THE HISTORIAN'S PERSPECTIVE - MG: Glory Days!

A double line of MG M-type Midgets leaves the new Abingdon factory beginning a new and glorious era in the MG Car Company history. MG General Manager, Cecil Kimber's, office is at the top of the stairs.

by Bob Vitrikas

In the last article, we traced the origins of the MG marque back to the first private sale and registration on 16 August, 1923. Those early MGs, up until the opening of the new MG factory in 1929, were based on existing Morris car components.

According to a paper "Evolution of MG Cars" written by MG Publicity Manager George Tuck on 20 August 1946, these early MGs were:

> "Morris conversions. Modifications included: alterations to chassis frame, modifications to suspension, truing the engine and fitting special induction systems, incorporating MG brake gear, special steering and coachwork. 1927/28 models were the first to be known as MG, and carried on the radiator, the octagonal trade mark. These were the first of the type to use the 'square-nosed' radiator. In 1927 the Company was termed 'The MG Car Company - Proprietors: The Morris Garages'. Prior to this the cars were known as 'Morris Garages Super Sports'. 1929 onwards MG cars ceased to have a Morris as the basis, and were made of material exclusive to MG."

In this same memo, Tuck estimated MG production:

1924:	7	1930:	1605
1925:	120	1931:	1301
1926:	200	1932:	1877
1927:	300	1933:	2575
1928:	450	1934:	2340
1929:	740	1935:	1294

It is surprising that MG were able to continue and even increase the production rate in 1929 despite moving to the new Abingdon works. The importance of the works can be seen in the production figures which more than doubled in 1930 to 1,605 cars, peaking at 2,575 in 1933 and 2,340 in 1934. These figures are even more impressive when one accounts for the impact of the Great Depression. Indeed these were the 'Glory Days' built on the extraordinary competition successes of MGs.

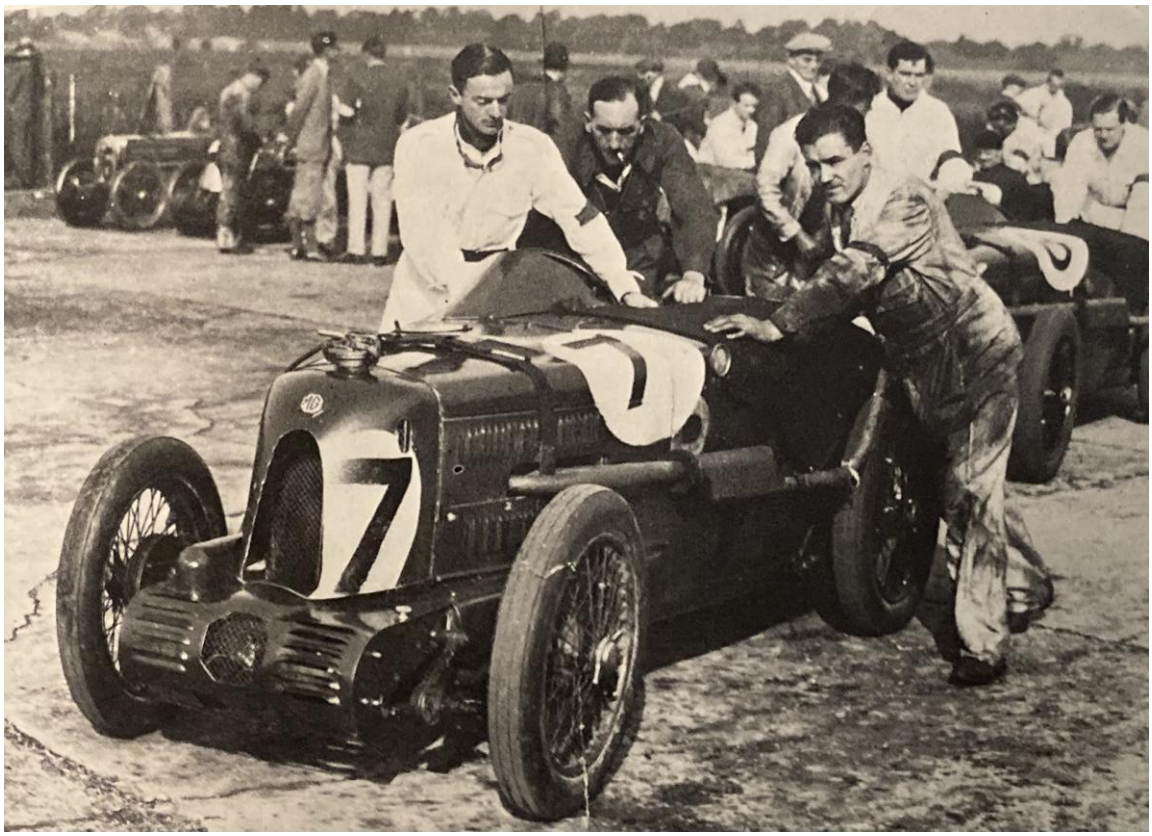
In Cecil Kimber's words:

