THE MAN WHO MADE MG

Wilson McComb reminds us that Cecil Kimber was born 100 years ago

A 1936 picture of the Kimber family watching the Abingdon Trial. Rene Kimber was to succumb to a lengthy illness two years later. In the centre is their elder daughter Betty who was to marry RAC motor sport chief Dean Delamont. The car is a Singer, not an MG.

On April 12, MG enthusiasts celebrated the centenary of the birth of Cecil Kimber, founder of the marque they so admire. Official MG Car Club functions were held in various countries—Australia, South Africa, the USA and elsewhere. This month’s annual MGCC Silverstone festival will this year be known as the Kimber Centenary Trophy Meeting, and attended by his surviving daughter, Jean Cook.

Kimber died over 40 years ago—that’s more than a quarter-century before W.O. Bentley, for example—and it follows that few present-day MG fans ever met the man. Their admiration is warm enough, though, if not always expressed conventionally. I know of an MG household ruled by a Siamese cat called Cecil, and more than one MG-borne pet dog answers to the name of Kim. At Kimber’s death, two months before his 57th birthday, a leading British motoring magazine said: “In many parts of the world, as well as in this country, MG owners will feel a sense of loss, for he had been closely identified with the car which he was responsible for building up, to a degree shared by few others in a comparable position... It is impossible in the minds of those who had known him to dissociate the man and the car.”

“This presented quite a problem for me—who did not know him—when I began a study of MG history almost 30 years ago. My colleagues at Abingdon could and did tell me many stories of Cecil Kimber, managing director of the MG Car Co Ltd, who had left them in no doubt that he was their chief (albeit a much-respected one). But what of the man himself? His widow had remarried and refused to see me. When I arranged a meeting with his two daughters in the hope of learning more, it was like striking a match to find a gas-leak. I discovered that the elder daughter had quarrelled with him many years before, and his younger daughter (who had named her firstborn son Kim) was suffering from such an immense father fixation that she took a pair of scissors to our tape transcript! Ten years later, having recovered her normal sense of humour, Jean wrote of the occasion: “Wilson, of course, had no idea beforehand into what emotional minefield he had inadvertently strayed.”

Cecil Kimber was born in the London suburb of Dulwich, but moved eight years later to Manchester where his father opened a branch of the family printing-ink business. The Kimbers had money, but trade declined, and there was no talk of university for young Cecil when he left Stockport Grammar School. Instead, he
trained as a salesman in the business and devoted his spare time to dashing about
on secondhand motorbikes. Still in his early twenties, he was run into by a car at a
Cheshire crossroads; one knee and hip were so badly smashed that he narrowly
escaped losing his right leg and limped for the rest of his life.

Quite substantial damages were
awarded to Cecil, who celebrated
by buying a brand new Singer 10 in 1913.
Somehow he wrangled for it an Irish
registration, N 191, knowing the local
police would tend to confuse it with the
Manchester number, N 191 — whose holder was doubtless kept busy fending
off unwanted tickets for speeding.

In 1914, obviously unfit for military
service in the first World War, Cecil
continued working as a printing ink
salesman until he was forced to leave
home after a blazing row with his father,
who was furious when Cecil refused to
invest the remainder of his compensation
money in the failing family business.

Through AW Reeves, designer of the
Manchester-built Crossley, he got a job on
the far side of the Pennines with Sheffield-
Simplex, makers of luxury cars, and thus
entered the motor industry at the age of
23. In September 1915 he married Irene
(known as Rene) Hunt of Fallowfield, and
carried her off in another Singer — this
time a modelled T-head 14hp raced by
a previous owner at Brooklands, and now
fitted with a stark open body from an
Hispano-Suiza (and of course registered
N 191). For a touring honeymoon, it was a
magnificently unsuitable vehicle.

A year later Kimber was in Surrey,
working as chief buyer for AC Cars with
Rene as his secretary, but in 1918 he
moved again to EG Wrigley Ltd of
Birmingham, the well-known suppliers of
steering gears and transmissions. During
his time there, Wrigley’s became involved
in the ill-fated Angas Sanderson project,
and the enthusiastic Kimber invested his
own little nest-egg, too. He lost the lot, and
was virtually penniless when in 1921 WR
Morris (the future Lord Nuffield)
appointed him sales manager of the
Morris Garages in Oxford. This was a
separate enterprise from Morris Motors Ltd
but quite an important one, and
Kimber was rapidly promoted when the
general manager inexplicably committed
suicide in 1922. How Cecil and Rene
Kimber then began designing new and
shapelier bodies for the humble Bullnose
Morris is, of course, the foundation stone
of MG history.

