

# Good Sports

By the end of the '70s the sports car seemed dead, but a decade later roadsters were cool again. Andrew Noakes explains, with the help of six of the best sports cars from four decades.

Photos by Matt Barnes

**W**ind-in-the-hair motoring is addictive. In the early '60s you couldn't cross the road for fear of being mown down by a roofless roadster, because every enthusiast worth his Solvol had an open sports car. From Midgets to Big Healeys to E-Types, there was something for everybody. Then along came the Mini Cooper, and then US safety legislation

and – final nail in the coffin – the Volkswagen Golf GTi, and the roadster was dead.

Good story, but it isn't true. For a start, those open roadsters very often weren't open at all. Many of those E-Types were fixed-head coupes, lots of Healeys had works

hardtops, and even though Lotus went to a lot of trouble to make the Elan available as an open car, you could still order it with a fixed roof if you wanted.

Nor did the sports car story stop when the Mini came along, or when the hot hatch

**“The sports car has enjoyed its revivals and now, once again, true sports cars are the hottest things on four wheels”**



Representing four decades of sports cars; the Lotus Elan, MGB, Fiat X1/9 (above) and Toyota MR2, Mazda MX-5 and MGF (below) show how design has moved on but still reflects the past.



appeared in the late 1970s. Though allegiances have changed and other cars had their moments of glory, the sports car has enjoyed its revivals – and now, once again, true sports cars are the hottest things on four wheels. So to celebrate, we've gathered together a group of classic sports cars demonstrating that variety of age, performance, layout, price and classic appeal.

From the 1960s, we have the ubiquitous MGB roadster and the sophisticated Elan, here in fixed-head coupé form. The targa-

top Fiat X1/9 represents the 1970s, when the hot hatch was beginning to make its presence felt. From the 1980s we have the Toyota MR2 (another hard-top sports car) and the Mazda MX-5, the car that made roadsters cool again. Finally, the MGF of the 1990s represents a new era of coming classics. Good examples of the X1/9 and MR2 regularly change hands for less than £3000, while at the other end of the scale this particular Lotus was for sale at £8750 and roadster Elans fetch considerably more.

These six cars give us some interesting pairings and comparisons: the MGB, Lotus and Fiat are recognisably classics, while the Toyota, Mazda and MGF are still 'emerging' in most people's eyes. We have three conventional front engine/rear drive cars and three mid-engined. The MGB and MGF are obviously linked; the MR2 was Toyota's step beyond the X1/9; the Mazda was an Elan for the 1990s.

Each one has its own appeal, strengths, and weaknesses. Which would you choose? ▶

# MGB

If any classic car needs no introduction, then this is it. The MGB has been with us since 1962, a modern monocoque-shelled replacement for the MGA, and like all MG sports cars before it, the MGB proved itself in competition. There were creditable performances in three Le Mans races (in 1963, '64 and '65) and outright wins in the 1000-mile Guards Trophy and the 84-hour Marathon de la Route at the Nürburgring. On the road, the MGB's combination of low price, convenience and fun made it the world's favourite sports car.

Early cars had three-bearing engines but by the time 'our' MGB was built in 1969 the specification included a five-bearing crank-

shaft and all-synchro gearbox. TJN405H was one of the last MGBs built before the car received a Leyland 'corporate' makeover, with Rostyle wheels, Leyland badges and a dark grille. TJN retains the earlier bright grille and an interior that has a certain '1950s-ness' about it, with lots of brightwork and a big plastic spring-spoke steering wheel.

The car was owned by MG enthusiast Eddie McGowan, who made the first ever solo drive from London to Moscow and back in 1979/80 in this very car. Not content with that he went back with a group of other MG enthusiasts in 1987, only to have TJN run a big-end bearing on the way. In the end, the MG was towed to the border by the Russian police: Eddie and TJN travelled 1456 miles on the end of a seven-foot tow rope, a distance which put the pair of them in *The Guinness Book of Records*.

Eddie died only a year or so later, and in his will he left TJN to the MG Owners Club, which has looked after it ever since.

