

A potted history of the MGA

by Rob Higgins

THE MGA HOW IT CAME TO BE

The world's best selling sportscar did not get off to a good start. After the first prototype was built, the project was shelved for two years by a remote corporate decision. Would the MGA's impact would have been much greater without this delay? Or would a less reliable and rugged engine have been used, compromising its eventual success? As we shall see, delaying the MGA project in 1952 resulted in, arguably, the best possible medium term outcome for M.G. as a whole. Although the major mechanical components in the MGA were all tried and tested from the BMC parts bin, the production cars were built with the systematic testing of only one car. What a way to build the world's best selling sportscar! The success of this approach is a tribute to the design and production team at Abingdon. That the modifications introduced by Developments over the seven year production cycle attended really only to design detail is further confirmation of the quality of the original package. Forty years after the launch of the MGA, we will look back at the cars produced before the major production run commenced at car 10106. There is a difficulty for the historian, as registration plates were freely swapped between cars at Abingdon. Indeed, the few surviving Developments Shop inventories from the period show that many cars were not registered, and if they were to be taken out on the road some plates that were "lying around" would be fitted. Furthermore, we have at least one example of a chassis number being carried forward onto a rebuilt car with replacement chassis and body. Abingdon did keep a detailed log of each car in Developments, but these were transferred to Cowley and appear to have been lost, despite the efforts of Cliff Bray and Don Hayter at the time. Without writing an account that becomes introspective and pointless I have tried to recount early MGA history car by car, as far as anyone can be sure about what actually happened! I am always welcome to be corrected, and to receive new information. "EX 172". This was an M.G. TD special, registered UMG 400, that was built by the M.G. factory for George Phillips to compete in the 1951 Le Mans 24 hour race. If it had been just a T type with a special body I would not need to mention it. However, I believe it was considered to be a more important project for three clear reasons. First, the design specification was detailed more like that of an M.G. factory racer, not just a private car with works support. Secondly, the allocation of an EX number suggests that the car had a particular place in the development of future designs. Lastly, the factory approved publicity surrounding the project, with prominent features in the motoring press, suggests that this was a "toe in the water" exercise for the new shape M.G. Although the body of UMG 400 looks ungainly and badly proportioned now that we have the MGA, a careful look suggests that the designer must have had a very clear idea of the eventual MGA shape. It was just that the constraints of a racing special (get the frontal area as low as possible) meant that the proportions of UMG 400 could never be expected to look quite right. In fact, I feel that if the front grille surround had been better designed, UMG 400 would have been much more than an "ugly duckling". This body was designed by Syd Enever, and is a mixture of aerodynamic lessons learnt from the record breaker EX135 and contemporary styling cues from cars such as the Jaguar XK120 and Alvis Special Sports Tourer. The high waist line appearing in other desirable motor cars of the early 1950's (such as Aston Martin and Ferrari) was not adopted, although the MGB followed that trend. The bulky body styles that had appeared on the Arnolt TD's and also on a TD bodied by Ghia Aigle were not followed. A scale model was wind tunnel tested, and the full sized body built of aluminium over wooden formers. The aerodynamic success of the design is indicated by the top speed of 116 mph achieved on the Mulsanne straight at Le Mans, using only an unsupercharged XPAG power unit of 1250cc capacity.

As a design and public relations exercise UMG 400 was a great success. As a racing car it was not, for Phillips pushed the engine too hard and dropped a valve after 3 hours of the 24 hour race. "Some high words ensued" as John Thornley said M.G. engineers did not like to see their hard work wasted by over^aenthusiastic drivers. In George Phillips' defence he had some experience of using similar engines at Le Mans with success, though not in this high speed body.

EX 172 was apparently offered to George Phillips but he did not want to buy it. The car is generally assumed to have been broken up in Abingdon. The specification indicates a modified and lightened chassis so it seems improbable that the car would have been sold by the works even if a standard TD body had replaced the special one.

"EX 175" This was conceived quickly after the 1951 Le Mans as a prototype for the new production car. Roy Brocklehurst had been taken on by Syd Enever straight out of school to work in the small design office on various projects. After the success of EX 172, he was given the task of designing a chassis suitable for a production car. This was completed before he went on National Service in June 1952, when he was only 20 years old. Thirty years later, after completing other major projects such as the MGB he was still proud of the MGA chassis "probably the best separate chassis frame ever engineered" he told a motoring journalist (who presumably did not know who had designed it!). The design of the body had been completed quickly after Le Mans, a blueprint being produced in February 1952, followed by wind tunnel testing.

