



Gears without fears

East Anglian V8 Burbler, Ashley Vane, says "you've no doubt seen all the advertising and articles in various MG magazines recently about the Mazda 5 speed gearbox conversion, well from someone who has made the "change" I can thoroughly recommend it as money well spent".

I am not a stickler for originality and I think tasteful and relevant 'mods' are perfectly acceptable. The original 4 speed gearbox in the Factory MGBGV8 with overdrive invariably ended up with 3rd being blocked off because of too many warranty claims caused by excessive torque in that gear. Maybe that's why BL fitted the detuned 137bhp Range Rover engine to reduce warranty claims and improve reliability on a gearbox that was only just capable of doing its job.

The previous owner of my 1975 MGBGV8 had a replacement 4 litre engine with big valve heads supplied and fitted in 2009 by RPI. The original SU carbs and gearbox (replaced in 1991 and therefore in good condition with only 20,000 miles use) were retained. I drove the car sympathetically as I felt the gearbox was not really capable of handling the excellent 190 bhp of the 4 litre V8.

I carried out considerable research into alternative 5 speed gearboxes like the LT77 which requires mods to the gearbox cross member, gearbox tunnel and remote gearchange to enable the gearstick to be located in the correct position. All possible but time consuming and requiring new slave cylinders, speedo cable, propshafts etc. Clearly an expensive option.

In August 2016 I saw a Vitesse Global advertisement in Practical Classics offering free fitting of their Mazda MX-5 gearbox conversion to an MGB. There was no mention of V8s so I contacted Christian Disney of Vitesse in Hinckley who told me about a recent conversion they had carried out to a US spec 3.9 litre engined MGB Roadster. He told me they were working on a standard kit and they should be able to fit the MX-5 gearbox to my car and that mine would be the first Factory V8 to have the gearbox. If I were to go ahead Vitesse would treat my car as the 'guinea pig'. After further discussion and a good deal of thought I decided to proceed and let Vitesse 'do their thing' with my car.

A correct bellhousing had to be cast and a special clutch plate sourced before I drove my car from home in Suffolk to Vitesse in Hinckley in November 2016 where I stayed overnight before

handing it over to the company for them to carry out the conversion. Vitesse were most welcoming and gave me a tour of their immaculate and impressive workshop while my car was made ready for its eagerly awaited conversion. They stripped the car and made ready to remove the engine and gearbox. The company carries out work for Morgan and Land Rover so they have a good deal of the right experience for the job. All went well and they even resealed the sump during the process.

However, next day a major problem was encountered. The new engine and gearbox combination would not line up with the new gearbox mounting bracket. Vitesse could not quite understand why and told me the car might not be ready to drive home that day. They offered to pay for an extra overnight stay or trailer my car to my home when it was completed - or I could borrow their V8 Roadster. What a choice! I did, of course, borrow the V8 Roadster and experienced the joy of its 5 speed gearbox and 3.9 litres of delicious V8 power! I soon relished the decision I had made in going for 5 speeds instead of the original 4 plus overdrive.

The V8 Roadster felt modern with quite superb driving characteristics. Closer ratios with smooth, positive and quiet operation, no big gap between 2nd and 3rd and no whining – even in reverse. And the car weighs 13.5 kgs less – better than a crash diet!

Christian called on November 10th to tell me my car was ready and that they'd found the problem. Apparently, when the 4 litre engine was installed in my MGBGV8 the engine mounts had been fitted on the wrong side effectively pushing the engine forward by 10mm instead of backwards thus causing a 20mm discrepancy with the gearbox mounting. Putting that right and shortening the exhaust system solved the problem and all was well. The car feels superb to drive. I can now use the delicious power of the V8 without worrying about the potential fragility of the gearbox. Oh and also the new gearbox really is brand new and carries a 12 month guarantee from Mazda Europe.

The whole kit for the MGBGV8 is around £2,700 including VAT plus fitting. That may seem a lot but bear in mind that Type 9 gearbox conversions for Midgets and Morris Minors cost up to £3,000 so this is very good value for money.

And as for Vitesse Global I can't say enough in their favour. They are enthusiastic, knowledgeable and caring - a very good company.

