

OUR 1950s MOTORING SCENE

THE MOBILGAS ECONOMY RUNS

By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*

PRIOR to 1955 a number of Economy Runs for saloon cars had been held in America and Europe, but the South African version, announced by Vacuum Oil for April that year, proved to be unique. Organized in conjunction with the RAC of SA, the Mobilgas Economy Run was to be a four-day rally over 1 560 miles, the longest run of its kind ever attempted. It was also to attract the largest selection of cars, eventually 23 different models participated with engine capacities ranging from 800cc to 4 500cc.

On arriving for the start in Cape Town the cars were housed in the impound control at Holmes Motors in Strand Street. The competitors were to be flagged off from the Foreshore by Commander Jack Holmes, the General Manager of the RAC, and the rally was to include stops at Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban before ending in Johannesburg. Performance was to be judged, not by the miles per gallon, but by the ton miles per gallon for each vehicle. This was to be calculated by multiplying the all-up weight of the car and its occupants by the number of miles covered, and dividing by the number of gallons used. Each car had to carry two drivers and two RAC observers. To avoid a car



Andrews and Dabbs' Borgward TS in Cogman's Kloof, overall winners 1959

gaining an advantage by carrying light-weight drivers and observers, every car was set to carry the same weight, 650 lbs. Those with less had to carry ballast and those with more were credited in the computations. The competition was divided into three classes of car; 'A' under 1 100cc engine capacity, 'B' 1 100cc to 2 000cc and 'C' over 2 000cc.

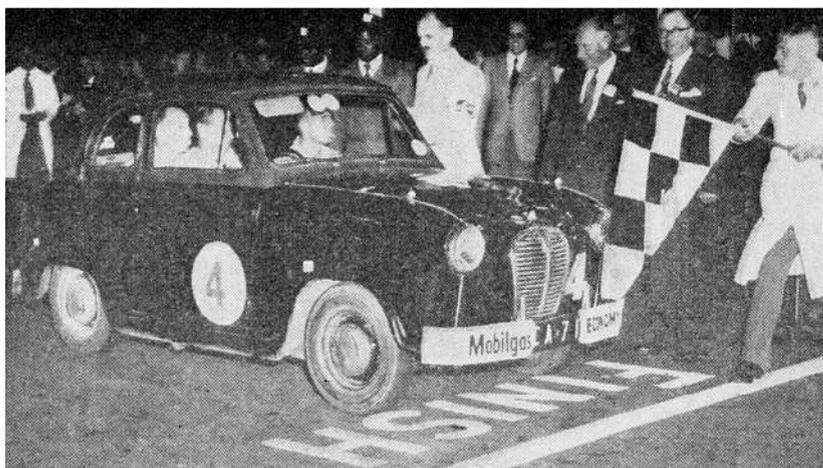
Examining the results of previous Mobilgas Economy Runs in America, many commentators put their money on the larger saloons like the Studebaker and the Nash Rambler. One of them calculated that to compete, a small car like the pre-war Austin 7 would need to average something like 60 mpg, a seemingly impossible task. But in working his slide rule he had taken no account of the human element, which was just as important in an economy test as it was in a race.

Colonel John Berryman, the dynamic MD of the Austin Motor Co (Pty) Ltd, could see the considerable sales potential of a good performance on this economy run. Within a month the first Austin was to roll off his new assembly plant at Blackheath in Kuils Rivier and he was



John Berryman receiving the Mobilgas trophy, 1957

determined that his cars would do well. He assigned a small Austin A30 in Class A to the experienced racing driver, Roddy Turner and his co-driver Bill Seymour, and kept an Austin A 50 Cambridge in Class B for himself and his co-driver Jimmy Bain. The standard Borg Warner overdrive fitted to the A50 was to prove a considerable advantage. At first glance a racing driver might not appear to be the ideal person to pilot a car in an economy run, where the accent is on moderate, not high speeds. But



Turner and Seymour, Austin A30, winners in 1955



Radcliff and Brown, Austin A55, winners in 1957



Farber and Rossouw, Renault Fregate crossing the Caledon river, 1957

these men knew their job, from racing experience they had mastered petrol conservation techniques; they kept engine speeds constant when cornering and used the gear box for deceleration. Officials driving behind some of the racing drivers were to note that they hardly ever used brakes on a bend, and cornering was done at a controlled engine speed with an absolute minimum of throttle movement.

After the thousand-mile run to Durban, mechanics took over the cars as they reached the impounded areas and worked all night servicing them for the next day's run. The last car reached Johannesburg in the evening of 21 April and then began the meticulous job of topping up every car to the nearest fluid ounce of petrol, a task that kept Vacuum Oil and RAC officials busy into the small hours.

The overall winner represented by the Premier Award was a surprise; it had been won by one of

the smallest cars, the Austin A30 driven by Turner and Seymour at 56.36 ton miles per gallon, they were also the winners of Class A, followed by a Renault 4CV from Farbers in Bree Street. Class B had been won by a Renault Fregate from Johannesburg, with the Berryman / Bain Austin A50 second. Class C had been won by a Rover 90 driven by John Radcliff and Pat Brown of Robb Motors in Strand Street. The Cape Town drivers had done extremely well.

For the 1956 competition Colonel Berryman pulled out all the stops. He retained Turner and Seymour in the Austin A30, recruited John Radcliff and Pat Brown to drive the A50, and entered Class C for the first time with himself and Bain driving an overdrive A90 Westminster. This time the rally left Cape Town for Worcester and Graaff-Reinet; on each side of New Bethesda the competitors had to negotiate a challenging pass, if they took their

time to save petrol they were penalized heavily for arriving late at Middelburg. The rally ended in Pretoria and this time Turner and Seymour had dropped to second place in Class A behind a Fiat 1100. However Austin had almost pulled off a clean sweep as the Radcliff and Brown A50 had won the Premier Award and Class B at 60.50 ton miles, and Berryman and Bain had triumphed in Class C in the A90.

