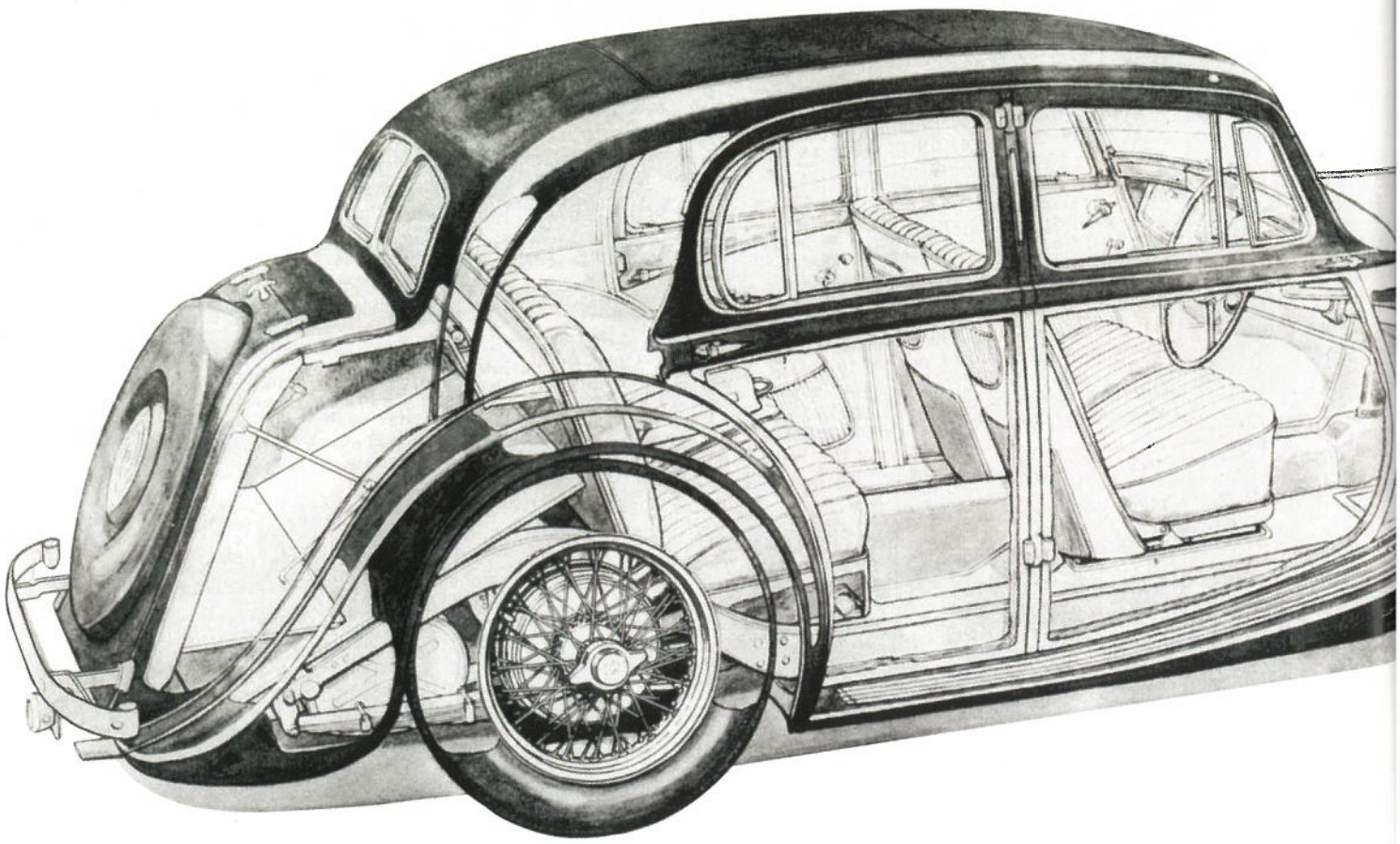
A 1939 WA owned by SVW Register member, Jeff Gibson. Note the distinctive front bumper with the indented V-shaped centre, which instantly identifies the model



ABINGDON'S JAGUAR-BEATER?

