

■ BUYER'S GUIDE: MG MAGNETTE ZA AND ZB; WOLSELEY 4/44 AND 15/50

Blood brothers

PHOTOS JOHN COLLEY

The fifties range of Wolseley and MG medium-sized saloons are excellent value for money, if the rust hasn't got there first.

Nick Larkin looks at buying one



Smooth saloons:
MG Magnette and
Wolseley 4/44

BUYERS GUIDE: MG MAGNETTE ZA AND ZB; WOLSELEY 4/44 AND 15/50

SPECIFICATIONS

	Wolseley 4/44	Wolseley 15/50	MG Magnette ZA (ZB)
Produced	1952-56	1956-58	1953-56 (1956-58)
Engine	4-cyl in-line ohv	4-cyl in-line ohv	4-cyl in-line ohv
Capacity	1250cc	1489cc	1489cc
Bore/stroke	66.5x90mm	73x88.9mm	73x88.9mm
Max Power	46bhp @ 4800rpm	55bhp @ 4400rpm	60bhp @ 4600rpm (64bhp @ 5400 rpm)
Suspension	Front; Ind with coil-springs, wishbones Rear; half-elliptic, leaf springs	Front; Ind with coil-springs, wishbones Rear; half-elliptic, leaf springs	Front; Ind with coil-springs, wishbones Rear; half-elliptic, leaf springs
Brakes	Drum	Drum	Drum
Length	14ft 5in	14ft 5in	13ft 9in (14ft 1in)
Width	5ft 1in	5ft 1in	5ft 1in
Max speed	72mph	78mph	80mph (87mph)
0-60mph	32.6sec	27 sec	22.6 sec (18.5 sec)
Fuel cons	23-25mpg	25-30mpg	24-32mpg

Stylish, comfortable and reliable, examples of the MG Magnette ZA / ZB series and the closely related Wolseley 4/44 and 15/50 have been happily trundling around since the fifties, oblivious to the fact they've caused more arguments among enthusiasts than just about any other family saloon. In one corner, there's the hard-line MG

disciple proclaiming that the Magnette couldn't be a real MG — just a Wolseley with the right badges. Others reckon the car was designed as an MG, the Wolseley variant merely appearing in order to satisfy the Nuffield marketing department. The Wolseley side proclaims that the 4/44 was introduced a year before the Magnette ZA, and can really stir

the hornets' nest by pointing out gleefully that their car actually came with an MG engine, whereas the MG Magnette had a BMC B-series engine, which was later to power the Austin Cambridge and other lowly creations. The merger of Nuffield and Austin to form BMC was the real reason for this conundrum, however. Nuffield had intended

both cars to have versions of the XP engine which powered, among other cars, the MG TC, TD and YB. BMC wanted to rationalise its range of engines, with the XP being among those destined for the skip. But it was too late to stop the 4/44 going into production with the unit, even though its 1250cc and 46bhp were a trifle pedestrian even by 1952



Bucket seats and half octagonal speedometer in Magnette



More sombre 4/44 similar to other Wolseleys of the time

BUYERS GUIDE: MG MAGNETTE ZA AND ZB; WOLSELEY 4/44 AND 15/50

standards. Independent front suspension and rack-and-pinion steering were bang up to date however, and the unitary-construction car was well received.

It was pitched as 'the perfect car for a man whose taste demands something a little better', and 29,845 buyers from 1952-56 decided that this marketing statement applied to them.

The MG Magnette ZA surfaced in 1953. Most of the dissenters, who thought the MG name was being violated and who had strong memories of the pre-war Magnette racing models, were rather happier when they had seen, and driven, the newcomer.

Although it shared the same monocoque as the Wolseley, the Magnette was lower,

with different sills and there for all to see, a traditional MG radiator. The MG's sporting look was enhanced by its sitting two inches lower than the Wolseley.

The 1489cc BMC B-series engine, fed by twin SU carbs, gave 60bhp, a credible increase over the Wolseley and one which contributed to the MG's immense success, with 18,076 examples finding homes in three years.

In 1956 the Wolseley 4/44 was discontinued, being replaced by the Wolseley 15/50. The Magnette became the ZB, with the engine slightly uprated to 64bhp, lowering the 0-60mph time from 22.6 to 18.5 seconds. The already sumptuous cabin got yet more wood and the 'umbrella' style

chrome decoration on the front wings was dropped in favour of a straight-sided strip.

Most significantly, a new Varitone version of the Magnette, featuring a larger rear window and (on most cars) a duo-tone colour scheme. The Varitone was the only car in the range to have flashers rather than semaphore indicators.

By far the greatest changes were applied to the Wolseley. A 50bhp, single carb-equipped version of the B-series replaced the XP unit, and the gearchange was moved from the steering column to the floor.

The 15/50 also gained different chrome strips, and BMC benevolently threw in an extra front foglamp over the single unit offered on

CLUBS

MG Car Club

PO Box 251 Abingdon Oxon OX14 3FA (01235 555552)

MG Owners Club

2/4 Station Road, Swavesey, Camb CB4 5QZ (01785 51014)

Wolseley Register

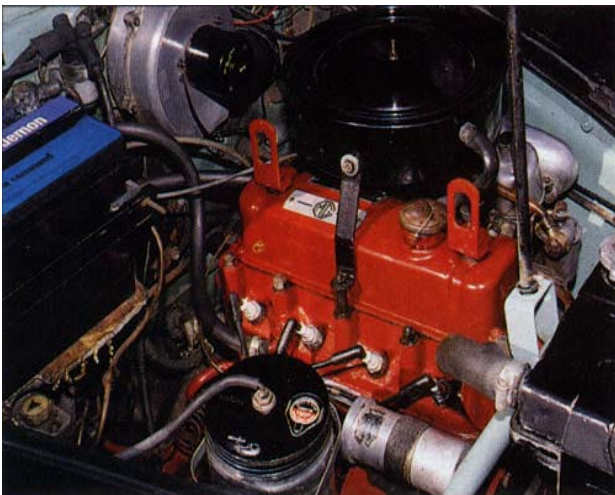
6 Ezard Street, Newtown, Stockton on Tees Cleveland TS19 0BZ

- Our thanks to the Avoncroft Museum of Buildings, Stoke Heath, Bromsgrove Worcs. B60 4JR for the use of their grounds for photography. Open from March to November, the museum hosts numerous classic car events. Exhibits range from an early 19th century windmill to a fully furnished prefab.

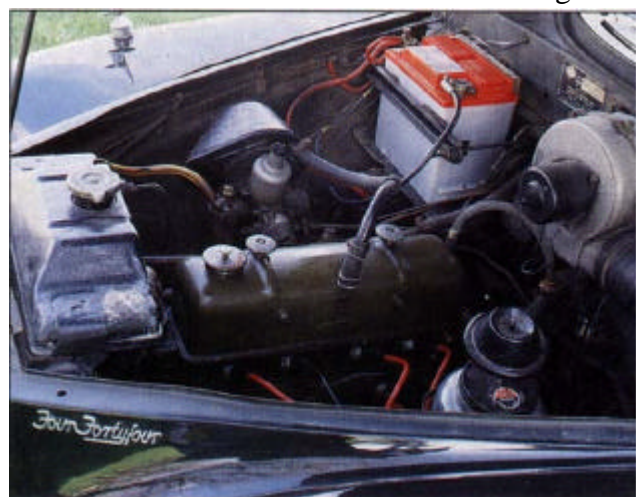
the previous model.

Both the new MG and Wolseley were offered with two-pedal Manumatic transmission as an option, though this never proved particularly popular.

Both the Magnette and

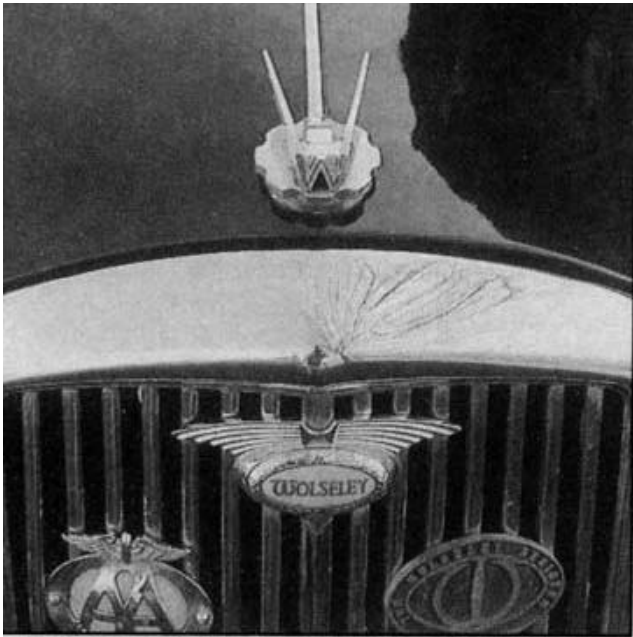


Magnette had twin-carb, uprated BMC B-series unit



Basically prewar engine in 4/44 is rugged but slow

BUYERS GUIDE: MG MAGNETTE ZA AND ZB; WOLSELEY 4/44 AND 15/50



Traditional Wolseley grille and mascot on 4/44 helped foster reassuring image.

the Wolseley disappeared in 1958, when BMC were clearing the decks for the new, Farina-designed range.

BODYWORK

These cars have developed an awesome reputation for rust, but the newest examples are now 30 years old, and many other cars have rotted just as much.

You must meticulously check the bodywork. The sills, totally different on each model, have an inner membrane as well as outer and inner sections. These can rust just about anywhere, and it's likely that any rust born in the sills will

have gone walkabout into the floor sections, which can, therefore, rust completely along their length. Check the area around the bottom of the A-post, which can also rot.

Door bottoms can also say goodbye and you should watch out for corrosion along the welded seams on the front wings, and around the sidelamps.

The rear wings 'go' along the bottom and around the wheelarch, and the bootlid rusts around the bottom edge. Have a good look at the area around the rear spring hangers, too.

Non-rechromable mazak is used for door handles and other pieces of decorative chrome, and while



Two-tone colour scheme, larger back window And flashing indicators on Varitone MG.

you're inspecting the chrome strips, make sure that rust hasn't been breeding behind them.

The good news is that many body panels are available from specialists, though supplies are geared more towards the MG than the Wolseley.

For example, good-quality glassfibre front wings are £95 each from John and Lou Shorten in Norwich, whose vast stock also includes front floor sections at £14 and rear ones at £12. NTG Services of Ipswich will supply sills and other parts: outer sills are priced at £52.69 for the MG and £54.89 for the Wolseley.

OTHER POINTS

Providing there is still the bodywork left to carry them around, the mechanics in these cars seem to go on just about indefinitely.

The 4/44 unit is susceptible to small, but not particularly important oil leaks, but like the B-series, would need to cover a vast mileage before real wear becomes apparent. If you're trying to knock together a Magnette engine from B-series bits, remember that the Magnette has larger valves than were fitted to standard B-series engines.

Replacing your 4/44's engine with an original unit could prove expensive as MG enthusiasts are always

BUYERS GUIDE: MG MAGNETTE ZA AND ZB; WOLSELEY 4/44 AND 15/50



Wolseley 4/44

John Webb

Retired newspaper photographer John Webb has owned Wolseley 4/44s since 1961. He now has around a dozen examples, including one he's restoring, another two he wants to see restored, and the rest for spares. "I've collected the cars over the years because I just couldn't bear to see them going to the scrapyard and turned into square boxes," said John, who lives in Worcestershire.

"I went for them because they were quality cars that were affordable." He would be keen to offer a complete car to a genuine restorer and can help him with spares.



1957 MG Magnette Varitone

Alex Riddlett

Alex Riddlett, who runs the MG Car Club's Z Magnette Register, has owned his immaculate Varitone for five years.

The two-previous-owner car, with a mere 58,000 miles on the clock, is completely original apart from a lower half respray.

"The performance is good and the cars just look completely right," said the 62-year-old graphics lecturer at Loughborough College of Art and Design. He previously used the car every day but now uses a 1970 MGB GT.

after them to put in MG TCs and the like. Many, many a semi-restorable 4/44 has met its end due to this demand.

As a slight consolation,

BMC B-series engines are freely available and will slot into the 4/44. A change to a floor-mounted gearbox can be made without too many problems.

Owners have been known to equip their Wolseleys with MG-style twin carbs — but a worn set can do awful things to fuel consumption.

These cars are also renowned for having noisy rear axles, but normally they will rumble for years without causing problems.

Gearboxes are generally long-lived. If the 4/44's change seems sloppy, it may be just the spring at the bottom of the gearchange shaft which runs parallel to the steering column.

Manumatic cars are extremely rare, and there are reports of dubious reliability. Finding spares for this system must be a nightmare, too.

Kingpins can often display wear, as can the Silentbloc bushes in the rear suspension.

One of the biggest problems is finding replacements for the combined brake and clutch master cylinder. These are in extremely short supply, though often a specialist might have found a few. John and Lou Shorten offer an exchange reconditioned unit for around £120.

The interiors are certainly among the cars' most attractive features, and again, the specialist market is geared towards the Magnette.

The Shortens will do you an 18-piece carpet set for £110 and a set of door trims for £186.

Early Magnettes had a 'tin top' rather than a wooden dashboard, and the very first 4/44s had open glove boxes, without the wooden lids fitted to most examples.

Seats can be recovered using new covers available from specialists, and they should be able to help you with replacement wood. The dashboards, seats and door trims are all different.

Also, although the cars share the same bodysell, the bonnets, sills and doors are not interchangeable between models.

PRICES

There's a huge difference in prices between the Wolseley and MG models. A Magnette suitable for everyday use is likely to set you back £2,500-£3,000, yet a Wolseley would be half that.

The far more usable 15/50 has an edge on

BUYERS GUIDE: MG MAGNETTE ZA AND ZB; WOLSELEY 4/44 AND 15/50

price over the slower 4/44, and a Magnette Varitone would be expected to cost at least £500 more than a standard example.

You're not likely to get much change out of £3,500-£4,000 for an exceptional Magnette, and you could double that for a concours car. In reality, it would be difficult to imagine even the best Wolseley reaching much more than £2,500.

A down-at-heel MG would be a much more viable restoration proposition than the equivalent Wolseley, but specialists reckon a full professional restoration could end up costing £10,000 or more.

A tatty and rusty Wolseley with no engine and an awful interior is worth little more than its scrap value.

VERDICT

While the MG undeniably has a performance advantage over the Wolseley, the 4/44 and 15/50 are loaded with period charm, and it does seem a bit silly that the Magnette is double the price of its close relation, no matter how much you enjoy the

idea of plonking down an MG keyring on your local pub bar.

A 4/44 is not really suitable as a long-distance motorway cruiser, but if you only want to potter around country lanes or to local rallies, this car should see you right. And there's the pleasure of knowing you're driving behind the engine that's powered some of the most loved MGs.

The Wolseley 15/50 offers perhaps the best combination of performance and price, though it's undeniable that the Magnette is the most usable model.

If you are worried about performance, and not too much of a stickler for originality, there's not a lot to stop you putting a 1622cc engine from a Farina model or even the MGB's 1798cc unit in your Wolseley or Magnette.

If you watch the rust, you can't really go wrong with any of these extremely stylish and practical vehicles which look good from any angle and radiate pleasant fifties character.

Perhaps the ultimate solution to the arguments about the car's credibility as

MGs (or Wolseleys) can be found in a recent *Popular Classics* interview with their stylist Gerald Palmer. 'Both can be designed together,' he says. A simple statement to end a complex argument?

This article was originally published in *Popular Classics Magazine*, June 1991 and was written by Nick Larkin and photography by John Colley. Reproduced on the website by kind permission. To obtain *Popular Classic* back numbers please call +44 (0) 1858 438820. To subscribe to *Popular Classics* please call +44 (0) 845 1214000.

All prices quoted are as published in June 1991 and may not be current. Please check with the suppliers as to current price and availability.