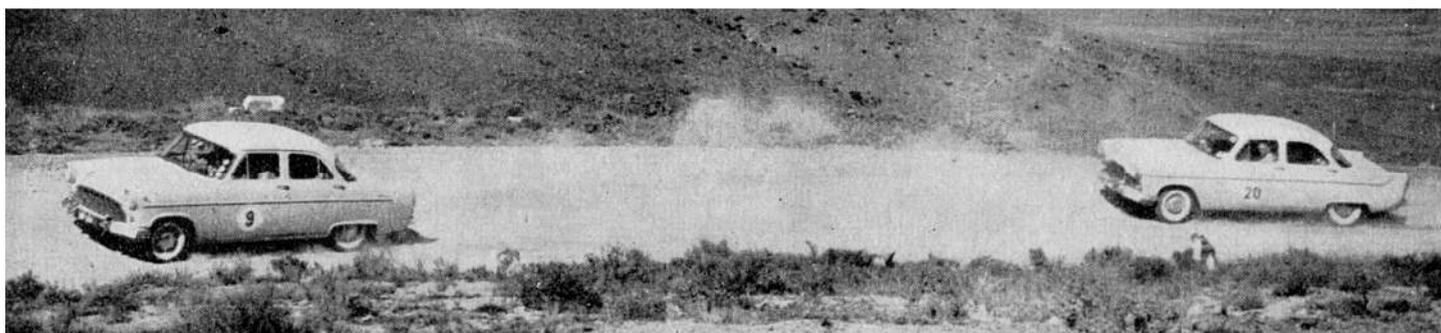
In 1957 the 1 481-mile route left Cape Town for George, Knysna, Graaff-Reinet, Bloemfontein and Durban, about 50% of the road surface was tar and 50% gravel. For the first time premium fuel, Mobilgas Special, was used. The Austin team again did well; winner of the Premier Award and Class B at 63.88 ton miles was an Austin A55 Cambridge driven by Radcliff and Brown, second and winner of Class A was a Morris Minor from Durban driven by Les Miller, and third and winner of Class C was an Austin A95 Westminster driven by Berryman and Bain.

By 1958 the opposition had started to step up the game, and the ton miles per gallon of the winner continued to climb. The send-off had been changed to Durban and the

1 490-mile course to Bloemfontein included Piet Retief, Sabie via the Long Tom Pass to Pietersburg, Rustenburg, Pretoria and Kimberley. Class A had been limited to 800cc, Class B to 1 200cc, and Class C to 1 800cc, while two had been added, Class D to 2 700cc and Class E above 2 700cc. In addition, the classes had been subdivided to separate out those saloons fitted with an overdrive.

A home start appeared to have benefitted the locals as the Overall Winner and victor in Class D (1) was an overdrive 2.6-litre Riley driven by Les Miller at 67.17 ton miles. The winner of Class C (1) was the Austin A55 driven by Radcliff and Brown, second in Class D (1) was an Austin A105 driven by Berryman and Bain, and third in Class B (II) was an Austin A35 Countryman driven by Roddy Turner and Mark Zoccola. Signs of the times were the winner in Class C (1), a Borgward TS from the Cape agents Wolman Motors driven by Chris Andrews and Austin Dabbs, and the Renault Fregate driven by James Farber, winner of Class D (III).

For the 1959 rally it was decided that only the overall winner was to be assessed on a ton mile basis, all class winners would be ranked by miles per gallon. The start reverted to Cape Town and the run to Port Elizabeth was shorter than usual at 875 miles, but it proved to be the toughest yet. The weather conditions were so bad that many cars bogged down in the mud, near Willowmore large sections of the road had been washed away and the Katberg Pass and Hogs Back proved to be impassable. To Gerald Wolman's delight the winner was the Borgward TS driven by Andrews and Dabbs at 57.49 ton miles per gallon, not surprisingly this was a lot lower than the



Ford Zephyr chasing a Ford Consul in the Free State, 1957



Above left: *Dyna-Panhard crossing the Tugela, 1958*
 Above: *Jack Holmes flagging off Berryman and Bain, Austin A95, 1959*



Left: *Peugeot 403 in Bain's Kloof, 1959*

previous year's results. Radcliff and Brown won Class B (1) in the Austin A55 and Berryman and Bain won Class C (1) in an Austin A95.

In 1960 the rain stayed away for the 1 300-mile competition from Cape Town to Durban, and dust was a major challenge. Runners up in Class A (II) were Roddy Turner and Ralph Clarke in the newly-launched Austin Seven 850 (the Mini), just behind a Renault Dauphine. Two other French cars also did well, a Peugeot 403 won Class B (II) and a Renault Fregate won Class C (II), while the Austin team held on to one prize, Radcliff and Brown won Class C (I) in an A99 Westminster.

Colonel John Berryman's forecast that good results in the Mobilgas Economy Runs would prove to be a boost to sales certainly proved to be correct. By the early 1960s Robb Motors, the Cape agents for BMC products, had cornered some 25% of the Cape Town and Bellville market.

But some of the European manufacturers were starting to become extremely competitive.

Acknowledgements to The Autocar 13 May 1955, The South African Motorist May/June 1956, CAR magazine June 1957, '58, '59 and '60, John Brewster, Gordon Bruce and Mike Hooper. 🚗

Dodge Pioneer, Cape Town foreshore, 1960

