

BMC (Australia)



‘Context is everything!’ – a much used phrase but a most important one. If one is aware of the context, it is much easier to understand the actions of people and corporations and the reasoning behind many of their decisions. I believe this is the case when looking at the MGB. Many of the questions such as ‘What were they thinking?’; ‘why did they do it that way?’ can be answered if we understand the environment and thinking at the time these vehicles were made. They also give one a much better perspective about what the car is, what it was expected to achieve, and what it meant to the buying public at the time.

The MGB was a product of post WW II industrial Britain. After nearly a decade of devoting people and physical resources to the ‘war effort’, the British (and much of the western world) were thrust into a rebuilding phase. The whole industrial effort was now able to pick up where it had left off almost ten years ago and concentrate on making both the country, and therefore its people,

prosperous again. Such a massive rebuilding program was costly. Countries were looking for the quickest way to take the now outdated technology and to continue producing goods and services as quickly and efficiently as possible.

The USA, not having been involved to the extent of Britain initially (the country was not attacked to the extent that Britain was), had the advantage of progressing with their car development during this period. Where the USA had embraced the ever developing technology of mass production, Britain was forced (due to reasons previously mentioned) to produce vehicles, using much outdated technology, but still needing to compete in a world market. Whilst in most cases this was done to a high standard, nevertheless they were coming from the 'back of the pack', consequently striving for similar quality and quantity, but with diminishing returns. Having said all that, there was still a desire for the British product, based on a mixture of style, quality and perhaps nostalgia.

NB: It is said that much of the marque's popularity in the USA was due to ex-servicemen, stationed in Britain during the war, wanting the cars they had been exposed to during this time.

Australia, who had partnered Great Britain throughout the war, was in a similar situation and needing to provide, not only for returning service men and women, but to meet an aggressive campaign by the governments of the day to expand the industrial base of Australia, through a concerted effort to attract migrants from around the world to share in its promised wealth. A much touted phrase by the Australian government was 'produce or perish'.

The Company

Most people, here and overseas, were (and remain) quite unaware of just how large a venture BMC (Australia) was. The factory, on a 57 acre site, was equipped with its own foundry facilities, panel pressing facilities, trim and paint shops and research laboratories. It possessed the largest presses at the time in the Southern hemisphere. Many of the engines, transmissions, axles and vehicle body panels were all cast, pressed and assembled locally. At one stage, BMC was producing a car every 4 minutes.

There were 'feeder' companies (eg Joseph Lucas, Smith's, James N Kirby, Champion Spark Plug Company and Olympic Tyre and Rubber Company) which took up the remaining land of the 115 acre site and established local factories to support BMC as well as other producers in Australia). As a result, a number of unique vehicles for the Australian market were constructed here. (The original

prototype MGC, incidentally, used an Australian 2.4 litre 6-cylinder engine based on '1.5' 1622cc 'B' series engines.)

NB: Despite BMC (Australia)'s significant local facilities, in the case of Australian assembled MG cars, most of the mechanical components and body panels were imported from the UK.



Figure 1 Aerial view of site (photo: J. Lindsay)

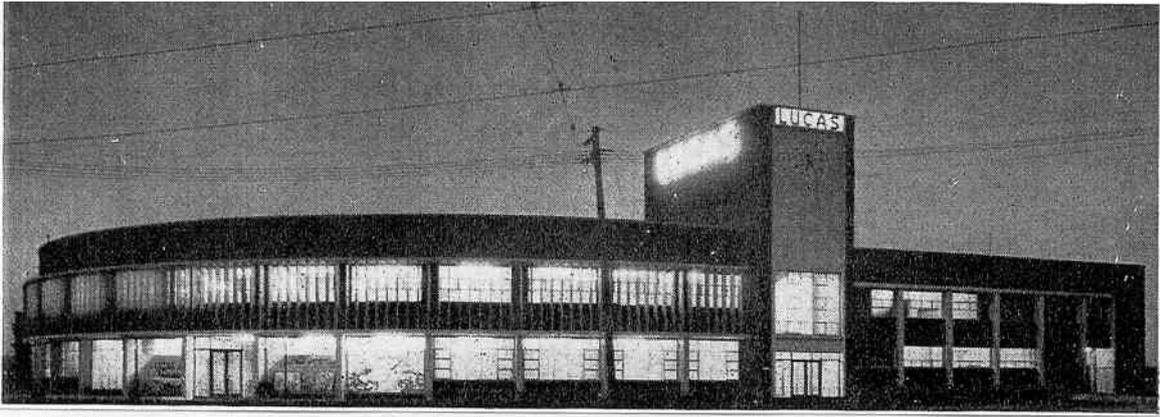


Figure 2 Feeder Companies onsite (photo: BMLHG)