> "In achieving the longest list of successes ever gained by any one make of machine MGs have made motoring history. Their success is sustained by a coterie of clever technicians and engineers who adapt the knowledge won by racing men, building it into production models… Every MG victory is scored with a production model, never with a specially built car, except for record breaking."

Arguably the first noteworthy competition victory for the MG, the March 1925 London-to-Land's End Reliability Trial. Here 'Old Number One' is piloted by Cecil Kimber, the father of the MG sports car.

There are more notable victories scored by MG production based cars in races, rallies and trials 1925-1935. Let's start at the beginning. One of the first competition events entered by an MG was the 1925 London-to-Lands End Reliability Trial. Started in 1908, the trial has been held every year except for the two World Wars. The course has been altered over the years but it generally started in London and ran south west to Lands End, the most westerly point in mainland England, over a variety of road surfaces and gradients. Total distance is over 300 miles and is truly a test of man and machine over a grueling course. MG's record on these trials from 1925 to 1935 was extraordinary, 54 First Class Awards. Similarly MG scored big in the London to Edinburgh Trial tallying 39 First Class Awards during the 1934 running. Truly a testimony to the toughness, handling and power of these early MGs.

Speaking of performance over long distances, how about MG's record of three straight class wins at the 24 Hours of Le Mans in 1933, 1934 and 1935, including an incredible 4th overall in the 1934 race! Similarly England had its version of the famed Le Mans race held at Brooklands in two 12 hour stints called the "Double Twelve." MG took the Team Prize in 1930 and in 1931 a team of C-type Midgets finished a spectacular 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th and took the Team Prize for the second year running! Also at Brooklands, MG C-types took 3rd overall and 1st in class in the 1931 running of the Brooklands 500 miles race averaging an incredible 92.17 mph with a 746 cc engine! For comparison, the winning average speed in the 1931 Indy 500 was 96.629 mph.

