

# MGB Seat Renovation

*(Reprinted from the Sports Car Chronicle - Christmas, 2008)*

A properly restored MGB deserves decent seats. Why is it when you look at a typically restored MG, the body looks great, but often when you peer in through the driver's window, the seats are ratty?

There are several reasons for this.

Seats have always been thought of as complicated assemblies-too difficult for a car owner to repair. This is often not the case actually!

Though restoring your seats to new condition costs money, (just what doesn't these days!) seat components can quite often be found on sale. This allows you to get the job done properly and save some money!



Since the vast majority of MGBs are 1970 and later models, we will elaborate on the repair of 1970 and later seats.

MGB roadster seats are all practically identical from 1970-1980 with the exception of the upholstery finish (the pattern molded into the vinyl) and the shape of the headrests. I might mention that the seat bottom foams also vary slightly. Early base foams have a pronounced "hump" in the middle while 73-80 base foams are essentially flat.



Here is a seat recently pulled out of a 73 MGB roadster. It is in typically poor condition. The large rip in the seat back is fairly obvious.

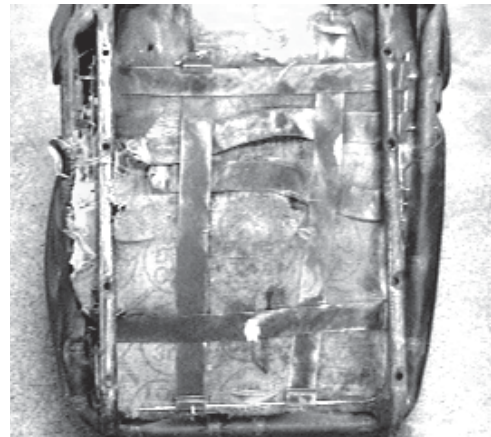
A little less obvious is the condition of the seat bottom foam. Look at how the seat bottom upholstery has collapsed in the lower RH corner of the picture. The seat bottom foam has disintegrated and no longer supports the upholstery above it.

As soon as you see low spots in the upholstery, you can bet that new seat foams will be needed.

Here's the underside of the same seat. Half the diaphragm straps are broken or missing!

Without the rubber diaphragm to support your weight, the upholstery will soon fail!

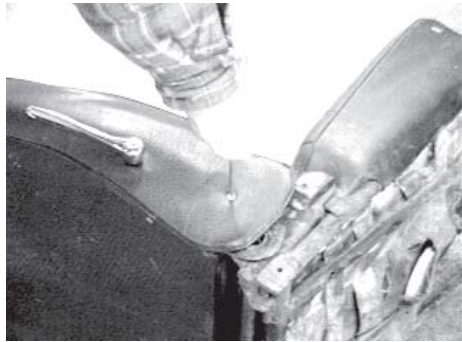
As it does, you'll be sitting closer and closer to the floor until the "gizzards" of the seat bottom are actually riding on the floor!



The headrest must be removed first, to allow proper access for upholstery removal. It simply pulls (with some difficulty) straight up, and out of the seat back. Don't be scared to apply a little muscle.

(NOTE: If you're replacing the upholstery as well as the foams, cut out the rear portion of the vinyl seatback, remove the back-board and push in the metal tab on the headrest shaft to remove it easily.)

While you're at it, remove the Phillips head screw and slide off the chrome seat adjuster handle. It too needs to be removed, before the upholstery can be slid off.

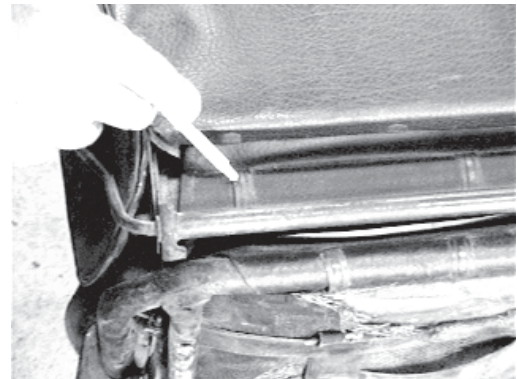


You must remove the Philips headed screw on each lower "flap" on the seat sides.

