

LOOKING BACK WITH DICK JACOBS

EARLIER THIS YEAR another era ended in the history of MG when a compulsory purchase order forced the closure of W. Jacobs and Son Ltd., Mill Garage, the most famous of all MG dealerships, run by that famous MG racing driver and entrant Dick Jacobs in Chigwell Road, South Woodford, Essex. Jacobs and Mill Garage possibly gave the MG marque more publicity in the '50s than the entire Nuffield or BMC publicity machines and more positively sold more MG cars in London and the Home Counties in each of the 19 years from 1952 than any other dealer. Jacobs' working life has been devoted to MGs, indeed he almost gave his life for them in a horrific crash with the MG-A prototype in the tragic 1955 Le Mans 24-hour race, fortunately living to read his own obituary in the *Evening Standard* and to transfer from racing driver to highly successful private entrant and team manager. It seems somewhat remiss of British Leyland, therefore, that no word of thanks was forthcoming from them when the garage closed to make way for an M11 access point. Perhaps the following brief history of the garage and the man, gleaned from Jacobs in recent conversations and from excellent, comprehensive articles he has written over the years, particularly in the MG Car Club magazine *Safety Fast*, will help to redress the balance.

Interestingly, that splendid man John Thornley, OBE, Director and General Manager of the MG Car Company until early Stokesian days, acknowledges in a tribute to Dick Jacobs in the February issue of *Safety Fast*, "It was largely through the interest and enthusiasm engendered by these exploits (referring to the performances of Jacobs and George Phillips in T-types and YBs) that I was able to persuade the Board of BMC to authorise me to set up the Competitions Department". The ensuing results of that subsequently World-famous Department are too well known to need recalling here.

Mill Garage was built around the Old Mill public house and the Old Mill barn, a hostelry frequented in summer by "dubious characters from the East End of London arriving on horse-drawn transport" until the brewery withdrew its licence in 1912/13. It was then

acquired by Walter John Shelley, owner of the nursery opposite, whose daughter married William Henry Jacobs, manager of a Woodford shop, around the same time. Bill Jacobs' main claim to fame, like Lord Nuffield, was cycle racing as a youth and the ownership of one of the first motorcycle combinations in the area. He learnt to control four wheels on an early de Dion Bouton acquiring an interest in motor transport which led him to volunteer for the Army as a driver in 1915, the year his elder son Richard was born, and in spite of backing the Peerless lorry into a lamp-post he passed the Army driving test because drivers were scarce.

On leaving the Army in February 1919 Bill Jacobs rented the Old Mill Barn and yard from his father-in law, acquired a couple of lorries and went into the haulage business, one of his first contracts being to collect crates of car parts from Southampton Docks to deliver them to what is now known as Gates Corner, where Bill Jacobs' old Army Subaltern, Frank Gates, assembled the parts into Maxwell cars. Dick remembers as a six-year-old he and his mother serving petrol in two-gallon cans when the family moved into the Old Mill House in 1921, and later the one-gallon capacity hand-pump which was installed after a burglary of two-gallon cans. A charabanc business was started and being seasonal the drivers were put to work in the winter of 1925 to build a filling station and shop, which the arrival of electricity allowed to be kept open later. The success of the charabanc business was such that in 1929 Bill Jacobs bought three new AEC Regal, 32-seater coaches to coincide with the start of a three-times daily coach service between Kings Cross and Walton-on-the-Naze (the coach service was sold out in 1935 when Government regulations began to oppose the small long-distance operator), customer car maintenance was developed in the workshop built for the coaches and a row of lock-up garages built. Because of the AEC connection Dick Jacobs was apprenticed at the AEC works in 1933, just when diesel engines were gaining a foothold in heavy haulage, but had to leave in 1937 to help run the garage because of his father's indifferent health. By then the Mill Garage had been



Dick Jacobs with the empty Mill Garage.

a Wolseley dealership for three years, a franchise it held until the closure. Mrs. Jacobs had learned to drive on a two-cylinder Wolseley in 1925 and an almost new Hornet saloon acquired in 1933 had confirmed the favourable impression of the marque which led to the seeking of the franchise.

