

Thanks to Heyns Stead, one of Spider's previous owners, for assistance with this piece originally written by Gus Macleod

The TC MG, produced from 1946 to 1949, proved to be a worthy successor to the series of pre-war sports MG s, and quickly became popular as an affordable way of taking part in motor sport. While in my early twenties, I had bought a secondhand TC in good condition, and soon found myself taking part in gymkhanas, hill climbs and an occasional grass track meeting. In due course I was tempted to enter the TC in a track race on Roy Hesketh and stripped off all non-essential bodywork which considerably improved the performance. Although the slowest car on the track I learnt a lot about racing and also how far off the pace I was in the TC.

After the race I got to talking with Roy Mc Oowall, a member of the Ecurie Miller who had been racing a single seater MG in the same event, and he encouraged me to upgrade to a more competitive car, and recommended that I also contact Les Miller, who I had not previously met in person. It so happened that Les, who had by then been racing Fat Man for a year or two, had made Spider available on a couple of occasions to a gentleman named Harry Percival. Harry was entered in the same race that I had taken part in but rolled Spider at the end of the main straight going into Quarry Curve during practice on the day prior to the race. Harry came out of the accident with a broken arm and some less serious injuries, while Spider suffered little more than a broken steering wheel which Harry replaced in due course. Looking back, I think Harry's accident may well have been to my advantage as a factor in Les deciding to sell



Spider, as when I met Les for the first time shortly thereafter and became more closely acquainted with the car a deal was soon settled, and I became the proud new owner of Spider.

As a measure of the man, Les took me through the workings of Spider and, (in his own garage/workshop,) guided me through a cylinder head overhaul and tune-up to get the motor running sweetly. He then drove me in his car with Spider in tow on an A frame, so that I could take part in a Hill climb on the Bluff in Durban. Presumably satisfied with my performance of coming within 1.3 seconds of Des Gray's time, in another Ecurie Miller car, on my first outing, Les invited me to join the Stable. Les then fashioned a towbar on my TC, by then restored to a road car, to take the A frame tow-bar, and from then on the TC became my regular tow car besides the other functions it was required to perform.

As from that time I entered Spider

in every Hill climb, Club race or National event that was on the calendar in Natal. It was encouraging to finish sixth in my first major road race, and to pick up some complimentary comments from motoring columnists along the way. also earned a number of other placings in Hill climbs and on Roy Hesketh during 1957.

The only change I made to Spider during that time was to construct air-scoops for the front brakes and re-line the brake shoes to eliminate the brake-fade which disconcertingly occurred at the end of the main straight under heavy braking. I sometimes wondered whether brake-fade had played a part in Harry's accident.

Spider proved to be very reliable and, only once in 1957, did I not finish a race when the clutch pressure plate disintegrated. The only other mechanical glitch I had was when a hairline fracture developed in the tube from the hand pump to the fuel tank, an

essential part in maintaining pressure in the fuel tank to feed the carburetors), and instead of a quick check of the fuel pressure gauge and two or three strokes of the hand pump each lap, I had to pump continuously for the remaining 4 laps whenever my left hand was not otherwise engaged in changing gear or assisting my right hand while cornering.

1958 started on a high note in January with the Fairfield. My handicap was such that I had to make up 6 minutes on the limit man and not lose more than 2 minutes on the three scratch men. Spider and I had formed a strong bond by then and pulled off a memorable win against some formidable opposition. The win was doubly pleasing as the Fairfield was the one race which had not previously been won by the Ecurie Miller. It was also notable in that the win by Spider was the last occasion that an MG Special won a major event, outside of any later Historic racing events.

