

FEB 2023 HISTORIAN'S PERSPECTIVE –

MG: How it all started

by Bob Vitrikas

A quick scan of our Club's 2022 roster shows that half of our membership owns either an MG (25) or a Triumph (21). By happy coincidence, both of these beloved marques are celebrating their 100th anniversary this year and we will celebrate right along with them. I am unabashedly an MG enthusiast so I'll exercise writer's privilege and start the ball rolling with a series of articles on the MG. Ready? OK, here we go!



Where it all started, the original Morris Garage on Longwall Street in Oxford. Workshop General Manager Cecil Kimber took the initiative to transform mundane Morris cars into sporty cars that appealed to the automotive enthusiast. They were modified in a corner of this workshop. Sadly, this building no longer exists, having been torn down and replaced with town homes.

We are a British car club that welcomes all British marques and body styles, not just sports cars. The fact is about 90% of our members own at least one sports car and MG and Triumph are the embodiment of that genre. So let's start with the basic question, and a hotly debated one at that, "What is a sports car?" Colin Campbell, an automotive engineer for over 35 years, answered that question rather simply, "A sports car is any road vehicle in which performance takes priority over carrying capacity." Hmm, that definition leaves me rather cold. I prefer a more emotional description. Sir Osbert Sitwell's book "Left Hand, Right Hand" describes motoring in the early 1900s in a more colorful and emotional manner, painting a beautiful word picture of the sensations many of us experienced on our first drive in an open top sports car such as an MG or

Triumph. Maybe we were fortunate to have our girl friend or wife along like the author did. As you read this, I hope it brings back a flood of memories to warm you on cold winter day and something to look forward to on a SVBCC drive to come in a couple of months.

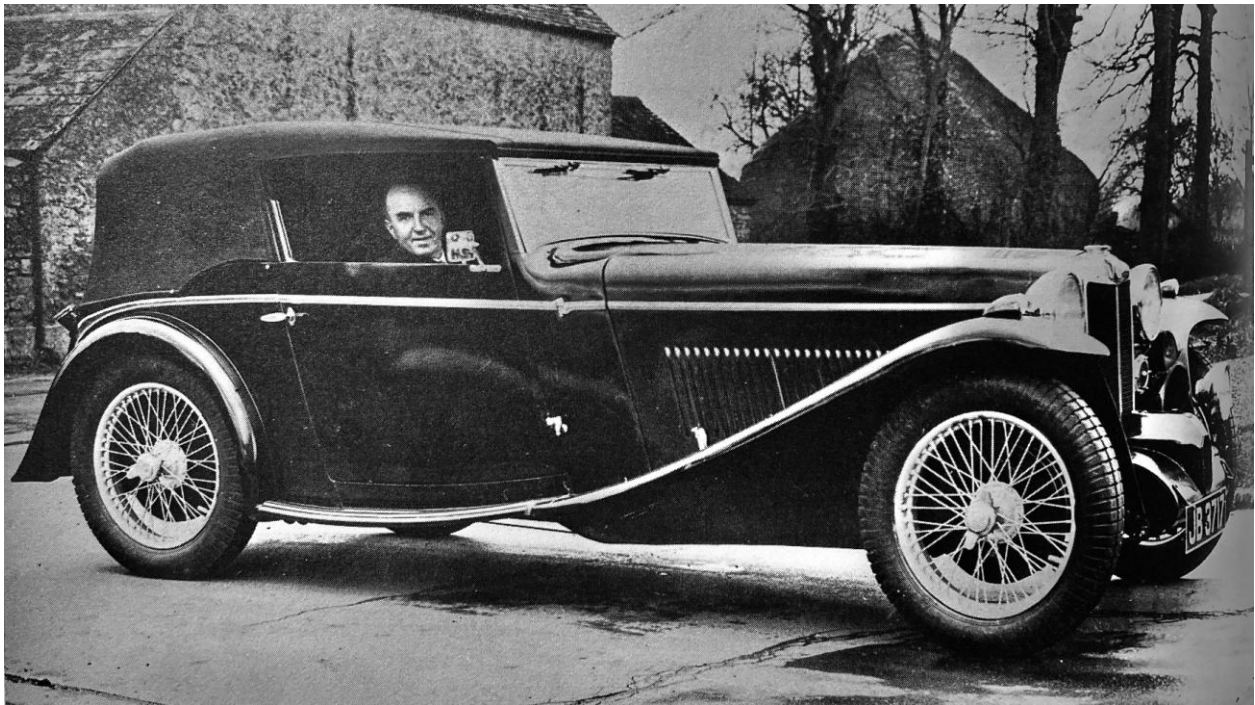
“They would sit together, the two of them, the man at the wheel, the girl beside him, their hair blown back from their temples, their features sculptured by the wind, their bodies and limbs shaped and carved by it continually under their clothes, so that they enjoyed a new physical sensation, comparable to swimming; except that here the element was speed, not water. The winds — and their bodies — were warm that summer. During these drives, they acquired a whole range of physical consciousness, the knowledge of scents, passing from one into another with an undreamt of rapidity, the fragrance of the countless flowers of the lime trees, hung like bells on pagodas for the breeze to shake, changing into that of sweetbriar, the scent of the early mornings and of their darkness, of hills and valleys outlined and tinged by memory; there was the awareness of speed itself, and the rapid thinking that must accompany it, a new alertness, and the typical effects, the sense, it might be of the racing of every machine as dusk approaches, or the sudden access on a hot evening of cool waves of air under tall trees; all these physical impressions, so small in themselves, went to form a sum of feeling, new in its kind and never before experienced. Even the wind of the winter, at this pace snatching tears from their eyes, and piercing through layers of clothes, was something their father had not known.”

