



Summit . . . Bwlch Oerddrws. The M.G. is about to descend to Dinas Mawddwy, the road down the hill having a 1 in 5 gradient.

MAKING

By Michael Brown

the GRADES

PASS CLIMBING IN THE WELSH MOUNTAINS WITH A 1¼-LITRE M.G.

THERE comes a point where a sporting reputation may impose a restriction on the popularity of a firm's cars in other directions. At least, that is an opinion which I hold. It seems to me that the long and good sporting record of the M.G. (remember the "Cream Crackers" and the original Magic Midget?) might make the ordinary family motorist hesitate before considering a car from the same stable. He would probably say, rather deprecatingly, that it "was a bit too hot for him"; which would be a pity.

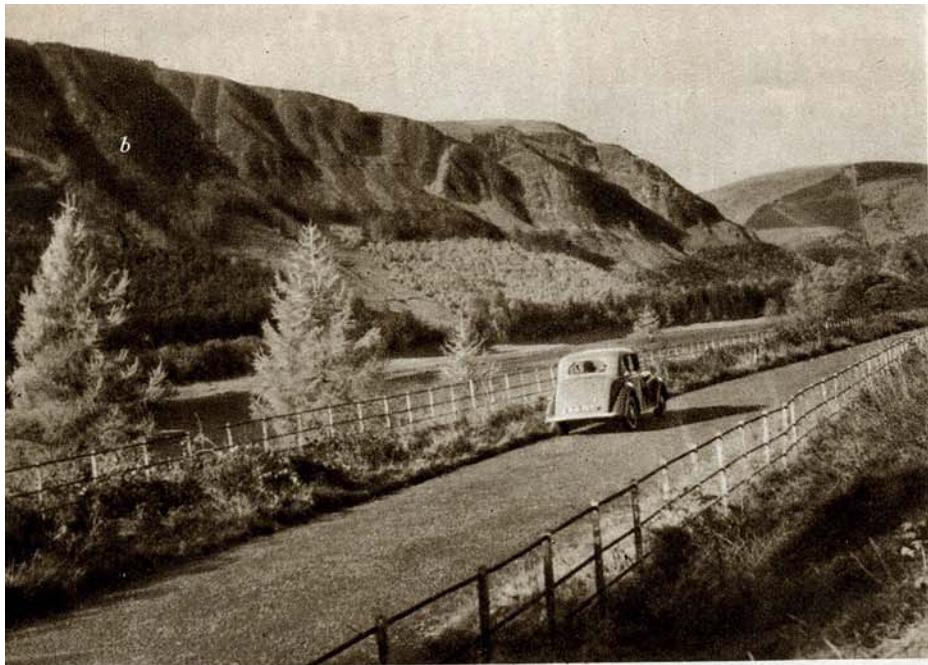
Curiously enough, a similar timidity might arise over tackling mountain passes. Accustomed to driving the family along the flat roads of most of the south of England, our typical tourist might feel that the mountains meant "real" climbing, and, by an association of ideas, he might remember hectic pictures of M.G. Midgets bouncing up Bwlch-y-Groes. Whereupon he might decide to stick to the Brighton Road, which, again, would be a pity.

Now I would hesitate to claim that I am anything more than a typical motorist. Consequently, when the opportunity occurred to take a 1¼-litre M.G. saloon over the mountain passes in Wales ("Go ahead: climb anything you like with it") I was very pleased. Here was an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. I could give the ordinary motorist's reactions to the latest product from a sporting firm, and I could describe the various passes which I climbed for the benefit of the apprehensive tourist. If the result sways a timid fellow-motorist over to scaling the passes when basic petrol once again returns, so much the better.

First, the car. It slipped out of Berkshire on a fine morning with every promise of a good run ahead of it. At the wheel, a driver who, quite diffident for the first few miles with a strange car, was becoming rapidly familiar with it. It is that sort of machine, and that early instilling of confidence is a hallmark of British quality design. How Britain gets the "quality" feel I do not pretend to know, but I think that it arises from a happy combination of solid construction and positive control; an ease of operation of such things as throttle, brakes and clutch pedal; a slick and smooth gear change, and comfort of driving position. It may even be that a polished walnut facia has something to do with it. Polished walnut has always suggested quality in this country, and may it long continue to do so.

