

## A trip to the Nürburgring

by Lance Gauld

It's early August 2004 and James Willis phoned asking about motor homes. After a short chat it was agreed that we would take my motor home with his car on a trailer for a wee jaunt to Europe to compete in the 400km race on the Nürburgring Nordschleife circuit in Germany, the first race of the Oldtimer Grand Prix meeting, for, as James put it, "a bit of a laugh".



A bit of history. James' car is the third of three special bodied Midgets built by BMC's Competitions Department at Abingdon in 1962, with sequential chassis numbers. MG racing legend Dick Jacobs persuaded the Managing Director and Chief Engineer of MG that a lightweight Midget based on the shape of the Aston Martin DB4 GT could take over the racing cudgels from the MGAs which his team had been running, but were now obsolete. The first two Midget Coupes were allotted to the Dick Jacobs team and these competed widely until the end of 1964 when they were returned to the factory. They ran at Sebring in 1965 as works entries but that was the end of their works racing careers and were subsequently acquired by Sid Beer (a modest man with a huge character who collected more important MG competition cars than anyone else on Earth). The third car commenced racing in 1963, in the hands of John Milne, James' stepfather and a man active in Scottish motorsport from the early Fifties to the late Sixties, and it continued racing and hillclimbing until the end of 1966 when it was deemed by the factory to no longer be competitive. But this car did not return to the factory to face an uncertain future as did the other two; instead John Milne paid the MG Car Company the exorbitant sum of £100 to keep it. And it has remained in the family ever since.

This was my first European racing trip and James's first time on the Nordschleife. But the car had been there before, for the 500km races in 1964 and 1965. This year was the 40th anniversary of the 1964 500km race, when all three Works MG Midget Coupes took part, running as a team, Ecurie Safety Fast after the MG motto. This was the only time they ran all three cars together.

Three years ago James suggested to Beer the other three cars should compete as a team once more in 2004 but initial enthusiasm did not translate into success.

So one fine Wednesday afternoon we, by which I mean James, Laurence (mechanic) and I, set off from Dollar in the motorhome with the MG securely strapped into the trailer behind and headed for the excellent Superfast Rosyth to Zeebrugge ferry, complete with cabins and on board jacuzzi, bound for Nürburg and the 400km race on the Nordschleife. What anticipation! (I don't know why the race has now been reduced to 400km – probably to help the Porsche drivers. They need it!)

On board the ferry we met up with Chris Chilcott, George Cooper and gang who were all off to compete in various races on the new Nürburgring over the weekend. It made for a most convivial, and long, evening. The restaurant on the ferry is really very good.

We docked at 12 noon after a good breakfast and by 5 o'clock were in the paddock at the Nürburgring all ready for evening sign on and scrutineering, where it must be said I have never ever seen so many officials at a race meeting, and so little work being done by them. Quite astonishing. The drivers briefing for this one race was a real eye opener if only for the fact there were over 200 drivers at it, mainly German, but quite a few Brits as well. There was the occasional English translation but most of it was in German.

Just before bedtime at 11pm it dawned on me to check that I actually fitted in the car as I hadn't so much as sat in it up to then. I need not have worried. For such a small car it is amazingly comfortable, a damn sight better than a Legend!

On Friday morning we were in position in the old paddock for 8 am, ready for the 9am start of a 2 hour official practice session. James went out first with a full load of fuel in the long range tank. His job was to stay on the road for three laps, about 45 miles) to make sure the car was qualified for the race. He came back in with eyes wide open gibbering about trees, Germans, trees, 911s all over the road, trees, blind apexes, more trees and the fear that someone else was going to drive his lovely old car which had been in his family since his step dad, John Milne, raced it there 40 years ago.

I drove out onto the track fearing the unknown, and got my head down to a rally attitude to the first few laps, with 15 miles per lap, 158 corners and around 205 marshals posts, and absolutely no idea where the road went. It was the most daunting experience of my racing life, but my head was down and pushing hard, getting used to the car and watching for the faster cars coming up behind, as we knew on top speed we were 70 mph down on the GT40s, in whose class we were!! There were all sorts of cars on track from the humble, but amazingly quick, Fiat 500 Abarths, to Alfa TZ1s, Marcos, Porsche 911s and 904s, Volvos Jaguars and Ferraris.

The track encompasses all possible speed levels with flat out corners , blind to the left and right, long sweepers where one can see almost for a mile ahead, two banked Carousels (seriously different – believe me!) and every conceivable connotation of blind over brow into the unknown.

Three laps later I got the “in” board and at the end of the fourth lap (and 45 minutes driving) I was more than a little relieved to get the car back in one piece and with a respectable 10 minutes 42 seconds on the board, with James only a few seconds behind to qualify us 89th out of 104 cars!!

