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A r t i c l e s

TO PART, OR NOT TO PART? THAT IS THE QUESTION (PART I)

Richard Kelly

Glancing through past numbers of *Safety Fast!*, I came across a note in the issue for April 1988 on 'V8's and the Married Man', in which Knowlsey, your esteemed V8 scribe, was describing how he was about to take on the responsibilities of a wife, mortgage, cat and a greenhouse etc., and how he was also in some quandary as to whether his intended would allow the garaging of his other girlfriend, the V8. He is, no doubt, a wiser man by now, wherever his V8 is kept, but reading his

note prompts me to write of my own experiences in this respect, and perhaps, as a belated reassurance to him, or any others contemplating the Holy state: V8's and marriage are definitely compatible — it's parting with them that's the problem!

I've enjoyed marriage for a few years now, with not a word said against the V8. I made sure of this! The three of us started off very much in the manner I meant us to go on, with the V8 well to the fore, as the accompanying photograph of our departure from the wedding reception proves! I'm the good natured-looking inebriate hanging on to the other side of the car, although I hasten to add, I didn't drive in that state — someone was kind enough to prop me up for the camera.



Joking apart, there's a perfectly serious side to owning a V8, and one which cannot be given up lightly, marriage or otherwise. They're highly addictive machines, particularly when it comes to selling. I can't suggest a cure, but maybe my story will convince you that it's better to live with the addiction than suffer the

withdrawal — I'll let you draw your own conclusions.

The V8 concerned is a rather special one, quite apart from my affection for it. It's one of the first ten, standard factory V8's — HOH 932L — and one of a like number of BL's press demonstrators, being the car reviewed in *Motor Sport* for

October 1973 shortly after the V8 was launched. I came across it quite by accident, and never realised its history until after I'd bought it. It was in a sorry state then, needing a lot of work; but luckily, I acquired it just before the restoration fever bit, and just long enough after factory production had ceased, that you could pick up a rough example for a little over a grand or so.

I hadn't owned many cars up to that time, but I'd owned enough to find out that some went faster than others, and some went even faster. My first car wasn't in any of these categories though — it was a Wolseley Hornet Mk III, the 'Mini with the boot' and the 'trampoline', hydrolastic suspension — the Midwife's, or District Nurse's Mini! It had been my mother's from new and she wanted something better: I'd just started my first job and was too poor and shy to approach the bank manager, let alone risk deception at the hands of a motor trader. The Wolseley seemed a much safer bet, being still reliable and a known quantity; so, for four hundred quid, another hundred for a round of tyres and a service, I was away . .

I'm bound to say at this point that all my school friends had long since gone through the Mini stage. Most of them were on their third Capri by the time I started with the Wolseley. I was obviously a late developer as far as cars were concerned. During school days I was far more interested in trainspotting and Coronation Class 4-6-2's to think about cars. They were boring and besides, when my friends did start to drive, I couldn't see the point in riding around, stacked seven-up like deck-chairs, in the back of a Mini van with a furry dashboard and a silly little steering wheel. All that suddenly changed however, after driving the Wolseley for a while. The problem was that it just wouldn't go faster than the next slowest car, which as far as I could make out, had never been made.

I wrote a rather coy letter to one of those car magazines of the day catering for Marina owners and up-and-coming boy racers, asking how I could tune the Wolseley to go faster. I already had vague notions of twin carbs, but that's as far as things went: I needed to know a lot more. The reply came, all about Cooper heads and LCB exhausts, but not soon enough, for in my indecent haste for speed; or rather, trying to avoid the embarrassment of having had my letter published and seen by my garage friends, I opted for a different solution . . .

"Was it you in that magazine, Ritch? . . chuckle, chuckle . . . Put a bigger 'lastic in it!" . . . Loud cackles of laughter. "You don't want to bother with twin carbs and heads and the like . . . they're a load of

trouble... Stick a 1275 in it... that'll make it shift! You might even catch some pigeons if you keep your mouth open long enough!"... More laughter. It wasn't long before I'd found an abandoned 1275, and in the wisdom of hindsight, I now know why. I returned to the garage.