Figure 3 Some of the Presses (photo: J Lindsay)



Figure 4 Unit Plant (photo: BMCLHG)

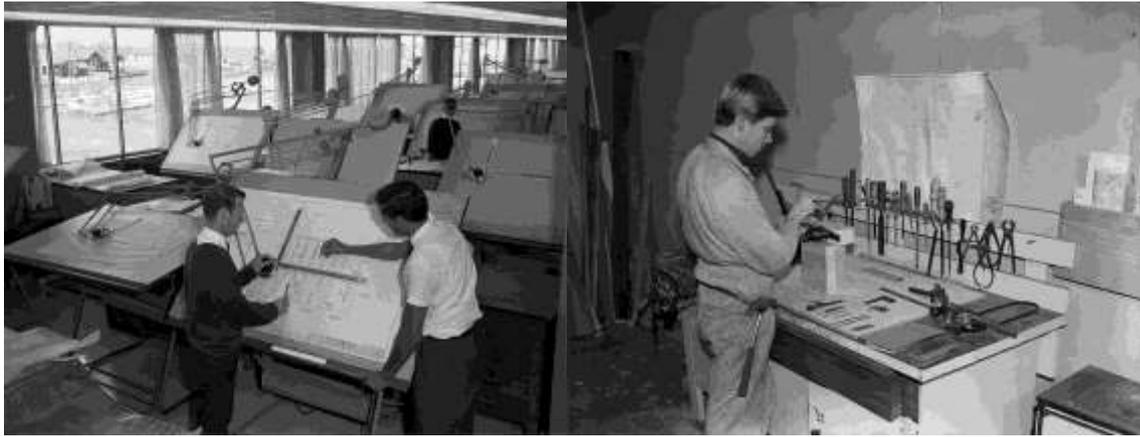


Figure 5 Drawing Office - Planning (photo: J. Lindsay) Figure 6 Experimental (photo: BMCLHG)



Figure 7 Laboratory (photo: J. Lindsay)



Figure 8 Conveyor Control Room (photo: J Lindsay)

The company employed 50 000 staff over its short life (1950 – 1975); 5 000 -7 000 at any one time. It was regarded as the largest private employer in the Sydney area. The workforce was made up largely of migrant workers. This presented unique challenges for management. Thirty five different languages were spoken at the location (in many cases, hand signals were the only form of communication). The company even offered English classes to help assimilate the workers more quickly.



Figure 9 Apprentices (photo: BMCLHG)



Figure 10 Apprentice marching practice (photo: BMCLHG)



Figure 11 BMC Youth Orchestra (photo: BMCLHG)

A brief history of the site:

Originally, the location was a swamp. In 1908 it was turned into a racetrack. Thirty nine years later, on one of his many trips here, Lord Nuffield (the founder of Morris Motors Ltd) had noticed the Victoria Park racecourse was for sale. He advised his company to purchase the site for car manufacturing, but when they voted against such a move, Sir William Morris purchased it himself (ironically to be sold back to his company for a sizeable profit a year later). In 1949, development of the site was approved and in 1950 car production commenced at Zetland (also referred to as 'Waterloo' and 'Victoria Park').

Physical layout of the location

Of the 115 acres the site occupied, Nuffield Australia (later to become BMC Australia and Leyland Australia) took up possession of 57 acres of the site, with the following being subdivided and sold to 'feeder' companies such as: Champion Spark Plug Company, James N Kirby, Joseph Lucas and Olympic Tyre & Rubber Company.

The buildings

Some of the buildings housed on the 57 acres were:

CKD Plant

Unit Plant, where engines, gearboxes, rear axles and suspensions were manufactured.

Press Shop, where body panels were pressed and body shells assembled.

Car Assembly Building (CAB), where painting and assembly of vehicles occurred.

Spare Parts warehouse.

Personnel Office.

Employee Amenities Building.

Garage.

The site was a self-sustainable location for the manufacture of motor vehicles.



Figure 12 ADVERTISEMENT 1970