

An article penned by **Dennis Wharf**, MG Midget Registrar of the MG Car Club for the June 2011 edition of Safety Fast”

The MG Midget Coupes

Interest has been growing recently regarding the various special bodied Spridgets which abounded in the late fifties and early sixties, the Sebrings, WSMs, Lenhams, and Ashleys all receiving renewed attention. Couple this with the role played by the works MG Midget coupes which have been mentioned in some of my driver interviews lately, and I thought the time was about right to revisit the history of these cars.

The Jacobs Midgets, as they are usually but quite wrongly referred to, have always held a certain fascination for me, which led to a couple of long and interesting conversations with **Dick Jacobs** in the mid seventies, when we discussed the cars at some length. The first of these took place on a miserable Monday morning, when the demolition men were moving in to knock down the once famous **Mill Garage** in South Woodford. This was in January 1974, and was to make way for the M11 motorway, the premises having been compulsory purchased by the local authority. Dick Jacobs, lost in thought at times and clearly moved by the whole unhappy affair, was clearing out his old office when I arrived. Here was an indication of the man's true character, however – he had an appointment with an unknown enthusiast and stuck to it, despite the sadness and the bulldozers being manoeuvred to wreck a lifetime of history and achievement. I'm so pleased I met Dick and was able to share some of his memories on what were for me, very special occasions. It was an honour and something I've always treasured.

Most students of MG history will already be aware of Dick Jacobs' early exploits racing both works MGs and his own MG-derived specials in the immediate post-war period. In 1949, along with Ted Lund and George Phillips, Dick managed to persuade John Thornley into entering a works-backed team of TCs for that year's *Daily Express* Production Car Race at Silverstone. From then on he was often invited to drive a works car. It was on one such occasion that sadly his racing career, and very nearly his life, came to an end. Driving one of the three works prototype MGAs in the 1955 Le Mans, he came across the scene of that terrible accident which claimed the lives of 80 spectators, when Levegh's Mercedes 300SLR careered into the packed main grandstand opposite the pits. Within a few moments of seeing this, and possibly as a result, Dick lost concentration and rolled his MGA near Whitehouse, being flung out and receiving severe injuries in the process. Six months later and finally approaching recovery, he decided that at 40 perhaps it was time to give up racing himself and have a crack at managing other peoples' entries instead.

Initially he managed Alan Foster's MG Magnette in the 1956 *Daily Express* May Silverstone meeting, and then ran the team of Magnettes which won the 750 MC's 6-Hour Relay Race, also at Silverstone later that same year. During 1957 & '58 he looked after the Magnettes of John Waller and **Alan Foster**, acquiring an MGA Twin Cam also in 1958. This was entered for the RAC Tourists Trophy at Goodwood (in standard trim), where it finished a creditable third in class driven again by Alan Foster sharing with Tommy Bridger. A second car was acquired and the pair of Ash

Green MGA Twin Cams (1 MTW and 2 MTW) were then to be seen regularly throughout the 1959 and '60 seasons. Although experiencing some problems, many successes came their way, the Jacobs' équipe gaining a reputation for both their high standards of preparation and consistently good results.

Things were a bit quiet for the team in 1961, for the MGAs had been sold off at the end of the previous season, and with no suitable MGs available, there was nothing to go racing with! At about this time, however, catalogues for the soon-to-be announced new MG Midget were released and Dick, looking through a copy, had by coincidence open on his desk a *Motor* magazine road test of the Aston Martin DB4. Both items of literature had side drawings of their respective cars, not drawn to scale, but to a similar size, and by making a tracing of the DB4's roofline and laying it over the Midget, he had the outline of a Midget Coupe. Just perfect he thought, for a small capacity GT racing car. (On my first visit he still had the Midget brochure, Aston Martin road test and original tracing in a folder and laid before me what he had shown **John Thornley** and **Syd Enever** when approaching them with his idea in 1961.)