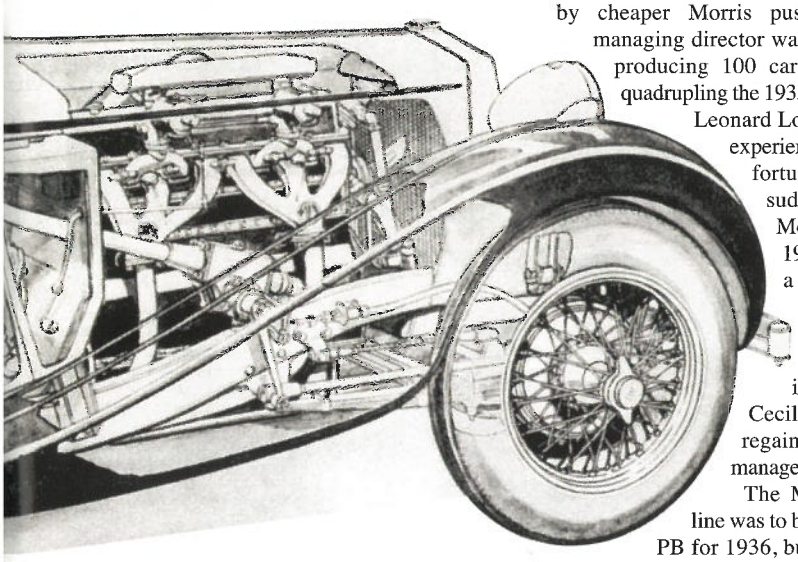
Jonathan Wood *returns to the big pre-war MGs and looks at the six-cylinder cars, the 2.2-litre SA and the 2.6-litre WA*



Below: This 1938 SA, recently restored by Chisbon Restorations of Beaumont, Essex, displays the single spot lamp and louvred bonnet of the later cars. It is also fitted with a rear bumper, initially only available as an option







The SA, as revealed in October, 1935. Note that the chassis passes above the rear axle rather than beneath it, which had been the MG norm. The ptototype's bolt-on wheels did not reach the production cars, being replaced by knock-off wire ones

Despite the wide array of MGs available throughout the 1930s, the SA was to prove the company's best-seller, apart from the M-type and TA sports cars. The arrival in time for the 1935 Motor Show of this rapid, roomy and luxurious saloon has often been portrayed as a result of MG's Morris Motors parent exerting a commanding role over the marque's model strategy. In all probability, however, the car was conceived by MG's founder, Cecil Kimber, before Abingdon was forced to cede design responsibility to Cowley. It was as late as 1st July, 1935, that Lord Nuffield, as Sir William Morris had become in the previous year, had sold MG to Morris Motors, hardly enough lead-time to produce a new model three months later. In the wake of the ownership reshuffle, Kimber was demoted from the position of managing director to that of general manager, while the Abingdon drawing office was closed and would remain so until 1954. And there would be no more racing cars.

Such radical restructuring of Nuffield's business interests was initiated by Leonard Lord, who had been promoted, to the surprise of the industry, to the position of managing director of Morris Motors at the age of 36 in 1933. Lord had modernised Cowley, launched the Eight and returned Morris Motors to its pre-eminent position as Britain's largest car maker.

In due course, this dynamic but ruthless executive, who disliked, amongst many other Morris managers, MG's founding father, turned his attention to Kimber's fiefdom. It had enjoyed switchback fortunes between the years of 1930 and 1935 – during this period its cumulative profits amounted to just £419. The promise of the M-type Midget, which sold an impressive 3235 examples, had not been maintained. Although it spawned a diverse model range, the sports cars invariably sold in hundreds rather than thousands. This, combined with their expensive overhead camshaft engines and H N Charles's ingenious R-type monoposto racer with no road car equivalent, contributed to Kimber's vulnerability.