The body was built at BMC's Body Branch in Coventry with careful supervision from Syd Enever. The drive train was from the T type with a small bonnet bulge being one of several detail differences between this car and the eventual production MGA. Overall the design of EX175 was a case of "right first time".

The registration number was HMO 6 leading to its sobriquet in Abingdon of "homosex". It was finished in a handsome metallic dark red and extensive road use took place, forming the only real testing before the design of the MGA was finalised. Although HMO 6 stayed in Developments for some time after MGA production started it was eventually cut up on orders from Cowley an event remembered with some sadness by Don Hayter, for it was apparently a solid and servicable car.

"EX 179" Two chassis to Roy Brocklehurst's design were produced. One was used for EX 175, and the other was kept in store until 1954, when it was used for this record breaker. After EX 135's swansong in 1952 there had been no M.G. record breaking in 1953 while Goldie Gardner was unwell. Talks began with George Eyston in 1953 with a view to using a 1500cc version of the XPAG engine, as more power was needed for the production cars and record breaking was a way to combine development with publicity. HMO 6 was wind tunnel tested with a cockpit cover, spats and undershield, but was not efficient enough aerodynamically to achieve the required speeds with the power unit earmarked. Therefore a specially built body was needed, and a new chassis was waiting to be used.

The story of EX 179 touches directly on the development of the production MGA in two ways. First, the chassis and suspension design were tested under exacting conditions an important consideration given that only one other chassis was actually driven before the design was finalised. Secondly, attention was centred on the (relative) shortcomings of the XPAG engine, as it should be remembered that at this stage the eventual power unit for the MGA (and even the MGA name!) had not been determined.

Driven by George Eyston and Ken Miles, EX 179 took 8 international and 28 national records in 1954. A sprint engine took the international 10 mile flying start record at 153.7 mph, and the endurance engine went for 12 hours from a standing start at 120.7 mph. In 1956 the 10 miles International record was raised to 170.15 mph. EX 179 went on to take at least 86 other speed records in 1956 and 1957.

EX179 is of course still in existence, as part of the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust collection at Gaydon. "Development of the MGA" The go ahead for full scale production was given in June 1954, two years after the project had been shelved. The delay was due to limits on capital expenditure for the development of production sports cars. There were three cars competing for corporate backing to go into production in 1952 the new M.G., the Austin Healey 100/4, and the Jensen 504. There was a superficial resemblance between the Jensen prototype and EX 175 indeed, it has been suggested that the MG design copied that of the Jensen. That, however, cannot have been the case as the full blueprints for the M.G. body design were completed well before the Jensen appeared. The Jensen prototype did apparently spend some time at Abingdon for assessment in 1952/3, but in any case was rather ugly in its proportions and would have been difficult to transform into an M.G.

The Austin Healey 100/4 was given priority for production over EX 175 and the Jensen. Leonard Lord has frequently been villified by M.G. enthusiasts for this. However, there was a corporate carve-up which was probably easier to make than many of us might think. There were three cars which could have been put into production, but there was only money for one at a time. BMC also had two other projects - one to build the car, and one to run the new Competitions Department. It was fairly logical that Healey got their car, and that as consolation Jensen built it and Abingdon got the new BMC Competitions Department.

This really worked out very well for M.G. Eventually M.G. had their sports car, built the Healey and had ran the Competitions Department. A full house, with complete success on all counts. The world's best selling sports car, the world's most successful Competitions Department (possibly since Abingdon in the 1930's), and top rate build quality on the Healey 3000. M.G. only missed out because Healey kept a supported racing programme in Warwick, and the Mini racing was supported via Cooper. And of course the memory of a corporate business can be very short so that all of this counted for little in the 1970's.

After the final go-ahead for the MGA was given in 1954, the aim to have production running in April 1955 was over optimistic, but even so it took only just over a year to go from drawing board to full scale production and export. Roy Brocklehurst and Terry Mitchell worked on the suspension, Harry White on chassis details and Jim O'Neal on the body.

