

Syd Enever, An MG Life

By Bob Vitrikas



Two key MG personalities,
Syd Enever, Chief Engineer on the left,
John Thornley, General Manager on the right.
Photo courtesy of Facebook

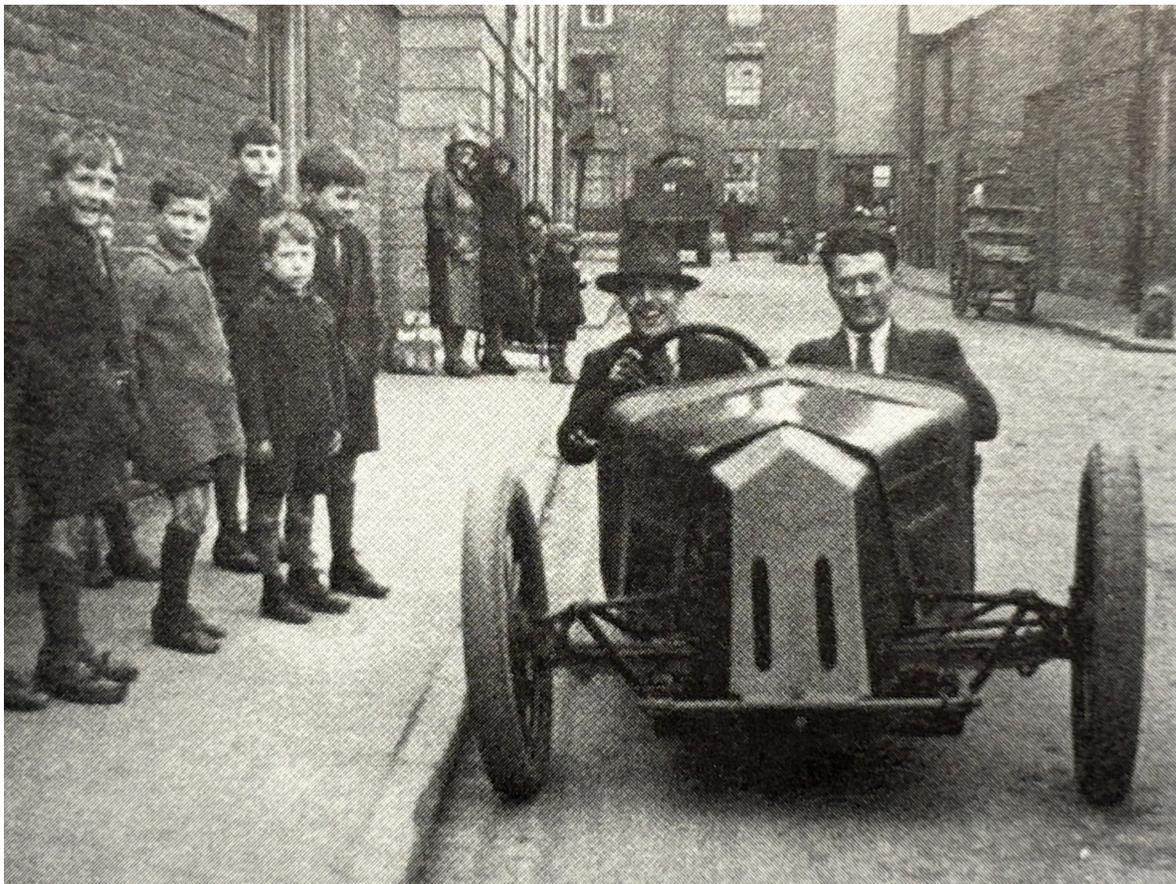
Continuing our series of articles on British car personalities, let's focus on one of the unsung giants of British automotive history. The name Sydney "Syd" Enever is not well known by many outside the beating heart of the MG enthusiast community. His story is one that begs to be told so here we go!

