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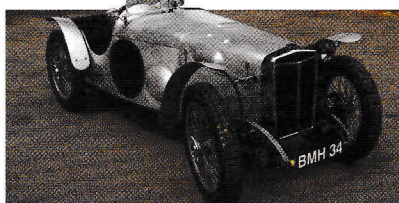
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## MGF SUPER SPORT 2

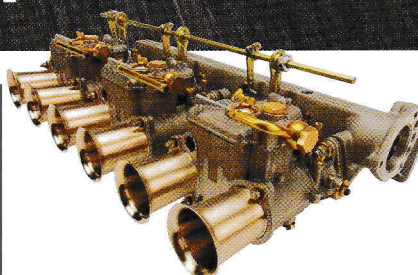
First test of the 1998 prototype that rocked BMW



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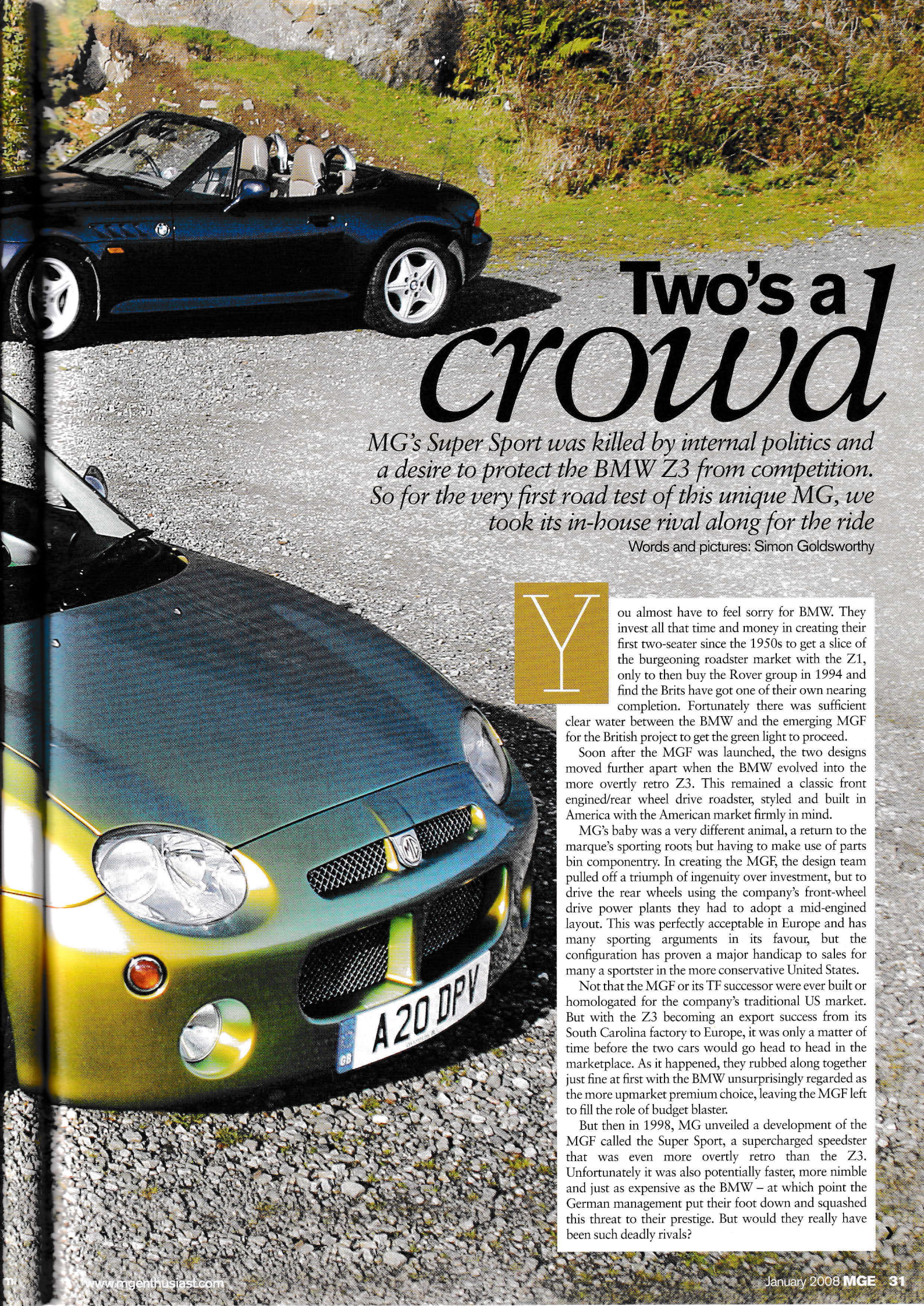


