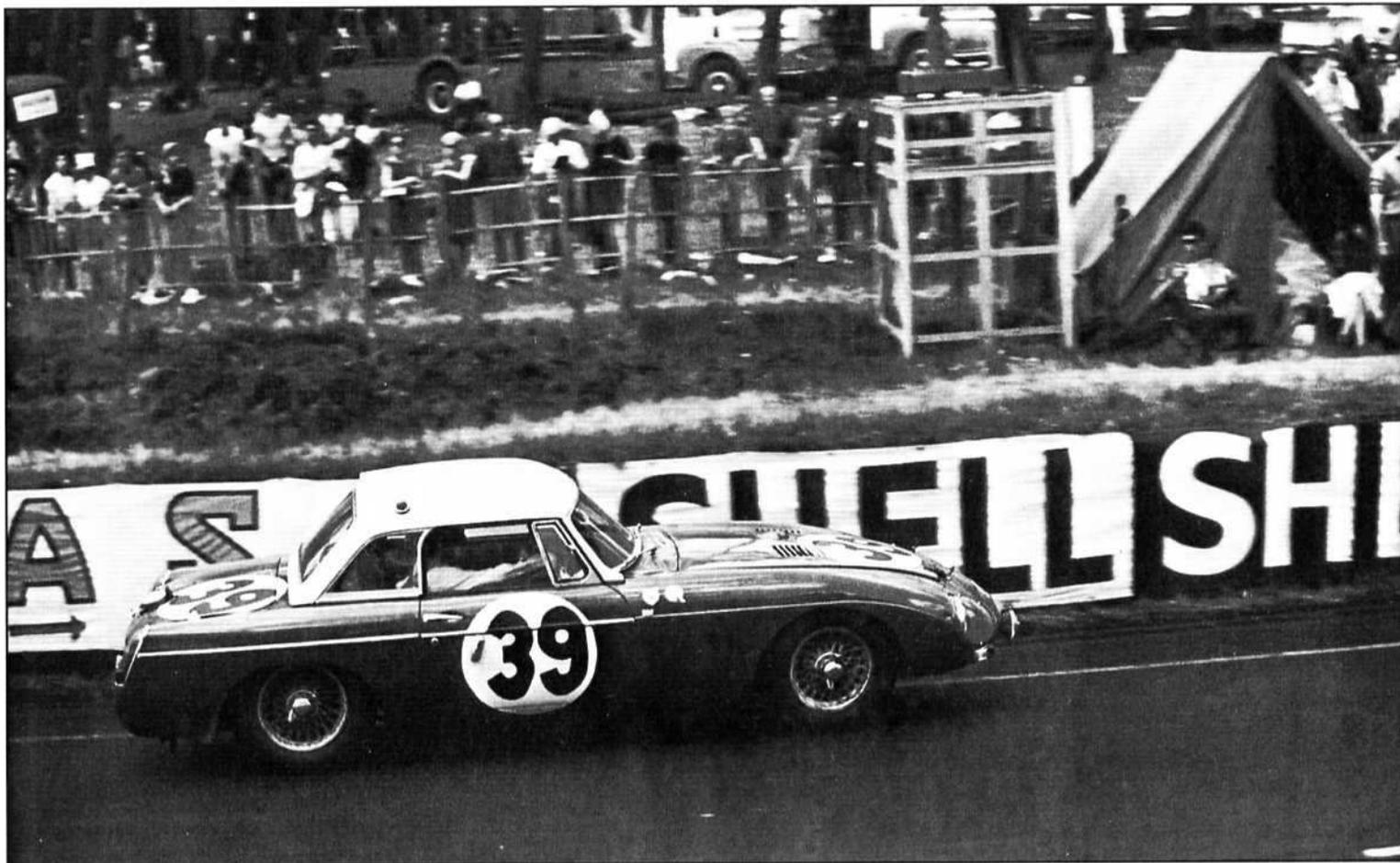


Déjà Vu

MGBs finished well at Le Mans for three years running. Jeremy Coulter reunites one of the gallant cars with the great race 20 years on

Paddy Hopkirk and Andrew Hedges took this works MGB to 11th overall at Le Mans in 1965. This year we returned to the circuit with the car and its owner, Barry Sidery-Smith. Once again, eyebrows were raised



THERE'S no getting away from it. Some cars are glamorous. Others might be successful, fast and much loved but they just aren't glamorous. This is how I'd account for the raised eyebrows in some quarters when T&CC announced that the Historic car we'd been reuniting with this year's Le Mans 24 Hour race would be an MGB.