John Thornley was immediately behind the proposal as was Syd Enever, who instructed his drawing office to sketch out some details while they had lunch in the canteen. All agreed that rather than modify existing production cars and run into homologation problems, Dick's small GT idea had many advantages. Soon everyone involved was satisfied and the project was put in hand, it being decided also at this time that the cars should remain the property of the works, but would be loaned to the Jacobs team, who would look after their maintenance and racing programme from their garage in Chingford Road. The cars were to have hand-beaten aluminium bodies, mounted on a standard steel floorpan, attached by epoxy resin and rivets. Bodywork was basically standard, but the very attractive shape evolved due to a new elongated nose section. Syd, being a great believer in maximum air penetration and aware that bumpers and other bits of brightwork were not required, designed this new nose-piece to be complemented by a smoother tail design. But apart from this and the new roof, the remaining panels were very true to the original design. It was undoubtedly this improved air penetration, achieved by combining the new long nose with a sharper more raked windscreen and smooth tail, which contributed to the cars' considerable straight line performance on the faster circuits, for wind tunnel testing had indicated the new car at 100mph required 13bhp less than a standard car at the same speed. Building the new MGs was quite a lengthy affair however, as many departments were involved, and so delivery was rather late not being made until June 1962, with two cars **770 BJB** and **771 BJB** going to the south Essex team, and a less well known car **138 DJB** heading north of the border for Scottish MG enthusiast **John Milne**.

The reputation for high standards of preparation continued, the Jacobs Midgets always appearing immaculate and prepared to perfection. The cars entered fourteen international events during their Jacobs years, and from those twenty-eight starts, they achieved twenty top four places – pretty impressive by any standards. To begin with however a new team driver was required, for a full programme of events had been planned, and Tommy Bridger with business commitments had decided to retire. Successful Sebring-Sprite driver, **Andrew Hedges**, had come to Dick's notice on a few occasions, and so following a meeting at the Steering Wheel

Club in Curzon Street, and a successful test session at Silverstone, he was invited to join the team. Along with Alan Foster he would share most of the driving over the coming two-and-a-half seasons, although helped on occasions in the longer events where two drivers would be required by **Keith Greene**, who was usually teamed with Foster, and the highly experienced **Chris Martyn**, who would therefore partner Hedges.

As was expected a few teething troubles were first encountered, but the new cars weighing 11cwt (3 less than a standard road Midget), proved to be very rapid right from the start. They appeared with Lockheed disc brakes, replacing the standard drums, and wire wheels. These options, to everyone's surprise, created homologation problems for although homologated for the Sprite, no one had thought to do so for the Midget. Needless to say this was dealt with pretty swiftly! Running 'A' series 995cc Formula Junior engines for the 1962 season, they scored many victories in 1,000cc class events and scared much of the opposition in far larger engined machines. The cars' competition campaign began on Whit Monday at Goodwood, where Alan Foster held off a couple of Lotus 23 sport/racing cars for some distance before the power deficit inevitably told, but this was a remarkable achievement for a road going based car so close to standard spec. However, the cars were immediately returned to Abingdon for some much needed chassis modifications, which saw ZF differentials being fitted, but more importantly softer rear springs with taper plates, special bushes and Aeon rubber bump stops. This was in an attempt to overcome the rear end hop and severe over-steer that the drivers had both complained of and which had nearly put both cars off the track. (It certainly worked, for even today Malcolm Beer marvels at how well the little Midget GTs handle). Once returned they embarked on the remaining fairly stiff schedule, including being part of the British team in the 'World Cup' at Zandvoort, which they won easily. Not starting until June, this half season could only be judged a huge success, for the cars had achieved four firsts, five seconds, one third and three fourths, with neither car retiring or failing to finish any of the events entered.