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# Two's a crowd

*MG's Super Sport was killed by internal politics and a desire to protect the BMW Z3 from competition. So for the very first road test of this unique MG, we took its in-house rival along for the ride*

Words and pictures: Simon Goldsworthy

Y

ou almost have to feel sorry for BMW. They invest all that time and money in creating their first two-seater since the 1950s to get a slice of the burgeoning roadster market with the Z1, only to then buy the Rover group in 1994 and find the Brits have got one of their own nearing completion. Fortunately there was sufficient

clear water between the BMW and the emerging MGF for the British project to get the green light to proceed.

Soon after the MGF was launched, the two designs moved further apart when the BMW evolved into the more overtly retro Z3. This remained a classic front engine/rear wheel drive roadster, styled and built in America with the American market firmly in mind.

MG's baby was a very different animal, a return to the marque's sporting roots but having to make use of parts bin componentry. In creating the MGF, the design team pulled off a triumph of ingenuity over investment, but to drive the rear wheels using the company's front-wheel drive power plants they had to adopt a mid-engined layout. This was perfectly acceptable in Europe and has many sporting arguments in its favour, but the configuration has proven a major handicap to sales for many a sportster in the more conservative United States.

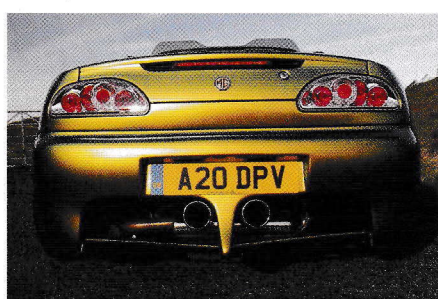
Not that the MGF or its TF successor were ever built or homologated for the company's traditional US market. But with the Z3 becoming an export success from its South Carolina factory to Europe, it was only a matter of time before the two cars would go head to head in the marketplace. As it happened, they rubbed along together just fine at first with the BMW unsurprisingly regarded as the more upmarket premium choice, leaving the MGF left to fill the role of budget blaster.

But then in 1998, MG unveiled a development of the MGF called the Super Sport, a supercharged speedster that was even more overtly retro than the Z3. Unfortunately it was also potentially faster, more nimble and just as expensive as the BMW – at which point the German management put their foot down and squashed this threat to their prestige. But would they really have been such deadly rivals?





"The Super Sport simply motors on round corners as fast as your courage will allow"



## MGF Super Sport 2

MG's Super Sport project first broke cover with a concept car at the Geneva Motor Show in 1998. This was a red speedster that managed to look both futuristic and retro at the same time, but as our feature on that vehicle back in the June 2006 issue explained, it was actually far more about show than go because while it looked fantastic, the car was too impractical to be a viable proposition on the road.

All of that changed the following year, when MG returned to Geneva with a development that looked much more of a production possibility. It retained the original Super Sport's more muscular flanks and much of the mechanical specification, but combined this with a more conventional interior, a standard screen instead of the earlier car's Perspex

deflector and a fully functioning hood. Finished in metallic black with a red leather interior, the Super Sport 2 may have lacked the original's dramatic impact, but with a promised 200Ps from a Janspeed-developed supercharged VVC engine and an MGF Cup-derived suspension, it was still more than enough to get the enthusiasts' juices flowing. Mind you, the estimated £10,000 premium over a standard MGF (a price hike of up to 30% over a standard car) may have cooled many an ardour.

The following year, the Super Sport 2 was given a makeover before being shipped over to Japan for the Tokyo Motor Show and its black paint gave way to an eye-catching Chromaflair treatment that saw it changing from gold to yellow to green, depending upon which angle you viewed it from. The interior was also re-trimmed, with green leather replacing the earlier red to better match the paint.

But these were troubled times for MG-Rover. BMW was busy cherry-picking the best parts to ensure it got the maximum return from its investment, as well as squashing potential competition from those parts of the company that were to be sold. By the time the Phoenix Consortium took over MG-Rover in 2000, the Super Sport project had been squashed and the once-glamorous show car pushed into a corner and allowed to decline. Even its supercharged

engine was unceremoniously hoiked, put on a test bed for development and then mysteriously disappeared one night without trace.