Syd was born 120 years ago this month, on 25 March 1906, in Winchester England. His full name was Francis Albert Sydney Taylor Enever. He was the youngest of six children with five sisters, one of whom died when she was just 16 months old. More sorrow would follow. When Syd was just 3 years old, his father, Francis Albert Sydney Enever, abandoned his family after 14 years of marriage and was never seen by his family again. That left Syd, his four sisters and his mother Maud, who was in her mid-thirties, to fend for themselves. Despite all these challenges, Maud managed keep the family together, fed, housed and clothed. She even managed to send all her children to school and for two of her daughters to take piano lessons. She was a strong willed and loyal woman, traits that carried over to her son. At the age of five Syd and his family moved to Oxford where 12 years later MG would begin production. He lived a typical adventurous and sometimes mischievous boy's life enjoying swimming, bicycling and carpentry which resulted in the construction of a wooden boat. One of his interests nearly led to his demise. His lifelong pal, Arthur Cook, and Syd became

fascinated by using easily obtained black powder to create small bombs. Oh boy! Syd, being the budding engineer that he was, designed and built a small cannon out of a two foot section of drain pipe. The black powder charge was loaded into the barrel but as Syd leaned over the muzzle the powder ignited and blamo Syd got a face full of flames which burned off his hair and singed his face. His mentor and father figure, Reverend Doctor Stansfeld tended to his burns and bandaged Syd's face, leaving two small slits for his eyes. After several weeks of agonizing pain, the bandages were removed revealing the damage left behind, which was considerable. Eventually the burned skin flaked off and Syd was left unscathed, but with bushier eyebrows.

Syd did well in school, finishing second in his class. In the evenings he enrolled in carpentry classes at the Oxford Technical School. The headmaster recognized Syd's aptitude and enthusiasm for all things mechanical and suggested he seek employment as a shop boy at the Morris Garages in downtown Oxford. At the age of 15 Syd signed on at Morris Garages as a 'shop boy' and his life was changed forevermore!

This self-made genius, educated by hands-on experience, achieved much in his life which was dedicated to the MG Car Company. Here are some highlights of his illustrious career:



In the late 1920s Syd made this three wheeler out of spare bits he had, got it licensed and drove it for a few months. Syd is driving with his lifelong friend Alfred Cook on the right in the Oxford area near where they grew up. A fun ride!
Photo from the Enever archive

1920: As 'Shop Boy' he recorded mechanics' time cards, kept the workshop clean, gathered spare parts and when needed, helped mechanics tear down engines, transmissions, differentials etc. The wide range of mechanical work and car types provided Syd with an extensive knowledge of the good, bad and ugly of car design and maintenance which stood him in good stead as he moved up the ladder at MG.

Early 1920s: Syd worked as a junior mechanic hammering out bent fenders and chassis. He was occasionally sent out to rescue broken down cars which he did expeditiously using his own system of diagnosis aided by his custom made tools.

1926: Syd bought a BSA motorcycle and became enamored with the marque. He subsequently bought two more, the last one with a sidecar which he put to good use going to local dances. Syd and his lifelong friend Arthur Cook decided to enter the sidecar in grass track racing events in the Oxford area. This kick-started his interest in competition and engine tuning and provided no end of fun.

Late 1920s: Enever's demonstrated ability to quickly repair a wide variety of cars coming into the shop, provided him insight into the rapidly developing automotive engineering of the time and fueled his innovative nature.

1929: MG moved into its new factory in Abingdon and Syd followed suit in 1930. There he worked closely with two gifted mechanical talents, Reg Jackson and H.N. Charles who were key to developing his engineering abilities. His arrival coincided with the beginning of MG's 'glory days'. Development of road and competition cars was taking off and Syd soon proved himself worthy of playing a key role in those exciting times, landing a job in the Experimental Department.