Over the winter of 1962/3 the cars were overhauled and with the new 1098cc engine now in production, advantage was taken to bore these blocks out to the maximum permissible under the regulations. This allowed the cars to run in the 1150cc and 1300cc classes, with engines of 1139cc. Initial testing identified a few problems, but by the end of March all was well, with a hectic season beckoning. Tackling all the 'Autosport GT Championship' events, along with most other major UK sports and GT car races, the cars were competing at least twice a month for much of the season, including intensive preparation for the classic Nurburgring 1000km, where they finished second (Hedges/Martyn) and third (Foster/Greene), in the 1300GT class. The brakes, however, were the limiting factor here, for they were simply not up to this type of racing and were creating a few headaches not to mention scares. On return from Germany the team entered two more 'Autosport Championship' rounds, but the cars were by now very tired and due another overhaul, following which during testing at Silverstone they recorded faster times than ever before. Experimenting with a 948cc cylinder head on the Andrew Hedges car in preparation for the British Grand Prix support race, Andrew was consistently some three seconds faster than his team mate, very quickly another 948cc head was found, and equilibrium returned. They repeated their 1-2 at the August Bank Holiday Guards Trophy race at Brands Hatch from the previous year, and then it was the Tourists Trophy at

Goodwood. Uncharacteristically one of the freshly rebuilt engines broke its crank during qualifying, so a 995cc unit from the previous season was hastily installed. Not quite within the rules which stated a minimum of 1000cc, the car came home fifth out of nineteen starters in the two-litre class, behind overall winner Graham Hill in his Ferrari 275LM. The cars had performed very well all year, with Alan Foster emerging the 1150cc class Champion in the 'Autosport GT Championship', and third overall, however he could easily have won it outright had the head gasket not blown necessitating several pit stops to take on water. So ended the 1963 season, and with the cars finishing in the first three fifteen times, they had acquitted themselves remarkably well against far more powerful machinery all year. In preparation for the 1964 season the team decided to run two types of engine, a new 1139cc unit, with larger main bearings, and a 1287cc version, based on the 1275cc Cooper S block, for use in prototype racing. The team had enjoyed the Nurburgring 1000kms from the previous season and felt they would like to enter more of the classic continental long-distance events, running the cars as Prototype GTs, for which the larger engine would be ideal. Obviously other changes would be required including fitting new larger 18.5 gallon fuel tanks, larger oil radiators, faster wiper motors and larger bore exhaust manifolds, but most important of all and what made it actually possible was, following some arm twisting and behind the scenes manoeuvring, Lockheed finally came up with improved brakes. This new long distance spec inevitably added weight, bringing the cars to just over that of a standard road car, and so while the close ratio gearboxes remained unaltered, as did the basic suspension layout, they would now require the use of thicker anti-roll bars and stronger springs, although still deploying the same competition shock absorbers at the front and adjustable lever arms working on the rear quarter ellipsics.

The season started with a 1-3 at the Goodwood Easter International, followed by a 2-3 at Oulton Park where Keith Green deputised for Alan Foster. At Silverstone a few weeks later another first was picked up, the very wet conditions giving the superb handling Midgets a huge advantage. Next up was the Nurburgring 1000km, for which the team had been preparing since the start of the season. With the larger tanks and stronger springs fitted, first they entered the Whitsun Goodwood meeting, where they were obliged to run in the unlimited GT race due to their 1287cc engines. The cars came home sixth and ninth, the smallest capacity machines in the race, performing well in "long-distance" trim – it was a good test and a taste of what was to come. Setting off early the preceding week the team settled into their preferred hotel, the 'Zurburg', just opposite the main entrance to the famous German circuit. The team took stock of the opposition and planned tactics. Statistics record there were eight different makes in the 1300cc GT Prototype class and that a total of 87 cars would take the start, 35 being British entries, that the Ferrari 275P of Scarfiotti/Vaccarella was leading at the end, with the Midget of Hedges and Greene winning the 1300cc GT Prototype class, and the similar car of Foster and Martyn coming home second. These then are the basic facts, however, to come home 1-2 in the prototype class was a tremendous achievement; the clean sweep included beating Clive Baker and Bill Bradley in a Warwick-entered works Sprite, the French works team from Rene-Bonnet, a couple of highly developed Divas, several sophisticated and very fast Abarths, plus the pair of works Alpine-Renaults headed by Mauro Bianchi. Covered in laurel leaves, while they played 'God Save The Queen' for being the first British car home, the four drivers could reflect on the many Ferraris, Porsches, Jaguars, Alfas and Abarths that were behind the little MG Midget