So it was that the young Dick Jacobs nurtured an enthusiasm for sports cars on Wolseley Hornet Specials until his life-long MG connection began in 1937 with a four-year-old J2. Visits to Brooklands, Donington and Crystal Palace developed an enthusiasm for racing but the War intervened before he had the chance to participate. Wartime Royal Navy service was spent in engine rooms of diesel-engined coastal craft, putting into practice his AEC training. Sadly, his younger brother Bob died when his Hurricane disappeared over the desert.

Dick took over Mill Garage from his ailing father in December 1945 and the following year acquired the MG dealership: he had written to Wolseley Motors from Scapa Flow during the War, asking if they would renew the agency when hostilities ended and on the strength of this having been confirmed he wrote to MG asking for their dealership too—and got it. So in October 1946 Mill Garage got its first MG TC, the car which was destined to be Dick's first competition mount, firstly in trials and then hill-climbs and sprints. His first speed event was a Brighton and Hove MC impromptu hill-climb at Clayton driving this TC, by then partially stripped and fitted with an Arnott supercharger.

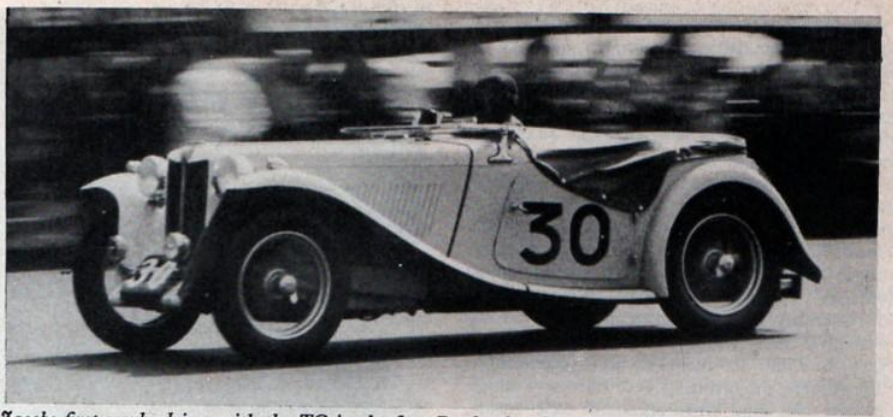
Dick Jacobs' first race was the first ever meeting at Goodwood in 1948. He took down the blown TC with John Hazendompf, a pre-War trials driver with a P-type MG, a head-gasket blew on the way there and had to be changed before practice and the gasket blew again on the third of the three permitted practice laps, all the result of running on the compulsory Pool petrol. With a new head gasket fitted, benzole had to be added to the tank to ensure that the pair could get home that night. Jacobs takes up the tale: "I said to John, this is silly, we won't finish a three-lap race on Pool. They're



The Goodwood 2nd Easter Handicap, 1949, and Jacobs takes his first MG Special to 2nd overall in its first race, behind Stirling Moss (Cooper 500).

going to take a sample of the first three cars over the line to see that there hasn't been any cheating, so if I tell you and some other independent person I'm going to start the race on benzole with no intention of finishing in the first three, at least I'll get the fun of doing it, gain experience and I won't have done anything to spoil my chances of getting another competition licence. The race started and at the end of the first lap I shot past Tony Crook and Watkins in 328s and took the lead over the line, so on the second lap I thought, 'Oh my goodness, I'm in the lead. I mustn't do this'. So I let them pass me in the same place on the second lap and slowed down to wait for the third man, Lusty in a blown TC. And I had to wait and wait for him to catch me up, but it was most enjoyable!"

Benzole or no benzole Jacobs had found that his forte was circuit racing rather than hill-climbs. "It was something to do with mentality. I took a long time to warm up and whereas Frank Kennington in his MG K3 and Lionel Leonard in his HRG were usually first and second in hill-climbs with me third, when it came to circuit racing Leonard couldn't live with me." Or at least he couldn't once Dick had built himself a respectably quick MG in the form of his first MG Special, a TA chassis powered by a Marshall-supercharged TC engine (using a Morris 10 block sleeved to bring the capacity to 1100 c.c., keeping the blown engine within the 1½-litre class) with a body built by John Hazendompf. The mixture was a remarkable success, winning seven times and finishing in the first five 18 times in 26 races, a record which in itself would have brought him to the attention of the MG Car Company. As it was the MG Car Company and John Thornley in particular, Service Manager at this time in 1949, knew more than enough about Dick and his MG racing contemporary George Phillips, later chief photographer of *Auto-sport*, who'd pestered him continually for parts and information. Still, Thornley is a tolerant and perceptive man and the two nuisances finally talked the factory into providing a team of three TCs (with Ted Lund as the third driver) for the very first production car race in this country, supported by the *Daily Express* at Silverstone in August



Jacobs first works drive, with the TC in the first Production Car Race, Silverstone, 1949.