So it was in a rather sorry state that the Super Sport 2 ended up with its first private owner, Darren Vaughan, in 2006. Now fitted with a standard VVC engine, the car had been sold by the official receivers to specialist historic, sports and racing car dealer, Oakfields of Hampshire. Before having it shipped to his home in Wales, Darren got Oakfields to rectify some of the problems that time and neglect had wrought. These included the paintwork of course, with each and every panel requiring rectification.

One total respray later and Darren was finally able to try out his new toy on the road. Once a problem had been resolved with the wrong size of tyre coming unseated from the 17in rims, it was straight down to Stoneleigh for a starring role at the *MG Show and Spares Day*. This was when Darren discovered that the exhaust was little more than a couple of pipes stuffed with wire wool – by the time he got home, he could hardly hear a thing. So he had one custom-made to look the same with the silencer sitting well back under the car and two huge tailpipes the best part of a foot long exiting from the centre of the tail. Guess what? It was even louder.

Plan B involved getting a breakdown of exhaust options from that font of all MGF





**Left:** Swollen arches barely fit over the much-increased track.  
**Right:** Tai Pan induction kit is just visible in the narrow engine bay.  
**Below:** Grenadine green leather was fitted to match the Tokyo paint.



knowledge, Andy Phillips, even including a description of how each one would sound! Darren chose a Mike Satur performance exhaust complete with cat to stay both legal and tolerably quiet. He then had chrome finishers welded on to mimic the original, if not to copy it.

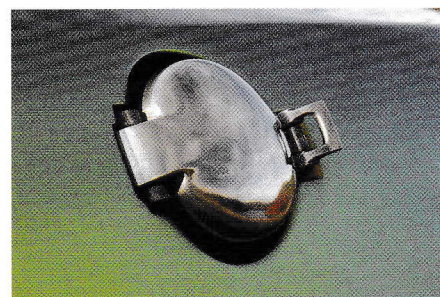
But then, it is hard to decide just what is original about this car and what is not. On some period shots you can see that the front discs were cross-drilled for example, but not on all. There were even rumours that the factory built two Super Sport 2s, not just the one. But that at least is one rumour that Darren can pretty much lay to rest – the boot of his car betrays the original black metallic paint on the inside. When he had it resprayed, Darren did consider reverting back to black, but that would have required a whole new interior as well. Besides, it was the flipshade paint that had made the car look so special when he first saw it, so it was the more eye-catching Tokyo version that he decided to stick with.

The engine is another problem area. As we have already mentioned, Janspeed built a supercharged 1.8 K-series putting out 200PS, but this has long since disappeared. The car currently sports a VVC unit, totally standard apart from the exhaust and a Tai Pan induction kit. To get the full flavour of what could have been, Darren will need to shell out the thick end of £6000 for Janspeed to recreate their blown

motor. If he does, you can be sure we'll be back for a rematch...

In the meantime, the VVC motor currently filling the engine bay is a perky lump that signals its approach long before the car itself swings into view. Just as well really because even though the exhaust note is rorty enough to get the hairs on the back of your neck tingling in anticipation, it is the visual impact that completely takes over your senses. The mid-engine layout naturally gives the MGF a cab-forward balance that is so peculiar to European sports cars of this configuration, but the widened arches only emphasise the proportions while also lending the F a more dramatic and curvaceous air. Combine this with a ride height lowered by 30mm and it changes the visual dynamics entirely. Quite simply, the Super Sport looks like it could hug any corner at any speed.

Inside the cabin, the Recaro seats trimmed in Grenadine leather are deep and narrow, but softly padded so that they grip well without ever becoming uncomfortable. The way they fill the cabin does mean the lid to the cubby between them won't open properly, but you don't buy an ex-show car to quibble about the functional details. Having said that, the car's exterior drama is largely hidden from view once you get behind the wheel, although a glance in the door mirror along the ever-changing flanks does give



a nice reminder. The drilled aluminium pedals and brushed aluminium heel mat hint at the sporting designs of the original and the exhaust – well, we've already introduced the glorious note it makes and we can't help holding onto the gears longer than is strictly necessary just to hear its staccato wail bounce off the buildings as we head out of town.

