

Trial by MG

Peter Garnier recalls tackling the Edinburgh Trial in an MG TD during his days on *The Autocar*

WHEN the MG Midget first appeared as the M-Type in 1929, the purists looked at it askance; there were mutterings of 'Buzz-box' and 'Promenade Special'. But the cars quickly began to prove themselves. Private owners of all ages competed in formidable numbers in the MCC 'classic' trials and in innumerable speed events — alongside works teams like the Cream Crackers; occasionally, to add support and encouragement to the privateers, official entries ran successfully in major international races. In consequence, the MG Midget convincingly justified its sporting appearance, becoming synonymous with sporting events, grudgingly accepted by the purists as an essential part of the sporting scene. It was a safe, fun-to-drive car — which is probably what we mean by a sports car. And it had the additional advantage of putting fun-motoring within reach of thousands — which was none too easy for the purists to accept. For them (and for me too, I have to admit) scarcity value also played a part — it was fun to be envied, too.

It is worth looking back briefly at the TD's forebears, from the pointed-tail, fabric-bodied M-Type that begat them in 1929. In keeping with Cecil Kimber's principle of basing MGs upon the existing Morris Minor of 1928, with three-speed gearbox and two-bearing crankshaft; power output was a modest 20bhp and maximum speed around 65mph. First development of this was the modified and supercharged version that won the team prize in the 1930 Brooklands Double-Twelve — the year the factory took officially to racing. This became the Double-Twelve M-Type, and was further developed into the 746cc, supercharged C-Type which, in 1931, won the Double-Twelve, Ulster TT and Irish GP.

The M became the J, which included developments from the C — and, in 1932, the characteristic striking J2 (supercharged as the J3 and J4) with what were to become the MG Midget characteristics of extremely low build, rear-mounted slab-tank with the spare wheel behind it, twin wind scoops on the scuttle, fold-flat screen, cut away doors, neat remote control for its now four-speed gearbox — and the rest. This was to become virtually the prototype MG Midget in appearance and character, upon which all successive models were based — right through to the TF; a style which, as the archetypal mass-production sports car, others were to copy — not always successfully.

From the J grew the P-Type, with the same 847cc, ohc engine, but now with a much-needed three bearing crankshaft; and, with the final development of this engine, the 939cc PB in 1935 — along with the 750cc, Zoller-blown Q-Type racing version, and the extremely advanced, blown 750cc R-Type single-seater racing car, with

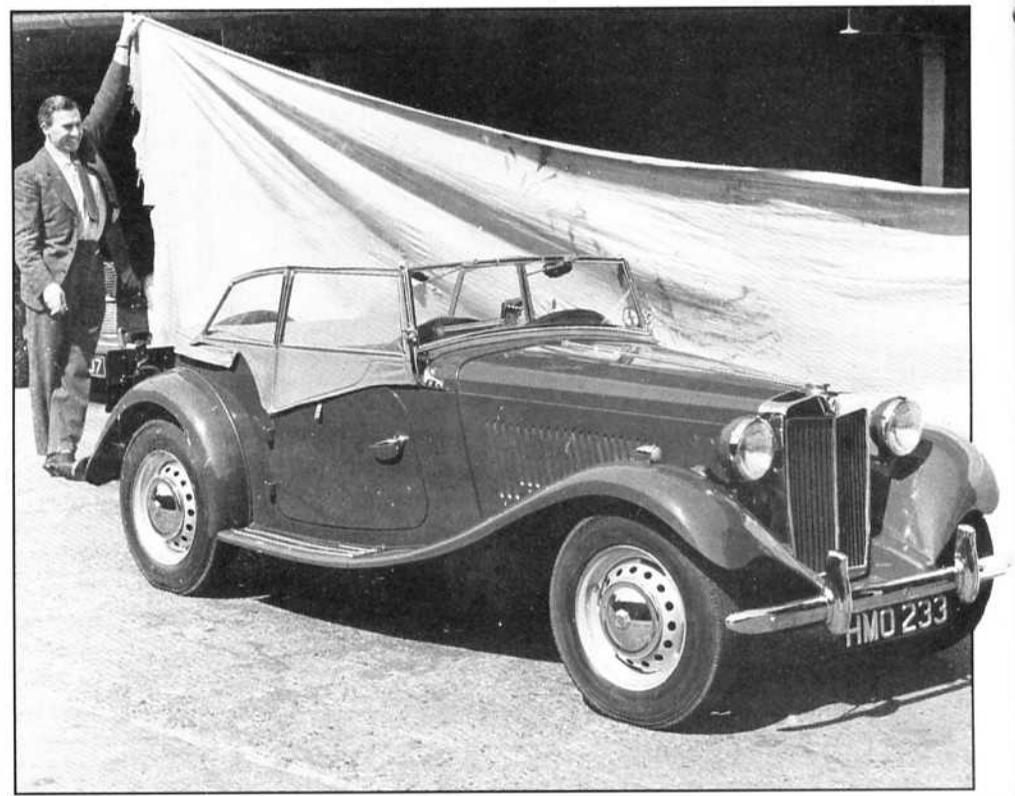
all-round independent suspension by torsion bars and wishbones. In 1935 the company withdrew from racing, and built no more competition cars.