Not any MGB mind, but the very car that Paddy Hopkirk and Andrew Hedges piloted around to 11th place overall and second in class in the 1965 *Vingt Quatre Heures*. Lest you not follow my line of reasoning, typical of the cars that T&CC has previously taken back to Le Mans have been a D-Type, C-Type, 3.0-litre Bentley, Aston Martin DB3S, Ferrari 250GT, Ford GT40 *et cetera*. You get the picture?

However, in the course of that Le Mans weekend we managed to correct a few people's notions of the capability of an MGB and had a highly enjoyable and unashamedly nostalgic time.

Since 1983 a syndicate of various British-based companies has come together to take back to Le Mans a group of cars that have either actually taken part in the race or are closely related to a model that has. Not just British cars you understand; it's the event that is being celebrated, not just the British flag. Hence the inclusion this year of a Ferrari, an Alfa Romeo, and a Delahaye.

The right crowd plus us!

Pirelli, Aston Martin, Lagonda, Ford, Sealink and Rolls-Royce all contributed to make possible another historic visit this year with the event being organised under the chairmanship of former Rolls-Royce man Denis Miller-Williams.

The cavalcade of cars gathered on the Thursday before this year's Le Mans race at the picturesque country club run by the RAC in Epsom. The T&CC presence comprised Lionel Burrell, seated beside

former T&CC man, now Aston Martin man, Michael Bowler in Victor Gauntlett's Aston Martin DB3, while I was enjoying sitting in the surprisingly commodious passenger seat of Barry Sidery-Smith's MGB.

1985 is, of course, Lagonda's golden anniversary of success at Le Mans so it was highly appropriate to have the two team cars along as part of the procession. The 1935 winning car belongs to T&CC's auction correspondent David Johnson, while its sister car (plus the third non-Le Mans team car) is owned by Mrs Robbie Hewitt. A 4½-litre Bentley and the ex-Lord Howe Alfa, both from the stable of Bill Lake, plus the other Bentley, a Delahaye and an LM Aston Martin completed the pre-war picture.

From the post-war years there were three further Astons, a DB2 driven by the Hon Gerald Lascelles, a DB4GT Zagato and the DB3. The lovely Zagato is Nigel Dawes', but Ray Wiltshire was at the wheel, Nigel choosing to drive his ex-

Cunningham lightweight E-Type. The other Jaguar present was the 1955 winning car which is superbly restored and must surely be the finest D-Type around. Nigel Hulme's 4.7-litre AC Cobra and the Sidery-Smith MGB completed the list of cars being driven to France. James Allington chose to trailer his newly restored Ferrari Testa Rossa while the British Motor Industry Heritage trust team thought that the gas turbine-powered Rover BRM was also better off in a box for the time being. Three GT40s were to meet with the party at the circuit.

The journey from Epsom to Dover took in a severe traffic jam on the approach to the M25. Time and coolant was lost in most cases, turning an otherwise leisurely drive to the coast into a headlong dash. Sealink held the boat as long as possible but eventually had to up-anchor with several of the older cars left behind. They caught up later though.

The MGB made the boat with a few minutes to spare because we'd

If at first...

Three years later and we made it, in the DB3

THREE years ago, Victor Gauntlet was kind enough to loan us his newly acquired Aston Martin DB3/8 sports racer to take to Le Mans. On the way to the coast a wheel bearing failed and that was that. This year we were to try again, a prospect we viewed with relish because with our only too brief first stint with the car, we had really come to enjoy it.

Unlike many high-performance cars from the Fifties and Sixties, Victor's DB3 is so easy to drive, a live, positive gearchange, light accurate steering and almost, but not quite, road-going sports car ride. DB3/8 has a 2.9-litre version of the WO Bentley six-cylinder engine producing around 160bhp. It was raced at Snetterton, Goodwood and Silverstone in 1953/54 by Downing, Parnell and Boles and took a class win in the '54 Dutch sports car GP in the hands of one Beauman.

Well, this time we made it to Le Mans — not without the odd drama: a faulty fuel pump stopped us twice but after a major rebuild on the roadside (with help from the British Motor Industry Heritage group who were taking the Rover BRM Gas Turbine), our journey was without further problems.

