

BUYER'S GUIDE: MG MAGNETTE ZA AND ZB; WOLSELEY 4/44 AND T5/50

Blood brothers

PHOTOS JOHN COLLEY

The fifties range of Wolseley and MG medium-sized saloons are excellent value for money, if the rust hasn't got there first.

Nick Larkin looks at buying one

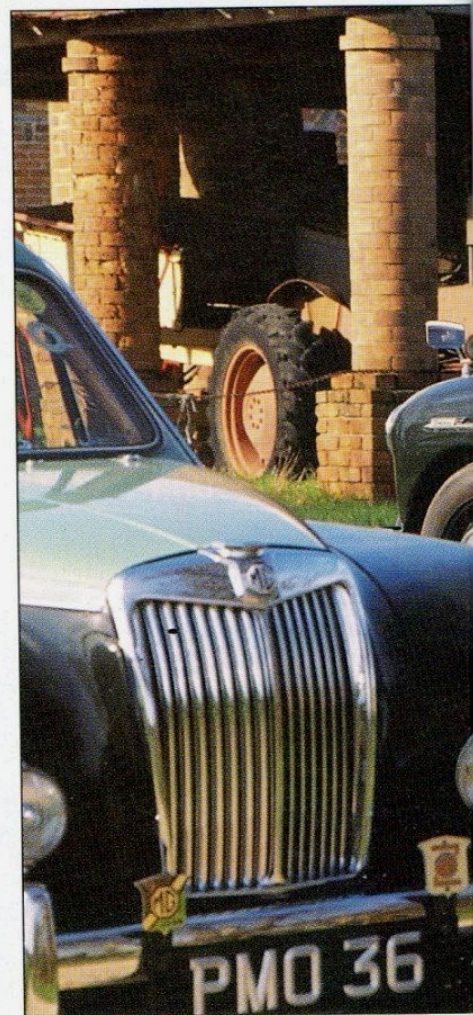


Smooth saloons:
MG Magnette and
Wolseley 4/44

SPECIFICATIONS

	Wolseley 4/44	Wolseley 15/50	MG Magnette ZA (ZB)
Produced	1952-56	1956-58	1953-56 (1956-58)
Engine	4-cyl in-line ohv	4-cyl in-line ohv	4-cyl in-line ohv
Capacity	1250cc	1489cc	1489cc
Bore/stroke	66.5x90mm	73x88.9mm	73x88.9mm
Max power	46bhp @ 4800rpm	55bhp @ 4400rpm	60bhp @ 4600rpm (64bhp @ 5400rpm)
Suspension	Front: Ind with coil springs, wishbones Rear: half elliptic, leaf springs	Front: Ind with coil springs, wishbones Rear: half elliptic leaf springs	Front: Ind with coil springs, wishbones Rear: half elliptic leaf springs
Brakes	Drum	Drum	Drum
Length	14ft 5in	14ft 5in	13ft 9in (14ft 1in)
Width	5ft 7in	5ft 7in	5ft 7in
Max speed	72mph	78mph	80mph (87mph)
0-60mph	32.6sec	27sec	22.6sec (18.5sec)
Fuel cons	23-25mpg	25-30mpg	24-32mpg

Cars look good from every angle, but Wolseley appears more pedestrian



Stylish, comfortable and reliable, examples of the MG Magnette ZA / ZB series and the closely related Wolseley 4/44 and 15/50 have been happily trundling around since the fifties, oblivious to the fact they've caused more arguments among enthusiasts than just about any other family saloon.

In one corner, there's the hard-line MG disciple proclaiming that the Magnette couldn't be a real MG — just a Wolseley with the right badges. Others reckon the car was designed as an MG, the Wolseley variant merely appearing in order to satisfy the Nuffield marketing department.

The Wolseley side claims that the 4/44 was introduced a year before the Magnette ZA, and can really stir the hornets' nest by pointing out gleefully that their car actually came with an MG engine, whereas the MG Magnette had a BMC B-series engine, which was later to power the Austin Cambridge and other lowly creations.

The merger of Nuffield and Austin to form BMC was the real reason for this conundrum, however. Nuffield had intended both cars to have versions of the XP engine which powered, among other cars, the MG TC, TD and YB.

BMC wanted to rationalise its range of engines, with the XP being among those des-

tined for the skip. But it was too late to stop the 4/44 going into production with the unit, even though its 1250cc and 46bhp were a trifle pedestrian even by 1952 standards.