The oldest design here, TJN still puts forward a good case. It's fun to drive, with a growly exhaust note and road manners which, while not Lotus-sharp, are safe and predictable. The 'B' rolls more than you'd think, but it grips well enough on its narrow radials: uprated suspension would improve the roadholding, on smooth roads at least, but would spoil the MGB's surprisingly effective ride/handling compromise. The 'B' still cuts it as an everyday sports car, and it's easy to see why, 40 years after its launch, it's still so popular.

## SPECIFICATIONS

### ■ 1969 MGB

<b>Engine</b>	1798cc in-line four OHV
<b>Power</b>	95bhp @ 4500rpm
<b>Torque</b>	110lbft @ 3000rpm
<b>Transmission</b>	Four-speed manual
<b>Brakes</b>	Disc front, drum rear
<b>Suspension</b>	Front: wishbones and coil springs Rear: leaf-sprung live axle
<b>Wheels</b>	Centre-lock wire
<b>Tyres</b>	165x14in
<b>Performance</b>	Top Speed: 105mph 0-60mph: 12sec



Above left: classic British sports car fayre, open top, black leather – fantastic. Above right: MGB corners better than you think. Right: Noakes seems to be enjoying himself.



## MEET THE DRIVER

# Mag man

■ Andrew Noakes was the founding Editor of *CLASSICS*, and still contributes regularly to the magazine. He currently drives a 1972 MG Midget every day, so this '69 MGB borrowed from the MG Owners Club was familiar territory.



Above: MGB features 1.8-litre B-series engine running twin SUs – classic stuff.



# Lotus Elan

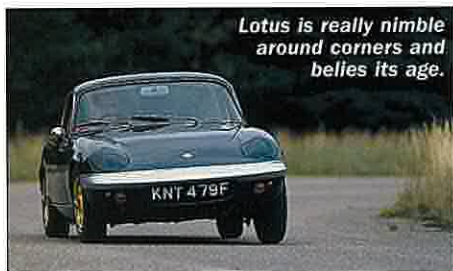
Colin Chapman's first foray into road-car production was the glassfibre-monocoque Elite of 1958, but the Lotus boss quickly realised that the car's race-bred Coventry-Climax engine made it too expensive. The bodysHELLS were expensive, too, and time-consuming to build. What Chapman needed was a car that was easier and cheaper to make, and could be sold in higher volumes.

Original ideas centred around another glassfibre monocoque, this time with the option of an open top (all the Elites had fixed

## SPECIFICATIONS

### ■ 1967 Lotus Elan

<b>Engine</b>	1558cc in-line four, DOHC
<b>Power</b>	115bhp @ 6000rpm
<b>Torque</b>	108lbft @ 4000rpm
<b>Transmission</b>	Four-speed manual
<b>Brakes</b>	Discs all round
<b>Suspension</b>	Front: double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar Rear: Chapman strut, lower wishbones, coil springs
<b>Wheels</b>	Centre-lock steel
<b>Tyres</b>	145x13in
<b>Performance</b>	Top Speed: 123mph 0-60mph: 7.6sec



Lotus is really nimble around corners and belies its age.



Above: Lotus twin cam fills the Elan's engine bay - there's not a lot of spare room in there!

roofs) and powered by the short-stroke, 997cc Ford Anglia engine. While work progressed on the bodysHELL a mechanical prototype was built up with a simple Ron Hickman-designed, sheet-steel backbone chassis, forked at each end to contain the drivetrain and suspension. This proved to be such a good solution that it was retained for production.

Bigger versions of the pre-Crossflow Ford engine became available early in the 1960s and the first Elans used 1.5-litre units, though a 1.6-litre engine was quickly adopted. The bottom end was all sourced from Ford, but on top sat a new light-alloy cylinder head with twin overhead camshafts, designed by *Autocar* technical editor Harry Mundy. The result was 105bhp, enough to propel the Elan to 60mph from rest in well under 10 seconds - not much to write home about today, but rapid for 1962.