Only after parading round the circuit on Saturday morning just before the race, did the car start to misfire. We only just made it back to the pits. At first we suspected the fuel pump, but no, we had to dig deeper to find the screw securing the condenser had come

adrift. Once secured, the engine burst into life again. We did miss the parade of drivers but it could not and did not spoil our enjoyment at driving round this world famous circuit.

Our parade finished, we settled down to watch the 24-hour battle, hoping that the Emka Aston Martin or the V12 Jaguar would put a dent in the Porsche wagon train. The Emka had a good race but all was not so happy for the Jaguars, but maybe next year?

The return journey through France was uneventful until we were nearing our first fuel and watering stop. Suddenly the silencer box under the car on the driver's side split. There was nothing we could do about this, so we motored on, switching the engine off whenever we came up to a traffic jam or had a long run down hill to avoid choking on the fumes that otherwise filled the car.

After a weekend in a car like the DB3, I can see why in the old days drivers had so much fun. This car was capable of being driven to the circuit, raced and if nothing broke, driven back home, or to the factory, in readiness for the next race.

Even though the DB3 was not quite the success that David Brown had hoped it would be when the first car campaigned on the circuits of Europe back in the early fifties, it is certainly a delight to the eyes and ears 30 years on.

Lionel Burrell

"That wretched fuel pump again." Les Anglais dans la soupe



had to stop twice to let the engine cool down. Barry had fitted a Kenlowe to the normally fanless car, but stopping for more than a few seconds saw the temperature gauge rising inexorably. Switching off and keeping fingers crossed for a clean restart of the full-race engine was the only answer.

Just to prove that French officials can be helpful, formalities at Calais were dispensed with and the party drove straight off the boat and into France without documents being sought. We then headed off towards our overnight stop.

The B was running well and any doubts we harboured about run-

ning the car with its straight-through exhaust soon evaporated as we saw the enthusiastic reaction that the car's ear-splitting crackle generated among the French public as we passed by. We had brought along a silencer just in case but to all intents and purposes that car was as-raced at the HSCC's International Historic Weekend meeting of the previous week.

Gacé, a tranquil village some 50 miles from Le Mans, was the venue for lunch the next day and reaching there in good time called for some brisk motoring. Each car had left the overnight hotel in Abbeville in its own time but once on the road the cars soon fell into groups that kept in touch. In the MGB we found ourselves in good company behind the Aston Zagato, D-Type and light-weight E-Type.

Cracking pace

As the roads became clearer and the day became even brighter, so the speed of our mini-convoy increased. After administering a slap on the wrists for being too hard on the overdrive unit and for slipping the clutch too much in an effort to get the cammy kangarooing MG under way Barry seemed happy enough to let me drive.

I found the car similar in many ways to the 'B' that I'd raced at Zandvoort a few weeks previously (see page 66). However, the engine was much peakier and difficult to get away and the brakes felt terrible. The gearchange was much better though, cleaner and quicker and at least this car had wind-up windows rather than the pieces of Perspex wedged into place on the Zandvoort car.

Ray Wiltshire was setting a cracking pace in the Zagato, with the E-Type next up, then the D-Type and finally the red and white MG. At 120mph nobody seemed too concerned, except perhaps Mr Neilan, sitting perched in the air-blasted passenger seat of the D-Type. Wind blast or no, the D-Type soon speeded up a little when I had the cheek to overtake, albeit briefly!

The fact that the MG had not only been able to keep up in this fast company but actually gone by at one stage caused quite a stir at the lunch stop. Barry was required to raise the bonnet to prove that the engine bay did in fact house 'only' a B-series four-cylinder engine. That red-painted lump looks remarkably innocuous but in truth produces a healthy 130bhp, and is one of the main reasons for the car's speed.

Barry bought DRX 255C in 1972,

having been asked by the then owner Bob Shellard to sell it for him. "I advertised it for sale at around £950," recalls Barry, "but I got to thinking that I might not have another chance like this, so I bought it myself."

The bodyshell of the car was taken from the Abingdon production line in 1964 and was built up by the competition department in 1965, being completed just days before the Le Mans race. MG historian Wilson McComb was able to come up with the build sheet for this very car. The specification seems quite extended, but the claim made at that time was that all the equipment used could be bought at very reasonable prices from the Special Tuning Dept at Abingdon. By this reckoning, the cost of work-preparing an engine was around £265 in 1965, including such items as a +20in rebore to give a capacity of 1801cc, a special nitrided crank, steel flywheel, AEA 770 crankshaft, gas-flowed cylinder head, special manifold and a Weber carburettor. Sadly this original engine was destroyed years ago, but the unit now fitted to the car is very similar, although of 1850cc.

