

Cover up Down Under

By Thomas Aczel

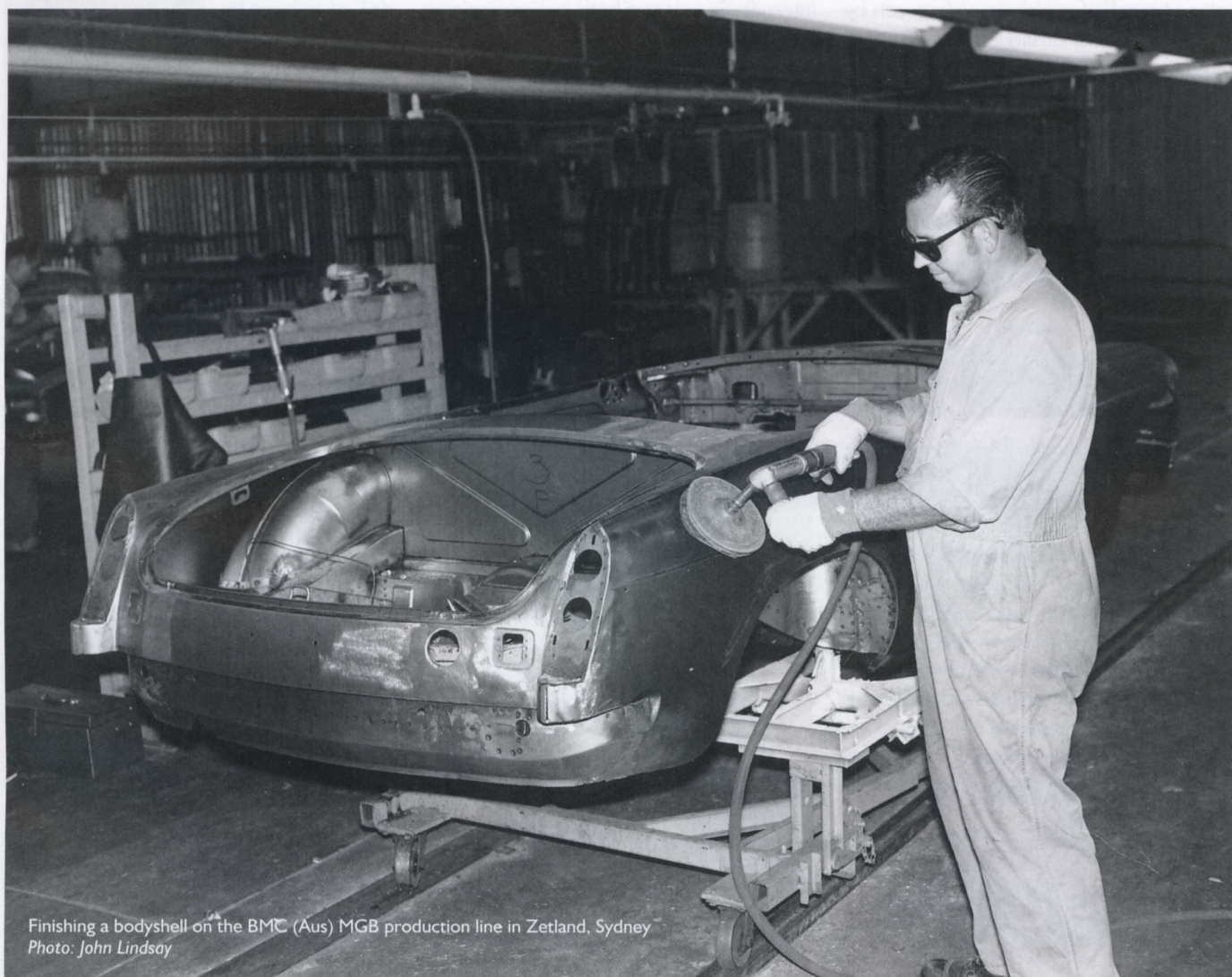
MGB owners in the UK are familiar with the hardtops that were available for the B during its production life. What is not commonly known in the UK is that there was a thriving independent business producing hardtops in Australia for the MGB's that were produced locally in Zetland, Sydney. Thomas Aczel, an Australian and owner of an MGA and B, has pieced together the story of the hardtop manufacturers and their products. His findings are told here.

Background of the Australian automobile industry

Following the Second World War, the Australian Government embarked on a programme to develop a local manufacturing base. Hefty import duties were placed on imported manufactured goods, often of the order of 80%. In the case of motor vehicles, considerable tariff reductions were applied where a specified and significant local content was achieved. For this reason, many large international motor vehicle manufacturers established

local Australian manufacturing facilities. Over the years, local outposts were established by BMC, General Motors, Ford, Chrysler, Toyota, Nissan and Mitsubishi and others. A large component supply industry grew up to support these local manufacturers.

In the case of MG, it proved cost-effective for BMC to locally assemble the MGA and thereafter the MGB, as by achieving a 45% local content a considerably lower tariff was applicable. This was achieved by using local tyre, trim, electrical



Finishing a bodyshell on the BMC (Aus) MGB production line in Zetland, Sydney
Photo: John Lindsay

component and paint suppliers, in addition to the labour cost component afforded by local assembly. CKD ('completely knocked down') kits were dispatched from the UK for local assembly. The MGB actually had no connection with the Abingdon MG factory itself, with components being supplied by 'Pressed Steel', BMC 'Tractors and Transmissions Branch' etc. Ultimately, approximately 10,000 MGBs were built in Australia between 1963 and 1972.

