

PROJECT MARATHON

*Experts who built and drove a works MGB in the Sixties
visit a freshly rebuilt MG Owners Club replica*

THE first moment of truth for the MG Owners Club's special restoration project came back in April when a group of famous and knowledgeable people visited the Club's Workshops at Swavesey in Cambridgeshire. Twenty-five years ago, a works MGB registered 7 DBL and crewed by the Morley twins won the Grand Touring category on the Monte Carlo Rally. The car had been prepared at Abingdon by fitter, Tommy Wellman, under foreman, Den Green.

For the MGOC team this VIP visit was a Big Day, for they had invited Don Morley and his equally famous rally-driving wife, Val, together with Den Green and Tommy Wellman, to view a 1963 MGB which has been totally rebuilt since Christmas into an almost exact copy of 7 DBL. Needless to say, as this group of experts approached the workshop door there was some eager if slightly nervous anticipation in the minds of the MGOC's Workshop Manager, Jim Adamson, the chief fitter on the car, John Starmer, and the Club's Technical Officer, Mike Beales.

At the back of workshop, beyond customers' MGs of most ages and types, the rebuilt car stood on chassis stands, awaiting judgement, you could say. Entered on the second Pirelli Classic Marathon in late June, the MGOC team were determined that their MGB would be absolutely right in all respects. The party of visitors walked round the car, inspecting it closely; then Tommy Wellman said: "It does look good: you've made a marvellous job." And from Den Green: "What a beautiful job! It seems a shame to take it." If any ice needed to be broken, that did it. The party split up into groups, reminiscing about old times and getting down to examining the car in extreme detail. Tommy Wellman, now retired, has a prodigious memory; he could remember the material specifications for non-standard parts such as the works cars' engine mounting rubbers. Typically, he quoted: "The head could lift slightly on these engines when used hard: you should have EN40 washers under the cylinder head nuts." Den Green still works for the Rover Group in the Service Department and his memory is equally sharp. In short, the contribution of the visitors to the

finished car was invaluable. They had been helping over the 'phone and by post before this moment.

Thanks to many enthusiasts who have kept records, the correct specification of 7 DBL remains known. With that and photographs, some of which came from our own archives at *Classic Cars*, Mike Beales and Jim Adamson were able to complete their thorough research. It has to be said, too, that the car looks superb; the term "Show condition" would not be out of place. In fact, Den Green said: "It looks exactly as if it has just come out of the Works", and asked: "Is it really an old bodyshell?" Somebody then spotted the pedals, and said: "The accelerator and brake are right but the clutch pedal was never built up like that." The answer here was that the photograph of the footwell, from which the pedals were made up, did not show the clutch pedal. A standard clutch pedal will go back into the car, and that is exactly the sort of finishing touch that this meeting was all about.

There's one area in which it has to deviate from the original 7 DBL on which it is based, and that is the fireproof bulkhead behind the seats. To comply with current safety regulations this can no longer be open through to the boot as it used to be, and John Starmer has made a neat job of this modification. Tommy Wellman added further comments on the exact type of sump and tank guards that will have to be made, and he helped with some detail points on the dash which is a work of art in itself.

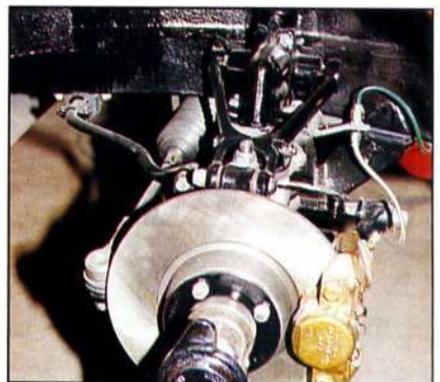
Meanwhile, Don Morley was looking around the car most carefully, too. After every event his brother Erle would meticulously type up their report for the team at Abingdon to consider. After their successful outing on the '64 Monte, they made a number of recommendations based on the observation that the car was not competitive in terms of straight acceleration and top speed against the opposition, especially the 2-litre Porsches. The recommendations were never taken up as Abingdon was concentrating on the Mini as the main thrust of the rally programme in those days, and the MGB was not developed further as a rally machine with any serious commitment.

As I shall be driving this newly rebuilt car myself, with Mike Beales as co-driver I was most keen to hear any tips or comments from Don, who had driven 7 DBL so successfully in the past. "You will find it a super car to drive", said Don. "It will be very forgiving and you can take a few liberties. But there was never enough power, so you must drive trying not to scrub off speed on the corners." It sounds as if it will not be so very much different from the MG Maestro that Mike and I have campaigned under the MGOC banner for the past three years, even though the drive is at the other end of the car!