1930: Enever worked as part of an all-star team of MG mechanical wizards who created a very special lightweight record breaker EX120. It was the first of a long line of MG record breakers and Syd was a key player in every one of them. Not bad for a young lad who had no formal engineering education. Designed to be the first 750 cc engined car to break the 100 mph barrier which it did on February 16, 1931 averaging an amazing 103 mph for 5 km! EX120 went on to establish many, many more records, the last being 101.1 mph for an hour. Sadly it crashed and burned on the lap after setting this record. RIP EX120.

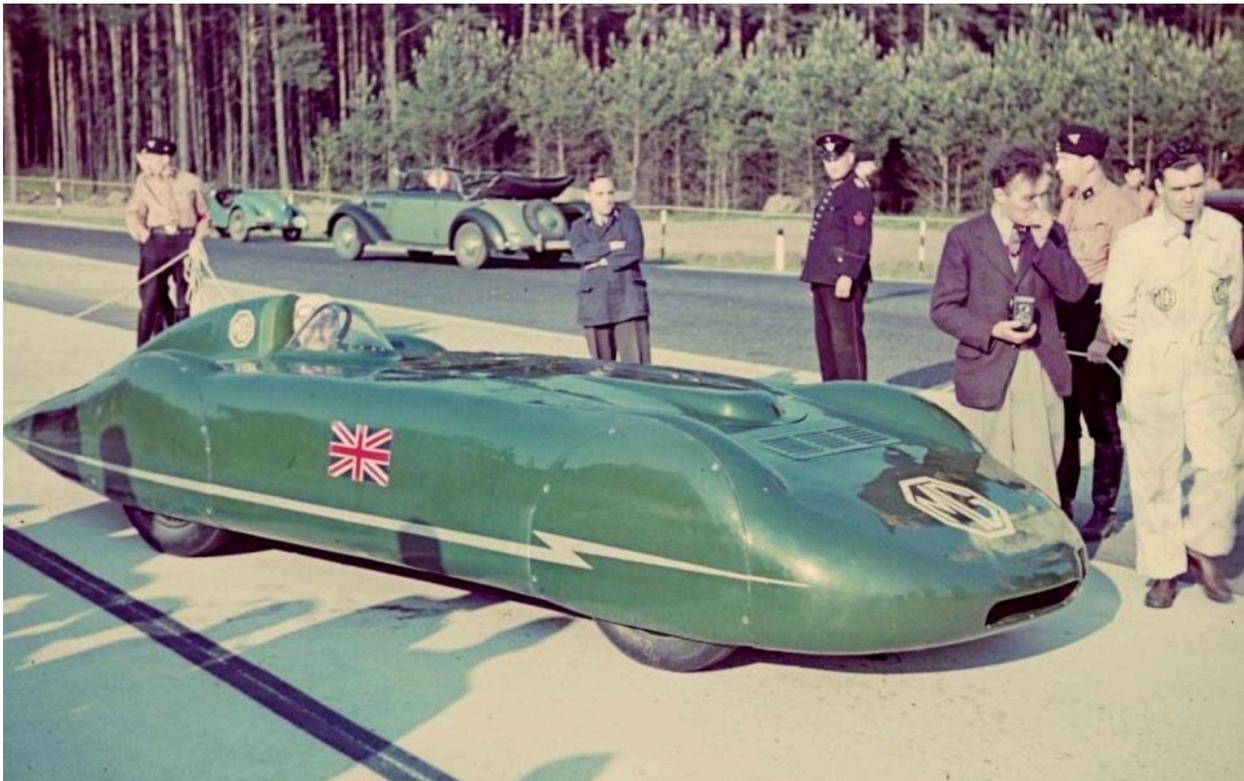
1931-1933: Syd was next involved with the boys in the MG Experimental Shop in building the EX127 record breaker known as the "Magic Midget". EX127 pushed the Class H (750 cc) record to an astounding 128.62 mph on October 19, 1933. But there was more to come. Much more!

1935: After working on the all-conquering MG K3, Syd worked under H.N. Charles' expert direction again in creating the revolutionary all-independent suspension MG R-Type. With a greatly stiffened frame, the independent suspension had a good basis for development but alas it was not to happen as MG's parent company, Morris Motors, put an end to racing and that was that.