Missing nose

The outer body was made up in aluminium with discreetly flared wheel arches. The glassfibre hard-top had a vent in the roof. This little flip-up device was in fact an item from an A35 van. There was a 21-gallon tank with double pumps and a 4in filler cap grafted into the aluminium boot. Other racing items included Perspex side windows, uprated dampers, and quick-lift jacking points, while for Le Mans all the fuses and relays were brought inside the car, twin coils were fitted, all the interior chrome painted black and number lights screwed on all round. Also there was a special aerodynamic nosecone which had also graced the '63 and '64 Le Mans cars. Most of these special items remain on the car today but sadly the nosecone, removed after the '65 race, has been lost. Does anyone know what became of it?

After its success at Le Mans in '65, DRX was taken both to the Targa Florio and Sebring where it was used as a practice car and it raced again at Mugello. Alec Poole then bought it from the Comps Dept, made good damage to the chassis sustained at Mugello and raced it for several years.

The car then went to Ireland and

Déjà Vu

Andrew Nielson used it to win the Irish modsports championship in 1970, his career in the car coming to a halt when he flipped it during a hillclimb. It was then repaired and sold to Bob Sheppard before coming to rest with its present owner of 14 years' standing.

Back to the present. The high spot of our Le Mans visit was to be a half-hour demonstration run on the circuit before the race but on the previous evening race organisers, *Automobile Club de l'Ouest*, had arranged a run round the streets of Le Mans and a presentation of each car to the crowds in the main square. The organisation of this affair left something to be desired but the crowds seemed to like it now that the authorities have put a stop to the informal 'Le Mans GP' that once took place round the town square before the race.

The waves and shouts from members of the huge British contingent *en route* to the circuit early the following morning suggested that many of them recognised the MG. We picked our way round the back of the circuit to end up in the Historic paddock behind the Le Mans museum. There we prepared the cars for the demonstration lappery and generally drank in the sights, sounds and smells associated with this great race.

At the allotted time all engines were fired up and the cars trickled round to the track entrance. Finally the signal came and we pulled on to the circuit, lining up in true Le Mans fashion and in age-order along the pit wall. The buzz from the packed grandstands and the intense activity in the adjacent pits as teams readied their race cars made this a time to savour. No less an experience was the drop of the flag



Twenty years on, the Hedges/Hopkirk B awaits a brief but sporting sortie on the Le Mans circuit. The car remains indecently quick for an MGB and it was necessary for the Jaguar and Aston Martin owners to form a syndicate to keep the cheeky B in its place. Attempts to have it put down failed, but honour was restored in the end (see story)

to wave the cars off on the demonstration laps.

Instructions to keep speeds down and stay in age order soon foundered when the Rover-BRM suffered a flame-out of its whispering gas turbine engine and expired temporarily in a cloud of smoke, confusing everybody. Likewise the Webber 3.0-litre Bentley stopped half way down the Mulsanne straight. We subsequently learned that Mr Webber had simply parked up at *Les Hunaudières* restaurant to book a table for dinner. That's real style.

Eventually most drivers gave in to the temptation to speed up and soon we were really flying down that amazing straight. As the extraordinary little engine in the MG climbed towards 7000rpm in top gear — around 135mph — my mind went back to the 'real' race exactly 20 years before.

Team manager Peter Browning had set a target of 288 laps, broken down in nine 29-lap sessions, which he calculated would just break the magic 100mph average barrier. The previous year's effort

had seen that average tantalisingly close at 99.9mph.

As recorded by Denis May writing in *Motor* back in 1965, unscheduled pit stops cost the team 25 minutes and lost six laps:

7¼ hours: Nearside rear tyre puncture. Andrew Hedges turns off at *Tertre Rouge* making it to pit on rim. Three minutes lost changing wheel and repairing incidental damage to wing.

8 hours: Stewards order come in to replace stop lamp bulb broken in *Tertre Rouge* incident. Another three minutes lost.

16¼ hours: Five and a half minutes lost wiring up exhaust pipe reported grounding on right-hand corners ... another payoff of that puncture.

19¾ hours: Paddy Hopkirk called in and carpeted by stewards for allegedly baulking Ferraris at White House.

