



A fascinating insight into the MG/Rover car that never was (well, almost)...

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RDX60 at The British Motor Museum.

No longer languishing at Longbridge... a missing link between old and new - by Dave Moss.

Anyone interested in preserving the history of Britain's once proud motor industry will surely have welcomed recent news that the British Motor Museum has secured the long-term loan of eight historic cars from MG Motor UK. All have been in storage since 2005, and all depict key moments in the MG and Rover story... but one, known as RDX60, is arguably



the most historically interesting of the entire group. Though never publicly revealed, this mid-sized concept is tangible evidence of progress made in the early 2000s on what many regarded as the car that could “save MG Rover” ...



The first two historic cars (of eight) on loan from MG Rover are now at the British Motor Museum; MGF on the left and RDX60 on the right as you view this shot.

The car that never was... well, sort of...

On the face of it, if any car could claim to be the “last real Rover/MG”, this is probably it, having been frozen in time following MG Rover’s fall into oblivion. There is, though, a lot more to this story than meets the eye, for none of the Rover, MG or RDX60 stories actually ended there. RDX60 in particular forms a missing link with today’s MG, which – although its products have inescapably diversified far from the brand’s much-treasured early heritage – remains very much alive. Whether today’s MGs are “real” remains a subject for sometimes passionate debate, but it is worth remembering that much current MG design input still originates from Longbridge-based engineers and stylists, who are designing populist, up to



the minute vehicles for a new age of motoring - and they're selling in greater numbers than the marque ever previously achieved.

The RDX60's lineage certainly connects old times with new, with a provenance traceable through senior relatives from earlier Rover and MG generations. themselves direct descendants of model lines threaded through the sometimes sad and often tumultuous BL, BMH and BMC years, back to humble MG and Rover beginnings. The roots connecting it to today's MG actually spring from BMW's tenure, when replacement of Rover's 25 and 45 model lines was considered absolutely vital, resulting in the initiation of project R30, a medium-sized hatchback, slated for launch in 2003. However, when BMW opted out and transferred Rover Group to buyout consortium Phoenix Venture Holdings in May 2000, it bequeathed absolutely none of that work...

A long and winding road... downhill

Phoenix did however gain facilities and manufacturing rights for the then-current product range, quickly setting up MG Rover as its operating company, and re-introducing the MG-F, the venerable Rover 25 and 45, and the relatively new 75, plus the classic Mini - until production ended that September. An already planned 75 Tourer derivative was soon introduced, along with newly developed MG variants of the three Rover model lines. This was an ageing line-up, underscoring just how important that new mid-range model was for MG Rover's long term prospects. With the R30 project withheld, there were no new cars on the drawing board - or even a drawing board come to that, since Rover's modern design centre at Gaydon had been included in BMW's exit sale to Ford.

Yet somehow, work on a completely new version of this vital new car still began in 2001, with model coding believed to have been RD60 for 3 and 5 door Rover hatchbacks - with RDX60 signifying MG equivalents - RD61 for a Rover 4 door saloon, and RD62 for a 5-door estate/tourer derivative. A shortened, cost-reduced version of the existing Rover 75 platform was its starting point, incorporating much existing mechanical hardware. However, limited facilities and modest staff numbers combined to make early progress slow, and Tom Walkinshaw Racing's specialist engineering consultancy (TWR) was soon enlisted to help.



After this, much of the design work was visualised on computer, greatly speeding things up.

Another surviving vehicle, also heading for the museum, now briefly enters the story. The Rover TCV (Tourer Concept Vehicle) styled by legendary designer Peter Stevens, then Design Director of MG Rover, was exhibited at the 2002 Geneva and Paris Motor Shows. There have been suggestions that its styling themes may have been similar to those of RD60 at that time, which is quite possible; manufacturers certainly reveal such vehicles at key motorshows to gauge public reaction. However concept car styling tends to be a moving target, as ideas continually develop, so the TCV's initially cool show reception might have influenced several known later RD60 styling reviews...



Dr. Brian X. Sun, Chief Executive, CBIH (China Brilliance), and Kevin Howe, Chief Executive MG Rover Group, pictured with a Zhonghua sedan and MG Rover's then new TCV.



Early in 2003, TWR was given significant control over the RD60 project, and at least one mocked-up prototype was completed before MG Rover abruptly halted the work, ostensibly for a routine project appraisal. However some commentators have speculated that costs were accumulating, while MG Rover's financial situation was steadily deteriorating. The reason became academic in February 2003, when TWR Group ceased trading, and receivers were appointed. Although parts of TWR were eventually rescued, work on RD60 never resumed, and simply to continue the project, MG Rover had to find significant cash to regain access to its many and various files, drawings, prototype parts and more from the receivers...

While TWR's demise dramatically slowed RD60's progress, and despite a growing background of financial difficulties, late in 2003, MG Rover felt it was time to lift the spirits of its increasingly frustrated dealerships, summoning key people to Longbridge to preview its long-anticipated new car. During the presentation, a convincingly complete five-door RD60 variant, in metallic British Racing green, with a notably avant-garde interior treatment, and believed to have carried MG badges (so technically an RDX60), was driven out before the assembled dealers.

