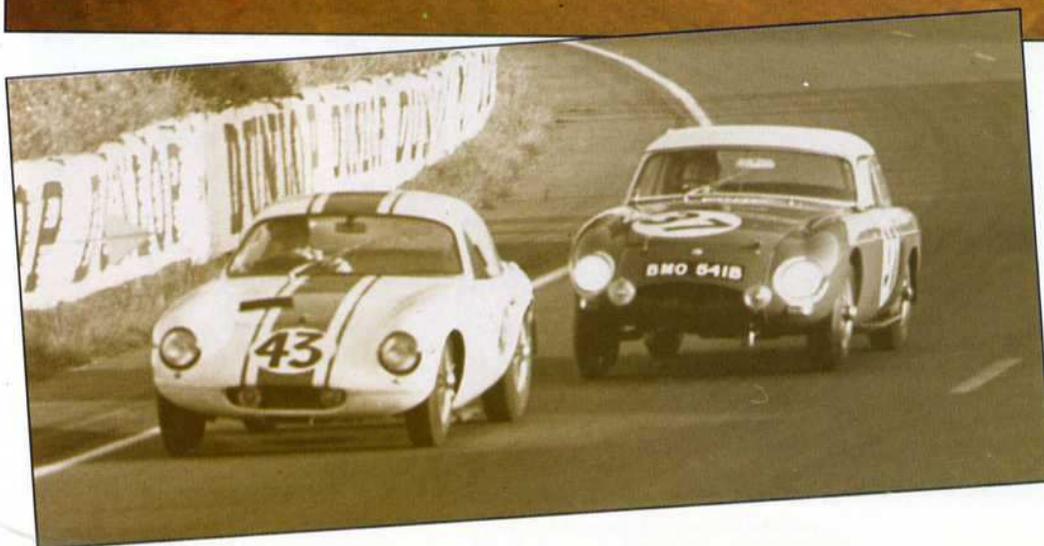




Above, GRX 307D, known as Old Faithful, on the starting ramp of the '66 Monte with Tony Fall at the wheel



Left, MGB versus Elite at Le Mans, 1964. Paddy Hopkirk is the driver

MGB IN ACTION

Though designed as a road car, the MGB outperformed and outlasted many more exotic rivals in international racing. By Wilson McComb

OF the original M-type MG Midget, John Thornley once remarked that nobody had any idea it would race, "or if they did, they omitted to tell the designer." He could have said the same thing about the MGB, although in that case he himself was involved in the design.

Primarily intended to be a rugged open sports car that would provide predictable handling and reliable service on the road for two people and their luggage, the B was built more in the *genre* of a Vintage Bentley than a Lotus. The combination of a 95bhp engine and a kerb weight of well over 2,000lb is not an obvious race-winning formula, that's for sure, and if the displacement is 200cc below two litres, it doesn't seem like a class-winning recipe either. The engine was tough enough to stand tweaking up to about 130bhp (Stage 6 tune) without becoming unreliable, and of course some of the steel body panels could be replaced by light alloy, but the whole structure of the car was such that no dramatic reduction in weight — still less in frontal area or drag coefficient — was possible without a radical departure from the production body.

In practice, substituting the odd lightweight panel barely made up for the extra weight of a hardtop, rollover bar and long range fuel tankage, so Abingdon's works MGBs usually weighed *more* than a standard road car, and the best power-to-weight-ratio that the BMC competitions department could expect from the MGB was about 135bhp/ton. This meant that for international rallying they continued to campaign their well-tried Big Healeys, which, in fully-developed form, offered something closer to 170bhp/ton and the survival qualities of a Sherman tank. By the early Sixties, though, even the mighty Austin-Healey 3000 was starting to look cumbersome for rallying alongside the nimble Mini-Cooper.

What the MGB did have was infinitely better handling than the Healey (which needed extensive mods to make its performance usable, even in the hands of such experts as Pat Moss, the Morleys and Timo Makinen) and a way of keeping on going when the rest had stopped. So BMC's competitions manager, Stuart Turner, decided to keep the MG name alive in the world of motor sport by selected entries in major endurance races such as the Sebring 12 Hours, Le Mans 24 Hours, the Targa Florio and various 1,000-kilometre or even 1,000-mile races. "We knew we hadn't a hope of an outright win with an MGB," he once told me, "but we could certainly pick events that would give us a class win or category — especially long-distance events where reliability counted more than speed."