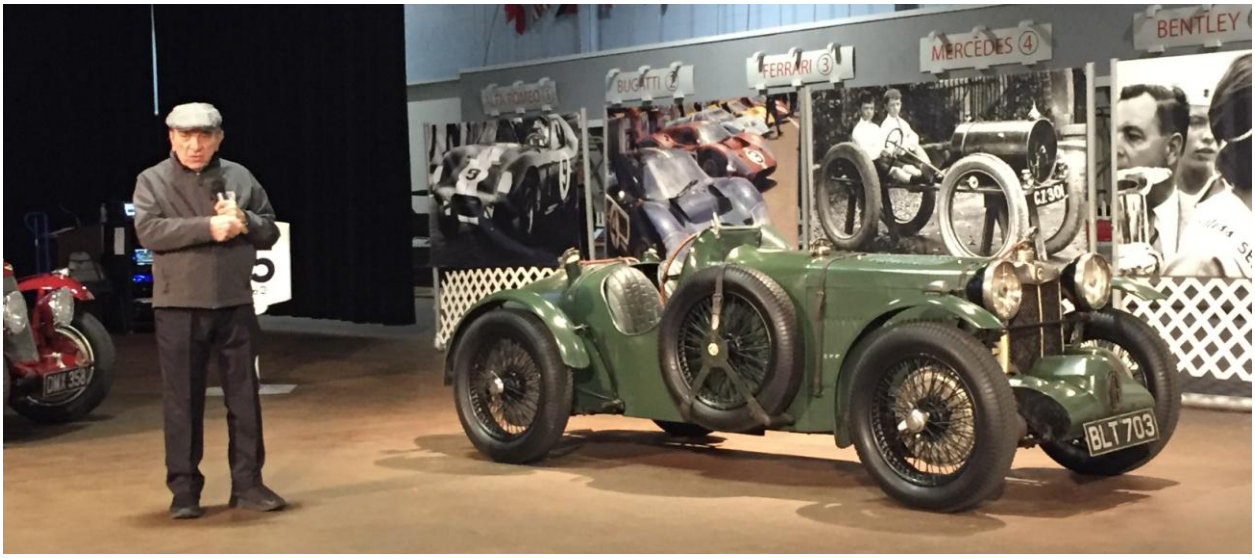


The Earl of March in the spotless white overalls on the left, wheels his C-type MG to the start line of the 1931 Brooklands 500, assisted by Syd Enever on the right in the less than spotless overalls. Enever would later go on to become MG Chief Engineer and designer of the MGA sports car.

In the 1932 Brooklands 500, MG C-types came in 1st overall and 1st, 2nd, and 3rd in class and won the Team Prize. Their 1st and 2nd in class and Team Prize finish in the 1933 Italian Mille Miglia thousand mile race surprised the world of endurance racing and was a high point of MG racing successes. In the world of Grand Prix races, MG finished 1st and 3rd overall in the Irish Grand Prix, 1st in class at the German Grand Prix, 3rd overall in the 1934 Australian Grand Prix and 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th in the 1935 Australian Grand Prix. Also in 1935, MG took class wins in the French and Belgian Grand Prixs. In mid-August 1934 three supercharged six-cylinder MG K-3s soundly beat a flock of Maseratis to take 1st, 2nd and 3rd in the Coppa Acerbo Junior race. In fact MG won so many Italian races that year, they were awarded the 1100 cc Championship of Italy, an unheard of honor for a non-Italian marque. Mama mia!

Perhaps the greatest driver of all time, Italian Tazio Nuvolari, wheels his MG K-3 to victory in the 1933 Ulster Tourist Trophy race.

If I had to pick one MG that was the pinnacle of MG's competition success during these 'Glory Days' it would be the 1933-34 K-3 Magnette model. Just 33 K-3s were made but what an impact they made! A two-seat sports racer, weighing in at just under 2,000 lb, its 1087 cc in-line overhead cam six cylinder supercharged engine produced a robust 120 hp propelling the K-3 to an honest 110 mph. The entire car was so expertly designed and sturdily constructed that this speed could be sustained for hours in some of the most grueling endurance races in the world. In 1933, driven by Count Johnny Lurani and George Eyston, they won the 1100 cc class in the Mille Miglia, one of the most demanding tests of man and machine ever. The Mille Miglia ranks with the 24 Hours of Le Mans in the world of endurance racing. Driven by one of the most, if not the most, renowned drivers ever, Tazio Nuvolari, driving a K-3, scored an outright victory (on handicap) in the 1933 Ulster RAC Tourist Trophy race. Perhaps the K-3's greatest victory was in the 1934 24 Hours of Le Mans. Driven by Roy Eccles and Charlie Martin, it finished 4th overall and won the Index of Performance. This car can be seen today at the Simeone Foundation Automotive Museum in Philadelphia. In addition to these road racing triumphs, MGs scored 16 class wins at hill climbs all over the UK and Europe.



The late Dr. Fred Simeone with the MG K3 that finished 4th overall and won the Index of Performance at the 24 Hours of Le Mans. They are both winners.

Following on heels of the 1931-32 C-type racer, the 1934 Q-type MG was a highly developed race car for the 750 cc class. It soon was realized that it needed a better chassis to handle all the power. The crew at Abingdon had to fit a grab handle on the floor for the mechanic to grab onto to stay inside the car! Regarded as the epitome of MG road racing specials, the 1935 R-type incorporated the powerful Q-type engine with several cutting edge chassis design elements including fully independent suspension mounted to a rigid boxed section Y-shaped chassis that weighed just 57 lb! Thirty years later the Lotus Elan would use a similar design. 'Motor Sport' called the R-type "a car which will be the admiration of the rest of the world…a genuine Grand Prix racing car in miniature. Nothing like it has ever been within the reach of motor racing enthusiasts at the price, either in England or on the Continent."

