

## Our Post-War Motoring Scene

By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*

# THE MG CAR CLUB IN CAPE TOWN

**T**he name MG is synonymous with sports cars. In 1924, Cecil Kimber, the manager of Morris Garages in Oxford, modified the new 1.8 litre Morris Oxford tourer into the MG Super Sports. A lightly-tuned engine, improved handling and a handsome aluminium body effected the transformation, and backed by Morris reliability and service, the MG was a success. Morris introduced the new 847 cc Minor four years later, and Kimber soon adapted it into the little fabric-bodied, pointed-tail two-seater M-type MG Midget. With its engine tuned to 20bhp, 65 mph and excellent acceleration, this was Britain's first really cheap but practical sports car. The MG J-type and later P-type Midgets became popular in the Cape during the 1930s, actively promoted by the agents, Gee and Norton (Pty) Ltd in Strand Street.

The first post-war MG, the TC, arrived in 1946. The 1250 cc TB had been launched in 1939 but few had been sold before the war, and the TC was essentially a TB with a body widened by three inches and a synchromesh gearbox. As a sports car it looked right and was fun to drive, soon owners of the pre-war models and the new TCs were gathering at Harold Clarke's Rendezvous Garage in Voortrekker Road, Parow, on Sundays. His sons Magnus, Ralph and Harold jnr were involved in the local motoring scene, participating in the hill-



*A pleasant excursion to Cape Point in an MG TC; looking down on the Cape of Good Hope.*

climbs at Paarl, Camps Bay and Parow, races at Paarden Eiland, speed trials at the Strand and acceleration tests on the old Malmesbury road straight at Killarney. Magnus and Harold drove J2s, while Ralph competed in a J2 special and a PA.

At the time the TC was one of the few sports cars available in the country and they soon became highly sought-after. One evening in mid-1948 Craig McNaught, who worked at the MG agents, Norton Motors (as it was named after Ernest Gee had retired) and two others decided to form an MG Club. After an initial run to Hermanus, in

September that year the MG Car Club of South Africa was formally established in Cape Town. Basil Maskew-Miller was elected chairman, and Sunday runs were held to Paarl, Gordon's Bay, Betty's Bay and Franschoek. He always gave strict convoy-driving instructions to members before they set off, but as soon as the convoy reached the open road, each member put his foot down and never let another car break the convoy.

Members struggled to obtain TCs as they were in very short supply. One of them had a stroke of good fortune, the pregnant wife of the American Attache in Cape Town

found that she was unable to fit behind the wheel of their newly acquired TC. He was able to purchase the car, it had been driven by the well-known actor, Tyrone Power, on a visit to the city in 1948. Austin Dabbs managed to obtain a TC from Nortons that year and was driving home from the showroom when a Wellington Fruit Growers truck reversed into the car at a set of traffic lights. The radiator shell and both headlights had to be written off - the car had barely covered two miles.

The first post-war race meeting at the Cape, the Van Riebeeck Trophy, was held in October 1948



*The MG Car Club at Rhodes Memorial in 1950.*



*Muddy MGs on the Oysterbeds rally in 1956.*



*Motor Show at the Good Hope Centre, May 1978. Ted Pickstone's two-tone MG YA saloon in the centre.*



*In 1986 two famous MGs, the R-Type and 'Hoodoo', met for the first time after their encounter at the Grosvenor Grand Prix at Pollsmoor in 1937. From l to r Ralph Clarke, Vic Ayson and Ralph Rohr.*



*MGAs at the MG Car Club's display at the Maynardville car show.*

at the Paarden Eiland Track. During one of the heats Johnny 'nine-thou' Baylis, competing in his super-charged TC, changed down to second on entering a corner. The subsequent explosion disintegrated his flywheel and destroyed most of the back end of the engine. He was elected the founder member of the Squirrels Club after this episode, he spent his time picking up the nuts! The second Van Riebeeck Trophy race at Paarden Eiland in December 1949 proved to be a triumph for the 1250 cc TCs, as they came in first, third, fourth and sixth.

