

Ten years ago Roger Blockley was working as a fitter building Triumph Spitfires at the standard Triumph factory in Coventry. Wages were average, working conditions nothing special and life generally somewhat predictable. Sure, he was interested in cars and was reasonably happy with the job, but the problem was his lack of a true future. What hope was there of making the break, escaping the rat race and releasing some of his pent-up ambition? Would his dream cars, the MG TF and Rolls Royce, ever be within reach?

Then, suddenly, it all became obvious. Spitfires had separate chassis that were ideal for rebodding, and so did Heralds and Vitesse. The latter were well suited to the TF's general dimensions. Right, forget the Rolls for the time being and concentrate on building a replica of the TF, that was the answer. Buy an old Vitesse 1600 and transform it so beautifully that other enthusiasts with similar dreams—and a similar lack of funds—would be tempted to do the same thing. That way, running a company building good quality kit cars, Roger would at least be in control of his own destiny. The Rolls was at least a remote possibility and perhaps even a *real* TF could be acquired at some stage.

Early in 1974 a rather basic 900 sq. ft. workshop on rural small holdings in Barwell, Leicestershire, became the first home of a new company called RMB Motors. Filling the role of managing director, salesman, fitter, fabricator, mechanic, carpenter, delivery man and tea boy was an energetic one-man-band by the name of Roger Blockley. Year one wasn't what you'd call easy: it took 12 hours of virtually every day of every week through the year to build some 14 TF replica body kits. 1975 was much the same but, even allowing for development and improvement, the production pattern had at least been established and some 40 kits were able to clear the shop floor. Better still, things were looking good for 1976, the order book was getting fatter and expansion was under way. Two staff were taken on.

That expansion never abated. By 1977, the RMB Gentry, as the kit was known, was being produced at the rate of two units per week. The following year the weekly figure increased by 50% and occasionally by 100%. Roger Blockley and his Gentry had arrived—from fitter at Standard Triumph to junior-size Cecil Kimber in only four years. Tough going at times but more than impressive. There are no substitutes for hard work, energy and the commitment required in running your own company. It's the only way to earn truly satisfying rewards.

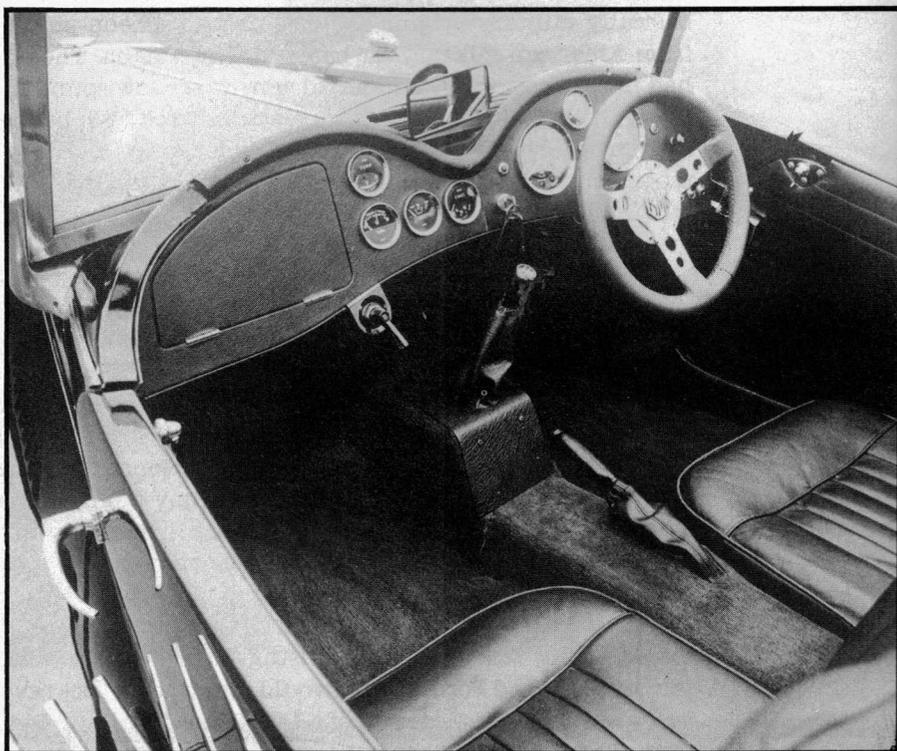
Today, RMB Motors is one of the country's leading kit car manufacturers. Still in Barwell but nowadays operating from well organised 2500 sq. ft. premises