The Clubmans Races followed shortly after the Fairfield in early February 1958 and as it was a novel event it may be worth mentioning in some detail. The days program consisted of three or four separate races each of some 10 laps. The format was to start all cars in the first race on a pre-calculated handicap aimed at ending the race with every car crossing the finish line at the same time. Based on the actual times of each car in that race, new handicaps were calculated for the next race with the same objective of having all cars finishing simultaneously, and so it continued for each subsequent race. There was an extra second or two



Les racing Spider



Gus Macleod Roy Hesketh Fairfield Handicap winner

added as penalty for those who finished first, second or third on the previous race to afford everyone a chance of being placed, and at the same time encouraged those who did well to try that much harder after each race. It was an excellent race-craft exercise as it made for close racing with many overtaking opportunities and the need for quick decision making under different circumstances. As if nature had come in on queue to add an extra dimension to the event, rain began falling just prior to the start of the final race, and by the best method possible I, and a number of other drivers, learned the difference between racing on a dry track and racing on a wet track, also learning to avoid having a 360-degree rotating landscape as viewed from the cockpit of Spider.

The following event in February 1958 was the Scott Road hill climb in Durban where there was a small field, so being placed second on handicap was no great achievement.

However, as a measure of relative performance of Spider compared to a Cooper style motorcycle engine powered racer, that had taken the racing world by storm around that time and a more or less standard MGA 1500 it showed the following differences:

The "Cooper" at 33.5 seconds set the fastest time, bettering the old record by 0,5secs, Spider clocked 37 seconds (3,5 secs off the new record). The MGA clocked 42.4 seconds (9,3 secs off the record time).

Following the Fairfield, and with the aim of remaining competitive I had started looking at possible ways of improving Spiders performance, so for the benefit of anyone who imagines motor racing consists of a dashing fellow collecting a large trophy amid an adoring bevy of beautiful women while a group of mechanics take care of his car until the next race, let me hasten to assure you that was not the case in those early days of amateur racing, as will be apparent from my quest for improved performance.

At some earlier stage Les had begun looking at the feasibility of fitting four carburetors to Spider and had made devices that could separate the siamesed inlet port in the cylinder head, and he had also made adapters to connect each of the four carburetors to a single cylinder. Les, who for personal reasons had at that time taken a break from active participation in racing, gave me the parts he had made, and I started from where es had left off. The design of the TC motor does not lend itself to fitting four carbs. due to inlet and exhaust ports both being on the same side of the cylinder head, however with much effort I made up an exhaust system which accommodated the new inlet manifolds and brought the exhaust

pipe directly out of the side of the bodywork. Cliff McArthur, who ran a motorcycle shop in Durban, sourced four Amal motorcycle carburetors for me, and on his home lathe turned a brass drum to co-ordinate the simultaneous throttle control of the four carbs. I also managed to lay hands on a supercharger camshaft to replace the standard camshaft. With four carbs I was able to take advantage of the long overlap in inlet openings of the supercharger camshaft, which did not suit a shared inlet port twin carb system.

I soon found out that tuning four Amal carbs from scratch is infinitely more difficult than tuning the conventional twin SU carb set up. Changing the main jet on the Amal necessitated partly dismantling each carburetor, unscrewing the main jet, selecting a larger or smaller jet, and reversing the process for each of the four carburetors before re-starting the motor. To add to the effort was the fact that the garage I hired exited directly onto Currie road in the heart of Durban's flat land, and, with a very much lightened fly-wheel which allowed for no starter ring-gear, the only convenient method of starting the motor on the run-down Currie road and quickly reversing back into the garage before any of the neighbours had time to throw something at me for disturbing the peace.

The whole objective of this operation was to ensure that Spider was up and running before the start of the Easter races, which required much burning of mid-night oil and subjecting my staunch and ever-tolerant girlfriend Ingrid, later to become my staunch and ever-tolerant wife, to the role of assistant number one! Despite the unusual courtship Ingrid entered enthusiastically into assisting with accepting a variety of chores and was an indispensable part of the pit crew.