"Well, if you insist on wasting your money, at least get the thing done up right!", and I was directed to this, "veritable guru", they knew; "The only one worth knowing when it comes to engines!" The guru had apparently kept a garage since 1910 and had all the reboring jigs etc. "He'll do a corker of a job for you, and if you slip him a few packets of No. 6, he'll do it much better than any of these commercial outfits!" I was suitably impressed: just what the doctor ordered I thought.

I found the Engine Guru working alone, putting the spring back into what appeared to be a broken alarm clock, in the rear of a huge old, ramshackle garage which clearly hadn't heard the sound of an engine for years. Until I'd produced the No. 6, the old codger was reluctant to even look at me, let alone talk about the engine, and in any case, still fumbling with the clock, he just couldn't understand why fine young fellows such as myself wanted to charge around the place like maniacs... BMC cars, and God's if he'd been driving one, were quite fast enough as they were. He muttered something about an Austin Jiffy or Jumpy which had been quite fast enough in his day with just 650 ccs. All this added to the mystique, of course. Pushing the No. 6 in his direction, I eventually managed to persuade him that I wasn't one of those nasty chaps in rally jackets racing up and down the King's Highway, besides... "it would be sacrilege to waste such good workmanship!", I said. On hearing this, the clock clattered to the floor and the No. 6 vanished beneath the bench. He looked intently and hissed through his cigarette stump that in the rare event it had to, the engine could fly the Wolseley after he'd finished with it! I was enthralled...

It took several visits, hundreds of No. 6's, colds, aches and as many deaths as the proverbial cat's allowed before the engine was ready. In the meantime, I could have sat an 'O-level' in gas-flowed heads, high lift cams, balanced cranks, competition clutches, and so on! But finally, the moment of truth came: the engine was fitted and there were 1275 ccs (or was it 1293 after a rebore?) under the bonnet. I bought a pair of discreet little 'GT' badges to stick to the boot lid and front grille, and one of those silly little steering wheels which I'd so despised before, to go in the cockpit. I felt ready to fly!

For about a week, I was elated as the Wolseley 'GT' was taken through its paces. It could easily overtake wheelchairs and pedestrians, but somehow, the thrills soon subsided: it just wasn't fast enough for me. To add to my mounting disappointment, no-one had mentioned the gearbox, which should

also have been overhauled. How was I to know that the synchromesh crashed on 3rd and 2nd gears? It had looked OK when it was split from the block; nothing could possibly have been wrong with it!

I lived with the crashing gears and wrote another letter to the same magazine asking for go-faster formulae for the 1275. However, just as before, I pre-empted the reply and parted with even more money for a Howley Racing head, twin carbs and an extractor exhaust. Sure enough, the Wolseley now began to shift much more in keeping with its new GT badges, and much more to my liking...

I remember well those heady days, just after the new dual carriageway had opened on the A55 at Aber... Molly Melons, whom I'd always fancied at school in her mini-skirt beside me, and the needle on the newly-fitted Cooper S speedo flickering on the 105 mph mark — I was one of the lads at last!... A rev counter purloined out of an MG 1300 at the breaker's yard, bouncing up and down on the dash tray and a smell of burning from somewhere... but, who cared, even if there was a fog of white smoke behind us as I decelerated off the dual carriageway into a smoochy lay-by?... the valve stem oil seals going down the exhaust pipe with the smoke, and probably much of the cylinder walls as well! Melons certainly didn't care...

The disillusionment returned: with the Wolseley 'GT', as well as with Melons. That speedo needle steadfastly refused to pass the 105 mark and there were plenty of boring old Cortinas and the like which sat on my tail until I had to give in and let them pass. There was no way that a long-stroke BL 1275 was going to rev happily above 6000 rpm, no more than, as I found out, Melons was going to in the back seat. I half toyed with the idea of parting with a very large sum of money for a specially made diff with a 2.7:1 final drive ratio which would have taken us to 130 mph. Alas, St. Part-With-Thy-Money must have heard my prayers, for before I'd even sent an order for the new diff, I had literally given away considerably more, for what I was convinced was the *Ultimate Mini!*

To be continued...

