

A-grade RESULT!

Andy Kenning spent eight years restoring it – now it's the best early MGA that we have ever seen

WORDS DANNY HOPKINS PHOTOS MATT HOWELL

Andy is already well on with his Lotus project. The backbone chassis is done and a rebuilt engine and box installed.

A clean, straight MGA is thing of profound beauty. Proportionally perfect, its compound curves are a subtle work of art. These curves make a rusty example one of the ultimate restoration challenges... a challenge that Andy Kenning was happy to embrace.

'I had been talking about it for years, and found the perfect project in Scunthorpe in 2007,' says Andy. 'It was a 1956 1500 roadster, an early car just like I wanted, but it wasn't exactly a runner.' When it turned up, Andy pushed it into the garage and shut the doors quickly. 'I knew exactly what the family would say: "Not another car in boxes, surely!"' Andy was a veteran of previous 'in boxes' restorations, a Midget and an MGB V8 – he had a reputation.

The MGA had a chassis, a front body tub and a back tub, but nothing in the middle. Both tubs had dissolved from knee height down and what was left had perforations: 'It was a bit like a teabag!' laughs Andy. 'The front wings weren't original and had some sloped headlights, like a Porsche, fitted into them. Apparently, this was called a Le Mans conversion – horrible.

At least none of the mechanical components were seized and the handbrake worked. Result!

Serious stripdown

The controlled demolition began with parts being removed and catalogued. 'I made a spot weld cutter. The welds on the 'A' only need a small cutter, so I found an old 5mm drill and ground my own.' Many hours of drilling followed as panels were removed. Andy reacquainted himself with his MIG welder and began to make small repair panels – even the smallest of which had compound curves. 'Early on, it was a slow process, but, after all, this is a hobby to be savoured, not rushed.'

Andy continued through 2008, repairing the front tub and bonnet with a combination of bought and made panels. A new nose was welded on and its duct panel welded to the nose and seam sealed. Andy also sorted the front wings: 'Both were stripped of paint and almost one kilogram of filler was removed from the offside. This was followed by several weeks' work with a hammer and dolly... I had to apologise to the neighbours after that.'

Dash and instruments were repaired ➔



THE RESTORER

Andy Kenning lives in Redhill and works for the Metropolitan Police. He is a veteran of two other successful MG restorations: a Midget and an MGB V8. His other passion, Lotus, is represented by his Lotus Exige, Elise and current project, a Lotus Elan Plus 2530.

AS FOUND



Fresh from Scunthorpe with 'Le Mans' front wings.



Glacier Blue: the perfect colour for a perfect MGA.

and refurbished next, then the car was pushed out into the sunshine to be turned around ready for work to start on the rear tub. 'It was very bodged with lots of grotty patches and even worse welding.' Andy had to fabricate patches before he could even think about trying remove or repair panels. 'It needed the strength, as did I.' This went on for months.

Andy repaired the top front of the nearside rear deck so, as with all his other repair panel creations, it was out with the cereal box and scissors to make a template. 'Because it has a 90-degree bend, a curve across the top face, a curve along the side face and a twist along its length it needed bending, panel beating over a number of different dollies and a new technique for me – cold stretching. You lot at Practical Classics ran an article on cold stretching and cold shrinking, and very useful it proved, too. It's probably the most complex repair panel I had to fabricate during the entire resto... and it fitted in perfectly.'

Andy repaired, patched and made new sections for every panel on the rear tub. Then another new skill,



ABOVE Rebuilt B-Series 1500 was re-rebuilt by Andy.

RIGHT Next resto, is in the garage: a Lotus Elan 2+2.

TECH SPEC

- Engine** 1493cc/4-cyl/OHV
- Gearbox** 4-speed manual
- Power** 71bhp@5500rpm
- Torque** 82lb ft@3000rpm
- 0-60mph** 11.3sec
- Top speed** 101mph
- Fuel economy** 29mpg
- Price new** £940
- Value now** £30,000



BELOW LEFT Half tank of fuel is a tempting invitation to take flight. **BELOW RIGHT** New chrome was a wonderful surprise birthday gift.



