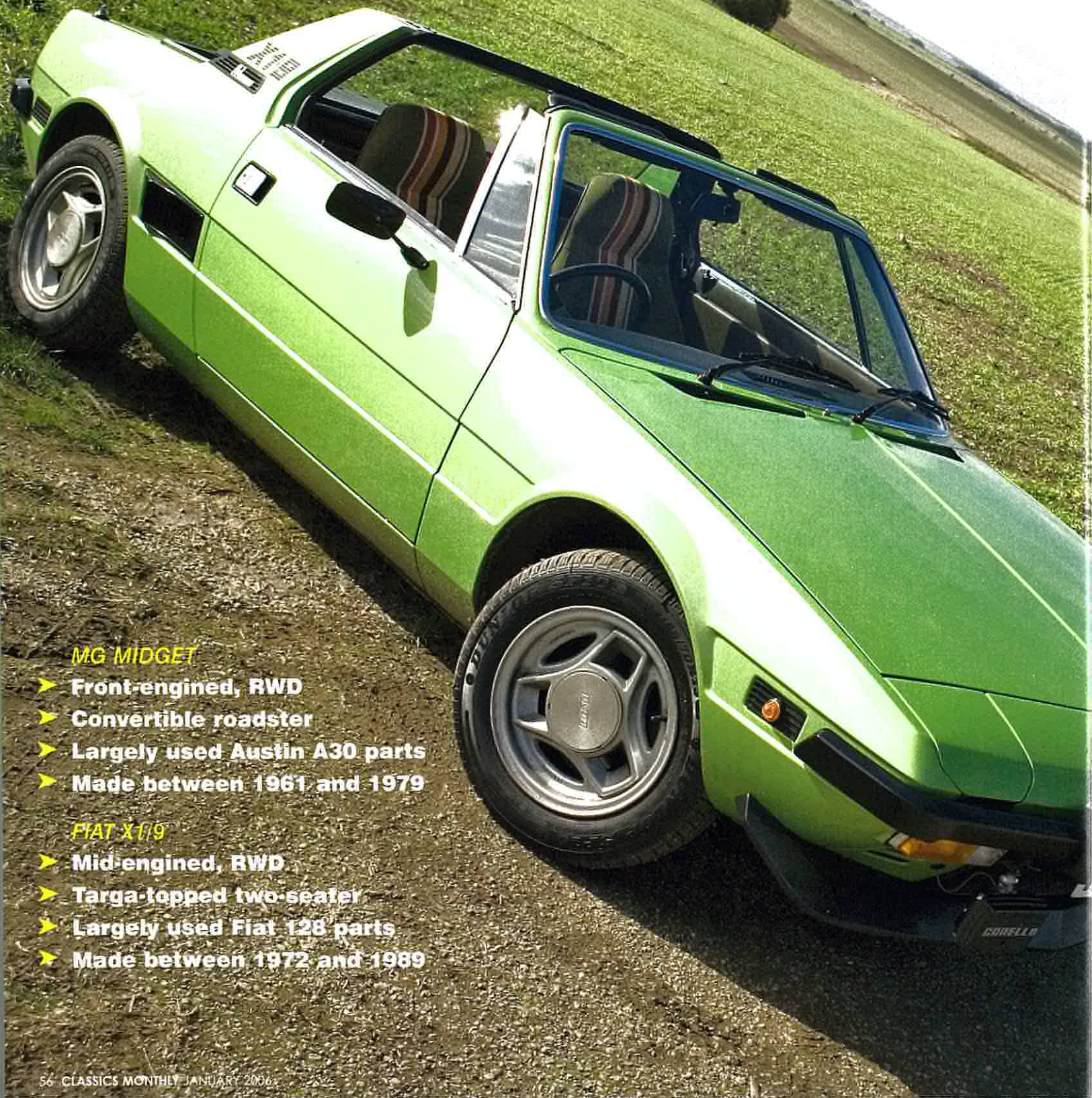


Photos by Rolf Gaunt



MG MIDGET

- **Front-engined, RWD**
- **Convertible roadster**
- **Largely used Austin A30 parts**
- **Made between 1961 and 1979**

FIAT X1/9

- **Mid-engined, RWD**
- **Targa-topped two-seater**
- **Largely used Fiat 128 parts**
- **Made between 1972 and 1989**

Generation GAP

The MG Midget offered affordable sportscar fun, but stayed on long after its time had passed. Mark Robinson says the X1/9 shows what it could have become.

