

RISEN FROM THE ASHES

A remarkable MGA in period, this Twin Cam has undergone an even more remarkable restoration in recent years to become a piece of living motorsport history.

WORDS AND PICTURES: ANDY STARKEY



ABOVE: The MGA Twin Cam on the grid at Nurburgring for the 1000km race.

factory in 1958. He ordered the car as a righthand drive export vehicle, (this would apparently speed up the delivery,) as well as asking for a competition wiring loom to be fitted and sets of double fuses – this car was headed for a life in racing. No sooner had the MG rolled off the production line than its bodywork was removed by Peel Fabrications of Sudbury and a bespoke hand-crafted aerodynamic replacement front end was built.

At the same time the brand new zero miles Twin Cam engine received some extensive work, being fully ported and given bigger valves, redesigned cooling and the addition of twin Weber carbs, all by the fair hands of Barwell Engineering. Roger has an old receipt of Paul's from Barwells and the work cost £1500. That might sound like a bargain, but don't forget that this was 1959 and with the help of those cunning little chaps at Google, I've found that this amount is equivalent to more like £24,000 in today's money. That's on top of buying the car and the new bespoke bodywork – Paul must have been a fairly wealthy chap who »

History has never been my best subject. When I was a mere strip of a boy, the school curriculum of the time made the subject pretty dull in my eyes – all kings and queens and the holy wars and that sort of thing. It was only when I heard about Harold getting one in the eye at the Battle of Hastings that it started sounding remotely interesting.

Some time later I started to learn about the industrial revolution, the arrival of steam, mechanisation and of

course the invention of the motor car; finally my little ears pricked up and I started to take notice. Yes, modern history was certainly more my cup of tea. Unfortunately, I'm now old enough to be a part of that history, remembering when we'd play music on vinyl and when petrol was 33p a gallon. Certainly some of the cars I've owned over the years would now be classics if only they had survived in more caring hands than my own. I guess I wasn't to know back then. Someone who does care about such

things however, and cares an awful lot, is Roger Skinner. With his lovely MGA Twin Cam he has given me a history lesson that is far more interesting than a bunch of musty old Stuarts and Tudors. The story behind this car is one of mystery, money and near tragedy. Sounds more like an episode of *Murder She Wrote* than a magazine feature and I'm no Angela Lansbury, but here goes...

Way before Roger was involved with this car, a certain Paul Fletcher had ordered it directly from the





ABOVE: Perfect in its period trim and back at Silverstone for our photoshoot.

RIGHT: Twin Cam engine survived the fire and has been meticulously rebuilt.

« was very determined to fulfil the plans he had made for the MG.

That plan had been for Paul to race during 1959 as part of a three car team under the Fitzwilliam Racing banner, a team that MG supported when the marque was banned from racing after Le Mans in 1955. Paul was a close friend of Richard 'Fitz' Fitzwilliam and had raced with him in 1958. The 1959 calendar would include such iconic venues as Silverstone, Goodwood and the Nurburgring, featuring Richard Fitzwilliam, Robin Carnegie and of course Paul Fletcher as drivers, all in MGA Twin Cams, though only Paul's was to have the bespoke bodywork.

The year had its ups and downs. One of the more harrowing adventures was when Mr Fletcher's MG came



a cropper at Silverstone, coming off and rolling at Copse. There were no injuries to Paul thankfully, but the same can't be said of the car. Duly fixed, our car finished the year intact, only for Paul to switch mounts and turn to single seaters for his

adrenalin-fuelled antics in 1960.

In November 1961 WGN 734 appeared in *Motor Sport* magazine amongst the cars for sale with the Gold Seal Car Co. Ltd of London. Now finished in British Racing Green instead of the original black and with a paltry asking price of just £545, this must have been a bitter pill to swallow considering the build costs.

The text in the advert said: 'A most rapid and exciting car to drive.' Simon Richardson must have been enticed by the prospect as the car ended up in his keep. What Simon used the car for is not clear, as Roger has not found any racing history at all for WGN during this time. It seems that Simon had just enjoyed 'a most rapid and exciting' time with her until 1969 at least, when yet another owner comes into the mix.



The interior was destroyed in the arson attack of 1986, but has now been restored back to its red leather glory. As with all the many details during this painstaking process, the car's first owner – Paul Fletcher – was consulted on a regular basis to ensure that the finished result is a near perfect a recreation of the car as it was when he first had it readied for racing back in 1958.



This was a Mr Paul Briault. There's no absolute proof of any track action with Mr Briault either, but some photo history shows a few modifications. The front end was made to flip up for example, but keeping the aero shape. I can only assume the panels were bonded together? The rear end got chopped and squared off too, and I don't think you'd go to all that trouble if it wasn't for a particular purpose. Just what that purpose might have been is still not clear, however.

By 1978 the car came into the care of the MG Twin Cam guru, Peter Wood of Twyford. As a side note, this is a chap I have to meet. Not only is he

an absolute god when it comes to these engines, but he's also known as a restorer of aeroplanes and their engines! Peter, I hope you like beer because I'm coming for a pint and a chat some time very soon.

Anyway, back to WGN and what happened next. The car was stored away safely in a big wooden shed behind Peter's place – except it didn't turn out to be quite that safe after all. In 1986 some mindless hoodlum practiced a bit of arson on the wooden structure and caused a considerable amount of damage to it and its contents. Our Twink suffered so badly that the whole aluminium body was

destroyed, as was the entire leather interior, along with untold harm being done to other cars stored in the same building. One saving grace, if you can call it that, was the fact that Peter had partially stripped the car down and the engine was out and stored elsewhere. Small mercies, indeed.

