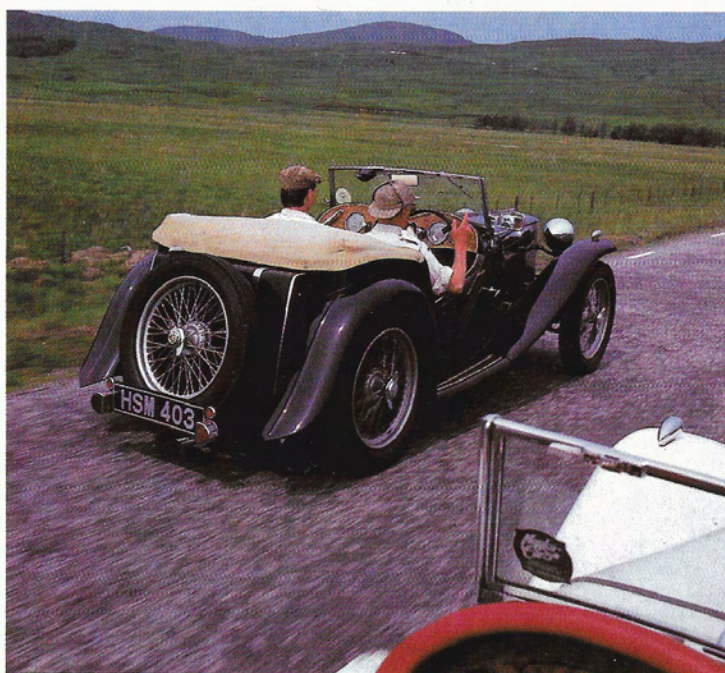


Déjà vu

Forty years ago, The Motor drove one of the first post-war MG Midgets to Scotland and back. Forty years later, the MG Car Club staged a re-run as part of the T-type Midget's Golden Jubilee. John Simister took part too . . . in a Naylor TF

Photographs by Maurice Rowe



Clockwise from above:
Robert MacGillivray's ex-Pat Moss TF; stately TA Tickford of Simon Gibbard; Roger Righini's TD from Switzerland; two views of David Peebles' TC





Simister about to inspect the Naylor's engine at Fortingall (above). Henry Stone relives racing memories with David Saunders and TC (below)

The sun beat down, searing our eyes as it reflected in the paintwork and chromium plate of nine fast-travelling T-type MGs, and threatening to fry our noses. Severe sunstroke was a real possibility, especially as the wind buffeting our faces gave the illusion of a cooler temperature. No doubt we would pay for our folly later.

On this same day, but 40 years earlier, it was very different. It was, in fact, pouring with rain. Getting sunstroke then was about as likely as eating radioactive lamb, on this side of the world at least. But there was one similarity with today: then, too, an MG TC Midget was travelling rapidly, as we were, from London to Inverness and back. The dark figures huddled inside were *The Motor's* then editor, Christopher Jennings, and his



David Saunders, indefatigable event mastermind, relaxes fleetingly with Abingdon veteran Henry Stone

wife Margaret who had raced a P-type Midget before the war.

It was the last weekend in June, 1946, when the Jennings sped north and back again. The roads were practically deserted, petrol was rationed and pleasure



motoring was an almost-forgotten activity. Even the car makers themselves found it difficult to go testing, despite the country's need of their products to help the export effort. So when the MG Car Company offered an MG TC to *The Motor* for evaluation, it was an opportunity not to be passed up. It would provide MG with valuable feedback from the private motorist's viewpoint, and it would provide *The Motor's* editor with the chance to see what the war had done to Britain's remoter roads.

That was exactly 40 years ago. Precisely 10 years earlier, in June 1936, MG had introduced the first of the T-types. So for T-type aficionados, June 1986 was a double cause for celebration. What better way to celebrate the T-type's Golden Jubilee, thought the MG Car Club's T Register, than to carry out a re-run of the route and invite *Motor* to participate? This time, however, there would be nine T-types, and instead of the Jennings' three-day marathon with driver swaps throughout the night, the event would be spread over four days with overnight stops.