Actually Paddy Hopkirk's version of the latter incident was rather different as he maintained that the Ferraris were holding *him* up. This may indeed have been the case because the MG was flat through this section of the course while the Ferraris were braking quite heavily. To make up for their car's low top speed, both Hopkirk and Hedges had to drive the MG near its cornering limit all the time.

That said, Peter Browning was forced to ask for some moderation after one third distance when the MG was fitted with the only replacement set of tyres. This situation arose because of the incompatibility of Dunlop's new R7 rear tyre with the B's wheel arches; in fact this was probably responsible for Hedges' fateful puncture. The truth of the matter was that the 'B' had never been race-tested before going to France. The R7s had *seemed* OK. Suddenly the team's stock of fresh R7s became redundant and someone was despatched to find the one remaining (and part worn) set of obsolete R6s. That

one set of tyres lasted for 16 hours ...

The little car kept plugging away and gradually worked its way up the leader board. With three and a half hours still to go disaster nearly struck. By some cruel irony a Ferrari baulked the MG and Hopkirk was forced to stand on the brakes so hard that he vaporised what was left of the front pads and destroyed a caliper piston seal.

Now brakeless, Hopkirk continued with gears and a puny handbrake as his only means of retardation. When the car eventually did cross the line at four o'clock he almost mowed down the welcoming team and they only managed to stop the car by dragging themselves along behind it.

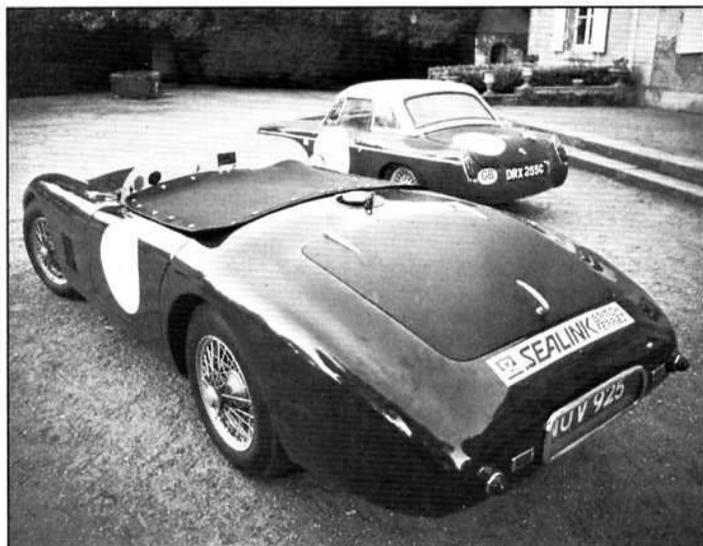
Eleventh overall and second in class to a Porsche seemed fair reward for an entry truly in the spirit of the great race.

These images in my mind evaporated instantly as Barry slid the car round Mulsanne corner once again and ran wide on to the kerb. Fortunately for the sake of my nerves the chequered flag went out minutes later and we left the stage and the next 24 hours to the serious players.

Nigel Dawes yet again took exception to the MG passing a Jaguar on the circuit and formed an impromptu syndicate to buy the car and destroy it. This attempt failed so the honour of the Aston/Jaguar brigade was salvaged by a ritual cremation of a picture of the MG! Barry Sidery-Smith managed to stop laughing long enough to put out the flames and retrieve the charred picture for framing ...!

On the following day with the race over, the Historic cars turned round and started to head back to England. The postscript for the MGB was the screech of tyres and the figure dashing towards us as we filled up with petrol just outside Le Mans. By some remote coincidence, John Neilson, the one previous owner with whom Barry had been unable to get in touch, had spotted the MG as he drove past. There followed a frantic exchange of addresses and information as another chapter in this fascinating car's history unfolded.