This begs questions about quite how the cash-strapped company progressed to this point so quickly after TWR's demise. Another big outstanding question is whether that presentation car, and the example now at the British Motor Museum, are one and the same - which might suggest little significant progress on full-size prototypes after 2003. The museum car certainly ticks the right boxes on colour, interior treatment and badging, but exact details of its completeness, driveability, and the state of its structural and engineering development are still awaited.

False dawn and international dreams

Though that dealer reveal proved to be a false dawn, rumours have long persisted that further styling and scale-modelling work on RD60 continued behind closed doors afterwards. Yet by 2004, thinking about the project's future role was starting to shift, driven by MG Rover's twin and ever-growing existential problems: dwindling product sales, and



rapidly ballooning cash-flow issues...

There had been recognition from the outset that MG Rover alone was too small to survive long term in a future world of consolidating automotive giants. This led to high-level, sometimes simultaneous discussions with various international auto manufacturers, seeking alliances ranging from investment partnerships, to technology sales, to full joint ventures. Talks began at Malaysia-based Proton in 2001, moving via Iran, Poland, and India to car maker China Brilliance during 2002. Some progress must have been made here, as an official “company executives” photograph was issued, but agreement proved elusive, and MG Rover spent the next two years talking to thirteen more Chinese manufacturers.

Productive talks with Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation (SAIC) during 2004 led to the sale of intellectual property rights (IPR) to the Rover 25 and 75, and their K series engines, providing some useful financial breathing space for MG Rover. The dialogue continued into 2005, with the company’s survival being played out in a high-stakes joint venture game, which ended in Shanghai in April 2005. There, a complex last-ditch survival bid - now including potential “New medium car” (aka RD60) production - foundered on professional advice which predicted uncertain future financial stability for its potential British partner. SAIC pulled out - and it was all over for MG Rover.

What happened next?

Surprisingly perhaps, this abruptly turned page in British automotive history didn’t mark the end of this vital-yet-perpetually-strapped-for-cash story of international automotive intrigue. Two decades on, much of the convoluted tale surrounding the unique car now resting at the British Motor museum remains vague, and the same could be said about part two of the saga, which continued, out of sight behind the scenes, after MG Rover’s downfall.

RD60 work at Longbridge ceased as the money ran out, and no definitive evidence of any prototypes - driveable or otherwise - having gone to China has yet surfaced. However it remains a possibility - and clearly the work invested in this car remained of value when MG Rover entered receivership. In due course SAIC made a conditional offer for its assets,



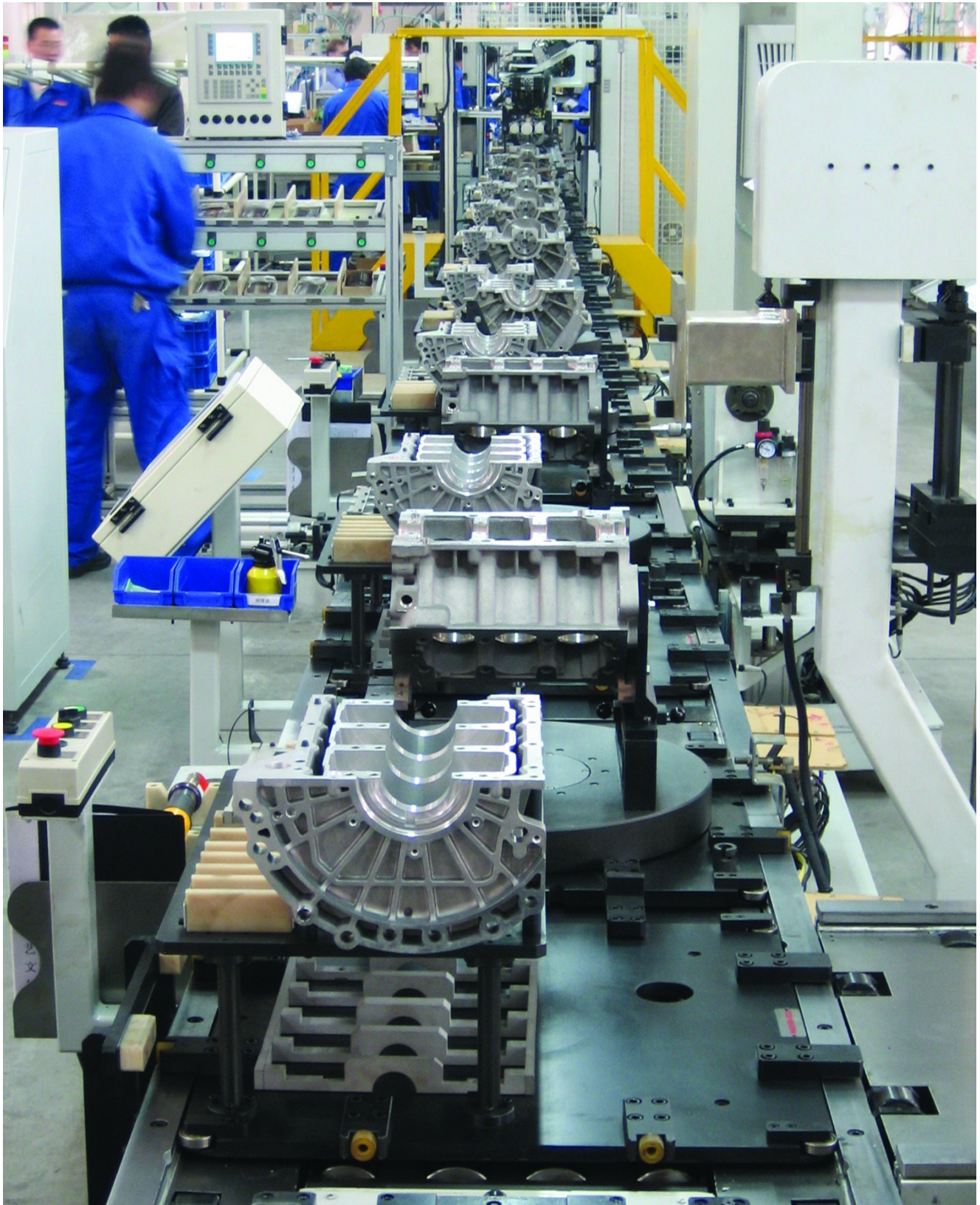
which was rejected, allowing Nanjing Automobile, a Chinese truck maker then trying to establish in-house car manufacture, to snap up a £53 million bargain, including the Longbridge site, and the MG marque. It moved most tooling and production facilities - excluding those for Rover's 45 models, which were recovered by Honda - to a new Chinese factory.