Before very long I was completely at home with the machine, and the throttle could be opened freely. As usual in this country, the roads dictated the speed, but one could potter at 30-35 m.p.h. or cruise at any speed from 40 m.p.h. upwards as far as 65 m.p.h., when possible. Seventy appeared on the speedometer once, but a damp road surface and wet leaves lying on it forbade a real attempt to pack the miles into the hours. However, 17 miles between Chipping Norton and Broadway were covered in 22 minutes, giving an average of 46.4 m.p.h. and later 13 miles went by in 16 minutes (48.75 m.p.h.). For the hour, forty miles were recorded, and the figure would have been higher but for the Evesham speed limit and a traffic light stop in the town.

The suspension gave no little assistance towards getting



THE AUTOCAR

High level . . . the road round Lake Vyrnwy at over 800 ft. Crisp morning sunshine lighting the gold of winter spruces.

dated in advance by the prospect of climbing a hillside-clinging road over a strange pass in a car that was not my own in pouring rain (which came on at night-fall), and with plenty of wet leaves on the decided corners. However, we did it in blissful ignorance, the beam of the head lamps occasionally leaping out into space over the post-guarded outside edge, and the hillside across the valley a black mass pierced at times by a cottage lamp.

On the descent one bend caught us napping. It was one of those that go on getting sharper as you round it. A motor cyclist was coming up. I had to put the steering wheel over harder than discretion advised. The car came round. Even so,

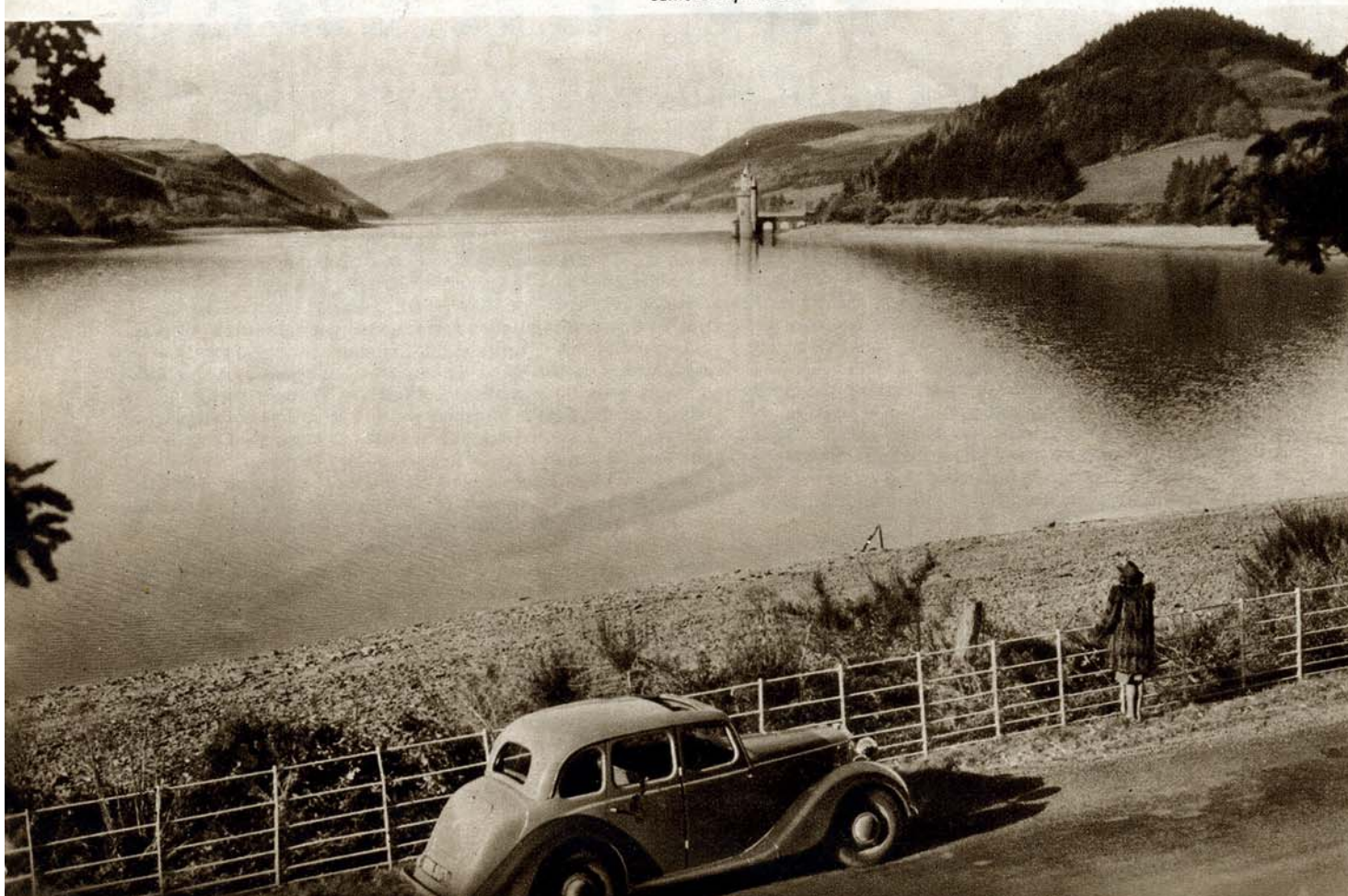
along rapidly. Coupled with a lively and positive response to the steering, which is light and likeable, the car went round curves in an exhilarating manner. It wagged a tail once, very slightly, but was easily corrected. And then we approached the Worcester area—in which, at one point, the starter switch refused duty for the only time during the run—and the higher speeds became out of the question, although later, somewhere on A49 and in the neighbourhood of Church Stretton, we covered five miles in as few minutes. Finally we reached Llangollen—just after dark—and the real trip began.