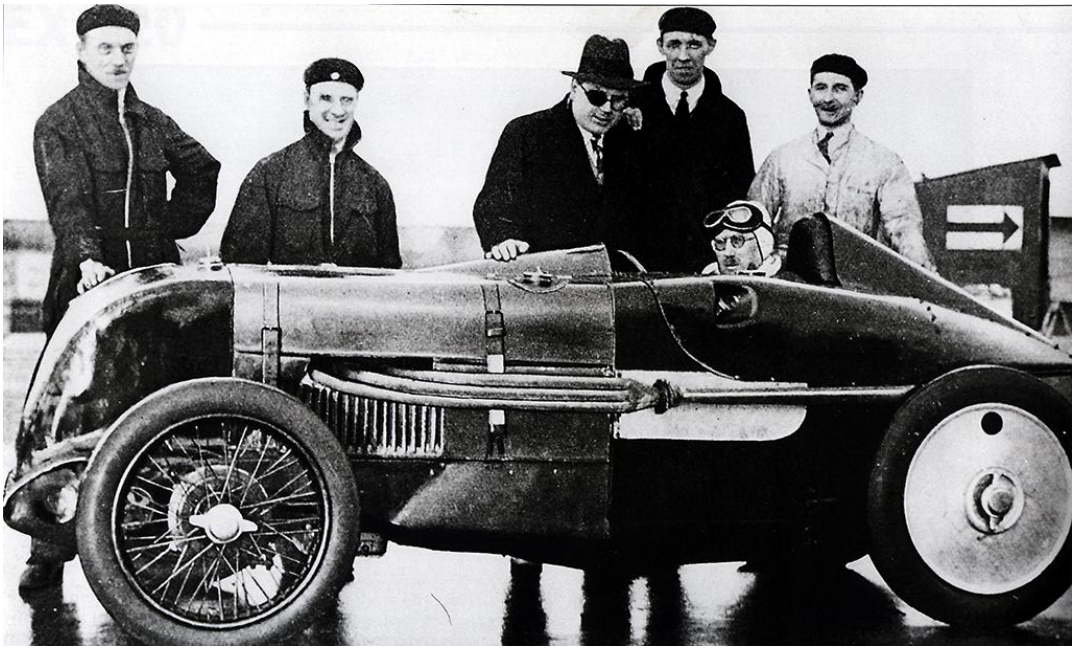
Below is a table that compares MG car prices yesterday and today in constant U.S. dollars. "Selling Price Today" is estimated based on most recent auction results.

MG Type	Number Built	Cost New (Today's $)	Selling PriceToday
First MG 1923	6	$33,850	$?
M-type	3,235	$19,340	$35,250
K3	33	$91,000	$400,000
R-type	10	$85,300	$338,400
Q-type	8	$63,000	$320,000

In addition, MG had a very successful International Land Speed Record program from 1930-1959, setting over 75 records from 1930-35 and another 105 from 1936-59 utilizing engines from 350cc to 2000 cc capacity. In a clever bit of engineering and making do with what you have, varying capacities were attained from one engine by disconnecting two or more cylinders! Here's a sampling of their accomplishments:

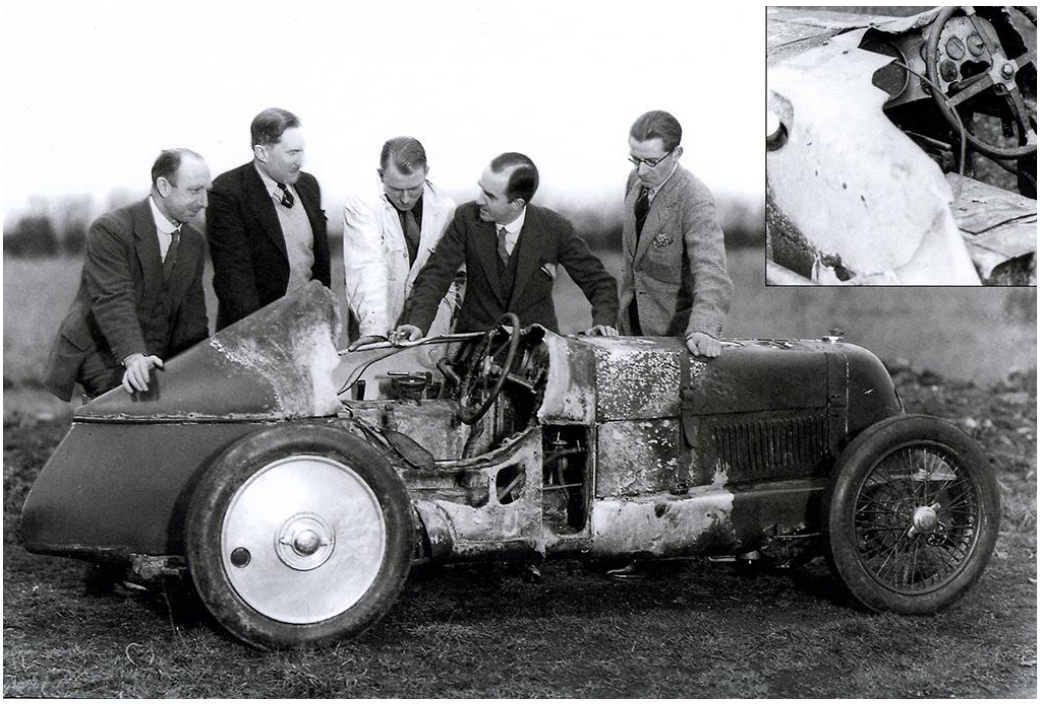
350 cc: 121.09 mph set on the Jabbeke Highway, Belgium, July 1950
500 cc: 154.86 mph set on the Jabbeke Highway, Belgium, September 1949
750 cc: 159.151 mph set on the Jabbeke Highway, Belgium, October 1946
1100 cc: 203.5 mph set on the Dessau Autobahn, Germany, May 1939
1500 cc: 245.64 mph set on Bonneville Salt Flats, USA, August 1957
2000 cc: 254.91 mph set on Bonneville Salt Flats, USA, September 1959

Development of a record breaking MG started with EX115, a prototype based on the M-type Midget. The work on EX115 would lead to the M-type successors right thru the TC. Driven by competition with Austin Seven race cars, inspired by the engineering of a little known French car called the Rally, and made economically possible by of all things bicycle frame tubing, MG's first record breaker, EX120, began to take shape in a secret work space in the MG Abingdon factory. Engineer H.N. Charles put his World War I aircraft experience to good effect incorporating several clever features into the EX120 design. Enter British record-breaking superstar, Capt. George Eyston and engineer Ernest Eldridge. Their visit to the MG works formed a partnership with Cecil Kimber that would set a pattern of MG record breaking for the next 30 years. Gifted MG worker Reg Jackson was given the lead to construct EX120 under the direction of Eldridge. Great pains were taken not only in the chassis design in construction but the engine was meticulously and cleverly put together by Jackson and Gordon Phillips. In late December 1930, EX120 was taken to the Montlhery track located outside Paris, to see what it could do. On 30 December Eyston squeezed himself into the cockpit and set off down the track. He covered 100 km at a credible 87.1 mph before a valve broke ending the MG's record run. Now Kimber had the bit between his teeth and was determined that an MG, not an Austin, should be the first 750 cc car to achieve 100 mph in an hour. To achieve that figure a supercharger was fitted and the engine modified in just 4 weeks, driven from Abingdon to Paris in an MG, and installed in EX120 at Montlhery by Reg Jackson and MG worker Freddie Kindell. Despite their best efforts, the best Eyston could do was 97.07 mph. Kimber sent two more talented MG workers, Cecil Cousins and Gordon Philips, to assist the exhausted Jackson and Kindell. A fresh set of eyes did the trick. The four of them determined they needed to fashion a front cowl for the radiator to reduce the risk of carburetor icing and streamline the car. Cousins, Jackson and Kindell made a front engine cowl from a discarded oil drum which they formed using a concrete drainage channel in the track. It seemed the record attempt was not to be. The French time keepers crashed enroute to the track, and a sudden hail storm pelted the track. Despite the bitter cold, wet track, stiff cross-wind, and with just 30 minutes of daylight remaining, Eyston went out on 16 February 1931 for a 10 mile run. With the engine screaming at 7,000 rpm, driving with one hand while the car snaked all over the track on its treadless tires, and keeping the fuel pressure up with his other hand, Eyston bravely set four records, the fastest being five kilometers at 103.13 mph!