AN ODD ARTICLE

Rob Higgins

Have you ever worked out **exactly** how much it has cost to run your everyday cars? No cheating now, no forgetting that little suspension rebuild or tax and insurance. And no smugness from those who bought their T types for 2/6d in 1955 and only use company cars every day.

The total costs of running the old cars I have owned over the last 7 years are shown in the table. All have been used for day to day transport, apart from the MGA, which I include to try and persuade my better half that it's not a complete waste of money. I have assumed that the cars currently owned are not subject to depreciation, as the purchase costs would be recovered from insurance if the

proverbial company Cavalier wiped them out unexpectedly (though I wouldn't like to see the Cavalier after trying to destroy the MGC or pre-crumple zone Volvo).

The total costs of running each of these very different cars are astonishingly similar — not at all what I expected when I started to do the sums.

I should explain that these figures are not the result of exacting care in purchase and running, and that less than half the servicing and repair work has been done by myself (apart from the MGA, almost all my work). The modus operandi for many years has been a supremely naive policy that consisted of running a dilapidated old rust bucket for 1 or 2 years in the mistaken belief that I was the custodian of a fine and historic fragment of motoring history. Sadly, the MGB, Morris Traveller and Mini Cooper were all sold for next to nothing with no MOT and a (quite misplaced) hope that I would learn from my experience. Despite this, the running costs were not prohibitively high.

How do these costs compare with running newer cars? Sara had a VW Polo before we were married, which was bought when 4 years old. Over 50,000 miles this cost rather less than the old cars (about 17 pence per mile at 1990 prices). However, the lower costs were counterbalanced by dull handling, poor brakes and appalling starting from cold in later years. As for the costs of running new cars, buy a copy of "What Car" and shudder! A 1990 Volvo 240 series estate would cost more than twice as much as our 1968 model, with relatively little difference between the cars mechanically.

The economy of the old cars has to be weighed against mechanical unreliability. None of the cars we have run for more than 10,000 miles has escaped major breakdown (ie needing either a tow-in or the AA). However, there is a big psychological difference between old and new cars here. If an old friend runs into a little trouble, this is expected and easily forgiven. "Well, of course, the distributor's gone, its 25 years old and has gone round and round at least a billion times, poor old thing" is an easy form of self delusion. On the other hand, when the pinnacle of modern technology won't start the whole day is wrecked, and life in general has a rather bleak outlook for several days, the heart attack looms up several years earlier etc, etc, etc.

Which of the cars here has provided the best blend of value and enjoyable motoring? Well, not the Mini Cooper. I was always late for work because the old dog wouldn't start (new distributor, leads, plugs, coil, battery made no difference), and the MGC handles better (yes, really). The Volvo will probably be cheapest to run in the long term, as the costs I've shown here include a large bill for new bodywork and a respray. To digress a little, the quality of engineering has to be admired in the Volvo. Line up the Heath Robinson MG connections between SU carbs on an MG, and the beautiful little rods with ball and socket joints on the Volvo and you will see

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overworked and stained beyond recovery I swish-swashed my way to the side of the car to ask Chris for something dry, a bit of cloth. She replied to the effect that NO-WAY was she stripping off, and she doubted that anything was dry, even things hidden from sight unless its bull in china shop time. She sat and brushed her hair! That's a feminine thing to do isn't it? I mean, it was her Midget anyway!

Amortised. Deaded. Expired, Kaputed. Vanilla-ed, sorry, wrong, that's ice-cream I think.

Luckily a tractor perched along (like that? perched, has a sort of Biblical ring to it) and the friendly local hauled us out and towed us dripping all the way to Patricia and David's.

It took Chris twenty years to get her own back. Imagine, fancy saving up that little incident to tell the solicitors about in the divorce. Mind you, its an ill winds that blows nobody any good. I subscribed to the AA now, oh yes, and the RNLI.

Bye for now, maybe I can let you into another bit of my MG past in the future, I remain your MG-ness, Wakely, A., O Positive, Capricorn.