The Austin-Healey Sprite and its later twin, the MG Midget, brought sportscars to the masses in the 1960s. They were simple, affordable and fun, and sold in huge numbers. The also sold long past their natural sell-by date. British Leyland desperately tweaking the basic design through the 1970s until fading popularity and increasingly-restrictive legislation slowly dimmed the lights on the 'Spridget'.

Yet even before the Spridget went on sale its makers were already developing a Mini-based

THE LAST OF ITS KIND

At the end of the 1950s the original Austin-Healey Sprite, famed for its 'bug-eye' looks, was easily the cheapest mass-produced sportscar on the market, and the best-selling. Not wanting to let such success fade, a new version went into development for a 1961 launch, the replacement car also sold as an MG Midget.

The recipe was simple – borrow as many components as possible from ordinary models, put them in an cute sportscar body and give it

“British Leyland marked 10 years of production with a radical new model. Actually, it didn't. It just axed the Healey version”

replacement, which went as far as a prototype. Another prototype MGB replacement project from the end of the 1960s, featured an enclosed cabin and mid-mounted engine, while the 'Michelotti Mini' proposed a targa-topped, Mini-based sportscar in the early 1970s.

One by one, British Leyland's apathy, chronic lack of development money, and the temptation to leave profitable models alone killed each of these ideas, and the MG Midget hung around until 1979. By then, time had well and truly passed it by. But we can get a taste of what the next generation should have been by looking at a tiny sportscar that came not from Abingdon, but from Turin – and called the Fiat X1/9.

extremely chuckable handling – and hugely successful. It was so successful that BMC management were hesitant to replace it as it grew older. There were small changes – bigger engines, front disc brakes, a curved windscreen and winding windows, improved soft-tops and a host of cosmetic changes. Then in 1971 British Leyland marked 10 years of production with a radical new model. Actually, it didn't. It just axed the Healey version, and left the MG to fight on alone.

The final version saw the light of day in 1974 as the MG Midget 1500, giving the ageing bodywork a plastic facelift and another increase in power. It kept the tradition alive, but that was about all.

Bryan Fox bought his 1979 MG Midget 1500 about eight years ago.

“It was in quite good condition,” he says. “It's had a complete retrim and I've just done bits and pieces gradually. I've had a new engine in there just over a year.” Small improvements include K&N air filters and electronic ignition, but otherwise it's largely as the factory intended.

“I bought it just for fun, really – open top motoring – and it was a reasonable way to get into classic cars, and you can get all the bits for it.”

The MG Midget 1500 comes across as a slightly odd mix of the 1960s and the 1970s. Not only does it have the



Comparison | MG Midget v Fiat X1/9



Bryan Fox's MG Midget is perfect for keeping his grandson Daniel amused during half-term.



The year is 1979, and the octagon badge will soon disappear - for the first time.



suspension lacks in smoothness it makes up for in firm cornering, and the engine is powerful enough to push the little roadster around at a decent speed. And those K&N filters Bryan's fitted sure give it a lovely growl.

To be fair, the changes that defined the Midget 1500 were beyond British Leyland's control. Sales in the United States were essential to British sportscars, and the rise of Ralph Nader-inspired safety regulations, as well as tighter emissions controls, meant changes to design were inevitable. Given the financial trouble the industry was in, they would inevitably be compromised. Those big, black rubber bumpers were designed to reduce the danger to any pedestrians the car might hit. And they're not just rubber; the plastic actually moulded over a heavy steel base that helped push the car's weight up considerably.

The collection of new rules also set a minimum height for headlights, which was higher than the lights on most sportscars and was the driving force behind the sudden popularity of 'pop-up' designs. To make its



Under that spare wheel the Renault 16 had a new, lightweight aluminium engine.

more modern trimmings hanging off the far older bodywork, but it also has a very old-fashioned cockpit for a car built on the cusp of the 1980s, with a flat black dashboard carrying big round instruments trimmed in chrome.

It's not just in looks that the MG shows its age. Sitting in the driver's seat, the door wedges itself hard against your right shoulder, while the steering wheel sits high and close to your chest - a throwback to the days when effective turning meant being able to exert plenty of leverage on the wheel. All the controls are, however, well-

placed and easy to use, although it would be hard to put anything too far from the driver in a car this small. The only quibble is the positioning of the gearlever too close to the bottom edge of the dashboard, where a careless gearchange could leave you sucking on your bleeding knuckles.