Those gears are allegedly part of an uprated close ratio box that was specially designed for the supercharged Super Sport, but the ratios are nicely suited to the normally-aspirated VVC unit too. This engine has enough torque to pull from 30mph in top, but the fun only starts as the revs rise and the engine spins rapidly up to the 6800 red line and beyond, all the way in fact to a rev limiter that cuts out the fun well inside the danger zone at 7250rpm. A supercharger would





**Left:** Six cylinders help to fill the BMW's long and graceful engine bay

**Right:** Lines are conventional, with US styling influence clear.

**Below:** Those roll hoops are for show – they lift up to reveal a cubby hole!



boost power across the rev range and provide masses of torque, but the VVC delivers its power so smoothly and progressively that it is easy to convince yourself the induction roar from the Tai Pan kit is actually a blower.

The steering is power assisted, which is just as well because at parking speeds, the lock on the Super Sport is poor. This is hardly surprising given that an increase in track from 1400mm to 1670mm at the front and from 1410mm to a massive 1725mm at the rear was achieved solely by fitting wider wheels with a massive offset. On the MGF XPower 500, the engineers cut and widened the subframe and this is how the Super Sport would have developed, had it not been prematurely canned. The Super Sport also came with the uprated suspension of the MGF Cup cars. This brought with it masses of negative camber, there to provide a better tyre attitude for the tread area during hard cornering with no regard to the wear effects. Darren has barely done 2000 miles on the road, and already been through to the wires on one rear tyre!

The tyre wear is worth it, though. With its lowered and stiffened suspension coupled with specially developed dampers, the Super Sport stays dead flat through the corners and simply motors on round as fast as your courage will allow. Until you get used to the feel, the stiff and low suspension can suggest a slight twitchiness

at the limit, but you soon learn you have to be doing something rather stupid before it is ready to let go. What is more surprising though is how this excellent roadholding is combined with a total lack of harshness – I've got more than my share of tooth fillings but even after taking several cattle grids at speed, not one of them has even started to rattle.

Reigning in all this exuberance are a set of AP racing discs and, on the lightweight F, they are as immense as you would expect. The pedal is very firm and bites right at the top of its travel. It can handle a good hard prod though and remain both progressive and free from snatch, with the wide Goodyear rubber (now running 215/45-R17 at the front, 235/45-R17 at the rear) requiring a massive panic stamp before the wheels even consider locking up.

It is all tremendous fun, and would be even more interesting with the addition of a blower. But in unblown form, just how does it compare to the BMW it supposedly threatened? There is only one way to find out.

### BMW Z3 2.8

Given that the Super Sport is currently lacking a supercharger, we should perhaps have lined up one of the four-cylinder Z3s as a comparison. But that would be doing the German-American hybrid a great disservice, because the four pots



were always the runt of the Z3 litter, good cars to drive but lacking the ultimate power their looks deserved. Indeed, weighing in at 1260kg compared to just 1060kg for the contemporary MGFi, the Beemer would feel slow and cumbersome against any MGF, even in non-VVC guise. No, it is the six cylinder Zs that a high performance F would have been competing against. Top dog of the Z3 tree would have been the 3.2 Z3M, but there were six cylinder options through the vehicle's production life from as low as 2.0 litres through 2.2, 2.5, 2.8 and 3.0 litres alongside the 1.8 and 1.9 four pots, so we reckon Mark Burgess' 1998 Z3 2.8 is an entirely appropriate benchmark for the MG to aim at.

What all the BMW models had in common was, of course, a strict adherence to rear wheel drive that sat so well with American preferences





"The massive torque of the engine means it is very hard to pick a wrong gear"



In fact, as already mentioned, BMW didn't just design a car for the American market and ship the things over there, they designed it in the US and built it at a plant in Spartanburg, South Carolina. It was every bit as retro as the first Super Sport had been, with the same sense of fun to the styling. Somehow it managed to look more expensive than it actually was too, being smooth but not soft, refined rather than rugged, manifestly styled rather than engineered but none the worse for it and very easy to live with.

In fact, 'easy to live with' is perhaps the best way to describe the four cylinder cars which handled well, had respectable performance but were a trifle subdued. In contrast, as well as the extra power, six cylinder cars got a limited slip differential and flared arches over a wider track, together with a more menacing exhaust note. It is even more menacing in Mark's car thanks to a sports exhaust that is well able to compete with Darren's in the 'aural anticipation' stakes. Mark has lowered his car by 30mm too, which should make the comparison even more interesting as it brings the designs closer together.

Close, but clearly not anywhere near identical. The Z3 has a long and sculpted bonnet and its cabin is well back towards the rear axle with a short and unfussy boot to bring up the rear. It is ironically much closer to the classic British roadster, but with some American exuberance

in the design touches that perhaps owe more to the Corvette than the MGB.

