

John Price Williams samples the new MG3 Form Sport

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What defines an MG? The marque has had a long sporting tradition since building its first car some 90 years ago, though the badge has been stuck on Maestros, Metros and Montegos, among other less distinguished models, all quite some distance away from the original concept of a two-seater sports car.

I recently had the chance to test the MG3 – the latest offering, a slick, spacious good-looking five-door hatchback. How much of an MG is it? Well, it's made in Birmingham, by British workers. Perhaps assembled is a better word since the car comes in very large chunks from the SAIC Motor Corporation, one of China's largest car makers, and is only bolted together at Longbridge. However, it was developed and designed in Austin/BMC/Rover's old home at



Longbridge at the SAIC Technical Centre, with British roads and British tastes in mind.

Having owned an MGB and two MGFs, and having written a book on the MGA, I was curious to see how the tradition was being carried forward. The MG3 is pretty conventional mechanically, front-wheel drive with MacPherson strut suspension at the front and torsion bar at the rear. There's only one engine for the four-model range - a 1500cc petrol unit which delivers 106bhp and a 0-60 speed of 10.4mph, topping out at 108mph, the same performance for all models, though when I talked to MG people at the Millbrook Proving Ground, where manufacturers test their cars, there were hints of a sportier model.

Incidentally, the last time an MG had a 1500cc engine was in the first series of the MGA sports car of 1955-9, but that produced only a modest 68bhp @5,500rpm, which took it from 0-60mph in 15secs.

I pushed the new MG3Form Sport, which is of course at this stage no more sporty than the others, around the hill route at Millbrook, a complex of short straights, sweeping curves and hairpins, designed for car makers to test cornering and handling to the limit.

It handles remarkably well, clinging to the line through corners, with little body-roll and its precise steering makes it easy to end up where you were wanted to be going. The five-speed gearbox can feel a bit baggy at times and I think the engine can sound thrashy when pushed hard.

The brake set-up, discs at the front, drums at the rear, bring it to a smooth halt. Internally, it's quite restful - good fabrics, comfy seats with a good driving position, though some of the plastics are a bit scratchy. Fuel consumption is claimed to be 48.7mpg in the combined cycle, though whether anyone in the real world ever achieves car manufacturers' figures achieved in a laboratory is a vexed question.

The MG3 range is remarkable value for car of this size. The basic 3Time starts at £8,399 and has 14" steel wheels and a few unexpected bits and pieces at that price such as hill-hold control and a stability control system, in addition to CD audio with MP3 compatibility, LED



daytime running lights and six airbags. Moving up to the top-spec model, the 3Style at £9,999, brings all sorts of goodies – air-con, reverse parking sensors, cruise control, electric mirrors, central locking, DAB radio, Bluetooth and 16" alloys. As always these days you can spec-up with things like decals, different wheels and colours.

Its only real competitor at this size and these prices is the Dacia Sandero, though that has a less sophisticated feel about it. MG3's low prices are really designed to compete with small city cars, but for £8,399 you get a five-door, full-size supermini with lots of kit. MG claim that to get a similar car to their top-of-the-range 3Style at a quid under £10,000, you would have to find another £2,000 for the Skoda Fabia SE, and a Ford Fiesta Zetec would cost another £750 on top of that. However, what's not clear at this stage is what the MG's depreciation is likely to be over three years; the others may hold their value better. On the other hand, the insurance group for the MG3 is a very low 4E.

MG3s are a rare site on the roads at the moment, as at present there are only about 50 MG dealers, but it's planned to have 80 dealers in the UK by the end of the year, and 100 by the end of 2015.

MG is so confident in its products (the other one is the MG6) that it's offering factory tours at Longbridge once a week, which can also include a test drive, and visits to the Technical Centre, the MG Museum and the office of Lord Austin, who founded his car company at Longbridge more than a century ago. If you are interested, call 0121 251 6533/4, or email info@mg-salescentre.co.uk.

VERDICT

For: Exceptional value for money; good looks and handling.

Against: Noisy engine; no sporty MG model yet.

SPECIFICATION



| | 3STYLE | 3FORM SPORT | 3FORM | 3TIME |
|---|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| | £9,999 | £9,549 | £9,299 | £8,399 |
| Alloy wheels | 16" Diamond alloy wheel | 16" Carousel alloy wheel | 14" steel wheel + trim | 14" steel wheel + trim |
| Reverse parking sensors | ✓ | x | x | x |
| Cruise control | ✓ | x | x | x |
| Automatic headlights and windscreen wipers | ✓ | x | x | x |
| Easy electric air conditioning | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | x |
| Led daytime running lights | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Body-coloured side sills with black insert | ✓ | ✓ | x | x |
| Bluetooth telephone integration | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | x |
| CD player with MP3 and USB/aux input | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| DAB digital radio | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | x |
| Smartphone and iPod integration | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | x |
| Leather steering wheel with red stitch detail and audio functions | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | x |
| 'Zero' design fabric sports seats | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | x |
| Front and rear electric windows | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Cool silver interior finishes | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Hill hold control | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Brake disc wiping | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Stability control system | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Remote central locking | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | x |
| Electrically-adjustable heated wing mirrors | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | x |
| Rear spoiler | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | x |

TECH SPEC IN BRIEF

MG3 Form Sport

Engine: 1498cc twin overhead camshaft, 16 valve, normally-aspirated four cylinder petrol

Power: 106 PS @ 6,000 rpm

Torque: 137 Nm (101 lb.ft) @ 4,750 rpm

0-62 mph: 10.4 sec



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Top speed: 108 mph

Fuel consumption:

('Urban'): 37.7 mpg

('Extra Urban'): 57.6 mpg

('Combined'): 48.7 mpg

CO2 emissions: 136 g/km

'On the road' price: MG 3Form £9,299

(Prices range from £8,399 for the 3Time, to £9,999 for the 3Style).