1936: EX127 was sold to German MG racer and record breaker Bobby Kohlrusch. He had another special dubbed EX154 built using the engine from EX127 but with a bronze cylinder head to aid cooling. Enever, ever the master engine tuner, extracted an amazing 146 bhp from the little 750 cc engine that could, with the aid of a supercharger blowing 39 psi of air down the intakes. The result was a class record of 140.6 mph established on October 10, 1936 on the Frankfurt autobahn. Rule Britannia!

1938: Despite a ban on racing, MG collaborated with record breaker Goldie Gardner in building a privately owned car, EX135. Once again Enever was a key member of the MG team that designed and built the newest record breaker which immediately began breaking speed records on German autobahns.

1939: On Wednesday May 31, 1939, EX135 set the under 1100 cc Class G record for 1 km at 203.5 mph on the newly opened Dessau autobahn. But wait, there's more... Those clever boffins at MG figured out a cheap way to attack the Class F records. They would bore out the EX135 engine just slightly to 1,105 cc to attack the 1,001 to 1,500 cc records. They did this using a Van Norman portable boring machine with the engine still in the car! Syd and Reg Jackson had never used the machine before and overcame a series of mechanical malfunctions working throughout the night on Thursday in the local police barracks at Dessau and completed the task Friday morning just in time for some more record runs. The result was a series of records from 1 km (204.2 mph) to 5 km (200.6 mph). In just three months England would be at war with Germany and Syd would have a new set of challenges.



EX135 on the Dessau autobahn. Enever, shown far right in immaculate white overalls.
Photo courtesy of Facebook

1939-1945: World War II brought a complete change of direction at MG and other British industries as they shifted to supporting the war effort. In his new role as Planning Engineer, one of Syd's projects was to convert tanks into armored bulldozers and transports. Necessity is the mother of invention.

1946: Following EX135's record runs in 1939, MG's Experimental Shop, under the supervision of Enever, built up a new engine based on the mighty K3 inline overhead cam six cylinder. Displacement was reduced from 1,100 cc to 750 cc since the objective was to establish Class H records. Testing showed 130 hp at 8,000 rpm with the supercharger huffing and puffing out 30 psi of boost. On October 31, 1946, running on the Belgian Jabbeke Highway, the Gardner MG set three new Class H records up to 159.151 mph, easily surpassing Bobby Kohrausch's previous record of 140.6 mph set 10 years earlier. From 1946-1950 with Syd Enever's engine tuning expertise and innovative mind and Goldie Gardner at the wheel, EX135 established records in six of ten international classes!

1947: Ever the innovator, Enever came up with a clever way to reduce the displacement from 750 cc to just under the Class I limit of 500 cc by drilling large holes in the tops of pistons 2 and 5 and disabling the valves in those cylinders and voila a 496 cc engine! In July 1947 Gardner returned to the Jabbeke Highway and established four Class I records up to 118.061 mph.

1949: In September Gardner returned to Jabbeke with the six cylinder MG engine running on just three cylinders for 500 cc to raise three Class I records up to an astounding 154.86 mph.

1950: Making the most of the trusty K3 engine, Syd then disabled four cylinders by removing the pistons and connecting rods, further reducing displacement to just under 332 cc with two cylinders. Returning to the Jabbeke Highway, Gardner pushed this tiny engine (20.25 cu. in.) to the maximum 8,200 rpm and established three Class J records up to 123.861 mph. The little engine that could!