T-types are nowadays worth a great deal of money and we felt it unlikely that anyone would wish to lend us one for a 1000-mile dash to Scotland and back. So *Motor's* mount would be a Naylor TF 1700, lovingly built by people who have restored MGs for years and sharing many of its steel body panels with the MG TF. It shares the ash-framed construction, too, but its separate chassis features a rear axle sprung by coils and located by four links and a Panhard rod instead of the original car's leaf springs, while the front coils are damped by telescopic dampers instead of lever arm units. And for the engine Naylor have adopted the closest modern equivalent to the XPEG power unit, Austin Rover's 1700 cc O-series as latterly used in the Ital and the Ambassador, and now employed in the Sherpa van.

Belgrave Square, Thursday June 26, 6.30 am. Photographer Rowe and I were the first to arrive at the start, but very soon the early-morning stillness was interrupted by the distinctive sound of XPAG and XPEG engines. There were two 1947 TCs, both beautifully rebuilt, a black one crewed by David Peebles and his son Graham from Lincolnshire, and the red one of Mike Lugg. David Saunders, mastermind of the



Clockwise from top:
Mike Lugg's TC;
Marian Best's TF
driven here by Ron
Embling; the Lloyds
in their TF 1500;
Raymond Sunler's TF
from Switzerland



Half-way house on Friday night: the happy throng of MG Car Club members outside the Nethy Bridge Hotel

whole exercise, arrived in his delightfully original-looking 1948 TC accompanied by "riding mechanic" Henry Stone. Henry deserves a feature devoted solely to himself; he worked at Abingdon from 1932 to 1974 as a development engineer, involved with everything from M-type Midgets to MGBs and contributing a lot of his vast wisdom to MG's racing activities. He is a man who has seen it all.

All the way from Switzerland came Roger Righini's blue 1950 TD and Raymond Sunier's metallic green 1954 TF; this TF was originally restored in Ireland and was bought by Raymond after it had been stored for several years in many pieces spread among several boxes and crates. How it arrived in Switzerland no one seems to know. Another 1954 TF 1250 was the black and very original example of Marian Best from Essex: Marian's co-driver was Ron Embling from the New England T Register in the US.

TF 1500s were represented by two 1955 examples. Ian and Rosemary Lloyd's dark green car was originally exported to Rhodesia, supercharged and raced in South Africa, and re-imported to Britain in 1963. Robert MacGillivray and passenger Bruce Nelson arrived in a red ex-works TF which used to be rallied by Pat Moss; it was the only TF ever to have competed under the works banner. This car now lives in Lanarkshire, in company with Robert's four other MGs.

If you have been counting, you will have reached only your eighth finger: yes, there was one car missing. But we would wait no longer, so at seven o'clock we set off around Hyde Park Corner and aimed for the Edgware Road. Before long the motorcade of MGs had turned off past Lord's cricket ground, travelled up the Finchley Road and Hendon Way and joined the A1, known more grandly to Christopher Jennings as the Great North Road.

In 1946, the Great North Road wound its way northwards through a multitude of towns and villages like Welwyn, Knebworth, a much smaller Stevenage, and Baldock. Now this southern end is a new motorway apart from the section near Hatfield which is in the process of becoming one, and the old road, now quiet, criss-crosses the new one.

At The George, in Buckden, Huntingdonshire, we met T-type

number nine, the oldest of them all. Simon and Joyce Gibbard's 1939 TA, with the older, ultra-long-stroke 1292 cc engine, has rather grand Tickford coachwork with full-height doors, a fixed rather than folding windscreen, lots of polished wood and a hood which can be folded back half-way to a Coupe de Ville position. If you don't remember what that is, think of the first stage in rolling back the fabric roof of a Citroën 2CV.

For us, The George was a well-earned breakfast stop. It's a

next to Clumber Park in Sherwood Forest. A banjo bolt holding the float chamber to the main body of the rear carburettor had fallen into the road some miles back, so it was petrol everywhere and no power. And there was no spare banjo bolt in the B&G van. All we could do was effectively blank off one carburettor and rely on the other, while Robert's wife (who had stayed at home) brought a spare bolt to our overnight stop north of the border.

