

# MGA

The man in charge looks back at the competition history of the prototype MGAs

By Marcus Chambers.

ON 1 December, 1954 the Competition Department of the MG Car Co was re-opened. To begin with it shared the workshops of the Development Department, pending the completion of a new workshop being built next door. There was a resurgence of the old MG team spirit which had been put into a state of animated suspension since Lord Nuffield and Lord Austin had decided that both factories should stop racing in 1935. But as luck would have it some of the enthusiasts who had done so much to keep the Octagon to the fore in the past were still very much in evidence. Cecil Cousins was now works manager – he had been the racing manager in those days – Jacko Jackson was now chief inspector and Alec Hounslow the foreman of the Development Department. Syd Enever as chief designer was the formidable back room boy behind the record breaking cars past and future and was to be a worthy successor to H. N. Charles the pre-war designer. George Eyston, who was now a Director of C. C. Wakefield, the Castrol makers, was always on call to help and advise or organise anything to do with record breaking at Utah or anywhere else for that matter, a subject of which he knew more than anybody else. The whole team was led in a dashing and inspiring fashion by John Thornley, the Managing Director.

A programme for rallies and races was already drawn up, drivers had been chosen and cars were being prepared by the end of 1954. There were a number of interesting prototypes around, amongst which was the famous EX 179 record breaking car which externally resembled the pre-war Goldie Gardner record breaker very closely, but was mounted on an MGA-type chassis. This car took the 10 mile 1½-litre record at 153.69mph. The last three years had been very formative and in 1951 Syd Enever, assisted by Alec Hounslow (who had been the riding mechanic when Nuvolari won the 1933 TT on a Magnette), had collaborated with George Phillips, a private enthusiast, to produce a low profile MG Le Mans car, powered by a TF engine. This car was the forerunner of the MGA prototype which during 1954 was given the code number EX 175 until its announcement date.

It was in this atmosphere of great optimism, assisted by the complete co-operation of all the MG departments and followed a little later by help from the development departments of Longbridge and Cowley, that I found myself in charge of the MG Competition Department.

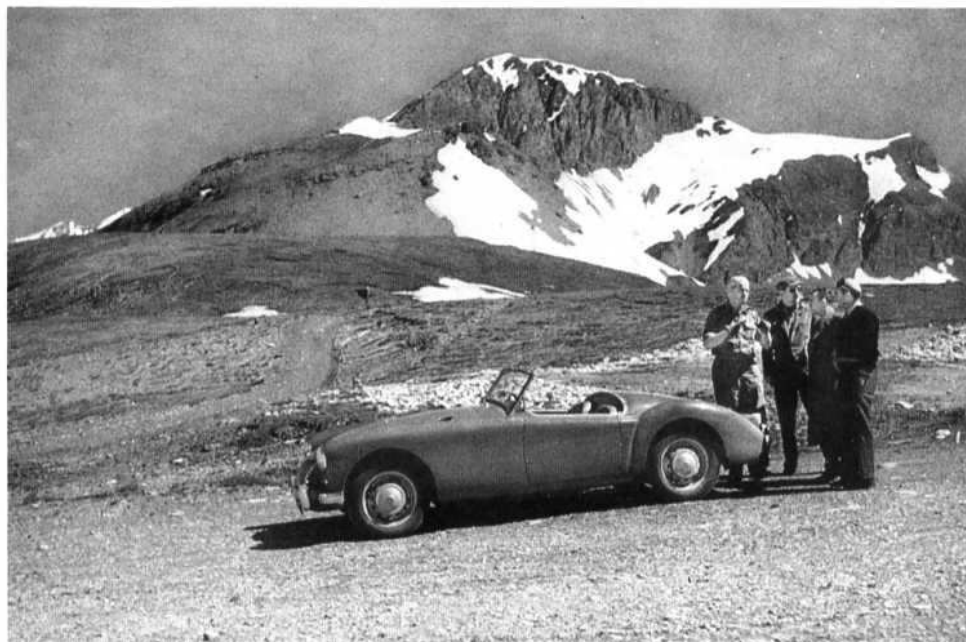
We had the four Le Mans cars, which were in effect MGA prototypes with light alloy bodies, and were built by Syd Enever's boys, together with three MG Magnette

saloons, which had been entered for the 1955 Monte Carlo Rally; the programme for 1955 included Le Mans and the Tourist Trophy Race, then held in Ulster. The Le Mans cars were to concentrate on reliability so as to finish and qualify for the Biennial Cup Race in 1956.

Suitable racing drivers had been chosen by John Thornley, but British rally drivers who were not already attached to a works team, and who had International experience, were hard to find. At that time there was not an MG with a good power-to-weight ratio in production, and as a result they were not likely to attract any of the great named drivers. As a result the Monte-Carlo Rally was not a great success, but the RAC rally in March 1955 produced a couple of class wins, one in a TF and one in a Magnette; and the Scottish in June gave us a 1,2,3, in the 1500 sports car class.

The 1955 Le Mans race was entered into with great enthusiasm and much optimism. The cars even lapped faster than we expected, managing 94mph without much driver effort. However fate was against us; the Mercedes multi-car accident which took place just opposite our pit was the most serious that motor racing had ever experienced, and naturally any publicity which the Ted Lund and Johnny Lockett MGs achieved was completely overshadowed by the disaster. We lost Dick Jacobs' car in an unexplained crash at White House Corner. Dicky said later that he thought the "Slower" signal had made him take the wrong line on that corner; but he was very lucky to come out of it alive and he spent a long while in the Churchill Hospital, to which he was flown by the Nuffield Organisation. The team returned to England with bitter-sweet feelings; we had very nearly brought off our plan at the first attempt.