James went out again and tried hard but the car wasn't pulling the revs it should and he decided that the diff ratio was too high and would need changing for the race. I went back to the main paddock to get the 4.2 diff whilst James and Laurence removed the 3.9. It did not take them long to fit it. James was becoming concerned by the new engine's increasing oil consumption, but he maintained that the rate of consumption was not bad enough to give up. If the motor turns, James would not give up.

The race was due to start at 3 pm., but in true German style there was a warm up lap and then a formation lap before the rolling start, all of which took best part of 30 minutes to complete, so James left the pits at 2.20. The game plan was for James to do 5 laps and come in. Then I would do my stint for about an hour and a quarter, then he would drive to

the finish.

As the race progressed James pushed hard and really got the car singing, taking a further 20 seconds off our practice time, helped by the 4.2 diff, but this was just masking an increasingly sick engine.

After 5 laps I jumped in just as the heavens opened and boy was I cursing as I headed off into the woods with rain pouring down and I'm fumbling to remember Thursday night's trip through the switches to find the wipers, which I duly did, plus side lights. During my first lap out I had 3 cars spinning across my bows and I just kept my head down and drove as gingerly as I could, but after Adenau bridge the track was bone dry and I was back up to speed, but by the time got to the mile and a half main straight near the end of the lap I was back in the rain again. So it continued with a very carefully driven MG, only having one lurid slide as I avoided a Porsche in the middle of the road. (Porsches really are a menace!) But the marshals were great, hugely enthusiastic, with every post having a marshal pointing into the air where it was raining or pointing to the ground if there was oil, which is almost impossible to see in the shadows under the trees.

I don't want to discuss the extra pit stop I made when concerned about the fuel level. I was told, firmly and really not very politely, that guest drivers should follow instructions, not try to do the team captain's thinking for him and to get the F\*\*\* back out on the track until called in.

By the end of 7 laps I was pleased to see the "in" board and I brought the car in after a 1 hour 20 minute stint, my face scarlet with heat (the air-con is dreadful) and concentration but with a huge grin all over it.

The car was replenished with fuel and oil and James set out on the last stint, But the oil consumption was getting worse and after three laps James was getting serious problems with oil surge on the right hand bends. His last lap was a nightmare. The engine was running like a sow. (It transpired that the camshaft was failing progressively). For the last ten miles he nursed the car along, coasting where possible and cutting the engine on right-handers to stop the oil pressure falling to zero. He crossed the finish line and stopped immediately, on the pit exit road. But the efficient Germans wouldn't let James push the car back into the pits so he refilled the car with oil and did a "slowing down" lap. This was a very slow lap – the circuit was covered in recovery vehicles and the ever enthusiastic marshals were clearing up the circuit – 15 miles of waving, smiling and hand shaking. Incredible. Like Knockhill after a Legends Final but much, much bigger. An experience never to be forgotten.

Despite the traumas of the final laps (and the extra pit stop) we finished 52nd out of 104 and we were a very proud quartet at the end of it, the car, James, Laurence and I.

At the end of the long slowing down lap James parked the car with the rest of the finishers on the F1 grid on the new circuit and we went to enjoy the prize giving held on the F1 pit road. This was a very civilised party, with mineral water, sparkling wine and food boxes provided, and cups for all the finishers.

Over the rest of the weekend James competed in two further 30 minute FIA\_GTC races on

the new Nürburgring which is a good circuit, but Mickey Mouse after the Nordschleife, the real Nürburgring, built by Hitler, where the scale, the atmosphere were incredible. A heady cocktail of elation and fear which modern, super-safe circuits cannot generate. How people raced there without barriers, through the trees and over the blind summits in cars of huge power but little in the way of handling, brakes or safety makes our modern forms of racing seem very passé and sterile. These guys really must have been real heroes.

At the end of it we, and the car went home in one piece with four “pots” between us, with James and myself flying back on Monday morning and Mechanic Lawrence driving the motorhome and trailer back over the next two days. The car had held up, just, but had completed around 500 racing miles over the weekend, and needed an engine rebuild, gearbox rebuild and more besides. But it was all worthwhile and a lifetime experience. We met some wonderful people. One person sent James an incredible picture of the Midget taken during the 1964 500km race. It shows how much fun historic racing can be and it is one of the few classes that will enable most drivers to experience the great tracks around Europe.

Since that race in August, the engine has been rebuilt and the cause of the camshaft wear resolved. September saw James at the wheel of the Midget out at Oulton Park, Knockhill, Spa and Zandvoort. Roll on next year!