

The big 50

The MGB hits 50 this year. To celebrate, Frontline Developments has launched the 212bhp, 160mph LE50. It's pretty special but does it justify the asking price?

Words David Lillywhite Photography Dean Smith

LET'S GET THIS OUT OF THE WAY. The MGB GT you see before you costs £49,950.

And now I'll explain why. First, it's handbuilt from brand new parts, except for a reconditioned dashboard panel, axle casing and handbrake lever.

Next, most major parts represent significant improvements upon the originals. The engine is the latest 2.0-litre four-cylinder from Mazda, mated to a six-speed gearbox from the same stable. The suspension is re-engineered with cast aluminium alloy components, telescopic dampers rather than the old lever-arms, and the rear leaf spring set-up replaced by a five-link coil-sprung live axle, carrying an optional limited-slip differential. Brakes are discs all round, firmly gripped by alloy calipers.

All this in a new Heritage bodyshell, seam-welded, reworked for stunning panel gaps and rustproofed to modern standards. That's roughly £36,000 worth of parts alone.

This car, named 'LE50', is the result of 20 years of MGB and Spridget work by Frontline Developments (www.frontlinedevelopments.com). Best-known for Rover K-series conversions, the company has now moved onto the lightweight Mazda unit: with double overhead cams on variable timing and kitted out with Teflon-coated pistons and billet steel crankshaft and 'rods, it will safely rev to 8000rpm.

Mapped to suit the LE50, the Mazda gives 212bhp and 174lb ft of torque. A stock B gives 95bhp/110lb ft and the V8 137bhp/193lb ft. Weight is a perfectly distributed 941kg – 50kg lighter than standard.

So how does 212bhp feel in an MGB? Stunning! Acceleration – accompanied by a deep intake growl that one observer compared with 'an Escort BDA on a forest rally stage' – is relentless, and you can find yourself topping the ton without expecting it. A top speed of 160mph and 0-60mph in five seconds gives an idea of how quick this buzzing B really is.

What's even more impressive is how civilised the LE50 feels in the face of this monster power delivery. Thanks to decent silencing, extensive soundproofing and clever suspension engineering, there's never a time when it's noisier or harsher than a stock MGB. More importantly, it sticks to the road in a way that the jumpy stock B could never match, it's rarely thrown off line by rough roads, even under full power, and ride comfort isn't compromised.

Sheesh, I nearly forgot the electronic power-assisted steering! It's a custom-designed system, so beautifully weighted that I honestly think a newcomer to an MGB could get in and drive without having the faintest idea the steering is assisted. But gone is the heaviness at parking speeds and the horrible tendency to weight-up mid-corner.

What else? There's the lovely Alcantara-trimmed interior, air-con, heated front and rear screens, uprated heater, top-notch hi-fi, electric windows, xenon headlights, central locking and much more.

So, £49,950... You can probably see why, now. The surprise is that it still feels like an MGB; just a very good one. Whether you could justify the price is more personal. Several of those who have already reserved one cite the difficulty in turning up for work in a look-at-me Porsche or Mercedes. An MGB, even at £50,000, is still a classless classic. We loved it.

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Clockwise from left Brand new shell has been seamwelded; retrimmed interior features air-con; Dunlop steel wheels look fabulous on a 'B'; engine is a 212bhp Mazda four.