It was with considerable

did so on the west side, via Carlisle, so we would too.

Just over the border we passed Gretna Green where all the youthful elopements are turned into hasty marriages, and shortly after we reached Lockerbie and our first overnight stop. It was a welcome sight; we needed a rest from the wind and the sun, and so did the cars. Believe me, when you're doing 70 mph in a car like a TF (be it MG or Naylor), you *know* you're travelling.

The King's Arms Hotel positively oozes faded splendour. Everywhere there's wooden panelling and lovingly signwritten notices pointing the way along labyrinthine corridors. In the corner of each bedroom is a vast art deco wash basin, while the silvering on the mirrors behind is crumbling. This hotel can't have changed in forty years. We ate, we drank, and we were merry.

Next morning the hotel's garage was a hive of activity. And Henry Stone was in his element, fiddling and fettling and applying his intimate knowledge of engine tuning gained through all those years at Abingdon. Not that there was fundamentally much wrong with any of the MGs: "Some of them are better than they were when they left the factory," volunteered Henry.

Shortly after eight o'clock we set off, bound for the Highlands and passing through Abingdon where the Jennings breakfasted after their wet drive through the night. Skirting Glasgow and passing the Linwood site of the Scottish motor industry's finale, we crossed the Clyde by way of the Erskine Bridge, built since the Jennings' day to replace a ferry. Tranquil Loch Lomond registered in my peripheral vision as we sped along the A82 towards that great junction of the Highlands, Crianlarich with its famous station tea rooms ("Now Privately Owned" declared an informative sign).

I could feel a subtle inner excitement building up as we approached one of Britain's great roads. We climbed, slowly at first, through sinuous sweeps that steepened as Rannoch moor drew near. The Naylor was leading; up the hills we pulled out a greater lead as the taut-handling TF 1700 got into its element.

Then the road was straight, and flat for a few miles before we began the descent into the Glencoe Pass between brooding, shady mountains populated by

T-types for two

BY JUNE 1946, when the Jennings carried out their epic drive, the T-type Midget two-seater had been around for exactly ten years although the war had obviously interrupted production. First of the line was the TA, larger than the ohc-engined PB which preceded it and the result of the Nuffield Group's need to rationalise components. To this end it was fitted with a pushrod 1292 cc engine of ancient Morris heritage and featuring an enormously long stroke. Three years later came the TB, now powered by a much shorter-stroke 1250 cc engine still with pushrod valvegear; derived from that of the Morris 10 M Series, the new unit was designated XPAG and developed 54 bhp.

The TB's career was brief, for this version did not reappear after the war. Instead, Abingdon introduced the TC with detail modifications and a cabin four inches wider so that the occupants didn't have to rub shoulders quite so intimately. This was the car that kindled the Ameri-

cans' love of British sports cars in general and of MGs in particular. And it was with transatlantic tastes in mind that MG, in 1949, unveiled the TD with its disc wheels, independent front suspension and rack and pinion steering. A "softer" MG it may have been – it even had chrome bumpers front and rear – but there was little doubting its dynamic superiority.

Finally, while work was progressing on the prototype MGA, the last of the T-types made its debut. The 1953 TF had an altogether more rakish body (still steel-panelled over an ash frame), with faired-in headlights, a lower bonnet line, a rearward-sloping grille – and, if you wanted them, wire wheels. The 1250 cc engine was retained to begin with, but later a bored-out 1466 cc version (designated XPEG) took its place. This produced a useful 63 bhp, but was ousted in favour of the Austin-engineered 1489 cc B-series unit when the TF 1500 gave way to the MGA in 1955.

place oft-frequented by MG Car Club members, including Ron Gammons who had lent us a van and trailer from his Brown and Gammons MG servicing and restoration business to join the convoy in case of a terminal T-type mechanical failure. In the back of the van was a selection of T-type spare parts, and in the front seats were Tony Dickinson (who used to race a Hart-powered Skoda in special saloons) and his wife Barbara.