Independent front suspension and rack-and-pinion steering were bang up to date however, and the unitary-construction car was well received.

It was pitched as 'the perfect car for a man whose taste demands something a little better', and 29,845 buyers from 1952-56 decided that this marketing statement applied to them.

The MG Magnette ZA surfaced in 1953. Most of the dissenters, who thought the MG name was being violated and who had strong memo-

ries of the pre-war Magnette racing models, were rather happier when they had seen, and driven, the newcomer.

Although it shared the same monocoque as the Wolseley, the Magnette was lower, with different sills and, there for all to see, a traditional MG radiator. The MG's sporting look was enhanced by its sitting two inches lower than the Wolseley.

The 1489cc BMC B-series engine, fed by twin SU carbs, gave 60bhp, a credible increase over the Wolseley and one which contributed to



Bucket seats and half octagonal speedometer in Magnette



More sombre 4/44 similar to other Wolseleys of the time



● Our thanks to the Avoncroft Museum of Buildings, Stoke Heath, Bromsgrove, Worcs B60 4JR (0527 31886/31363) for the use of their grounds for photography. Open from March to November, the museum hosts numerous classic car events. Exhibits range from an early-19th century windmill to a fully furnished prefab.

the MG's immense success, with 18,076 examples finding homes in three years.

In 1956 the Wolseley 4/44 was discontinued, being replaced by the Wolseley 15/50. The Magnette became the ZB, with the engine slightly uprated to 64bhp, lowering the 0-60mph time from 22.6 to 18.5 seconds. The already sumptuous cabin got yet more wood and the 'umbrella' style chrome decoration on the front wings was dropped in favour of a straight-sided strip.

Most significantly, a new

Varitone version of the Magnette, featuring a larger rear window and (on most cars) a duo-tone colour scheme. The Varitone was the only car in the range to have flashers rather than semaphore indicators.

By far the greatest changes were applied to the Wolseley. A 50bhp, single carb-equipped version of the B-series replaced the XP unit, and the gearchange was moved from the steering column to the floor.

The 15/50 also gained different chrome strips, and BMC benevolently threw in

an extra front foglamp over the single unit offered on the previous model.

Both the new MG and Wolseley were offered with two-pedal Manumatic transmission as an option, though this never proved particularly popular.

Both the Magnette and the Wolseley disappeared in 1958, when BMC were clearing the decks for the new, Farina-designed range.

BODYWORK

These cars have developed an awesome reputation for rust, but the newest examples are now 30 years old, and many other cars have rotted just as much.

You must meticulously check the bodywork. The sills, totally different on each model, have an inner membrane as well as outer and inner sections. These can rust just about anywhere, and it's likely that any rust born in the sills will have gone walkabout into the floor sections, which can, therefore, rust completely along their length. Check the area around the bottom of the A-post, which can also rot.

Door bottoms can also say

goodbye and you should watch out for corrosion along the welded seams on the front wings, and around the sidelamps.

The rear wings 'go' along the bottom and around the wheelarch, and the bootlid rusts around the bottom edge. Have a good look at the area around the rear spring hangers, too.

Non-rechromable mazak is used for door handles and other pieces of decorative chrome, and while you're inspecting the chrome strips, make sure that rust hasn't been breeding behind them.

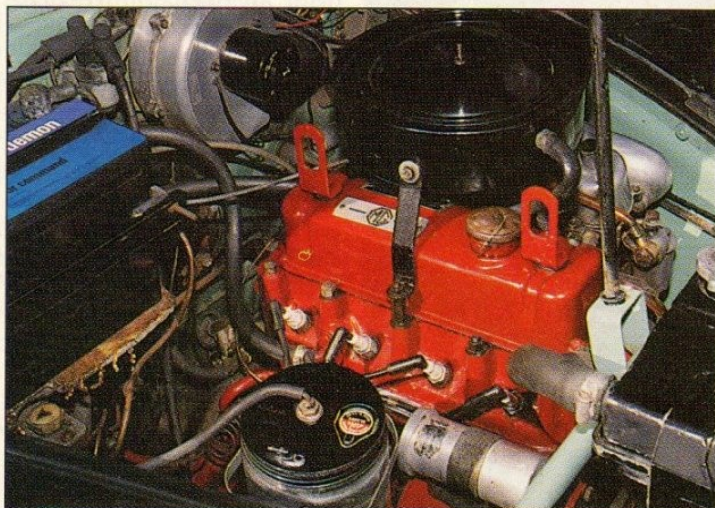
The good news is that many body panels are available from specialists, though supplies are geared more towards the MG than the Wolseley.