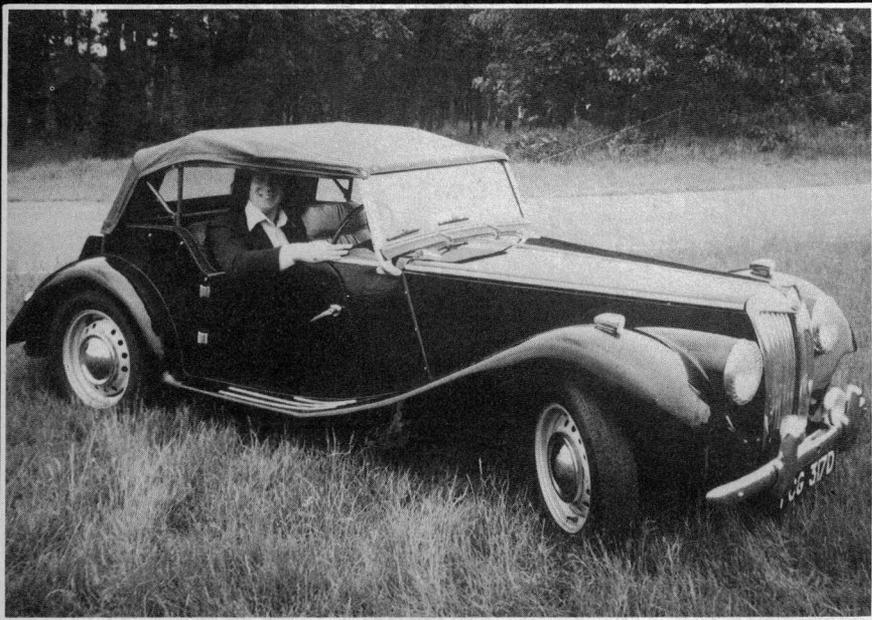
The cockpit of Roger Blockley's own Gentry is immaculately trimmed. The seats are finished in brown leather.



