

# SUPERLATIVE SEBRING

*Wilson McComb follows up the story of the exciting lightweight MGC — a long-lost*

*British sports car that has now come back to its birthplace*

**M**ISSING for 15 years or more, the second Sebring MGC has been found at last, and this exciting car — the last MG racing model to be built at Abingdon — is now back in its native land, where Colin Pearcy plans to run it in Historic events.

It's strange, really, that a car as significant as the lightweight racing MGC coupé should be so ill-documented, but this is probably because only two examples had been built when, in 1968, the BMC Competitions Department's activities came under the stern and rather disapproving eye of Donald Stokes following the Leyland takeover.

Development work on these promising 3-litre racers was brought to an abrupt halt, and both cars were sold to the American MG importers. We can only guess what their competitions career might have done for MG's image in the late Sixties.

Indeed, we also have to guess at the motivation that lay behind the project, for it started at the very time when Stuart Turner, BMC's highly successful competitions manager, was handing over to his successor, Peter Browning — and both answered my query in almost the same words: "I don't remember a thing about them!"

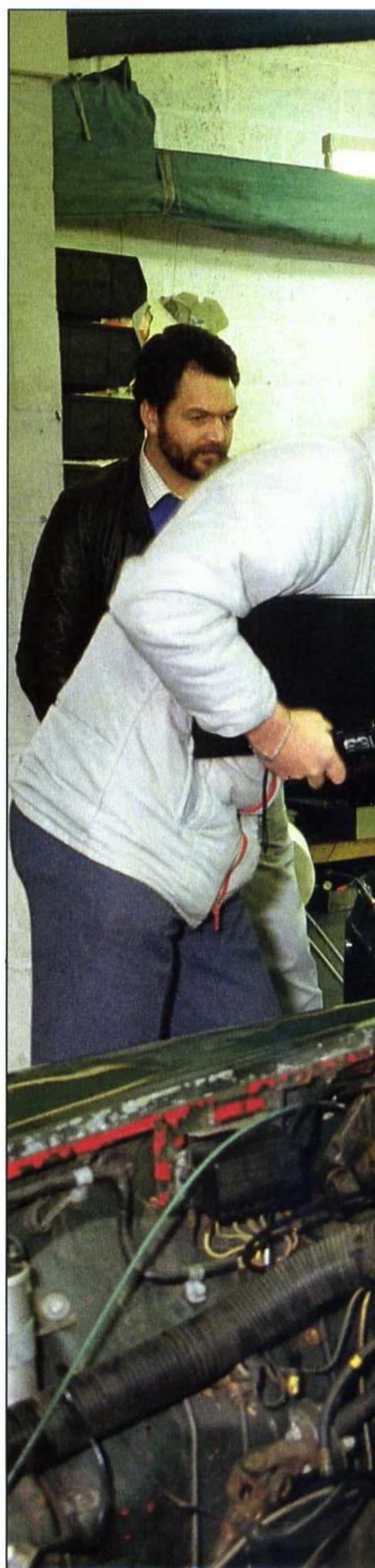
But it's not hard to see how they came about. Abingdon's most famous muscle car, the Big Healey, had for some time been playing second fiddle to the fast and nimble Mini-Cooper. Long before the production Austin-Healey 3000 was

discontinued in December 1967, Makinen's works car had been pipped for outright victory by Aaltonen's Mini-Cooper in the 1965 RAC Rally — the last event that a works Healey was to compete in. And there were great hopes for the still-secret MGC, due to be announced in October 1967, for it was expected to be a very fast car with its new seven-bearing, six-cylinder engine, of exactly the same bore and stroke as the Healey — which meant that much of the Department's considerable tuning experience could probably be applied to the new power unit, too.

One of the big advantages in having BMC's Competitions Department at Abingdon was its closeness — geographically and otherwise — to Syd Enever's Development Department, staffed by notable wangers who had many years' experience in getting things done (though not necessarily according to the rulebook). No drawings were made: it was simply arranged that at some convenient time the appropriate department of Pressed Steel at Swindon would produce half-a-dozen sets of body panels in light alloy instead of sheet steel. Experienced body men will understand that this was a very tall order indeed — but it was done. In much the same way, BMC's own Bodies Branch at Castle Bromwich built up three lightweight bodysells, using epoxy resin and pop rivets (the same technique adopted some years earlier when building three Midget



*Above, the last ever works competition MG, seen in Moto-Build's workshops before Christmas. Right, at Roger Dowson's, with former Deputy Competitions Manager Bill Price, ex-Foreman Tommy Wellman and new owner Colin Pearcy examining the unique 'C'*





racing coupés) to unite the alloy panels with steel MGC floorpans. Pronounced wing flares, to allow clearance for wide-rim wheels and tyres, transformed the appearance of the familiar GT body shape.

