections are not uniformly wider, though, but vary in width to suit the profile, narrowing right down at the end of the front wing, for example, but continuing down the rear wing protrusion.

The rest of the body transformation echoes, but does not ape, the 1955 Le Mans car. All the extra new panelwork is beautifully handcrafted in-house in aluminium. So you have a superb-looking front valance with Le Mans style cutouts, for example. The door skins are aluminium, as per original, the bonnet is standard, as is the alloy boot lid apart from a hole for the Le Mans-style fuel filler.

Warren did not opt for the Le Mans works bonnet style with its venting cut into the top end, as all this did was to baffle hot air in the rear of the engine bay. Instead, the hot air is sucked out through standard MGA vents. The bonnet and boot lid do follow Le Mans etiquette with their leather straps,





Attention to detail (below) is everything on this MG, from the beautifully put-together braking system, to the aluminium dash and period instruments. The badge on the front leaves no doubt as to the car's heritage.



though. Another very neat Le Mans fitment is the headlamps which are original and rare Lucas Le Mans 24-hour period units, as used by Aston Martin racers and the like in the 1950s. Another neat touch is the grille, which has its shield removed.

The cockpit is partly enclosed with aluminium tonneau panelling. This consists of bolt-on extensions to the door tops, a cutout panel surrounding the driver, and a cover over the passenger's seat. Kennedy has also developed a second open cutout cover that allows a passenger to be carried, although that person won't have a screen in front of them as the driver does.

The driver's screen itself was produced using a mould taken from a genuine Le Mans item. There is also a rear-view mirror box atop the scuttle.

The Borrani replica wires wheels with their triple-pronged spinners look simply stunning, as indeed they should when they cost £3500 for a set of four! The 16-inch wheels help fill out the wider arches and, with their low profile tyres, give the car a contemporary edge. No MGA ever had rubber as sure-footed as this – the engagingly styled ZR-rated Goodyear Eagle F1s measure a mighty 205/50 at the front and 225/50 at the rear.

The overall effect is spectacular. Indeed, at first glance it is not obvious that this is an MGA at all – you could say it has an air of AC Cobra about it. Paint it red and it could be mistaken for a Testa Rossa! It has a muscular feel that the 'A' never had, and the effect is enhanced by its pure 1962 British Silver paint scheme.

The interior is just as becoming, with a flavour that has a definite 1950s racer style.

Instrumentation is kept to a minimum: there are just three warning lights, an original horn button, Lucas ignition switch, push-button starter and the original indicator switch relocated under the dash, TD-style. Dominating the fascia are the large rev counter and smaller speedometer, which are the original Jaeger items treated to SS100-inspired period-style faces with silver-and-blue lettering. These sit in a fabulous hand-turned aluminium dashboard with dark-blue leather trim.

The leather treatment can also be found on the transmission tunnel and inner door trims, while the aluminium theme is continued with chequer-plate inner doors, floor, side panels and rear bulkhead. The transmission tunnel has been widened to clear the new Rover gearbox. In keeping with the Le Mans racer theme, the fuel lines and wiring are all in-board and visible in the cockpit. The seats are period-style buckets that are presently trimmed in cloth, although Warren plans to finish them eventually in dark-blue leather to match the rest of the trim.

And so to the V8 installation, which was not as difficult as so many MG enthusiasts said it would be. In fact the engine can be removed as a unit without taking the heads off. Access to the engine is good, too, as the front-mounted radiator can be easily removed from its cradle. Apart from cutouts to make the exhaust fit, the inner front wings needed no modification.

'The exhaust was undoubtedly the most difficult aspect of the build,' says Warren. 'To make it fit in the space available and to get all the pipes the right length to ensure a good flow was the greatest challenge. The

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car has a 4-into-2-into-1 manifold with a twin-pipe system and a balance pipe across the centre below the gearbox, although it's actually all symmetrical.' The exhaust can be accessed via removable panels in the inner wheel arches, by the way.

The engine is a brand-new 3.9-litre short unit, which actually worked out cheaper to buy (at under £1000) than rebuilding the bottom end of a 3.5-litre unit. Warren has fitted new fully polished and ported Stage 3 heads with machined 30cc chambers and big valves, plus a fast road cam, four-barrel Weber carburettor, a fabulous Offenhauser manifold, twin-point Mallory distributor and a lightened and balanced flywheel. In this tune the engine develops a very healthy 260bhp.

'I recently took the car round a French track near Laon and was very pleased with how it went,' recalls Warren. 'It was lapping at 1 minute 19 seconds, beating Dodge Vipers, Porsche 911s, Ferraris and a Mercedes 300SL' which were all around the 1 minute 23 to 27 second level. In fact, we were only beaten by race-tuned lightweight cars, such as Ginettas!