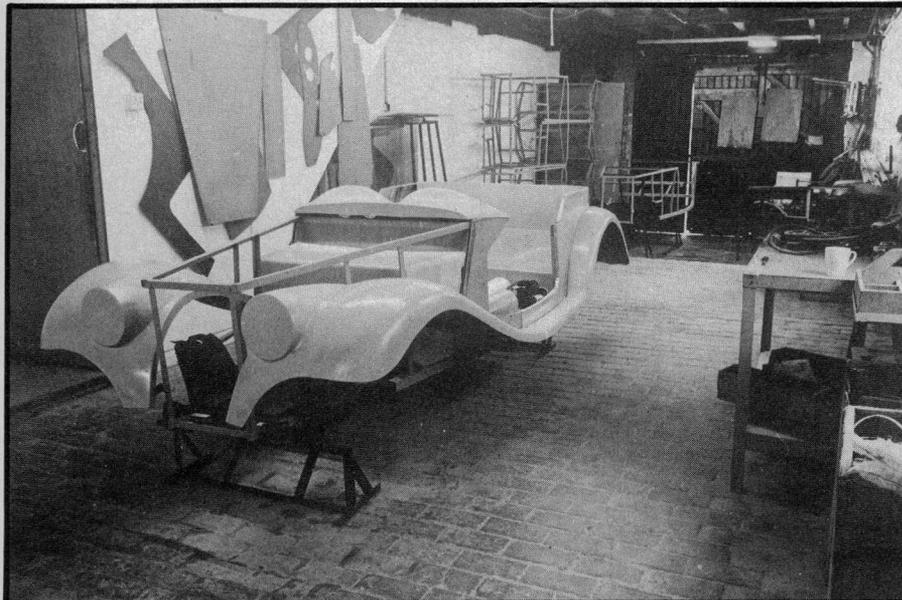
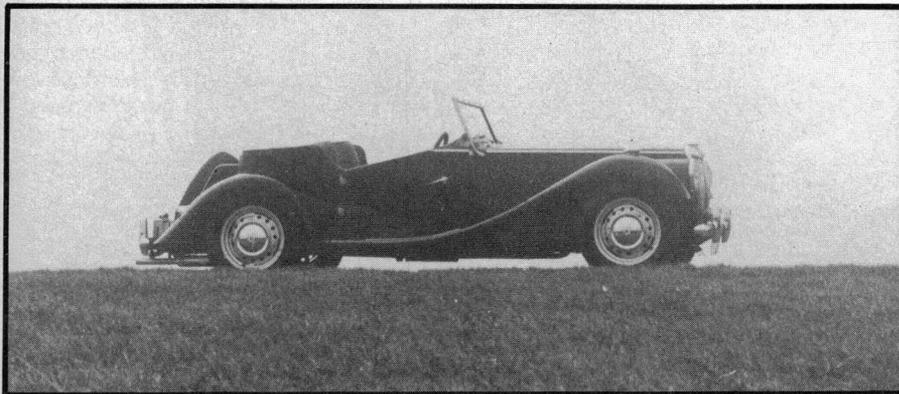
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Landed on its feet, that is. Yes, from very basic beginnings in rural Leicestershire, one lovingly produced MG TF replica rates highly amongst today's most successful kit cars. To help celebrate a marvellous tenth anniversary, Peter Filby reports on the rise to fame of the Gentry, a car that might normally raise a few eyebrows in more staid surroundings! Photography by Adrian Horgan.





GENTRY



Far left: Roger Blockley with the reward of many years' hard work. Left: The Gentry, one of Britain's top kit cars.

close to the town centre, the company still only produces the one model but remains totally happy satisfying an apparently insatiable demand for replicas of what many consider was MG's greatest ever sports car. True, almost every kit supplied has little option other than to mate with the unsophisticated Herald/Vitesse chassis but then few people could afford the real thing anyway. Well over 1000 Gentry customers can't be wrong.

The most outstanding impression one gets when visiting RMB's factory is of a particularly happy atmosphere. There seems to be an excellent understanding between Roger and his four staff that, as long as the necessary work is done, the hours can be flexible and the job as enjoyable as they can all make it. So things swing along nicely even though, funnily enough, the production rate these days has dropped from its highs of 1978-1980 (when the waiting list was sometimes a whopping 14 months long) back to a steady two kits per week. This hardly surprises Roger, though, as enormous country-wide redundancies have undoubtedly affected a great many people's spending power. And there's also the little matter of the competition; although none of them are MG replicas, several other Triumph-based kits are available and must have affected the Gentry. Yet there's a saying that the first is always the best . . .

As you'll see from the pictures, the RMB workshop was looking exceptionally neat and efficient at the time of our visit. With the separate laminating shop, stores area and office upstairs, there's plenty enough room to handle current production and this no doubt is the chief factor in the general tidiness. The Gentry is basically a glassfibre, marine ply and aluminium body over an angle-iron body frame, and it's this frame which starts off the production system up by the premises' front doors. Dave Colman is the man responsible for welding the 1" x 1" x 1/2" strips into the strong and rigid structure which carries virtually all the panels. He also makes various brackets, the 3/4" tubular steel hood frames, the polished aluminium channel frames which form the windscreen assemblies and any other metal components needed. The only items bought-in are the cast alloy windscreen assembly feet which come from a local supplier.

Next stage in the Gentry 'line' is down to Phil Moore, who paints the body frames in primer before preparing the various 1/2 inch marine ply panels which are used for the body sides, dashboard, floor boards and bulkheads. Phil is also

The RMB workshops at Hinckley are always kept clean and tidy. In the foreground is a Gentry body kit almost ready for delivery to a customer.