Just about 5ft 5in, Kimber had the
Napoleonic drive of many small men —
combined, in his case, with seemingly
boundless energy. He strove continually
to establish the separate identity of MG,
and encouraged his chassis designer, HN
Charles, to update and improve his
products all the time (save only for using
hydraulic brakes, which Kimber disliked
(distrusted). He demanded the
highest standards in an office (MG office
staff were told that all customers’ letters
must be answered the same day) or a
factory (“By the time he’d finished with
Wrigley’s,” his brother Vernon told me,
“you could eat your dinner under any of
the machines.”). He had what Harold
Connolly (the artist responsible for most
prewar MG catalogues) described as “A
lovely flair for line, a lovely idea of what
the young lad of the village wanted. . . .
He always said a sports car should look fast
even when standing still, and that was the
basis of all his designs.” Far from
inaccessible, Kimber appeared at most
social functions of the MG Car Club,
which he supported enthusiastically from
its foundation in 1930. He attended many
British speed events, and on one occasion
drove an MG all night long to run-in the
engine for an important Brooklands race.

As an MGCC Founder member, Harold
Hastings of The Light Car (and later of
Motor) knew him well. “You are quite
right,” he once told me, “in thinking that
he had a very complex personality. In
some ways, he was quite ruthless and
uncompromising, but in others there was
a very kindly streak. Above all he had
everousness, and this, I think,
produced the uncompromising
ruthlessness which could make him a
distinctly prickly personality at times. We
in The Light Car used to regard him with

A rare picture taken on Kimber’s wedding day with the couple’s honeymoon car, a Singer 14 previously raced at Brooklands and later fitted with a Hispano-Suiza body.

A Morris Garages Chummy, the real predecessor of the MG. It was one of these that Kimber drove in the Land’s End Trial two years before competing in ‘Old Number One’.

The diminutive Kimber and his financial backer Sir William Morris on January 20, 1930, the day of the MG Car Company’s inaugural luncheon.

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an odd mixture of affection and respect,
coupled with a measure of apprehension
as to what he would find to grumble at
next.”

Bravely disregarding the frequent pain
of his damaged hip, Kimber became an
agile tennis player and a good ballroom
dancer. An early Leica owner, he was
working in 35mm at a time when many
serious photographers were still wedded
to 3½-plate glass negatives. Another hobby
was flying-fishing, but his greatest love was
to get aboard his little six-tonner and sail
right away from land-based worries.

The combination of small stature and a
strong stubborn streak encouraged
Kimber to design some fairly cramped
vehicles. His first MG employee, the 6ft
3in Cec Cousins, never forgot a supremely
uncomfortable ride in the prototype MG
Midget of 1928, at the end of which all
criticism was brushed aside. As Cousins
Cecil Kimber with wife Rene and daughter Jean in 1935 watching a J2 tackle the annual trial organised by the MG Car Club at Abingdon. The windows behind them on the left were those of the author’s office from 1939 until 1969.

...and soon started gunning for Kimber — backed by the straitlaced Lady Nuffield, who had disapproved of Kimber’s second marriage, a few months after Rene’s death in 1938, to a much younger girl he had known for some years. When Kimber secured an important wartime contract for Abingdon without first seeking Nuffield Group approval, Thomas demanded his resignation. It was a disgraceful thing to do, and in normal times the Kimber family would have taken legal action. But this was November 1941, with the war going badly for Britain on all fronts.

Kimber was hired by Charlesworth, the coachbuilders, to prepare their factory for aircraft production. Then he moved to Specialloid Pistons, and early in 1945 he got in touch with Harold Connolly again: “Hadn’t changed a bit — still just as nice, kind, thoughtful, and never went up-stage. But I knew that Thomas and Lord had hurt him badly; he was very unhappy.” By this time the war outlook had improved enormously, and Kimber said he wanted Connolly to meet Sir John Black of Triumph, two weekends later, to discuss his post-war sports car designs.

That appointment was not kept. The previous Sunday, February 4, 1945, Cecil Kimber was killed in a freak accident at King’s Cross when travelling to Peterborough on behalf of Specialloid. After 40 years of fast motorcycles and cars, he was fatally injured in a railway carriage going backwards at no more than a walking pace.

Kimber’s Marshall-blown Magnette with drophead body by Corsica which he used in 1934 was allegedly good for 100mph on the road. It still exists today and was recently bought at auction for the Basile de Ferranti collection.