Beautiful, I don't you think?



Cecil Kimber, the man whose vision and enthusiasm gave birth to the MG sports car. Shown here at his desk at the Abingdon assembly plant.

Great cars often start with men of great vision. Enzo Ferrari, Henry Ford, Ferdinand and Ferry Porsche, Sir William Lyons and Jaguar, Henry Royce and Rolls-Royce, and yes, even MG. The inspiration behind MG was Cecil Kimber whose passion for motor sport combined with his organizational skills, propelled the MG marque to become the most popular sports car in the world. Born in 1888, Kimber was the son of a south London printer. Despite his father's urgings, Kimber didn't fancy himself as a printer. What excited him were automobiles and motorcycles. Imagine how exciting it must have been for him as a teenager in the turn of the century (the last century, not this one!), as the horse and buggy were replaced by cars and motorcycles! Being of modest means, Kimber started his motoring journey with the purchase of a motorcycle and rode it enthusiastically I'm certain, until it all came to a screeching halt in 1911 when he suffered a serious accident followed by a two year recovery. At the age of 24, he was left with a limp for the rest of his life. He kept on for three more years with his father in the printing business, but his heart wasn't in it. Eventually the strain in their relationship became too great, and Kimber left his father to begin work in the motoring business just as World War I was erupting. Following the war, in 1921, Kimber began working at the Morris Garages as Sales Manager and was quickly promoted to General Manager the next year. In addition to his organizational skills, Kimber was an avid sportsman enjoying motorsports competitions, sailing his boat "Fairwind," and fishing. He also had a love of art which he got from his mother who was a painter. His sense of proportion and a beautiful line are evident in his cars, as shown below.