A variety of minor changes were made during the Elan's first few years of production, resulting in the S3 models such as this 1967 example. Compared to our other cars the Elan is tiny, but as long as you're not too tall

the cockpit proves comfortable, once you're installed through a narrow door opening. But it's a curate's egg: the varnished wood dash looks good but some of the warning lights are unlabeled, and it's all at odds with the garish yellow race harnesses fitted by a previous owner. The Colin Chapman signature steering wheel is the right size and looks great, but has a cheap vinyl rim. Fire up the twin-cam engine and it, too, blends good and bad. It makes all the right noises, dominated by the growl of the four Weber chokes just ahead of your toes, but this example didn't quite have the razor-edge throttle response of the best 'twinks', perhaps because it had been standing for a while and needed more use.

Get the Elan out on the road and you can quickly see why it caused so much of a stir. The ride is good, the handling taut and responsive, and the car has plenty of straight-line urge to match that glorious twin-carb soundtrack. It was expensive - around £1500 in the mid-'60s, and that would have bought you a good secondhand E-Type - but it was worth it. ▶



Lotus was always very proud of its motor racing heritage.



## MEET THE DRIVER

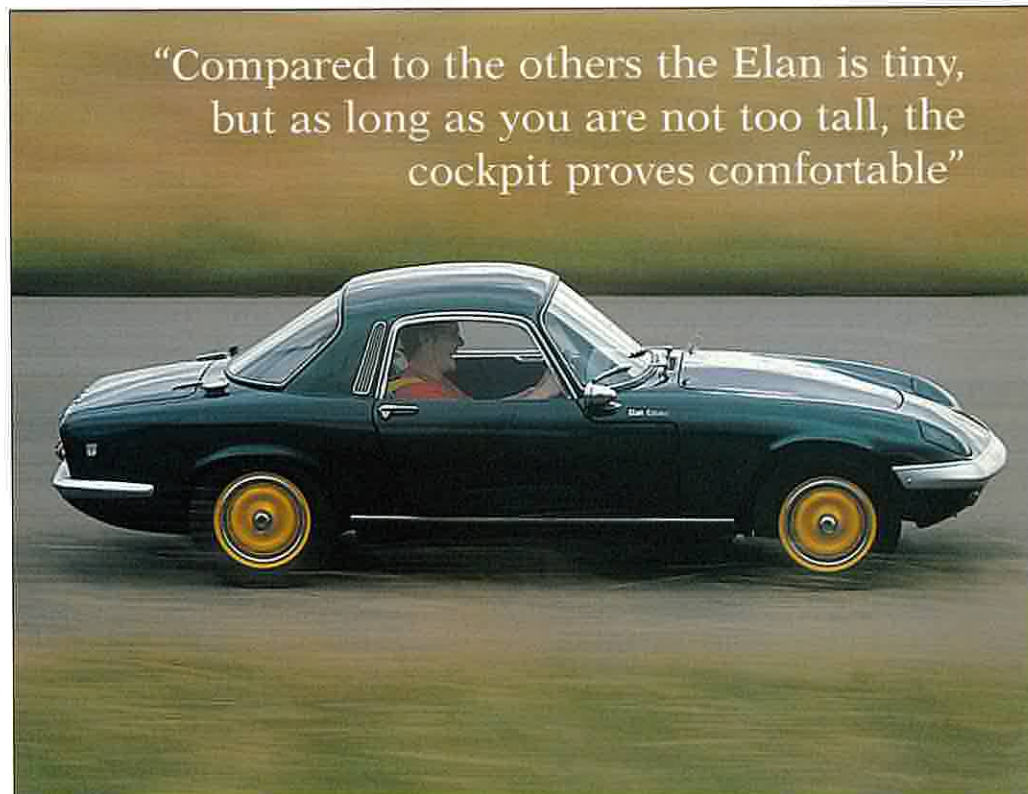
### Elan virgin

■ Normally chained to his desk, *CLASSICS* Art Editor Pete Nightingale was released

into the sunlight, blinking like a pit pony, to drive our borrowed Elan to the photo shoot. Pete's Mini is being rebuilt, so for everyday transport he's currently driving a Vauxhall Senator that's bigger than his house.



