

CLASSIC TO CONSIDER

THE ATTRACTION OF COSTELLO

We're talking about Ken not Elvis Costello of course - and his idea of shoehorning a Rover V8 into the MGB created a classic that's better than the official hit

It's a staggering 40 years since a Mini expert with a big idea got the max from the MGB. Ken Costello was wandering around the workshops of a BLMC main dealer, who sponsored his racing exploits, one day in the late '60s and spied a Rover V8 engine on the floor. Sizing it up he could see that it just might fit into the underpowered B engine bay - and when he discovered that he could almost lift the alloy unit on his own, well the MGB V8 was a given.

Aptly based near Brands Hatch, Ken Costello was more than your average Mini racer of that time. A renowned engineer, Ken's exploits in Minis are as legendary as Paddy Hopkirk, Gordon Spice or John Rhodes. Costello and his self-prepared Minis were so unbeatable that they were continually being questioned and checked or moved up a class. Ken was a British Saloon Car champion in 1966, the same year he helped make the classic Formula One movie Grand Prix.

By 1969, around the same time that the ill-starred MGC was dumped (and after a spell in

professional Formula 3 racing), Ken was looking for new things to occupy his mind and with a written-off MG roadster in one hand and a Rover V8 (an ex Oldsmobile derivative, actually) in the other, he put them together.

Of course it wasn't remotely as simple as that; in fact when MG first toyed with the idea in 1967, after realising the newly launched MGC was a lemon, its engineers looked at the feasibility of slotting in Rover's unit but concluded it was impossible without considerable modifications.

Ken quickly sussed it though after altering and redressing the bulkheads to provide clearance for the V8, rerouting the exhaust manifolds and putting another (Hooke) joint in the steering column assembly. To mate the unit to the existing MGB gearbox and clutch, a special bell housing was fabricated.

The fact suspension was left alone and the brakes simply received harder brake pads - interesting as Ken used the full fat 150bhp V8 and not the Land Rover tuned unit found in the factory version... But as history shows, compared to the factory effort, Ken mainly guessed it right. To clear the twin SUs a bonnet power bulge was required, one far meatier than the design found on the MGC, although later Costellos used a Weber carb which allowed the standard bonnet to be retained. Apart from this, changes to the stock MGB were minimal and a 'Costello' was up and running by November 1969!

As you'd expect, the motoring press went wild over the Costello MGB and naturally questioned why BLMC didn't do the same. Such was the resulting popularity of the car that a flourishing business started on the back of his £975 conversion. Certainly MG took an immediate interest and was very impressed when Ken turned up unannounced at the factory with a completed car. In 1971 BLMC commissioned Ken to build MG one, a left hand drive Harvest Gold roadster, although Costello doesn't remember the cash-strapped motoring giant ever coughing up the £1,000 for the work, which he carried out and delivered in just two weeks!

Apart from questioning the steering column mod, which it thought dubious (Costello disagreed and said if it's good enough for Triumph...) MG used the car as the base for its own model which came out in 1973, a year later than planned. History has it that in a fit of pure spite BLMC cut off his factory supply of V8 engines a year before the 'real' BGT V8 was launched and when Ken asked for new MGBs to be delivered sans engines, the request was refused.

Engine supplies didn't bother Costello too much as he bought a stock of old Buick engines from Belgium, although once the MG version was in the showrooms the writing was pretty much on the wall for Ken's pricier conversion and production was halted in the mid 1970s after nearly 250 cars were made. Less than 10 were roadsters, amazingly (small wonder MG never made one then-ed), with one LHD GT even exported to Canada.

The road was now clear for the MG model to capture the market Costello created, but what is the real Queen B?

What one is better?

Which is the better B depends what you want from your V8. The factory version is naturally the most rounded and best developed, not least because it uses a beefier transmission; a weakness of the Costello that caused Ken to design his own five-speed gearbox to cope.

But the Costello is the sportier hot rod because the top tuned V8 gave it a claimed 140mph potential and far more poke over the official 137bhp alternative. Plus of course the



Apart from the sexy bonnet bulge and front spoiler, Costello looked like a normal MGB



Ken Costello in his hey-day, posing with his F3 single-seater with Mini in background; more recently as part of Frontline Costello



scope for Costello to offer further tuned examples was considerable; top cars had 200bhp under the bonnet, which was storming stuff for the 70s

It's a similar story with the handling. Where as the Costello was a modded MGB, the factory car was subtly reengineered, riding an inch higher with stiffer rear springs and a properly relocated steering rack; a precursor to the US mods carried out to all MGs for 1974. Sitting lower, the Costello was the more predictable when cornering, being less lurch-prone and the press commented on it at the time. Plus again, if owners wanted it, a variety of chassis mods were also marketed. In truth, there wasn't such a thing as a standard Costello.

The motor-noters were always kinder to the Costello, too; praising its enterprise, added pace and the fact you could even have it as a convertible – whereas the factory GT was criticised as being too little, too late – and far too dear for such an outmoded design!

Today their rarity (watch out for fakes and counterfeit Costello tuning parts – something that did the company's reputation no good at all) now ensures that Ken's can command values perhaps three times that of a normal BGT V8. A club and website has recently been launched to cater for the 40 or so that's believed left.

And what of Ken? Well, he continued to market V8 conversions and MG tuning parts, relocating to Bath and joining forces with fellow MG specialist Frontline to form Frontline Costello in 2001 (www.frontlinecostello.com or call 01225 852777) before retiring.

Today, MGB V8s are ten a penny and such is the size of the aftermarket that you can build one like a giant Meccano kit. But without Ken Costello's foresight the car probably would have remained a "what if?".



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Ken Costello's one and only press advert, seen in Motor October '73, months after MG launched its own V8. But as superior as Ken's cars were, the writing was on the wall

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