MG Midget purists had their doubts about the TA that followed in 1936, with its 1290cc, pushrod ohv, long-stroke engine (still four cylinders) and hydraulic brakes. But, by now, the harshness of a concrete-mixer, starkness of a traction engine, and the weather-protection of a surfboard were no longer a part of the sporting scene. The TA was wider, much more comfortable with its properly upholstered seats and less unrelenting suspension, and the weather protection was excellent. You could go fast, or relatively so, in comfort — and remain dry. In 1939 came the TB, with a synchromesh gearbox and shortened-stroke version of the same engine, the capacity reduced to 1¼-litres. The TC followed after the war and, thanks to the large numbers of American servicemen still in Europe — who exported them in quantities to the

States — probably did more than any other (except, perhaps, the Austin-Healey) to develop an interest in the States for small, European sports cars.

The TD, which was on sale early in 1950, and came to *The Autocar* where I then worked, for a road test in April 1953, still retained the archetypal MG Midget characteristics in every respect — though thoroughly modernised. It was more 'rounded', wider, softer-looking (and riding); it had smaller wheels and bigger tyres, and bumpers and over-riders — and coil-spring-and-wishbone ifs, mounted on a necessarily stiffer, box-section chassis-frame, and rack-and-pinion steering. But it was *still* an MG Midget, and it is interesting to put a J2 and TD together and study how the one developed directly from the other.

Though the TD was an altogether 'fuller'-looking car, there was not all that much in it, compared with the TC, so far as dimensions were



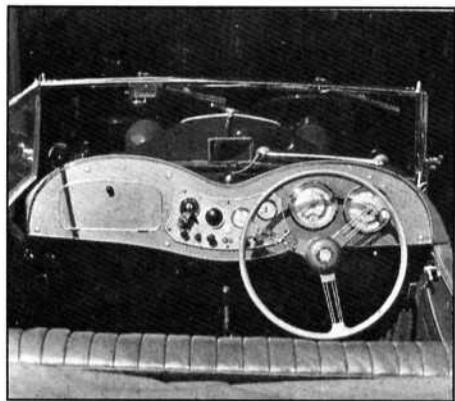
concerned. The wheelbase (7ft 10in) was the same for both, though the TD's 12ft 1in overall length was 6in longer, because of the bumpers. Comparative heights and overall widths were as follows (with the TC's in brackets): 4ft 8in (4ft 5in); 4ft 10½in (4ft 8in). The TD's track (3ft 11½in front, 4ft 2in rear) was well up on the TC's 3ft 9in front and rear. The new car paid a weight penalty, of course, at 1995lb to the TC's 1810 (and the C-Type's remarkable 1120!).

In all respects, though, the engine was unchanged, with 7.5 to 1 compression ratio and 54.4bhp at 5200rpm. In consequence, the performance figures were down on the TC's (in brackets): 0-30mph, 6.3sec (5.7); 0-50, 15.6 (14.7); and 0-60, 23.9 (22.7). Maximum speed seems to have been about the same for the two, with a best in one direction of 75mph. The TD cost £530, plus £221 19s 2d purchase tax — a total of £751 19s 2d — to the TC's £412 10s (plus £115 6s 8d purchase tax). Pre-war, from (and

Left, the TD pauses with a line of trialists including an earlier TC, Standard Vanguard, Riley RM and a Jowett. Below, more rounded lines than its forebears were a characteristic of the car, as were the chrome bumpers with over-riders



Left, Peter Garnier, with an obvious frisson of amusement, holds aloft the tarpaulin to show off the TD's sporting lines outside The Autocar's garage in 1954. Below, cosy seating for two — and this time the waterproofing actually worked



including) the P-Type, the price had been steady at £222, increasing to £225 for the TB.

If you wanted to improve the TD's performance, and 'have a go', Abingdon provided a series of five stage-by-stage tuning modifications, though the effect of wind-resistance on the standard body became increasingly apparent, stage by stage. The basic, 54bhp, standard engine gave a two-way, mean maximum of 72.5mph. Stage one, with its 5bhp gain in power output, increased the top speed by 5mph. An increase of 17bhp, given by Stage four, raised the top speed by only 9.5mph — and the 9.5-1 compression ratio, Shorrocks-blown Stage five, with 43bhp increase, produced a mean maximum speed only 23.5mph higher than the basic 72.5. It was, sadly, in standard form that Abingdon lent *The Autocar* a car for road test.

Having completed the road test, I persuaded Abingdon to let me keep the car a few days longer, to compete in the MCC's classic 'Edinburgh' at Whitsun. Like the pre-war Edinburgh, it actually finished at the Scottish capital, but was a rally, not a trial; it was unlike today's Edinburgh, however, which — though again a trial — doesn't go anywhere near Edinburgh! I'd already competed in the 'Land's End' on two, three and four wheels — it seemed only right to branch out a bit.