Refreshed, we set off northwards along the part of the A1 that the Romans built and called Ermine Street. We bypassed Stilton, of cheese fame, similarly Stamford, Grantham and Newark-on-Trent, and came upon Robert MacGillivray's TF stopped at the side of the road

hunger pangs that we stopped for lunch at the Bridge Inn just outside Wetherby – and there were all the MGs with their bonnets open. Clearly this was *de rigueur*, so I opened the Naylor's too.

In the cool of the restaurant all was revealed. Hot T-types get fuel vaporisation when they stop, unless you allow air to circulate around the carburettors. But in other respects the cars had – so far – proved reliable apart from the odd item working loose through all this unaccustomed hard, constant-speed driving. Such as the TF banjo bolt.

We left the A1 at Scotch Corner, where northbound travellers have to decide whether to enter Scotland on the east side or the west. The Jennings

sheep where 300 years ago there had been people. Until the infamous massacre and the clearances changed the face of Highland Scotland for ever...

The road is blindingly fast in the right car; you can see for miles ahead, although there are a few bends to trap the unwary. But heavy lorries in cautious convoy thwarted our run, giving us time instead to become absorbed by the eerie doom of these threatening heights. Soon, though, we were at the bottom and pulling into the forecourt of the Ballachulish Hotel for lunch where the Jennings had had a second breakfast.

We had lost the TA Tickford, but not for long; its petrol pump had given up in the heat but the B&G van had a spare. After lunch I tried a TC, David Peebles' beautiful black example. And the comparison of this beam-axled square-rigger with Naylor's 1980s interpretation of the T-type theme proved intriguing. Instead of the ultra-positive, if not particularly quick, rack and pinion steering there's a Marles worm and roller steering box with lots of play around the straight-ahead and an extremely rapid (and heavy) response thereafter.

The Naylor's quick, positive gearchange, though, is matched by the TC's if you make allowances for the lack of synchromesh on first gear and the need not to rush the change between the other ratios unless you double-declutch. The engine in David Peebles' car pulled smoothly and strongly, and the view along the tapering bonnet to the proud-standing headlamps made a stirring sight as we crossed the end of Loch Leven by the Ballachulish Bridge.

As I got acclimatised to the steering's responses (which are fairly typical of a beam-axled car) I could push the TC a little harder around the bends. On a smooth road there was surprising grip, but once settled into a bend the TC tightened its line in direct proportion to the build-up of roll, calling for a reduction in steering lock. Strange at first, with practice this trait could be used to advantage on a tightening bend.

And there was the smell. The nostalgically invigorating aroma of a warm metal and hot oil, merging with the wind, the sun, the busy burble of the exhaust and the intimate reproduction of the road surface through the seat of the pants to make it clear why travelling in a TC (or others of its ilk) is such a fulfilling

method of progress. You are an integral part of the scene; those in hermetically-sealed modern saloons are mere observers.

Through Fort William and Spean Bridge we continued, then past Loch Lochy and part of the Caledonian Canal (linking the line of lochs formed by the giant diagonal land fault that separates the northern chunk of Scotland from the rest) and on to Loch Ness. We drove along the loch's less-frequented eastern shore, as the Jennings had forty years before. Then the road was "picturesque but in a rather poor state", but it's well-metalled now.

At Fort Augustus, at the south-west end of the loch, I had taken over Robert MacGillivray's TF, now restored to twin carburettors. After the TC it felt like a go-kart. I sat lower in a car that seemed wider, and one steered by a rack and pinion system of delectable precision, feel and quickness of response. By comparison the Naylor felt positively cumbersome, an altogether bigger car, although it's exactly the same size. Somehow, people seem to have forgotten the knack of producing truly satisfying steering systems, at least in front-engined cars.

What's more, this ex-works rally TF (completely standard, incidentally) was not disgraced by its 1980s reincarnation in performance, either. What it lacked in ultimate pace was amply compensated for by a scalpel-sharp throttle response and by a delightfully gutsy, torquey power delivery. And all the time the exhaust rasped and crackled enthusiastically as I throttle-steered it through the Highland twists. What's more, the roll-free tautness of the handling was not obtained at the expense of the ride; though hardly smooth, it rounded off the worst of the bumps every bit as well as did the Naylor. A TF 1500 isn't especially fast, but it sure is a lot of fun. Do I want one? Yes. And with its leathercloth dash and octagonal instruments behind a large wood-rim steering wheel, and racy twin carburettors instead of a paltry single, it's somehow a more honest car than the Naylor with its polished wood and type-approved warning lights.