Delays in getting to production related principally to the body and the engine. The production bodies were to be made by Pressed Steel, and experiments with plastics were in vogue. If Pressed Steel's plans to use plastic dies to form the metal body panels had worked the MGA would have been a truly revolutionary car! As we now know this was not possible with mid-1950's technology and metal dies were used. The XPAG engine was near the limits of its design with the XPEG unit used in the MG TF. The choice of the B series engine from the BMC range was therefore logical. It was already known to be of durable design having been used in the M.G. Magnette saloon. The use of an unproven engine in a car which was to be exported in large numbers from day one of production could not be considered. Subsequent experience with Austin and Morris twin cam engines (and even the MGA Twin Cam) confirmed the wisdom of this choice.

The name of the production car was also decided upon, and of course returning to the beginning of the alphabet was the right decision, that still has the right ring today.

"EX 182" These competition cars were built primarily for the Le Mans 24 hour race, but a considerable race programme would probably have eventually followed if it had not been for the terrible events of 1955. Although the EX 182 programme was used as some last minute testing before the MGA launch, it really just served to confirm that the production design was sound - it was a little late to make any major changes.

THE LE MANS TEAM

Rather like UMG 400, the publicity surrounding the Le Mans drive was more valuable than the results achieved. If the Mercedes accident and attendant mortality had not occurred the MGA might even have attracted a reputation as an unsafe car, since Dick Jacobs nearly died after his accident.

Completed in time for some testing at Silverstone prior to Le Mans on 11-12 June 1955, work on building the EX 182 cars started soon after the Monte Carlo rally in January, for which a team of Magnettes had been prepared. The chassis frames were welded up from component parts by Harold Wiggins, Doug Watts, Tommie Wellman and Cliff Bray, because full scale production had not started. A jig was prepared which was next to the engine test bed, and chassis welding continued even with engines running right beside - there were not so many health and safety regulations in 1955!

It seems that six chassis carried EX 182 numbers conventional wisdom says four, and some recognise five, but read on to see the details! The first car was numbered EX 182/38. What were EX182/1 to EX182/37, you may wonder? Fortunately for the historian there are not another 37 prototype MGA's! Each part specially designed for the project was given an EX182 number brake drums, oil cooler and pipes and so on. It so happened that by the time enough special parts for a whole car had been made, 38 was the next available number.

"EX 182/38" Designated "Car number 1" on the EX file and presumed originally to have been given registration number LBL 301. The original engine was EX 182/42.

At Le Mans, LBL 301 was at first given race number 40 which was changed to 42 by the organisers. It was to be driven by Jacobs and Flynn. Dick Jacobs was involved in a serious accident on lap 28 of the race, inflicting terrible damage on himself and the car.

In 1992 a group of MG mechanics who were involved in an EX 182 replica project agreed that the wreck had been returned to Abingdon and broken up.

"EX 182/39" Designated "Car number 2" on the EX 182 file, and given engine number EX 182/43 this is presumed to have been registered LBL 302 in the first instance.

It was race number 41 at Le Mans and driven by Ken Miles and Johnny Lockett. The highest finisher amongst the EX182 cars in 1955, it was 12th overall.

It then seems that EX182/39 was modified with new front wings of a Jaguar C-type appearance, together with Girling front disc brakes. For the Dundrod TT race a Morris twin-cam engine was fitted with last minute manufacture of a manifold to take Weber carburettors, the Solex types originally fitted being unsuitable. Ron Flockhart and John Lockett were the drivers and race number 34 was allocated. The last minute modifications were the undoing of this foray as the manifold split at half distance. While running, the fastest lap average was 79.46 mph, considerably faster than the pushrod engined MGA's at the same event.

The subsequent history of EX 182/39 is unclear at the present time.

"EX 182/40" With engine number EX 182/44 and registration number LBL 303 this car was part of the Le Mans team and was driven by Ted Lund and Hans Waeffler. Although it seems that on top speeds they were a little faster than Miles and Lockett in EX 182/39 (fastest lap 5 minutes 22 seconds, top velocity through speed trap 117.39 mph), there was less consistency in the lap times and delay due to an accident. At 5am Lund had taken over driving from Waeffler and went into the sandbank at the Arnage corner whilst trying to overtake a Triumph TR2. Unfortunately the run off area was already occupied by a D type Jaguar and Ted Lund ran into its rear end. There was considerable damage to the front wing, but the car was still driveable after attention in the pits and finished the race in 17th position overall.