"Compared to the others the Elan is tiny, but as long as you are not too tall, the cockpit proves comfortable"





"The X1/9 comes into its own on a twisty road: for fun at a bargain price, little can touch it"

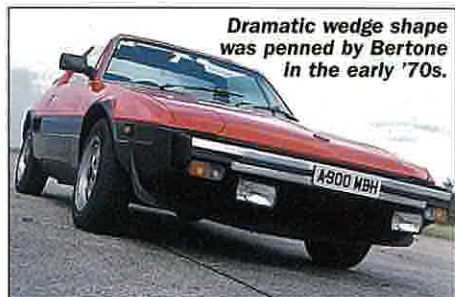
# X1/9 five speed

## SPECIFICATIONS

■ 1983 Bertone X1/9 VS	
<b>Engine</b>	1558cc in-line four ohc
<b>Power</b>	85bhp @ 6000rpm
<b>Torque</b>	87lbft @ 3200rpm
<b>Transmission</b>	Five-speed manual
<b>Brakes</b>	Discs all round
<b>Suspension</b>	Front: MacPherson struts Rear: MacPherson struts
<b>Wheels</b>	5.5x13in alloy
<b>Tyres</b>	185/60x13in
<b>Performance</b>	Top Speed: 108mph 0-60mph: 10sec



Mid-engined Fiat has exceptionally neutral handling.



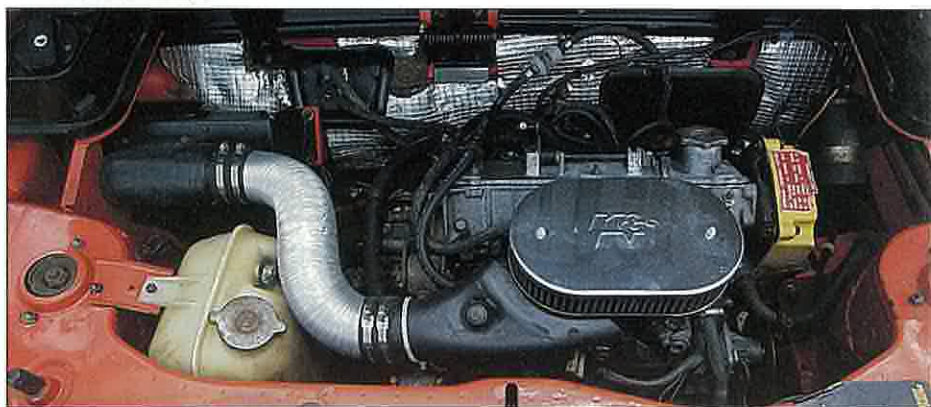
Dramatic wedge shape was penned by Bertone in the early '70s.

## Bertone X1/9

Originally badged as a Fiat, the X1/9 was invented by Bertone. In 1969 the famous Italian carrozzeria unveiled the Runabout show car, and the striking wedge-shaped style of the concept was developed into production form for the targa-roofed X1/9 in 1972. Early cars, rare now in the UK, were powered by the 1290cc Fiat 128 engine, but from 1978 the X1/9 received the 1498cc engine used in the Ritmo/Strada, and a five-speed gearbox. Even then, there was only 85bhp to play with, and in the US emissions regs resulted in as little as 67bhp.

Bertone always built the bodyshells, and from 1983 the firm took over complete assembly as Fiat divested itself of some low-volume production burdens: Pininfarina adopted the 124 Spider the same year. The X1/9 survived until 1988, when production ended with a 'Gran Finale' special edition. Simon Ghent's car is one of Bertone's VS models, with leather seats, electric windows and a two-tone paint finish.

After the Elan, the X1/9 feels short yet wide, with plenty of elbow room in the cosy cabin and a needle nose disappearing out of the driver's view at the front. The dash has a simple rectangular binnacle in front of you, the two main dials being partly hidden



by the steering wheel rim. Then you fire it up – a typically Italian thrum emanates from the rear – and you notice that the speedometer and tachometer needles rotate in opposite directions, bringing the important sectors of both instruments into the centre where they can be easily seen.

On the move the X1/9 feels soft and supple, but still turns in eagerly and corners with little roll or fuss. Control inputs need to be meatier than with some of the other cars here, but sometimes that's no bad thing – the unassisted brakes need a hefty shove, for example, but provide a stable pivot for fancy heel-and-toe footwork (unlike the MX-5 with its over-light brake pedal). As owner Simon says, the Fiat – sorry, Bertone – comes into its own on a twisty road: for fun at a bargain price, there can be little to touch it.