coupes that day, for as always the cars had run like clockwork and had confounded many of the fancied runners. Due to being turned down from entering Le Mans, no doubt because the French feared a sound beating in the smaller GT class, something they considered their own, the team returned to the German circuit in August to team up with John Milne and his Midget coupe, for the 500km race for saloon and GT cars, where they would run as the MG Team. During qualifying the Abarths were in dominant form, claiming the front row of the grid, but it was pouring with rain at the start and by lap three Andrew Hedges had his coupe up in third place pushing the leading pair of Abarths very hard indeed. Pit stops saw the lead swapping between the MG and the Abarths, but sadly towards the end of the race Andrew was forced off the road, the resulting pit stop to replace a broken wheel and attention to some damaged bodywork dropping the car to eleventh place. By the finish the MGs were running in fourth, sixth and eleventh places, taking second in the team awards. The final race of the season and for that matter the team, was at Snetterton for the Autosport 3 Hours, where fittingly and in true storybook fashion the cars came home first (Andrew Hedges) and second (Alan Foster) in class, beating Marley's Lola and the Lotus 23B of Paul Hawkins. This last season had netted no less than fifteen top three places for the team, the cars then being prepared for the last time as if for an international event, but then returned to Abingdon ready to start a far shorter second career as official works entries.

Dick had always run his team as a private affair, or as Motor Sport magazine put it in a 1963 interview with him, "simply for the patron's pleasure". This was often quoted when describing Dick Jacobs' approach towards motor racing – Dick, the drivers and mechanics all took part primarily for the fun of it. No driver was ever paid and the two mechanics, with Gerry Neligan as chief, worked on a flat-rate basis. Some assistance came from the Mill Garage, of which Dick was the proprietor, and some from the trade without which the team could not have participated, but it was undeniably a private undertaking. Dick Jacobs was regarded by his contemporaries as a perfect gentleman, always one of the first to congratulate any winner when one of his own cars was beaten, and always the first on scene to help another if in trouble.

Now back at Abingdon, "comps" became the coupes' custodians, preparing them for the 1965 Sebring 12 Hours, where they would appear under the BMC Works banner for the first time. Andrew Hedges was invited to drive his old car on this occasion, partnered with Roger Mac, while the other car was to be piloted by local Chuck Tunnlund and John Wagstaff from England. In the monsoon-like conditions Hedges and Mac finished first in class, beating far more sophisticated machinery mostly, it must be said, due the appalling conditions which favoured the Midget again due to its superb handling. The second car failed to finish. Next up was the Targa Florio, where only one car was entered. This classic Italian road race saw fifty-nine competitors line up to take the start in what many consider was the toughest event in the world. It took about 40 minutes to complete the 45-mile lap and Andrew Hedges, sharing with Paddy Hopkirk no less, did a fantastic job in the searing Sicilian heat. The car was clearly well suited to this mountainous circuit, for not only did they finish eleventh overall and on the same lap as the outright victors – Nino Vaccarella and Lorenzo Bandini in their 3.3 litre 275 P/2 Ferrari, no mean achievement by any standards – but they were the first British car home and came second in class, only a minute behind a far quicker Abarth Simca 1300. This, after

seven-and-a-half hours of racing! Later that same month, the last international appearance of a Midget coupe took place when a single entry was made for the annual Nurburgring 1000km. Try as they might, however, old Jacobs' team drivers Andrew Hedges and Keith Greene, could manage no better than 27th overall and fourth in class against far more specialised pure racing GT cars which by now were pushing production-based cars aside in this class. Nonetheless, despite having only entered a few of the qualifying rounds, the Midgets did come second in the World GT Constructors' Championship. Times had changed, however, and in a relatively short period too, and by the end of 1965 it was obvious the cars were no longer competitive at this level and so they were withdrawn and laid up and, but for John Thornley's foresight, would have languished unused for a very long time, or worse, may even have been broken up. But this is where another MG garage proprietor enters the story.