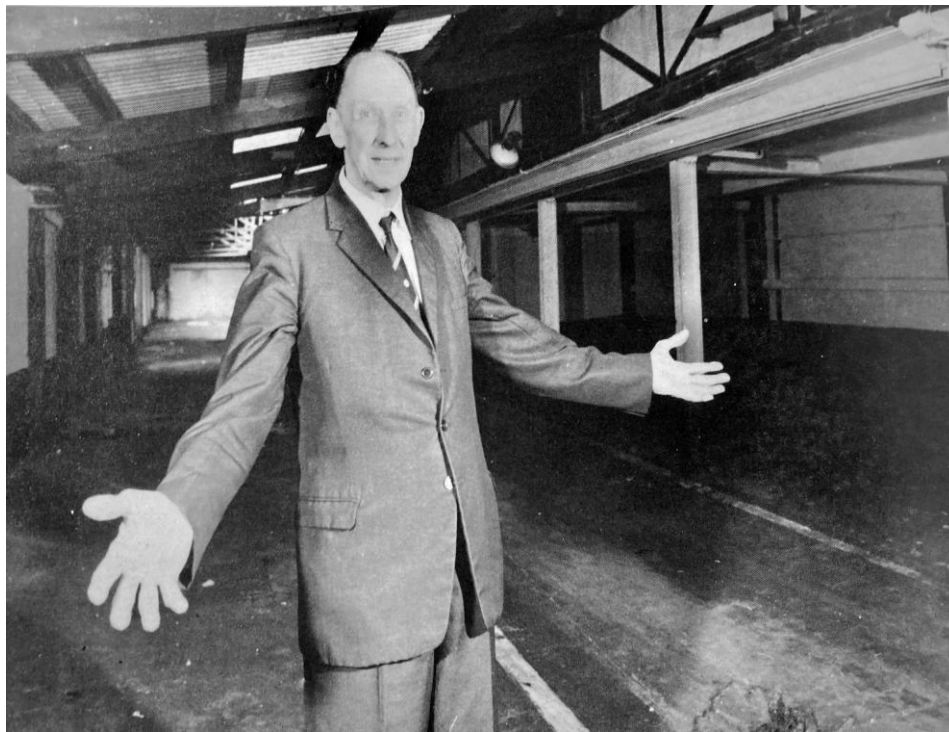


Kimber's personal MG was this magnificent 100 mph supercharged six cylinder Magnette with one-off Corsica drophead coupe body.

His enthusiastic driving was legendary, but he did keep true to his slogan “Safety Fast!” and seldom had an accident. Truth be told, he did have a serious accident driving his wife and mother-in-law in a factory experimental car which had a new type front suspension. The suspension failed, and the resulting crash broke Kimber’s nose. History does not record what ill-effects, if any, his wife and mother-in-law suffered. Kimber managed to get the car back to the factory, swapped it for another, and continued the journey. He never reported the accident because he didn’t want the suspension designer to be blamed for the accident.

Now that I’ve introduced you to the man behind the marque, what about the machine? The Morris Garages were located in Oxford, a hot bed of motoring enthusiasm with several garages selling motorcycles and offering modified specials in the same manner we have today with AMG for Mercedes, John Cooper for Mini, etc. In his book, “Behind the Octagon,” Brian Moylan relates that on Sundays hundreds of enthusiasts congregated in Oxford city center where the dealerships would open their showrooms for business with their latest models on display. The County Hall was even opened on Sunday so new owners could register their purchases! William Morris, Kimber’s employer, let him carry on with the Morris Garages’ business while he (Morris) concentrated on establishing his motorcar business. Kimber began modifying Morris bodies to offer something a little different and more sporting to attract would be buyers.

Cecil Cousins, commonly regarded as MG’s first employee who joined the company at the age of 17 in 1920, and “hotted up” the engines in a corner of the Morris Garages on Longwall Street.



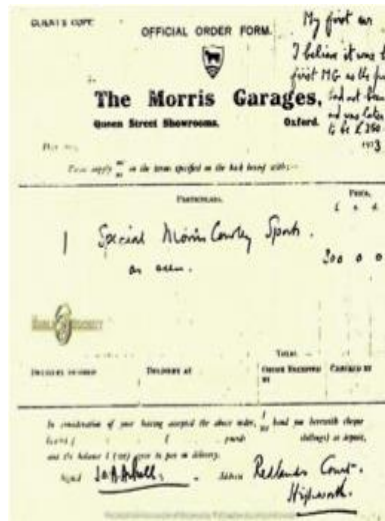
Cecil Cousins, MG’s first employee, shown at the Alfred Lane MG “factory.”

