

Car of the Month

How I Learned to Love “The Wedge”

by George Sherback

My first impression of the “Wedge” was formed when I saw that absolutely radically shaped car speed into a correspondingly wedge shaped trailer in a commercial. It looked fast and meant to be driven. Of course I had no intention of ever owning a new car. At the time I had owned two Volvo 544s, a Sunbeam Alpine, and a wickedly cursed MG Midget, (I should confess to also driving a couple of \$100 Ford Falcons) had just been married and was a high school teacher, so it wasn't even on the radar screen. My college roommate was managing a large multi-line “Import car” dealership at the time and drove a beautiful burgundy TR7 coupe with the canvas sunroof as a demo. Though not a real car junkie, he loved this car. I was totally impressed with the style but never asked to drive it. He said they were in such demand that they were sold before they were delivered. Because he liked it so much, he would steer customers away from it for whatever reason seemed appropriate. However, there was a deep dark secret regarding this car. I remember him telling me over a few beers about the incredibly terrible build quality. They sometimes couldn't get them off the trailer and had to send them right into the shop. Often their proud owners would come back within days with blown head gaskets or charging issues. Today we



know these were the infamous “Speke built” cars. This plant was a bastion of old time union activism with purported sabotaged cars and constant work stoppages. British Leyland had a car that was actually exciting Americans and they totally dropped the ball! As many know, this car was designed to accept the then modern all aluminum Rover V8 but again production demands were such that they were allocated to the “saloon” market and OHC four was forced into production.

But I digress.



The Sunbeam Alpine was my first “impulse” car. To me it was very modern compared to the other British sports cars. Brilliant red paint, roll down windows, knock off wire wheels, wood steering wheel with mother of pearl inserts and machined aluminum dash. The coolest part was the sheet metal boot that completely hid the top when down. I didn't want the Series III with the fins, but that was all I could afford so I forked over the princely sum of \$600 and drove this baby home. Good-bye Volvo 544 (the greatest car I ever owned, but that is a totally different story.) I was ecstatic! The Alpine drove, looked and sounded great. I got three speeding tickets in a little over a week thrashing it around. I bought the Glenn's repair manual and was ready to enjoy this machine. One ominous note: when I bought the car, a friend of my father made a rather cryptic remark, “Sports cars are like race horses, once they go down, just shoot them.” I didn't get it at the time, but I was only



nineteen. I actually had the Alpine for two summers and a winter. The only paid work done was to replace the clutch very soon after purchase. There was actually a Sunbeam dealer in Weymouth, Massachusetts called Twomey's Garage. Since I was in college, repairs were a financial disaster. The following fall, the shift forks/gearbox let go and I didn't have the cash, so it sat at Twomey's 'til it was probably cannibalized. Back to hundred dollar Ford Falcons.

But the Glenn's repair manual is an important link because it also included the legendary (to me anyway) Sunbeam Tiger.

I still have the book and remember looking at the Road & Track test data that was standard in these books and imagining the sensations of a V8 powered sports car. But, years went by and I eventually bought a twenty five year old Cessna 172 airplane. That was my diversion for thirteen great years. A heart attack changed all that. The Doc said he wouldn't sign me off for a year so the plane had to go. A sad day when someone few off in “my” plane. But now I could buy my Tiger. I went to the British Invasion and met Dave Twombly and his outstanding white Sunbeam Tiger. I had seen quite a few but they were obviously hit, dinged and showed their age/beatings. This one was clean and straight. You may have also seen Dave's beautiful XKE at the Field of Dreams Show or Lars Anderson. Anyway, I spent a minimum of two hours trying to find a price that would get me into this car. I was trying to be low key but I'm sure I must have been like a bad dream following him

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around. I can't believe how patient he was. Finally the critical moment came. He said to me that if I really wanted a car that could be driven and enjoyed without fear of overheating or finding myself with oddball issues, I should look at a TR8. He said that he had one and this is a car you can enjoy rain or shine, is fun to drive and has the power to accelerate sideways if care is not taken. I gave up trying to coerce him and went to look at the only TR8 at the event, a fairly tired cashmere gold DHC. I was not excited right away, but as I thought back to the old "Shape of Things to Come" ads and how the car stood out on the street back in the day, I caught the disease. Unlike the Tiger, where obviously tired examples brought big bucks, respectable TR8s could be had for less than a quarter of the price! I was starting to daydream of 200 HP all aluminum V8 sounds.

Of course when you start researching specialty enthusiast sites, the disease only gets worse. They say how the problems are all resolvable if you follow my direction and the car is now better, greater, etc.

I actually bought the second one I looked at. The first was in North Carolina. My wife and I got a \$63 flight to Raleigh-Durham and drove out to meet the guy and his supposedly pristine TR8. Well this was the racehorse that needed to be put down. It was leaking antifreeze, refused

to start and had a developing case of the tin worm, as they say across the pond. He had said we'd be able to drive it home, but needless to say we flew away from this one.

After surfing the net for weeks, I found one in Texas. The pictures were great. Poseidon Green with beige top and Panasports. Perfect! The engine had the four barrel conversion and the AC even worked!