After repairs at Abingdon it seems most likely that it continued to carry LBL 303 and was fitted with the Austin twin-cam engine for Dundrod. This was removed at the last minute and a Le Mans specification engine fitted.

With race number 35 and driven by Fairman and Wilson LBL 303 finished the race a creditable 4th in class, at an average speed of 71.07 mph.

There is no reason to suppose that the registration number LBL 303 was moved onto another car so I presume that LBL 303 next appears in competition as one of the two Le Mans cars loaned to the Fitzwilliam Racing Team in 1957. For some time prior this it had been stored under dustsheets in the competitions department, while rather more important matters such as turning the Healey into a rally winner were addressed. Together with EX 182/41, disc brakes were fitted in early 1957, providing a useful test bed for this modification before its eventual introduction as standard on the MGA 1600 in 1959.

Repainted in a pale green, LBL 303 had an active year. The events entered were:-

1957 Mille Miglia, race number 347. A steady race, driven by Blaksley and Simpson, finishing 6th in class at an average speed of 73 mph. Simpson told Autosport that the car ran reliably, with water temperature never exceeding 175 degrees, and oil pressure 70-75 psi. They used 180 litres of fuel, therefore with overall economy of better than 20 mpg.

1957 Nurburgring 1000 kilometres, race number 23, driven by Fitzwilliam and Simpson. Finished 6th in class behind a number of factory assisted Porsches.

10 June 1957, Goodwood Whit Monday International Meeting. Driver Fitzwilliam, race number 72. Finished 3rd Class A.

This car was then involved in an accident on the road, soon after Goodwood. Abingdon had just replaced one of the other cars in the Fitzwilliam Racing Team and according to Robin Carnegie they did not think it worthwhile repairing LBL 303 for racing, and would not loan the team a replacement.

Ted Lund was apparently told by the M.G. works that the body from his Le Mans car was fitted to a new Twin Cam chassis in 1959, for the MGCC's entries at Le Mans. This is the car registered SRX 210 that Ted Lund raced at Le Mans three years in a row, winning its class in 1961. SRX 210 still retains an aluminium body but there seems no absolute proof that it carries the body from EX 182/41. There were several aluminium bodies made in 1955 so it is quite possible that Ted Lund was mistaken and another of the bodyshells was used. The fate of the chassis from this car is not known.

THE MGCC LE MANS CAR"EX 182/41" This was "car number 4" on the EX 182 register, fitted with engine EX 182/45 and registered LBL 304. The air intake cut into the front shroud, just to the nearside of the front grille, was at a higher level than on the other EX 182 cars. Therefore, excepting the possibilities of body swaps between different chassis or more than one body being cut in this way, the history of this car can be traced more easily than that of the other individual EX 182 cars.

In 1955 it went to Le Mans as a spare car and was not used during the race. It was also used for road tests by John Bolster and others on return to England.

Judging by the front shroud detail mentioned above EX 182/41 was one of the cars loaned to the Fitzwilliam Racing Team, but it carried registration number LBL 301.

Events entered:-

11-12 May 1957, Mille Miglia. Race number 357, driver Robin Carnegie. Finished 4th in class, first British car home that year. A full account of this race appears in the MGActivities section of the the MGCC monthly magazine, Safety Fast, during 1995.

26 May 1957, Nurburgring 1000 km. Race number 24, drivers Carnegie and Hogg. Dropped valve on lap 28 and withdrew.

10 June 1957, Goodwood Whit Monday International Meeting. Race number 73, driver Carnegie. Finished first in Class A.

13 July 1957, Rheims 12 hour race. Race number 44, drivers Carnegie and Fitzwilliam. Dropped valve (again!).

5 August 1957, Crystal Palace August Bank Holiday Meeting. Second in class, Marque Scratch Race. Fourth, Invitation Handicap race.

24 August 1957, MGCC meeting, Silverstone. Driver Blaksley.

31 August 1957, Goodwood, Marque Scratch Race. Race number 83, driver Carnegie. Disqualified.

28 September 1957, Goodwood. Race number 95, driver Carnegie. Second, Marque Sports Cars race.

The Fitzwilliam racing team returned the car to Abingdon at the end of 1957. It is not known exactly what happened to the car. An American called Southam is reported in Autosport as racing an ex Carnegie aluminium bodied MGA bearing and EX 182 chassis number, and a similar car is advertised for sale in Autosport in November 1959. This could have been LBL 303, of course. Anyone out there with details will be gratefully received!