These screws retain the lower portion of the upholstery onto the seat back frame.

This photo (taken from the rear) shows the spring steel clips that must be pried off with a screwdriver.

This will allow the seat back upholstery to be pulled up, off the seat.



After removing the upholstery clips, open the seat up fully (you will need to temporarily reinstall the chrome seat handle for this).

With the seat fully open, grasp the flap of upholstery material and feed it up and out of the "crack" in the seat. The seat back upholstery can then be slid off. It will need to be fed over the seat adjuster shaft though.

Similarly to the seat back, the seat bottom upholstery is secured on all four sides by round, spring steel clips. Care should be used when prying off the clips.

The ends of each clip are "barbed" to hold them in place. Carelessly prying them off is sure to damage the vinyl upholstery material. (Probably this does not matter anyways since you are likely replacing it with new).





After the clips are all removed, it is a simple matter to lift away the seat bottom upholstery and foam.

Sadly, the seat frame is often very rusty. The one in our photo is no exception! Look at the pile of rust flakes in front of this seat frame.

The rubber seat diaphragm is plainly visible as well and needs to be removed now.

Here's your MGB seat frame in "bare" condition. In addition to the upholstery and foam, the cardboard seat back panel is removed. It is held in place with two small screws, which are easily removed.

After the seat frame is stripped bare, it should be carefully inspected for damage. Cracks in the tubing can be welded and reinforced. Seat adjusters that don't work properly should be repaired (or possibly replaced from a donor seat).



If the seat frame is severely rusted, we recommend replacing it with a better one. Keep in mind that there is a lot of force exerted on the seat during hard acceleration! It would be extremely disappointing to go through the expense and labour of seat rebuilding only to have the frame break!

The seat frame consists of a seat back and seat bottom. They are held together with two bolts, washers, & nuts. They should be unbolted and separated for cleaning & renovation.

Unfortunately the seat latch & adjuster mechanisms are welded & riveted to the seat back frame. This makes repair or replacement difficult, though not impossible!

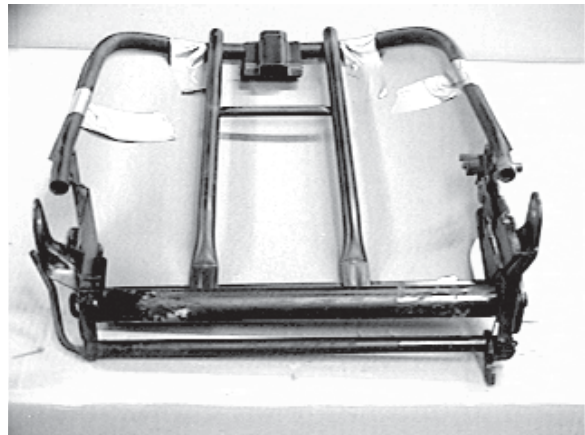
We have abrasive blasted our display frame to remove rust and then painted it. We recommend that you do the same if your frames are rusty. You don't want to get abrasive material in the adjuster while doing this. Carefully "bag off" the adjuster assembly (cover it with plastic and tape over the edges) to prevent this from happening.

After cleaning & painting the frame pieces, it is time to start the reupholstering.

Here is the seat back frame, ready to go. It's been blasted, painted, & cleaned up.

A new cardboard backboard has been installed.

Two little screws in the bottom and duct tape around the sides & top hold the backboard in place.