1949. Thus Jacobs had his first works drive in only his second season of racing.

In practice for this race the TCs were five to eight seconds a lap slower than Eric Thompson, Peter Clarke and John Buncombe in HRGs. The MG team were not amused. In desperation Jacobs replaced the TC's 19 in. wheels with the 17 in. wheels from his Special and improved nine seconds a lap, but similar wheels could not be found for the other two cars. Jacobs was catching Eric Thompson for the class lead in the race when the throttle jammed, he hit the bales at Becketts, rejoined the race, and the TCs had to be content with 5th, 6th and 7th.

However, Thornley was more than pleased that the three most standard cars in the race should finish at all, let alone at an almost 70 m.p.h. average and when Jacobs and Phillips attacked him over the winter about racing the new TD, the prototype of which they'd seen in October 1949, in the following season's production car races, he finally proved amenable. Phillips and Jacobs found the heavy TD intolerably slow in the tuned form which Thornley let them try and it was only after Jacobs had persuaded them to add Andrex shock-absorbers, aero screen, bucket seats, air scoops on the brakes and so on that the thing would go at all and in this form Jacobs raced the TD prototype in a production car race at Blandford Camp, winning his class after a closely fought duel

with Eric Thompson's HRG, only to forfeit the class because the MG factory could not state that six identical models fitted with Andrex shock-absorbers had been built.

With works Mk. II TDs Jacobs, Lund and Phillips finished second, third and fourth in class in the 1950 *Daily Express* production car race. Compression ratios were raised from 8.6:1 to 9.3:1 (on 80 octane fuel!) to improve performance, and the cars and drivers shipped to Ireland for the TT, where Jacobs had one of the finest drives in his career to win the 1½-litre class in this dreadfully wet Tourist Trophy, won by Stirling Moss in a works aluminium XK120. Jacobs covered 189.892 miles at an average speed of 63.2 m.p.h., with Phillips second in class, seven miles behind, and Lund third, limping his way to the finish with no oil and run bearings, a fantastic result for the Abingdon firm.

With demand for TDs exceeding capacity by the end of 1950 the factory decided not to race in 1951 and the three TD Mk. IIs were sold to their respective drivers (at full list price!). All three were entered in the Silverstone Production Car Race and this time Jacobs succeeded in winning his class in his favourite race, at 72.66 m.p.h., after he had pushed Bert Hadley's leading Jowett Jupiter into blowing its engine. The three TDs went to Ireland once more, this time as private entries, but found the sports car opposition of Lesters and Coopers far too tough for the TD and the writing was on the wall. When the *Daily Express* announced that the next production race at Silverstone would be for touring cars Jacobs saw a suitable alternative, sold the outclassed TD and aimed for the new saloon car racing with one of the newly announced MG YBs, acquired just three weeks before the Silverstone race after a bit of string-pulling by Tommy Sangster, the Morris Motors Sales Manager, for the MG factory just didn't want to know about Jacobs' latest crazy idea. It was Sangster, incidentally, who at a Belfast reception after the 1950 TT had been talked into awarding Mill Garage the first new Morris franchise to be granted since 1939, giving the garage the complete Nuffield franchise of MG, Morris and Wolseley.

MGs should have had more faith in Jacobs: in that 1952 Production Touring Car Race Jacobs won the class after a friendly slip-stream tow from Stirling Moss's Jaguar Mk. VII (which became an annual occurrence) had helped him to catch and



Taking that disputed class win with the modified prototype TD, Blandford Camp, 1950.

pass Hadley's Jowett Javelin. For UHK 111, this incredible little YB, it was the first of three class wins in these Silverstone Production Car Races, while Jacobs took no fewer than five class wins in a row, the first in the TD, three with the YB and the 1955 race with a ZA Magnette.

