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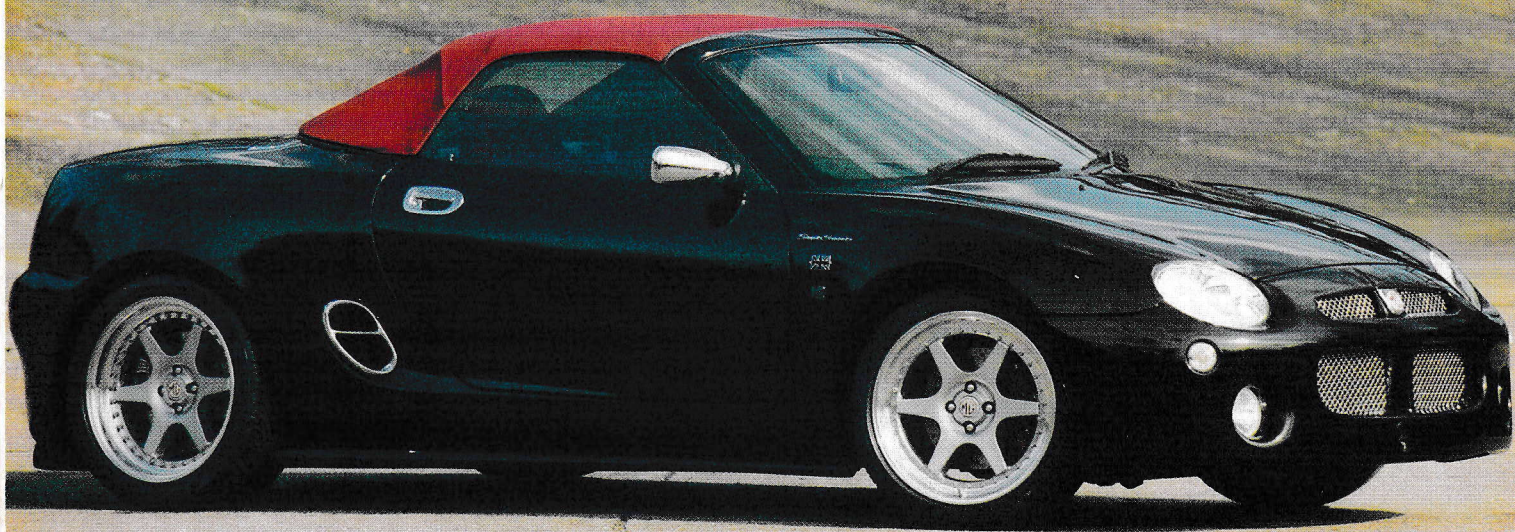
**MGF Super
Sports
take two**

Will this car go into production?



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Geneva convention



MG unveiled a new version of the MGF Super Sports concept car (above) at this year's Geneva Motor Show. Our man David Knowles was there to see the stunning car and talk to key people involved with the project

Visitors to the MG stand at this year's Geneva Motor Show might have been forgiven for experiencing a slight sense of déjà vu.

Last year, onlookers were stunned by the MGF Super Sports concept car. This was based on the MGF, but boasted muscular flared wings, a supercharged engine, racing screen and outrageous trimmings.

We were told at the time by designers Gerry McGovern and Dave Woodhouse that the intention was to make a statement and spark discussion. They said that the company wanted to hear our views, and that a favourable reaction could lead to the project evolving further.

During the months which followed, the Super Sports appeared at a number of events, and enthusiasts had a chance to see the car and to voice their opinions. It was something of an open secret that further developments of the MGF were being worked on; including a supercharged version and a six-speed Tiptronic-style automatic gearbox. Many people quite logically assumed that the Super

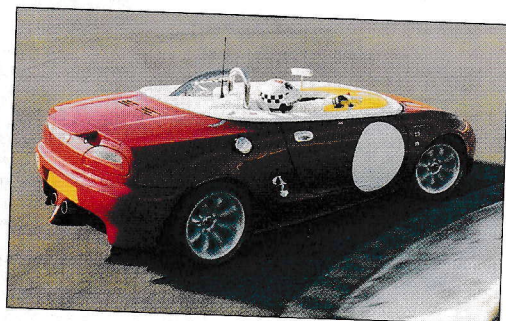
Sports was a prelude to a whole host of improvements to the 'F' which they might have seen later in 1998.

