

Sporting cars

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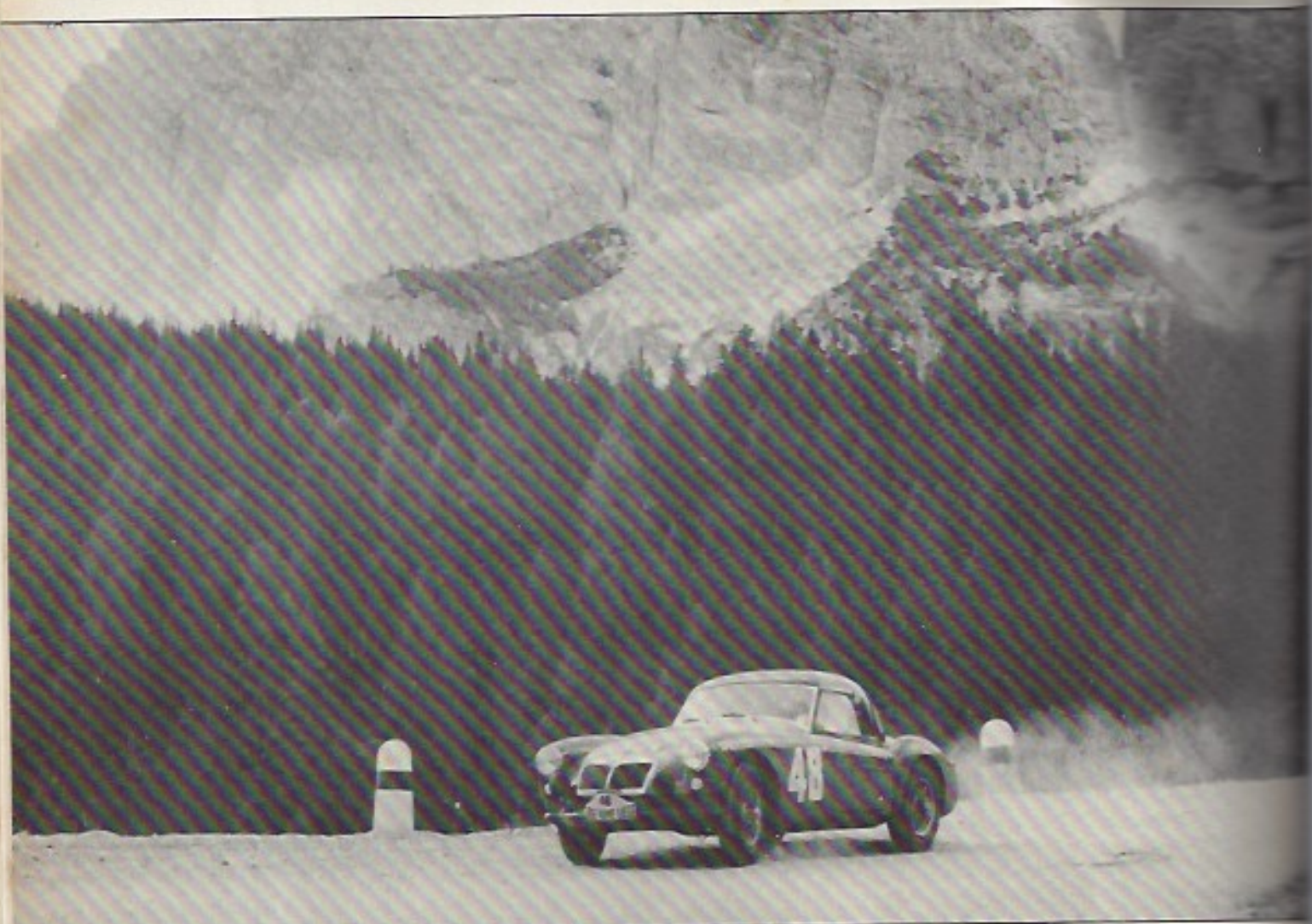