With MG's fortunes now firmly in the hands of Morris Motors, the range was drastically reduced. At Lord's instigation, out went the sophisticated ohc engines of Wolseley parentage to be replaced by cheaper Morris pushrod ones. Morris's managing director was aiming for MG to be producing 100 cars a week, effectively quadrupling the 1935 figure. As it happened, Leonard Lord was not destined to experience the revival of MG's fortunes first-hand, having suddenly resigned from Morris Motors in August, 1936. Although there was a collective corporate sigh of relief, he left a stronger business than the one he had inherited. For his part, Cecil Kimber was able to regain his previous managerial position.

The Midget ohc sports car line was to be seen through with the PB for 1936, but it would be replaced from March of that year by the TA, powered by a pushrod engine of Morris ancestry. It followed the announcement, in September, 1935, of a wholly new model in the shape of the Two-Litre, better known today as the SA, which used a power unit of similar design and pedigree. While such a specification was clearly Cowley's contribution to the SA, there is clear evidence to suggest that the concept of a large MG sports saloon was already on the boards of the Abingdon drawing office before Lord's mid-summer purge had been implemented.

MG's design register records a large saloon, Ex 150, which Abingdon nicknamed *Queen Mary*. It is likely to have been powered by a 3.5-litre engine of Morris origin, although, incredibly, a V-8 also seems to have been contemplated. Suspension would have been by all independent torsion bars in the R-type idiom. Perhaps because such a large car flew in the face of MG's existing offerings, the largest of which was a mere 1.3-litre, Cecil Kimber, who had hitherto been responsible for styling, approached coachbuilder Mulliners of Birmingham for its ideas on a large four-door sports saloon. The design by stylist James Wignall, one of three drawings he submitted, is dated 27th June, 1935, and was thus commissioned prior to the Morris take-over. What is not known for certain is whether it was intended for Ex 150 or the SA, although the former project seems the more likely.

So what was Kimber's thinking behind the contemplation of such a large model? To ascertain this we have to retrace our steps briefly to the year 1928 and the arrival of the 2.5-litre, six-cylinder 18/80 MG, a fine car whose promise was dashed by the onset of the world depression. It was the ensuing chilly financial climate that permitted the much smaller and cheaper M-type to flourish.

In later years Kimber acknowledged the 18/80 as a car in the Bentley idiom. With the backcloth of an improved economy and the reduction of the RAC tax rating from £1 to 15s (.75) per hp in April, 1935, It is probable that the *Queen Mary* was similarly inspired. A demonstrable milestone in the evolution of the sports saloon had been Rolls-Royce's revival of the Bentley marque with the 'Silent Sports Car', unveiled for the 1934 season. Retaining a 10ft 6in wheelbase, its 3.5-litre pushrod engine, based on RR's own 20/25hp six, gave it a top speed of 90mph.

Another influential exemplar of the sports saloon concept came from a newcomer in the shape of William Lyons's SS marque, which had made its debut at the 1931 motor show. Like Kimber, Lyons was responsible for the styling of his own products. SS, renamed Jaguar after the Second World War, would present MG with its most formidable opposition. Indeed John Thornley, who joined MG in 1931 and would run the company in the post war years, has recalled that 'Kimber was determined to out-Jaguar Jaguar (SS)'.

The mechanical sophistication of Ex 150 had been swept aside by Cowley's coup, although its theme lived on in the SA, which probably inherited its predecessor's Mulliner styling. It was accorded the designation of Ex 158 in MG's design register, which had been maintained despite the drawing office's move to Cowley.

Morris's input was immediately apparent with the use of a two-litre engine shared with the Wolseley Super Six, and designated type QPHG. With dimensions of 65.5 by 102mm (2062cc) and an RAC rating of 15.96hp, its annual tax would be £12. The crankshaft ran in four main bearings, while the ribbed aluminium sump provided echoes of MG's racing pedigree. The clutch was cork-faced in the usual Morris, but not MG, manner, and therefore ran in oil.