1951: Time for a change. The K3 derived engine had served its purpose and in its place was the new MG XPAG engine used in the MG TB, TC, TD and for a while the TF. The XPAG engine was a less sophisticated pushrod vs the previous overhead cam design but MG wanted to prove the mettle of the MG TD engine, especially to the American market. Accompanied by Enever, EX135 had a 1,250 cc XPAG engine fitted in the car with 10 psi boost from the Shorrock supercharger. A spare engine running on alcohol and boosted to 30 psi produced an impressive 213 bhp. EX135 was crated and shipped to the U.S. on the Queen Elizabeth. It would run on the Bonneville Salt Flats, an ideal record breaking venue. These were to be distance record attempts which required a five mile circular course to be laid out. Syd had to factor in the altitude (4,219 ft above sea level), the varying wind load, rolling resistance and wind drag on the Reid Railton designed streamlined body. This was a big difference from running at sea level on dead straight concrete roads in Germany and Belgium. Syd sorted through a mountain of data, likely supplied by American record breaker Ab Jenkins. Jenkins resided in nearby Salt Lake City and brought the Salt Flats to the attention of British record breakers in the 1930s. Syd's calculations were on the money and the result was six international Class F (1,101-1500 cc) and 10 American records up to 137.4 mph over distances ranging from 50 km (31 mi) to 200 km (124 mi). Definitely worth the trip!

1951 Part 2: More change was in the wind at MG. The 'square rigger' T-series was getting a bit long in the tooth and sales were sagging, especially in the U.S.. Enever was charged with coming up with a streamlined body for MG racer George Phillips to run in the 1951 Le Mans 24 hour race. Christened EX172, the new body

worked well enough but using the TD frame meant the driver sat very high in the car. The XPAG engine eventually failed and that was that for EX172.

1952: EX135 returned to the Salt Flats, again accompanied by Enever, and raised two Class F (up to 1,500 cc) records for 5 miles to 189.506 mph and 10 km to 182.846 mph. After an illustrious nearly 20 year career of record breaking thanks in large measure to the engineering expertise and innovative engine building talents of Syd Enever and the MG Experimental Department gang, EX135 was retired. Goldie Gardner, not in the best of health, sold EX135 to MG for historical display. EX135, in company with EX179 and EX181, can be seen at the British Motor Museum in Gaydon, England.

1952 Part 2: Always looking to the future, Enever began drawing up a new perimeter chassis design to allow much lower passenger seating, a stiffer platform for attaching suspension bits, and improved side impact protection. Reportedly he did this design, EX175, on his dining room table! MG General Manager John Thornley dubbed it "The George Phillips car put right." Syd ordered two of the new chassis. They would be put to good use in two significant MG designs, record breaker EX179 and in 1955 the prototype MGA.

1954: EX179 with its new Enever designed chassis and three XPEG engines developed for the MG TF 1500 (80-97.5 bhp), the team headed for the Salt Flats to do more record breaking. The intent was to give lagging MG TF sales a boost, especially in the States. Set records they did; eight standing start International Class E (1100-1500 cc) records from 100 miles (120.30 mph) up to 12 hours (120.74 mph). Ten American National Class I (67-91.5 cu. In.) flying start records were also set ranging from 300 miles to 12 hours at a nominal 120 mph. American MG racer and later Carroll Shelby superstar, Ken Miles took EX179 out with the sprint engine and set a 10 mile record at an impressive 153.69 mph. Congratulations were in order for Miles, Enever and his MG partner Reggie Jackson! At the same time Austin-Healey was also running a streamliner at Bonneville. It developed a cylinder head leak which Syd Enever and Alex Hounslow were able to fix. Team players!

1954 Part 2: In the summer of 1954 a dedicated MG Design Office was set up in Abingdon under the leadership of Syd Enever. Its first project would be the 'clean sheet' design MGA which was destined to become the most popular sports car in the world. Changes from the 1952 EX175 design were minimal.

