



Enjoying an MGBGT V8 Conversion

John Bonnett has an MGBGT V8 Conversion finished in Teal Blue which was built by a former time served MG apprentice to a very high standard. John then added Frontline's Six Link rear suspension system and found the handling was transformed. Here he describes how it happened. John starts by saying "that what follows is a purely personal opinion and in no way intended as a criticism of the Factory produced MGBGT V8 or to cause offence".

My first encounter with the V8 was when I purchased a standard Teal Blue Factory GT in the early 1990s. It fell woefully short of my expectations and was hugely disappointing. No performance to speak of and when cornering, initial understeer followed seamlessly by final (and unpleasant) roll oversteer; a characteristic very similar to that of my Toyota Hi-Lux with the Truckman top fitted. It wasn't a happy association and I moved the car on as soon as I could, vowing never to have another. But the lesson here is "Never say never!"



Here is my car pictured with Ann Hall the rally driver whom some of you may recognise.

Classic cars and motor sport have always been my passion and without either I would probably be quite wealthy. But what use is wealth on its own? It's the quality of life that's all-important and ticking off the things that one would like to do and achieve them before close of play. And so it has been for me. I have restored a number of cars, built two from scratch and created the Lightweight; a handcrafted aluminium bodied Triumph GT6 for hill climbing. I know I am biased but this is one of the most beautiful cars I have ever seen and I am really proud of it.

I've never been in the position of being able to afford two classic cars so my competition cars have had to double as road cars as well. The Triumph did everything and more that I designed it to do but on the road it was noisy and tiring to drive for long periods. My last and final competitive event was the Coupe Florio in 2015 so

without the need to double as a racing car, the search was on for a genuine Gran Turismo that would eat up the miles, particularly in France where we spend most of our holidays. It also needed to be affordable both in buying and running costs. I looked at a number of options including TVR and Gilbern but I'm not a lover of fibreglass so they were discounted. Each time I kept coming back to the V8 MG, which I felt would do all I wanted providing I could get it to handle and produce sufficient power.



The Lightweight, a handcrafted aluminium bodied Triumph GT6 for hill climbing.

I was interested in seeing how Frontline Developments had tackled the handling issue and arranged a visit to their works. The reception we received was very special and we were made to feel that our visit was the most important event in their day. During the tour round their shop the immediate impression was the standard of their workmanship and the attention to detail particularly in the trimming department. A number of cars were in various stages of build and it was interesting to see how they were put together and how they differed from the standard cars. I was able to see the front and rear suspension systems close up which was the reason for the visit. Not only to see but to try as well.

The **Frontline Abingdon Edition** is a recreation of the MGB featuring a six-link rear suspension and telescopic front. It is powered by a 2.5 litre Mazda engine developing 304BHP and mated to an MX5 six-speed gearbox. 0-60mph comes up in 3.8 seconds. On the road, the car was every bit as quick as one would expect but my lasting impression was how sharp it was on the road; precise turn-in and very predictable cornering. In fact, pretty much everything I was looking for in my next car. Except for the Mazda power unit, which thrives on revs. Replace it with a V8 that has a

decent output and the job's done. Of course there is a weight penalty with the V8 so the Mazda engined car would always outperform it. But if my V8 were in the same league, I would be more than happy. So, the hunt was on for a finished car requiring little or nothing in the way of work.

Considering how few Factory V8s were made, it is for me **surprising that there are always so many for sale**. Perhaps because other owners, like me, were disappointed in them. I saw a number; both private and trade sales and none impressed me. Either in poor condition or over priced. I then spotted and arranged to view HUV 999K, a 1971 chrome bumper V8 GT conversion in Teal Blue in Fordingbridge; a private sale. The vendor, Mike Clemas, a former time served MG apprentice, had built the car. He had used a rust free shell as the basis for the build and at the time, he also had a Factory car that he could use as a reference. Having built and restored cars myself I could appreciate the care he had taken and the standard of his workmanship.

The car was beautifully presented in every detail and difficult to distinguish from a genuine Factory car. The great thing about it is that it is presentable rather than being finished to concours standard so no worries about leaving it in a public car park or using it on a daily basis. Another plus point for me was that it hasn't been over restored and retains its patina.

It is fitted with a 3.5 litre engine that Mike had rebuilt and runs the Lucas 14cux hotwire injection system. He has very cleverly fitted it to clear the standard bonnet.



The engine is coupled to a five-speed LT77 gearbox from a Rover SD1. The test drive did two things. It put my mind at rest about the performance, which was more than adequate but it also reminded me of the shortcomings in the handling department. But nothing that couldn't be sorted out using the Frontline components. So, we struck a deal and the car was mine.

To my mind **a Conversion makes a great deal of sense**, obviously depending on the quality of the workmanship. First of all there's the price; far lower than a genuine Factory car. Second, the car can be modified without the kind of constraints that could apply to a Factory car with regard to maintaining originality and safeguarding its value.

It wasn't until I got it home that I realised that the **car had done less than 150 miles since its first MOT following the conversion**. Mike had spent years working on it only to find that with the recent addition to the family, it wouldn't be practical to keep it. And he had never really used it and enjoyed it. A bit sad really. The downside to it only having done a very low mileage was that there were quite a few little problems to iron out. Nothing major and

easily rectified. Mike had told me that he hadn't fitted the V8 3.07:1 differential, retaining the standard MGB 3.9:1. This gave the car good acceleration but not the long legged GT that I want. So the V8 diff was put on the list along with the Frontline rear suspension.



Frontline rear suspension kit showing rocker assembly

I intended to order the five link kit from Frontline but Tim Fenna the Director, wanted me to have the special six link system that they normally only fit to cars they build in-house. The **main difference between their five and six link systems is the Panhard rod is replaced by a rocker assembly similar to a Watts linkage**. This is a beautiful piece of fabrication in stainless steel. Torque reaction bars complete the package. I'm really pleased I took his advice because the difference it has made over the leaf spring arrangement is huge. Banished forever is the roll oversteer and the ride is vastly improved too. The car still has to be coaxed into a corner but hopefully this will change when the front is changed. The 3.07 diff was fitted at the same time as the rear suspension and that too has added to the driving experience and the way the car covers the ground.

They say that comparisons are odious but, be that as it may, they are made all the time and **having gone from a couple of GT6s to the V8, comparing the two marques is inevitable**. One of the most striking differences is in the integrity and general solidity of the MG. It feels rugged and capable of handling everything modern day motoring can throw at it. This must be largely due to the excellent shell and the very stiff monocoque. The same cannot be said for the Triumph, which, having a separate chassis, always felt fragile and creaked and groaned over poor road surfaces. The GT6 and the Lightweight are iconic and draw people in, particularly the French. The MG on the other hand by comparison looks pretty ordinary and doesn't have the same attraction. This was very apparent during our recent trip to Brittany in company with a GT6 and a Gilbern Invader when the MG received barely a glance.



Triumph GT6, Gilbern, and the MGBGT V8 Conversion.

So, in conclusion, it is fair to say that HUV 999K is the best classic car I have owned. It is comfortable, quiet and covers the ground with consummate ease. A proper GT.