In the usual downpour of rain, we were flagged-off from the Kenilworth start at 12.15 am (midnight — in case you hadn't noticed) on Whit Sunday morning by a wringing-wet marshal who said he'd rather be in the MG's dry cockpit than attending to the likes of us for half the night. We agreed. The rigid sidescreens were almost as good as wind-up windows; in the absence of turn-indicators, though, it was a wet business poking one's arm out through the flap to give hand-signals.

As with all MCC events, the night's drive was wholly undemanding; 4¾ hours were allowed for the 145 miles to the breakfast stop at Harrogate and we splashed our way there with plenty of time in hand to sleep. After that, though, things began to tighten-up, the route to the lunch stop at Carlisle wandering off through the Pennines and Lake District to Oughtershaw, Buttertubs, Tan Hill and Hardknott and Wrynose passes — country to which rally organisers were much addicted in those days, before the flat-out forestry stages came to their rescue. The section included a downhill braking test on Buttertubs, a regularity test at Tan Hill, and a stop-and-restart on an extremely steep stretch immediately following one of the Hardknott's steepest hairpins.

Dampened spirits

The Hardknott marshal — depressingly over-keen to weed-out the entry — told us that 75 per cent had so far failed to get away inside the three-second allowance. Further to damp our spirits, we spent ages watching somebody merrily burning-out his clutch amidst clouds of smoke and the scent of hot Ferodo — until, clutchless, he was manhandled by spectators off the road. When our turn came, the fly-off handbrake — another of the Midget's sporting features — was a blessing, and we stepped smartly off the line with no trouble at all.

I'd no idea at the time whether there was to be an allowance for this delay, and to be on the safe side I assumed there wasn't — which proved to be correct. The route led on towards Wrynose, a slow section with endless hairpins and a very poor surface in those days. When we eventually returned to civilization, with 37 miles to the Carlisle control, we found we had only 39 minutes left. Arrival at Carlisle more than ten minutes late automatically excluded one from the event, so we had an absolute maximum of 49 minutes in which to cover the 37 miles and

remain eligible for a Third Class award — a 'Bronze'.

We decided to ignore the ten minutes' grace: "After all the experience you've had on the road test, you'd better win a 'Gold'," HS Linfield, then editor of *The Autocar*, had said; so we set off to try to average 60-odd. Luckily, there was very little traffic, and the roads were fairly fast, and dry. We kept the poor little thing at its maximum the whole way, and we couldn't half have done with one or other of Abingdon's stage-by-stage tuning modifications; it never complained, though.

Cast-iron disaster!

At one stage we were preparing to gobble-up an ancient, non-competing Austin Seven, with our optimistic speedometer showing 80mph — when, all of a sudden, the Austin shed a large piece of cast iron about the size and shape of a standard-issue banana, which bounced and gyrated into our path. There was no possibility of dodging it — and anyway, we were too busy dodging the little Austin, which had started to swerve about a bit at its leisurely 20mph. Our right-side front wheel hit the 'banana', throwing it up with a terrifying bang somewhere beneath the car. If we'd stopped to check for damage, our efforts would have been in vain. The only things we could check, without stopping, were the steering and possibility of a severed brake pipe. All seemed well, so we hurtled on — to clock-in at the Carlisle control only two minutes late, having covered 37 miles in 41 minutes. If we made no more mistakes, this qualified us for the 'silver'.

On inspecting the car for damage, we discovered a very large lump on the top surface of the right-side, front mudguard. Had the mudguard been aluminium, the 'banana' would have gone right through. With these excitements behind us — the only time we'd really had to try hard in the whole event — the route from Carlisle to Edinburgh resumed the country-ramble style familiar to competitors in the MCC 'classics' on the main road sections.

Two further demands were made on us, an acceleration test on Talla Linn, and, at the finish in Edinburgh, a series of three continuous stops-and-restarts against the clock. The lines astride which we had to stop were just a little too far apart to hold first gear in comfort, yet too close to waste time changing up into second. There was no alternative but to remain in first, eyes glued to the rev-counter. Three times it sailed up to 6000rpm, where it was held amidst valve-bounce until violent braking brought the car to rest astride the next line. Even somebody with no mechanical sympathy whatever would have objected violently to this — especially with a borrowed car. But there was no alternative, and it took it all happily. Finally, we handed in our numbers, and made claim for a 'Silver'.

Insensitive treatment

In the light of subsequent international rallies with Jack Sears in Big Healeys of the BMC team, the 1953 Edinburgh seems a very tame and undemanding event — but at the time, and with the performance available, it was enormous fun. In the 457 miles and 18 hours, the TD had been subjected to some pretty insensitive treatment, which it had endured without any apparent effect whatever. The engine still sounded right; brakes were still good and responsive, stopping the car in a straight line, hands-off; and there was no damage, apart from the effects of the little Austin's banana. It was very sadly that, after a further 360 miles, the car was returned to its owners on the Whit Monday. It had averaged 26mpg overall.