Jacobs remembers that the saloon car regulations in those days were very similar to today's Group 1 (or should it be 1½?). "The third year I ran the YB I've got an idea we could fit larger valves and double valve springs. We weren't allowed to do much—I remember in the third year I went to the assembly area without the back seat in and they wouldn't let me race till I replaced it. Tyres were the ordinary very narrow Dunlop Racers, we ran with standard axle ratios, standard gearboxes and absolutely standard brakes. The engine was more-or-less standard as well. The only thing we did to it, apart from make sure it was put together properly, was to slip in a TC camshaft and double valve springs, which didn't make all that much difference: the TC/TD engine gave something like 52 b.h.p. and the single carburetter Y-type 48 b.h.p. But the difference between the Y-type and the ZA Magnette was something like 10 sec. per lap. Those extra 250 c.c.s made all the difference in the World."

Whilst all this business with the TDs and YBs had been going on Jacobs had found time to build and race two more MG Specials. The first, a much lighter supercharged 1100, netted him third place in a supporting race at the Ulster Trophy Meeting in Dundrod. The last, built at the end of 1954 along with an identical car for a customer, both with glassfibre coupé bodies on YB chassis, was no match for one C. Chapman's Lotus-MG. Jacobs raced several non-MGs too, including Ernie Stapleton's ex-St. John Horsfall, Spa 24-hour-winning Aston Martin, and a Frazer Nash.

Meanwhile, in South Woodford, Mill Garage continued to expand helped by the publicity surrounding Jacobs' racing successes, yet never in his driving career from 1947 to 1955 did he use any of his successes in his own company advertising, for his approach even when a works driver was that of an enthusiastic amateur. In 1951 he spurned the "solus site" offers being made by the big petrol companies and instead offered 100 per cent exclusive rights to the Mobil Oil Co. Ltd. when they were ready to open up in



Jacobs at Le Mans with the MG-A prototype shortly before his accident.

Britain and on January 1st, 1952 the first gallons of Mobilgas sold in Britain were served at Mill Garage to the then current World Land Speed Record Holder, John Cobb.

After his class win in the 1955 Silverstone Production Touring Car Race with the first Abingdon ZA Magnette, Jacobs' next big event was the Le Mans 24 hours, co-driving, with Joe Flynn, one of a team of three MG-A prototypes, at this stage still known by the Experimental Department number EX 182. Today Dick Jacobs is loathe to talk about that terrible race which cost the lives of so many spectators, but it is interesting that hearsay reports of his own accident I have at hand disagree with Dick's own memories in so much as they assume that his crash occurred *before* the Levegh crash when in fact it happened afterwards. "I know what caused my shunt—it was two things, in my opinion, anyway. I went through the pit area just as Lance Macklin was picking himself up off the road and Levegh's Mercedes was on fire in the crowd, and I'd another two laps to do before changing drivers. When you get over the top of White House, coming down to White House Corner, you can see over the top of the house; see all the flames and smoke and whatever, so that caused a certain amount of lack of concentration. The other thing was that we knew that after the first 2¼ hours the shock-absorbers would get a bit floppy,

which all MG-As did, and we had additional Andrex shock-absorbers which have a little adjustment so that all the mechanic had to do was to take them up one turn, then at the end of the next 2¼ hours take them up another turn to compensate for the Armstrong's failings. The front end started to go and because I wasn't concentrating enough I went into the ditch." Number 42 in fact overturned and caught fire at White House and Jacobs was critically injured, but amidst all the confusion of the Mercedes crash nobody quite knew what had happened to him. His condition turned out to be so serious that BMC flew out a thoracic specialist and medical team to bring him back to England. It was to be another four months before he regained his feet, six months before he could drive and resume work at Mill Garage and under pressure from relatives and co-directors he agreed never to race again.