And Bryan's car still does what a Midget was supposed to do - offer pockets full of driving fun. It bounces and skips its way down the road, the chassis and steering wheel relaying each twitch and bump in the road, and despite the car's size it has a solid, dependable feel. The steering is direct, although heavy, and what the

"Bryan's car still does what an MG Midget is supposed to do - offer pockets full of driving fun"

decade-old models meet the new regulations, however, MG increased the ride height of its cars. In the case of the Midget, the suspension was

lifted by about an inch, giving the impression the car was standing on tippy-toes. This not only spoiled the looks, it also had a negative effect on the car's ride and handling.

In reality, while they seem visually mismatched to the neat 60s' design now, when the 'rubber-bumper' MG models came out they weren't too bad an update - although the Midget's new face doesn't seem to work as well as on the larger MGB. People must have liked the new look at the time, however, with the fresh face giving the car a sales boost in the following two years.

This is also the fastest of all Midgets. With

extra weight to carry, even British Leyland was smart enough to work out it had to give the car more power to compensate. The previous model's 1275cc A-series engine was dropped in favour of the 1493cc Triumph engine, as used in the Triumph Spitfire, combined with a new transmission adapted from the Morris Marina. The increase in power was marginal, rising from 65bhp to 66bhp, while torque went from 72lb ft to 77lb ft. This was only just enough extra to

“Bertone showed a concept car that borrowed bits from Fiat’s front wheel drive parts bin - but reworked into a mid-engined design”

compensate for the extra weight, with a marginal increase in top speed and a slightly improved 0-60 time as sugar on top.

So this was the end for the MG Midget – essentially the same car as had been in production for more than a decade, but higher, heavier, and slightly more powerful, with the elegant lines changed by ‘modern’ plastic bumpers front and back. Some say it was a sad end, but many of the harsh comments this last of its line attracts are unfair. The Midget is still a light car, and tremendous fun. It just should have been pensioned off and replaced with something new long before its time began running out.

A NEW WAY OF THINKING

Which raises the question of what kind of car should the next Midget have been? BMC and British Leyland’s designers were certainly up to the challenge of re-inventing their sportscars, with a raft of new ideas for mid-mounted engines and targa-tops. In Italy, Fiat faced the same problem, and created one of the most perfect small sportscars of all time.

That is, admittedly, a big call, but a fair one if you put aside the chronic problem of rust that plagued Italian cars at the time.

From 1965 to 1972 Fiat offered a ‘spider’ version of its diminutive 850, designed and built by Bertone. This was a very lucrative contract for

Bertone, building just over 124,000 in seven years, and one it was keen to replace when the 850 bowed out for a planned front wheel drive successor. At the same 1969 Turin motor show where Fiat debuted its first front wheel drive model, the 128, Bertone showed a concept car that borrowed bits from Fiat’s front wheel drive parts bins – but reworked into a mid-engined design. This concept evolved into the X1/9 for a 1972 launch.

The X1/9 did in the early 1970s exactly what the original Austin-Healey Sprite did almost 15 years earlier. It was, basically, a derivative of the Fiat 128 in the same way the Sprite had been a derivative of the A50. The engine and gearbox both came from the 128, but instead of being mounted ahead of the passenger cabin for a front engine, front wheel drive layout, it sat behind the seats and just ahead of the rear wheels for a mid-engined, rear wheel drive design. Because of this fundamental difference, Fiat chose not to call it the 128 Spider, but instead



X1/9 interior nicely laid out, and James has still has the overnight bags to match the seat fabric.



For ease of use, the targa-top leaves British roadsters cold - and wet. James Freestone's car is one of the best on the road, and it hasn't been restored. Amazingly for a Fiat of the 1970s, it's never been welded or resprayed.



Under that spare wheel the Renault 16 had a new, lightweight aluminium engine.



X1.9



BERTONE

"It's never even had the rust fixed, because it never had any - incredible, but true - and the distinctive lime green paintwork is fresh from the decade that taste forgot"

put it into production using its internal development code.

James Freestone's 1977 X1/9 is probably the best you're likely to see on the roads today. It's a genuine, almost-one-owner, low mileage car that's never had any restoration work done to it. It's never even had the rust fixed, because it never had any - incredible, but true - and the distinctive lime green paintwork is fresh from the decade that taste forgot.