Upstairs the valves were pushrod operated. The twin SU carburetters, supplied by twin SU pumps, were located on the offside with their dashpots mounted horizontally to permit a low bonnet line. Hotspots were provided by the adjoining twin three-branch manifolds, while supplementary

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This 1938 WA Tickford drophead coupé is for sale with Beaulieu Garage of Beaulieu, Hampshire, with a £40,000 price-tag, together with an SA for £45,000

cooling was provided by ventilation shutters along each bonnet side. The four-speed gearbox, actuated by a willowy lever, used double-helical gear sets and had synchromesh on top and third gears.

With a wheelbase of 10ft 3in, the chassis required added rigidity. The side members were boxed and punctuated by lightening slots along their inner faces. Further strength was contributed by three tubular cross members, the two forward ones passing through a pair of supplementary longitudinal box members that provided support for the engine and gearbox.

There was very little obviously MG about this chassis. The side members passed over the rear axle, rather than beneath it, and gone were the beloved sliding spring trunnions, although they persisted on the TA. On the prototype, the wheels were of the bolt-on variety, but the car exhibited at the 1935 Olympia motor show had knock-off hubs, with wire wheels carrying 18 by 5.50 tyres, which became the norm. Smith's Jackall hydraulic jacks were fitted as standard. Despite Kimber's distrust, the Lockheed hydraulic brakes with 12in drums were also a first for MG, as was the high-geared Bishop cam steering which provided only two and a third turns lock to lock.

The SA was a large but supremely elegant car with four-light, four-door coachwork provided by Morris's Bodies Branch. With its long bonnet and shapely boot, it measured 16ft 3in. The spare wheel was accommodated in the boot lid, endowing the SA with a distinctive and pleasing rear profile. At the front the by-then well-established MG slatted radiator was flanked by large chromed headlamps. An attractive two-tone colour combination was available and the SA displayed at the 1935 show was finished above and below the waistline in MG's traditional chocolate and cream livery. The price was £375.

Inside, the accommodation and furnishing, particularly the leather trim and woodwork, were impressive. At the front were adjustable bucket seats, their squabs enhanced by air cushions. The rear seat included a central movable arm-rest, while rests on each side incorporated ashtrays, matching those at the front located in the doors. Rear passengers were also able to rest their heads on art-silk cushions that graced each corner. On fine days, the Weathershields sliding roof could be opened.

Woodwork was of burr walnut veneer, although the instrumentation differed from previous MG practice in that the familiar octagonal instruments had made way for circular dials, the centres of their faces being finished in a distinctive golden hue. A 100mph speedometer on the left was balanced by a rev counter incorporating an eight day wind-up clock, and flanked by supplementary gauges. Befitting its market, the SA was to be offered with the option of a radio. Top of the range was the Philco at 18 guineas with the Masterradio at 13.5, while the aerial was three guineas more. Do any surviving SAs retain their original sets?

This SA Tourer, belonging to Peter Pimm, MGCC SVW Register librarian, was registered in November, 1937, the month in which the cutaway front doors were introduced



Also making its Olympia debut that year was the new SS Jaguar range, the 2.6-litre Standard-based model now enhanced by Harry Weslake's overhead valve cylinder head to give 105bhp. Selling for £385, it therefore cost only £10 more than the MG.

On the face of it there was not much to choose between the specifications of the two models. MG historian Wilson McComb has written of the SA having 'a genuine maximum of well over 80mph.' It could be cruised in comfort at that speed and handled a good deal better than the Jaguar, according to the same source.