But there was nothing to stop Jacobs involving himself with other people racing. Firstly he persuaded John Thornley to let Alan Foster drive the works Magnette in the 1956 Silverstone Production Touring Car Race and then took it upon himself to raise a team of Magnette's for the 750 MG's Six-Hour-Relay Race. He succeeded and the team won this, in those days, quite important National event, the first win for a team of MGs. Flushed with this success he took Alan Foster and his MG-A under his wing for late 1956 and 1957 and if Foster's own story about the beginning of that association is anything to go by, Dick Jacobs didn't give him much alternative: Alan was leading a Goodwood marque race with a self-prepared MG-A, Dick was in the pits loving the sight of an MG in the lead of a race once again and then on the last lap, no Foster. He'd run out of petrol! A furious Jacobs grabbed the MG-A keys, gave Foster the keys to his own road car, confiscated the MG-A and prepared it properly at Mill Garage.

In 1957 too, Dick Jacobs was responsible for managing Foster's and John Waller's MG ZA Magnettes and for the *Daily Express* Touring Car Race in September, in which Foster won the 2-litre class and Waller was second, Roy Bloxham joined the team with his ZA.

For 1958 Jacobs prepared and ran two Magnettes for Foster and Waller in the BRSCC Saloon Car Championship for modified production saloons. With Foster leading

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The second MG Special, with blown 1100 engine.



The final MG Special, in glassfibre on the last YB chassis.

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the 1600 class disaster struck at the May Silverstone meeting when a wheel came off his car, which was wrecked, and Waller spun dramatically at Woodcote in full view of the television cameras and consequently Mrs. Waller sitting at home in High Wycombe. The result was that Waller, a dentist, decided to stop racing in case damaged limbs should prevent him carrying out his profession and the following day he sold his Magnette to Jacobs to replace the Foster car, a timely move, for it enabled Foster to win the 1600 c.c. class in the Championship, won overall that year by Jack Sears in the works A105.

The MG-A Twin-Cam had been announced in July the same year, Jacobs acquiring one of the first. In spite of opposition from the BARC, who thought this absolutely standard car would be too slow, it was entered for Foster and Tommy Bridger in the Tourist Trophy at Goodwood in September and finished 14th overall and third in the 2-litre class behind two works Porsches. Encouraged by this and a second in class in a one-hour race at Snetterton, Jacobs decided to attempt a full season with a team of two GT cars and 1 MTW, the Foster Twin-Cam, was joined by Roy Bloxham's identical 2 MTW, Jacobs stressing that both cars and drivers should receive exactly the same treatment. Through the winter the two cars were fully modified and over 2 cwt. chopped off their weight by replacing all unstressed steel panels with aluminium. The MG factory, who had given no help with the Magnettes, had been encouraged to co-operate with Jacobs again by the Magnette class win and now with the Twin-Cams, particularly because it was a new model and they were interested in racing development, they agreed to do most of Jacobs' engine work. That first full season resulted in six firsts, including a class win for Gil Baird, driving Foster's car in the *Autosport* Three-Hour Race, four seconds, three thirds and a fair amount of teething troubles.

By the end of the 1960 season, in which Tommy Bridger drove 2 MTW, which Jacobs had purchased from Bloxham, a total of 56 entries had been made for the Twin-Cams, mostly for both these light-green cars, in either 2-litre or 1600 classes or events, out of which they had finished in the first three no less than 36 times, a pretty fair argument against the Twin-Cam's reputed bad reliability record. The season had its drama when Tommy Bridger wrote off 2 MTW's aluminium body at Goodwood in the TT when a tyre burst, an accident for which Jacobs blames himself for not calling Bridger in for a tyre change. The car raced again the following weekend with a new steel body taken from the Mill Garage rafters. The season and Jacobs' Twin-Cam team ended on a high note with the *Autosport* Championship and the Three-Hour Race at Snetterton: the cars won the 1600 c.c. class in the Championship, were promptly put up for sale and today are still running, both owned by Roger Daniell.

