MGBGTV8 (Bracken 2106) on display at the 1974 Motor Show

Rubber bumpers

The "rubber bumper" home-market MGB and MGBGT came with the **"1974 ½" facelift** of the four and eight cylinder "rubber bumper" MGBGTs which were on display at the 1974 Motor Show at Earls Court. The driver behind the introduction of "rubber bumpers" was the legislative power that underpinned changes to vehicle standards in the United States and then there was the urgent need for MG to meet those requirements because sales of MGs in North America were vital to the future of the MG business at that time. The way MG handled the introduction of "rubber bumpers" to their models was both rapid and imaginative.

Although at the time and for many years later "rubber bumpers" were seen by many as a damaging, even ugly, feature on an attractive classic British sports car well known for chrome grilles and bumpers, attitudes have changed. In recent years the combination of the relative rarity of "rubber bumper" MGBGTV8s and the ingenious design of the bumper created by the team at Abingdon has been seen as increasingly attractive to MGV8 enthusiasts. The earlier disdain for "rubber bumper" MGV8s, which encouraged so many owners to carry out "chrome bumper conversions" on original rubber bumper cars, has reduced a very great deal over the last decade. Here Victor Smith looks back on how the "rubber bumpers" for the MGB model range were developed, supplied and then introduced as a "facelift" for the MGBGTV8 model in 1974.

US pressures to improve passenger safety in motor vehicles

In the early 1970s the legislative power that underpinned vehicle standards in the USA grew enormously under the US National Highway Traffic Administration (NHTSA) and the key piece of legislation that seemed determined to destroy the open sports car was the Federal Motor Vehicle Standard 208 (FMVSS 208) concerning the protection of vehicle occupants in the event of a collision. In 1972 the US Congress enacted the Motor Vehicle Information and Cost Saving Act (MVICS) which required NHTSA to issue buyer standards that yielded "the maximum feasible reduction of cost to the public and the consumer". President Nixon explained this law in October 1972 saying "the act also authorises the Secretary of Transportation to establish cost-effective bumper performance standards for new cars manufactured in, or imported into, the United States. Since effective bumpers are key to preventing most automobile damage caused by low-speed collisions, these standards should help to insure substantial resistance to collision damage and significant reduction in repair cost without compromising driver safety." Initially this led to "Sabrina" bumper over-riders as an option to provide impact protection.

Why were there rubber bumpers on MGBs and V8s?

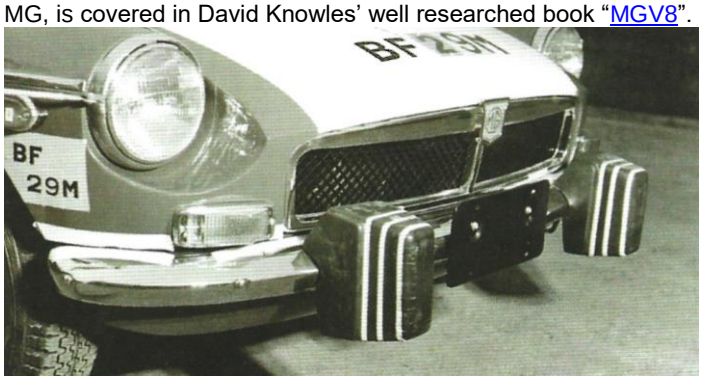
As a major part of MG production of MGBs went to North America it was a vital market for the Abingdon Plant and its future. With the growing concern in the USA over consumer safety and emissions legislation, MG had to comply to maintain its sales there. Starting from the 1974 model year, cars on sale in the US had to resist a level of impact damage, with tougher standards promised for subsequent years.

When MG began looking at ways to make their MGs resistant to impact damage they looked at a range of options but an alternative to their initial option of a metal bumper system was developed. MG eventually settled upon a flexible moulded urethane bumper which became what is usually referred to as the "rubber bumper". They were made of Bayer's Bayflex 90 polyurethane over steel and were moulded by Marley Foam giving the finished bumper casings a semi-gloss black finish. It was very cleverly styled to sweep round the front of the MGB minimising the visual imposition of what seemed to be a large protective lump.

The rubber bumper added 105 lbs to the weight of the MGBGTV8, a 4.3% increase on the kerbside weight. Although the 4 cylinder MGB had a raised ride height, the V8 model remained unchanged throughout production although when the MGBGTV8 model was launched in 1973 the ride height was raised in comparison with the contemporary MGB and GT.

MG's "rubber bumper"

The MG development team at Abingdon, did their best to develop upgraded bumpers that would meet the US requirements whilst minimising the damage to the classic appearance of MGBs. The early bumpers they created for the MG were rubber moulded over metal that were bolted through the standard chrome bumpers to sprung steel blades which protected the MGB well in direct front and rear impacts. Like other car manufacturers who managed to come up with arguably more elegant solutions, MG later moved on to the so called "rubber bumpers" but had to do so at a time when they had very limited development funds from the parent company BLMC. Detailed information on this period of passenger collision protection legislation and the response of car manufacturers, particularly those producing sports cars like MG, is covered in David Knowles' well researched book "MGV8".



