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Rallied in the 1950s, this historic YB is back in action, as Jon Pressnell relates

# OLD TROUPER RETURNS TO THE RALLY STAGE

Spool back a dozen years and Y-type MGs weren't on Marc Hanson's radar. MGs, yes: his first classic had been an MGB, and he'd gone on to use an MGF in sprints and hillclimbs. But the perpendicular YA and YB four-door saloons, current from 1947 until 1953, hadn't really entered his consciousness... until he came across one – and not just any 'Y' – in the auction at the Goodwood Revival.

"It was the former Dick Jacobs car. It had an amazing race history, as it had been a three-times class winner in Touring Car racing at Silverstone in Jacobs's hands, in 1952, 1953 and 1954, and was the oldest-known surviving Touring Car entrant in the country. Yet it wasn't going for much. I didn't know anything about Y-types but I bid, on impulse. It ended up being bought by a dealer and passed to someone else who wanted to race it, but who finally put it to one side. Later I bought it, at another auction. Then Dick Jacobs's daughter died and I was able to buy some memorabilia."

Marc prepared the YB to MG's Stage Two tune, and used it for sprints and hillclimbs. "They were fun to do in the car, although I was never very fast. When Dick Jacobs raced the MG, it was very fast." Currently on display in the BRDC Silverstone Experience museum, it was set up by Marc for sprints, with lowered suspension and big 1½in carbs. "It's fast on circuits but the ride is a lot harder, and whilst it's good for anything over 30mph, it bogs down at lower engine speeds."



*Flashing indicators replace the trafficators, for safety reasons. YBs have 15in wheels rather than the 16in rims of the YA*





*Dash includes temperature gauge fitted by Grant, and various additions for historic rallying; period electric demisters aren't very effective. The instruments, set into a veneered dash, have octagonal surrounds – marque founder Cecil Kimber would have approved*



*Engine details include a spin-on oil filter, a battery cut-off, a sports coil, and carb heat shields*

*Marc Hanson says the YB is surprisingly modern; TD wheels allow extra ventilation of brakes*



*Rear of the Y-type is nicely appointed – more luxurious than the Morris Eight that donated its bodyshell*



As such, the Jacobs 'Y' wasn't really suited to historic rallying, which was starting to tempt Marc. "I thought why don't I have a rallying YB? Then 'UMG 662' came up at auction, and I bought it seven years ago. It had been bought new in 1952 by Gregor Grant, the founder of *Autosport* magazine, who had previously rallied another Y-type. The YB was used as a press car on the 1953 Monte Carlo rally and the 1953 Mille Miglia and Grant competed in it in the 1953 Scottish Rally and the 1954 Monte. With *Autosport* photographer [and well-known MG privateer] George Philips as co-driver, he almost came home in the results. But he made a mistake on one of the timed sections at the end of the rally, and was excluded."

When Marc bought the car it was fitted with twin 1¼in carbs, which he feels were most likely fitted for Gregor Grant by the factory. "Abingdon built three rally YBs at roughly the same time as mine was built. They had twin carbs, and the works was very coy about their specification, as they were supposed to be largely standard cars. Gregor Grant would have been in a perfect position to ask MG to put twin carbs on his car, and my hunch is that this is what happened."

Marc's first rallying foray with the YB was the 2016 Monte Carlo Classique. "Since then I've spent more and more money, getting the car better and better. Jason at Classic and Sports Cars Essex has looked after the car for me. He's very good. He's very responsive, and the work gets done and gets done well."

The specification includes an unleaded-compatible head, a sports cam, a 60-thou overbore and full balancing, plus those twin 1½in SU carbs, on a TF manifold. "It's much more lively up to 30-40mph than the Jacobs car on its bigger carbs," says Marc. The XPAG engine is mated to a Hi-Gear five-speed gearbox installation – although this has to come out for certain events for which such modifications are not permitted. Marc is in no doubt about the value of the conversion. "With the standard four-speed gearbox the car is nowhere near as relaxing. At 55mph you're starting to put a strain on the engine and at 60-75mph it's quite noisy and harsh. The five-speed is a big transformation and a good mod. For everyday long-distance driving it makes things much more bearable."

The standard suspension is retained, right down to standard-spec lever-arm dampers front and rear, but it has been fully rebuilt, using polyurethane bushes. "It does wallow around corners a bit," admits Marc – this being the price for a more comfortable ride than on the racer with its lowered suspension. TD wheels are used, shod with Michelin radial-ply tyres which make a big difference to the car's roadholding.