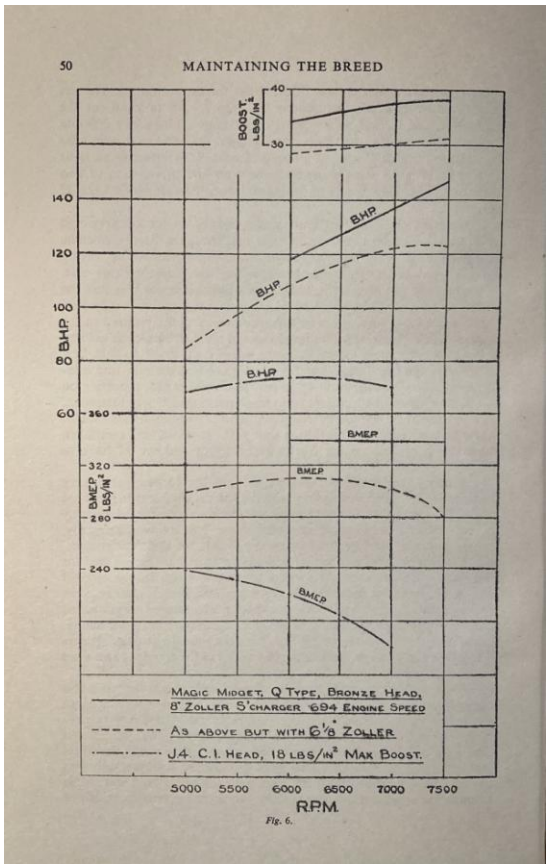
Mission accomplished! A joyous crew celebrates after EX120 establishes the 750 cc Class H record at 103.13 mph. Note the crude but effective dark cowling in front of the engine compartment. Seated is Capt. George Eyston and standing in back left to right are Reg 'Jacko' Jackson, Freddie Kindell, Ernest Eldridge, Cecil Cousins and Gordon Phillips.

MG and Austin continued to battle, trading 750 cc Class H records back and forth over the next couple of months. It all came to a head in March 1931 When Eyston went out in EX120, brought the revs up to 6,800 rpm and kept his foot in it for an hour, setting the record at an impressive average of 101.1 mph. On what was supposedly a cool down lap, EX120 caught fire! Eyston managed to maintain control as the car agonizingly slowed to 60 mph and Eyston was able to bail out of the cockpit. Using his fox hunting experience to good use, he rolled to a stop, badly burned and shaken but not broken! EX120 was not so lucky and its record breaking days were over.



Bending over the charred remains of EX120, Cecil Kimber talks with George Eyston about his amazing escape from death while setting the 750 cc Class H one hour record at 101.1 mph. After this incident, Eyston filed a patent for fire resistant coveralls! He would go on to set many more international land speed records, famously battling with John Cobb and Malcolm Campbell on the Bonneville Salt Flats to establish the Land Speed record on 16 September 1938of 357.50 mph.

In my mind the most impressive demonstration of MG's ability to get a quart of performance out of a pint pot, was the output of the tiny 750 cc four cylinder engine used in the Q-Type racing MG and the record breaker Magic Midget. On a not so quiet Sunday, it recorded 146.2 hp (and climbing) at 7,500 rpm on the Abingdon dynamometer with the ,aid of a Zoller supercharger putting out 39 psi boost!