In the early spring of 1967 one of the shells was turned into a complete motor car, of which I hold the original build sheet — one of the few that have survived from the old BMC Competitions Department. This shows that MBL 546E was allocated the chassis number ADO52/1060 (ADO52 was the standard MGC project number) and engine number ABX-1001, and built by Gerald ('Wiff') Wiffen. Initially the suspension was standard MGC except for police-type rear springs, adjustable dampers, and lowering the back end by an inch. There were Girling disc brakes front and rear, with two vacuum servos, and the original wheels were centrelock Minilites with 5.50x15in tyres on 6½in rims. Other special features included a roll cage, a long-range (21.9-gallon) fuel tank with filler just below the offside rear quarter-light and twin SU pump in the offside wing, and a ZF limited-slip differential.

**The secret 'C'**

One thing the new car *didn't* have, though, was the new 3-litre engine, for it was first entered in the 1967 Targa Florio, some six months before the production MGC model was revealed to the public. As it therefore could not be called an MGC, Stuart Turner entered it as an 'MGB Prototype' and had the car fitted with an overbored (2,004cc) MGB engine.

Nobody in Sicily spotted the torsion-bar front suspension, or even guessed what MBL 546E really was. Its formidable appearance certainly attracted comment, but unfortunately it handled extremely badly on the very demanding Targa Florio circuit, and the new braking system gave considerable trouble. Makinen and Hopkirk achieved wonders in these circumstances, and with only 150bhp under the bonnet, to finish ninth overall — a position maddeningly denied them by the '90% distance' rule, though they did claim third place in their class behind two Porsche 910-8s. Afterwards, Abingdon's new racer disappeared for almost a year while the new BMC competitions manager, Peter Browning, dealt with more pressing problems. When MBL reappeared for the 1968 Sebring Twelve Hours it had assumed its true identity, having a tuned MGC engine enlarged to 2,968cc and giving 200 bhp with an alloy head and three twin-choke Webers, while an attempt had been made to improve the handling by lowering the front roll centre and fitting telescopic dampers at the rear. Driven by Hopkirk and Hedges, it achieved MG's best-ever placing at Sebring by finishing tenth overall, winning the 3-litre Prototype Class and placing third in the Prototype Category. It was, indeed, the best-placed British finisher in the race.

Heartened by this excellent result, Peter Browning had a second car completed during the early summer of 1968. This was RMO 699F, which for some



*Top, the MGC as found; it was extraordinarily original. Above, left, Comps mechanic Brian Moylan and owner Colin Percy study Chris Harvey's book The Mighty MGs, and find it all ties up! Above, right, Tom Wellman looks for a serial number on the alloy cylinder head*

reason was given the earlier chassis number ADO52/1059 and engine number ABX-1000: it was *probably* built by Gerald Wiffen, but we can't be sure because nobody remembers and the build sheet has disappeared. I do have the build sheet covering the preparation of MBL for the 1968 Marathon, though, and this work was done by Johnny Evans. With it is a weighbridge ticket giving the weight as 2,471lb, which underlines the point that, despite their alloy panelling, Abingdon's competition cars were never lightweights by the time they were hung with roll cages, long-range tanks and other special equipment; this figure is barely 10lb less than the kerb weight of a bog-standard production MGC GT!

The new car must have been lighter, though, for we know it was fitted with one of three engines from Eddie Maher of BMC Engines Branch which not only had alloy heads, but specially-cast alloy blocks as well. And the replacement of the dreadfully heavy cast-iron MGC engine by this lightweight unit must have done wonders for the weight distribution.

## Demanding event

The two MGC racers first ran together in August at the Nürburgring, where both were entered for the 84-hour Marathon — an incredibly demanding event which Andrew Hedges and Julien Vernaevé had won outright in 1966, using a hardtop MGB. In 1968 the winning pair shared MBL with Tony Fall of the BMC rally team, while the new car was driven by Roger Enever (son of Syd), Alec Poole (son of the Dublin MG importer), and Healey man, Clive Baker. The MGCs started well, lying second and fourth for quite a time, but RMO had to retire after 24 hours because of a faulty head gasket. MBL still held a commanding position, and was moving up on the leading Porsche when, at two-thirds distance, the brake pads wore through and welded themselves to the discs, immobilising the unfortunate MG. At the end of the 84 hours it was classified sixth overall.

And that, alas, was the very last official race entry by an Abingdon-built MG. Under the British Leyland flag there was absolutely no chance of continuing to develop the promising MGC racers, so the two cars were sold together with most of the spares, and entered for the 1969 Sebring race by the American MG importers of Leonia, New Jersey. Hopkirk and Hedges finished 15th overall with RMO, and MBL was driven into 24th place overall by two Canadians, Bill Brack and Craig Hill. After the race, RMO was bought by the Baker Motor Company Inc in Atlanta, Georgia, while MBL gathered dust in New Jersey until it was bought by a Leonia vice-president, Bruce McWilliams. Back in Britain, Big Healey enthusiast John Chatham bought the third bodyshell, the three unused sets of alloy body panels, and all remaining bits and pieces. He used the complete bodyshell to build a Modsports racer which still exists, unregistered, and fitted one set of alloy panels to a steel car, VHY 5H, which ran in the 1970 Targa Florio. He built a similar

car, EHW 441K, for road use, and this is now owned by MGCC member Edward Kirkland. A third composite steel/alloy car was built for Alan Zafer and is now in the Beere collection.

