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HISTORIC MONTE '93

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SEVENTIES SPORTING COUPES

Our roving road test focuses on four sports coupés of the Seventies. Brian Palmer dons his umpire's coat

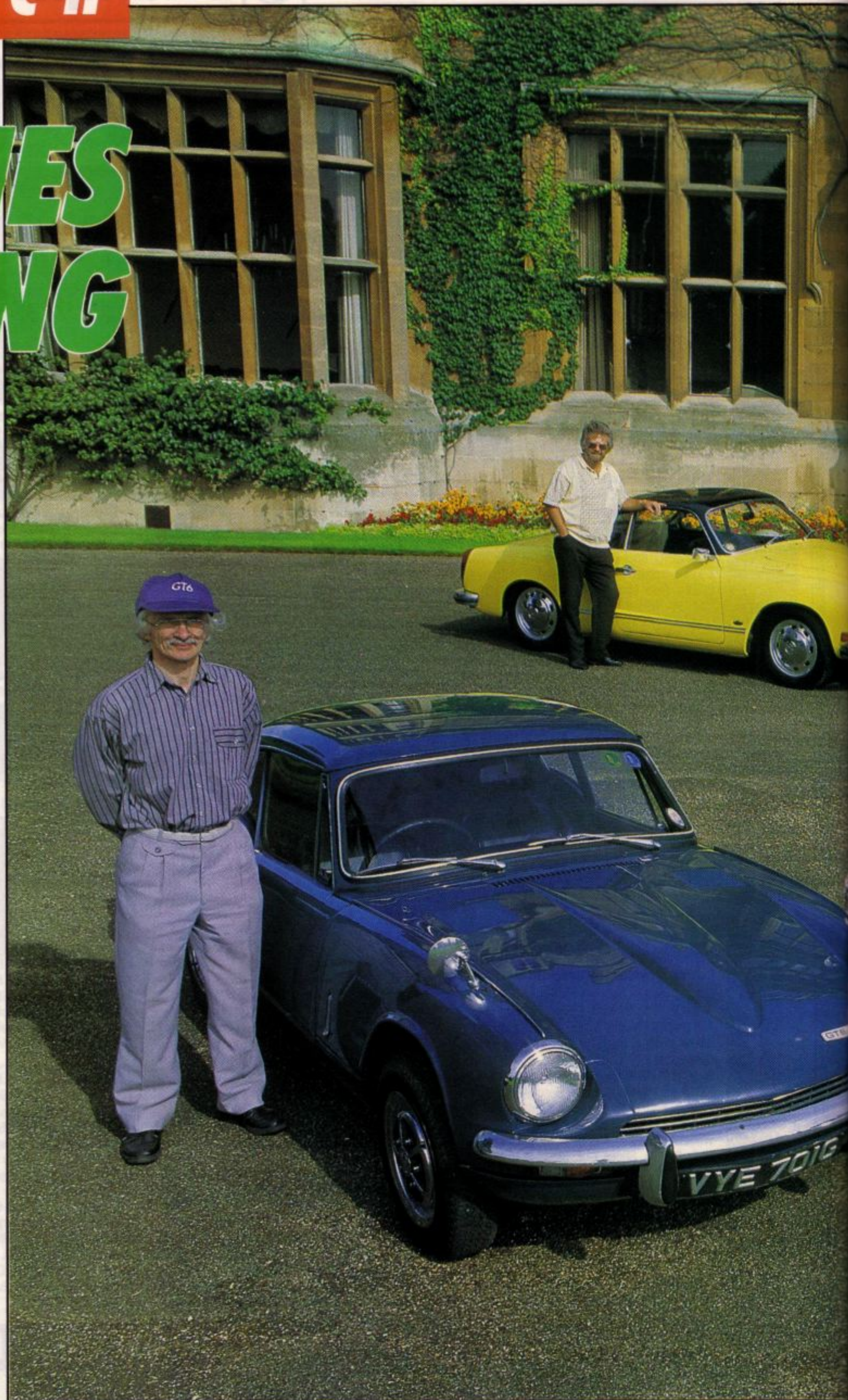
IT'S 1970 and you fancy a small sporty coupé? No problem. An MGB GT comes to mind immediately at £1,356. Something cheaper, perhaps, but no less stylish? How about the delectable little Triumph GT6 Mk2 at just £1,210? Or maybe something a little more unusual – like the Volkswagen Karmann Ghia at £1,361? Or what about the glass-fibre style of the Bond Equipe 2-litre at £1,223?

As you can see there's no lack of choice and you'd never have problems telling one from the other. Moreover, the designers clearly had very individual ideas on what constituted the perfect car in this category. That's why each model is a collector's piece today with an ardent fan club of fellow enthusiasts.

So we invited four of them to swap ignition keys on one of our unique assessment sessions, to see what each thought of the others.

