

MG F – 25 years of this modern classic and it's still looking good

Published: March 12, 2020

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Online version: <https://www.wheels-alive.co.uk/mg-f-25-years-of-this-modern-classic-and-its-still-looking-good/>



MG F 1.8i

MG *F* – 25 years is a long time – by Dave Moss, who tells the fascinating story of this model (and the TF)...

The MG *F*, which passed the 25th anniversary of its Geneva Show announcement on March 7th 2020, was a remarkable car. Developed to capitalise on a long and formidably successful



heritage defined by its world famous (and subtly reworked) octagon badge, it has left a fitting and indelible mark on British motoring history.

Its story began in the 1980s, after production of the MG B and Midget ended, when Austin Rover's best endeavours to keep the marque on sale gave the world the distinctly hard-top MG Metro, Montego and Maestro. The first public hint that MG might still have a genuine sports car future came when the radically styled "EX-E" concept car appeared at several major motor shows, beginning at Frankfurt in September 1985. It was never destined for production, and nor was the next MG concept, a front engined, front drive open top mock-up known as "MGF 16." Styled by one Gerry McGovern - then recently of Peugeot, and previously Chrysler, its chance of progression as an MG B successor stalled when Austin Rover was sold to British Aerospace in 1988.

Though we'll probably never know for sure, it seems likely that the 1989 arrival of the all-new Mazda MX 5 then kick-started MG *F* development. Quite conventionally engineered, the Mazda personified past MG sports car attractions, and its immediate public welcome surely spoke volumes to the marque's new owners. Within a year Rover's new Special products group - formed to cost effectively deliver smaller scale projects - was considering the first new convertible production MG in ten years....

In 1991 three running prototypes were commissioned from separate trusted consultancies to evaluate front engine, front wheel drive, front engine, rear wheel drive, and rear or mid engine, rear wheel drive chassis configurations. Boldly, given no previous production MG had used it, the mid-engined alternative designated "PR3" was chosen. It went to Rover's Canley studios, where the original deliberately anonymous appearance was transformed through extensive styling and character development by Gerry McGovern and Gordon Sked. The result was a smoothly modernistic style, with familiar design cues clearly defining it as an MG.

Evolution of mass-market designs on tight budgets underpinned the limited amount of genuinely new product development Rover was then undertaking, so it's appropriate that



the MG marque emerged from similar founding principles seventy years earlier. The MG *F* acknowledged its legacy through innovative design, re-using in-house hardware and technology where possible.

The shoestring magic employed by Rover Special Products to evolve niche models ranging from the Metro Cabriolet to the Rover 800 Turbo worked by enlisting trusted suppliers to undertake key component design and sub-assembly development. The MG *F* continued this approach, including the masterstroke of reducing bodyshell production costs through a collaborative “body design, manufacture and build” agreement with the then Coventry-based Mayflower Motor Panels operation.

Lateral thinking was evident everywhere: the front subframe from the K-series engined Metro was adapted for mid-mounting, while the 5 speed manual gearbox came from Rover’s larger cars. A more unlikely Metro carry-over was Alex Moulton’s front-to-rear interconnected hydragas suspension, specifically tuned by him for this application. Power came from Rover’s K-series engine, launched in August 1989, when the top performing 1.4 litre version delivered 95 PS and 124 Nm (91 lb.ft) torque. A novel method of enlarging cylinder bores developed in 1991 raised capacity to 1.6 litres, but its 109 PS was still deemed inadequate for the MG *F*, so a 1.8 litre version was quickly evolved, providing 120 PS and 165 Nm (122 lb.ft). High series variants benefited from an advanced variable valve control (VVC) cylinder head, delivering 145 PS with 174 Nm (128 lb.ft) maximum torque.

The top news story on February 1st 1994 was British Aerospace’s sale of Rover to BMW, allowing the MG *F* a special place in history – as the sole MG-badged product to be signed off, and launched, under BMW ownership. First customer cars were in UK showrooms in October 1995, equipped to typical 1990’s levels – which meant ABS and passenger airbags were both optional. The 1.8i model had a list price of £15,995, without the electric power steering of the £17,995 1.8 VVC version.



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MG F 1.8i VVC.



MG F 1.8i VVC and 1.8i

The MG *F* received a generally warm press welcome. Though its easy, vice-free driveability attracted much praise, and it was comfortable, controllable and good-looking, some drivers wanted more power, and the feel-less steering response and dull handling when pressed were criticised – overall the non power-assisted cars were rated better for keen drivers. The public loved it: 77,269 examples were built, with 42,099 finding British homes, and 1998 was the best year for both production and UK sales.



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MG F 1.8i



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MG F 1.8i cockpit.



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MG F interior with leather upholstery.



MG F Trophy SE, 1995 to 2001.

Following MG Rover's acquisition of Rover's remnants in 2000, a more powerful 160 horsepower VVC engine was introduced, and in February 2002 the range was relaunched as the MG *TF*, with a styling update, revised engine range, and a CVT automatic variant. Coil springs replaced the hydragas, and chassis adjustments tightened the handling characteristics. These changes revitalised the car: 39,880 *TF*s were built between 2001 and 10.22am on April 7th 2005, when the last "official build" *TF* left the production line as MG Rover collapsed.



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MG TF 160 and 135.



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MG TF Spark SE.



MG TF - interest in this modern classic, and the MG F, is growing...

After a two year hiatus it seemed the car might live on despite MG Rover's demise. Nanjing Automotive, which had gained the MG marque rights and TF production tooling, unveiled a Chinese built example with minimal changes at the 2007 Shanghai Motor Show. Production restarted in Chinese hands - largely from imported CKD kits - at Longbridge in 2008, with completed vehicles incorporating only minor changes.

By then the car was ageing fast, the time gap was long - and new marketing minimal. The earlier impetus and enthusiasm built up for the MG *TF* had evaporated, and under 1000



CKD examples had reportedly been built when production ceased forever in spring 2011. It was a sad and ignominious final curtain for a worthy car, and an 89 year old story of British motor industry endeavour, the like of which the world will never see again.

References:

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[Austin Rover K series engine launch press information, 1989](#)

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[Official report into the collapse of MG Rover](#)

[Glass's Guide to car values, various editions 1995-2005](#)

[Original MG *F* Press launch write-ups, presentation notes and launch guest interview recordings.](#)

[Nanjing press information.](#)

[A selection of rare but definitely arcane MG *F* and *TF* data is available here:](#)

https://www.mgfcars.de/vin/emgf_vin.htm#code