The Alpine Rally of 1955 was cancelled, as the FIA and the French government had got in such a panic after the Le Mans disaster that motor sport in France looked like ending for some time. Until new regulations were drawn up, no racing or rallying took place in France. John Thornley who was the real power behind the whole British Motor Corporation's competition policy, suggested that I should use some of the Alpine budget and time to prove a number of different models as well as suitable drivers on the Continent. We recruited some ex-HRG rally drivers, led by the late John Gott, who was, with the exception of Ian Appleyard, probably the most experienced private entrant in England at that time. When it came to events like the Alpine, John had detailed records of rally times and feasibility studies for every pass in the Alps. 32



Above, prototype MGA on the Col d'Iseran during tests 1955 showing styling differences. Left, team cars in the 1956 Alpine

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We set out with a Le Mans MGA, a prototype MGA (heavier), an Austin A50 with a MGA Le Mans engine and an Austin A90. We visited Spa, Nurburgring and some of the higher Alpine passes and called in at Montlhery track on the way home. We returned with a lot of useful information and a much better idea of what makes a rally driver really tick.

The Tourist Trophy followed in the autumn and two of the Le Mans-type cars were fitted with twin cam engines, one with a Longbridge engine, designed by Appleby who had worked with Murray Jamieson on the famous pre-war Austin 750 s/c twin cam cars, and the other from Engines Branch, Courthouse Green, Coventry, where the Nuffield engines were developed by Eddie Mayer. Both cars were fitted with Weber carburettors of which there was not a great deal of tuning information. However, I contacted my friend Dicky Protheroe who ran them on his very fast XK 120 and he agreed to come over and help us. The engines played up in practice and mis-fired badly as soon as they got warmed up. The trouble persisted during the race in spite of the fact that we had changed most of the components. The result was disappointing and the race was again marred by accidents and fatalities which continued to give racing in general a bad name. We came back and the boffins found that the cause of the trouble was due to cracked inlet manifolds. For reasons which I have never understood the Longbridge engine was dropped and the Nuffield engine, with its more angular cam boxes, became the MGA TC production model. During the winter we had time to think about the MGA team for 1956. Pat Moss was gaining experience in a TD and we were running some modified saloons with slight success. Nancy Mitchell, who has a great record with HRG, had joined us as a full time driver. At first with Magnettes and later with MGAs, winning the Ladies' European Touring Championship in 1956 and 1957, almost exclusively with MG.

In May 1956 we ran two MGAs in the Mille Miglia, entered in the 1500cc limited price category. The cars were driven by Peter Scott-Russell/Tom Haig and Nancy Mitchell/Pat Faichney. The weather for much of the race was appalling with floods and torrential rain, nevertheless both the number one drivers drove the full distance. The MGs had a great struggle against the Sunbeams and the Triumphs. They finished 70th and 74th respectively out of 365 starters, of which 182 finished. Nancy and Pat were the first ladies' crew to finish and the cars were 4th and 5th in the 1100 to 1500cc Sports car class. They were beaten by an Osca, which came 9th overall, Behra's Maserati and a Porsche so we felt that we had done better than it looked. In retrospect we should have run the Le Mans cars and gone for the sports class and not the limited price class, which was won by Jaguar. The cars gave no trouble and had no service during the race and achieved an average speed of about 65mph.

In July Nancy Mitchell and Pat Faichney were entered in a production hardtop MGA in the Alpine. The other team cars came to

grief but Nancy and Pat won an Alpine Cup, for an unpenalised run, and the Coupes des Dames. From 1956 Alpine our successes in that event grew followed later by the Liege-Rome-Liege.

The Development department was not however idle, record breaking cars of a new breed were coming along. The most interesting being EX 181 which took the world's 1½-litre record for the mile at 245.64mph in 1957 driven by Stirling Moss and later in 1959 Phil Hill reached 254.33mph. EX 181 was the tear drop shaped car designed by Sid Enever.

The old test bed where Goldie Gardner's engines had been tested was pensioned off.

They used to show me the chips in the walls caused by flying connecting rods from the George Eyston record engines. A new test bed was installed to look after the latest prototypes. Alec Hounslow no longer had to worry about the competition boys as we were moved to a new spacious workshop. This was presided over by two gentlemen who were to make a name for England by the way they prepared, tuned and serviced every thing from the TD, MGA, and Austin Healey 3000, to the works Mini Coopers. They were my two foremen, Duggie Watts and Tommy Welman, who were worthy successors to the Cousins and Hounslovs of the old brigade. ●



Opposite, Le Mans 1955 with Dick Green and Alec Hounslow; 41 (Miles/Lockett) finished 12th, 42 (Jacobs/Flynn) crashed. Inset, on the way is the 1956 Alpine. Above, sad remains of 42 after Dick Jacobs accident; chef's comment 'Oh! Quelle omelette!'. Left, Green and Hounslow straighten the front end of the Lund/Waeffler car. Below, scrutineering line-up but someone's got the numbers wrong!





