**MG Maestro: The forgotten hot hatch?**

**Whatever people say about cars like the Escort XR3i or the Golf GTi Mark 2, they were undoubtedly sales sensations and a common sight on our roads that both offered a sporting image along with a different slant on what they were really based on – rather unexciting 3 or 5 door hatchbacks.**

**Words by Mike Humble**

The 80s era of the hot hatch saw some brilliant and inspired cars arrive in the showrooms, great models such as the Astra GTE or 205 GTi even today, are held on an almost God like pedestal. In the case of the Peugeot 205 GTi, quite rightly so, as they drive so bloody well even by a modern standard and today, still make middle-aged men nod approvingly when spotted.

But there was also a whole host of metal which failed to catch on for differing reasons, but all of which having a genuine talent, cars like the Charade GTi, the Strada 130TC and one of my own favourites – the Citroen Visa GTi. Of course there were models that were best left forgotten like the Toyota Corolla or Mazda 323 GTi for example, but one thing is certain, that era is long gone and sadly much missed. Our very own cash strapped Austin Rover jumped in with both feet with the MG Metro and Turbo thus creating the nearest thing to powered roller skates and the best laugh yet since the original Cooper S Mini.

In my own opinion, the 1983 MG Maestro 1600 was nothing short of a mess, even the production team had no confidence in the car and it was forced into the showrooms by sales hungry and greedy senior management with a view to making money rather than to develop the thing properly and enjoy some deserved success. The Maestro worked well in the intermediate models, but the MG was nothing short of embarrassing as dealers struggled to cure running problems with the Weber carbs.

Symptoms that manifested as flooding, backfiring, stalling and monumental flat spots – even the occasional engine bay fire. Looking back now – it’s horrific to think about!

The gear change was at best, imprecise and the even the horn was poor – being the same part as fitted to Mini & Metro models emitting a laughable high-pitched peep sound rather than a shouting twin tone blare. Looks wise, it was not too bad with those pretty herringbone trimmed faux Recaro seats and red themed carpets / seat belts. Those odd-shaped alloys were pretty to look at too even if they were buggers to keep clean. Such as same, as the MG Maestro 1600 was potentially a good dish, just a bit half-baked with some inferior ingredients. The MG model quickly gained a reputation for being poor, but ARG tried again a year later – with some success too!

After even trying the twin carb treatment on the new S series engine, Austin Rover engineers admitted defeat mainly due to not having access to a cross flow cylinder head. Out on the open road the 1600 MG could give a fairly good account of itself where cool airflow was present. But around town where temperatures in the engine bay would rapidly rise quickly, petrol evaporation became the critical problem owing the exhaust manifold being inches away from the fuelling systems. Even firing up an MG 1600 after a motorway ‘splash & dash’ could be a traumatic experience thanks to the fuel in the carb float chambers evaporating due to heat.

For the 84 model year, Austin Rover launched a revised range of Maestro’s with some much-needed tweaks including an all new 115bhp 2.0 EFi engine and gearbox which mirrored the power train fitted in the also new MG Montego. The trusted ‘O’ series engine used a Lucas designed fuel injection system which aided top end performance while at the same time, not harming the ‘O’ series nature of good low-speed torque. Gone was the Volkswagen sourced gearbox with its, at best, tolerable shift change quality, replaced with a Honda designed but ARG built T5-AR transmission known latterly as the PG1 which became Rovers signature gearbox in years to come.

To cope with the increased power from 103 to 115bhp, the front brakes benefited from vented discs and hub assemblies again, from the 2.0 Montego which at the same time, laid to rest the common Maestro fault of failed front wheel bearings which would hum like a Childs spinning top. As a consequence, the 2.0 MG Maestro was over a second quicker to 60, had superb in gear acceleration times, and was no thirstier on the fuel the outgoing 1.6 version. Visually, there was not much difference between the two models with the exception of a slight lowing in the ride height and subtle ‘EFi’ decal to the tailgate.

The interior also looked unaltered, but keen eyes would have spotted the new 3 spoke steering wheel which looked far better than the spindly affair of old, the new gear lever and gone was the Texet calculator style digital dashboard, replaced by conventional dials – though it could be specified as an option. The MG Maestro finally became a credible car for the ’86 model year when the Montego style dashboard was fitted, ridding the Maestro of its ‘unfinished prototype’ look to the interior. This new facia was of decent quality and gave the car a solid feel along with some novel touches like fibre optic column switch illumination.