In the event, however, the MGF facelift – which is still very much on the cards – has been delayed by a number of factors. First, the demand for the cars was depressed by the parlous state of the far-eastern market, and so production output had to be reduced. Second, the future of the plant where the 'F' is built has been the subject of some painfully public debate, and thus every programme at Rover has been the subject of reviews and realignments. Add to this the fact that the MGF is now built in a different part of the Longbridge plant, and is consequently subject to the various deliberate production breaks in Rover 200 and 400 production, and it may be seen that changes to the car have not come as soon as we expected.

Back to Geneva, though. This year, the Super Sports made a reappearance in a more conventional guise. The more extreme and impractical features of the 1998 version have been banished to the toolbox, and the result is a mean and purposeful road-eater. Julian Quincey – part of the team which designed the original 'F' – was responsible for bringing the latest car to fruition.

Such is the speed at which information

This year's MGF Super Sports concept (top) is clearly much closer to a production car than last year's wild interpretation (left).



Upex's perspective

At Geneva, Geoff Upex (right) – Rover Group's Director of Design – spoke to David Knowles about the reason for showing the MGF Super Sports a second time and expounded some thoughts on how the MG marque might develop in due course.

Geoff Upex: Last year we showed the 'extreme' version of the Super Sports, which was really a styling statement of intent. This new version is much more feasible as a road car; it has the same 200PS supercharged engine, but the windscreen and interior are more conventional. It retains the blown wheelarches of the earlier car, so there is still a very tough look to it.

David Knowles: Are we likely to see any of these features making it into production?

GU: That's very likely. We hope to get a feel for people's reactions. Last year we had a good response, and so this year we hope to get a feel for what they think of the 'productionised' version.

DK: Personally, I like the nose with the circular driving lamps, although I am less sure of the tiny round indicators.

GU: They are a little wacky aren't they? Whether we would do them exactly like that is a moot point.

DK: So what is the next stage likely to be?

GU: We'd really like to do it, but we have to be

flows nowadays, that barely hours after the Super Sports was announced, details of it were being debated on the internet. Views were straight from the hip, but were nevertheless received with interest when passed to Rover design staff at the show.

Unfortunately, Julian Quincey himself was not on hand at Geneva, but we speak to Rover's Design Director Geoff Upex (see below) and Dave Saddington, Studio Director for MG and Mini and responsible for overseeing the revised Super Sports. "We are getting closer to a feasible car," Saddington confirmed, "but in developmental terms we still haven't committed to production." He also pointed out that the Super Sports on show was a hand-built prototype and public reaction would influence whether or not the car went into production.

Also on hand at Geneva was Rover Engineering Director Nick Stephenson (see next page) and one of his engineers Chris Lee,

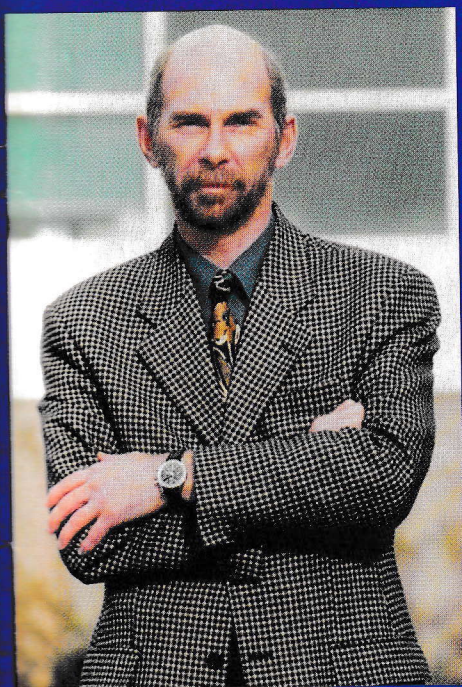
whose title is Product Development Director – MG & Mini. Lee confirmed that the new Mini was going well. "We've got through the first prototype phase very well, and are about to move onto the second prototype test phase." With decisions on the future of Longbridge in flux – making a change of plans even at this stage a real possibility – Lee pointed out that through the simple necessity of having to work within some parameters, and alongside a production team, all work on the new Mini to date had naturally assumed that it would be built at Longbridge.

We asked Chris Lee what the significance was of placing both MG and Mini in his care. "Originally, my patch was called Small and Sports Cars," he explained. "The idea was to put together the two niche brands and make the best use of our time and manpower. It doesn't imply that we are going to put the two together on the same platform; it is more for operational convenience and efficiency".