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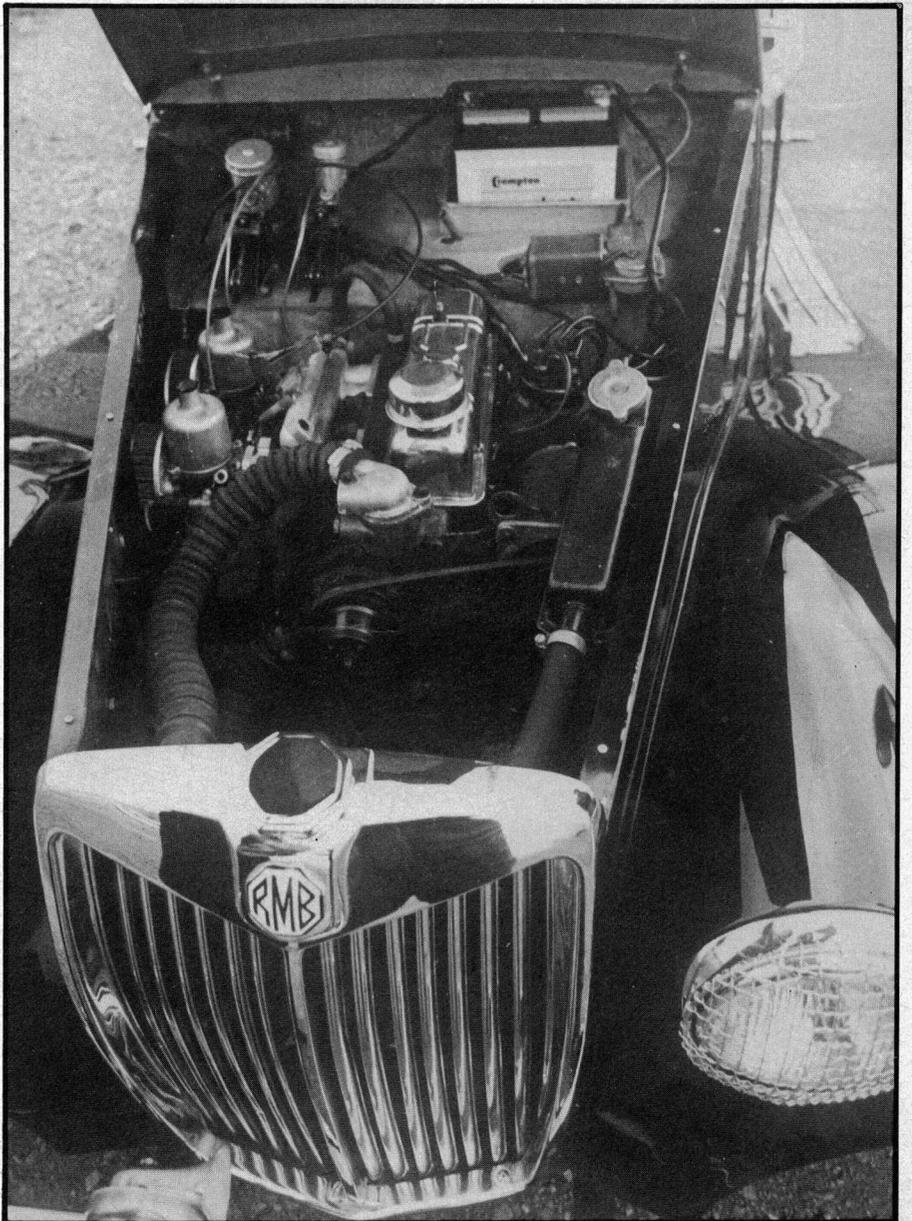
pretty handy with the saw when cutting the 18g aluminium panels which go over the plywood body panels to form the outer skin.

Glassfibre is used in the Gentry body for the front wings, rear wings, running boards, scuttle, rear apron and doors. John Allsop, a skilled laminator who used to work with boats, is the man responsible for all these panels and he works upstairs on a first floor that, not surprisingly, usually has all its windows open! About ten sets of glassfibre panels are kept in stock with two new sets going downstairs each week to complete the latest body units. These days at least a half of all kits supplied go out in fully assembled form for a price of £795 plus VAT. With all panels ready fitted to the body frame, all sealing carried out and the whole assembly finished in etch primer, this means some 40-50 hours are saved in building the finished car, so perhaps it is surprising that more people don't pay the extra £125 (a kit form bodyshell is £670 plus VAT) and save themselves a lot of time.