*The Royal Oak in St. Neots is now The Halifax Building Society and there is a brass plate. The Swan in Bedford has metamorphosed (now there's a word boy!) into the Moat House, one of those plastic and chrome jobs which could be in Japan or Los Angeles — soul-less is the word. — APW.

THE MG MARQUE IN THE 1990s

David Knowles

The role of the M.G. badge in the coming decade promises to be radically different from its role during the last. During the 1980's a range of M.G. badged cars was spawned which, at its peak, contained six different models on sale simultaneously. Whereas the Austin Rover management of the early '80s used the M.G. badge as a means to dramatically uplift the image of their mainstream Austin saloon ranges, a leaner and arguably much more dynamic Rover Group has entered the new decade with very different plans. Within two years, it seems that the M.G. badged saloon will be no more, as firstly, the M.G. Metro bites the dust this Spring (to be replaced by a new Rover Metro GTi), followed by the end of the MG Maestro and MG Montego as their respective ranges are discontinued. This change in policy centres around the clear intention of Rover to consolidate the image of its predominant marque now that the Austin name has been buried. The writing was on the wall when the "GTa" and "GTi" versions of the existing ranges appeared, and despite some early thoughts that the forthcoming coupé version of the Rover 200 might have been badged as an MG, most of the future outputs of Longbridge and Cowley will be either Rovers or Hondas. However, another important part of the equation is the fact that Rover are determined to

crack the highly lucrative North American market, one which they all but abandoned in 1981 but then re-entered with a clean sheet just five years later. The outcome of the Rover/Honda "XX" project was launched in the USA as the Sterling 800 range, but despite a promising reception, sales have subsequently fallen way below expectations. Sterling dealers have had to depend upon a single product line for too long and now they are united in calling for an expanded range offering much more variety. Foremost in their requests is an MG in the traditional idiom; a two-seater open-topped sports car. Tentative plans for such a car have been in the melting pot throughout the past decade, but at each stage the project has been allowed to simmer on the back burner due to other priorities. Now, however, Mazda have launched a sensational sports car (the MX-5 Miata) and Rover, egged on by their North American dealers, have been encouraged to bring a new MG sports car a few steps closer in reality. In fact, there is now a distinct possibility that a new MG, based upon the running gear of the Rover 200 (and consequently with front wheel drive — a possible handicap?) may be only the first of a series of new sporting MG's, including the exciting prospect of a powerful mid-engined car loosely based upon the EX-E prototype. This then is the role for the MG badge, one to which it is most obviously best suited and one which I am sure most real MG enthusiasts believe that it should never have relinquished in the first place.



1994 MG MGD Roadster?

TO PART, OR NOT TO PART? THAT IS THE QUESTION PART 2

Richard Kelly

The old Wolseley and Melons were unceremoniously ousted for a 'race-prepared' Mini Special with every conceivable Cooper S this-n-that fitted. It had a 1430 ccs over-bored block, a Stage III competition head with nimonic valves, a racing cam and a close ratio gearbox, and as if to prove it — not that I needed proof of course — it had been put together by another guru and Boy Racer god called 'Kenny Speed', or 'Kenny-ton-forty'...

"It'll do a ton-twenty-five, easy," he said. "I was racing this geezer in a 924 Porsche on the way from Preston last weekend and he just couldn't take me"... That was sheer music to my ears, and the kind of sales talk I just couldn't resist. 'Speed' was a research student at Bangor University, but it was soon evident from his car, that probably the only research he'd accomplished, was use the

University's engineering facilities and materials to build his Special. Obviously, there was a 'genuine' reason why he was selling... "I wanna do some more research man, and I need the bread for this bike I'm buildin'". It wouldn't have mattered either way; I wanted his car a lot more than I cared for his engineering ambitions... Incidentally, I wonder what became of him. I was later told that before I'd bought his Special, he'd had a steel plate fitted into his skull after he'd rolled it on the Beaumaris bends in Anglesey. Weird!... he probably had 'Cooper S' or 'ton-forty' stamped on that tool!