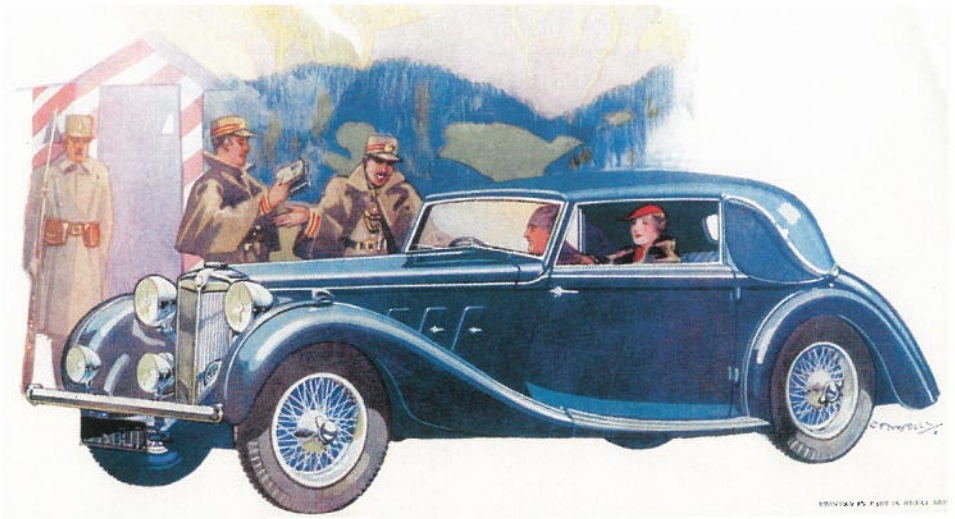
But Lyons got his new models into production rather quicker than did Kimber, because the Abingdon factory just wasn't laid out to take on higher volume production of a more labour-intensive car. By the time the parent company had completed the task, valuable sales had been lost to the Coventry product. *Motor Sport* reported in its issue of June, 1936, that the plant had been 'completely reorganised, and four assembly lines have been fitted into the space formerly occupied by two...The output at present is one car an hour, but it will rise as high as 100 cars per week' – Leonard Lord's target figure.

When Two-Litre production eventually began in March of that year, the model had undergone some changes. The most significant of these, probably prompted by the SS opposition, was an increase in engine size to 2288cc, achieved by increasing the engine's bore to 69mm, and power to 75bhp, although the Two Litre name was maintained. The RAC rating consequently rose to18hp, so the big MG now cost £13.50 to tax.

There were other minor modifications. Although synchromesh had featured on the original specification, it did not reach the first of the SAs. The original direct acting gear lever was replaced by a remote control. But, after a few months, synchromesh made a welcome return and further changes were made to the gear lever.

The first factory-approved variation on the saloon, a Tickford drophead coupé by Salmons, was announced in April, 1936, at a cost of £398. One enthusiastic driver was Laurence Pomeroy Jnr, who had recently returned from Germany prior to becoming technical editor of *The Motor* in 1937. He took delivery of his SA on 26th July that year.

More than two years later, writing in November, 1939, on '47,000 No-Trouble Miles', Pom reported he was laying the MG up for the war. He enthused that his was 'certainly the best car I have ever owned out of a considerable number... Where it does score is in its amazing capacity to roll steadily along at 60-65mph in supreme comfort so far as springing is concerned, with entire absence of effort from the engine.' Does anyone know the fate of his car, registered AMO 604?



The SA lent itself to Continental touring and established a small but noteworthy German clientele, so this rendering of a Tickford drophead coupé at a border check-point is particularly appropriate