MBL returned to Britain in 1973, spent some time in the Cheddar Gorge museum, and is now owned by Colin Smith. But the whereabouts of the sister car, RMO, remained a mystery; there were rumours that it had been broken up, and not long ago somebody came back from the USA with some rather unconvincing remains which, it was claimed, were those of the missing car.

What actually happened was that after trying desperately for almost two years to sell this historic MG, the Baker Motor Company finally unloaded it for \$4,500 on a 22-year-old who worked at the local Jeans West store; he paid \$1,300 deposit, agreed to pay another \$1,000 the following month, and the rest on hire purchase. When this young man — impressively named Camran Hossein Ayobpour — moved to Southern California in the early Seventies and acquired a personalised licence number, for all practical purposes the car simply disappeared. After literally years of detective work it was found and bought by Julius Thurgood, who brought it back to England a short time ago and sold it to Colin Percy.

We arranged that on the last Monday of 1986 some of the folk most closely associated with RMO in days gone by should be reunited with the car at Silverstone, where the GTS was being stripped for examination in the workshops of Roger Dowson, who looks after Colin Percy's racing MGs. Present were Tommy Wellman, Foreman of the Competitions Department workshop at the time of its closure in 1970; Bill Price, former Deputy Manager and the man who for years handled all their documentation; Brian Moylan of the MG Car Club's Abingdon Works Centre, himself a "Comps" mechanic for many years; Gerald Wiffen, who built at least one of the two MGC Lightweights originally, and possibly both of them; and Alec Poole, one of RMO's drivers at the Nürburgring on the car's one-and-only European appearance.

## "A proper works car"

All agreed the car was still amazingly original, but, inevitably, memories had dimmed in almost 20 years. "I've done so many since this," said Wiff. "They all run into one..." Brian, too, admitted he was stumped, and Alec's main recollection was of the sister car's first appearance in Sicily. "Timo Makinen and I were to drive a Group 3 MGB roadster, but Timo fancied the GTS as soon as he saw it, so he changed places with Andrew Hedges. Then he found the new car wouldn't handle, so he wanted to change back again!" "It was all wrong, the handling," said Tommy Wellman. "Lifting wheels, axle judder... After the Targa we put the 'teles' on the back and lowered the front roll centre about 7/16in, I think. That helped. And radius arms to stop some of the judder."

I asked about the wire wheels now fitted. "We stopped using the Minilites early on," said Tommy. "Then we were breaking spokes in practice for the Marathon so I flew out to Germany with ten 60-spoke wheels. And the centre-lock nuts were spreading, coming loose too. We stiffened them with big rings of EN 40, about 5/16in thick, and after that we needed a bar about four feet long to get 'em loose again.

"The bonnets were rear-hinged at first, then we changed them — you can still see the fixing holes for the old hinges here. And see those brackets down in the engine bay? I remember those, too. That extra padding on the driver's door — that looks like Jack Hayward's work, but the seat is wrong; we had them covered in specially-made anti-sweat material. Those straps for the spare wheel, we had them made by a saddler at East Ilsley — and that's the right pump, too: SU with a double body; if one side stops the other keeps going.

"This is a proper works car, all right. We built just the two of them, complete — Eric Carter did the bodies at Castle Bromwich — all in ali, the scuttle, roof and all. And the third spare body that used to sit on the top of my office, the one that John Chatham bought from us — that was nearly ready to build, except for a bit of welding. He came with a big lorry when we closed down, took it away — and all the spare panels."

## Tom's wonderful memory

Once he got started, it seemed there was no stopping him. "Old Tom's got a wonderful memory. Knows every nut and bolt, does Tom," said Gerald Wiffen.

"With the original brake set up," Tom continued, "You couldn't get the bloody pedal down — we were pushing the back of the seat out. So we changed the ratio on the servo, did it like this. And at one time we had ventilated discs: Girling made them and they cost £8 each, which was a fortune in those days. But they distorted when there were hot.

"Eddie Maher cast six ali blocks, but one was porous. Another went missing from his place at Coventry, so that left four, and one of those went into our stores as a spare, with an ali head. We had three engines built, and one of them went into John Gott's Big Healey. The other two went into these cars."

The engine that Roger Dowson has taken out of RMO is a cast-iron unit with light-alloy head, but Tommy Wellman confirmed that this, too, was a genuine ex-works component, pointing out the lightened steel flywheel and the way the head was stamped "46.1cc" — the average combustion chamber volume. "Even that dynamo is one of ours — all lock-wired, and ball bearings at both ends."

Eventually it was time to move from Roger's workshop to the *Green Man*, but everyone looked contented as we filed out. "Nice to see it again," said Wiff. "And so original," said Brian. "Yes," Tom agreed. "When they were sold to America, well, I never thought I'd see one again." ▲