For example, good-quality glassfibre front wings are £95 each from John and Lou Shorten in Norwich, whose vast stock also includes front floor sections at £14 and rear ones at £12. NTG Services of Ipswich will supply sills and other parts: outer sills are priced at £52.69 for the MG and £54.89 for the Wolseley.

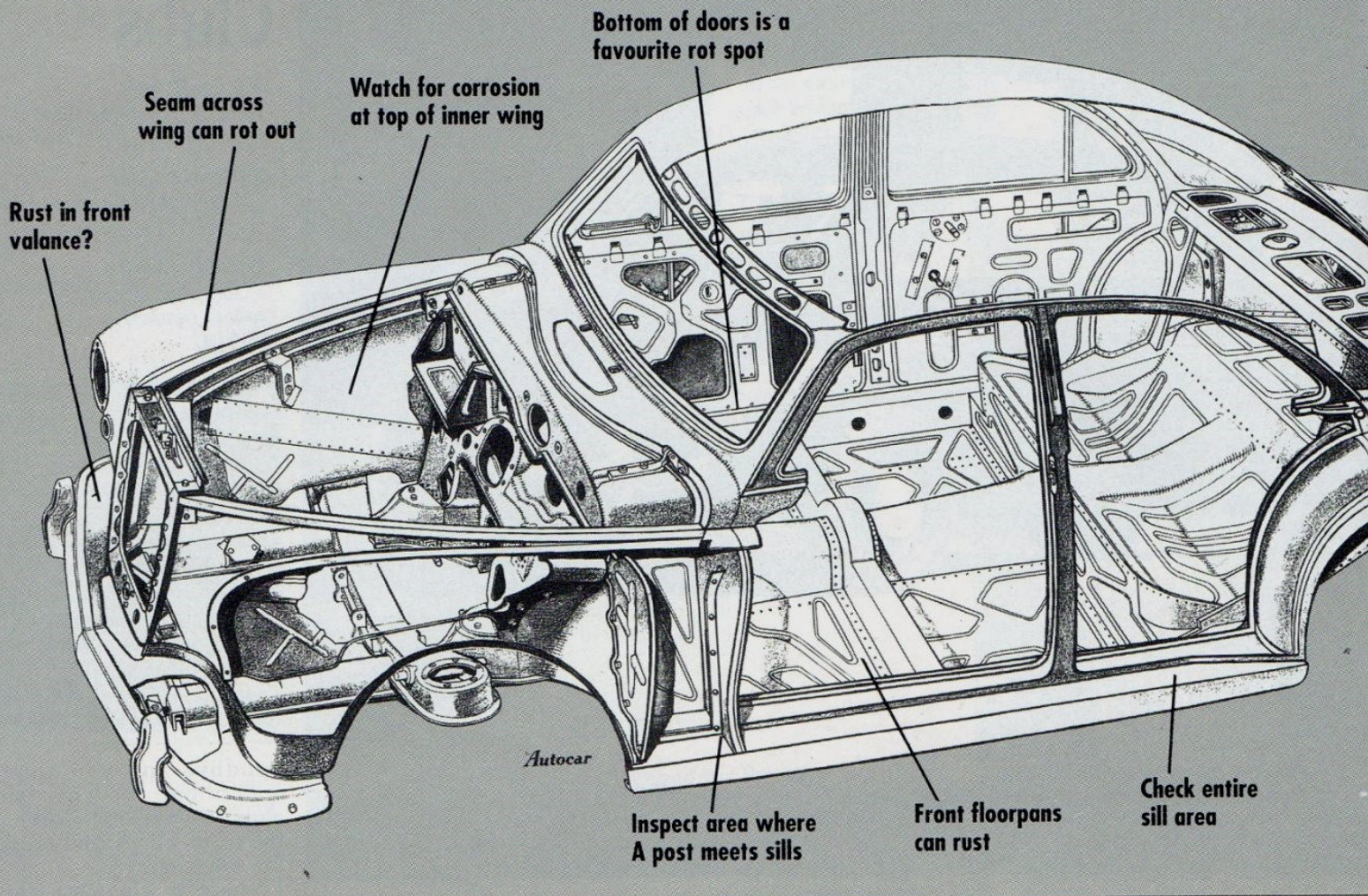
OTHER POINTS

Providing there is still the bodywork left to carry them around, the mechanics in these cars seem to go on just about indefinitely.