### MEET THE DRIVER

## Fiat fanatic

■ Simon Ghent has always liked X1/9s, and took the plunge two years ago with this 1983 car. Some body repairs were needed, but since then it's done long trips with no dramas. "The one thing everyone has problems with with X1/9s is the electrics," says Simon. "After all, it's a 15 year old Italian car!"



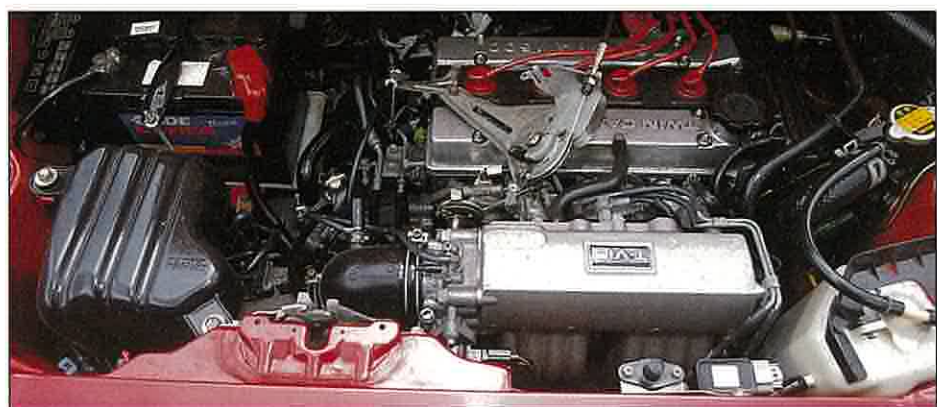


## SPECIFICATIONS

■ 1989 Toyota MR2 Mk1
<b>Engine</b> 1558cc in-line four dohc
<b>Power</b> 122bhp @ 6600rpm
<b>Torque</b> 105lbft @ 5000rpm
<b>Transmission</b> Five-speed manual
<b>Brakes</b> Discs all round
<b>Suspension</b> Front: MacPherson struts, anti-roll bar Rear: MacPherson struts, anti-roll bar
<b>Wheels</b> 5.5x14in alloy
<b>Tyres</b> 185/60HR14in
<b>Performance</b> Top Speed: 122mph 0-60mph: 8.0sec



MR2 excels on a dry, twisty road and has similar characteristics to the Fiat.



## MEET THE DRIVER

### Five cars

■ Michael Sheavills runs the North East region of the Toyota MR2 Mk1 Club. This particular MR2 actually belongs to Michael's partner Joanne Thom, and is one of five Mk1 Toyota MR2s currently owned by the pair. "I felt bullied into buying it," Joanne jokes. "He sold my car when I wasn't there..."



## Toyota MR2

Japanese car makers were pretty unadventurous in the 1970s and early '80s, and Toyota was probably the most conservative of the lot. Its cars were reliable, worthy, often well engineered – but a bit boring.

In the mid-'80s Toyota obviously decided to do something about its image, and a variety of impressive performance cars was the result. One of the first of them, and possibly the most impressive of all, was the mid-engined MR2.

It's about the same length as the X1/9, but taller and wider – which, to my eyes at least, makes it a fraction less attractive than the Bertone design. The benefits are obvious inside though, where there's more

room, particularly for taller drivers, and the cabin feels no less snug as a result. Black plastic dominates. The instruments are buried deep in a binnacle, the sides of which bring controls for the lights and wipers close to the steering wheel rim, but not curiously not close enough to operate without removing a hand from the wheel.

On the move the MR2, like the X1/9, has a surprisingly supple ride. Turn-in is eager and grip levels high. You'd have to know the car well to explore its limits on a dry road, though I'm told it's much less secure in the wet (also like the X1/9).

It's impressive in a straight line, too, with that strong 1.6-litre twin-cam engine spinning smoothly even at the top end of the rev-range: the red line is at a heady 7600rpm. The gearchange is lightning quick, and the short gearing helps take advantage of the engine's top-end bite which propels the MR2 swiftly towards the horizon.