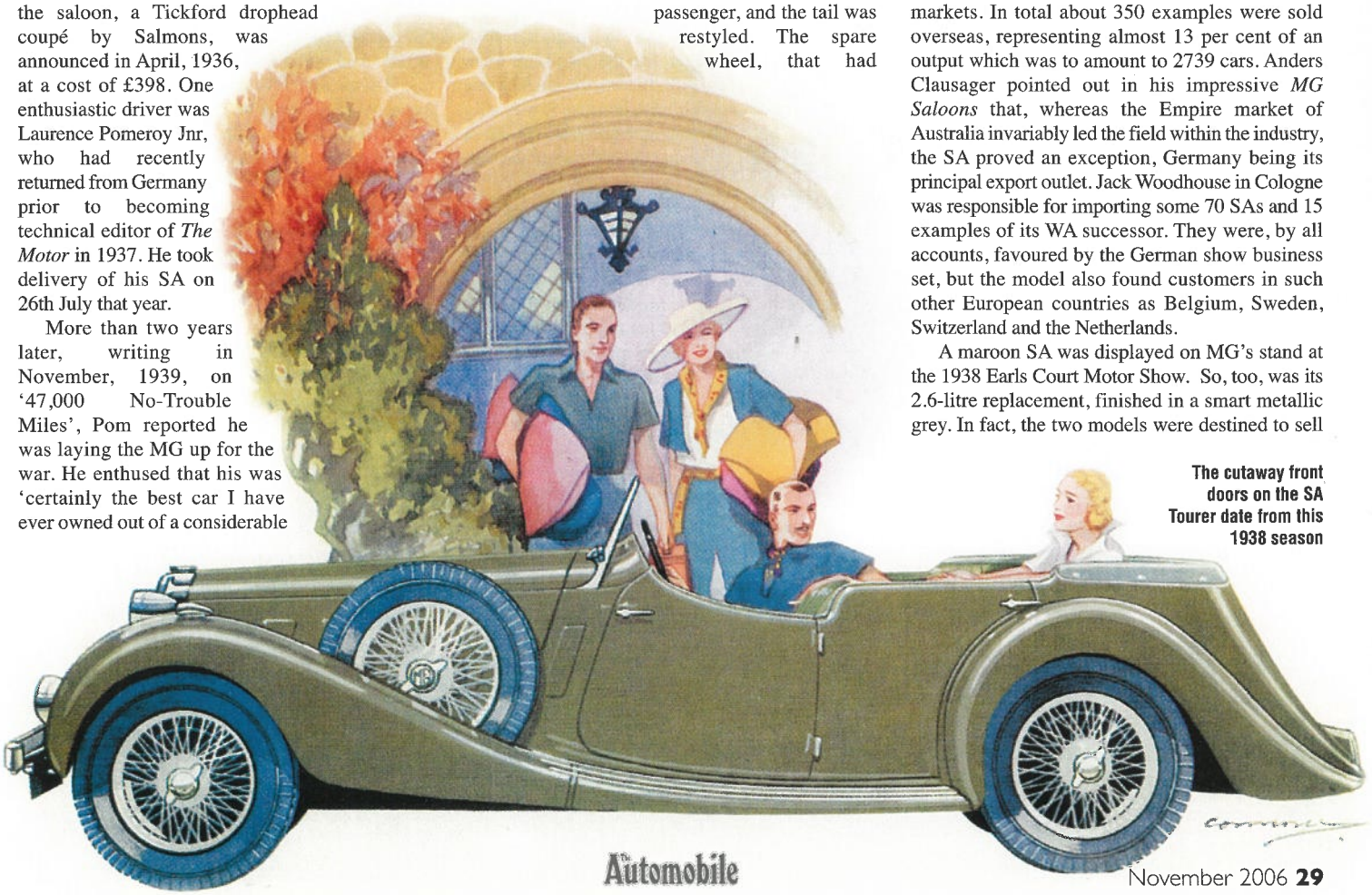
A touring version of the SA by Charlesworth followed in July, 1936. Selling for £375, it retained the four-door layout and looked particularly presentable with its hood concealed. *The Motor* was impressed. During tests the magazine's drivers found that the engine would rev happily to more than 4500rpm. They also praised the brakes, but the gears came in for some criticism. They were 'not very quiet', which is saying something for an open car. On the original tourers the top of the doors followed the waistline, which ran from the upper corners of the radiator to the tail, but from the 1938 season these lines were softened. The upper faces of the front doors were cut away to provide elbow room for driver and passenger, and the tail was restyled. The spare wheel, that had hitherto been located there, was transferred to the nearside front wing.

An imperceptible change in the SA's engine size occurred in February, 1937, when the bore was upped from 69 to 69.5mm. This increased capacity to 2322cc. While going to the limit of the 18hp ceiling, the MG six now shared its internal dimensions with Wolseley's new 18. Simultaneously, changes were made to the bonnet ventilation, and a badge bar, complete with central spot lamp, was introduced.