As new, apart from the steering wheel.



'There was much tea drinking done before I could bring myself to cut the rear tub off'

aluminium welding! 'I bought some HTS2000 Aluminium welding rods and had a go at repairing the holes in the middle of the boot lid with quite acceptable results,' smiles Andy, but he didn't stop there. 'I decided to have a go at some bigger fabrication work. Two inner wing repair panels resulted. I had a block machined to enable me to emulate the swage lines in the sections I'd made, too.'

Once it was strong enough the rear tub was removed. 'There was much pacing, pondering and drinking of tea before I could bring myself to cut the rear of the car off, but the tub came away in one piece and without flexing.'

The chassis and running gear could now, at last take centre stage, made easier by Andy's homemade moveable dolly. 'I built the frame to enable the chassis to be bolted to it either way up to give access to both top and bottom of the chassis. I sandblasted the lot and listed the numerous dings and damage.' Andy, of course, ended up doing more work than originally anticipated.

The world changes

Andy's plan had always been to restore the car slowly, enjoy the process and learn new skills along the way. Then he and his wife, Hilary, would go touring in it. In 2010, just after fitting up the chassis, all the plans changed, as Andy's world was turned upside down. 'My wife was diagnosed with cancer. I couldn't do much as I spent most of my time looking after her and running back and forth to hospital. Naturally, the restoration slowed down a bit.'

Andy still managed to move the MGA on. He made and fitted the floorboards, fitted 'F' sections, sill closing plates, sill finishers and outer sills. 'During this time, I felt the need to be kept busy and distracted.' Andy fitted the front and rear tubs together after a lot of measuring and help from a friend, James. Then, after months of trial fitting, he attempted to fit the body to the chassis. 'The inner wing panels that I fitted to the car were repair panels that I got with the car, so I don't know where they came from, I just trusted that they were right. One wasn't.' Which meant fitting body and chassis together wasn't going to plan until a he received an email from fellow MGA restorer, Bill Jeffries. 'He sent me some critical measurements between front and rear tubs in both longitudinal and diagonal axis. These measurements, when compared to my car, showed that my front and rear tubs needed moving on the chassis for them to line up properly.'

A four-weekend weldathon saw the structural fettling finished. 'It was followed by a happy moment. I took the roadster outside into the sunshine to reveal her truly glamorous lines. I just can't walk past without running my hand over the wings, it's a really tactile car.'

After four years and several rounds of surgery, chemo and radiotherapy, Hilary's cancer was sadly diagnosed as terminal. 'As a coping mechanism, I think,' says Andy, 'I threw myself into the restoration knowing that, if she never got to see it finished, it would never get done and just fester in the garage. I needed for her to see the finished car.' The next few months flew by in a restoration frenzy. 'I decided to hand over the

Here's how Andy did it



1 FEB 2009 Rear panel

Already, two years of painstaking bodywork have taken place and panels are now being fitted, including this huge rear valance repair panel. Testimony to Andy's fabrication and welding skills... it fitted perfectly.

2 OCTOBER 2011 Front to back

By now the chassis has been restored and it is time to think about joining the front body tub to the rear. Here are the sections required – ready!



3 NOVEMBER 2014 Proof of quality

It is all coming together and here are the panel gaps. Given the depth of the work, nothing short of miraculous.

4 JAN 2015 Le Mans no longer

Thanks to expensive repair panels, Andy built up a correct headlight mount by using the nearside item as a template and reversing the measurements. Truly expert panelcraft made to look easy.



5 AUGUST 2015 Ready for the big refit

After a professional paint job, the MGA's body was fitted back onto the chassis at the paint shop. It went on first time. Testimony to an in-depth restoration well completed.