I must confess that it was not intended to begin there. From a welter of maps a day or two before I had said airily to my passenger, "We'll stay the night at Denbigh and make the first climb over the hills in the morning." Unfortunately, I had overlooked the fact that between Llangollen and Ruthin the road leaps up and over the Horse Shoe Pass. Perhaps not so unfortunately, for I might have been intimi-

brakes were still necessary—gently—and I prepared to correct a slide. But it did not happen, and the M.G. came back snugly under the hillside as if to tell me that I had a lot to learn about the safety margin of independent front suspension. I probably have. In the steep streets of Denbigh we searched for our hotel, and finally garaged the car in a tremendous downpour, untired but thankfully—because of the rain—after the run of about 200 miles.

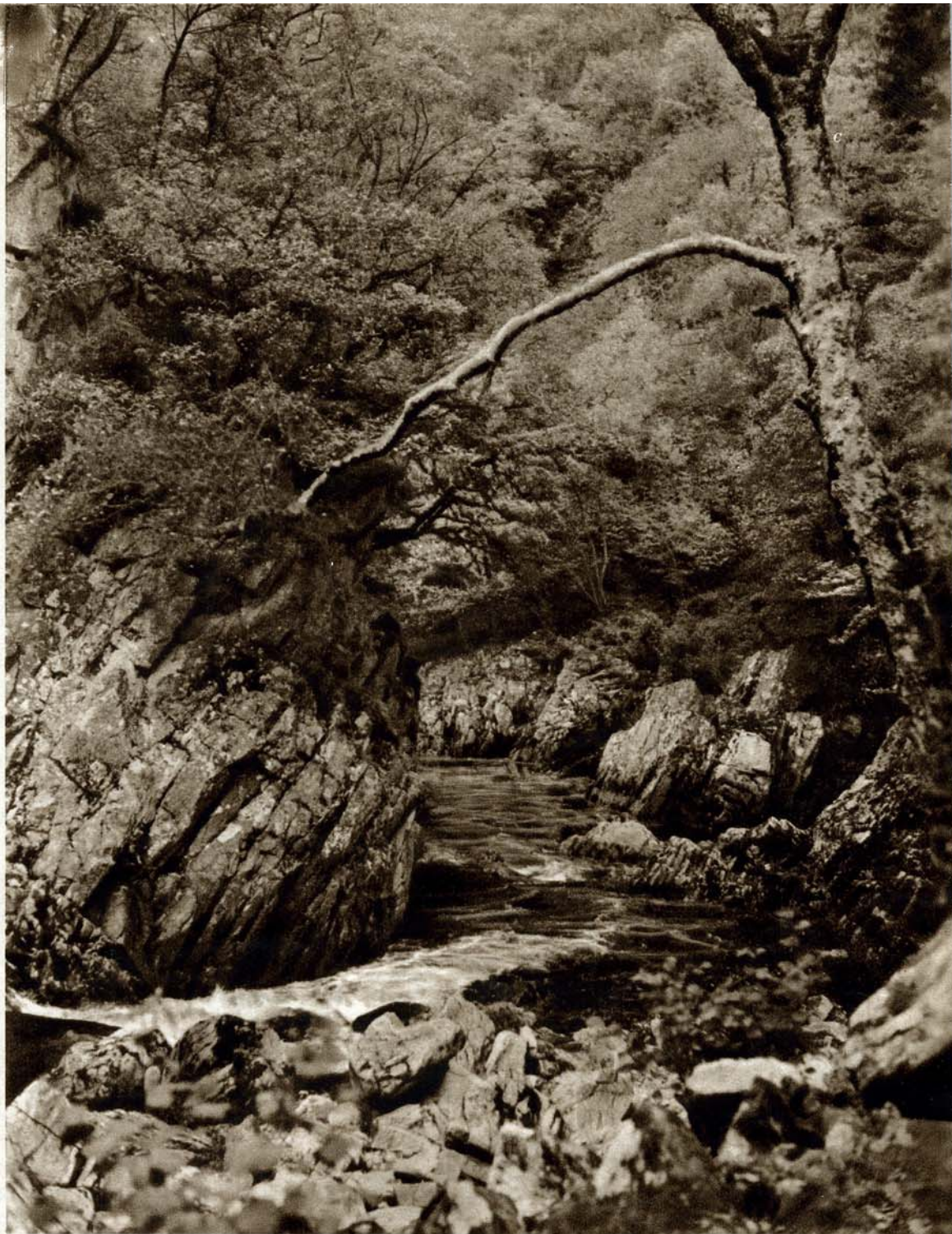
Next morning the sun was up, although the day was to deteriorate. With some affection now, I topped up the radiator and pressed the starter button, the engine firing immediately and needing practically no choke, which may have meant a mixture that was a little too rich. To warm up we went down to get petrol at a garage at the bottom of the town, and then returned on A543 to climb over to Pentrefoelas, which lies on A5. The road is adequate in width and the climb is long and steady, up into desolate moorland in which Llyn Aled and the Alwen Reservoir are

Low level . . . Lake Vyrnwy itself was low as a result of the dry summer. Sunshine and still mountain air gave the necessary clarity for winter camera exposure.



JANUARY 9, 1948

"That ravine through which the river pours . . ." Conway Falls, where cars may be parked in a special park and tuppence gives a glimpse of Heaven.



