Stalled MGA Restoration Cautionary Tale

A friend of mine bought a stalled 1960 MGA restoration that has been sitting for 10 years. It was in a Quonset Hut temporary garage in the back yard of a former auto body shop owner who had purchased it as a previously restored MGA from the 1990s. He wanted to do some modifications and refresh the paint.

This is a cautionary tale about buying a stalled restoration and what might be found in the process of restarting the restoration. The paint looks pretty good (although it was not viewed in bright daylight). The chassis looked decent and the metalwork looked OK. There were a few chips here and there that will need to be touched-up. It is a resto-mod and thus has an MGB 18V engine (originally low compression) with a Moss supplied Eaton Supercharger. The tires are at least 10 years old and are 205/60R15 on Panasport style alloy wheels. This would cause sluggish steering and will be replaced with narrower tires. The car is painted in two stage British Racing Green with a dark tan interior. The car was still not completely assembled when my friend bought it. We collected all the bits laying around and hauled it all to my place to sort through the boxes and bits.

As we started inspecting the car on my lift we discovered many items that were left half-finished in the assembly. We knew about some of this when we initially inspected the project but came across many surprises. Some of the simple things were the rear brake cylinders were missing the dust boots and yet the parking brake cable had been installed at the rear (the parking brake lever and tunnel braces had not been installed yet). Many of the copper/nickel brake lines had not been tightened even though they were in place. Since the transmission tunnel had been widened and modified to accommodate a 4 synchro MGB transmission the new floorboards had been modified as well, but when we went to install the parking brake handle assembly the support would not fit in the tunnel. We ended up taking all the floorboards out (fortunately they had not been sealed in place). We had to do further modifications to the floorboards to have them fit correctly. We had to make many changes as they had just drilled holes where they wanted to as many of the captive nuts had not been replaced when the new metal floor supports were installed. All the currently supplied floor board screws appear to be flat ended rather than the original cone point, so, some of these were hard to start in some of the remaining captive nuts. They had not installed any fume excluders in the firewall (closing panel above the front floors), so, we had to remove that and install the appropriate excluders and make changes to the floorboards as they had not located some of the screws in the correct locations. Of course, this involved removing the steering column which did not have the upper bushing in place AND they had hammered the end of the retractable column end where the nut holds the wheel on and thus the nut and column end had to be replaced.

The wiring harness was from the previous restoration and appeared to be serviceable, so, we decided to reuse it. None of the P clips were there, so, I had to scrounge through my collection of bits to source those. One of the mods is that they converted to an alternator and the previous restoration had used a control box (regulator) with spade connectors on it. Therefore,

I had to change the wiring according the Moss kit to use the old regulator as a junction block for the alternator conversion. Along with the wiring harness to the rear, there was no battery cable and the fuel line had not been installed. So, we installed a battery cable, rear wiring harness, brake line and fuel line in the clips provided and installed the appropriate longer screws where needed for the original clips at the rear for battery, brake, and fuel. We installed the supplied fuel pump in the original location but with modified plumbing as it does not have the same fittings as the Lucas pump. We also installed the fuel sending unit in the new tank that was already installed.

As we addressed each area of the car we discovered that many parts were missing. Fortunately, I have a pretty good supply of used parts. We have been purchasing many new parts as well for the shiny bits. The accelerator pedal assembly was missing as well as the bonnet latch bits. Also, the windshield wiper tubing was missing, but the motor and cable were there. Certain parts need to be installed before others to make assembly easier. We finally got to the point of addressing the engine. I noticed right away that although the supercharger and alternator were in place and the exhaust header was mounted (no other exhaust system parts present) that the distributor mounting flange was missing. I also noticed that the coolant drain port to the rear of the distributor was also missing. I sourced these out of my spares and installed them along with setting up the distributor for initial static timing. We installed the supplied oil cooler after drilling holes in the radiator support. There was no oil in the engine, transmission, and rear differential, so, all of these were filled. Since the engine has a custom sump for extra capacity and the dip stick does not touch bottom anymore We had to recalibrate the dip stick and the oil capacity took 9 quarts.