After a modest success driving his modified Morris Cowley “Chummy” in the 1923 London-Lands End Trial, Kimber took the bold decision to produce a sports car based on the Morris Cowley with an attractive special body, modified chassis for improved handling, and tuned the engine for greater performance. To accommodate anticipated future sales, in February 1923 production was transferred to a tiny workshop in Alfred Lane, Oxford. By tiny I mean TINY, only 20 ft wide and 100 ft long. The work force consisted of just Cousins and two other blokes. Production was started with six sporty bodies delivered by Raworth car bodies in Oxford. MG got off to a slow start. It took a year to sell these six modified Morris cars. Oh, dearie me!



A happy couple out for a top down drive in one of the Raworth bodied Morris Cowley “Chummy’s.”

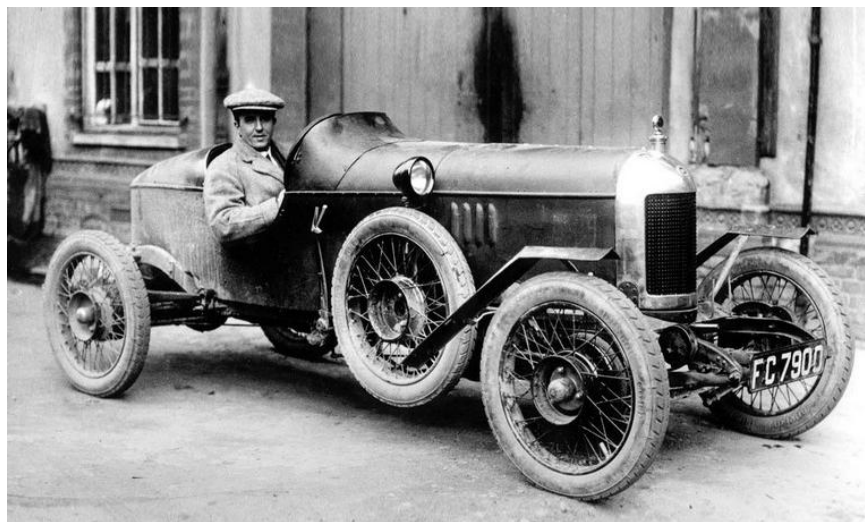
There has been much discussion about when the first MG was built; 1923, 1924, or maybe 1925? I defer to those in whose footsteps I follow, principally my good friend from South Africa and MG historian Norm Ewing whose epic MGA travels you may recall from my previous newsletter articles. Norm has amassed a convincing body of evidence, including first hand accounts from those MG employees who were there, that indeed the first MGs were produced in 1923, and the first one was sold to a Mr. Oliver Arkell in August 1923. Here’s how it went down. Mr Arkell originally intended to purchase a Morris Cowley “Chummy” but changed his mind when he spotted a “Chummy” modified by Morris Garages and sporting an eye catching yellow body with black wings. On 11 August, Arkell told Kimber he would buy the yellow car and the deal for the first MG car was sealed. On 14 August, Mr. Arkell gave Kimber a check as a deposit on the MG. Finally, on 16 August 1923, the first private sale MG was registered and the rest is history. Norm has persuaded the MG community to accept 1923 as the birth year of the marque and hence the centenary year world-wide celebrations beginning in 2023. A tip of the hat to you, Norman! Here’s the advertisement and sales receipt to prove it!



On the left notice the use of the MG logo in this early ad. It appeared as early as 1921. The two tone paint scheme announces the sporting nature of the MG marque.

At upper right is the Morris Garages order for the first MG car, “1 Special Morris Cowley Sports.” Oliver Arkell’s signature is at lower left. Notation at upper right reads, “My first car. I believe it was the first MG as the price had not been fixed and was later said to be 350 pounds.”