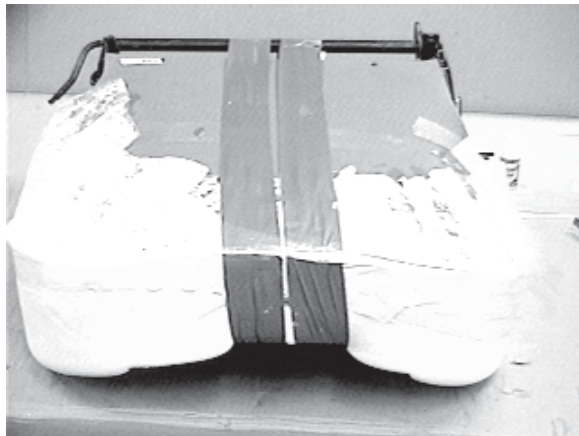
Here is the seat back frame with new back foam installed. It is simply glued in place with contact cement.

What the instructions don't ever tell you is to secure the foam with duct tape until the contact cement cures!

When gluing the foam to the seat back frame, the job will be slightly frustrating! The seat foam has a flat cross section. This must be made to conform to the curved shape of the frame. The foam won't want to stay tightly against the frame, particularly at the top, in the area of the headrest-mounting hole. It must be persuaded with lots of contact cement and taping.



After this has been accomplished, glue a strip of plastic (about 5" wide) around the outside edge of the seat as shown in the photo below.



Plastic strip glued around the periphery of the seat.

Remove the duct tape after the glue has set.

The plastic strip serves two purposes:

- It helps hold the foam in place against the frame while assembling.

- Plastic has a smooth surface that will allow the upholstery material to slide down over the foam, onto the seat frame, without snagging.

After the contact cement has thoroughly dried it will be time to test-fit the seat back upholstery onto the seat back.

It must be carefully, yet strenuously, pulled down over the foam & frame.

Take special care not to snag to material as it pulls down over the seat adjuster handle shaft! Pull it down until the upholstery is firmly down onto the top of the seat. Check and make sure that the upholstery fits squarely over the headrest hole. If not, adjust as needed.

Be careful what you're pulling on! Excess force on the rear corners of the upholstery can rip the seam, not a pleasant proposition on an expensive seat kit!

With the upholstery in its correct position, mark the centre of the "tail" hanging down on the bottom. Use chalk or "white-out" if you wish. Mark the centre of the seat frame tube at the bottom as well. This will help ensure proper fitting.

Once you are satisfied with the fit, slide the seat back upholstery back off the seat! (Seems like a lot of work for nothing right!)

Take the old seat back upholstery and open it. Inside the wings, or side flutes, (where the screws were installed, one in each side) there are semicircular boards. These are the same material as the seat back board. Pull them out of their pockets. These should now be glued into the new seat back pockets.

Since no two seat upholstery pieces are ever identical, some trimming of these pieces may be necessary prior to installation.

Glue should now be applied to the inner front surface of the upholstery, as well as to the inside edges of the side panels.

Apply glue to the corresponding surfaces of the seat foam and the edges of the frame.

If you are using contact cement, allow sufficient time for it to set before assembling anything.

When the glue is ready, pull the seat back upholstery down onto the seat back.

The same cautions as before will apply:

- Keep the upholstery centred on the way down. Use the headrest hole as a guide.
- Be careful not to snag the material going over the seat adjuster shaft.
- Don't pull the back corners so hard as to tear the material or the stitching.

Lean down into the front face of the seat with both elbows & forearms to get the front face of the upholstery properly stuck to the foam. Working in this position will also allow you to work the material down towards the bottom of the seat. This will result in a tighter fit with less wrinkling.

Once you are satisfied with the fit, apply glue to the bottom flap of upholstery and also to the lower frame tube, over which it will be secured.

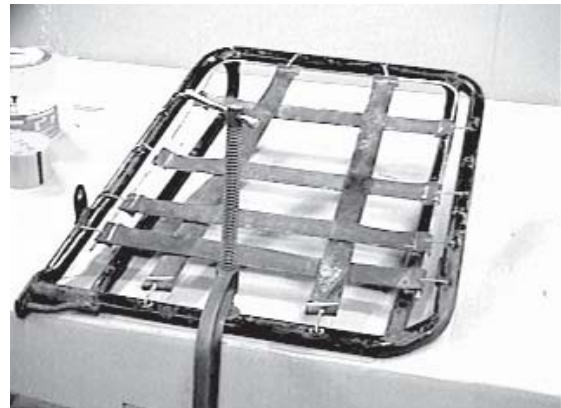
Wrap the material tightly around the tube and install the barbed circular spring clips.