Just because the MGB GT seems commonplace today, that is no good argument for ignoring the model; it was popular for good reason. Launched in 1965, three years after its open sister, it quickly defined a whole new market for people who wanted an element of practicality with their fun. Indeed, you could say the MGB GT was the forerunner of our modern day sports hatchbacks.

With its robust, 1,798cc engine, over 100mph was still possible with the tin top.



Acceleration was not too impaired given the extra weight and civilised surroundings, and fuel consumption was barely affected. Few variations on an original theme have ever looked so elegant and classically 'right' or been imbued with such an individual character as the MGB GT.

One that nearly got it right first time was the GT6 version of the Triumph Spitfire. The GT6 was a rather more complex development in that it used the

six-cylinder engine of the Vitesse. Launched in 1966, it was undeniably sleek and, like the MGB GT, featured an opening rear hatch.

If there was one fly in the ointment it concerned the family trait of kicking its legs in the air on bends, so that you sometimes ended up pointing in the opposite direction to that intended. Help was at hand for the 1969 season when the rear suspension was altered and the car's playful tricks tamed.



Similar antics were almost expected of a Volkswagen with the engine in its rump. Most people didn't expect a model which had made such a hoo-haa about being anti-style that it ended-up being stylish anyway to spawn such an overtly fashionable version as the Karmann Ghia Coupé.

This wasn't just Cinderella going to the ball, this was the transformation of an Ugly Sister into Cinderella in the first place. It's hardly surprising that this chic variant is so highly sought-after today.

Considering they're such a rarity here it's a great surprise to realise that production actually commenced for the 1956 – yes, fifty-six – model year and finally bowed-out in 1974 to make way for the Scirocco.

By comparison, the life-cycle of the Bond Equipe was so brief that you might easily have missed it if you'd blinked. Three short seasons, between 1967 and 1970, made the Bond the automotive equivalent of the mayfly. Bond's brief dalliance with four wheels was put-paid-

to after its acquisition by Midlands arch-rival Reliant in 1969.

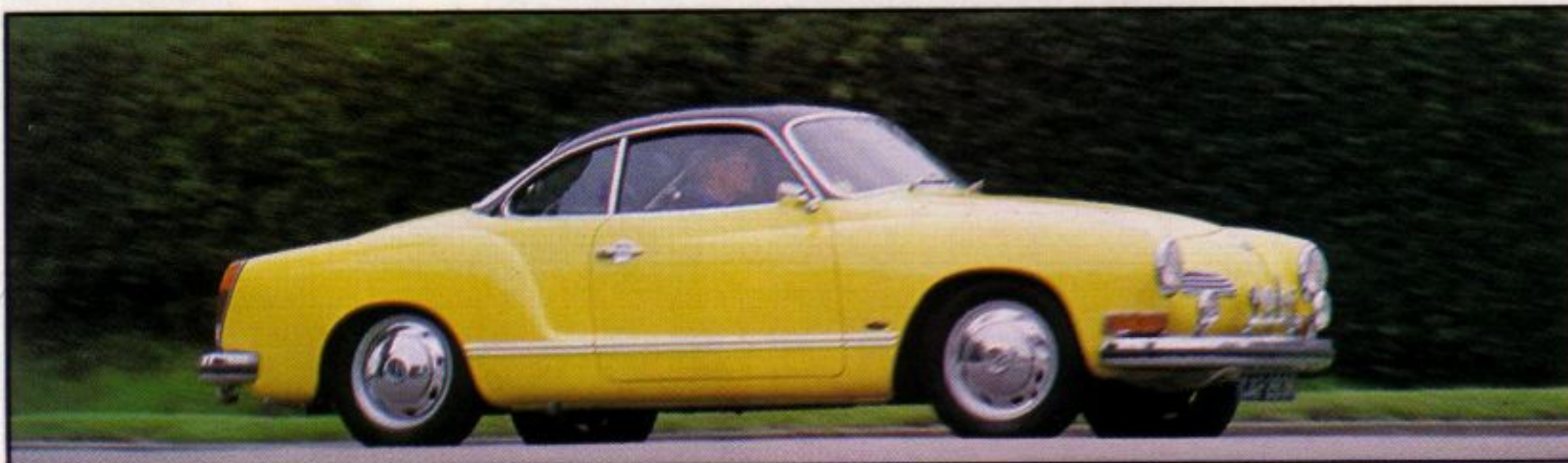
Based on Triumph Herald or Vitesse running gear, the Equipe sported sharply-styled glassfibre and steel bodywork that offered the rare advantage of a fastback GT with four seats and luggage capacity, yet promised livelier performance through lighter weight. A high purchase price and indifferent build-quality from Bond's Preston factory sealed its fate. Sheer rarity value works in its favour today.