The MR2 has a likable, eager character backed up by sound, sensible design. On the one hand it's quick and rewarding to drive, on the other hand convenient to use, reliable and well-built. It's hard to believe that, again like the X1/9, these cars rarely struggle beyond £3000. ▶

# Mazda MX-5

Mazda never made much of a secret of the fact that the MX-5 – or Miata, as it was known in some markets – was a modern interpretation of a Lotus Elan. Look at the two cars and you can see some similarities. There's a line here, a proportion there, the shape of the air intake and the side profile of the nose. Under the bonnet, the twin-cam engine does a passable impression of the Lotus unit. Put the Mazda and Lotus side by side and they don't look identical, but there's definitely a relationship. It's like meeting the son who has his father's eyes.

During the life of the car – it was introduced in 1989 and replaced by a new MX-5



Below: You can't help but make comparisons between MX-5 and Elan – even the engine looks similar, at least to the casual observer.



in 1998 – there were numerous special editions. Alan Ward's car is a rare SE model, one of 200 with a special wood and leather interior and alloy wheels, built in 1992. It sports an appropriate registration plate – MXS165E looks like MX5 1.6 SE.

More than half a million of those original MX-5s were built and it wasn't only the car's throwback styling that made it popular. Mazda got the engineering right, too, with a punchy 1.6-litre twin cam engine and a responsive chassis. With familiarity the MX-5 can be steered neatly with the throttle as much as the steering wheel, particularly on a low-grip surface, and you can see why Alan regularly uses his car for club track days.

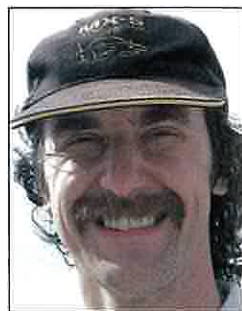
Driving the MX-5 is easy, with typically Japanese controls requiring only feather-light inputs. Mostly that's similar to the Elan that inspired it, the difference being the engine. The Lotus twin-cam is torquey and punchy and gruff, the Mazda sewing-machine smooth with a seamless delivery. With that wieldy handling and a supple ride, the Mazda MX5 makes a strong case for itself.



## MEET THE DRIVER

### Only car

■ Alan Ward's limited edition 1992 MX-5 1.6SE is his everyday transport, but a car that also spends the weekends doing club show events and track days. Alan also runs the MX-5 Owners Club's Oxford area website, and some local events. "They're a great bunch of people," he says.



"With familiarity, the MX-5 can be steered neatly with the throttle as much as with the steering wheel"



## SPECIFICATIONS

■ 1992 Mazda MX-5 SE	
<b>Engine</b>	1597cc in-line four dohc
<b>Power</b>	115bhp @ 6500rpm
<b>Torque</b>	100lbft @ 5500rpm
<b>Transmission</b>	Five-speed manual
<b>Brakes</b>	Discs all round
<b>Suspension</b>	Front: double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar Rear: double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar
<b>Wheels</b>	7x15in alloy
<b>Tyres</b>	215/45ZR15in
<b>Performance</b>	Top Speed: 121mph 0-60mph: 8.8sec





## MGF

We end how we began, with an MG. The revival of MG sports cars began in 1992 with the introduction of the MGB-based RV8, for which classic car enthusiasts can take a lot of the credit.

British Motor Heritage had restarted making panels for the MGB and then, when it had located and refurbished all the tooling, started building complete MGB bodyshells. That led to the creation of a new version of the MGB, using Rover V8 power and with some major improvements under the skin.

The MGF was a more serious attempt to build a competitive, modern sports car. Rover started with the acclaimed K-series engine and Hydragas suspension of the Metro, mounting the engine amidships. Two versions were available, the standard 1.8-litre with 118bhp and a 143bhp unit with variable valve timing.

Climbing in to the MGF gives you mixed signals straight away. The interior is the

usual modern confection of plastics, though it's attractive enough. But as soon as you shut the door you know from the nasty tinny 'clang' that Longbridge just couldn't match the build quality of Japan.