Gradually sales picked up as Kimber tried different combinations of two door and four door bodies, four and six cylinder engines as well as open and closed body styles. Sales really got a boost when Kimber’s specially modified Morris Cowley; consisting of a gray painted Carbodies narrow two seat body (the 48th delivered to Morris Garages), modified chassis, and tuned engine, won a Gold Medal in the March 1925 Lands End Trial. In subsequent years, this MG has been dubbed “Old Number One” as it started a trend of “cheap and cheerful” fun and competitive two seat sports cars that defined the breed that continues to this day. More on this in later articles!



Cecil Kimber in “Old Number One.” The rear mudguards are missing, perhaps the result of the pounding they took at the Lands End Trial. The copious coating of mud on the rear body panels supports this theory!

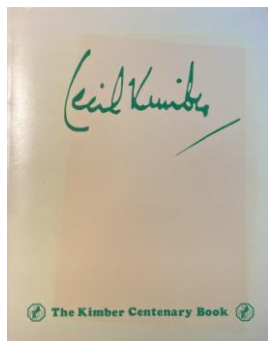
Somehow the MG work force of three men managed to pack 25 cars, work benches, machine tools, and parts into the tiny space at Alfred Lane and turned out 20 cars a week! This is how it was done. Chassis were brought from nearby Cowley, modified as necessary with a hand drill, then delivered to Carbodies of Coventry to have the body installed, and lastly bring the completed chassis and body back to Alfred Lane and do the finishing up. An 80 hour week was not unusual. Whew!



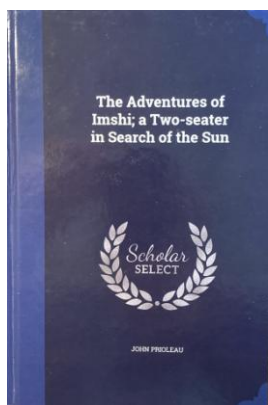
The move to Abingdon finally gave MG the production capacity they so desperately needed. Fueled by competition successes, sales soared. More on this next month!

As sales of the MG specials grew, it became necessary to move to a succession of ever larger workshops dedicated to the production of MGs. In September 1925, production was moved from Alfred Lane to a vacant space in the Morris radiator Bainton Road factory. By this time, the MG workforce had grown to 50 employees and space was still at a premium. The Works Manager, George Propert, occupied a glass-sided office just 8 ft by 5 ft! In 1927, the Morris Garages trade name was established, and in the spring of 1928, the name was changed to the MG Car Company Ltd. The final move was to Abingdon in 1929 where the company remained until its closure in 1980.

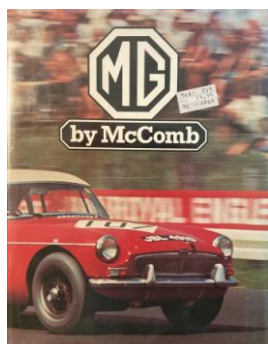
If you want to learn more about the early history of the MG, I recommend the following:



"The Kimber Centenary Book," Edited by Dick Knudson and published by the New England MG T Register on the occasion of the inaugural Kimber Festival, April 1988, one hundred years after Kimber's birth. This 208 page book is bursting with interesting stories about Kimber and the beginnings of the MG. Nine chapters are written by Kimber himself and one by his daughter, Jean Kimber Cook. The next Kimber Festival will be held on 28 and 29 April 2023 at the world famous Simeone Foundation Automotive Museum in Philadelphia.



"The Adventures of Imshi; a Two-seater in Search of the Sun," by John Prioleau, first published in 1922. First editions are hard (and expensive!) to find. Fortunately, due to its popularity, affordable reproductions, such as this one, are available. The book chronicles the author's four month road trip in his Morris car through Europe and North Africa in the post World War I years. It offers a fascinating insight into the condition of the roads and contrasting cultures Prioleau experienced during his travels. This book did much to boost Morris sales and encouraged Kimber to produce the MG.



"The Story of the M.G. Sports Car," by noted MG historian Wilson McComb, published in 1972. A later expanded edition, "MG by McComb," was published in 1978. The copiously illustrated text covers MG history from the earliest days through the late 1970's. Over half the text covers pre-World War II MG history. A 'must have' for any MG enthusiast's library.