1,200 ft gleam dully and menacingly when the sky is grey. There are no crags or difficulties about this pass, and it drops discreetly into A5 leaving only an impression of clean air and windy wastes. The contrast with the wooded vale along which A5 runs is remarkable—the difference between the grim lines of hard old age and soft cheeks of the maiden. We stopped and clambered over the rocks at the Conway Falls, wondering if anything could be more beautiful than that ravine through which the river pours. Then we sped on through Bettws-y-Coed and Capel Curig—climbing again—to Llanberis Pass.

After the descent, the ascent. Llanberis—a spectacular pass of broken rock, scree and exciting peaks—has an easy gradient and a good surface, although the sides of the road need watching for protruding rocks. Up a traffic-free road the M.G. climbed in third gear, the speed held down by the corners, but not dropping below 30 m.p.h. or rising above 40; a most satisfying climb. We dropped down to Llyn Gwynant and lunch at Beddgelert.

The afternoon climb was from Ffestiniog over to Bala. The road is narrow, the surface fair; the prospect on that

day was bleak and misty. From Ffestiniog the way leaps up sharply and then steadies into a long climb. At 1,500 ft the cloud level was the same as ours, but, peeping under it, we could admire the amazing view back over Cwm Prysor, alongside which the railway runs. This is a road which no one need fear, and towards Bala it becomes excellent in width and surface. Sheep, of course, are frequently encountered, as elsewhere on the Welsh roads.

The hotel at Bala—the White Lion Royal—can be recommended, not least for such thoughtfulness as the drying of wet coats (without asking), the provision of a hot water bottle, and two morning papers with the early tea, also without asking. Local advice was forthcoming on the route from there.

Not over to Rhiwargor, at the head of Lake Vyrnwy; nor via Bwlch-y-Groes at that time of year. Bala—Llangynog? Oh yes; that was quite all right.