It starts instantly, as you'd expect from an engine boasting all the benefits of modern construction techniques and engine management, and idles quietly. On the move it's all easy to use and the performance is brisk, high-g geared steering and a well-controlled ride adding to the fun.

There's a wooden feeling to the way it responds – perhaps a quirk of the gas-strut suspension – and the build quality is depressing. Somehow the other cars here manage to feel special in a way that the MGF can't quite manage. ▶

### MEET THE DRIVER

## Club man

■ Duncan Monroe works in the MG Owners Club's regalia department, especially busy in the run up to Christmas: with 50,000 MGOC members to satisfy, that's not difficult to believe. This green MGF is owned and run by the club to gain experience of the modern MGs – our thanks to Duncan for bringing it.



*The first new sports car from MG for many years has become a big success.*



### SPECIFICATIONS

#### ■ 1997 MGF

Engine	1796cc in-line four
Power	120bhp @ 5500rpm
Torque	122lbft @ 3000rpm
Transmission	Five-speed manual, RWD
Brakes	Discs all round
Suspension	Front: Wishbones, Hydragas springs, anti-roll bar Rear: Wishbones, Hydragas springs, anti-roll bar
Wheels	15in alloy
Tyres	185/55R15
Performance	Top Speed: 120mph 0-60mph: 8.5sec



*Fuel-injected K-series engine lurks behind this panel in the middle of the MGF.*

*Undeniably pretty shape from MG, but does it compete with the Japanese on the thorny issue of quality? Noakes isn't convinced.*





## The verdict

There are many differences between these sports cars, some glaring and some subtle. Which you'd choose depends very much on what you want.

The MGB is the oldest design, and feels it: if you want a sports car that 'feels' classic then this is the one. The Lotus, introduced around the same time, is a more advanced package and has a different kind of appeal. A later, quicker Elan with sharper throttle response would appeal even more.

The MX-5, an Elan for the '90s, makes a strong case for itself with impeccable build, fine handling and decent straight-line performance. It's an entertaining package – to me, a more effective one than the disappointingly flimsy and wooden MGF.

On the day the two cars that had the most appeal for me were the X1/9 and MR2. Both were fun to drive, wieldy, comfortable and quick. They are also absurdly good value. If only the MR2 looked as great as the X1/9; if only the X1/9 had the dependability of the Toyota. If only...

### THANKS TO

The Vintage & Sports Car Garage near Maidstone in Kent (01622 859570), which kindly lent us the Lotus.

Richard Monk, general manager at the MG Owners Club (01954 231125) who arranged for us to borrow both MGs.

Fiat X1/9 Owners Club (01286 872161)

MX-5 Owners Club (01279 656914)

Toyota MR2 Mk1 Club (01582 454971).

"If only the MR2 looked as great as the X1/9; if only the X1/9 had the reliability of the MR2. If only..."



### SPORTS SALOONS

## The Competition

■ Sports cars aren't the only machines to appeal to enthusiasts, and since the 1950s there have been a series of credible rivals to the true out-and-out sports machine. Jaguar's compact monocoque saloons, starting with the 2.4 in



1955 and reaching their peak with the 3.8 Mk2 of 1959 had performance and handling to worry all but the greatest of the sports cars, and with four seats plenty of space.

In the 1960s John Cooper dropped a Formula Junior engine into a Mini to create the Mini Cooper, which gave enthusiastic drivers a cheeky alternative to a Spridget or Spitfire. The Mini's roadholding was, in fact, good enough to worry more powerful machinery, as John Rhodes' tyre-smoking

performances in saloon car racing proved.

Another circuit racer was the Lotus-Cortina, using the Lotus twin-cam engine from the Elan: its three-wheeled cornering in the hands of Jim Clark and Sir John Whitmore, amongst others, is still famous today. Ford developed the idea into the Escort Twin Cam of 1968, then the RS range



of Escorts that ran through the 1970s.

As if all that wasn't enough, there was the front-wheel drive brigade: first the Alfasud Ti, then the original 'hot hatch',

the Mk1 Volkswagen Golf GTi and all those that followed.

But despite all these rivals the sports car carried on and today it's more popular than ever.