The extras list for the discerning Gentry builder is long and covers small items like interior trim panels, door handles and bumpers plus large items like a moulded glassfibre hardtop, a complete soft top set and even a special chassis. This latter item is made by RMB from 10G 3" x 2" box-section steel for use with the regular Herald or Vitesse running gear, but although it seems to be kept as something of a secret the company can in fact be persuaded to supply an alternative assembly which accepts either MGB or Ford running gear. Maybe the answer is that Triumph running gear at least keeps things simple and will be readily available for a long time yet but, even so, it will surely be surprising if more customers don't now look to these optional and, if anything, more desirable base mechanicals. In the MGB's case, almost everything is used; with the Ford option, the best combination mates a Triumph front end and modified propshaft with—ideally—a 1600 GT engine and an Escort rear axle on semi-elliptic springs.

As long as you're in no desperate hurry, Gentry construction is a fairly straight forward body change operation which, other than in the above special cases, leaves all the base Triumph running gear untouched. There are exceptions even to this rule however, in that Herald-based cars need Vitesse radiators, Vitesse-based cars need GT6 radiators and all cars need a Spitfire petrol tank plus either an MG Magnette ZA/ZB grille or one of the special chromed steel grilles that RMB can supply.

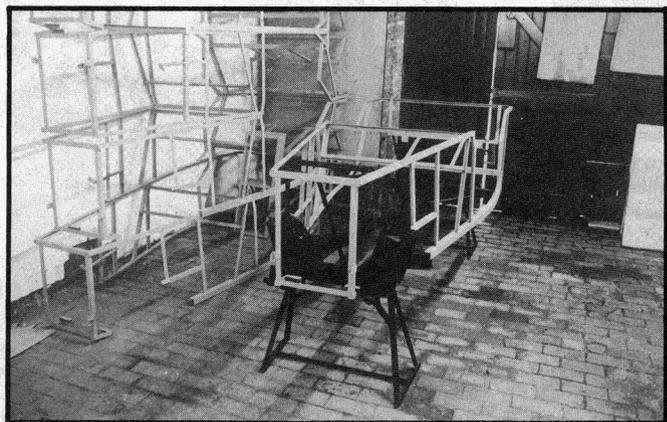
Top right: Sneak preview of the new RMB electric Mini currently nearing completion at Hinckley. Right: Gentry engine compartment. This is the warmed-up 1500cc Spitfire unit in Roger Blockley's own car. Grille is MG Magnette ZA/ZB.



GENTRY



RMB's factory at Hinckley has 2500sq ft of working space. Production today runs at a regular two units per week.



This shot shows a near-completed Gentry angle-iron body frame sitting on a special jig made up from an old Triumph chassis.

Before you start to wonder about that fourth member of the staff mentioned earlier, it should be made clear on behalf of female equality that RMB's secretary holds the paperwork side of things together with an eagle eye! Like any real car builder, the boss himself prefers to steer clear of all that sort of stuff and concentrate on being one of the lads. These days, this doesn't so much mean a role in assembling Gentry kits as a determined effort to make workable and fully feasible an exciting electric vehicle using a most attractive glassfibre monocoque bodyshell inspired by the old Neville Trickett-styled Minisprint.