For the 1938 season, the original bonnet ventilators were replaced by louvres, the aim being to reduce under- bonnet temperatures. The late motoring historian Michael Sedgwick owned a second-hand SA and wrote enthusiastically of how it provided fast 85mph motoring. But he had little doubt that 'the over-crowded engine compartment' was responsible for making the big MG 'a foot-frier'.

Interestingly, the SA found favour in export markets. In total about 350 examples were sold overseas, representing almost 13 per cent of an output which was to amount to 2739 cars. Anders Clausager pointed out in his impressive *MG Saloons* that, whereas the Empire market of Australia invariably led the field within the industry, the SA proved an exception, Germany being its principal export outlet. Jack Woodhouse in Cologne was responsible for importing some 70 SAs and 15 examples of its WA successor. They were, by all accounts, favoured by the German show business set, but the model also found customers in such other European countries as Belgium, Sweden, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

A maroon SA was displayed on MG's stand at the 1938 Earls Court Motor Show. So, too, was its 2.6-litre replacement, finished in a smart metallic grey. In fact, the two models were destined to sell



The cutaway front doors on the SA Tourer date from this 1938 season

alongside one another throughout 1939. There is evidence to suggest that Morris did contemplate reviving the concept of the 3.5-litre saloon, no doubt prompted by SS introducing such an option for the 1938 season. But Ex 160 seems, at best, to have been a tentative idea. Instead work went ahead on Ex 161, which we know today as the WA.

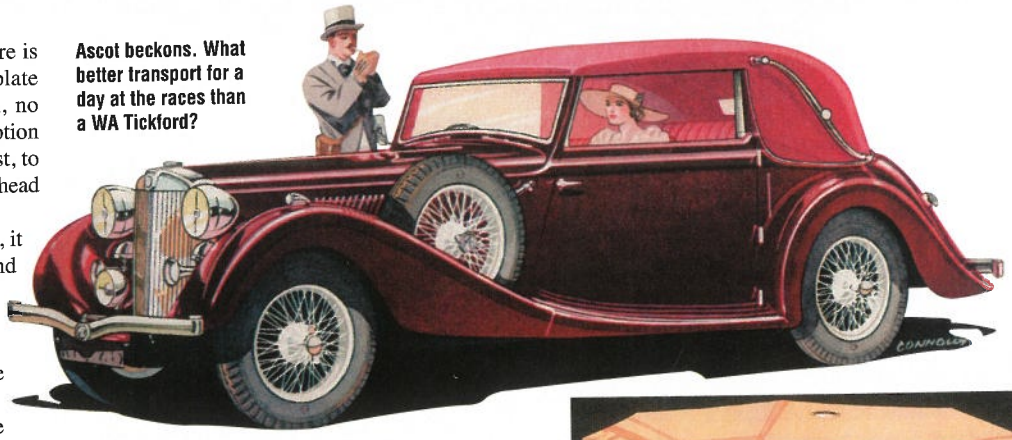
Whilst it was clearly derived from the SA, it differed from it both stylistically and mechanically in some notable respects. Outwardly the familiar MG radiator was perpetuated, although it was now mildly V-shaped and came with a matching bumper. The body was, to quote *The Autocar*, 'broader and more capacious than that of the Two-Litre model, and there is additional foot room.' The spare wheel now resided on the nearside, following the style of the SA tourer and MG's 1.5-litre VA saloon of 1937, its space in the tail now being taken up by a fitted tool kit, a feature SS had offered since 1934.

