

## Driving Impressions – 1948 MG TC



Open any car magazine and you're sure to find "Driving Impressions" of cars that are so new the paint is barely dry. These articles are written by journalists who somehow convince car companies to trust them behind the wheel of their latest models. The journalist spends 10 or 15 minutes behind the wheel at a test track and then proceeds to write an in-depth review of the cars acceleration, steering, upholstery, cup holders, and every other salient feature. My hats are off to those writers. It takes me at least a year of using a car as my daily driver before I can begin to understand the vehicle. I've been using my 1948 MG TC as a daily driver for about 10 years now, so my driving impressions are beginning to solidify. OK, maybe they've gone beyond solidifying and are beginning to ossify. In any event, they aren't changing. Fortunately, neither is my car. I've actually owned the beast for 20 years, but couldn't drive it for the first 10 years as I was stationed overseas and had to put it in storage. Then when I began driving it I

experienced the normal “teething problems” that crop up when a car hasn’t been on the road for a while. A front wheel fell off. The differential housing opened up, dumped its oil all over the road, and locked up the rear wheels in the process. Then there was a bit of unpleasantness when the engine kicked back while starting. I opened the hood to investigate and saw with horror that the starter was hanging on the battery cable, still bolted to pieces of the block, the sump, and the flywheel housing. Those mishaps are behind me now and the car has been purring steadily for several years, so I’m able to present my driving impressions.

### **First Impressions:**

My initial impressions of a TC were formed in college, when my friend Viktor bought a black 1949 TC. I thought it was the most beautiful car I had ever seen in my life! Sweeping fenders, a hood that seemed to stretch to a horizon framed by gleaming chrome headlights, cut down doors, a fold-down windshield, and giant wire wheels. When he first let me drive it he warned me not to pull out in front of any oncoming cars, as it wasn’t quite as fast as it looked. He needn’t have bothered. I was used to driving a 1928 Model A Ford, and the TC seemed wonderfully fast to me. It also had quick, responsive steering and handling that was like nothing I’d ever experienced before.

Comparing the TC to a 28 Ford isn’t quite as outrageous as it sounds. Although my Model A was twice as old as Viktor’s TC, the TC was really just a minor modification of the prewar MG TB which was designed when the Model A was barely 10 years old. The TB went on sale in 1939, but production was halted a few months later when Hitler invaded Poland and England devoted all her resources to winning the war against Fascism. When the war finally ended MG dusted off the TB design drawings, tweaked a few details here and there, and sold it as the TC. In every respect but chronology, the TC is the last prewar MG.

My first impressions of my TC were formed when I was stationed in Ohio and I responded to a classified ad for a 1948 MG TC. My wife is really responsible for that. I

had often talked about Viktor's TC, and one day she surprised me by suggested I buy one for myself. TC #5311 had been owned for several years by a gentleman who only drove it in an occasional parade or when his grandchildren visited. It was a beautiful car, but I then got orders for Alaska and reluctantly concluded it was a bad time to buy a sports car. The owner gave me a photo of the car which I stared at through three long Alaskan winters. When I got orders for a second overseas tour I decided the car wouldn't remain unsold forever so I bought it while I was home on leave between assignments.

I was infatuated with the car before I bought it, but I fell in love with it when I drove it from southern Ohio to a storage location in Michigan. It was a beautiful summer day. The miles rolled by effortlessly beneath those big wire wheels. I particularly remember driving through what passes for hill country in Indiana in the soft, warm light of early evening. The road was lined with trees which arched over the pavement, and I could see their reflection in that long slender hood and those gleaming headlights. I couldn't imagine a more enjoyable driving experience. Oh, there were a few snags. I had to disassemble the fuel pump and file the points a few times along the drive. The wooden floor boards caught fire shortly before I crossed the Ohio border. And my wife and kids followed behind me in the family sedan, honking every time a part fell off the TC. (Actually only one part fell off – a front shock absorber link. I quickly decided it wasn't essential, tossed it behind the seats, and continued the journey.)