Despite the availability of disc conversions, Marc has kept to the standard unassisted all-drum set-up. "You don't need discs. Even on the longest mountain passes in Italy I've had no brake fade. In any case, in the events I do I wouldn't be allowed to have discs. I've thought about Alfin finned alloy drums but you can't get them in the YB's size – and I'm not sure the cost of getting a set specially made would be justified."

Final details include an electric fan and a high-flow radiator. "The only time we got close to not finishing was when the car got hot, coming down from the mountains. With the improved cooling system never again has it got close to overheating." On top of this, there are the inevitable requirements for safe rallying – an extra spot light, LED lights and a reversing light at the back, flashing indicators, a high-level brake light. "It's important to be seen," says Marc. "At night you're at risk from drivers failing to spot the standard 1950s rear lights."



*The MG serving as a press car on the 1953 Monte; alongside is a competing Acton-built Renault 4CV*

*Grant on the 1953 Scottish Rally; he won his class in the Gleneagles Acceleration and Braking Test*



*The MG on the Col des Lèques during the 1954 Monte – pursued, somewhat improbably, by a Triumph Mayflower*



# GREGOR GRANT

*Journalist and F1 commentator Simon Taylor, former chairman of Haymarket Magazines, has fond memories of Gregor Grant, who in 1966 gave him his first job, as an Autosport reporter.*

Gregor was a journalist on *Light Car* before he launched *Autosport* in the middle of 1950. It was a brave thing to do – and it was run pretty much on a shoestring. In the 1950s the only way to find out what was going on in motor sport was through getting *Autosport* on Friday. Newspapers didn't cover motorsport unless there was a death or something. So before *Autosport* you couldn't find out what had happened in a Grand Prix or at Cadwell Park or Snetterton the weekend before. The magazine was very important.

Gregor was Scottish, dapper and moustachioed. He was a big personality. He just knew everybody. That's why he was able to start *Autosport*. He was the life and soul of the party, and a great man in the bar. He'd stand anyone a round of drinks. He was very good at telling stories. A lot of the gossip he came up with was in fact untrue – such as Enzo Ferrari buying Cooper, for example. But you could never be sure. 'If some of his tales seemed tall, the more impossible they appeared the more likely they were to be true,' wrote his colleague John Bolster.

Doing rallies in his MG Y-type, that was a big thing. My understanding is that it was his daily driver – he wrote about it for *Autosport* as a long-term road-test car. I wonder if it was an ex-demo car. Knowing Gregor, it certainly would have been a deal: he was on good terms with the manufacturers. He drank with their PRs and was very good at getting cars for events, or buying cars at discounted prices.

He was editor of *Autosport* until around 1967. The magazine had failed to pay its printer's bills and the printers had taken over – it was owned by the printers. We never knew this. In 1967 *Autosport* was bought by Michael Heseltine, who was then building up Haymarket Publishing. It was a terrible blow for Gregor, who was used to being his own boss, and he left and set up *Speed World International* in opposition. It ran for eight months and collapsed, and in 1969 Gregor died, very young, of cancer. It was sad. He was a great character. **ST**



*Pause at a French level-crossing. Rallying was a very different business in the 1950s: note the roof-rack and GB plate*



*Grant (left) and Phillips with the MG at Monaco, leek still attached; the lamp on the screen is for reading signs*



*The car was also raced at Silverstone in 1953, by George Phillips. The backward-turned headlamps are for better aerodynamics*



*The five-speed Ford gearbox conversion fitted to the car makes cruising a lot more relaxed*



*Gregor Grant in the MG as it passes through Sidcup on the way down from the 1954 Monte's Glasgow start. (Photo courtesy Simon Taylor)*

One piece of equipment that has no discernible effect on performance – and is certainly not homologated for historic rallying – can be seen in some pictures of Marc’s car. It is absolutely authentic, however, being seen in period when the YB was rallied by Gregor Grant. The item in question? A leek – yes, the vegetable – attached to the radiator slats. This has provoked many a ribald ‘Allo ‘Allo! moment, with perplexed Frenchmen asking Marc why he has a pointy green vegetable as part of his cooling system.