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Riding the 90-hour non-stop road-race

Chris Tooley on what it was like to "ride shotgun" in a works-MG in Europe's last great open road-race

IT WAS LIKE a leap into the unknown. In 1956 B.M.C. took the brave decision to enter a team of MGA's in the Liege-Rome-Liege marathon - a tough road-race-cum-rally across Europe. It was brave because the 'Liege' was the toughest event in the calendar, and the MGA, in its original single cam 1496 cc version, was still a fairly rare sight. True, a team of these cars had just taken part in the Alpine Rally - experience rather than success had been gained. But the cars had attracted a lot of attention and what was important for the 'Liege', had proved themselves tough and reliable.

Over twenty years have passed since the last 'Liege' and its look-alike Spa-Sofia-Spa was run, but the awe and the legend lives on. Why? The clue comes from its title "Marathon de la Route" and when you think about 3,200 miles in 90 hours without seeing a bed, or having a real rest stop, you will begin to get the idea... If this appeals, then think about the route: through six countries which was designed to keep you on the rough mountain and foothill roads of the French, Italian and Yugoslav Alps for as long as possible. Even away from the high ground, second class roads were often used, required tired crews to concentrate on navigation when they would prefer to sleep. The rules were delightfully simple. Don't be more than an hour late at any of the 70 controls, and bring back the same car, engine, axle, wheels and crew. Tune the car as much as you like, hang on all the accessories you want, remove all the weight you can. The roads were truly dreadful. And remember that equipment like tyres was nothing like today's array of technical sophistication.

L-R-L was therefore as hard and unforgiving on the crew as it was on the car, and its organiser M. Garot of the Royal Motor Union of Liege, was determined to keep it that way. As a result, finishers were scarce (rumour had it that M. Garot's ambition was to have just one finisher) but they could rely on tremendous publicity on the mainland of Europe. A team award was as valuable as an outright win, as it demonstrated the reliability of the marque. This team award was to be our target.

Four cars were prepared at Abingdon for each of the 1956 and 1957 events, (and they are described in the panel). When John Gott, the BMC team captain, and Chief Constable of Northampton police, asked me to go with him on my first continental rally, little did I know just how "deep" was the deep end.

The MGA was a strong car in every way, and the crews knew that it would stand up to the pounding inflicted by the mountain tracks. The drum brakes, thanks to the ventilation holes



Nearly all 'off-road'... over the highest goat-tracks of Europe

introduced on the works cars and the fade resistant VG95 linings were known to be adequate. (Discs were to come, later). Crew comfort was essential. There were plenty of stories about the effects of fatigue on L-R-L and not one had a happy ending. So to reduce noise and buffeting, those beautifully shaped works hardtops were fitted and having persuaded BMC to repaint his white Alpine car British Racing Green, John had the hardtop painted to match. The result looked superb. A reclining seat was provided and if you did up the full harness really tight, you could actually sleep without becoming bruised in the process.

The most important and usually the most difficult task for an 'Liege' crew was to stay awake at the right times. For example, driving down a winding mountain road with a sheer drop off the edge... Wakey-wakey pills were tried with varying success - the sound of a full orchestra playing seemed to be a common side effect. But our personal breakthrough came when we sought advice from the Royal Geographical Society, and adopted a menu similar to that used on the Everest expeditions. As a result, I have not chewed a dried apricot since 1957 but Kendal mintcake remains a firm favourite.

Living in an MGA for four days and nights had to be carefully planned especially as the boot was already filled by the 20-gallon tank, spare wheel, 'quick-repair' spares and a can of Castrol XL. The only space inside the car were the two door pockets and behind the seat. In desperation I screwed a plastic box to the centre tunnel and we managed to take on board the thirty or so maps, road book, our driving and

refuelling plan, rations, bottles of Lucozade, chamois leather (to keep the drinks cool), sunglasses (two pairs each in case of loss), a change of clothing (so as to appear clean and wholesome to the welcoming crowd if you were lucky enough to finish), map board, a large Jaeger le Coultre stopwatch (a beautiful and expensive device), a map illuminator and about twenty pencils.