Restorer of the Year 2021

Later this year you will be able to vote for your favourite restoration featured in PC via practicalclassics.co.uk. Then you can look forward to the 2021 Practical Classics Classic Car and Restoration Show on June 11-13. We will present the most popular restoration.

completion of the bodywork to professionals. I'd got the bodywork almost finished, but didn't have time to prep it before painting.'

James and Vince at Mini Speed in Brooklands were given the task of prepping and then applying the Glacier Blue paint and did so with an eye on the need to be prompt. During this time, Andy cleaned, stripped and rebuilt the engine. 'It had been professionally rebuilt and, once in bits, I saw it had been nicely machined.' Two of the bearings were scored, probably due to having been stood since 1978 and turned occasionally by hand. As a matter of course, Andy fitted new bearings, thrust washers, core plugs and a replacement water pump.

Getting it done

With number one son's assistance, 'thanks Dom,' Andy fitted box and engine as a unit and then fired it up. 'Immediately, she idled very sweetly! I did the usual victory dance around the garage, of which there is video evidence!' Andy took the chassis to Mini Speed to collect the body. 'We reunited the two at the workshop and they went together first time. After a nervous trip home, the car finally made it back to the garage, as we pulled up outside there was homemade bunting strung all over the front of the house!'

Andy's birthday saw the family club together to buy chrome – front and rear bumpers, overriders, all the dome headed bolts and fittings, MGA wing ovals, skeleton boot badge, windscreen grab handles. 'The rear bumper went on fine, but the front bumper irons fought me,' says Andy, 'In the end, the best man won!'

The MGA was completed in September 2015. 'Hilary saw the car finished from the comfort of her hospital bed in the living room of our house. She looked at it through the window and smiled at me when she saw and heard it running and moving under its own steam. Sadly, she wasn't well enough to get in it or go for a ride.' Hilary passed away on November 22, 2015 and, although the car was finished, for a while Andy didn't want to drive it.

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO DRIVE

Sitting behind the wheel of a car that has had so much emotional energy invested in it is a daunting prospect. But as soon as I am settled in, the nerves evaporate, simply because an MGA is

a delightful place to be. It is as intuitive and airy on the inside as it is perfectly proportioned on the outside. The B-Series pops into life and chatters eagerly. Changing up through the gears, the resistance of the radials quickly disappears as speed increases. This is a British sports car that invites you to go for a 'spin' rather than

a 'blast'. It's not, in any way, 'hairy chested' and that's no bad thing. Acceleration is perky and handling precise, with rack and pinion steering placing those radials with positivity. But the real joy of this car has more to do with Andy's handiwork than anything else. For the first time ever, I am driving an MGA that feels as if it has just left the showroom. It drives as well as it looks.



Is there a prettier classic British roadster?

THANKS TO

My brother Ian for the tow car, Reece for loan of the trailer and Dom, Alex and Robbie for the muscle. James Gordon for the calming influence. Bill Jeffries for the critical measurements, James and Vince at Mini Speed and **Sportscar Metalworks** for some of the new panels.

The 'A' took eight years to restore and is exactly as it would have been as it left the factory, with the exception of a Derrington style steering wheel and no whitewall tyres. 'Apart from the paint, I did all the work myself, including a couple of subtle modifications such as a motorised DAB radio/CD player that drops down from behind the dash and lifts back up again by operation of a hidden switch.' As the months passed following Hilary's death, Andy began to use the roadster. 'Wherever she goes, people stop in their tracks and look and point. I gifted my MGB V8 to my oldest son, Dom, and Hilary's Midget was passed to my youngest, Alex. In June of 2019, we had all three cars out for Alex's wedding – they looked stunning and all behaved perfectly.'

How he intended to use the MGA was an important part of why Andy started the restoration. The heartbreak of not being able to achieve that ambition cannot be underestimated. Andy put himself into this car, his heart and soul. Today, every time he opens the garage door the MGA pays him back, with interest, and with love. ■