

WORKS ALLOY MG MIDGET



Let's roll – light, precise steering and bags of revs will propel you through the corners, but Salisbury limited-slip differential in place of original Detroit Locker means you're less likely to end up admiring the mower's handiwork

# The Works Midget lives

*Few people realise MG raced a pair of alloy-bodied works Midgets and even fewer believe either car has survived. But this one has – it's real, it races and it's unbelievably quick*

WORDS MIKE GODBUN PHOTOGRAPHY LYNDON MCNEIL,  
BILL PRICE ARCHIVE

**T**HE CALIFORNIAN classic car dealer didn't know what he was selling. The browsers who glossed over the online advertisements for two years without buying didn't know what they were looking at. And even the Austin-Healey specialist who happened to have a spare slot in a container and imported it in to the UK in 2002 didn't know what he'd taken delivery of. But when works MG enthusiast Dave Saunders inspected the red alloy-panelled MG Midget with 'Sebring' race history, he spotted what everyone else had missed: the Sebring heritage was a red herring, but this was no ordinary Midget – it was one of two works cars that raced at the 1965 Bridgehampton Double 500, both missing, presumed dead.

Why such mystery surrounded the car is simple: the story of the Bridgehampton

Midgets is one of the least perpetuated in BMC Competitions Department history. Just three sentences each in the books *The Works MGs* by Mike Allison and Peter Browning, and *Mighty Midgets and Special Sprites* by John Baggott are all that's written on the cars, and those entries aren't entirely correct either.

Now it's time to set the record straight.

BMC was selling the Midget in the US through Ridgefield, New Jersey-based Hambro Inc and the launch of the 1275cc MkIII version of the car for 1966 was imminent, so it wanted to promote the familiar 'win on Sunday, sell on Monday' sales pitch.

The Bridgehampton Double 500, held at Bridgehampton Raceway in New York State each September from 1963-65, was one of the East Coast's premier racing events. With two 500-kilometre races (hence Double 500), it

counted towards the FIA World Championship of Makes for GT cars and the International Trophy for GT Prototypes. Cars up to 2000cc (up to 1600cc for Sports Car Club of America Modified sports cars) like Porsche's 904 GTS, Lotus Elans and the Midgets ran on the Saturday, those over 2000cc (over 1600cc for the SCCA Modified sports cars) such as Shelby Cobras, V12 Ferrari prototypes and Hap Sharp's Chaparral 2A ran on the Sunday.

BMC targeted the 1001cc-1300cc GT-1 B category with the 1293cc Midgets, where they would be up against a 1290cc Alfa Romeo Giulietta and 1108cc Alpine Renault A110. It also entered an MGB for Paddy Hopkirk in the 1601-2000cc GT-2 B class.

The race-tuned cars needed to remain recognisable to the buying public in 1966, so the Competitions Department at Abingdon



## 1965 MG MIDGET MKII

**Engine** 1293cc, in-line four-cylinder, ohv, single twin-choke Weber 45DCOE sidedraught carburettor  
**Power** 100bhp-plus @ 8000rpm (est) **Transmission** Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive, limited-slip differential **Steering** Rack-and-pinion **Suspension** Front: independent, wishbones, coil springs, lever-arm dampers, anti-roll bar. Rear: live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, lever arm dampers, anti-tramp bars **Brakes** Discs front, drums rear **Weight** 'Less than 600kg' (1300lb) **Performance** Top speed: 100mph-plus; 0-60mph: 5sec (est) **Value now** £100,000 (est)



took two standard right-hand drive British Racing Green MkIIs off the production line in May 1965 – they weren't re-badged Austin-Healey Sprites as some sources claim – and set about modifying them to make them more competitive without losing the Midget's looks. It succeeded. Even allowing for the works hardtop, leather bonnet straps, race number roundels and the absence of bumpers, you wouldn't guess that this Midget was particularly special – unlike the streamlined fastback specials of privateer Dick Jacobs.