In June 1958 another car bearing the registration LBL 304 and carrying the chassis number EX 182/41 appeared. The build sheet still exists, and shows that a new Twin Cam chassis was used, together with an aluminium body. Photographs show that the front wings with low headlamps, previously used once at Dundrod, were fitted.

However, the front shroud on this car had no cut-outs for air intakes. It seems most likely that one of the spare aluminium bodyshells prepared in 1955 was used. A month in the summer of 1958 was spent in Germany and Switzerland, entering events on the European Hillclimb Championship. Full works backup attended, remembered fondly by those who attended - weekend racing, only one car to work on and perfect weather! The official assessment of this race/testing exercise are not fully known, but Developments next project was the special bodied Twin Cam EX 186, no some limitations were presumably recognised. This reincarnation of LBL 304 was still in the Developments Shop in 1963, but its whereabouts are at present not known.

"EX 182/42" This chassis number was the result of some number swapping, as the car had originally been designated HDE/13/10101. This gave rise to potential confusion with another MGA in the works at the same time, HDC/43/10101. After Le Mans, this steel bodied roadster was used to replace Dick Jacob's damaged car, and was allocated EX 182/42. This had first been the engine number on the Le Mans car. EX 182/42 was registered as LJB 205 and was built up to racing and rally specification. An undertray and some aluminium body parts were used.

It had limited works competition use. The 1955 Alpine Rally was cancelled, but LJB 205 probably competed at Dundrod in 1955. Contemporary accounts suggest that one steel bodied car took part in this event, with a Le Mans pushrod engine, and this was presumably LJB 205. With race number 36 and driven by Ted Lund, the new special alloy fuel tank lasted 8 laps before splitting and putting the car out of the race.

Six other steel bodied cars were built up for the 1956 rally season, leaving LJB 205 in limbo. After being used for various jobs in the works in 1956 it was loaned to the Fitzwilliam Racing Team in 1957. Its only competitive outing was the Mille Miglia that year. The driver was Fitzwilliam, race number 358. Fitzwilliam went off the road into a Scotch whiskey advertisement and wrote the car off. Although LJB 205 was driveable, and indeed Fitzwilliam's wife Doreen did manage to get it back to Abingdon, the chassis was badly bent. The Competitions Department prepared a replacement, but damaged this as well, testing on the Oxford by-pass! This reincarnation of LJB 205 was then used by the team for the rest of the season. The identity of the replacement car is not known, and the production record does not report any new MGA's being sent from the production line to Competitions between the Mille Miglia and Nurburgring in 1957. It is possible that one of the other early MGA's was used (see below).

"Aluminium Le Mans type bodies" Six of these were manufactured, and four were fitted to the EX 182 cars for the Le Mans trip. It is possible that one other was used on the Twin Cam that Ted Lund and the MGCC raced at Le Mans (SRX 210), and this is still in existence in the UK, owned at present by Bob West. The last bodyshell may have been used in 1958 for the special hillclimb Twin Cam MGA built by Developments, and registered LBL 304.

"EX 178 engines" This is the factory number given for the MG development of the "B" series engine, that was already in use on the MG Magnette. Originally designed by Bill Applebee and Eric Bareham the B series engine was to be used, in many forms, for over 30 years.

The shortcomings of an engine with the inlet and outlet ports on the same side were well known to MG engineers, and Roy Brocklehurst was a little disparaging about this - "The result was he (Applebee) ended up with his pushrods all tangled up with his ports... when we started trying to tune the engine by opening up the ports, we kept meeting bloody pushrods, and the only way we could enlarge them was to square them off - which is what we advised in the MG tuning manuals. For the 1955 Ulster TT we had one car with the normal pushrod engine and head, one Twin Cam Engine, and a pushrod car with a special head to try and avoid the intermittent flow you get with two carbs on a four cylinder engine; we arranged a by-pass port across the engine to draw some mixture from the other carb and keep the mixture flowing".

The original build was of 12 engines for the 1955 European competitions season. Further cylinder heads were then ordered from Westlake in a specification which was probably for the 1956 Sebring 12 hours race. Unlike later entries, these cars were prepared in the United States but detailed specifications on an EX 178 worksheet exist for engines to be sent out.