### **Driving Impressions:**

What's it like to drive the TC today, now that I've sorted out the initial problems? You begin by entering the car from the right side. All TC's left the factory as traditional British right-hand drive models. The cockpit is "cozy" to say the least, but because the door hinges at the rear (aka "suicide" doors) entering is not too difficult. There is an inside door handle, but it's easier to reach over the top of the door and grab the outside handle to close it. All the driving controls are close at hand, or at foot in the case of the pedals. Indeed, in a car this size they couldn't be placed very far from the driver. The large diameter steering wheel is a few inches in front of your chest, easy to grab if you're used to driving with bent elbows. My particular car has a fairly new (20 or 30 years old) aftermarket steering wheel and an engine-turned dash façade that I would guess dates back to the 1950s. The position of the steering wheel is "configurable." I hesitate to use the word "adjustable" because you need to use a couple of wrenches to reposition it. It's

obviously designed to be adjusted for the primary driver. Anyone else who drives the car needs to make do. The seat position is indeed adjustable, as a lever underneath the seat allows the seat bottom to slide fore and aft and a couple of knobs behind the seat allow you to adjust the rake angle of the seat back. Just why anyone would want to adjust them to any position other than farthest back is a mystery, as there's barely enough room for anyone over the age of 12 in that position. There's a reason the car is officially known as an MG "Midget" Series TC.



The instruments and controls are designed with spirited driving in mind. A large tachometer sits immediately in front of the driver. It's traditional to refer to this gage as "saucer sized," but in the interests of journalistic integrity I compared it to several saucers from my wife's china collection and it's at least 1/4" smaller. In any event, it's large and easy to read. The face uses the archaic abbreviation "M" to indicate thousands, as in "1M," 2M," etc. There is no red line marked on the tach, but the power falls off rapidly

as you pass 5M so the driver needs no additional incentive to shift. A smaller oil pressure gage lives just inside the left edge of the steering wheel next to a combined headlamp dip switch and horn button. The dip switch is easy to flick with one finger while you're driving. The horn button probably would be handy if you can manage to remember where it is in an emergency. (I never have. I simply pound the heel of my hand uselessly against the center medallion on the steering wheel.) On the other side of the dip switch is a combined ignition switch and lighting control. The design of this switch makes it easy to turn off the ignition at the same time you turn off the lights. Whether you wanted to, or not.

Somewhere on the other side of the dash live an ammeter and the speedometer. I say "somewhere," because neither is visible if you're driving solo and have the tonneau cover over the passenger seat. That's my standard driving mode. Although I tend to be a rather enthusiastic driver, I have never gotten a speeding ticket in the TC despite not being able to see the speedometer. I'd like to think it's because my finely tuned driving skills and the TC's large tachometer give me all the information I need to accurately control my speed. What's probably more likely is that the fold-down windshield and 60 year-old suspension give me the illusion that I'm flying at speeds which barely elicit a yawn from the local constabulary.



The speedometer is placed immediately in front of the passenger. Contemporary reviewers claimed this placement was designed to “frighten the passenger”, but since the top speed on a good day is about 75 mph they couldn’t have been too frightened. An aftermarket grab handle gives them something to steady their nerves.

Starting the car is simple. Turn on the ignition, pull out the choke with one hand, and pull the starter handle with the other hand. (I wonder how many drivers today even know how to use a manual choke.) If the battery is dead, you can hand crank it with an emergency crank handle that lives behind the seats when not in use. The engine idles smoothly, and if you “blip” the throttle you can watch the tach jump up and down. The tach is a “chronometric tachometer,” which uses a clockwork mechanism rather than a spinning magnet to measure the RPM. The result is that the tach needle “ticks” from one reading to another without wandering back and forth in the general vicinity of the correct RPM as magnetic tachs are prone to do. I’m told the speedometer also ticks from one

position to the next, although as previously mentioned I usually can't see the speedometer as I drive.