The outer body panels are all lightweight aluminium alloy, fabricated by hand, and mate seamlessly to the steel floorpan and bulkhead. The rear bumper area is remodelled like the works MGs' rear ends, so it doesn't look like the bumper is obviously missing. Peer closely and you'll spot that the rear wings are slightly

## 'FEW PEOPLE CAN WORK OUT WHY IT'S SO QUICK, AND OWNER SAUNDERS IS HAPPY TO KEEP IT THAT WAY'

flared to cover 5in x 13in wire wheels with broad-shouldered Dunlop Racing tyres (it's on 4.5in x 13in rims with road tyres here). The result is a car that's lighter than some glassfibre-bodied WSM Sebring Sprites – just how light, Saunders isn't saying other than it's 'less than 600kg'. Still, that's at least 100kg lighter than a standard Midget.

The 1293cc Mini Cooper S A-series engine benefited from the department's most current tuning tweaks, while a long-range fuel tank (two regular tanks sandwiched together) resided in the boot. Using various parts from the BMC stores saw the brakes and transmission updated and suspension tweaked, with anti-tramp bars fitted at the rear. The Midgets also gained Detroit Locker locking differentials giving go-kart like drive characteristics – immense traction, but lift off and the rear-end would snap sideways. You needed a driver with the reflexes of a Flying Finn to handle that, and handily BMC had two: arch rival rally men Rauno Aaltonen and Timo Makinen.

Aaltonen was paired with Briton Gil Page, Makinen with American Leo Picard, but only the two Finns would actually take part in the race. BMC Comps Manager Stuart Turner

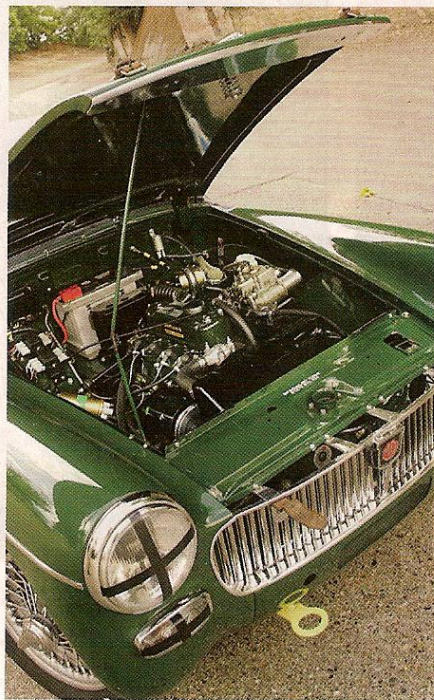
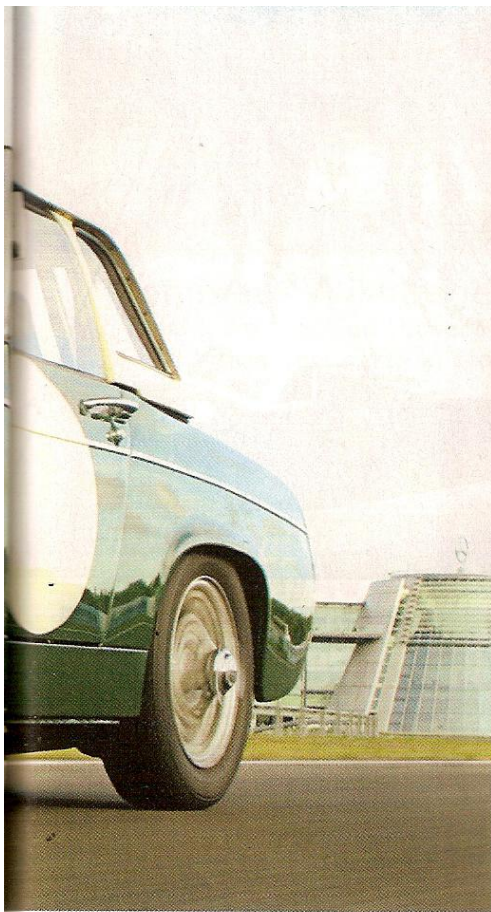
made the second drivers sit fully-kitted on the pit wall throughout the race, suspecting they would have compromised the race performance if they had driven. Aaltonen recalls: 'At the half-way fuelling stop he asked me "Are you OK to continue?" Of course, being a rally driver it was easy, a piece of cake!'