Spider was running by the time race day arrived, but there had been neither the time or opportunity for testing or fine-tuning prior to the start of the first race, a 1400 scratch event. The performance of Spider had markedly improved and during the race I was able to accustom myself to the extra pressure required on the accelerator pedal to open four spring-loaded throttle slides simultaneously.

In the main event, the 1958 Coronation Handicap, Spider was going well and by the half-way mark I had overtaken most of the cars that started ahead of me, including the driver who ended in third position in the final results. I continued to improve my position for several more laps and was heading for a certain podium position when the engine

suddenly cut out. My failure to finish turned out to be due to my having run out of fuel!! The one factor I had overlooked was that the Amals were thirstier than the SU carburetors, and because I was burning an Ethanol, petrol, Benzol cocktail the engine was happy to run on a rich mixture which gave no tell-tale signs until the fuel ran out prematurely. All of which reinforced the adage Les had quoted to me when I first started racing Spider, that "if you want to finish first you first have to finish"! Nevertheless, the effort that was required to fit four carbs to a TC motor had been in itself a great adventure and, although I would have liked to have finished the race, the fact that I missed out on a possible win was just another reminder that life is what happens to you while you are busy making other plans. Incidentally, and I stand to be corrected, as far as I am aware Spider became the first racing TC, (and possibly the only TC in any form), to claim the distinction of being fitted with four carburetors.

Shortly after the Easter 1958 Coronation Races I was transferred on promotion to IBM Head Office in Johannesburg and found myself with a lot less free time on my hands. I did however enter Spider in a race on Grand Central Circuit a month or two after moving to Johannesburg. Grand Central in 1958 rated very poorly, with a surface that felt as though a thin layer of tar had been spread over the grass, certainly not ideal for the tight suspension of a TC at high speed. A few practice laps on the track left me with a feeling that the 19-inch front wheels, which gave Spider superb handling characteristics on Hesketh, were in danger of collapsing on Grand Central. For safety reasons I fitted 15-inch wheels in front and used them during the race. The race itself was an

experience which, while not particularly enjoyable, was at least educational until it came to an abrupt end. I was going through a long sweep, Devotees, at full throttle when a violent vibration shook the car, and I had to find neutral in a hurry. The crankshaft had snapped between the front main bearing journal and number one big-end journal, fortunately without any other serious damage to the motor, but requiring an extensive overhaul. To circumvent a repeat performance, before fitting the new crankshaft I had it crack-tested and dynamically balanced, and I polished all interconnecting webs between the journals. With the limited spare time available and with no great desire to race again on Grand Central, repairs took longer than expected, and I did not again race on that track.

I had enjoyed my racing experiences to the full and not having the opportunity, the financial backing nor the burning desire to take it up more professionally, the time had come to call it a day and concentrate on married life and my business future. As I had made a commitment at some stage to take part in the Easter Races of 1959 back at Roy Hesketh, it was there that I ended my racing career, very much as an also-ran in that race) and shortly thereafter I married Ingrid. My last competitive drive in Spider thereafter was at the Krugersdorp Hill climb in 1959 where it was pleasing to come within one second of Harry Pierces time in his 1350 MG Special, and to know that Spider had ended our racing adventures on a high note.

It had been a privilege to be part of the racing scene at that time and to have competed against the best. I had also benefited in many other ways applicable to every-day life experiences and not only did I become a better driver but also a better human being.

As the era of the single seater TC Special was fast coming to an end many of these cars, which had played such a major role in popularising motor sport in SA, were destined to be broken up and sold as spare parts or scrap. There is no way that I could contemplate allowing Spider to end up in such an ignoble way, and as a loyal member of the family Spider had a place of honour in retirement, safely garaged for some fourteen years after the final event. It was about that time that Historic Racing was being introduced in SA and Spider found a new home in the care of Phil Howie, then Chairman of the MG Car Club and Committee Member of the Historic Car Register and Spider was not only raced by Phil with considerable success but was also used as the emblem of the Historic Racing Car Register.



*Spider Amals*



*Spider dash*