The 4/44 unit is suscepti-



Magnette had twin-carb, uprated BMC B-series unit



ble to small, but not particularly important oil leaks, but like the B-series, would need to cover a vast mileage before real wear becomes apparent. If you're trying to knock together a Magnette engine from B-series bits, remember that the Magnette has larger valves than were fitted to standard B-series engines.

Replacing your 4/44's engine with an original unit could prove expensive as MG enthusiasts are always after them to put in MG TCs and the like. Many, many a semi-restorable 4/44 has met its end due to this demand.

As a slight consolation, BMC B-series engines are freely available and will slot into the 4/44. A change to a floor-mounted gearbox can be made without too many problems. Owners have been known to equip their

Wolseleys with MG-style twin carbs — but a worn set can do awful things to fuel consumption.

These cars are also renowned for having noisy rear axles, but normally they will rumble for years without causing problems.

Gearboxes are generally long-lived. If the 4/44's change seems sloppy, it may be just the spring at the bottom of the gearchange shaft which runs parallel to the steering column.

Manumatic cars are extremely rare, and there are reports of dubious reliability. Finding spares for this system must be a nightmare, too.

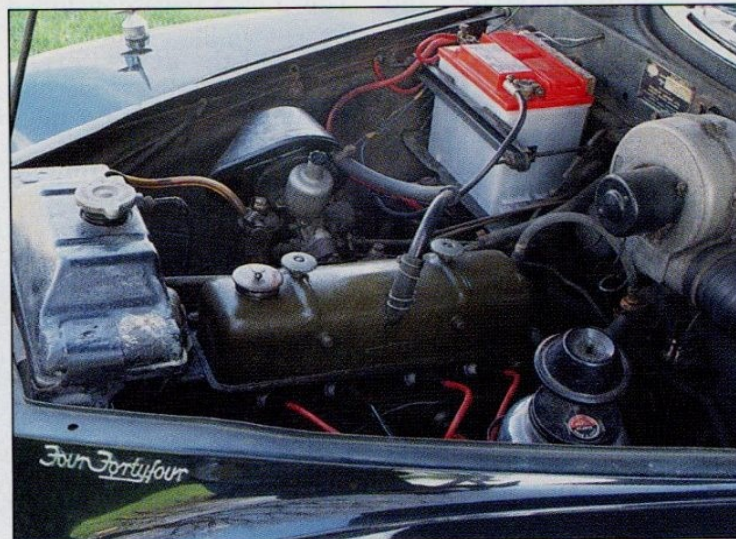
Kingpins can often display wear, as can the Silentbloc bushes in the rear suspension.

One of the biggest problems is finding replacements for the combined brake and clutch master cylinder. These are in extremely short supply, though often a specialist might have found a few. John and Lou Shorten offer an exchange reconditioned unit for around £120.

The interiors are certainly among the cars' most attractive features, and again, the specialist market is geared towards the Magnette. The Shortens will do you an 18-piece carpet set for £110 and a set of doortrims for £186.

Early Magnettes had a 'tin top' rather than a wooden dashboard, and the very first 4/44s had open glove boxes, without the wooden lids fitted to most examples.

Seats can be recovered using new covers available from specialists, and they should be able to help you



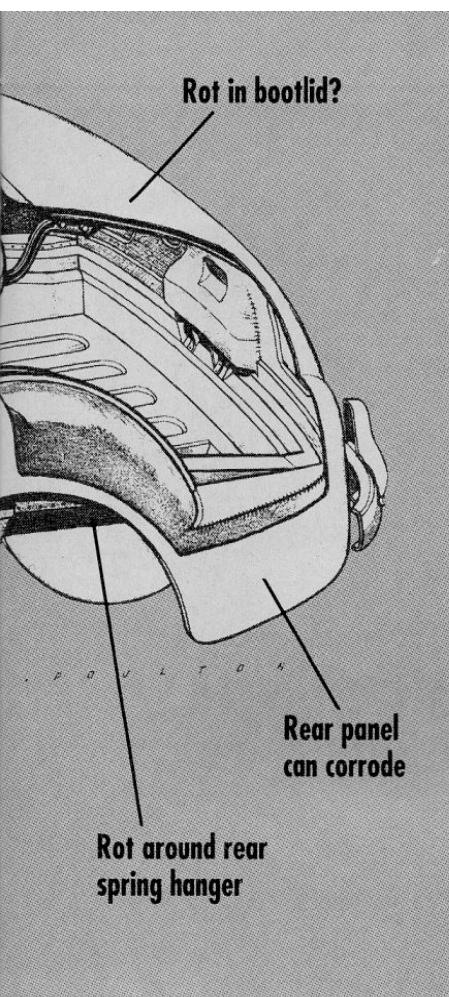
Basically prewar engine in 4/44 is rugged but slow

