

British in Belgium

John Bridgen tells of his adventures in Belgium racing an MGB



Top, the author at speed in the Brown & Gammons MGB during the race in Belgium, and above, collecting the third-place goodies after the race in Luxembourg while Barry Sidery-Smith occupies the number one spot

To race a car in Britain is one thing, but to race abroad is perhaps more exciting and maybe even a little glamorous. A prophet, as the saying goes, is never recognised in his own country.

Whatever their incentives for going to Belgium, 23 Englishmen and their cars went by hovercraft and ferry from Dover to Calais, Ostend and Zeebrugge and onto Zolder for the ninth European Historic Grand Prix. There wasn't actually a Historic GP race — that was just the name of the meeting.

The event was organised by the Belgium Racing Automobile Vintage Organisation, or BRAVO for short, which invited the 'MGBCV8 Club' on the understanding there would be a full grid for the August 13/14 meeting.

It's worth mentioning here that although we are told a carnet is always required when taking a car abroad, this was Belgium and not France. France requires you to have a carnet even for your plug spanner, but in good old Belgium if your car has a registration document, number plates and road tyres then you will be okay. No one bothered to ask about the trailers, but they could in France.

I had been offered a road-modified MGB to race by Brown and Gammons of Baldock, which specialises in MGs of all years, but has a particular interest in the B and T-Types.

Ron Gammons drove over in his road-going 'BCV8' which doubled as a race car for the purpose of this trip. It was also to take him and his wife on a few days' holiday, and then to compete in two more races at the Goodyear test track in Luxembourg on August 20 and 21. Valerie Gammons, or Mrs Ron, as my mechanic/gofer Eddie Marriott insisted on calling her, was sceptical about making it back to Blighty with the car intact. She needn't have worried as Ron didn't once let the curtain of red mist drop over his eyes, in the car or the bar, which is more than can be said for some others.

The evening after the Zolder race Glyn Giusti (who had taken his T-Type over and won twice) was involved in an ice-cream eating competition with Freddie Yhap at midnight. The catch was you weren't allowed to use your hands. Mad dogs and Englishmen etc. . .

Anyway I had other things to do, the first of which was a thorough check of the car as I didn't want to get pulled up at scrutineering here. After all it was a long way home for a failed car. I remembered to put the helmet and scrutineering ticket in the car and off we went. I needn't have worried though, despite joining a long queue and my first practice session only an hour away.

I pushed the car into a magnificent looking shed — it even had a weighbridge in there — on to which I steered the car. As requested I produced the scrutineering ticket. It was checked against the car number and before I could say another word or sentence, like: "Do you want the bonnet open?" I was being ushered out of the shed.

Being new to the circuit we were given two

practice sessions, one on the Friday the other on the Saturday. All but two of our 25-car (two Continentals were entered) grid improved their times during the second session.

The car I drove has an illustrious history and won numerous races in the hands of Barry Sidery-Smith. It is now no longer a winner and despite the handicap of a well-treaded set of tyres it went well, and I qualified 12th on the grid next to Dave Jarvis. He was having back trouble, but was being attended to by Dr Rod Hunt-Longton who qualified himself in sixth place. Jarvis was lucky to be on the grid at all as in practice he had broken the rear axle of his modified road-going class 1800 B. Freddie Yhap's clutch went in his similar B and he drove 250 miles to collect parts for both cars, which were repaired in time for the race. Peter Blackburn's monster B V8 didn't run properly all weekend, and, despite its reputed 300bhp, was 23rd on the grid.

When the flag dropped I made an average start; I overtook one, and one overtook me. By lap three I was starting to look for a way past Dave Jarvis, and behind me and dropping back were Neville Marriner, Francis Ridley and Paul Campfield, (B, B, C in that order). It was cat and mouse with Jarvis until the eighth of the 12 lap race, when Peter Blackburn's downdraught V8 loomed up from behind. He had started a couple of laps behind and seemed to be going better. He got by at the chicane before the start/finish straight and I went with him. Then the rain started. Just a mist at first but soon it was pouring. With the roads slippery, the tyres that Sir Robert Mark likes so much came into their own, and with cars pirouetting in front and behind I finished tenth, and fifth in a class of 14.

First in was Terry Smith, a minute ahead of Geoff Gear who was ten seconds in front of Colin Percy, then Terry Osbourne, Graham Davis, Barry Sidery-Smit (as they insisted on calling him), John Lodge, Mike Hibbard and Rod Hunt-Longton. During the race Neville Marriner was the only one to permanently find the Armco, but there was more damage to pride than car.

The MG circus moved on and after a few days

rest we took up positions at the Goodyear test track in Luxembourg. The numbers had been much reduced, and maybe it was those who thought we should be there to demonstrate our faith in the followers of MG cars on the Continent that went. The cult is as strong there as here.

Scrutineering there was also not quite what we expected. I was asked whether this was the car which had raced at Zolder. "Yes," I said. "Good, then I have seen it," said the scrutineer as he signed the card. The scrutineer also raced an MGB, but he came last, not having any rear shock absorbers!

The circuit was the Goodyear test track and had a long straight returning in a series of tight and tightening corners and was quite unlike any other circuit I have raced on. The surface was very grippy producing an inordinate amount of tyre squeal, and it varied in width considerably from just about three car's widths to ten.

As expected, Barry Sidery-Smith was fastest, I was second, Paul Campfield in his C GT 3000 was third followed by Ron Gammons.

We were to have two races, both of eight laps, one on the Saturday and one at 9am on the Sunday! The first four on the grid had planned to give a show to the crowd, for the first few laps, then it was every man for himself. However the plan started well, but when Peter Blackburn started to approach, Barry decided to go for home. Blackburn chased but to no avail, and I was narrowly third. During the race there was only one incident when Joe Blackburn and Phil Mavis, who were both in green MGB Roadsters decided to swap some paint. Paul Campfield retired on the last lap with a broken camshaft. To add insult to injury his Rover SD1 3500 overheated on the way home.

The order of the race the next day was the same, with Ron Gammons coming in fourth instead of sixth, and the two green cars once again doing battle, but this time swapping undercoat as well.

The race over, we went back to the campsite and as we finished loading up, the heavens opened. Well, we could take a hint and headed off for home, real beer and our own beds. 

The entire party of British MG racers in the assembly area at Zolder prior to practice for what developed into a good race