And a lovely climb it is. The sun—a real, summery sun with a few white clouds—was dispelling the ground mist as we left, and the lake was pale iridescence. Four miles beyond Bala a double hairpin and a steep gradient brought



Halfway down . . . on the road from Bala to Llangynog. The pass clings to the hillside, while over the edge of the road the pattern of Welsh farming grows from the miniature to the actual.

a still-cool engine down to first gear, but after that second gear shared with third the honour of lifting the M.G. into the skies. At 1,200 ft the view back over Bala is one of amazing beauty. We stopped to photograph a world of gold and crystal—gold in the leaves and crystal in the dew that sparkled on them. Oh, and a crimson splash of mountain ash berries and the pale blue of distant hills.

Out we drove on to the top of the world. Up the next long slope the narrow road reached onward into distance; and up the next; and the next. Over a pot-holed surface the suspension had a good test at 35 to 40 m.p.h., from which it came with credit. And then suddenly we were making the breathtaking descent into Llangynog, clinging to the hillside with a low stone wall between us and eternity and a view of meadow pattern, cottage-studded, the like of which is peculiar to Wales.

Eye of the Needle

At Pen-y-bont-fawr we turned right through Hirnant for Lake Vyrnwy. Here the road is very narrow, and a big car would be embarrassing. There are occasional places where two cars could pass, but they are not frequent. The M.G. is, however, attractively compact in size. We met only one vehicle—a lorry in a favourable spot. It was carrying pit props that were being cut from the Reservoir conifers a little nearer the lake, and through the scented depths of which it is extraordinarily pleasant to drive.

Around the lake the road is fine and the view magnificent. Then there came another sharp ascent from the dam end over to B4393, the hairpin bends bringing us down to second gear. Later, a lorry loaded with sawn logs brought us down to first, but we tired of the crawl and of the possibility of a log falling off to dent the precious M.G. and halted, in company with the village nurse in an Austin Seven, to let it get ahead. Then we romped over the summit far behind it.

From the junction to Machynlleth is main road motoring, plus fine scenery west from Bwlch-y-Fedwen. The road north to Dolgelley (A487) is also a main road, but what scenery! Along this one could take the most asthmatic

and ancient saloon with confidence, to the certain delight of its passengers.

But from the Cross Foxes Inn, near Dolgelley, A458 climbs off to the east and to Dinas Mawddwy, and is a different matter. This is Bwlch Oerddrws. The surface is good but the climb is long (1½ miles). Average gradient is 1 in 13, with a maximum of 1 in 9. From the Dinas side it reaches 1 in 5, with a hairpin bend. It is a fine, open climb, with good visibility, adequate width and surface and a grand scenic descent into Dinas. The M.G. climbed fast and well on third, was stopped at the top (the engine ran-on for a second after the key was turned), and was then allowed to potter down to Dinas. Should we turn and make the steeper climb? The failing light and the fact that it was in no way difficult decided us against it. We garaged at the Buckley Arms and enjoyed a cup of tea in the splendid setting of the rhododendron-clothed hills.

And that we might call the end of it, although two more climbs were made on the way home. One was on A483 south of Newtown—a jolly ascent in thickish mist which promised well for further investigation later, and the other was Birdlip (the new road), up which the M.G. fairly flew after a wait for a clear run. The hairpin by the signpost was taken on second gear, the last section on third, and the car came over the top at 52 m.p.h. with the needle still going up. In the end I swung into the works at Abingdon—Berkshire's only car factory, of which we are equally proud with Huntley and Palmer's biscuits and Simonds' beer!—with 600 miles on the trip, a petrol consumption of something just in excess of 30 m.p.g., and oil consumption of apparently nil, although I had added a pint of oil for good measure.

A typical motorist—as timid as most, I dare say—had taken a car that is backed with a fine sporting reputation over a mountain touring route in the winter. What had he found? That such a journey was as easy as falling off a log, and that the car concerned was such that its docility of control, coupled with a performance above the average for the engine size, speedily made it a machine to be appreciated. Moreover, the compact overall size, with visibility of both wings, is probably worth an extra quarter of a litre when it comes to making fast averages over British roads.

Route map . . . height above sea level against distance, but with no claim that the gradients shown are to scale!