One of the first post-war British saloon cars available in South Africa was the 1947 MG YA. Ted Pickstone bought his new from Nortons and had it railed to Nelspruit where he'd been transferred. During his six-year stay there he travelled extensively in Rhodesia, Mozambique and the Kruger Park and drove down to Cape Town four times. After ten years he refused a £100 trade-in for the car on a Mini, and kept it on his farm in Simonidium as a fire engine, installing the equipment on a roof-rack.

The TD sports car replaced the aging TC in 1949, and it was announced that the new car was to be assembled locally at the Motor

Assemblies plant at Jacobs in Durban. Utilising a slightly shortened YA chassis with coil spring independent front suspension and rack and pinion steering, the handling and road holding of the new sports car was much improved. The TD soon became very popular and membership of the Cape Town club increased significantly. The Oysterbeds rallies were held in mid-winter, predominantly on gravel roads with rain, mud and more mud being the order of the day and night. The route to the Oysterbeds Hotel at the mouth of the Breede River at Witsands was usually inland via Wellington, Bain's Kloof, Montagu and Swellendam with the participants arriving at the hotel well after dark. The owner of the hotel, Basil Botha, was a TD owner. The accommodation in rondawels was at the bottom of an embankment with the reception building and the pub above. Hill climbs on this road resulted in the hill becoming so polished and slippery that the cars could not get up to the start on departure morning and navigators had to mount the backs of the cars to provide traction. One of the participants broke a TC half-shaft on Garcia's Pass. As no tow rope was

available, he had to be towed by hand, his navigator clutching the hands of the navigator of a Morris Minor. History didn't relate how long their arms were by the time they reached Riversdale.

A replacement for the TD, the TF, was announced in 1953, and at the International Cape Grand Prix held at Gunner's Circle in March 1956, club member Gordon Phillips won the event both on handicap and outright in his MG Special utilising a 1466 cc TF engine. The replacement for the Y-series saloon, the ZA Magnette, was also announced in 1953. Fans were horrified to learn that this new MG was powered by a 1489 cc Austin B-series engine. However the power unit developed surprising potential and proved to be as reliable as a farm horse, the car survived the wrath of its critics and became deservedly popular.

A radically new sports car, the 1489 cc MGA, was announced in 1955 and the first of these cars was imported into South Africa by Mark Zoccola. He competed in the False Bay 100 production and sports car handicap race at Gunner's Circle in January 1957, and gained a commendable third place. The shapely bodywork of the MGA enclosed a strong and rigid frame and the car's handling and road-holding were universally praised. The 1798 cc MGB was announced in 1962, but from that year all MG sports cars were direct imports and with 100% duty imposed, they were no longer affordable sports cars for many South Africans. In addition,

interest in the marque waned as new MGs considered to be 'badge engineered' versions of standard BMC saloon cars were launched. It was time for a back-to-basics approach. In September 1967 a young MG enthusiast from Ireland, Charles Batham, aroused the interest of like-minded owners of T-types and earlier models and established the MG Sports Car Register SA, enthusiasm for the marque rejuvenated and in 1969 the two clubs were merged.

There has been a considerable revival of interest in pre-war MGs in recent years, and a superb bi-annual MG MMM Gathering is organised, often ending at the Franschhoek Motor Museum. A comprehensive register of South African Triple-M cars, Midget, Magna and Magnette MGs built from 1929 to 1936, has been drawn up, and more than twenty of these cars gather for each event. Drawn up en masse on the lawns of the museum, they create a panorama of sports cars of considerable character. Ralph Clarke was a leading light in the organising committee and, having restored a number of the superb cars on display, he brought an impressive seventy years of MG experience to this international event.

*Acknowledgements to The MG Car Club in Cape Town 1948-1998, The Classic MG by Richard Aspden, the 2015 South African International MG MMM Gathering brochure and Brian Hogg.* 🚗