"Sabrina" bumper as an early trial option fitted to an MGBGT

Recollections of Don Hayter

In his talk to V8 Register members in 2002, Don Hayter (Chief Engineer at MG) touched on this matter saying "as American regulations involved crash testing because of the raised bumper regulations which were coming in, we had started working on that

and it was my job. Crash testing was one of the things that really did make a difference because we had to raise the MGB by an inch purely because the Americans designed the regulations round all the American cars where the bumper heights were between 16 and 20 inches. Well our poor old MGB was low, it was right down on the 16 inches and so we had to raise the car a little and make a much deeper bumper, so that in fact when they did the test on it we could still pass.

The alteration in fact made the MGB the first car in the World that had a built-in system which was in fact compliant with the regulations and absorbed impacts within the bumper. Everyone else, for example Volvo and BMW, had a bumper with mounted inter-rubbers and actual travel was on a large socket or a rubber dish, in fact like a shock absorber. So the bumper actually moved, and they had to make it move under the body. We actually got compliance in the bumper itself within that polyurethane moulding.

If anybody has been bumped in a rubber bumpered MGB then you will know how good it is. I was stopped at a T-junction, very soon after I put my own V8 Roadster on the road (which is a V8 engined MGB Roadster I built in an "O-series" shell), and by mistake the lady in front of me selected reverse gear in a Renault and came back very rapidly and hit my car stoving in the whole of the back of her car. In fact my bumper was somewhere about in the middle of her boot! She drove forward and came to have a look and it had only cracked my number plate and scratched the corner, but her car had got a about £2,000 worth of damage! Now I had seen the crash testing at the MG Plant but had never been sitting in a car and seen it happen before my eyes!"

An early pre-production chrome bumper MGBGTV8 ADO75/413 was used for test fitting the new "rubber bumpers" and another car was subjected to impact testing them.

Blaze ADO75/413 used for an experimental fitting of "rubber bumpers" was later sold to development employee Basil Smith

Rubber bumper facelift seen at the 1974 Motor Show

At the Motor Show at Earls Court in October 1974 there was a major change – the MGB and MGBGTV8 models on display there had the new safety upgrade of rubber bumpers. The two MGBGTV8s on display were both pre-production cars (Bracken 2106 and Citron 2105) finished in bold body colours which suited the similarly bold black bumpers very well. Following the show they were both sold on to Newbury Motors Ltd in Birmingham by BLMC Austin-Morris Publicity at Longbridge and dispatched from the MG Factory on 25th November and 2nd December 1974.

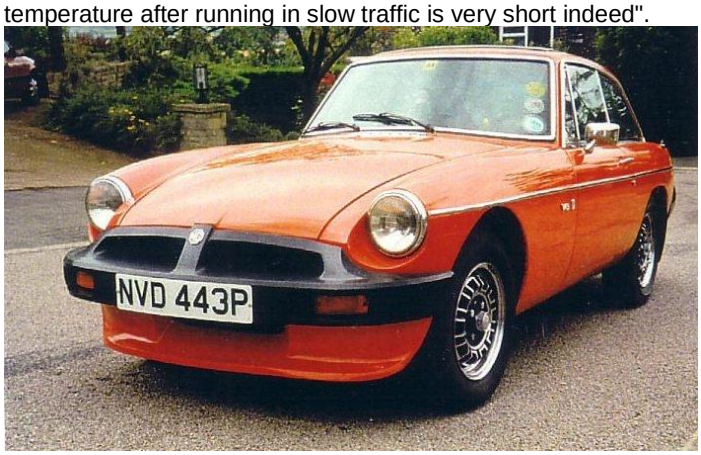
The first production rubber bumper car in 1974 was Teal Blue 2101 with the vehicle registration number TOF 560N which was dispatched to BLMC Austin- Morris Publicity as a pre-production photographic car and press demonstrator. It was later purchased by Geoff Allen, the foreman in Rectifications Department for 27 years. He looked after the car for many years until his widow Jean sold the car to John Davies in North Yorkshire. It was later purchased by Jacques Milliet in Switzerland who had been a personal friend of Geoff for many years.

First production MGBGTV8 (Teal Blue 2101) with rubber bumpers as a "facelift" launch in 1974 (Photo: Jacques Milliet)

The other pre-development early rubber bumper cars were Harvest Gold 2102 (a press demonstrator previously owned by the late Dave Saunders in Surrey) with the VRN DNP 229N, Mirage 2103 (advertising) with the VRN GDA 710N and Harvest Gold 2104 with the VRN GOL 997N.

Special Tuning's rubber bumper with an air dam

An accessory offered by Special Tuning for the MGB range became available which had a front air dam which is seen as a sensible fitment for the higher performing V8 powered MGBGT. Jeff Ward fitted the Special Tuning upgrade to his MGBGTV8 (Flamenco Red 2375) and commented "the front air dam suits the style of the black bumper cars very well and improved stability on the roads at higher speeds. There is a significant improvement in cooling from fitting a Special Tuning air dam (original ST part number STR0189, available from Moss as a "pattern part") and from repositioning the front number plate up from its original position under the rubber bumper and on to the rubber bumper". He felt this was essential to ensure there is an unobstructed flow of air through the duct in the air dam and onto the oil cooler. He added "that "in addition to reducing temperatures, the "recovery time" down to normal running temperature after running in slow traffic is very short indeed".



Flamenco Red 2375 fitted with a Special Tuning air dam