"The first six production cars" The numbering for the MGA production run began at chassis 10101, a straight continuation from last TF, chassis 10100 – it is not clear why the tradition of starting with the telephone number 0251 was broken. Chassis were from John Thompson Motor Pressings, bodies from the Morris Bodies Branch in Coventry, and engine and transmission from Longbridge, the whole being assembled in Abingdon. The first six cars were used for testing and development by the works, and it is appropriate to discuss them in detail here. Unlike the Le Mans cars, which were handbuilt using specially manufactured components as necessary, these cars were built between 16 May 1955 and 23 June 1955, most likely using production components. All these cars were finished in Tyrolite Green with a grey interior, apart from the left hand drive car which was Orient Red with black trim. Here they are, in order: "HDE 13/10101" Developments changed this number to EX 182/42. The registration number LJB 205 was allocated, and details are given above, under the EX 182 chassis number.

"HDC 43/10101" This was the first left hand drive MGA, finished in Orient Red with black interior. It carried the number LJB 439 and is easily distinguished in early press photographs by the windscreen wipers parking to the left and a wing mirror near the front of the off-side wing.

Apart from development it was used as a press car, and there are a number of nice pictures of LJB 439 around a Continental harbour (probably Vannes in Brittany) in a Motor road test, which has been reproduced in a "Brooklands" book.

It is not clear what happened to LJB 439 - it is tempting to think that it may have been used as a replacement for LJB 205 after the accident on the Mille Miglia. Certainly the car that raced at Nurburgring and then throughout 1957 was red in colour.

A Developments Shop inventory in 1963 does show the registration LJB 439 on chassis HDC/43/10101, but it was a black roadster with engine SPL/781/4. There is a note that the registration and excise licence had been returned from Austin, so it is likely that they were used on a different car, or a newer body had been fitted to the old chassis.

"HDE 13/10102" Registered LJB 370, this disc wheel RHD car was finished in Tyrolite green with grey interior and used very extensively in road tests in 1955 - photographs appear in most of the feature articles in the British motoring press.

In March 1959 LJB 370 apparently was still in original form, and being used by the works for various tests.

Unfortunately Roy Brocklehurst had an accident and put it into a ditch, although without personal injury.

Developments had to rebody the car, although apparently on the old chassis. As a black coupe it took part in extended autobahn testing of the MGB engine in Germany in September and October 1961. It does not appear on a Developments inventory in 1963, and the fate of the chassis is not known.

"HDE 13/10103" Registered LRX 238 and allocated to be a demonstrator, this car was used around the works for two years. LRX 238 was shown to a Motor Sport journalist visiting Abingdon in 1957, and called "a very hard worked 1955 model". Sold by the works in 1957, LRX 238 passed through a number of hands and is now undergoing a restoration in Stockport, Cheshire.

"HDE 13/10104" By a process of elimination, I believe this most likely carried the registration KMO 326 and was used by the works for several years for a long term test of the Austin twin cam engine. Reliability did not seem to be a problem, otherwise Don Hayter would not have used it for his honeymoon! However, various drawbacks meant that the Austin engine was not adopted and KMO 326 was eventually sold by the works. The registration number (but not chassis number) was retained and used for a Developments coupe. However, it seems that no parts from 10104 were carried over to the "second" KMO 326.

A Tyrolite green MGA carried the registration KMO 326 to Montlhery for high speed testing in 1955. The party comprised an Austin Healey 100, a Riley Pathfinder, and Austin Westminster and a 6/90 Wolseley, and KMO 326. Each car covered 100 miles in the hour in standard trim. More interesting, driven by John Gott, the MGA covered 112.36 miles in the hour when a "speed trim" was added - undertray and competition screen, but bumpers left in place. It is however possible that the Montlhery MGA was either EX 182/42 or chassis 10105, and that 10104 was registered KMO 326 for road use after Montlhery.

"HDE 13/10105" We have a clearer picture of this car's history than that of some of the earlier cars. Allocated to Competitions and used in a number of rallies and long distance events MBL 867 carried Nancy Mitchell in many of the campaigns which won her the 1956 European Ladies Rally Championship. Briefly, MBL 867 competed in these events:-

April 1956, Mille Miglia. Race number 228, drivers Nancy Mitchell/Pat Faichney. Finished 72nd overall, 1st Ladies.