The 'Machine', as it was christened, was British Racing Green, mean-looking and totally matt black inside, with lots of little dials and gauges pressed into an ill-fitting, vinyl-covered hardboard dash; stalk switches galore; bum-hugging seats; home-made roll-over bars in 1" steel piping, and the obligatory, tiny, overcoat button-sized steering wheel. It flew alright, straight past most Cortinas, but as for top speed, I never got a 'ton-twenty-five' out of it — more like a 'ton-ten'. It had the same old problem as the Wolseley, too high a diff ratio and the lack of revs above 6000 rpm. However, by the time I felt like complaining, 'Speed' had disappeared and a lot more disasters had struck. The engine kept blowing head gaskets like an eight-year-old with bubble gum; it was always overheating and a pig to start; then the main bearings went. Worse was to follow. During the strip-down, I not only found the block so over-bored that each piston could practically see what the other was doing, but the compression ratio was well nigh 14:1! I'd had enough, a blown engine and a blown wallet to boot! I parted with the 'Machine', having had it rebuilt and de-tuned with a milder cam and a new head, satisfied that its new owner, another charming speed-freak called 'Tommy Mad', wouldn't come back for a refund! I'd learnt my lesson, or had I?...

The replacement was supposed to be something sensible, certainly nothing of the genre which my mother once called to my father, "Look Bill, this boy's bought another toy!"; but she never did have the chance to comment on the next purchase. I'd always fancied an MG B GT, even whilst messing about with Minis, but they'd been too expensive at the time. I'd driven a friend's once and I'd been quite impressed. I also remembered my father's envious comment when the B GT's first came out in the mid-Sixties, "They can't be up to much son... look too much like a poor man's E-type to me!" Being relatively fresh from college and still full of good socialist principles though, I wasn't bothered about class distinctions, particularly when it came to cars. Speed and looks were far more of the essence, so I bought my first B GT. It came via the local garage from "a nice married chap involved with running the local football club... owned it from new!" That might well have been so, but the football club wasn't all he'd been involved with. During

a thorough clean of the interior, what popped out from behind the corner of the tunnel carpet was one of those little sleeping bags for mice, nicely wrapped in silver paper. It reminded me of the "You can do it in an MG" slogan of the time, but as well as he might have managed, I'm well over six foot.

Was the hankering for speed sublimated by the sheer elegance and classy good looks of the B GT? No more blown head gaskets and oily fingernails? Well yes, until the old compulsion reared its ugly head again. I could have easily started all over again by tuning the B, but I decided against it. I was still smarting from the last caper; things never quite right and an engine like a racehorse, only good for a season. It had to be a different solution this time I thought, and it wasn't long in coming either! After only a matter of weeks, the B was sold to someone my dentist knew who promptly wrapped it round a lamp post...

The V8 or 'HOH' as it's known, thus came into my life ten years ago, and instantly, satiated my lust for speed. I'll never forget that first drive along the Pentraeth straight in Anglesey, doing 120+ mph, with the steering wheel rattling and vibrating under the engine's weight on the rack — that familiar V8 problem of worn and collapsed engine mountings.

I shan't bore you with the details of the ensuing restoration which was done piecemeal, as and when I could afford it, by a real guru and gentleman this time, Geoff Allen in Abingdon. I'm sure he needs no introduction to many of you, but there's nothing he doesn't know about V8's. The engine was rebuilt, then the suspension, brakes and ancillaries, and finally the bodywork. My garage friends eventually got used to my frequent trips to Geoff's, "Off to Abingdon, again eh Ritch? ... what's wrong this time? ... Need air in the tyres, or emptying the ashtrays?!" But, I was used to them by that stage.

It was when I first corresponded with Geoff that I learnt of the car's special history. Geoff remembered having to tinker with it in the Rectifications Dept. of the MG factory during one Bank Holiday weekend prior to its release to the press. He must have performed his usual miracles as it received a commendable review from *Motor Sport* despite several criticisms of its dated features and extreme wind noise at speed. The most telling phrase for me though was that HOH had attained 150 mph on a long downhill stretch of German *autobahn*...