A thoughtful Tommy Wellman added: "The best two words we could have got rid of at Abingdon were "Safety Fast", the old MG slogan. Then we could have got down to building some lightweight motor cars!"

All the technical talk completed, the stories started to flow and we headed for lunch at the local pub; we heard of the '59 Portuguese Rally, when Den Green and Tommy Wellman were exhausted after several nights on the road without sleep. They drew up at a closed level crossing in the middle of the night, only to wake up hours later in the same spot with the gates open and the engine ticking over. It was broad daylight!

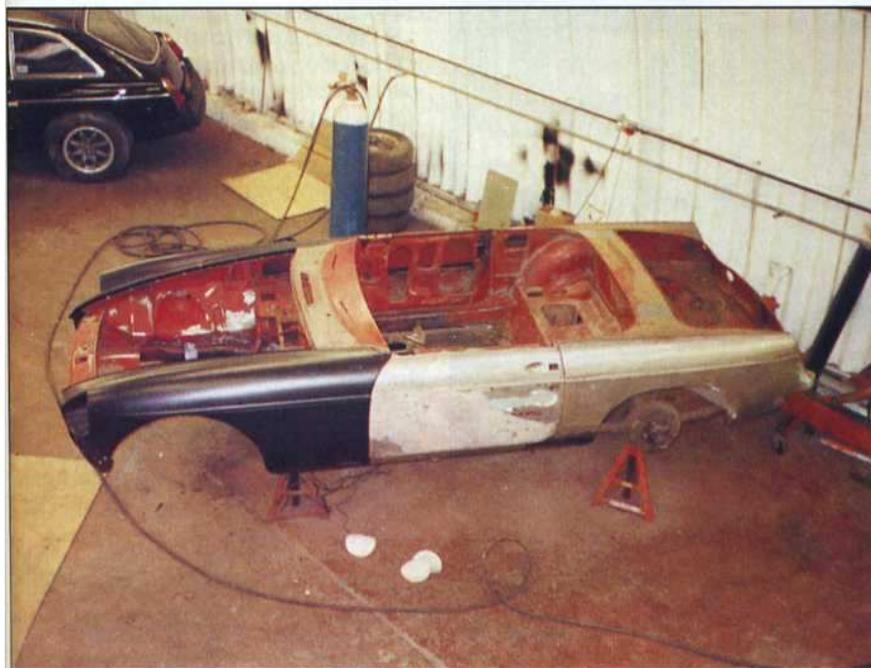
Then we heard of two well known lady rally drivers who were notoriously hard to wake up: the owner of one Alpine hostelry was not amused to find Tommy Wellman swinging the firehose into their room from the balcony above; well, the water was turned on. They were British ladies; some consternation was caused by a European baroness, also a driver, when she emerged from her car outside a restaurant where the Abingdon team was eating lunch. Looking a picture of elegance, complete with a pet cheetah on a chain, she permitted the animal to





Left, John Starmer working on the fireproof bulkhead. Below left, detail from front suspension, rebuilt as new. Below, early stage in bodyshell rebuild

Above, r to l, standing: Val and Don Morley, Den Green, Tommy Wellman, Mike Beales, Tony Dron; front row, r to l, Jim Adamson, Alan Francis, John Starmer



leap up onto the window box next to our friends' table: it promptly relieved itself in spectacular style.

The story of the '64 Monte, though a success for 7 DBL, had a sad side to it as one of the Abingdon crew, Doug Hamblin, was killed in a road accident in England on the way to join them. This sad fact meant that Tommy Wellman was left on the Grand Corniche, while Den Green was stuck in Paris and never reached the finish.

The VIP visit to view this rebuilt car was a great success for the MG Owners Club personnel who have built it up from a wreck. The real 7 DBL was written off in the Scottish Rally of 1964 and has disappeared without trace. We understand that its registration number is still in use; it is thought to be on an Aston Martin these days. That is of no interest to us, however, as we are not trying to pretend that 7 DBL has been resurrected. This car has simply been built up as an accurate copy of the works car in order to compete in rallies today; it will have an age-related number as it has no British registration at present. It would only be a fake if

somebody subsequently acquired the registration number 7 DBL, transferred it to this car and then tried to pass it off as the actual car that competed on the 1964 Monte Carlo Rally.

As I wrote in the May issue, this kind of chicanery is taking place these days and we must all be on our guard against it. On another quite separate point, we have given some publicity in the magazine over the winter to the FISA Historic Technical Commission's efforts to make sure that Historic cars run in the specifications that were feasible when they were new. This seems completely reasonable and desirable and, while we have considerable sympathy with anyone who has spent money only to find that his car is now no longer eligible for events, we applaud the FISA stand and support it completely. I have in mind the owner of an XK120 who ran out of brakes on last year's Pirelli Classic Marathon; wanting to avoid this in future, he spent a considerable sum on converting his car to disc brakes but then found the tightened rules have barred him from competing unless he changes back to drum brakes. This is very unfortunate but if a stand is not made we shall end up with some very strange hybrids masquerading as Historic cars!