I spoke to the owner and he said that he was an American car type and this didn't perform like a muscle car. He gave me all the reassurance that would be expected, but after my other experience I was skeptical. I couldn't get a cheap flight to Texas so what should I do? I started checking Texas car clubs to see if this guy was a member of any and came across another TR8 owner. I asked him if he knew the car or owner and he didn't, though he only lived a couple of hours away. Now the moment of truth. Could I figure out a way to get him to look at it and could he be reliable? After talking about Wedges and other banter, I sprung the the question. He said, "Of course! I'm a minister and have lots of free time during the week. Just send a donation to my church when I'm done." He didn't even say how much. Anyway, he sent a lengthy report that proved to be very accurate. I negotiated a little with the owner and the car was on its way north. When the ramp truck dropped it off three weeks later I was like a kid with a new toy. It

looked great (though the upholstery and carpet would need replacing), turned right over and sounded great! I threw a set of plates on and took it out for a quick drive. The performance wasn't big bore style, but it was quick and seemed solid! The steering was incredibly sensitive.

Dave Twombly had told me that there was a Wedge mechanic who was considered the USA guru in Taunton, Massachusetts named Woody Cooper. Specialists always make me uneasy, but I called and made the short trip down. Not your technician in a white lab coat! He casually told me my new prize was OK for the money, but... We talked about car experiences so he could get an idea of my expectations and I dropped the car off for a basic evaluation. I figured he could get it right then I could play with it from there. He seemed to think the car was roadworthy except for rear brake cylinders, brake lines and a couple of odds and ends. I expected to spend some money so we agreed to lower the car from its foolish high factory stance by changing out springs and replacing the tired bushings with upgraded urethane ones. He gave me a deal on some "take off" SPAX shocks and the car was reborn.

Next I ordered the original tartan plaid interior and carpeting and spent some evenings pushing that all together. I wanted it to look correct for the period. I was really happy with the car. The V8 didn't care what gear it was in, just push down on the gas and it goes. CD player and AC – what a life. AC with the top down is sinful. My wife was even taking it out with the neighbors!

Another Wedge owner once told me that owning a TR8 was like drug addiction. Once you start playing with it, you can't stop. The car is so malleable that you can be a purist for only so long. Soon choked up Strombergs give way to Holley carbs and headers and you gain another 30 or so horsepower. I took mine to a Boston area MG club outing and it dyno'd at between 170 and 180 horsepower (at the wheels of course). This was with a soft cylinder. The only car close was a heavily modified TR6 owned by Robert Lang that had incredible torque. I've



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watched him at many autocrosses and he really drives that car. A true enthusiast. Really mine is at the very low end of the power scale. A truly streetable Rover V8 can easily make over three hundred horsepower. Not bad in a 2700 pound car.

Low Points -My Bad Wedge Days:

Driving home from a long weekend, the oil pressure sender switch let go and immediately drained the crankcase. Believe it or not, it went right as I pulled into my driveway. So oil slick aside, things worked out for the best.

My first year at Stowe, it died in front of Ye Olde English Inn on Saturday morning. Imagine the feeling as all the "Truly Classic" British motorcars drive out looking at me and my dead TR8.....I had the car all ready to go to the grounds and was left in the front lot grinding away at the starter. Woody diagnosed it as a dead (in tank) fuel pump. I got a ride to NAPA, jury rigged an electric in line pump and was good to go. It is worth noting that the first time I went to the Invasion there were only a handful of wedges tucked way out back. Now we easily get over a dozen. This car loves mountain roads. Thanks to my wife Maureen, who preps the car, we have always been respectable in the voting.

Another "moment" was at the Roadster Factory Summer Party in Indiana, Pennsylvania. One of the events was drag racing for British cars only at a local drag strip. I have never (legally) drag raced so I was a nervous wreck as I approached the staging area. I knew I wasn't going to do anything special, I just didn't want to be the slowest TR8 or get beat by a couple of TR6s. Fortunately a thunderstorm came through as I sat four cars away from the start and ended the event. I say fortunately because as we pulled out onto the main road in true TR8 fashion, my accelerator return spring came loose and my little V8 sent my horrified wife and I to god knows how many RPM in second gear before I turned the key. This is a great event by the way, with autocrosses, gimmick gymkhanas and other events to keep every one entertained.

There was a guy there with a truly concours TR3 that drove from Ohio. My vote for true enthusiast. He refused to trailer it. You know what I Mean, Kurt?

I also got a flat tire at the Summer party and drove off to get it fixed. I got lost on the way back and found an MGB driver to show me the way. I had trouble keeping up with him. You guessed it, MGBV8.

Do not try to caravan to an event with Woody Cooper and his disciples though. I felt like I was driving a clapped out VW



Bug . My wife was definitely not ready for this.

Other incidentals have been a water pump, alternator, valve replacement on one side, distributor slave cylinder and the usual headlight stuck down or up (poor ground) issues Not bad for a car that has been driven a lot for over ten years. My obligatory Lucas event was running out

of gas in backwoods Vermont with a quarter tank indicating on the gauge. The orange warning light hadn't even come on yet!

Incidentally, I did own a 1974(?) MG Midget for less than two months. A friend's girlfriend sold it to me really cheap cause repairs were killing her. This car was possessed.

A highlight was going to the Malvern (UK) Show in 2002. There were a bunch of TR7 V8s there and when I told them I had a TR8, which were not sold in England, they were very accommodating. The judging was very interesting. People in the English countryside are very hospitable, especially after a pint or two.

Though sometimes I feel as out of place as a proud SAAB 96 owner, I have taken it to all kinds of events and cruise nights. I have autocrossed it many times. The engine pulls really well. It handles my six-foot-one frame easily and is comfortable on all-day drives on superhighways or winding roads. I have not been disappointed with my TR8. After all they only made 2600 of these things. If the V8 were available at the introduction as British Leyland had planned, I wonder how different things would be.

Maybe I don't need a Tiger after all. Except maybe that white one...

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