How much have I got out of it, I hear you ask? Well, after a prolonged running-in period, I managed about 135 mph, not just downhill with the wind behind and the seats thrown out either, but for some distance on the flat. Strictly a one-off trial though: besides the 70 limit, I respect Geoff's craftsmanship too much, and the hormone suppressants have little side effects these days — I even managed to drive an Allegro occasionally!

An Allegro? ...! Yes, a good old Austin Trundle, our latest runabout. As the

restoration of HOH advanced to Geoff's impeccable standards, I realised that I couldn't keep using it for daily transport without sacrificing some of its long term originality. As far as possible, I wanted HOH kept original and returned to its ex-factory condition, rather than recreate a concours glamour car. This meant a drastic reduction in annual mileage and buying a second car. Having so decided, there followed a catalogue of tin cans which would have made worthy donations to any breaker's yard. The Mini 850 with tins of underseal poured where the subframe should have been; the 1100 Allegro with a dicky valve and a fondness for oil surpassed only by the Queen Elizabeth; a similarly-afflicted, 4 cyl BMW 320 with twice as many drivers as miles; a 2 lit Ford Cortina GL which handled like a three-legged settee; and finally, a couple of Ford Fiasco's, which to be fair, did offer some improvements over the others as they were relatively new.

That's not quite the end of the story however: man and machine living in eternal happiness and all that. We've recently had to think of selling HOH because of family considerations, rising mortgage rates and so on; in fact, any one of those little reasons so favoured in the For Sale columns. But, it's a difficult decision to have to take ... extremely difficult.

During wavering over whether or not we could afford to keep HOH, we had to have a decent family car, as opposed to another banger. My wife is a sensible sort most of the time: nothing above 100 mph for her, so she naturally wanted a good, strong, and above all, safe car. She insisted, so we bought a newish BMW 318i, the envy of any would-be yuppie, the senior sales rep's stock-in choice of company car! Well, it might have been sturdily built, strong and well-finished, but it certainly wasn't safe. It hardly had any acceleration at all, and it had a nasty tendency to handle like melting ice cream — in other words — all over the place, particularly in the wet! It was my turn to insist. If I had to sell HOH, then I wasn't spending £6000+ for a replacement that

didn't even do what it was meant to. I was adamant! So as not to lose money, we returned to the same BMW garage to part-exchange the 318i for something better, and a few more of the same surprises as it turned out...

The replacement was a one-owner, top of the range, 140 mph+/- BMW M 535i, costing twice the price of a decent V8, and money left over for a Midget for the dog! But, what should have been the ultimate in German supercar-cum-family car compromise turned out to be yet another, not so heavily disguised Panzer tank! It was definitely quick, a lot quicker than HOH, but that treacherous handling of the 318i was still there, ready to take you completely unawares in the rain. For nearly £14,000, hang this for a game of toy cars, I thought and a private buyer eventually bought it through the Classifieds in *E&M*.

At this point, you would be right in thinking that we were positively spoilt, being able to afford such expensive trials to find a suitable car. But, is there such a car, one that can do all that HOH can, and double up as family transport? At the moment, we are trying out another compromise. No, not a Ford Sierra Cosworth 4x4, the latest digitally-controlled hurtle-box from Dagenham. No, not a Ferrari Testosterone either ... but a car I'd like to think is as good as, or at least sufficiently different to HOH to command the same lasting appeal: a Jaguar XJS. What! — the ultimate poser's car, the travelling bed much loved by football managers and hairdressers? Yes, 'fraid so. It's not new by any means, but it's the only car I've found so far with the same seductive qualities as the V8. It's extremely fast, it has the added space, and the same strength and safety features as the V8. Given a twisty bit of road though, I reckon HOH could still show the Jag a thing or two ... Hence the third runabout — the 1978 Allegro 1300, the Austin Embarrassment, while we postpone yet again, the decision on HOH. Any advice (or offers) gratefully received! (Keep the MG, mate, and stay forever young! APW).



Richard Kelly's V8 pictured at a V8 Register meeting at Abingdon.
(Photo: David A. Knowles).