The clutch is smooth and direct, thanks in part to the fact that the clutch pedal is connected to the clutch arm by a short piece of chain. Simple and trouble-free, without all the annoying complication of hydraulics or complex mechanical linkages. The brake pedal is similarly directly connected to a master cylinder that lives underneath the driver's floorboards. This makes it a pain to check the brake fluid, as you need to pull up the floor mats, crawl under the dash, and remove four screws that secure an access panel to the wooden floorboards. It's important to check the fluid regularly, as the brake pedal has a short throw and even a tiny amount of air in the system means the pedal runs out of movement before the brakes are fully applied.

Accelerating in first gear is moderately quick, thanks to a low gear ratio. The 1.25 liter four-cylinder engine generates a little over 50 horsepower so the acceleration is not going to mash your eyeballs into the back of your skull, but it is sufficient to out-drag most GTs. (Garbage Trucks) Almost any other modern vehicle can outrag the TC, but since most drivers don't floor it when the light turns green the TC can easily keep up with normal traffic. For its day, the TC's acceleration was comparable to American cars, with a published 0-60 mph time of 22.7 seconds making it a little slower than the 20.8 seconds of a 1948 Ford Deluxe Fordor but slightly faster than a 1948 Chevy Sport Coupe (23.4 sec), a Plymouth Special Deluxe (24.6 sec) or a 1948 Dodge Deluxe (23.9 sec).

Once underway the TC feels a lot peppier than its acceleration times would indicate, thanks in part to the sensation of speed which the folded windshield, low seating, and cut down doors create. The gearshift is a little too far forward for my tastes, as I have to lean forward to reach it. (It's probably about right for a pygmy driving with the seat slid forward.) People often ask if it's hard to get used to shifting with your left hand, but I've never had a problem with that. The shift lever moves crisply from one gear to the next, with good feel, although the throw is a little longer than on the "flick boxes" fitted to later MGs. It's certainly a lot quicker and more direct than the Model A gearbox or those



fitted to contemporary American cars! Once the gearbox oil gets warmed up I double-clutch on upshifts as well as downshifts, but since I've never had to rebuild the gearbox it may be that my synchros are worn. One thing I've never been able to do, though, is heel-and-toe downshifts. The accelerator "pedal" is a curious, bent metal rod with a roller on the end and it sits so far below the brake pedal that in the cramped footwell that I can't reach it with my heel while my toe is on the brake. I have no trouble heel-and-toeing MGAs, MGBs, or other sports cars, so I don't think it's my technique that's to blame.

Steering is brutally quick, with 1-1/2 turns lock to lock. When I first bought the TC it tended to wander around the road, changing directions at every minor imperfection in the pavement – including invisible imperfections. Replacing the tie rod ends and steering rod end helped some, but it was still erratic. Then one day I noticed that my front axle was twisted. (The TC has a beam front axle, as independent front suspension wasn't used until the much more modern TD premiered in 1950.) I took it to a blacksmith (yes, there still are a few blacksmiths in the world) who did a wonderful job straightening it. I rebuilt the Bishop's Cam worm and peg steering box while I was at it, and the steering was much more predictable afterwards. It did, however, exhibit a curious tendency to "turn in" on corners, meaning that instead of automatically straightening the wheels as I completed a turn it tended to turn tighter and I had to manhandle the steering wheel back to the straight position. A quick trip to an alignment shop revealed I had negative caster. Normally the pivot for the front wheels is angled slightly backward, so the wheels contact the ground behind the pivot and tend to straighten themselves, in the same way that the front wheels on a shopping cart straighten themselves after you turn the cart. My pivots angled forward, so once the wheel turned to one side it tried to turn further to that side. It turned out that the front axle is supposed to have a slight twist to it, just enough to give the wheels a positive caster. Evidently this made the car too stable for some drivers' tastes, so MG supplied "caster reduction wedges" which cut the caster in half. The blacksmith had straightened my axle completely, so there was no caster, and when I installed the wedges I introduced negative caster. The solution turned out to be to simply reverse the wedges and introduce a slight positive caster. Now the car tracks straight, turns easily, and quickly reverts to straight-ahead driving after a turn. The wheel turns

