

## Nostalgia trip

Three and a half decades later, when the first MG Regency Run from London to Brighton was being planned, one of the organisers, David Diplock asked if I'd like to drive his own J2. The chance of trying a J2 again, after all those years, was not to be missed.

Announced in the summer of 1932, the J2 Midget had a chassis closely related to the earlier C-Type or 'Monthléry' competition model. There are two almost straight side-members of open channel, passing under the back axle, with tubular cross-members. Suspension is of course non-independent all round, with long and fairly narrow leaf springs which have conventional eyes at their front ends but none at the rear; they just slide in slotted bushes, this set-up helping to discourage side-sway in cornering. The brake gear centres on a cross-shaft carrying the handbrake, with a link to the pedal which allows convenient adjustment, and four cables leading to the eight in brakedrums. The 19 in wheels carry 4.00 in tyres.

The long bonnet continues some way beyond the bulkhead and therefore opens to reveal not only the engine, but the gearbox top, accelerator shaft, pedals, and the feet of anyone who happens to be sitting inside. A long-stroke four-cylinder (57x83mm), the engine has the same 847cc capacity as the original M-Type Midget, with the vertically-mounted dynamo driven off the front of the crankshaft, its armature forming part of the overhead camshaft drive — which is why neglected 'cammy' MGs filled their dynamos with oil draining down from the valvegear. The heavy armature makes a useful camshaft damper, but sustained rpm is limited by the very spindly two-bearing crank. Most of the bearings are white-metalled. The gear-type oilpump is skew-driven off the crank, with the ignition distributor at its top end, and oil filtration is rudimentary. Transmission is by a single-plate clutch to the four-speed, non-synchro box, and thence by open propeller shaft. A long alloy casting surmounts the box, bringing the gearlever conveniently to hand.

Lightly constructed, the J2 weighs little more than 1400lb in production form, and by the standards of the early Thirties this allowed a very acceptable level of performance with a modest 36bhp at 5500rpm. Few J2s could actually pull these revs in top — equal to 80.85mph — and the 80mph car that Sammy Davis road-tested for *Autocar* had been tweaked considerably. *The Light Car* quoted 77mph in top and 55 in third, which was nearer the truth.

David Diplock's J2, at the age of 50-plus, is not only in far better condition than mine was at 15, but a distinctly better car than it was at the end of the Abingdon assembly line. Restored by Baz Staple, it features one of Colin Tieche's repro engine blocks which have extra stiffening webs cast into the water jacket, a Gordon Allen fully counterbalanced crankshaft, and Triumph Bonneville rods with shell bearings. The flywheel is lightened to compensate for the heavier crank.

As David says with disarming candour, his car also has all the Go-Faster extras: headlamp stoneguards, a bonnet strap, aero screens, a Brooklands spring-spoke steering wheel, additional instruments (clock and radiator thermometer), passenger's grab-handle, leather instead of metal strap on spare wheel, quick-



David Diplock's J2 MG Midget brought back many memories of ownership for Wilson McComb when he drove the car on the MG Regency Run from London to Brighton. Far right, part of September 1932 MG Car Company brochure for the J2. All pictures by Caroline McComb



Above, Jean Cook, surviving daughter of Cecil Kimber, presents a portrait of her father to MGCC chairman, Bill Wallis, at the start of the Regency Run

release filler cap on petrol tank. All these items were available from MG or from accessory specialists when the car was new, and of course owners did dress up their sports cars like this in the Thirties, but personally I'd rather do without such knick-knacks, which together add a lot of unnecessary weight and do nothing to improve performance. Remembering, though, how the ultra-flexible chassis of my own J2 would flip its doors open as I drove over a bump, I approved the extra catches on his doors, fitted because his small daughters often accompany him.

Getting into a J2 demands some agility; the cockpit is pretty snug (people seem to have been smaller in prewar days) and the steering wheel comes close to the chest. Once installed, I felt incredibly near to the ground, though in fact the floor level is almost 12 in above it. This is mainly because the scuttle is so high that the nearside front wing is invisible. It also means that the J2, with a wheelbase only six in more than a Mini's and not much longer overall, manages to feel like a normal-sized car to its occupants because they are sitting very much in it rather than on it. At the same time, leg and arm room are by no means generous: you really need that cutaway in the door to clear the right elbow, the door lock bores into your right leg, and if you wear wide shoes you'll collect several pedals at once.

### As it should be

The dash of David's J2 is, as it should be, made in sheet aluminium with 'engine-turned' finish, and carries the correct horn-button combined with dipswitch in its centre, with tiny MG mirror above (there's an additional one at the side, as a concession to modern traffic). On the left is the crowded cluster, octagon-enclosed, that takes in the combined ignition and lighting switch, ignition warning light, socket for inspection lamp, ammeter and oil pressure gauge. On the right, behind the mammoth steering wheel and also enclosed in an octagon, MG's rather ingenious speedometer which has additional scales giving the rpm in top and third.

Switching on, I pressed the bulkhead-mounted starter switch with my left foot and heard again

the busy sound of a cammy MG engine; even when overhauled from end to end they are never really quiet, but this one, with a fully counterbalanced bottom end, had a good up-together feeling about it and a satisfying 75 psi oil pressure at cruising speed.

The gearlever is exactly right, with fly-off handbrake to the left and behind it a pair of control knobs, one for the choke and the other to set the slow-running speed. Clutch travel is short, but getaway presents no problems because bottom gear is very low indeed — 3.58:1 on a 5.37:1 final drive. It is part of the cammy MG tradition that first and second are both low for trials work, but third (1.36:1) very close to top, and with these uneven gaps between ratios it takes time to get used to the gearchange. Naturally, having no synchromesh, you have to double-declutch both up and down. You also have to pay attention because the MG change is mirror-image of normal, with first and second on the right, third and top on the left.

In a J2, believe me, you change gear a lot. Nothing much happens at all below 3500rpm with this engine, and this represents 14, 24, 38 and 52 mph in the four gears — so you change down immediately when checked in traffic, or when you come to a hill.

Unloaded, the J2 carries 53 per cent of its weight on the back wheels, but of course this becomes a whole lot more with passengers aboard, and it has been condemned by some as a wicked oversteerer. I don't altogether agree. Responsive, yes, but no more twitchy, I'd say, than a Frogeye Sprite or a Porsche 911. I admit, though, that in the continual rain of the MG Regency Run I felt more in control with my right elbow outside the cockpit — even if it did get soaked through! The ride is comfortable enough on those long semi-elliptics, but the seat cushions of David's car need more rake; there's a tendency to slide forward onto the coccyx instead of sitting properly on one's backside.

What else? The oft-criticised J2 brakes were perfectly adequate even in heavy London traffic — they always are if they're kept properly adjusted, and the car driven in a way appropriate to cable brakes with eight in drums, not modern disc-and-drum hydraulics. In better weather I'd have folded the windscreen, not in order to play boy-racer but to avoid looking through three lots of glass: the screen itself, those damned aero screens, and my own specs. As things were, with that set-up and all the rain and wipers that worked only very inadequately, some bits of the Brighton road were covered mainly from memory . . .

Despite the rain, Caroline and I enjoyed our drive enormously, and agreed that it just wasn't worth putting the hood up for a mere 53 miles. But David — obviously far too fastidious to be a real sports car enthusiasts — decided to do so when we reached Madeira Drive. And what happened? The windscreen cracked.

There's a moral there somewhere