Then there was the hard cash, about £300 worth. As we were to pass through six countries, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Yugoslavia, France and Austria, it was essential to have enough of the local currency to ensure quick service when needed. It was not always easy to find petrol when you needed it and an open garage could be crowded with competing cars. If they were using coupons supplied by the petrol firms, the waving of a fistful of notes signalled instant profit and the transfer of attention to one's own car.

All this had to be stowed so that braking, cornering and thumping along potholed roads did not result in a shambles. What did cause problems was the generosity of the locals who forced bottles of wine, chicken legs and sausages on us when we arrived at controls. It must be said with regret that most of it had to be ejected once out of sight. We nearly had a big accident when a bottle jammed under the pedals on a tight section.

The procedure at controls was unusual by modern standards in that the passenger had to leave the car to sign on at a roadside table. The signature was required to make sure that the same crew did the whole route. If you were running late, you leapt straight back into the car and to avoid leaving a

M.G. road-race

leg behind when John let in the clutch I found it safer to arrive in the car in a kneeling position. They say that you can do it in an MG and you can straighten out from a kneeling position, but both actions are very difficult. If you were running early, then you met up with one of the delightful hall marks of L-R-L. Cars were started three at a time at three minute intervals and if there was room, and sometimes if there was not room, three abreast. This was exciting for the spectators and frantic for the crews.

Imagine the scene in a typical small town in the Alps with three cars abreast and more than likely one on the pavement. Two hundred yards up the street is a sharp turn onto the narrow dusty road leading up to the next pass. Each driver is determined to be first. The three co-drivers stand at the control table each holding one end of his road book. The official in charge has a firm grip of the other. He counts down, leaves go of his end (if it has not already been torn from his grasp) and three men race to their cars. If you manage to obstruct any of the others in the process, that's a bonus. The table was sited to suit the majority, i.e. left-hand drive cars so we always had to run round the MGA and were often last away. This led to some desperate overtaking, often through a cloud of dust.

Such a scene was at the start of the Passo Giau and here we managed to get ahead before the climb over twisting roads whose surface was made of two inch stones or so it seemed. Pieces of car were strewn on the road as the hammering took its toll. The whole transmission and engine of the MGA twisted and vibrated so much that the mounting rubbers were soon shot, and you could feel the whole engine and gearbox twisting in the chassis.

This had never happened before, and out of sympathy for the car we eased off. The eventual winners, Storez and Buchet in an open Porsche were fastest, followed by the '56 winner Mairesse in a Merc 300SL, and in third place Anne Hall doing miraculous things with her Zephyr. We were 29th, but the car was still in one piece and what's more it stayed in one piece. Which is more than can be said for a few cars which had been hammered on that notorious pass.

Only a few of the sections were closed to the other traffic and these were the timed-to-a-second climbs and descents of the famous high altitude passes like the Stelvio, Gavia and Vivione. Crews will still turn pale at the names of the last two, as memories come flooding back of single track roads carved from the side of the mountain, surfaces which at times were the bare rock, deep gullies where storm swollen streams had eroded their way across



the road, fragile fences on the edge and always the danger of coming round a blind corner straight into thick cloud billowing up from the valley below. Most of these horrors were tackled at night so you could not see the sheer drops. But a vivid memory is of the headlights illuminating the next mountain, and the beams from other cars above and below swinging round in space. There was one very sharp downhill hairpin which could not be taken in one sweep and involved reversing back from a sheer drop. During the manoeuvre one prayed that the next car would not arrive too soon.