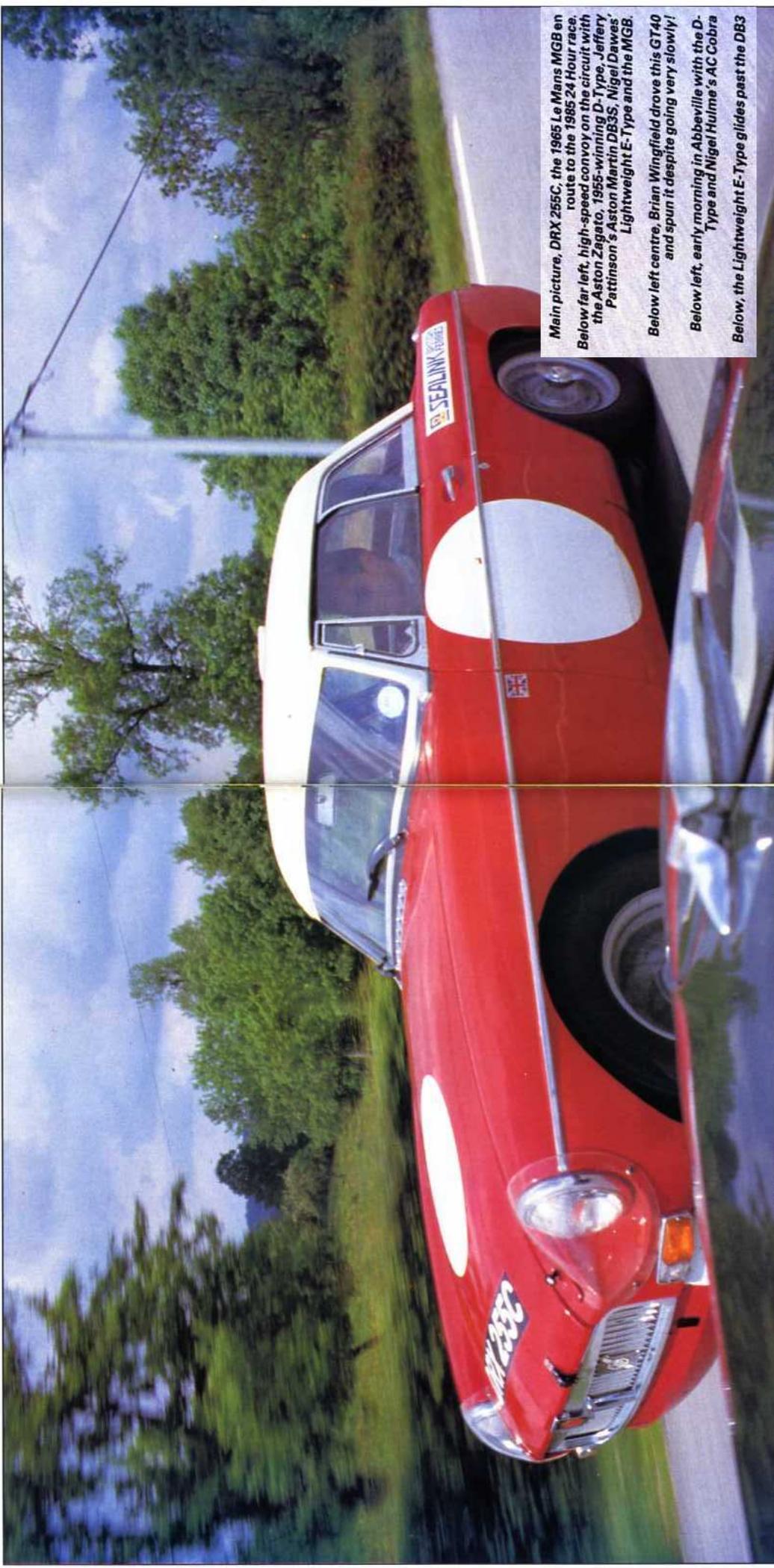
With the exception of one sooted plug the B didn't miss a beat. In 1000 miles it needed just a drop of oil and a few pints of water. The one thing I didn't quite understand was how we managed to fit 21½ gallons of petrol into the 21-gallon fuel tank on the way back to London. We knew there wasn't much fuel left, but it must have been running on air ...





Above left, an impressive lineup on the 'grid' at Le Mans. Top right, Stephen and Ruth Archer in Aston Martin LM17. Left, Michael Bowler and Roger Stowers enjoying Aston DB3/8. Below left, a superb sight, the three Lagonda team cars together. Below, the Webbers' 3.0-litre Bentley with the hood up!





Main picture, DRX 255C, the 1965 Le Mans MGB en route to the 1985 24 Hour race.
Below far left, high-speed convoy on the circuit with the Aston Zagato, 1955-winning D-Type, Jeffery Pattinson's Aston Martin DB3S, Nigel Dawes' Lightweight E-Type and the MGB.
Below left centre, Brian Wingfield drove this GT40 and spun it despite going very slowly!
Below left, early morning in Abbville with the D-Type and Nigel Hulme's AC Cobra
Below, the Lightweight E-Type glides past the DB3