It's the latest in a line of about 10 of these small sports cars James has owned, the others all the later 1500cc version with the American-required big rubber bumpers, and it's certainly the best he had ever seen. As he tells it, the couple who bought it new owned it until last year, although it was laid up for several years after the husband passed away. He saw it advertised for sale, but he wasn't able to raise the money at the time. When it came on the market again just a few weeks ago he found the money and grabbed his chance.

"I like the whole package," James says of his fixation for X1/9s. "The roof unclips and stows in the front boot - even by today's standards they're very well specified. I keep trying other cars but I keep coming back to them, the X1/9."

It would be impossible not to agree. The sharp styling is a perfect balance of form and function, with its simple lines looking as fresh as the day they were penned. The targa top - which became a popular solution to a feared banning of convertibles in the US - makes it easy to open the car up to the breeze. The top's light and held in place by just two clips, so one person can lift it off and stow it in the front luggage compartment without any difficulty. Even with the top stowed, there is still plenty of room for luggage at the front, and

"The sharp styling is a perfect balance of form and function - its simple lines as fresh as the day they were penned"



The rubber bumpers were added to meet US safety laws, but the facelift also boosted sales

there's a second boot at the tail for smaller items.

The interior space is also remarkable. Okay, it's not a big car and people with particularly stretched skeletons aren't going to have huge amounts of aft adjustment available on the seat,

but for my average 5'10" there's plenty of leg and elbow room. The steering wheel is far enough away to be able to stretch your arms

out a little and the pedals are well spaced. It's a good piece of functional design with good ergonomics, from the easily reached controls to the sculpted plastic dashboard.

To drive, the Fiat has much tighter handling than you would ever expect from an 'affordable' car. The weight distribution front and back is ➤



1290cc engine is from the Fiat 128 Rally - but the X1/9's superb chassis could handle more power

DATA FILE

The MG Midget and Fiat X1/9 were both similar in conception, reusing components from passenger cars to create an affordable sports car. In the case of the Midget, it was based on RWD BMC and BL parts, while the Fiat adopted its supremely balanced mid-engined design so it could use a drivetrain originally intended for front wheel drive. BMC experimented with the same idea, but never put it into production. British Leyland later experimented with a targa-topped Midget replacement, as used successfully on the X1/9, based on the Mini and front wheel drive.

MG MIDGET 1500

Engine	1493cc, inline, 4 cylinder, OHV
Power	65bhp @ 5500rpm
Torque	77lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission	4 speed manual
Suspension: Front	Independent, coils, wishbones
Suspension: Rear	live axle, leaf springs
Brakes	Disc front, drum rear
Wheels	13 inch Rostyle alloy
0-62 mph	12.3 secs
Top Speed	101 mph
Number built	(all Midget and Sprite) 366,000

THE MG MIDGET 1500 was the last of the line, and is the least sought after. Rubber bumpers and raised suspension to meet US safety laws, but larger engine to compensate for increased weight. It is still great fun to drive.

VERDICT

★★★★☆

Based on simple and widely used mechanical parts, the 'Spridget' is a practical and easy to own sports car in any of its many versions.

- **PROS:** Fun, economical and affordable. Parts are easy to find, and the simple mechanicals are easy to work on.
- **CONS:** The 1500 is less desirable than other versions, and was a dated design when new.

FIAT X1/9

Engine	1290cc, Inline, 4 cyl. OHC
Power	75bhp @ 6000rpm
Torque	72lb ft @ 3400rpm
Transmission	4 speed manual
Suspension: Front	Independent, coil springs
Suspension: Rear	Independent, coil springs
Brakes	Discs on all wheels
Wheels	13 inch alloy
0-62 mph	12.7 secs
Top Speed	99 mph
Number built	(all versions) 141,108

THE FIAT X1/9 replaced the 850 Spider in Fiat's range, designed and built by Bertone. Handling is their greatest strength, and rust their greatest weakness. When Fiat dropped the model in 1981 Bertone kept building it under their own name.

VERDICT ★★★★★

The Fiat offers a practical blend of wind in the hair, superb handling and punchy performance, but the rot while you watch.

- **PROS:** Sharp handling, easy to use targa-top, lots of luggage space, very comfortable.
- **CONS:** A good X1/9 is hard to find, such was the speed at which they rotted away. Parts less plentiful than for the Midget.