Makinen led the class for 85 laps but had to pit for four to have the tubular exhaust manifold welded up, which let 27-year-old Aaltonen in to the class lead and on to victory. Aaltonen finished sixth overall and claimed the chequered flag as a memento as well as a share of the \$500 prize money, while Makinen had to settle for third in class and 11th overall.

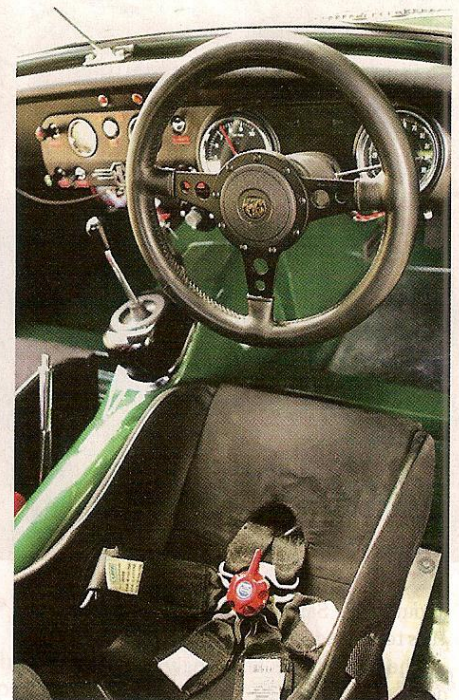
Aaltonen enjoyed the Bridgehampton race, likening lapping the hilly circuit in the sand dunes to surfing when compared to flat airfield-based circuits elsewhere in the States: 'You had to be very careful where you went over the blind crests, but it was very similar to a rally stage, which must have helped us. The only problem was the Alfa was faster in a straight line so we had to push all the time. I remember the Americans in the pits afterwards saying "How stupid are these Scandinavians taking such big risks" – but of course we weren't, it was all under control.'



Rauno Aaltonen makes the chequered flag his own after his '65 Bridgehampton Double 500 class win



Lifting the bonnet reveals a tweaked 1293cc Mini Cooper S A-series fed by a twin-choke Weber



There's just space to squeeze between the bucket seat and Moto-Lita wheel, but headroom is more generous

When Saunders was first asked to authenticate the Midget as found, there were a few tell-tale clues that it was one of the Bridgehampton cars. The fuel filler on the rear wing was one, the rollcage another. Saunders says: 'It had a huge diameter rollcage fitted at the insistence of the American scrutineers, who didn't like BMC's square-tube one. It was so big that the seat had to be carved around it.'

Saunders then 'fell in love with it' and bought the project as a 25th wedding anniversary present for himself and wife Nikki. With the help of former BMC Competitions Department men Peter Browning, Bill Price and Den Green he was able to confirm it was genuine and identify it as Aaltonen's class-winning car: 'Rauno always had his seats moulded to fit him. Den Green saw it and said "That's Rauno's".'

Former Shelby American works driver Ray Cuomo had bought the Aaltonen Midget soon after Bridgehampton and owned it in to the early Seventies. Cuomo would have seen the car there, having finished sixth overall in the big-banger 500 race the following day with a works Shelby American Cobra 289. Cuomo painted the Midget blue, with Goodyear sponsorship logos, and took it to the 1965 International Speed Week at Nassau in the Bahamas in late November. Of three races entered, it failed to finish the first two: the Nassau TT (driven by Paul Richards) and the Governor's Trophy, and 24th overall in the Nassau Trophy (second in the up to 1300cc GT class behind Howard Hanna's René Bonnet Djet) was its best result.

