

DOM JOLY

engine noise and taking about 30 minutes to get in and out of the bloody thing. Admittedly, I was a little more porky then, but I didn't feel the love.

MGs are in the same vein for me — the sort of British sports car driven by a middle-aged laydees' man who keeps the thing in his garage as his weekend car. I had a friend whose parents did that. Their pride and joy was polished frequently and kept under lock and key. I dimly remember finding the keys one weekend when I was staying and the parents were away. I don't need to go on, do I? I took it for a spin round the Cotswolds and pranged it into a tree. God, we got into trouble. This is the main reason I'm never going to keep a "special" car in my garage. I have teenage children. Trouble is just an inevitability.

I was quite intrigued by the MG, though. The mission statement of the manufacturer, Frontline Developments, which is based in Abingdon, Oxfordshire, the home of the original MG, was this: "Create a car that mirrors the iconic shape and style of an MG while delivering the performance of a modern day sports car." This did sound good fun and I'd been pootling around in my Range Rover for too long. I needed

Fancy driving a souped-up MG — classic-style body, all-new innards?" The call came and I took a moment before agreeing. I tried to work out what I thought about MGs. As a rule I'm not really a sports-car type of guy.

I once had to drive a Morgan around the UK for a month while filming a show about things that were still made in Britain. Now, while I'm thrilled that Morgans are still made in Britain, I have to admit to not really having enjoyed the experience. My main memory is of rubbish windscreen wipers, a lot of



to do some proper driving, something with a bit of soul.

This car is nothing if not soulful. Launched last year to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the MGB, it is to all intents and purposes a Mk 1 MGB GT, which, as MG enthusiasts will recall, was built from 1965 to 1968. The body panels and chassis on this reborn

technology is state of the art, but from the outside you would be hard pushed to tell the difference.

Unlike the MGB, though, the LE50 has optional air-conditioning, electric windows and power steering. It also has seatbelts and a stereo that work. If that sounds a travesty to purists, they can take comfort in the fact that the company makes liberal use of chrome, Bakelite and leather to give a retro feel and has steered clear of safety aids such as antilock braking, traction control and airbags. This is a driver's car, the company says, a little sniffily. I could hardly wait.

Standing in the autumn sunshine on my drive, it certainly looked beautiful, and my kids ran out and shouted, "Hooray, a James Bond car!" The interior was stunning: hand-formed alloy seat shells covered in Alcantara, with a Wilton carpet underfoot. It oozed class and I longed to take it out.

The problem was that I was home alone because my wife was in Austria having her colon cleansed (don't ask). How to take the children to school in a two-seater? The answer was simple: make two trips. Trust me, in this car that was not a chore.

Jackson hopped in first. He looked

around admiringly. "This is like a speedboat, Dad," he said. He wasn't too far wrong. I turned the key and pushed the button. A wonderful throaty growl came from the 2-litre, four-cylinder Mazda engine. Nobody was going to be in any doubt that this was no ordinary MG. Maybe I should have known what MG stood for, but I didn't, so I looked it up — it's Morris Garages, but you already knew that, didn't you? Smartarse.

We set off for Cheltenham. Took the scenic route past the neolithic burial mound and over Cleve Hill. The MG felt frighteningly low compared with my Range Rover — very vulnerable, in fact — but, oh my God, was it fun.

I was in a quandary. Part of me wanted to drive like a total idiot and pretend that I was the Saint escaping from some cartoon baddies. The other part of me kept looking at my boy next to me and wondering just how strong this vehicle would be in an impact. I didn't want to find out, so I drove as sensibly as one can in such a wonderful piece of machinery.

It was unbelievably responsive and easy to handle. The man who delivered it told me that it was perfectly weighted, and he was quite right. I haven't driven a car this much fun for a long time. The

company is making only 50 (the LE stands for limited edition) and they come in at about £63,000 a pop before you add any extras. I would have been tempted to get one were it not for the special-car-in-the-garage/teenage-children rule.

Back on the school run we roared (responsibly) past several sodden bike riders and entered Cheltenham. The car had an interesting effect on pedestrians. Most turned to look as they heard the engine. Those under 40 showed no sign of recognition and carried on walking.

The effect on those in the 50-plus bracket was extraordinary, though. First there was surprise, and then admiration, and then what looked like a hit of intense nostalgia. I assumed they were all mentally travelling back to a better time. A time when maybe they were still optimistic, young, single.

Possibly they had taken a certain lady out for a picnic in the thing. Maybe it had been a wonderful sunny day in the summer of '76. They had driven down to a meadow by the Thames, laid out the picnic, cracked open a bottle of chablis. One thing had led to another, but then the young lady had had to go abroad for work and they had lost touch and he had got married on the rebound.

Or maybe they just liked the look of

the car as we whizzed by. Whatever, it certainly turned some heads.

I dropped Jackson off at school and whizzed back for Parker. She climbed in and immediately grumbled that there was no iPhone connection. Honestly, she's sitting in a classic car with an amazing stereo and she wants an iPhone connection. Kids today, they don't know which side their bread's buttered.

I dropped her off and, as I headed back home, turned down a little deserted lane and pressed pedal to metal. The car does 0-62mph in 5.1 seconds but it felt a lot faster. I roared around screaming with joy for five minutes or so.

Things may have to change. I just may have to get a special car. Maybe I can get a special garage for my special car. I could have it somewhere in the village, far away from my pesky kids.

It's all becoming clear now. This was meant to be. I could even put a sign above my secret garage that said Morris Garages. Only I would know what that sign meant. And all you smartarses.

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Jeremy Clarkson is away.
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THE JOLYOMETER

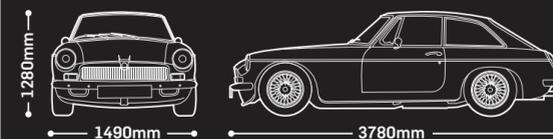
Joly's verdict
★★★★☆
The 1960s never felt so good



MG LE50

ENGINE	1999cc, 4 cylinders, turbo
POWER	212bhp @ 7400rpm
TORQUE	174 lb ft @ 4200rpm
TRANSMISSION	6-speed manual
ACCELERATION	0-60mph: 5.1sec
TOP SPEED	160mph
FUEL / CO ₂	Not available
ROAD TAX	Exempt — historic vehicle
PRICE	£63,240
ON SALE	Order soon — only 24 left.

Go to frontlinedevelopments.com



DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT, KIDS. THIS IS GOING IN MY SPECIAL PLACE

DIGITAL EXTRA

Watch a video of the LE50 in action at thesundaytimes.co.uk/mg and at driving.co.uk