THE TRIUMPH SPITFIRE

There was to have been a third car featured in this article - The Triumph Spitfire 1500. Unfortunately Steve Golab, who was going to take part in our test, was involved in a serious car accident shortly before the day we were to meet. Steve himself escaped with minor injuries, but his Spitfire is probably beyond repair. Intended as a direct competitor for the MG Midget and Austin-Healey Sprite before the BMC/Leyland merger, the Spitfire originally used modified Herald running gear and chassis. The first Spitfire went on sale in 1962, and as with the Midget it went through a series of improvements until the launch of the Spitfire 1500 in 1974. Now using the same engine as the Midget, this final version was also largely 'inspired' by the needs of the American market, but the raised bumper and Stag-like Kamm tail gave it a much more effective look for the 1970s. This restyle dated back to 1970 and the Mk4, although the engine was new, with subtle changes to every panel except the sills. The Mk4 also got improved rear suspension which helped control earlier versions' often wayward handling. The Spitfire aged much more gracefully than the Midget, the already-sloping nose allowing a much more elegant compliance with new safety rules than the MG's more square front end, while the Kamm tail suited the low, swooping bodywork very well. While plenty of enthusiasts



prefer the earlier cars, especially on 'first of the breed' grounds, there are few who argue the later cars were compromised as with the MG. The Mk4 and 1500 were also the best handling Spitfires, courtesy of the revised rear suspension - and the 1500 was the fastest. Although most tests put the top speed at 98mph, some gave it 101mph to make it the first genuine '100mph' Spitfire. It was, by any objective measure, the best of its line, and as the years went on it overtook the Midget in sales, but it had been developed as far as it could go. The last Spitfire in 1980 still had the same separate chassis as the first in 1962, and that had been an old idea when it was new. As with the Midget, it needed to be replaced before it faded. But it wasn't.

The Spitfire also provided the basis for the Triumph GT6, which added a fixed roof and hinged rear window to create a creditable MGB GT rival. The GT6 also gained the 1998cc Triumph straight six under the bonnet, as used in the Vitesse and the Triumph 2000 saloon, to give it more than 20 extra horsepower. This engine was never offered in the Spitfire itself to avoid clashing with the TR6, although it's a popular retro-fit. The GT6 ceased production in 1973.



MG Midget was an elegant car in the 1960s, but there was no hiding its age by the end of the '70s.



X1/9 styling was right up to the minute in 1970s, and remained crisp right through to 1989.

very even, and that weight is kept close to the ground, so cornering is neutral and precise. It sits flat and firm on the road, but with a smooth ride that's generations ahead of the Midget. The steering is direct and offers plenty of feel for the road, but is light and never twitchy, creating an overall feel of being at one with the car.

It's not hugely powerful, the 73bhp on the early right hand drive cars really not enough to exploit the superb chassis. The 85bhp of the later 1500 cars was better, but still left room for improvement.

Even so, performance was still good for its time, and the engine loves to rev, giving it plenty of punch on a twisty road, and there's a quick, slick gearchange to make the most what power there is.

It is a thoroughly well thought-out car, with dynamics that make the MG look prehistoric - and yet the example here today is actually the older of the two cars. That's not to say the Midget is the worse of the two. The less sophisticated MG is still possibly the more fun, even if it's more demanding to drive, and it also has the best performance.

"The less sophisticated MG is still possibly the more fun, even if it's more demanding to drive"

Figures quoted for the cars when new gave the Midget 1500 a 0-60 time of 12.5 seconds against the Fiat's 12.7, while the MG's top speed of 101mph was a nudge ahead of the Fiat's 99mph. The 1500cc engine borrowed from the Ritmo in 1978 reversed this, increasing the Fiat's top speed to 107.7mph and giving it a 0-60 time of under 10 seconds - just, at 9.9 seconds. It's also heavier than the Midget, and the 128 from which it borrowed many of its parts.

The problem for the MG Midget is that it feels like what it is - a car from the 1950s struggling to survive until the 1980s. For a classic car enthusiast, that doesn't matter, but in a new car showroom it was all important because, inevitably, another car would show customers what a 'modern' Midget should feel like. The Fiat X1/9 was that car, and the little Fiat still feels modern today.

Thanks to:
Midget and Sprite Club: www.mgcars.org.uk/midgetspriteclub
X1/9 Owners Club: www.x1-9ownersclub.org.uk
Triumph Sports Six Club: www.tssc.org.uk

Two cars with one mission - to give affordable fun to the masses.