1955: Introduced at the 1955 Le Mans 24 hour race, the prototype MGAs known as EX182, were fitted with the BMC B-Series four cylinder 1488 cc engine of rather pedestrian specification which was modified by Enever to be a fitting sports car

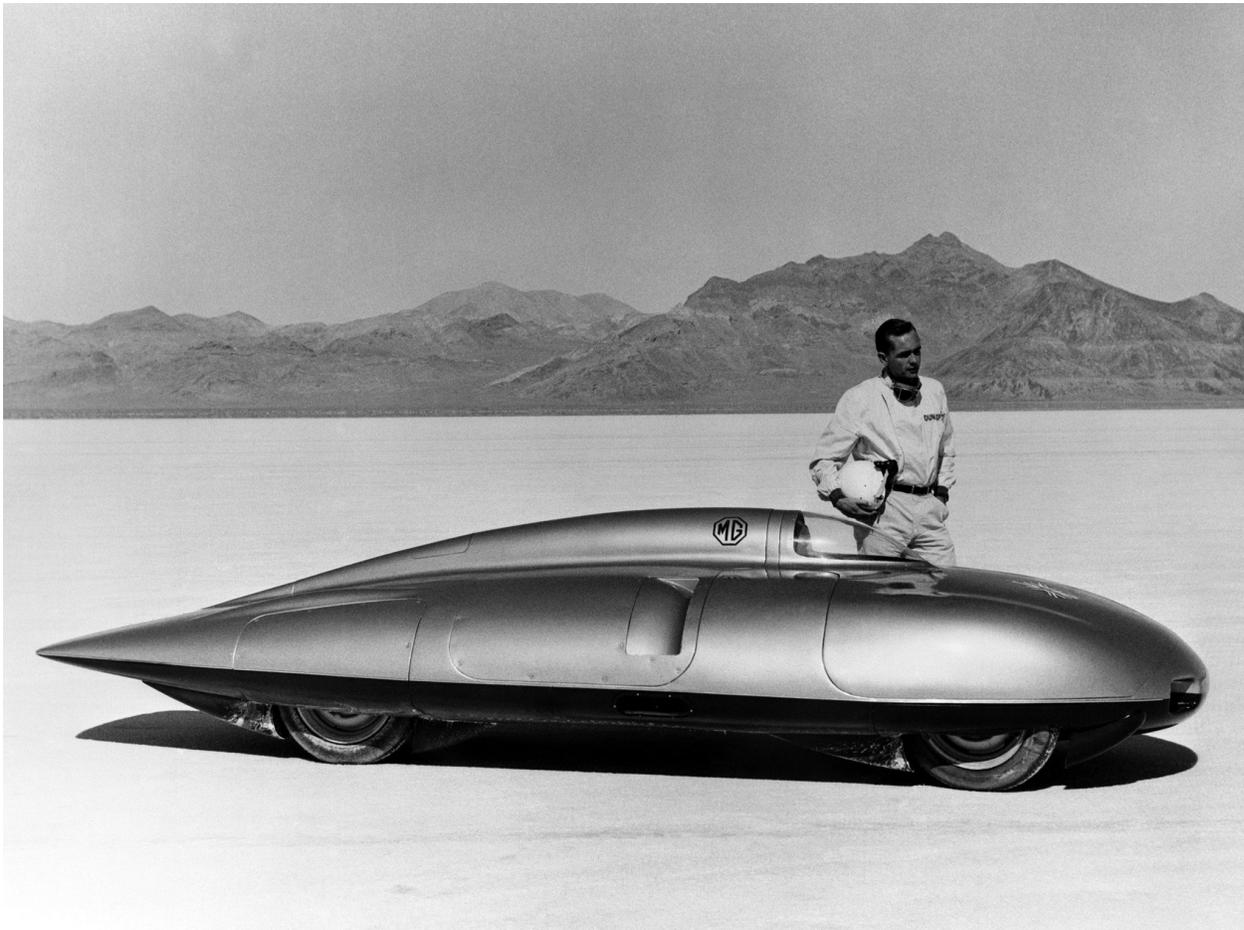


Two of the EX182 team cars on the way to Le Mans.
Photo courtesy of MG Car Club archive

engine. EX182 acquitted itself well during the race, which was marred by the tragic Mercedes accident which resulted in 80+ deaths and cast a pall over the race and racing in general. One of the MGs was also involved in a single car accident that destroyed the car and badly injured its driver and long time MG racer, Dick Jacobs.