Inverness came and went, the most northerly point of our expedition simply a name on our itinerary, and we were off down the A9 towards the Nethy Bridge Hotel between Carrbridge and Grantown-on-Spey. Like the A1, the A9 is now a thrusting new



Copies of the souvenir programme, containing stories on Henry Stone, the MG Car Company, T-type MGs and the MG Car Club, as well as a reproduction of Christopher Jennings' original article, are available at £1.25 from the MG Car Club Ltd, PO Box 251, Studley, Warwickshire B80 7AT. The proceeds will go to the British Heart Foundation Appeal

road for the most part.

The TA Tickford was setting a cracking pace as we followed it to the Nethy Bridge Hotel; 70 mph seemed no problem for this mostly stately of T-types. David Saunders' TC wasn't going so well, though: its late arrival resulted from a broken rotor arm. The parts book in the roadside garage didn't go back to 1948, but a Mini item proved to be exactly the same so David didn't miss dinner. Jennings spoke highly of the Nethy Bridge (they, too, stayed there overnight), and sipping beer outside at midnight with the sky still mid-blue behind a sea of pink and purple lupins, and the motionless air still warm, was an agreeable setting in which to soak up Henry Stone's tales of his exploits with MGs.

The next morning Maurice and I were back in the Naylor for our drive down the old A9 (more fun than the new one and quite empty). Our destination was the Fortingall Hotel, at the eastern end of Loch Tay, where we would do as the Jennings did and stop for lunch. A cold salad and white wine were just what we needed in the heat.

From Fortingall our route diverged from that taken by the Jennings. Our predecessors had returned south via Carlisle, for there they knew they could buy petrol. We had no such constraint, so we aimed for the Forth road bridge; in 1946 the Forth was bridged only by a rail link, and the cars had to cross by ferry. On then to Edinburgh and then the A68 through Jedburgh and crossing into Northumberland over the spectacular Carter Bar. This section of the A68 is another of Britain's great roads, with long,

open bends and switchback straights through bleak, rugged country where nature has very much the upper hand. There's the Kielder forest, scene of so many RAC rally stages, and the Roman section known as Dere Street which proves that the Romans did get further north than Hadrian's Wall.

We stayed overnight at the King's Head Hotel in Richmond just south of Scotch Corner; the hotel, surrounded by cobbled streets is as solidly stone-built as most other buildings in the centre of this imposing town. The next day we continued south via Donington, where the MG Car Club had joined forces with their sparring partners the MG Owners' Club for a day of racing and celebration of all things MG. There were MGs as far as the eye could see, surrounded by bronzed young couples revelling in the heat, the sun and the sheer joy of the occasion.

As guests of honour we all drove around the Donington circuit for a parade lap before departing south via Hinckley and the A5. This road, too, is not as the Jennings would have found it had they returned to London that way, for it now loops around sprawling Milton Keynes (though you can still follow the original route) and becomes the de-trunked A5183 after it crosses the M1 near Redbourn (which town it then bypasses). But it's still a fine road for rapid motoring; by this time quite a rivalry had built up between the TCs of Mike Lugg and David Peebles, with both cars going faster than their owners ever thought they would dare drive them.

As the nine MGs eventually arrived at Battersea Park for the champagne finish, early on Sunday evening after a total of 1073 miles, their owners' initial worries had given way to pride at the high speeds their cars had maintained in the heat. They had reason to be proud, too; the sturdy T-type is a sports car to be driven, not mollycoddled. That this is as true today as it was 40 years ago we had just proved over four gruelling days.

And as the fly-spattered Naylor sat with its whirring electric fan the only instant giveaway to the more modern technology lurking beneath, we reflected that it, too, represented a pretty pleasurable mode of travel. Maybe in 2026 *Motor* will once again drive the route in a Naylor, accompanied by some octogenarian T-types. With luck they should just about catch me in time.