

Reborn MG comes up to the marque

THERE is something about the MG that touches hearts. Rover must feel like Conan Doyle following the "death" of Sherlock Holmes at the hands of Moriarty. Pressure to resurrect something approaching a national treasure becomes irresistible — which is why an MG sports is back in production.

The MG R V-8 is based on the MGB, which ceased production 13 years ago, and sets MG on track for a return to full production of sports cars in two years.

At £26,500, the MG R V-8 is expensive, and the 3.9-litre Rover V-8 engine is hardly in the tradition of nimble little MG sports cars. It may have the proportions of the much-loved MGB, but it has twice as many cylinders and more than twice the power.

Rover was faced with a dilemma. If MG was going to get off the ground, it could not wait until a new car was developed for 1996. It turned to British Motor Heritage, which hand-makes replacement MGB body shells at a small workshop in Faringdon, Oxfordshire.

Heritage was asked to produce a limited series of bodies for a new model based on the MGB, but updated to meet modern safety standards.

Only 25% of the old MGB body remains. The original floor pan survives, along with the doors and the boot, but little else. The rounded front and rear wings and deeper body sill are all new, along with the bonnet,

Eric Dymock is first to test a relaunched national treasure

which has a bulge to clear the tall engine management system.

There was a GT version of the old MGB, with a V-8 fitted in the original engine bay. The modern V-8 has fuel injection, electronic ignition, catalytic converter, a five-speed gearbox (the MGB had four gears plus overdrive) and wide-tread, fat Michelin tyres.

Development of the R V-8 seemed sluggish and production is only now under way. The first customer took delivery only last week and this is the first press test of the finished vehicle.

MG lovers can rest content — it is every inch an MG. Rover has carefully identified a target buyer, taken aim with the R V-8 and fired. If the typical MG enthusiast is a fifty-something well-off male who failed to get a good MG first time round, this car will score a bullseye.

It will score a wide miss with anyone aspiring to a modern-day sports car, such as a Toyota Supra or Porsche 968. The live back axle with its small spring travel, limited by the confines of the body, puts paid to that.

The tail is skittish in the wet — just as sports cars used to be — and accelerating in low gears needs to be judicious. The fat tyres give good grip in the dry but make steering very heavy at parking speeds.

The MG R V-8 is exquisitely furnished with deeply supportive leather seats and a walnut-trimmed fascia, like the MGs of old. The hood, like those of later-series MGBs, folds easily and can be erected quickly, although it is not lined or sound-proofed.

The R V-8 is, accordingly, not particularly quiet. It burbles along slowly with a distinctive deep growl from the V-8, and at speed the wind fairly whistles past the hood. There is a primitive-looking screen that can be erected behind the occupants to deflect the slipstream.

This is not the heir of the T-Series MG sports cars of the 1950s, nor even the sprightly MGA. You have to go further back to identify its ancestors among the S, V and W MGs of the 1930s — touring cars that thought they were Bentleys.

The front resembles that of the rubber-bumpered MGB, the least creditable of the series made between 1962 and 1980, which seems a pity. Rover has revived its traditional grille to regain its identity, so it is surprising that the opportunity to have a proper MG frontage has been missed.

MG is back. Moriarty has been outwitted, Sherlock Holmes lives.



Four score: the MG R V-8's beefy 3.9-litre engine should be a winner Picture: