

# Sting like a B

*Looks harmless, but pulls a sub-4 second 0-60mph time and costs £80,000. Welcome to Frontline Developments' latest MGB-based creation, the Abingdon Roadster*

WORDS David Lillywhite // PHOTOGRAPHY Tim Andrews





**Left and right**  
Looks like a tastefully modernised MGB on the outside, but huge changes occur under the (beefed-up) skin, not least under the bonnet, where lies a 304bhp Mazda four-cylinder.

**F**IFTY THOUSAND POUNDS for an MGB! we exclaimed two years ago, on our first drive of Frontline's MGB GT LE50. What madness was this? Would anyone pay such a sum?

They did. Frontline has so far sold 32 LE50 variants, most loaded with options that have taken the price to well over £70,000, and that made them wonder what would happen if the options were simply offered as standard. The result of that wondering is the Abingdon, a Frontline-built MGB Roadster with even more power and torque than the LE50, that sells for £79,895.

So... '£80,000 for an MGB!' we can now exclaim, but there's no point contemplating whether or not anyone will pay such prices for what is virtually an entirely brand new car, substantially re-engineered, because four already have. What Eagle is to E-types, and Singer is to 911s, so Frontline is now to the humble B. While you can still buy a decent late-60s B Roadster for £5000 or so, Frontline has tapped into a demand for the best-of-the-best, with modern levels of performance and reliability in what many would say is one of the best-looking sports cars of all time. It was the dynamics that let the original down, not the styling.

You'll be wondering what you get for your 911 money then. The quick answer is a brand new bodyshell, uniquely modified and strengthened on the production line, fitted with a rebuilt and modified 2014 Mazda 2.5-litre four-cylinder engine and matching six-speed gearbox, sitting on cleverly re-engineered (at the front) and re-designed (rear) suspension, and topped off with all-new fittings and trim to a level that MG would never have considered at any point in the 1962-1980 production run.

First impressions? The Abingdon looks appropriately period, rather than highly modified, but clean and purposeful with it. This one is a customer's car, kindly lent to *Octane* for the day. Of course it starts beautifully, that's a given, running as it does on a new engine with 50mm

throttle bodies and Omex engine ignition. There's an appropriate rortiness, not too much – and quite different from the characteristic growl of the B's original siamesed exhaust port engine – but it's enough to keep the '60s sports car vibe intact.

No need to heave at the steering wheel, because there's an electric power steering rack hidden away under the dash. Stock steering on an original B is surprisingly heavy, with a tendency to weight up into tight corners as a result of excessive castor geometry, so these EPAS systems are becoming popular across all MGBs; this one has been developed and fine-tuned by Frontline, however, and feels completely natural. The amount of assistance can be dialled in and out by the customer too.

Of we go, heading out of Frontline's Oxfordshire village for more open roads. It's an easy car to adapt to, all the controls nicely weighted, the driving position in the new sports seats perfectly comfortable, the ride firm, fidgety at times, but unflustered by the inevitable potholes and blisters in the tarmac. There's enough torque that you can amble through the six gears, and the relatively long accelerator pedal movement makes for a more relaxed drive than you might expect.

Then, of course, the opportunity comes to push harder, and down goes the right foot, up go the revs towards the 7800rpm red line and the B comes alive, squatting down into the tarmac as it propels itself ever more rapidly down the road. This isn't 'quick'. This is phenomenally fast.

Is Lillywhite exaggerating, getting a bit carried away by a bit of extra power compared with his own B-series BGT? No, I say! And the figures prove it: the Abingdon has more power than Frontline's seriously quick LE50, 304bhp at 6800rpm in fact, and more torque too (241lb ft at 5200rpm), which means a 0-60mph time of 3.8 seconds. Yes, that's a sub-4-second sprint! Top speed, limited by aerodynamics and self-preservation, would be around 160mph, and though I didn't get close to that, 120mph appears on the new electronic clocks remarkably quickly. →



#### FRONTLINE MGB 'ABINGDON' ROADSTER

**ENGINE** 2488cc four-cylinder, billet crank and rods, DOHC, 16-valve, 50mm direct-to-head throttle bodies, Omex management **POWER** 304bhp @ 6800rpm **TORQUE** 241lb ft @ 5200rpm **TRANSMISSION** Six-speed manual, rear-wheel drive, LSD **STEERING** EPAS rack and pinion **SUSPENSION** Front: alloy uprights, tubular wishbones, coilovers. Rear: six-link live axle, coilovers **BRAKES** Front: vented discs, four-piston calipers. Rear: solid discs, two-piston calipers **WEIGHT** 897kg **PERFORMANCE** Top speed 160mph; 0-60mph 3.8sec



This could turn out to be lethal but the suspension and brakes are more than up to it. Frontline has long been known for Spridget and B suspension upgrades (my own Frogeye in the early '90s ran a Frontline front conversion) and the Abingdon continues the development into an all-new alloy upright, tubular wishbone and coilover set-up, stronger and far less compromised than the original lever-arm design. It's at the rear that it gets really clever, though, with the live axle now suspended on coil-over-damper units rather than leaf springs, and located by no fewer than six links.

As a result, the old tendency for a powerful B to axle-tramp its way off the line, and to skip around bumpy bends, is simply eradicated. Stepping from my own BGT into the Abingdon, it feels strange not to feel the rear squatting down as the car accelerates out of a corner, but instead the Abingdon remains flat and unflustered, only losing traction when pushed really hard, at which point the ease with which it settles back into line is utterly flattering. I'm a driving god! Oh, no, it's just a very well set-up machine.

Brakes, too, are more than up to the job. There are decent-sized discs and modern alloy calipers all round, and the car weighs only 897kg, so it's no surprise that it hauls up straight and fast. There was a smidgeon of 'will it or won't it' pedal feel under hard braking that Frontline was aware of, and has since rectified with a different master cylinder.

Most of all, on our long, fast test drive, the Abingdon felt complete, both structurally and as a package. Everything matches in feel, which isn't always the case with conversions like this, and it feels strong too. The B shell is a tough 'un, its strength coming from the triple-section sills and deep transmission tunnel, but Frontline commissioned a unique set of modifications to the British Motor Heritage E-coated bodyshell, moving the bulkhead rearwards to allow better engine placement for weight distribution, new suspension mounts (though Frontline's

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suspension conversions can be bought as bolt-on kits too), seam-welding and strengthening in key places. To that the company adds a raft of soundproofing, followed by an interior that feels appropriate to a B but several notches above the standard specification, beautifully trimmed in-house at Frontline's recently expanded HQ, with options of leather or alcantara throughout. Electric windows, central locking, Xenon headlights and high-spec stereo come as standard, while air-con, heated seats, heated 'screen, built-in sat-nav and more are options.

Sensibly, Frontline has left the external appearance more or less standard (save for those lovely Dunlop alloys), though there are three hood choices, ranging from a high-quality version of the original through to the Speedster look you see here, which gives a longer, cleaner rear deck, uncluttered by hood fixings – the rear edge of the hood on this version cleverly clips into the leading edge of the bootlid channel.

So, £80,000 for an MGB? Of course it doesn't *really* make sense, but it's clear to see where the money goes, and if you're after something useable, fast and utterly reliable, then it's one hell of an option. One customer has traded-in a recent 911 for an Abingdon – and we can see why. **End**