easily once you're under way, but it's a brute to turn when the car is standing still. Realizing you need to parallel park is a little like hearing a Marine drill sergeant say "Give me 20!" This may in part be because my car is fitted with 16" wheels and fat tires instead of the standard skinny tires on 19" wheels. The 16" wheels may be original – they were a factory aftermarket performance option - or it may be that a previous owner installed wheels and tires from a Jaguar XK120. Wherever they came from, they probably give my TC a little better traction than stock at the expense of a heavier steering effort.

The road feel in a TC is excellent, and you really understand the meaning of the phrase "driving by the seat of your pants." You can feel every bump, crevice, and pothole the car touches, and you feel it most in the seat of your pants. The car is supported by stiff leaf springs and hydraulic dampers on all four corners. The TC was built in the days of ladder frames, which tended to bend and twist under hard cornering. Soft suspensions just added to this movement and left the driver fearing that the car was about to roll over. (As indeed they often did if pushed too hard in a corner.) Before the advent of incredibly stiff unibody car construction, the way to make a car handle better was to make the suspension stiffer. MG obviously subscribed to this design philosophy. Their cars never glided as smoothly down a long, straight boulevard as a contemporary American car would, but they didn't wallow around curves the way American cars did either. The other design philosophy followed by MG was to improve handling and performance by keeping their cars light. Although the cast iron, steel, and wood used to construct the TC was a lot heavier than the carbon fiber and plastic materials available today, the TC still tipped the scales at just over 1800 lbs. That's one of the reasons the TC could outdrag the 3200 lb Chevy Sport Coupe, despite having an engine little more than a third the size of the Chevy mill.

Driving experience is more than just a compilation of statistics. The TC feels quick and agile on the road. With the windshield folded flat and a pair of motorcycle sunglasses to protect your eyes (I have goggles, but they look a little too "distinctive" for my tastes) you can easily imagine yourself tearing up the track in a 1950's sports car

race. The wind rushing past your face makes it feel like you're flying, and the exhaust makes all the right noises as you run up and down the gears through a nice, twisty bit of highway. The long hood and gleaming headlights look just as beautiful today as when I first bought the car. When the road allows you can take a quick glance to the side and see the pavement rushing by, just inches below your right elbow. Stand on the brakes for the hairpin up ahead (and you do have to stand on them, as they're adequate but hardly delicate), double clutch into second, and power your way through the turn. If you get a little overly exuberant the car will oversteer, something you notice immediately because you're practically sitting on top of the rear axle and you'll feel your backside sliding toward the outside of the turn. The handling is predictable and forgiving however, and as you scrub off speed in the slide the car will catch its grip and return to normal. The natural reaction to a slide is to back off the throttle, and while this will cause some sports cars to viciously snap into a spin the TC will merely slow down and straighten out. That's not something you want to do too often in the TC, as it definitely lacks some of the safety features of more modern vehicles, but at least it suffers fools with a moderate amount of patience. Traffic is just as boring in a TC as it is in any other car and Interstates are terrifying, but then again, you don't buy a sports car for that kind of driving anyway. That kind of driving begs for something like a Toyota Camry, with air conditioning, surround sound, and a pine tree air freshener hanging from the rear view mirror. The drive's a bore no matter what kind of a car you're in, so you might as well isolate yourself from your surroundings and be comfortable. But on a twisty bit of country road on a warm summer evening, with no other car in sight, there are few cars as satisfying as an MG TC.



*For more stories about this MG and other British sports cars, read  
"Flaming Floorboards," available from [Amazon](#) and [Barnes & Noble](#).*