1972 MGB GT

Engine:	Four-cylinder (pushrod, ohv)
Capacity:	1,798cc
Power:	95bhp at 5,400rpm
Top speed:	107.6mph
0-60mph:	11.6sec
Fuel consumption:	27.4mpg
Suspension:	F: ind, laura coil/wishbone R: semi-elliptic leaf
Weight:	20.1cwt (unladen)
Length:	12ft 9.3in
Price new:	£1,356 (1970)
Price now:	£5,500

Don Bishop, 63, is a retired Customs and Excise Officer from Southampton. He's also Chairman and Registrar of the MGB Register of the MG Car Club. Don bought his car in 1974 and he is its third owner. It has certainly not been molly-coddled, either, as the car had just 6,906 miles on the clock when purchased and the total stands at over 203,000 today. A reconditioned engine and new clutch went in 24,000 miles ago along with a new overdrive unit. Front wings, floors, sills and a respray followed in 1987/8, along with new seat covers. A sunroof was fitted in 1976. Now Don and the MGB GT are ready for their next 200,000 miles together.



1971 VW Karmann Ghia

Engine:	Four-cylinder, air-cooled boxer (pushrod, ohv)
Capacity:	1,584cc
Power:	65bhp at 4,600rpm
Top speed:	86mph*
0-60mph:	18.5sec*
Fuel consumption:	31mpg (approx)*
Suspension:	F: ind, transverse torsion bar/trailing arm R: ind, transverse torsion bar/semi-trailing arm
Weight:	17.7cwt
Length:	13ft 9in
Price new:	£1,361 (1970)
Price now:	£10,000

*Figures from *Road Test* magazine, USA.

Colin Richardson has owned his pristine and largely original Karmann Ghia for eight years. Colin, a 54-year-old cabinetmaker from Newhaven in Sussex, bought the car from a used-car lot to use every day but after clocking-up 15,000 miles in the first year and discovering its special status he decided to limit its use to the summer months only. Star of a TV commercial in 1988, the VW now tours shows and concours where its condition and rarity attract much favourable comment. Colin is a member of the Karmann Ghia Club and the VW Cabrio Club.



Volkswagen Karmann Ghia

John Cotton – “The VW’s looks flatter to deceive – performance is adequate but hardly sporty (6). The steering’s a bit imprecise and though the pedals are strange they work OK, and the gearbox is a lot better than I had feared (7). Handling may best be described as more like a limousine than a sports car, but it’s not bad (7) and the ride is really comfortable (9). Just as well because the seats are rock hard (6) and the interior is simple stuff. Voluptuous styling – although the car feels German, it certainly doesn’t look it (10). On looks alone the car scores highly, and while it would be great for cruising, I’d rather have my car for the twisty bits. Value Rating: 9. Fun Rating: 10.”

Don Bishop – “It’s there if you know how to get it! The VW boxer engine doesn’t perform well at the lower end of the rev scale, however (8). Good, basic Beetle steering (8), ditto brakes, and they don’t come much better than the Beetle ‘box (9). You need to get used to the handling – and I was (9). Don’t believe everything Ralph Nader told you. The ride was softer than I remember (7). These cars always benefited from a touch of the Konis. The interior was excellent as was the comfort of the seats. But oh, that awful Beetle clutch cable and the ghastly offset pedals (8). You know, this car looks beautiful now (10) – and the shape dates back to the mid-Fifties! You either like rear-engined VWs or hate ‘em – I love ‘em – so it was great to drive such a nice one again. Value Rating: 7. Fun Rating: 7.”



Peter Shawcross – “Good performer which felt as though there was always something in reserve (9). Positive steering (5), brakes OK but horrid pedals (3) and I couldn’t get used to the gearbox (2). Soft, comfortable suspension gave secure handling and remarkable ride (10). I

found the seats most uncomfortable and the strange nature of many of the controls made it seem very peculiar to drive (3). The styling was gorgeous, though (9). Not the car for me – I’d rather drive a tractor, and it would probably be more comfortable.”

Autocar (7.4.61 – 1,192cc version) – ‘From time to time there emerges a car with a design so outstanding that it continues in production for a very long period without substantial change... The platform-type chassis is wider to suit the low and shapely Karmann Ghia body and it is this body shape which resulted in a higher performance than the saloon, in spite of a weight increase of nearly 1cwt... Overall height ...is only a little over 4ft 4in so that entering and leaving the car is not a very easy matter in spite of the wide doors. The lower edges of the screen and windows are high in relation to the occupants... Reversing is not as easy as it might be... There is much room for improvement in the arrangement of the pedals... Finish of both the interior and exterior... is of a high standard... Front seats are well shaped for good support, particularly against cornering forces ...Luggage space is very generous for a car of this size...’



Even today, the Karmann Ghia is one of the most distinctive designs in automotive history. It brought a mixed reception from our testers and continues to be something of an acquired taste