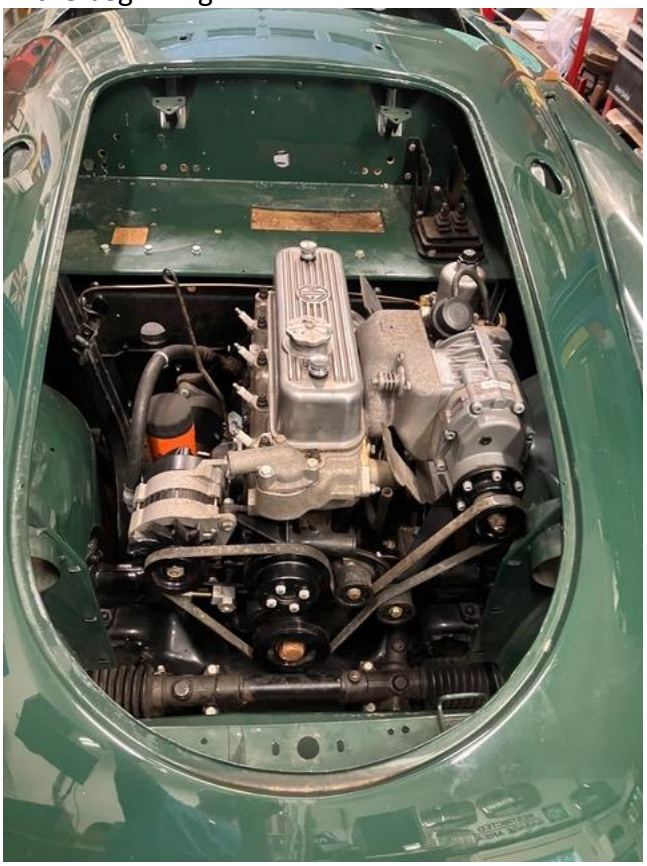
We finally reached a point of cranking the engine for the first time to check compression and oil pressure. We connected the battery (converted to a 12V Group 121R) and pulled the starter switch in the engine compartment (we had removed the dash to refurbish everything as it was pretty tatty). The engine cranked over and we got good compression on all cylinders (around 160 PSI in each cylinder). Though we were told the engine had received a “freshening up”, it is obvious that the pistons have been changed to a higher compression version. BUT, we were surprised that we could not build any oil pressure. THEN, we discovered about two quarts of oil on the floor under the car!!! Upon investigation we found that the oil galley plug above the oil pressure relief valve was MISSING and dumping oil on the floor. We also discovered that the oil pressure relief valve was not in tight. We decided to pull that off as well to inspect the oil pressure relief valve and it was never installed! We installed the plug and the oil pressure relief valve and added more oil and cranked it over again and now we have 65 PSI oil pressure!

Some other issues were that when they installed the MGB transmission (late MGB ’77-’80) where the fill plug is on the side if the transmission that they had not cut a hole in the tunnel for access (not enough room underneath and inside to fill). We cut that access hole. Another issue was that the transmission mount was not attached to the frame. They had removed the MGA mount and fabricated an MGB mount that rests on the frame, but not welded it in place. We solved that by making a U clamp and bolting it in place. Other issues involved the front of the chassis. The steering rack boots did not have clamps on them. Also, even though they had

used MGB V8 bushings on the A-arms one was beginning to sag so we installed new Urathane bushings. There was no anti-sway bar, so, we addressed that at the same time. When I went to fill the steering rack I pull the damper plugs at the top of the rack and fill from there with 90W oil. I found that both the dampers were completely worn through and the steel spring was touching the rack rod. I replaced both.

We are still only partially finished and have a lot more work do to. We are going to have to measure the carpet area and have a custom carpet set made due to the transmission tunnel changes. As many of you know from your own restoration projects there are often unexpected problems encountered and each one needs to be solved. I will keep you all up to date with our progress and perhaps some of these issues I have pointed out will help others avoid similar problems. Keep on wrenching!

In the beginning



After working on it for many hours