Beneath the bonnet, the six-cylinder engine was essentially carried over, but with some significant refinements. Now of 2561cc, achieved by increasing the bore to 73mm, the six's compression ratio was raised to 7.25 to one, high for the day, which helped it to develop 103bhp, or about the same as the comparable SS Jaguar. The RAC rating rose to 19.82hp and tax to £15. The twin exhaust manifolds were now heavily ribbed for cooling. Less outwardly apparent was the new crankshaft, which now incorporated integral balance weights, the first occasion that an MG had been so enhanced. The circulating oil was water-cooled, passing through copper pipes. A Borg and Beck clutch replaced the SA's cork one, while the gearbox possessed synchromesh on second, third and top gears. The propshaft was now divided. To accommodate the wider body, the track was 3.5in

The WA's engine with its distinctive ribbed exhaust manifold. It is depicted on the front cover of *The Autocar* of 4th November, 1938



Ascot beckons. What better transport for a day at the races than a WA Tickford?



greater at the rear than at the front, a differential that had to be remembered during cornering. Brakes were uprated with 14in drums and a tandem layout was adopted.

The WA's interior was similarly related to the SA's, but changes included a new instrument panel, complete with octagonal dials – here, the hand of Cecil Kimber is immediately apparent. He was also responsible for a so-called dress guard on the rear door, which overlapped part of the adjoining wing and was intended to protect ladies' dresses on entering and leaving the car on wet days.

Prices were rather higher than the SA's. The saloon retailed at £442, with the drophead coupé, now complete with a strengthening steel underframe, costing £468, while the open four seater sold for £450.

When *The Sports Car*, MG's in-house magazine, tested the 2.6-litre it reported that: 'Filtering through London traffic on a wet night after a theatre party, one appreciated enormously the manner in which the high performance engine has been made lady-like at low speed...If you feel disposed you can sneak about the London streets in top gear, using the lower ratios only for getting away from standstill.' But out of town: 'On a level stretch of tarmac road, runs in both directions over a quarter-mile against the stop watch showed a mean top speed of 91mph.' And the magazine found that the WA was 'steadier than the Two-Litre when burning up a by-pass (sic)'. In truth the model's true potential was never realised, because it was only manufactured for 11 months, production ceasing in September, 1939, following the outbreak of the war. Only 370 cars had been built.

So did Kimber manage to 'out-Jaguar Jaguar', as he intended? In purely numerical terms the answer is no. A total of 3109 examples of the SA/WA line were built, which compared with 6759 SS 2.5/3.5 Jaguars produced over the same period. So, if sales figures are any guide, Leonard Lord's hoped-for 5000 cars per annum did not materialise. MG's best pre-war year was 1937, when 2845 cars were sold. Of these, 1517 were TAs, compared with 1322 VA/SAs, although in



The WA's interior perpetuated its SA predecessor's roomy, comfortable accommodation

the following year the figures were dramatically reversed, the saloons accounting for 1888 cars compared with a mere 609 Midgets.

The big difference between the two businesses was strategic. William Lyons was first and foremost a manufacturer of saloons. This was because they sold in larger quantities and were thus more profitable than sports cars. He therefore revived the 2.5/3.5-litre models after the war, but not the SS 100 open two-seater. They survived, in essence, until 1951.

By contrast, MG was essentially a producer of sports cars which also built saloons. The T Series Midget line was reactivated in 1945, but not the big 2.6. One of the factors in its demise was that, in 1938, Morris had acquired Riley and a revived WA would have clashed with the new 2.5-litre RMB. And when MG did re-introduce a saloon, the Y-type of 1947, it was of a mere 1.25-litre capacity. It was back to 1935 again...

I much appreciate the assistance of Gary Perry and Peter Pimm, Chairman and Librarian respectively of the MG Car Club's SVW Register, and their supply of illustrations. The Register's website is www.svwregister.co.uk The MGCC's address is Kimber House, PO Box 251, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 1FF. The MG Owners' Club of Octagon House, 1 Over Road, Swavesey, Cambridgeshire CB4 5QZ, similarly caters for these cars. In addition to the aforementioned MG Saloons, *acknowledgment is also due to* The Magic of the Marque *by Mike Allison.*

The 1935 drawing by James Wignall, chief stylist of Mulliners of Birmingham, for an MG sports saloon. The design was adopted for the SA