Keen enthusiasts that we are, we chaps here at AC will bring you a full story on

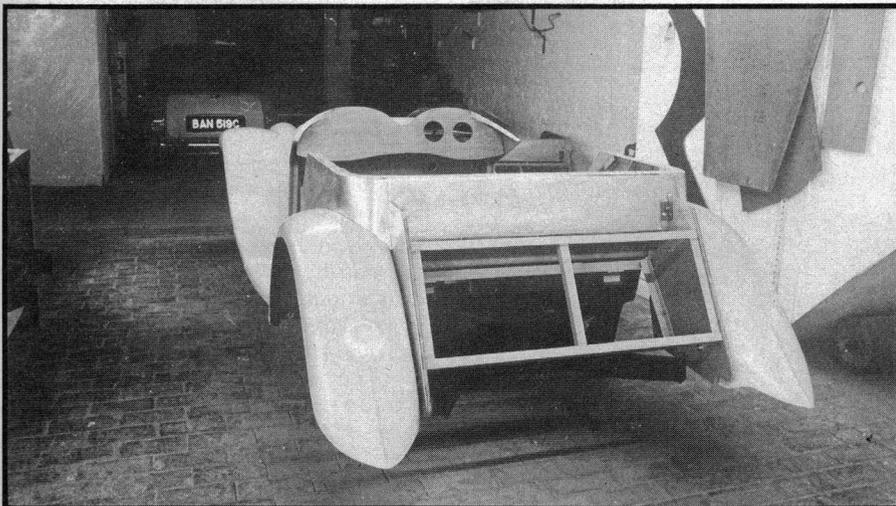
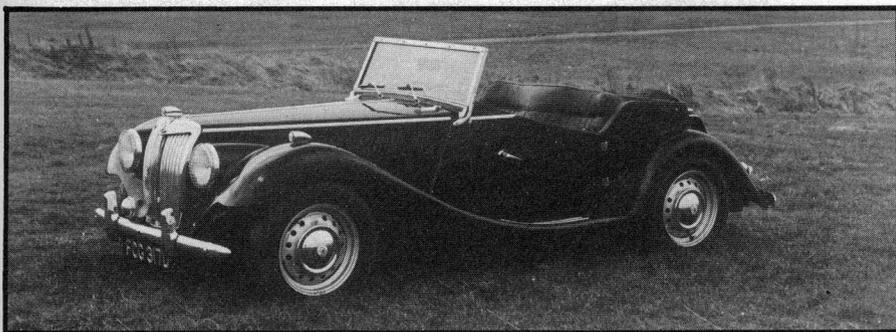
the cheekily named Lectro as soon as humanly possible, but in the meantime we can reveal that the car has already run extensive tests both on the road and at Mallory Park race track and should be ready for a full launch sometime later this year. It carries ten 6-volt lead acid batteries at present, can reach 45mph and has a range of about 55 miles between each 7 hour re-charge. And it looks superb, it really does!

Although the development of all electric vehicles is really tied up in the hands of battery manufacturers at the moment, Roger has a big investment in his car and great faith in its future. He feels if he can keep the price at a reasonable level, sooner or later there's a

fortune to be made from automobile electricity, especially once people are educated about the set range aspect. Well, maybe RMB Motors will move on to much greater things but, for the time being, the company is doing very nicely thank you right now. And it would seem to have a pretty good future merely producing Gentry kits. After all, the TF is an all-time classic; there'll never be a shortage of guys wanting the next best thing.

Having grafted so hard since those days bolting Spitfires together, Roger did of course eventually get his Roller, an immaculate '72 Silver Shadow which he cares for and cherishes almost as much as his wife (sorry, Pat!). And coming somewhere close to both wife and Roller is the very first Gentry which, although built all those years ago, is also in beautiful condition. Only used on sunny summer days, old number one sports lovely brown leather upholstery, gleaming black paintwork and a gutsy Triumph 1493 which produces about 85-90bhp with the help of twin 1½ inch SU carbs, a high compression head, big valves and a straight through exhaust system. It might not be seen very often but it's a fine example of what the Gentry builder can achieve.

Both the Gentry and its founder, then, have landed on their feet. You could be forgiven for assuming, therefore, that Roger might now be looking for an *original* example of what is still his favourite car. But how wrong you'd be! "Not now," says Roger, "because my Gentry is faster than the TF, is smoother and will never rot." He's absolutely right. Cecil Kimber must be turning in his grave: it makes more sense to run a Gentry than the legendary sports car it so lovingly copies. Good grief!



Clothing the Gentry's angle-iron body frame are panels of aluminium and plywood. Wings are glassfibre.