



MG REBORN

Richard Webber

YOU'RE looking at a 1964 MGB. Very handsome it is, too – a British icon, one of the all-time great roadsters. But surely a comma has been misplaced in the spec box – £95,874 for an MGB? That's almost £16,000 more than the great British roadster *du jour*, the Jaguar F-type, in full-cream supercharged 5-litre V8 form. And that's a brand new car that does 0-60mph in 4.2 seconds.

Thing is, the MG – officially called the Abingdon Edition and built by Oxfordshire-based Frontline Developments – is actually new, too, and reaches 60mph 0.4 seconds sooner than the fire-breathing Jag. Yes, this is a brand-new, 50-year-old car. The chassis, bodywork, engine, gearbox and suspension are all factory-fresh. In fact, only a handful of bits

including the dash, quarter lights and a couple of parts that never see daylight are original. But the bespoke chassis and body panels have been turned out by British Motor Heritage, which holds the licence to make parts for all pre-1982 MGs, so, as far as the DVIA is concerned, the car is authentic enough to retain its 1964 pedigree.

One implication of this – besides there being no road tax bill – is that seatbelts aren't mandatory. If this MGB still packed the perky little 95bhp 1.8 of yore, I'd happily do without straps. But the highly tuned 2.5-litre Mazda four-pot under the tell-tale bonnet scoop produces an altogether more bracing 304bhp, so the token lap-belts fitted to the Abingdon Edition feel barely adequate.

With less than a tonne to propel, including your correspondent (whose apprehension probably weighs a good 5kg and seems to be passing rapidly through his large intestine) and half a tank of high-

octane go-juice, it's no wonder the little MG accelerates faster than the 1,665kg F-type.

And no matter that its engine was last seen puffing out a mere 167bhp in the nose of the Mk2 Mazda 6. With upgraded internals and a remap from motorsport specialist Omex, the newly potent 2.5 makes the Abingdon Edition into a proper mini-rod. Start it up and the car tremors at idle, packed with a nervous energy, champing at the bit. With the bassy exhaust rumbling away behind it's clear even before turning a wheel that the car's pretty face, petite proportions and chrome jewellery have been possessed by a force that would have its 1964 owner calling for an exorcist.

The engine delivers, too. It pulls with determination from just 2,000rpm then warbles and howls its way up to and through the 6,750-7,500rpm "amber zone" on the tachometer without relenting. An upshift light prompts you to reach for the next gear from

the six-speed manual transmission, which is also Mazda-sourced and has a tidy, positive action.

Once up to speed on a twisty road you can begin to revel in the Abingdon Edition's sharp handling, diving towards apices and holding lofty cornering speeds with confidence – the car's agility is leagues above an original MGB's, as are its limits of grip, which are further extended by a rear limited-slip differential. This car might look like a Sunday afternoon dawdler, but with these credentials you'd be equally tempted to take it on the track.

The steering, developed by the Dutch company EZ, is the best electric system I've tried. There's no kickback but there is plenty of feel, weighting is ideal and responses are quick and fluid. It shows the big marques that fuel-saving electric steering can be a worthy substitute for traditional hydraulic setups.

On the road, a few rough edges might bother

you: the brakes can lock up under duress, the throttle is bitey, and the high-speed ride is too animated. But the dampers are adjustable, and this is, after all, the first of the planned run of 25 cars.

Some inconsistent body panel gaps could be excused for the same reason. But the platform is there for daily use – sixth gear soothes the engine when cruising and the comfortable cockpit is beautifully trimmed in farm-fresh two-tone Connolly leather and Wilton carpets. A retro stereo head and Smiths dials all have modern innards and there are xenon headlamps, too.

Chinese-owned MG no longer makes sports cars, but Frontline has taken up that hallowed mantle and produced something very special with the Abingdon Edition. Buy an F-type and you'll love it for a few years. But buy one of these things and you'll probably love it forever.

PRICE £95,874

ENGINE 2.5l 4 cylinder petrol, 304bhp

TRANSMISSION 5 speed manual, rear wheels

PERFORMANCE Top speed 160mph (estimate); 0-60mph 3.8 seconds (estimate)

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