There followed a lapse in the Jacobs' team when the MG Midgets intended to replace the Twin-Cams were delayed, but in the meantime Jacobs fed John Thornley with



Foster and the Jacobs Midget padding to that brilliant 3rd overall at Snetterton.

the idea for a fixed-head racing Midget. In January 1961 Jacobs had bought second-hand, 18 months' old, one of the first six DB4s, "the one which Gilly Tyrer bought new and stuffed through the hedge at Prescott". By chance he had a *Motor* road-test of the DB4 on his desk when the first publicity material on the new Midget arrived. Coincidentally the catalogue side drawing was the same length as the *Motor's* DB4 drawing and it struck Jacobs that below the waistline the DB4 and the Midget were exactly the same shape. With tracing paper he confirmed this and transferred the Aston's fixed head to the top of the Midget. It was a perfect match and Jacobs shot off to Abingdon, saw John Thornley and by the end of the afternoon the drawing office staff had sketched the suggested fixed-head Midget and John Thornley had given Syd Enever permission to build it. So began the history of the famous MG Midgets, though because of production problems it was to be another 15 months before the new light-green cars were ready, for Whitsuntide Goodwood in 1962. Three had been built at Abingdon—two for Jacobs and one for John Milne in Scotland. All had new wind-tunnel-designed noses which required 13 b.h.p. less to propel the cars at 100 m.p.h.

Andrew Hedges was brought into the team to replace Tommy Bridger, who had retired, a limited company was formed to run the racing team, mainly for tax reasons, and a two-car transporter acquired, a real luxury, for all the previous Jacobs cars, including the Twin-Cams, had been driven to races. These little Midgets, now owned by Syd Beer, of Houghton, Huntingdonshire and occasionally raced by his sons, were to become legendary in their day. In the first half-season in 1962, 10 events were entered, a total of 22 individual entries, and the Midgets were placed in the first four 13 times. In 1963 the two cars ran in 14 National and International GT races, finishing in the first four places 20 times, while 1964 saw 11 events entered with 15 places in the first three. Amongst the most notable of their generally remarkable successes were finishing first and second in their class in the International Guards Trophy meeting at Brands Hatch for three years running, including finishing seventh overall behind five Ferraris and an Aston in 1962, and perhaps their finest success ever, finishing first and second in the 1300 prototype class and being first British cars home in the 1964 Nurburgring 1,000-Km. race, and Alan Foster's brilliant drive in the wet

to third overall behind Graham Hill in the Coombes lightweight E-type and Roy Salvadori's Cooper Monaco in a 25-lap international sports car race at Snetterton in 1963.

Engines in these two cars varied from 972 c.c. in early 1962 to 995 c.c. and then, when the 1098 engine was announced this was fitted to the Midgets in 1139 c.c. guise, finally replaced by 1293 c.c. engines. Throughout the lives of these wonderful little Midgets, utterly immaculate as all Jacobs' cars have been, Hedges ran 770 BJB and Foster 771 BJB. They were co-driven on essential occasions by Keith Greene and Chris Martyn.

In the first year of the Midgets Jacobs was sidetracked into entering an MG 1100 in the International Six-Hour Saloon Car Race: Foster and Hedges carried off a win in the hardest-fought class of the race. The following year the same car finished fourth and then rejoined the Jacobs family as a run-about. Ostensibly Jacobs retired from racing when the works-owned Midgets were returned to the factory at the end of 1964 (and one of his greatest regrets was that he was unable to purchase one), but made a re-appearance two years ago when he entered an MG 1300 in the Group 1 Championship for Alan Foster. Last year Jacobs helped out Alan Foster with a Morris Marina in Group 1 and this year he will become even more treacherous to the Octagon (for British Leyland's lack of courtesy has thrown most of his marquee allegiance to the winds) when he runs the pit for the Gp. 1 Escort RS 2000 of Alan Foster, now the boss of the London Sports-car Centre.

Jacobs, now 59, is uncertain how he will fill his time in the future now Mill Garage has disappeared for ever. One thing he ought to do is to write an autobiography, for his wealth of amusing anecdotes would merge well with the detailed history of his career. Certainly he won't lose his interest in motor racing: "It's one of those things that gets into your blood. But I don't reckon when you talk about today's racing that it's any more interesting because it's faster. It's not the actual speed which counts—it's all relative. When the Formula One cars were lapping at about 95 m.p.h. we were lapping at 70 m.p.h. The F1 cars made more noise, but the class-leading saloon cars and production cars like the TDs, got a terrific cheer from the crowd, so it would seem that increasing lap speeds up to 130 m.p.h. hasn't made motor racing any more exciting for the spectator."—C.R.