Climb inside, and the Z3's prestige price tag starts to show what you got for your money. The leather trim came as standard on the 2.8 and there are plenty of electronic toys, all packaged very discreetly so as not to spoil the retro flavour. There is electric power for the hood, the windows, even the seats. There is a trip computer too with a very modest screen that used to predict some 27mpg. This has dropped since Mark fitted the sports exhaust – just as in the F, you have to hold the lower gears to get the full symphony, but instead of the MG's crackle, in the Z it is a deep bass six cylinder rumble.

It is not only fooling around that has you hanging onto the gears, though, as you are actually encouraged to use the revs by the very low gearing. The 2.8 was theoretically capable of 140mph, but in typical US style it is relatively low-geared and with a five-speed box it has you wishing for a sixth cog when cruising at motorway speeds.

Not that we are anywhere near a motorway on today's test, as it is the twisty roads around Llyn Clywedog that are providing our route. And as we twist and climb up to the reservoir, the massive torque of the big six comes into its own and it is hard to pick a wrong gear. There is power too (193bhp to be precise, roughly the



same as the supercharged Super Sport would have made) and particularly in the wet it is easy to provoke a bit of a slide. But if you gently feed in the power, then you are rewarded with a car that sits, grips and heads for the horizon. Even if you get carried away and overdo it, there is at most a little flicker from the back end before the traction control kicks in to stop the fun and send you on your way.

That traction control will also help you round bends if you carry in a little too much speed, although this should never really happen because the brakes are almost foolproof. Mark is a driving instructor by profession, and before buying the Z he made sure you could still steer it safely even with your right foot hammering down on the middle pedal. Yes, there is highly effective ABS to go with the traction control and





View from the driver's seat is far less radical than it is when standing on the outside.

to be honest, the brakes are superb, with some initial travel followed by massive bite.

But if all this electronic gadgetry gives you the impression that the Super Sport is a driver's car while the Z3 is not, then think again. Just as in the F, there is minimal roll through the corners and the suspension manages to be both comfortable and sporting. It feels less nimble than the Super Sports, and you would expect that to be the case given the big engine in the nose and extra overall weight. But this feeling is misleading as the BMW is a great handler that can post some very quick point-to-point times.

It also dishes out a surprisingly classic driving experience, perhaps in part because it carried over the Z1's slightly retrograde semi-trailing rear suspension from the 1982-91 BMW E30 platform rather than the later E36's multi link set-up. With the wide torque band letting you wring the best from each gear, it is a versatile package too. You can be lazy and simply cruise, or you can take the Z by the scruff of the neck and fling it through the bends. All the while with the added knowledge that should your ambitions exceed your skill, it will take good care of you and will not bite.

"It is hard to believe that they would ever truly have competed head-on"



Huge air intakes on MGF are aggressive, sculptured BMW nose is more refined.

## Verdict

Having driven these two cars side by side, it is hard to believe that they would ever truly have competed head-on. The appeal of the styling, the equipment and, let's be totally honest, the badge seems simply too different for that to have happened. And, of course, the whole ethos of each design speaks to a different customer base. The MG is all about high performance in a lightweight package, while the BMW relies on the grunt that comes with six cylinders and plenty of cc's to compensate for a body that errs on the luxurious side of sporting. But in the course of our research, we spoke to Ian Tilsley who was Competition Manager at Rover during the Super Sport era. He says that the MG was a lovely car to drive, smooth and with masses of torque. Then one day a director came to the workshop at Gaydon and drove it. The designers were immediately told to start working on something else as the Super Sport was too close to the Z3 for production to be countenanced.

It is hard not to see this as an opportunity lost.

True, the addition of a supercharger would have moved the two performance envelopes closer together, but that would not have changed the fundamental characteristic of either car. It may, however, have priced the MGF out of its natural price bracket.

That is not to say it wouldn't have been a fantastic car, but the more money you spend, the more it seems that badge and image come to the fore. And while BMW have worked hard to cultivate an aura of upmarket prestige for their blue and white propeller, the MG octagon has always stood for affordable fun and however much they would like to, it is very hard for one badge to sit comfortably in both camps. A luxury car with Ford's blue oval on the nose is always at a disadvantage in the marketplace for example, while a small Jaguar is never small and a cheap Audi is called a Skoda.

But I'll tell you one thing – if the Chinese could produce something similar to the Super Sport and sell it at MG prices, boy, would they have a winner on their hands.