Secure the back flap over the "angle iron" rail of the back of the seat frame. Secure it with three clips.

Pop a hole in the side of the covering for the adjuster shaft hole. Then the small screws can be installed through the side flaps, one in each side. Reinstall the seat adjuster handle.

Notice the big "C" clamp securing the seat bottom frame to the workbench. This is necessary because of the amount of stretching that you will be doing in order to fit the new seat diaphragm/webbing to the frame.

A new seat diaphragm should then be "hung" in place. I can't really recommend reinstalling a used diaphragm; no matter how good it looks. Remember, if the diaphragm fails it will quickly ruin your seat bottom upholstery!



Temporarily bolt the seat frame back & bottom back together. This must be done to properly align the upholstery flutes of the back & bottom upholstery.

This being the case—don't bother to tighten up the bolts or install the nuts or washers.

Take your new seat bottom upholstery and turn it right side out (the upholstery comes supplied with the side panels turned inside out!)

Place the seat bottom upholstery onto the new seat foam base. Ensure that it is positioned tightly over the front edge of the base foam.

Place the assembled base upholstery & foam into position on the seat bottom frame. This will take a little pushing and juggling since the new foam is slightly "large".

Mark the position of the front edge of the seat upholstery on the lower front edge of the base frame pipe. This will give a reference point for assembly. If you don't do this, the pattern in the base upholstery may not match the pattern in the seat back upholstery once it is installed!

After you are satisfied with the fit, remove the seat bottom upholstery & foam.

Disassemble the seat back frame from the seat base frame-remove the two bolts.

Seat bottom Upholstery & foam in position. The seat bottom in the photo to the right is ready to finish.

As you can see, the upholstery material extends down over the front seat frame piping.

Temporarily install one clip on each side pipe and one clip in the centre of the front pipe.

Install the clips carefully while someone holds the upholstery & foam tightly against the frame.



Slits must then be made in the vinyl material, approximately one inch long, where the forward frame tubes come down. This is necessary to allow the material to "clear" these pipes.

Carefully remove the three clips that were just installed. Great care must be taken to ensure that these "barbed" clips do not puncture the material!! Take the foam and upholstery off of the seat bottom frame.

Apply glue to the top of the foam and corresponding areas of the underside of the upholstery material.

When ready, install the glued foam and upholstery material onto the seat bottom frame. Fully clip it in place onto the frame.

The completed seat bottom and back sections may now be permanently bolted together.

If you haven't yet done so, the headrest can be pushed down into the seat back.

Bolt the upper halves of the track back onto the seat bottom. The seat is now ready to be installed into your car.

While seat upholstering takes some effort, the scope of the job is well within the abilities of most car owners.

There are a few possible problem areas:

- Fitting a new seat back foam can be difficult. For one thing a new foam piece will appear to be quite large compared to the old one. Deterioration and ageing make the old foam shrink substantially!
- Extra time and effort taken in forming the seat back foam & backboard together will be rewarded with easier assembly.
- Fitting the seat back upholstery can be difficult. We recommend having a headrest shoved into its hole while pulling the back upholstery down. It provides a good reference point for fitting.

When pulling the side flutes down, do it carefully. Excessive "yanking" on the back flap will tear out the stitching! Having the seat back upholstery fairly warm will allow it stretch into place easier.

Also be wary of the seat adjuster while sliding the upholstery over it as damage is easily caused.

If you pay heed to these pointers you should have limited troubles in doing the job. Should you not feel confident in attempting this job, take your seats and the upholstery kit to an automotive upholstery shop. From what we've heard, most shops will do this job for a couple hundred bucks.

In either case, newly upholstered seats will greatly add to the enjoyment of your MGB as well as increase its resale value.

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