Australian Hardtop Manufacturers

Despite Australia's relatively benign climate, with local assembly of MGs (A, B, Midget), Triumph TR4s and Spitfires, in addition to fully imported Datsun Fairlady's and Honda S600/S800s, the local sports car market was large enough to support its own aftermarket hardtop supply businesses. These included 'International Body Styling' and 'Peter Manton Motors' in Melbourne. The most prolific by far of these however was 'J & S' based in the western Sydney suburb of Ashfield.

J & S was established in 1956 by John Jennens and Jeff Simmonds. Initially building complete sports cars with bought in mechanical components, the 'green monster' was quickly shelved to be replaced by the 'Buchanan' sports car. (Design: Nat Buchanan.)

Thereafter followed another complete car, again available in kit-form, the 'Hunter' sports car, designed by Len Moya, who had meanwhile joined the J & S concern. The Hunter however was not a great success, with only 14 completed before the project ended by 1961.



MGB Fastback by International Styling



Elaborate interior finish on J & S detachable hardtop. (Interior light not originally fitted.)



Hunter sports car, designed by Len Moya



J & S Semi-Fastback model



Buchanan; built on MGA chassis and mechanical components

1961 also brought with it a severe 'credit squeeze' (these days termed a 'recession') which nearly drove J & S to the wall. The manufacture of fibreglass industrial tanks kept things ticking over however till the national financial situation began to ease, and J & S looked for new automobile ventures to explore. They acquired the body moulds for the Buchanan Cobra sports car from 'Pressed Metal' (who coincidentally assembled the MGA and thereafter the Mk1 MGBs in the Sydney suburb of Enfield).

It became clear however that the manufacture of complete motor cars and



Probably the most commonly seen detachable J & S variant



THE NEW J & S GTB CONVERSION Complete INC. TAX \$390

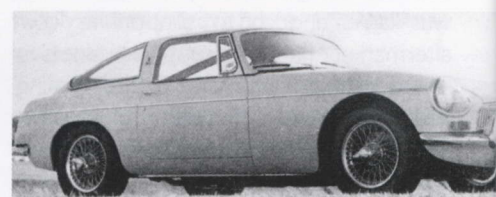
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J & S GTB

related kits was not the solution to J & S's survival. The introduction of the locally assembled MGB in 1963 however brought with it the realisation of the potential for after-market sports car hard tops, and J & S set out to fill this niche with great success.

The first of these tops were styled by Len Moya and the style continually evolved on a trial and error basis, in full size (never on the drawing board).

Fixed Hardtops

With the MGB GT never locally assembled, there was a marketing opportunity for after-market fixed hardtops in Australia. A gifted stylist from Melbourne, Anthony Pusteria, had already had two of his designs produced. The first was sold by Peter Manton Motors in Melbourne, as the 'MGB Gran Turismo'. The second was supplied direct from Pusteria's company, International Styling.

Tony Pusteria, having accepted a position with Chrysler in Detroit in 'Styling', sold his business, International Styling and, under the new owners, the hardtop was remodelled with a Kamm tail and the opening rear hatch was eliminated, necessitating luggage access through the cabin. This revised design was marketed across Australia as the 'MGB Fastback' by International Body Styling.

The finish on J & S hardtops was always far more elaborate than that offered on most alternative hardtop producers'

The Pirelli Cinturato fitted to the test car seemed to increase the understeer.



J & S detachable hardtop, circa 1964

products, with a car-style interior lining suspended on metal bows as was normal practice in large volume production sedans. In the case of the GTB, proper 'flow-through' arrangements were also included.

Detachable J & S Hardtops

The majority of J & S production and sales however always remained the detachable style of hardtop, in particular for the MGB, which was by far the commonest sports car on Australian roads. Despite Australia's mild climate, the fitting of such a top became very popular, probably due to the stylish lines of the J & S products; in today's terminology, they were simply 'cool'. A number of different styles of detachable

HARDTOPS by J. & S. Fibreglass (Sales) P/L

- The G.T.B. Hardtop
- The M.G.B. Semi-Fastback
- The M.G.B. Deluxe
- M.G.A. 1500 and 1600
- Austin Healey Sprite MK1, MK1 G.T., MK2 and MK3
- Triumph TR2, TR3, TR4 and Spitfire
- Datsun Fairlady
- Honda

J. & S. FIBREGLASS (Sales)
Pty. Ltd.,
530 Parramatta Road, Ashfield,
N.S.W. Phone, 71-5258.



hardtops for the MGB were produced, with at times, up to three different styles of detachable styles available at any one time.

The End

In 1972, the Australian Federal Government announced that the structure of import duties applying to motor vehicles was to be varied, necessitating a larger domestic input for a favourable import duty. Sales of MGBs, MG Midgets, and sports cars generally were falling at this time as local tastes shifted more towards high-powered, locally produced sedans such as the Holden Torana GTR and XU1, the Ford Falcon GT

and the Valiant Charger. (These were the Australian home-grown equivalent to the North-American 'Muscle Car'.) As a result, with dwindling sales of MGs, altering import duty concessions and the need to free up production space for the imminent Leyland P76 (ultimately a sales disaster), the decision was taken by Leyland Australia to cease local MG production and to not bother with importation of sports cars. Consequently, J & S's market progressively disappeared. The company tried to produce alternative products, including a quite successful 'dune buggy', but the end finally came when J & S went into voluntary liquidation in 1980.

MG Car Club Midland Centre

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Evening Dinner and disco

Sunday: Optional ride on Welsh Highland Railway from nearby Porthmadog, or, chill out with a walk on the beach, followed by Sunday lunch

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For more information contact the Midland Centre website www.mgcars.org.uk/mgccmidlandcentre or call Andy Robson: 0121 453 1595