The owner trail goes cold after Cuomo, but it was registered for Californian roads in 1979. The current registration mark '6 GRX' is another red herring: both Midgets ran unregistered at Bridgehampton to avoid paying purchase tax and although RX registrations were used by the Competitions Department – the three works Midget rally cars were YRX 727, 737 and 747 – it's just a

number that Saunders came across and bought. It looks the part though, doesn't it?

Makinen's car is still missing, with rumours that it exists in a poor state so far unfounded. If it ever surfaces, Saunders and John Palmer of Essex-based MG preparer Specialist Cars, who restored this Midget, will be able to tell whether it's the real deal: 'There are a few details that the works carried out that I haven't told you

## REMEMBERING THE BRIDGE

FROM THE AIR an inverted facsimile of Brands Hatch's Indy circuit. Bridgehampton on New York's Long Island also reflected the best (ball-crushingly brave) bits of Spa-Francorchamps and Zandvoort in its 2.85-mile layout.

Competitors blasted along the ¾-mile start/finish straight before diving over a blind crest towards the tightening right-hand turn two, Millstone Turn. Other corners included a banked hairpin, but average lap speeds for Sixties Can-Am cars topped 110mph. Little wonder it had a reputation as one of the US's most challenging tracks.

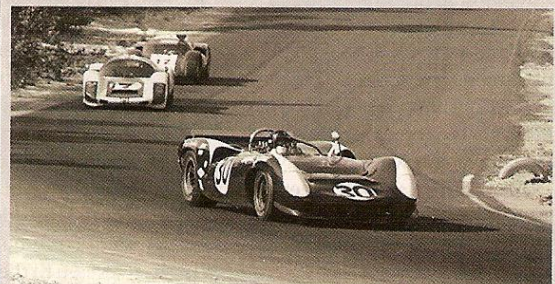
The circuit was built after road racing on New York State's country lanes was banned following too many accidents. Opening in September 1957, it was almost immediately granted a place on the NASCAR calendar for 1958 – the first non-oval course used. Dan Gurney gave

Ford its only Can-Am win with the Bardahl Special Lola T70 Spider at the series' first visit in '66, while the last big draw was a Trans-Am encounter in June 1970, won by Mark Donohue's AMC Javelin.

Housing and tourism demands brought the decaying track close to being built on in 1981, but amateur racing continued through 1997 thanks to intervention by the Friends of Bridgehampton (later the

Bridgehampton Racing Heritage Group) and current site owner Bob Rubin.

But noise complaints mean it's now golfers who enjoy the circuit's panoramic views, as the site is part of Rubin's golf course, The Bridge, opened in 2002. About a mile of circuit is preserved and Bridgehampton Racing Heritage Group continues to celebrate this once great track (see <http://bridgehamptonraceway.com>).



Dan Gurney turns his Lola T70 in to Echo Valley, en route to the only Ford-powered Can-Am victory, in 1966

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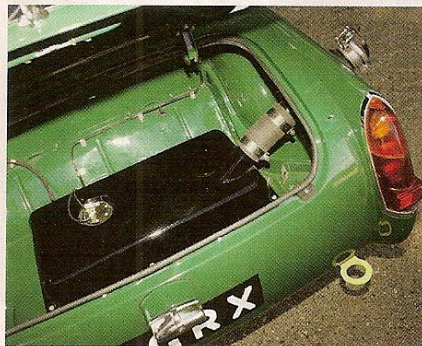
about,' says Saunders with a knowing smile. He's telling no-one.

The Midget was amazingly complete, right down to the original steering wheel, and required relatively little preparation to get it looking this good. 'It was a typical California car,' says Saunders. 'The floorpans were rotten, which happens when cars get left out in the rain with no roof on. But the exterior panels just needed cleaning up – we didn't have to do any repairs. Stripping the red paint off we uncovered the Cuomo blue, then the original British Racing Green. Even the brake calipers are original; they were rusty but cleaned up and work perfectly.'