1956: Converted to right hand drive and fitted with the newly designed twin cam engine destined for the MGA Twin Cam model, EX179 again headed west to the Salt Flats where it set 16 International Class records including 141.71 mph for 12 hours and 170.15 mph for 10 miles.

1956 Part 2: MG's record breaking was not finished yet. Examining EX179, Enever determined that it would require 350 bhp to attain the desired speed of 250 mph. The B Series engine, even in twin cam supercharged form simply would not be up to the task. Therefore in a letter dated 20 February 1956, Enever laid down the basic concept for a radically new MG record breaker, EX181. It would be a mid-engine design with a 1500 cc twin cam engine fitted with a Shorrock supercharger capable of producing up to 302 bhp which theoretically would propel the new streamlined body to the desired 250 mph. Once again Enever's calculations would prove accurate! EX181 would be Enever's ultimate record breaker design.



EX181, fastest MG ever clocked at 254.53 mph on the Bonneville Salt Flats in 1959 with American Formula 1 Driving champion Phil Hill at the wheel.

1957: The “Roaring Raindrop” as EX181 was dubbed by the press, was off to Bonneville with Syd Enever and Alec Hounslow in charge of the mechanicals while George Eyston, World Land Speed Record holder and record breaker extraordinaire, was the team manager. John Thornley had astutely arranged for British superstar driver Stirling Moss and American ace and future F1 World Driving Champion Phil Hill, to drive. Former EX179 record breaker Ken Miles, who had “defected” to the Porsche camp, was pointedly not included as a driver. Harrumph! Hill did the first runs to sort out the new car, then Moss flew in from a race in Italy and set five International Class F (up to 1,500 cc) records topped by a 1 km run at 245.64 mph, albeit with a few teeth missing from second gear. Didn’t seem to bother him or the car one bit!

1959: EX181’s engine was bored out slightly to 1,506 cc to run in International Class E (1501-2,000 cc class) and returned to the Salt Flats with Phil Hill as the primary driver. Phil took six records including the flying kilometer record at 254.91 mph, the fastest MG ever! EX181 bested the previous Class E record by nearly 70 mph!

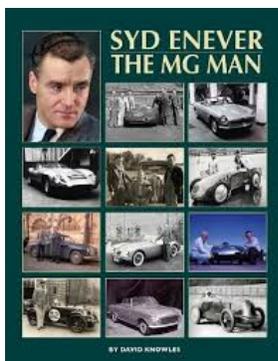
1960: Using EX181 as a starting point, Enever set to his drawing board on the MGB which would succeed the MGA as the best selling sports car of its day. There would be no more record breakers; Enever’s attention would be focused on the MG and Austin-Healey “Spridget” as well as further development of the MGB including the GT introduced in 1965 and the MGC introduced in 1967 and lastly the MGB GT V8 launched in 1973. Driven by U.S. safety and clean air legislation, eventually engine and car body designers around the world were forced to focus increasingly on meeting safety and emissions requirements.

April 30, 1971: After an illustrious career rising from shop boy to Chief Engineer, Syd Enever, the quiet genius of sports car engineering, retired from MG which had been his home, his family, and his passion for over 51 years. Syd Enever left this world on February 9, 1993, an MG life well lived.



Syd Enever, man behind the MGA and the MGB.

Photo courtesy of Oxford Daily Mail



As a footnote to this article, I heartily recommend a book just recently released, “Syd Enever the MG Man” by renowned MG author David Knowles. Not only is it a thoroughly researched biography of Enever’s life but also chronicles the history of MG. In addition to the anecdote filled story of Enever and MG, the text is filled with many sidebars highlighting MG personalities, comments on various MG models and milestones as well as copies of original factory correspondence not previously seen. I have drawn heavily on this book for this article.

If you only own one book on the MG, I highly recommend this profusely illustrated and beautifully printed 240 page masterpiece for your wish list! Yeah, it’s that good.