The story is simple. When Gregor Grant and George Phillips were competing in the 1954 Monte in the YB, the Glasgow starters had their first time control in the Welsh town of Llandrindod Wells. Here they were greeted by a patriotic Welshman, who equipped every car with a leek, this of course being the emblem of the

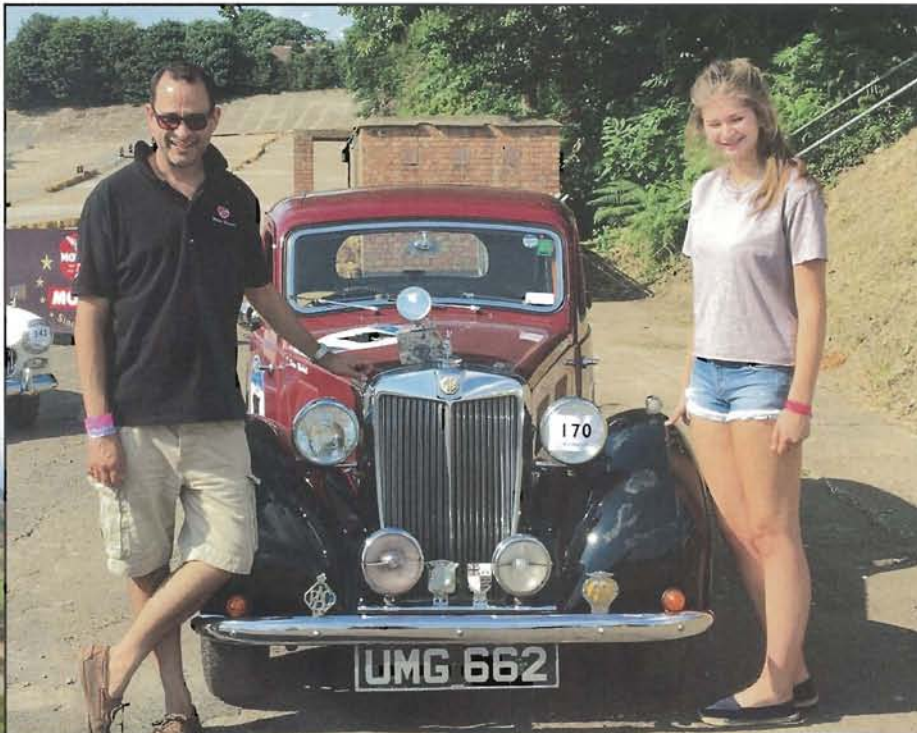
principality. By the time the cars had reached a refuelling halt at Sidcup in Kent, many had lost this adornment, but not the Grant/Phillips YB, which was still proudly wearing its leek when it arrived in Monaco...

With two further Monte Carlo Classiques under his belt, in 2017 and 2020, plus the 2016 Mille Miglia and the 2017 Rally of the Tests, Marc is an enthusiastic advocate of the YB, with or without leek. “The Y-types look very old-fashioned but the actual technology is pretty good. They had rack-and-pinion steering when Jaguar was still using a steering box. People forget that the TD came from the Y-type. I think the ‘Y’ handles better, because of its slightly longer wheelbase, and with the YB you have twin-leading-shoe brakes at the front, a front anti-roll bar, and a hypoid back axle. The YA kept breaking halfshafts, and its suspension wasn’t as well controlled.

“It’s a fantastic rally car. It’s perfect for the job. It has a short wheelbase, it’s comparatively light, you can tune the engine a bit, it’s quite nippy – and it’s warm and comfortable. For me it’s been bulletproof. Nothing has ever gone wrong with it – it’s one of the most reliable cars I’ve ever owned, and it’s so simple to look after. I can’t recommend it highly enough as a rally car.”

So what are Marc’s plans for the future, both for the car itself and for his participation in historic rallying? “I’ve thought about a Laystall cylinder head – people do repro heads. But it’s a lot of money and I’m not sure of the benefit. The tubular manifold I have on the race car I know makes quite a difference, on the other hand. I’m not sure I can get away with using one on the rally car. If I can, that will be my next job. As for rallies, there’s a London-to-Lisbon being planned for next year. In 1948 an MG Y-type took part in the Lisbon Rally – one of its first rally appearances. It would be nice to have the car do that again...”

Photos by Tony Baker and from Marc Hanson’s collection



In 2017 Marc and daughter Holly came joint first in the Brooklands Double-Twelve



In the course of the 2017 Monte Carlo Classique. Even in demanding terrain the brakes have proved up to the job



On the 2017 Rally of the Tests, judged by Marc to be too harsh on older cars, after the MG suffered suspension problems (Photo Tony Large)