Out on the road, the MG EFi was blessed with good road manners partly thanks to the revised suspension featuring a rear anti roll bar while at the same time, a ride comfort that was on the right side of acceptable and not being as crushingly harsh as the XR3i or Astra GTE. Engine wise, the MG Maestro was a joy to drive, no coughing or spitting from angry hot carbs, no annoying flat spots at low revs and certainly no worrying smells of fuel from inside the car. Simply grab first gear and away you went with a flawless presentation of power and torque from the gutsy 2.0 engine with that unique sound that is unmistakable ‘O’ series.

Just as happy to slog through the rainy rush hour in Bristol as it was to zoom across to Brussels, ARG produced a car that was equally at home with the elderly or eager motorist, all that needed to be shown now, was confidence and recapturing lost custom. Well, the MG Maestro EFi went on to sell in decent numbers, especially after the ’86 interior upgrades and those memorable feel good “Now We’re Motoring” TV campaigns. Never a runaway hit of Golf GTi or XR3i standards, but hardly a flop either but the 80’s for Austin Rover was more about survival and gaining some credibility rather than being a market leader.

At no point have I said that the EFi Maestro was a superb class leading car, its styling to some, looked clumsy and some of the shut lines were so large that thin people could enter it without opening a door, and yet the MG Maestro still gave a good account of itself even by the time of deletion in 1990. A bright airy interior with heaps of space for passengers and luggage were always key features and on the whole, the MG Maestro was decent in terms of reliability but corrosion always remained a major bugbear with many looking scabby if used and abused. What amazes me though, was how good the Maestro drove considering the lack of serious cash for development.

My own MG Maestro’s (a 1.6 & 2.0EFi) were like chalk and cheese, I was glad when the 1600 caught fire, it was nothing short of trash – I hated it after a few months, but the ’87 EFi was a different beast. Quick and reasonably economical with the way it could seat five with comfort and boot full of clutter impressed me. I grew quite fond of the odd styling too, and as for ease of DIY repairs and servicing? – They don’t come much easier than the Maestro. Gutsy and roomy while being practical and vroomy were features that gave the EFi powered Maestro a very rare second bite of the hot hatch cherry after the underwhelming 1600 version.

**The Highs:** Keen road manners – Practical – Easy to work on – Passenger space – 2.0 especially brisk – Injected version is a good high-speed cruiser. Reasonable economy when driven off the boil.

**The Lows:** Poor build quality – Rampant corrosion – Early interiors feel worryingly fragile – Brakes in standard form not quite up to the job for spirited driving – Some parts are getting hard to source – Always seen as an “also ran” car – Early Weber carbs require skill and correct procedure to maintain or fix.

What to look for:

* Engine / gearbox:
* Noisy timing chains (1.6R)
* Blown cylinder head gaskets (1.6R)
* Poorly tuned carb set up (1.6R)
* Oil leaks from cam carrier (1.6S)
* **Oil leaks from cylinder head (2.0)**
* Mis-firing or valve damage (2.0)
* **Fluctuating idle (2.0)**
* Sump damage (1.6S & 2.0)
* Poor & stiff gearchange (1.6)
* Noisy gearbox bearings in neutral (2.0)
* Droning noise from transmission on hard lock (2.0)
* Juddering or noisy clutch (1.6)
* Sticking or grating starter motors
* Failed or non working cooling fan

Steering / Suspension:

* Check for incorrect springs or dampers
* Broken front anti roll bar drop links
* Worn lower ball joints
* Wishbone bush oil leak contamination
* Failed front wheel bearings (especially 1.6 cars)
* Noisy outer C.V joints on full lock Knocking or failed front shock absorbers Loose lock nuts on rear strut tops
* Later cars with P.A.S suffer from leaking or noisy pumps

Brakes:

* Check for rear wheel lock up on heavy braking (faulty under bonnet Gravity valve)
* Rear wheel cylinders can leak prematurely
* Seized front calliper sliders
* **Excessive or premature brake fade – a sign of cheap low quality after market parts.**
* Handbrake cables can corrode and snap without warning – easy to fix
* Bodywork & Trim:
* Look everywhere for rust of signs of poor repairs – especially where panel work meets panel or joints
* Water leaks through bulkhead / sunroof and boot – Mould is a tell tale sign. Broken / worn trim or plastic parts – Some are very hard to source
* Sagging roof lining – Indicates damp or water leaks
* Weak or broken door handles
* Cracked bumpers
* Noisy or ticking analogue speedometer
* Failed voice synthesis unit (on earlier cars)
* Some electrical issues
* Check every switch or button for function

**DIY Friendliness – 8/10**