July 1956, Alpine Rally. Race number 326, drivers Nancy Mitchell/Pat Fairchney. Finished 15th overall, 1st Ladies. July 1956, Rome-Liege-Rome Rally. Race number 38, drivers Nancy Mitchell/Anne Hall. Finished 26th overall, 2nd Ladies.

March 1957, Lyons-Charbonnieres Rally. Race number 98, drivers Nancy Mitchell/Doreen Reece. Finished 32nd overall, 1st Ladies.

Later sold by the works, Tooley raced "Mabel" as the car became known, in many MGCC events. Now restored to Mille Miglia specification, she is in the UK and is owned by Bob West.

MABEL "The MGA - 1955 to 1995" What they said then:-

"This is a jolly good little sports car; if you want one, hurry up and get in the queue." John Bolster, Autosport.

"... the newest M.G. must be summed up as enthusiastically as it was everywhere received. That the modern styling is generally approved there can be no doubt, but far more important is the introduction of a small car with a degree of roadworthiness high by any standards. The famous slogan of the factory has indeed never been better applied" Motor.

"The M.G.A. is, in fact one of those cars whose cruising speeds is determined by road conditions, and this became very evident after driving fast over French and Belgian Roads. But there is no feeling at the end of a hard day that the driver has been doing most of the work. Long, winding hillsides are a joy to traverse; the car rockets to the top in third gear, and this gear is also extremely useful for overtaking other traffic and for town use." Autocar.

"The MG-A is a beautifully handling, handsome and ruggedly made little car which will serve as inexpensive and highly practical transportation within the obvious limitations of size and riding comfort" Car Life.

"We liked the new car's shape, speed, acceleration, and handling; but we missed the convenient tool box, and luggage space of the older cars. But there's no doubt this new car is better and in these days of high prices, still gives the cheapest sporting motoring" Wheels.

"This is a handsome job which should show up well in ... road testing... There is a strong desire to shout "The Prince is dead; long live the Prince." We feel the heir apparent has a long and successful reign before him" Sports Cars Illustrated.

In a letter to John Thornley, the famous racing driver turned journalist Sammy Davis gave a balanced view, but even in private had to try hard to be critical. Incidentally, 6000 rpm in top gear is 102 mph:"

My dear John,

Just a line about the new car. Without any doubt it is much very much better than its predecessors especially in speed, cornering and brakes. Would be interested to know how fast it really could take a curve. Don't like the position of the steering wheel one little bit and am enraged by an old fashioned jack. You want a drill for putting hood up single handed but it is a better hood, so are the sidescreens. Ventilation might be looked to, cockpit was getting hot. Suspension a little hard at speeds up to 40. Would like Healey pattern seat. Throttle pedal should be altered to allow Heel-and-toe. Like the way engine auxiliaries are accessible in that small space. Didn't check where fuel pump is, hope not underneath. Would like Healey aluminium edging to cockpit rather than leather. Would like Healey ashtray. Performance excellent for money, don't know what 6000 is on top gear but got to it by mistake owing to odd parking of rev counter.

All the best,
Yours,
Sammy"

What do they say now?

"It may grieve members that, while I own a PA, it's the MGA that's gone to work. The fact is, the MGA is seen as one of the most photogenically appealing sports cars of all time, rivalled only by the Alfa Romeo Giulia Spyder. Unless the period calls for MMM or T-types, professionals in the promotion business will go for an MGA since in the public mind it symbolizes the archetypal sports car. Triumph, Jaguar, Mercedes-Benz - eat your hearts out!" David de Saxe, Octagon Car Club Bulletin, 1994.

"The appeal of the MGA is due to many factors. Mechanically it is simple, robust and reliable. The performance is perfectly adequate. The handling and roadholding are among the best of any 1950s sports cars. It is a comfortable and easy car to drive and it is pretty, its rounded, flowing lines holding a particular appeal for the 1990's when aerodynamic or organic shapes are again coming back into fashion." Anders Ditlev Claushager, in "Original MGA", 1993.

"I didn't attempt to explain what it felt like to get into a well set up MGA and drive it just as hard as one was capable of doing, over a winding, swooping stretch of gloriously open country road, or on the banked track at Montlhery, or Brands Hatch, or the Club circuit at Silverstone. He wouldn't have understood what in hell I was talking about. But I knew, and I can still remember the joy of it." Wilson McComb, 1983.