This MGB should be in no such trouble as its complete specification is laid down in black and white. The idea was hatched by Jim Adamson and Mike Beales before Christmas: a suitable 1963 car was found in California by a specialist agent and by the second week in January it had been landed, cleared through British Customs, and was in the MGOC Workshops being stripped down to a bare shell. At that stage it had cost £1,500 all in but a larger sum has been spent since, only no-one has added that up yet! Still, it should make sense as an investment because the work has been carried out to the highest possible standard and it is up and going as an eminently usable car in many

"spent every free moment at autojumbles"

events today.

Incredible attention to detail went into the rebuild: I saw the car when it first arrived and it can only be described as a typical MGB that has spent all its life in California. Despite being 26 years old the visible rust that afflicts our cars over here simply was not there. There was evidence of some cheap resprays, which had crazed under the sun like dried mud in a desert. The trim was bleached from black to a kind of grey, and there was evidence of several minor scrapes around the front wings. On stripping it down it was found to be basically very good but there was some hidden corrosion in the floor. Though the car had not been run since 1985 it was mechanically quite good, suggesting a relatively low mileage in its 26 years.

A restorable aluminium bonnet was found, new floor sections were welded in and a new aluminium bootlid was modified from photographs of 7 DBL. The correct aperture was cut into the standard rear bulkhead, enabling the spare wheel to be carried. The normal spare wheel space in the boot is taken up by the extra fuel tank; this was fabricated by a leading MG specialist and the correct aperture for the special fuel filler cap was cut in the bootlid by John Starmer. Armed with the photographs, Mike and Jimmy then spent every free moment at autojumbles where they found all the correct Lucas lights, the Butler flexible map light, an unused windscreen demister just like the one in 7 DBL, the passenger's 'barnacle' rear view mirror, assorted dashboard switches and fittings and the gearknob complete with overdrive switch. John Smith, of Lucas Racing, was a great help with all sorts of obsolete Lucas parts relevant to

the car, and he should know as all those years ago he spent many a long hour working under contract at Abingdon, fitting up the electrics on the works cars.

The engine went to Oselli, who built our Maestro engines, and it came back in due course looking exactly the part. It has a twin-choke Weber carburettor, a mildly tuned camshaft and special exhaust system, and the compression ratio is increased to 10.4:1. A Safety Devices rollcage was fitted into the shell which, now resplendent with new wings and an MGOC respray in Tartan Red, was beginning to take on the look of a proper car. Not that it matters, but this car was actually Tartan Red from new. An Old English White works hardtop was found: they go for about £100 and if anyone says it should have a roof vent they would be wrong! No such device was fitted to the '64 Monte MGB.

The special straight cut close ratio gear set as used in 7 DBL was acquired from a specialist and the gearbox was built up by A1 Gearboxes of St Neots, while the Laycock overdrive is being modified for competition in the correct way by O/D Spares of Wolston, near Coventry. The old car had the lowest available final drive ratio and from what I hear of the Marathon we shall be glad of that in our car on the twisty mountain roads. 'Correct' competition seats have been rebuilt and covered in new black leather and the interior of the car will be completed by a rebuilt mechanical Halda Twinmaster, the old-style rally co-driver's friend.

In many respects the works MGB rally cars were surprisingly close to the standard cars that were so popular in the early Sixties. The suspension has uprated lever arm dampers but all the pick-up points and geometry are completely the same as any production MGB's from that era. The brakes are standard discs/drums but with Mintex 171 pads and linings. The wheels had yet to arrive when these photographs were taken: they will be special 72-spoke competition items as used by the works.

So there we have it: one complete replica of a particular works MGB, and evidence of support from Duckhams, whose lubricants we shall be using on the 1989 Pirelli Classic Marathon. See our News pages this month for the latest details on the rally. We are ready to go, and shall be reporting on the event as a whole from the cockpit of the MG Owners Club car. Its superb appearance is a real tribute to the team at Swavesey who built it. There will be faster cars on the Marathon, and there will be slower ones; naturally we shall be trying our hardest to get the MGB well up the final results sheet. The real point of such a rally these days, however, is to get out onto the great rally roads of Europe and enjoy driving your chosen car in the old style. The Marathon's originator, Philip Young, assures us that our drive from London to Cortina will be tough. It should be fun, even if it is a daunting prospect. 🏁

Tony Dron



Working from photographs and original documents, every detail could be reproduced accurately once the basic parts had been found by the MGOC team