Turning to the Super Sports, Lee was keen to stress that the car is not just a mock-up, but a fully functional working prototype. "We've driven it in anger, and it uses the 1.8 litre K-Series engine supercharged to give over 200PS. The gearbox is upgraded to cope with the higher output. The sequential gearbox is something for the near future."

Lee has a close eye on the opposition. "The Toyota MR-S is going to be a natural competitor; the whole sector that MG sits in is moving on and up." But would the Super Sports sit separately above the MGF range, or be integrated with it? "That is the \$64,000 question," Lee admits. "Do we leave Super Sports as a range-topper or do we take the technology out and put it into the base car, with this supercharged version at the top? There is a lot more work to do before we can really answer that question."

There have been many stories in the press suggesting the demise of the VVC engine,



in meeting US requirements than the standard MGF. We didn't design the 'F for America, and therefore this car won't go there. Looking to the future, we are unlikely to design another MG which is not North American Standards capable.

DK: At the moment, you have Mini and MG lumped together under the same departmental heads.

GU: That is more administrative than anything else.

DK: An onlooker could interpret from this that, while we know that Mini is very important, it could be that MG is simply tucked in alongside just because it has to be placed somewhere.

GU: Not really, it is just an administrative move, and doesn't diminish the importance of MG. I guess that if I went into the design studio and I said 'who wants to transfer to work on the new MG?' everyone would put their hands up.

DK: Is there anything you can tell us of the more distant future for MG?

GU: I can't be too specific, but I will say that if it hadn't been for a great deal of hard work, clever thinking and risk taking, the MGF would never have come about. The next car will happen under a very different regime, and so will be tackled in a different way. There is no doubt, for example, that it will have to go through a BMW-type process from all sorts of viewpoints which is extremely thorough in quality terms.

DK: How do you think that BMW sees MG in the scheme of things - especially since it has its own sports car line?

GU: I can't answer the question for them, but if I were them – and this is just my view – I'd

suggest that the BMW sports car line should be pushed upmarket, becoming a six-cylinder or V8 car, with MG slotting in below, maybe as a four cylinder. The other thing to bear in mind is that BMW needs to rationalise the number of platforms in use. I am not going to say we are going to use the same platform as the BMW Z3 for the next MG, but that sort of thing is part of the debate.

We will never do a car quite like the MGF again, for the whole situation has changed, and you could argue that if we hadn't been a front-wheel-drive company at the time, we might never have done a mid-engined sports car. We wanted rear-wheel-drive and we had to use the components which were available to us. Now we are no longer under that same constraint.

DK: What of the Riley project, seen as one of former BMW Chairman Bernd Pischetsrieder's personal babies?

GU: We have looked at Riley, but I can neither confirm nor deny that you will see anything with a Riley badge on it. One thing I will say, though, is that if we do a Riley, it will have to be credible as a Riley.

DK: What about rumours that the Rover 75 might be badged as an MG for the US market?

GU: They're absolutely wrong. It would be crazy to stick an MG badge onto the Rover 75; a complete and utter misunderstanding of what you should do with a badge. The 75 has specific Rover characteristics, and MG has a completely different set of characteristics. The problem in putting the Rover 75 into America is that there isn't a dealer network at present. We wouldn't want to sell it through Land Rover dealerships because these are specifically four-wheel-drive off-road centres. And we wouldn't go back with just one car; we did that with the Sterling, and it didn't work. But we certainly won't be badging the Rover 75 as an MG.

convinced that it is a sensible business proposition.

DK: This car suggests that both BMW and Rover are still committed to MG. Surely this is a clear signal that MG is still very much alive and well?

GU: It certainly is! We would be crazy to do anything else with such a strong brand other than exploit it sensibly.

DK: Presumably if the Super Sports gets the go-ahead, it will be confined to existing MG markets?

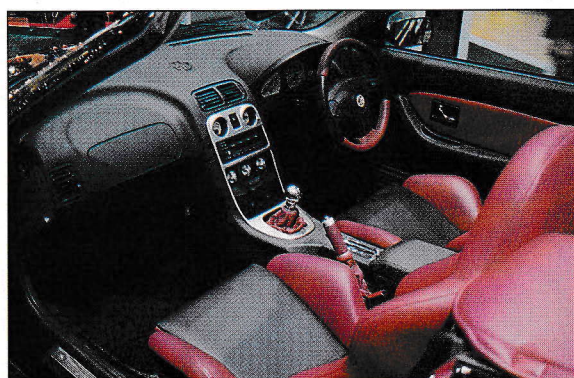
GU: Most probably.

DK: So there is still no likelihood of US sales?