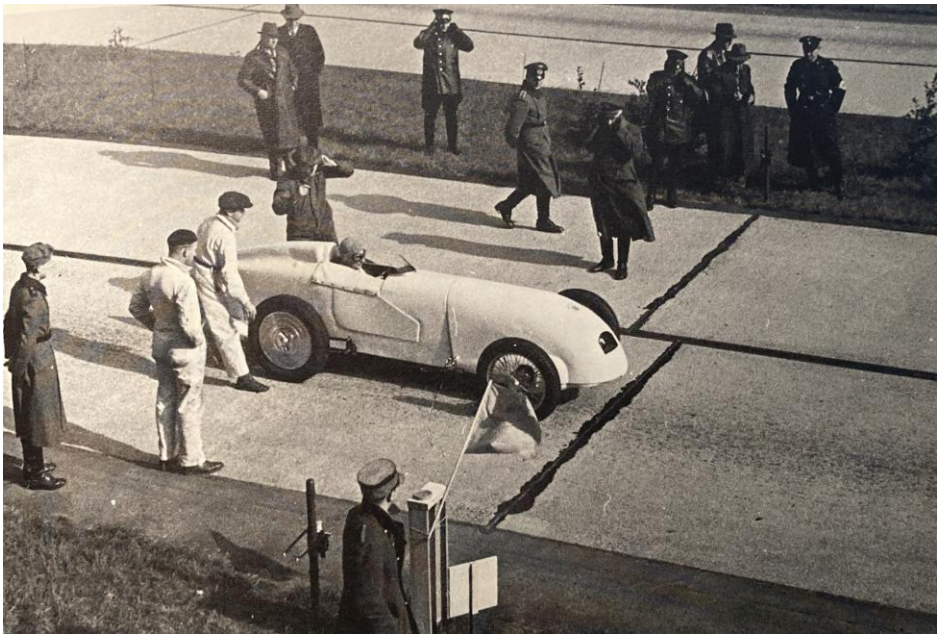


Backed by seemingly unlimited funding from the Third Reich, the world conquering, Dr. Ferdinand Porsche designed Auto Union mid-engine supercharged V-16 produced 85 hp per liter in 1935 and ultimately 161 hp per liter in 1939. Today's 840 hp Dodge Demon's supercharger puts out just 14.5 psi and a measly 137 hp per liter compared to the 87 year old Q-Type engine's 195 hp per liter! More remarkable is that the Q-type engine was developed by a handful of blokes with a shoe-string budget developing a five-year old production car engine that originally produced 20 hp from 847 cc or 23.6 hp per liter. Rule Britannia! Check out the graph below that documents this remarkable achievement. Consider for a moment that this was achieved in 1936 with a crankshaft supported by just three main bearings using the antiquated metallurgy of the day. Beyond impressive!

John Thornley incorporated this factory dynamometer sheet in his book, "Maintaining the Breed" documenting the amazing accomplishment of the MG engineering crew.

This engine was put to good use by German MG racer Bobby Kohlrausch who had the MG works install the engine in a revamped body on the Magic Midget which he raced to great success all over Europe, beating many Bugattis, Maseratis and Alfa Romeos with much larger engines. Capping off these impressive feats in 1935, the following year Kohlrausch set a 750 cc Land Speed Record of 140.6 mph on the Frankfurt autobahn, under close Nazi supervision.

On the road car side of the MG Abingdon factory, new models were coming fast and furious. At the 1930 London Motor Show, MG displayed 19 new models and body styles! Beginning in 1928, the M-type Midget led a bewildering array of Midget, Magna and Magnette model MGs featuring four and six cylinder overhead cam engines from 746 cc to 1271 cc displacement powering a wide variety of sports and touring cars. The M-type Midget two-seater sportscar was by far the most successful road going model of the MG line with 3,235 produced between 1928 and 1932. The M-type was followed by the J-1, J-2, J3 and J4 Midgets which totaled 2,494 cars from mid-1932 to late-1933. The rackish J series set the design pattern for two seater MGs until the mid-fifties; distinctive grille, long louvered bonnet, double hump scuttle, fold-down windscreen, cut down doors, two seat passenger compartment with four speed floor mounted gearshift and a short rear deck holding the external fuel tank and spare tire. The Magnas and Magnettes anchored the top of the line with six cylinder cars, often with handsome closed bodies featuring roll up windows.



John Thornley, successor to Cecil Kimber, candidly describes the “Glory Days” of MG.

> “Between 1930-35 in the intensely and ridiculously expensive period when we had made four new models each year, year after year, ever more complex, further away from what was then practical reality, we had been citing bread upon the waters. We had spread the name MG around the world at the expense of going fairly severely into the red every other year so that Kimber had to go along to Lord Nuffield and say, ‘Please to keep going, I want some more money.’ It was about 1935 that Lord Nuffield got a bit fed up with this and …cut.”

Just as suddenly the mad proliferation of models and complex running gear came to an end, MG switched gears and quickly adopted the rationalization scheme using Morris supplied components. More successes would follow!