The rest of the mechanicals come from

a variety of sources. The front suspension uses coil-over shocks, while the rear end is based around an MGC axle with anti-tramp bars and a 3.9:1 final drive for comfortable cruising ability. The front brakes are MG discs with four-pot calipers, while the rear ones are modified Ford Sierra Cosworth discs. The steering system uses a modified late-model MGB rack.

As the boot lid cut-out suggests, a large Le Mans-type fuel tank virtually fills the boot area and actually straddles both exhaust pipes as they exit through cut-outs in the rear panel. Also in the boot is a Facet fuel pump with feed return and breather, and a small, lightweight DETA battery. Surprisingly, though, Warren claims that, inch for inch, there is actually more storage space in this car than the original MGA. 'Because there is no spare wheel and no hood, there is still space in the boot, while the area behind the seats has boxes to store luggage. We managed to get 48 bottles of wine in a standard MGA the last time we went to France; we aim to beat that with this car! We also plan to fit a space-saver wire wheel in a cradle under the rear end.'

Overall weight is around 200lb less

Race-style filler cap and Ferrari-esque side vents all help to create that unique 1950s look.





DATAFILE

Body	1957 MGA 1500 on standard chassis, modified with widened arches, aluminium front valance, tonneau, mirror shroud, Perspex Le Mans screen, no bumpers
Engine	New Rover V8 with Stage 3 heads, fast cam, Weber four-barrel carburettor, Offenhauser manifold, lightened and balanced flywheel
Capacity	3900cc
Maximum power	Approximately 260bhp
Transmission	Rover five-speed manual
Suspension	Coil-over dampers at the front, MGC axle at the rear
Wheels and tyres	Borrani replica wire wheels with Goodyear Eagle F1 tyres: 205/50 ZR16 front, 225/50 ZR16 rear
Brakes	Front: discs with four-pot calipers; rear: modified Ford Cosworth discs
Price	£45,000

Classic Restorations



With a father who drove SS100s and Frazer-Nashes, it is perhaps not surprising that Warren Kennedy (pictured left) should share a passion for cars. He began his career as an apprentice at Ogle Design, during which time he undertook many personal projects for boss Tom Karen.

There he learned his panel-forming skills on cars as diverse as the Popemobile, four-door Range Rover and Ogle Metro.

Classic Restorations is evidently a thriving business. Having been mainly an MG specialist for many years, Warren has begun to diversify after he saw the beginnings of a price war in the MG world. He's still primarily an MG man, though, and the yard outside the works is littered with various MGs, not to mention a Lotus Eclat, Fiat 500, Triumph TR4A, Frazer-Nash and Naylor TF.

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than an MGB V8 Roadster, suggests Warren. 'The standard 'A' is 37lb lighter than the 'B' and we have removed the windscreen, wipers, bumpers and interior trim.' The car drives extremely well. Acceleration is blistering with this 260bhp engine, while the brakes feel ultra-modern and secure. The fat Eagle F1 tyres boast huge amounts of grip and the whole car has the air of being totally sorted.

The great news for anyone who likes this interpretation of the 'A' is that it is not just a one-off. Kennedy intends to put the car into production and has named it LM55 – to celebrate the appearance of the team of prototype MGAs in the 1955 Le Mans.

Warren intends to offer a strictly limited run of aluminium-bodied versions. They won't be cheap, at £45,000 for a replica to this specification, so it's strictly a machine for the discerning few. The price could be reduced, though, if you compromise on choice of wheels, standard interior trim rather than aluminium, and use original weather gear rather than the hand-crafted screens and covers.

Warren hopes that sales of the alloy-bodied cars will fund the development of an MGB-based kit-form version further down the line. This will feature a high quality glassfibre body incorporating bolt-on wings (so there will also be a market for them among restorers) and opening panels. The light weight of the glassfibre panels should prove popular with the racing community.



Furthermore, Warren is planning to tool up to make a replica MGA chassis; something that he doesn't believe has been done before. 'Using a replica chassis means that there will be a market among restorers, while kit builders won't have to go through an SVA test, which would mean fitting modern items such as foglamps.'

A second car is in the planning stage at the moment. This will have a full-width screen which may take the form of double Perspex screens, an original screen cut-down to size, or a Triumph TR-style slide-in screen with aeros behind it. The next car will also gain a full leather interior, carpets and possibly some weather gear.

Reaction has been overwhelmingly positive at a variety of shows. The venerable Don Hayter, who was involved in the original development of the MGB, has had a good look around the car, too, and was very complimentary, saying that this is just the sort of thing that MG should have done. 'Don said he wants to have a test-drive,' smiles Warren. 'He certainly can, so long as I can have a go in his factory MGB V8 Roadster!' **MGW**