By 1966 Syd Beer, the well known MG enthusiast and collector, had developed great trust at Abingdon for his integrity and understanding of MG history and motor sporting traditions. Due to this, John Thornley offered Syd the two green coupes for the current price of two new standard MG Midgets. These cars, by now five years old, and very tired, some would say represented poor value and Thornley knew this, but he also knew that in Beer's hands they would be used, but cared for and not sold on for a quick profit. As a result the cars were back on the grid in 1967 with Syd and sons, Malcolm and Bruce, sharing the driving in club events. At this level they were competitive for a few more years, but by the early seventies, time and progress had once more caught up and a decision had to be made for, like John Milne who was facing the same problem, either the cars had to be extensively modified with wider wheels and correspondingly extended arches, as was occurring to some ex-works MGBs, or remain in original condition and simply run in occasional club sprints or hill climbs. Fortunately for all three cars the latter was the case, seeing them remain largely unaltered to this day. With knowledge learned from the coupes, however, Malcolm Beer went on to construct his own modified Midget based on a Mk1 quarter elliptic shell over the winter of 1969/70. Hugely successful, Malcolm collected twenty-six awards, from twenty-two starts in 1972, becoming the MGCC's Speed Champion finishing well ahead of all the opposition. In 1988 Syd entered one of the coupes in the celebratory Coppa d'Italia, although on this occasion the car developed a fault on the first day, putting it out of the running. The same car, 771 BJB, was driven by Malcolm in a few high-speed trials in the early nineties, and still appears at various club events today.

Writing to me in 1986 Syd Beer commented. "Unfortunately I do not think there is a class for the superb little coupes in the Midget series. In spite of aluminium bodies the fact that they were designed for long distance racing entailed large heavy fuel tanks and other items which brought their weights just above that of a standard car. They were very nice road cars with silencers fitted. The day before the 70mph speed limit came into force Wilson McComb was here at the garage and I suggested we had a last fling with one. This was a memorable trip which included dual carriageway and winding country roads, I think Wilson was surprised with their handling. We almost always drove them to meetings, fitted with a silencer made them so much more flexible for road use. Those were the days!" Syd very generously let me drive one of the cars on two separate occasions in the eighties, memorable to say the least, I too was impressed by their remarkable handling, so

different from any other Midget I had ever driven.

So here briefly then is the story of the cars during their most competitive years. Although now eligible for both FIA and HSCC racing, the two most significant cars rarely appear for various reasons, although the ex-John Milne car is campaigned enthusiastically by a distant relation of the original owner. James Willis appears regularly with 138 DJB at many events, including MG Live and the Goodwood Revival meeting. Mainly raced in northern events originally, the car did venture onto the continent in August 1964 for the Nurburgring 500km Saloon and GT race as mentioned previously. Prior to running the coupe, which was returned to Abingdon for updating from time to time, John Milne had been successful driving MGAs, Minis and Healey 3000s, but at the wheel of the Midget, between 1963 and '66, he competed thirty-three times and collected eleven firsts, eight seconds, five thirds and three fourth places, also being part of the winning team in the Croft 4-Hour Relay Race. Always immaculately turned out in its Scottish racing livery of dark blue, on the occasion of the MGCC's fiftieth anniversary UK tour in 1980, John was happy to talk about the car and his exploits and escapades with it.

Over the winter and spring of 1961/2, Thornley and Enever set about proving the potential the Midget possessed, and in Dick Jacobs had the perfect partner to exploit that potential with huge success. With the closure of the Mill Garage in 1974 Dick decided to retire early, writing his book, *An MG Experience*, a couple of years later. Very sadly he died in November 1987 just a few days before only his 71st birthday.

Dennis Wharf

P.S. Interestingly, when the cars made their first public appearance in 1962 at that Goodwood Whitsun meeting, the motoring press assumed, quite wrongly, that they were prototypes of a new production Midget GT and requests came flooding into Abingdon from all over the world regarding availability. Sadly of course this was never the intention, the cars being far too expensive to build ever to be considered for production. Surprisingly though none of the glass-fibre accessory manufacturers, who were so prolific at the time, Ashley and Lenham for example, offered replica body panels, for most enthusiasts consider the works coupes without doubt to be about the best looking Spridget GT by far.