GU: No, there is no more capability of this car

citing supposed difficulties in getting it through imminent EEC emissions legislation. Chris Lee was keen to put these into perspective. "We are working hard to find a way of getting both the 1.8 base engine and the VVC through the emissions programme. If we don't do that, we still have to think about what we will put in the car for a top-of-the-range version; although we would still look at a supercharged version as an extension to the range, rather than a substitute for the VVC."

Chris Lee offers little hope to North American MG enthusiasts of seeing a version of the 'F'. "We have looked at it in the past," he confirmed, "but it would be a very expensive piece of work, and I have to say that the decisions taken so far have been against it. However, if you open up the time horizons, and talk about MG in a more strategic basis, then the relaunch of MG in the USA is absolutely dead-centre. In fact, it is now almost impossible to conceive of an MG product strategy that doesn't include the US market. The MGF was a result of very clever thinking and innovative investment and cost arrangements, and to have made the car US-legal would have added a lot more expense to the programme; probably to the point where it might not have got the go-ahead. But from now on, in the strategic framework, sports cars and the US market have to go together." **MGW**

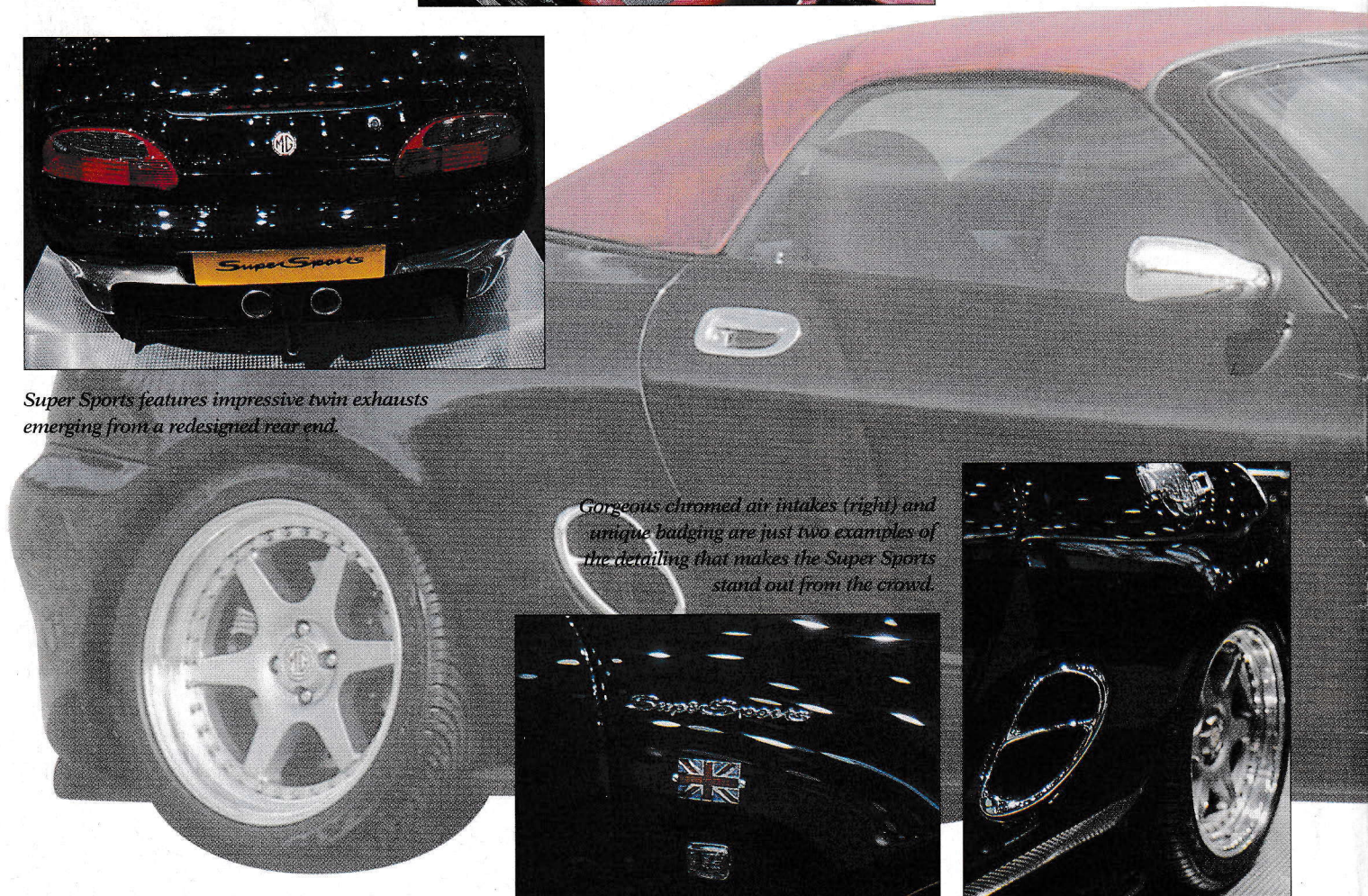


Super Sports interior (left) features unique trim and body-hugging Recaro seats trimmed in leather.