By 2006, SAIC had established an offshoot passenger car operation in China, and commissioned specialist technical help from Ricardo 2010, a new subsidiary of the renowned UK automotive consultancy, initially to transform its IPR into tangible car production facilities. Since the Rover marque was never for sale, SAIC registered the brand name Roewe - Rover in phonetic Chinese - and, with Ricardo 2010's help, subsequently put the Roewe 750, a version of the Rover 75, into Chinese production. Nanjing, meanwhile - at around the same time - started building 25- and 75- models on its newly transferred production lines, badging them for sale as MGs.



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KV6 engine production line at Ricardo 2010's Baoshan plant in China.



Ricardo 2010 staff with the first Chinese KV6 engine.

The stage was thereby set for the Chinese equivalent of an internecine battle royal over exactly what each company could or could not legally make and sell. Since both SAIC and Nanjing were state owned operations, this potentially unworkable situation was rapidly resolved by government decree, requiring a “merger”. Nanjing was then effectively taken over by the much larger SAIC.

Ricardo 2010's recruitment drive midway through 2005 attracted many specialist technical staff from recently defunct MG Rover, putting it in a strong position to help transform SAIC's recently acquired IPR into complete cars. After providing expertise to get the Roewe 750 into production, it moved on to specification, design and sourcing work for K series engine manufacture in China, which began in 2006, using many locally sourced components. SAIC's ultimate plan, however, was ownership of the Ricardo 2010 operation, as seedcorn for its own, in-house, full-service R&D capability for future European product development.



This purchase was completed in 2007, when SAIC Motor UK Technical Centre immediately began operations.



Inside SMTC tech centre.

RDX60 is parked up... and long live RD60

Rights to the RDX60 platform and other key design aspects must have been obtained by SAIC or Nanjing following MG Rover's downfall - since development soon re-started at Ricardo 2010. Quite why the museum car was left behind gathering dust is unclear, but it is known that shortly before bankruptcy loomed, significant bulkhead, floorpan and wheelbase changes were being evaluated to facilitate new styling ideas on the original structure. Perhaps the museum car was simply abandoned as an ageing development dead end, as a new approach - and a new head of styling - at Ricardo 2010 began to subtly shift the project away from earlier thinking.

The first visible result of this work was the arrival of a middleweight four-door saloon,



smaller than the Rover 75, but based on its underpinnings, which appeared on the Chinese market late in 2006. It was badged “Roewe 550”, and had much in common with earlier RD60 thinking, apart from alternative, neatly inoffensive front and rear styling - albeit not unlike some of the last known MG Rover styling ideas - and an interior addressing Chinese tastes. Marketed below the larger Roewe 750, it was very successful in China, and, carrying MG badges, both cars were reputedly exported to places as diverse as the middle east and south America, though never including Britain.

Two very close relatives were however sold here between 2011 and 2016. The slow-selling, competent, but generally unloved British-designed, Longbridge-assembled MG6 five-door hatchback and MG Magnette saloon retained much in common with the original 2001 concept, so keeping the lineage alive - and the closest Britain came to seeing any of MG Rover’s RDX60-related dreams become a production reality...



MG6 saloon with Head Designer Tony Williams-Kenny.

This slideshow requires JavaScript.



MG6GT.

Further reading:

See some pictures of the Roewe 350 and 550, and read the relevant text, at [the-big-read-saic-3-6-becoming-british-independent-brands-built-on-mg-rover-and-maxus](#)