For the wiring Saunders approached Stan Chalmers, one of only two Lucas Competitions Department employees who wired BMC's works cars. 'I asked Stan if he'd make a new cloth-covered loom for the car if I sent the old one to him. He said he wouldn't, but *would* build it on the car. He could tell by looking at the way the old loom was wound that he'd made it 40 years earlier.' The multicoloured loom, with twin fuse boxes, is both beautiful and an exact copy of that used in the car in 1965, right down to the correct materials.

Palmer's concours restoration work has returned the Midget to a condition far superior to how it was new. There's not a smear of filler anywhere on the body and it looks too good to race – but race it does. In the hands of Palmer and Scottish motor trader John Clark the kerb-hopping Midget has won its class in all Equipe GTS and GT & Sports Car Cup races entered and is theoretically rapid enough to qualify among the top six Modsports Midgets in the MG Car Club's race series. That's without the Modsports cars' slick tyres.

Few people can work out why it's so quick and Saunders is happy to keep it that way. Under the bonnet sits a Weber 45DCOE-fed 1293cc Mini Cooper S-based A-series built by Nick Swift at Swiftune Engineering. With a camshaft profile and power output whose details even Saunders isn't allowed to know, it's a bit special. Swiftune-powered Cooper Ss



Wing-mounted fuel filler and double-capacity tank are clues to this Midget's works racer identity...



... while its original dash plaque now shows off its provenance on the bootlid

claimed the top three spots during the St Mary's Trophy race at the Goodwood Revival meeting in September – Swift himself piloting the winning car – so he clearly has a competitive advantage that's worth keeping schtum.

Limboing between the deep-sided bucket seat and Moto-Lita wheel (both more recent additions to preserve the originals), you drop down in to the Midget's dark, confined cabin. It almost seems a crime to set foot on the gloss-painted panels, every one as immaculate as those outside. Wriggle to get comfy and there's just enough room for your arms and legs, but surprisingly generous headroom under the works hard-top – even for a six-footer like me.

With a turn of the key in the dash and prod of the large top-hat starter button the A-series immediately barks into life. With clearly very aggressive cam profiles, each angry, blunt, tickover pulse sounds like it'll be the engine's last. That all changes once you start exploring the upper echelons of the tachometer. You need 2000-3000rpm to pull away cleanly, full momentum engaging the instant you let out the sharp race clutch; but once the cam comes in and the sidedraught Weber's fuel supply gets more fully burnt, grittiness gives way to a shrill scream to the 8000rpm red line.

That scream is matched by an intensifying gear whine from the special close-ratio four-speed 'box. It's tough but crunchy and

rewards diligent speed matching by the driver in the lower two ratios – not easy as the accelerator sits a sole's width away from the soft brake pedal.

Hurting towards a tight corner, hard on the centre pedal, a twist of right foot to keep the revs up, I'm mindful of the locking differential coming in to play, but there's no need: the Detroit Locker has made way for a more gentle Salisbury limited-slip item. Tweak the light and immediate steering and the Midget darts towards the apex, a surprising amount of roll building through the corner, before you power out on the exit, the differential ensuring a surfeit of traction. With greater confidence comes more speed and a mesmeric slot car-like rhythm – minus the high-speed off into the skirting boards...

Mystery and intrigue still seems to follow the works Midget around, but somehow that adds to its appeal. And now you can count yourself among the initiated few. It's real, it lives, and it's coming to a race circuit near you – I can't think of a better way to spread the word. ☐

Thanks to Dave and Nikki Saunders; Brooklands Museum, Weybridge, which is open all year round (01932 857381, [www.brooklandsmuseum.com](http://www.brooklandsmuseum.com)); Mercedes-Benz World at Brooklands (0870 400 4000, [www.mercedes-benzworld.co.uk](http://www.mercedes-benzworld.co.uk))