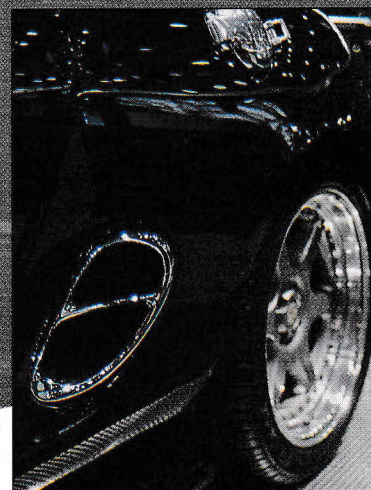
**"The relaunch of MG
in the USA is
absolutely dead centre**



Super Sports features impressive twin exhausts emerging from a redesigned rear end.



Gorgeous chromed air intakes (right) and unique badging are just two examples of the detailing that makes the Super Sports stand out from the crowd.



Stephenson's rocket

At the time of the Geneva show, Rover's Engineering and Design Director was the affable Nick Stephenson (right), who spearheaded the return of MG to the Bonneville Salt Flats. Sadly, though, in light of the recent changes within Rover Group's senior management, Stephenson has since resigned from his post (see *News*, pages 8 to 11), so this exclusive interview with David Knowles was probably the last he made as a Rover ambassador.

David Knowles: What do you hope the future of this Super Sports will be?

Nick Stephenson: We are keen to hear reactions to the car, but we also have to consider this against the backdrop of the whole set of Rover Group priorities, and we are very focused on getting our priorities right for the group as a whole. There are some very important discussions going on at present surrounding our small and medium cars. Within all that, we have to consider whether we still have time for the Super Sports as a sensible business proposition.

DK: You showed us a car not dissimilar to this one last year, and asked for

reactions. Now you have shown a modified version this year, so are you really any closer to a decision?

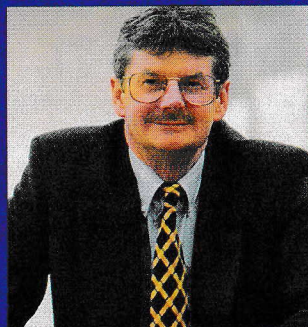
NS: Clearly we are – this is obviously a more feasible version. But we don't want to mislead people into thinking that we have made up our minds.

DK: Historically, a recurrent problem for MG was that the needs of MG were often subsumed to the greater needs of the parent company, particularly when the latter was in difficulty.

NS: I understand the point you're making! Clearly we must have business reality, but we are not going to let MG go off the boil. The reintroduction of the brand has been enormously successful, so why would we now take a step backwards? Even if the Super Sports were to remain a concept car, it is still a very clear demonstration that we are serious about MG's future.

DK: What reaction have you had from BMW?

NS: They are very serious about MG. If we go back to the takeover – when BMW was surprised to find that we both had new sports cars ready for production – there was concern



as to whether there would be room for both. History concluded that there was, and both the MGF and Z3 have been a success. So BMW is not going to change its view about the need for MG!

DK: Last year, here at Geneva, you told me of your philosophy for Rover within BMW of 'independence with integration'. Does that still hold true?

NS: Yes, there will be changes, though, with more integration, and I will probably be spending more time at Munich.

DK: The 'New Generation' engine project is presumably a good example of Rover and BMW engineers working together?

NS: That has been tremendous; we work very closely together already, and more integration should not be regarded as threatening, but as a very logical step. We have a number of joint projects, of which the New Generation engine is a good example.

DK: Last year at Geneva I compared the BMW-Rover relationship with the VW-Audi one; has the picture changed?

NS: At their heart, VW and Audi certainly have very close integration, but again they have a degree of independence, without which you lose brand identity. The trick is to get the level just right.

Deeper front section with chromed air intakes add a menacing appearance to the Super Sports' snout.