It stayed in this sorrowful state until 2008. At that point Roger had completed his latest project and was popping around to his friend, the aforementioned Peter Wood. During their routine cuppa and natter about all things mechanical, Peter suggested WGN 734 as an interesting project for Roger to get his teeth into. »



ABOVE: The large fuel tank in the boot had originally been adapted from that found in a Commer van.



ABOVE: Although the tail had been modified by later owners, the original curves were rebuilt in aluminium because that is how it had been raced from new.



The streamlined front end that Paul Fletcher had commissioned back in 1958 was destroyed by fire and had to be painstakingly recreated by hand from aluminium.



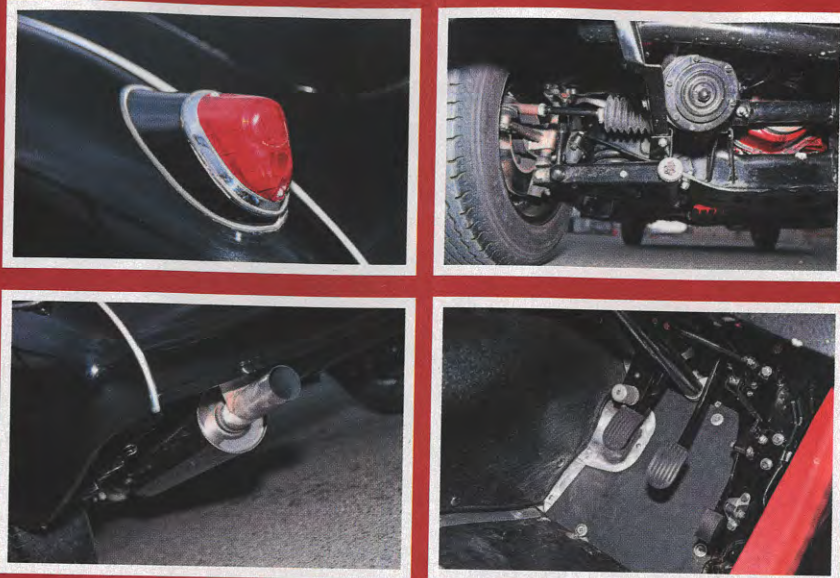
MGA Twin Cam



« Having listened to the tale and with the promise from Peter to rebuild the engine, Roger decided to take the car on and bring her quite literally back from the ashes.

Work began right away, with the stripped chassis quickly providing the first problem to be rectified. Either through the roll at Silverstone all those years ago or from the fire, Roger found that the front goalpost uprights were out of alignment. All was not lost, however, because the car was about to lend a helping hand. 'I unstitched the welds on the uprights,' Roger says, 'and with an almighty bang the chassis jumped back into shape.' (Perhaps there was more to the film *Christine* than I thought...!) Roger simply had to weld it back up in the new position, and at the same time replace the rear legs as they had definitely suffered in the heat of the fire.

There was another little anomaly in the chassis though, a huge dent in one of the crossmembers behind the driver's seat. Thankfully Roger was able to contact Paul Fletcher at this point, and he was more than happy to shed some light on it. Paul's long legs meant the seat didn't go back quite far enough for his proportions, so he took a big hammer to it. Roger tells me: 'It could have been so easily fixed, but it's



ABOVE: Despite being beautifully finished in every detail, owner Roger enjoys his Twin Cam whatever the weather. It may even make a return to racing in due course.

Paul's mark on the car and I decided that it should stay.'

Roger was also able to discuss those bespoke wings with Paul. Those front wings and the nose would be the hardest thing to recreate, so Roger enlisted the help of a very talented chap called Rick. He worked at the renowned panel beaters and restorers Healey Brothers of Northamptonshire, and was charged with making that aluminium front end. Each tiny step of the development of these new panels was sent to Paul Fletcher for his opinion on how close Rick was getting to the original. It took an awful long time and lots of toing and froing, but after nearly four years the bodywork met with everyone's approval.

Thankfully the rear end was a lot easier as these panels were all standard when the car was racing, and much easier to recreate

in aluminium. All the other notable modifications that had been made way back in the late 1950s were retained – the brackets for the adjustable Koni suspension, the modified rear spring hangars, and even the extra large fuel tank that was originally derived from a Commer van were all remade and fitted. And since the goal was to return the car to its original racing trim, that naturally meant it had to be returned to the original shiny black paintwork.

At last the day came when the freshly rebuilt engine and newly perfected body were reunited with the restored red leather interior and seats and the car was complete. Roger was able to show the finished article to Paul Fletcher, and he confirmed that everything was just how it had been in 1959, a tear-jerking moment for him

I'm sure. Unfortunately though, since then it seems that Paul has become hard to find and all contact has been lost. Maybe someone out there could shed some light on his whereabouts and perhaps let him know about this feature? In any case, wherever he may be,

I'm pretty certain that he would approve of Roger's efforts.

So, will WGN 734 see competitive action again? Well, as Roger tells me: 'I won't race it myself, but you never know, I may find someone who'd race for me in the future. At the end of the day it's just a car and I enjoy it rain or shine.' Well that leaves it nice and open ended for us, but I'd like to suggest it's not just a car, it's much more than that – it's a unique piece of British motorsport history.



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