He and his successor, Peter Browning, did this so effectively between early 1963 and the Leyland takeover of 1968 that the works MGBs from Abingdon achieved more than even they expected: not just class wins and, indeed, sometimes an entire category, but one or two outright victories as well in the most gruelling of races — even in a straight fight with the Porsche 911, Sunbeam Tiger, Jaguar E-type and Ferrari GTB. In the USA, where SCCA regulations allowed a wilder approach to car preparation for shorter-distance events, Joe Huffaker's 156bhp MGBs made a considerable name for themselves in Class E Production racing.

Ironically, the racing career of the works MGBs began with a disastrous flop in America — the place where Abingdon least wanted such a thing to happen. An exceptionally cold winter made it impossible to test the two Sebring cars properly before shipping them to Florida, and an undetected oil-surge problem caused both to run their bottom-end bearings in the 12 Hours. Let it be said, though, that Abingdon never let it happen again. In five other appearances at Sebring, from 1964 to 1968, there was only one other MGB retirement, when the 2,004cc Hopkirk/Hedges car threw a rod after 10½ hours of racing in 1966. Its more mildly-tuned sister car won the 2-litre class that year, beating the Triumph TR4s in the next class up to record the best performance by a British car.

Sebring successes

This was no isolated achievement by the MGBs at Sebring, where the world's sports car manufacturers fought it out for a valuable slice of publicity in the ultra-important US market. Let me spell it out: every year from 1964 to 1968, *without exception*, at least one of the two works MGBs outlasted or outpaced the Triumphs, the Sunbeam Alpines, the Lotuses, the Jaguars. The only time an MGB *wasn't* the highest-placed British finisher at Sebring was in 1965, when Makinen drove a works Sprite so brilliantly during a tropical storm that he overtook the winning Chaparral on the straight! Even including the 1963 disaster, in six years they started 12 cars and finished nine, with three class wins, a second and a third. Twice they finished third in category, beaten in 1966 by a couple of Stingrays and in 1967 by the race-winning Ford GT40s. But they never came higher than 11th overall — that distinction went to the Hopkirk/Hedges lightweight MGC that finished tenth in 1968.

At Sebring, it was politically desirable

to use a number of Canadian and American drivers although they often lacked international racing experience. When one of them commented on the length of the 12 hours after it finished, Peter Browning couldn't resist saying: "Imagine starting now and having the entire race all over again!" By which, of course, he meant Le Mans. MGBs ran only three times at Le Mans before BMC's competitions department pulled out, the speed of more specialised competitors having gone up so much in that time that they would have been hard-pressed to qualify at all. Each time they entered a single car, but it always finished, was always among the first three in the 2-litre class — more than that, it was always among the first three British cars to finish, and on one occasion won the *Motor Trophy* as the highest-placed British finisher.

Each car was a steel-bodied roadster with some light-alloy panels and an extended nose which made it seem a lot more "special" than it really was, for almost everything else was either standard or a standard option obtainable from BMC Special Tuning; not many cars run at Le Mans with standard interior trim and carpets! Engine tune was usually Stage 6, with a single AEH 785 Weber, and on a special 3.307:1 final drive they usually clocked between 130 and 140mph on the Mulsanne Straight.

The first B to appear at Le Mans, in 1963, finished last — but this was no disgrace, for only a dozen cars had survived out of 47 starters, the MG had the 2-litre class to itself, and only a Jaguar and a Lotus finished ahead of it. And it might have done better if Hutcheson hadn't spent 1½ hours digging out of the sand at Mulsanne, but Hopkirk retrieved the situation and they averaged 92mph overall. In 1964, Paddy was partnered by Andrew Hedges and their overall placing was only 19th out of 25 finishers, but they averaged precisely 99.9mph for 2,392 miles and beat all but one of the Porsche 904s in the 2-litre class. That was the year they took the *Motor Trophy* as the best British car in the event. And in 1965, when the same pair finished 11th overall, their MGB was one of only 14 survivors. Once again a Porsche 904 beat the MG in the 2-litre class, and this time the *Motor Trophy* went to the Rover-BRM experimental gas turbine car: it was the MGB's last appearance at Le Mans. In three complete Le Mans races, by the way, the works MGBs made just three unscheduled pit-stops: one to change a punctured tyre, one to change a broken bulb in a tail-light, and one to tighten a loose exhaust pipe.