Specialists

NTG, 282-284 Bramford Road, Ipswich, IPI 4AY (0473 211240). Extensive range of parts for both models. Catalogue available

John and Lou Shorten, 44 The Street, Lenwade, Norwich, Norfolk. Have owned examples of these cars for two decades. Supply new and used parts including glassfibre wings, reconditioned brake/clutch master cylinder units.

John Monkman, 90 Cardoness Road, Sheffield, S10 5RU (0742 307436). Well known enthusiast offering new and used spares, including as-new MG radiator grilles for £185, new nearside MG wings for £350.



with replacement wood. The dashboards, seats and door trims are all different.

Also, although the cars share the same bodyshell, the bonnets, sills and doors are not interchangeable between models.

PRICES

There's a huge difference in prices between the Wolseley and MG models. A Magnette suitable for everyday use is likely to set you back £2500-£3000, yet a Wolseley would be half that.

The far more usable 15/50 has an edge on price over the slower 4/44, and a Magnette Varitone would be expected to cost at least £500 more than a standard example.

You're not likely to get much change out of £3500-£4000 for an exceptional Magnette, and you could double that for a concours car.

In reality, it would be difficult to imagine even the best Wolseley reaching much more than £2500.

A down-at-heel MG would be a much more viable restoration proposition than

the equivalent Wolseley, but specialists reckon a full professional restoration could end up costing £10,000 or more.

A tatty and rusty Wolseley with no engine and an awful interior is worth little more than its scrap value.

VERDICT

While the MG undeniably has a performance advantage over the Wolseley, the 4/44 and 15/50 are loaded with period charm, and it does seem a bit silly that the Magnette is double the price of its close relation, no matter how much you enjoy the idea of plonking down an

MG keyring on your local pub bar.

A 4/44 is not really suitable as a long-distance motorway cruiser, but if you only want to potter around country lanes or to local rallies, this car should see you right. And there's the pleasure of knowing you're driving behind the engine that's powered some of the most loved MGs.

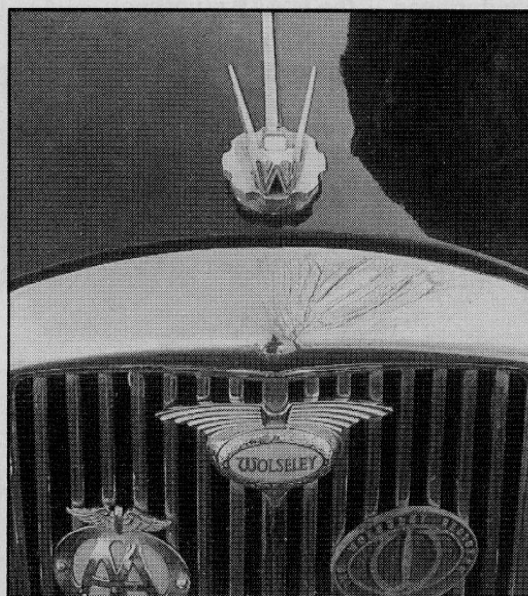
The Wolseley 15/50 offers perhaps the best combination of performance and price, though it's undeniable that the Magnette is the most usable model.

If you are worried about performance, and not too much of a stickler for origi-

nality, there's not a lot to stop you putting a 1622cc engine from a Farina model or even the MGB's 1798cc unit in your Wolseley or Magnette.

If you watch the rust, you can't really go wrong with any of these extremely stylish and practical vehicles, which look good from any angle and radiate pleasant fifties character.

Perhaps the ultimate solution to the arguments about the car's credibility as MGs (or Wolseleys) can be found in a recent *Popular Classics* interview with their stylist Gerald Palmer. 'Both cars were designed together,' he says. A simple statement to end a complex argument? ■



Traditional Wolseley grille and mascot on 4/44 helped foster reassuring image



Two-tone colour scheme, larger back window and flashing indicators on Varitone MG