A lot shorter than Le Mans at 450 miles, the Targa Florio is in many ways more

demanding, with an estimated 850 corners per lap of the classic mountain road circuit. MGBs appeared there three times from 1966 to 1968 and, as at Le Mans, did not altogether disgrace themselves. Indeed, the drivers of quite a few GT40 Fords, Porsche 911s and assorted Ferraris (GTO, 250LM and Dino) were embarrassed in 1966 when the Makinen/Rhodes roadster outpaced them to finish ninth overall, winning not only the 2-litre class but the entire GT category, and backed up by the Hedges/Handley MGB which came second in the class.

The 1967 Targa Florio marked the first appearance of a lightweight MGC coupé, but it was called an MGB because the C had not yet been announced, and had only an overbored (2,004cc) MGB engine. However, Makinen and Hopkirk took it into ninth place overall once again, coming third in class, whereas Andrew Hedges' 1,824cc MGB roadster hit a tree on the second lap. In the 1968 Targa it was the turn of Tony Fall and Peter Brown to crash their private roadster — in fact they crashed it twice, but still finished, while Hopkirk and Hedges drove a steel-bodied BGT and beat all but one of the Porsche Carreras to finish 12th overall, and second in the sports category.

Durability

There isn't space for more than a brief mention of some of the MGB's other successes in international long-distance racing — class placings in the Spa and Montlhéry 1,000-Kilometre and 12-Hour Surfer's Paradise races of 1966, for example — or the Morley brothers' surprising victory in the GT category of the 1964 Monte, one of the model's very few achievements in international rallying. We mustn't overlook the fine performance of John Rhodes and Warwick Banks in the 1965 Brands Hatch 1,000 Miles, a two-day scratch event in which their MGB beat five E-types, Lawrence-tuned Morgans, Triumphs, Healeys, whatever, to win the race outright at a 75.23mph overall average. There's the 1966 successor to that race, reduced to 500 miles but opened to Group 4 sports/racing machinery, in which Roger Enever and Alec Poole beat some even tougher opposition in their works MGB to finish third behind a Cobra and a Ford GT40, averaging 73.38mph in appalling weather.

One of the most remarkable of all MGB performances, though, was surely the outright victory that Andrew Hedges and Julien Vernaeve scored in that extraordinary event, the Nürburgring Marathon of 1966. When public opposition forced the organisers of the Liege-Rome-Liege *Marathon de la Route* to discontinue their superb but wildly dangerous road rally, they eventually replaced it by a race on the full 14-mile Nürburg circuit that lasted from Tuesday midnight until noon the following Saturday — no less than 84 hours or, say, three-and-a-half Le Mans races nailed together. Officially it was not a race, for the cars started at one-minute intervals and were set a bogey lap-time, but all the GT cars were lumped in together, and the



Above, happy faces abound as 8 DBL crosses the line at Brands Hatch to win the '65 1000-mile race



Left, two of the team cars at Sebring in '65, an event that always saw MGBs perform well

Below, Old Faithful again, this time with Timo Makinen chasing a Lancia during the '66 Targa Florio



penalties for lateness were very severe indeed: one unfortunate entry that failed to maintain schedule covered 5,800 kilometres on the road but suffered over 7,000 kilometres' worth of penalties, which gave him a *negative* race distance of more than 1,200 kilometres!

Two MGB roadsters were entered. On the first lap Roger Enever (son of the MGB designer) went off the road, and on the second lap Andrew Hedges did the same thing, but both cars were repaired and got under way again by the Abingdon mechanics, who stood watches of 18 hours on, 6 hours off (the drivers did spells of 7½ hours on, 7½ hours off). Throughout that incredibly long event the two MGBs kept going well while more than a score of other cars — Alfa, Ferrari, Lotus Cortina, Porsche, Sunbeam Tiger, Volvo — fell by the wayside. After 79 of the 84 hours the Enever/Poole MGB broke a driveshaft following a second crash, but

the Hedges/Vernaeve car kept going for the full 5,620 miles to win by three laps.

Before the Marathon, the Enever/Poole MGB had averaged 100mph for 10,000 miles in a Shell publicity stunt at MIRA. The winning MGB had merely tackled the Monte Carlo Rally (retiring when the steering UJ chafed through an oilpipe) and come first in the GT category of the Targa Florio, then third in the same category of the Circuit of Mugello. Christened "Old Faithful" after its Nürburgring success, GRX 307 D turned up again at Montlhéry for the 1,000 Kilometres in October, where it took a class placing behind a Carrera. Its sixth international event was the 1967 Sebring 12 Hours, in which Makinen and Rhodes shared the driving to finish 12th overall, second in the 2-litre class (under the curious "90% distance" ruling) to a Corvette Stingray that had, in fact, retired before the race ended!