On the Vivione a mule was encountered standing in the road and we had to ease past very gently before it took fright and kicked out the lights

— this had really happened. Overtaking on these tracks required the complete cooperation of the car ahead as it had to find a space, pull off and virtually stop. John always let a faster car through whenever he could but he was in the minority. Once as we slowed to let an Alfa past, it hit the MGA smartly up the back-end. Later the driver apologised profusely "I did not expect you to let me pass". In thick cloud or fog, the Frenchman Cotton was the driver to watch out for as he appeared to have radar built into his head and proceeded at a speed which was impossible to match. Once overtaken, experienced drivers tried to follow him through the corners but soon lost their nerve and let him go.

It was the unknown which made the

"The whole engine and transmission took so much punishment you could feel it all twisting in the chassis"

'Liege' such a fascinating event. Road sections which appeared to be easy could quickly become a race against time. You must remember that there was no free time and you had always to drive sufficiently fast to give yourself the chance to refuel the car and yourself carry out maintenance, cross frontiers, wash your hands and so on. So those planned relaxed drives to save precious energy became flat out dices through the unsuspecting road traffic when you had been held up by a level crossing, a flock of sheep or road works, when the length of the section was mysteriously longer than that given in the roadbook, or as happened in Yugoslavia we had stopped to pull an overturned car off the road. In those days the only maps we could obtain of that country were printed in Italy and the names of the places bore scant resemblance to the names in the roadbook and on the signposts. I still feel guilty about the speeds we were doing through those hitherto quiet Yugoslav villages.

When you were in a hurry, the passenger used a foot switch which operated a pair of very loud horns. This was effective in scaring tourists out of the way — but could be confusing in the mountains when the echo gave the impression of another car on the road.

Throughout the '56 and '57 events our MGA ran faultlessly, even surviving a slam into a rock face to avoid a bus (the driver got out and helped lever the wing off the wheel with his giant starting handle), a sideways crunch against a wall when fatigue made me think I was driving superbly whereas I was probably all over the road, and an onslaught by a drunken driver in Annecy which smashed half our lights. The ensuing drive through thickening fog was one which John and I later reckoned to be about the worst we had done together.

The drum brakes required adjusting about once a day and on one occasion we left it almost too late when John found that he was pumping the pedal to get any slowing effect at all. Sitting in the road dog-tired and trying to find those adjusting screws through small holes in a hot brake drum was not something, I thought, that the designer had ever tried. We changed plugs, one at a time when we had a moment to spare. Oil levels were checked regularly in engine, axle and gearbox, the latter via a small trapdoor in the cockpit floor. We also drained the fuel tank as we approached the first filling station on leaving Yugoslavia to get rid of the native petrol which might have had an



octane number but I doubt it. We drove it on the contents of the float chambers and left with the engine no longer pinking on every opening of the throttle.

The whole transmission took enormous punishment and there were times when top and sometimes third gear were not used for over two hours at a time. Revs kept below 5300 but not very far below when the critical mountain sections were being tackled. There was no synchromesh on first gear but double de clutching was time wasting. So for sharp hairpins, first gear was slammed in-crunch.

The handling of those cars was a true delight, and in MG tradition, quite forgiving. Steering on loose surfaces at speed was predictable and this gave their crews tremendous confidence. With the direct steering, there was a lot of kickback on bad roads, and a pair of driving gloves did not last very long. The tyres were Dunlop Fort pattern moulded from a hard compound and one set lasted the whole event. Which

was just as well as BMC did not have the resources to carry sixteen spare wheels and tyres across western Europe.

Before the events, John would spend hours and hours studying the route at home and noting everything he knew about it for the benefit of all the BMC crews. Hazards even down to the detail of deep gulleys on the Vivione, changes of road surface, times by when you should be at certain points on the vital sections like the Stelvio, obscure junctions and so on. He graded each section with a colour code according to its difficulty and then decided the driving order in our car. Other no.1's were left to make their own decisions. John, as no.1, would drive all the Red Plus (impossible) and Red (difficult) sections. I would drive the Blue (easy) ones. The Green (medium) sections were shared between us according to the need to deliver the no.1 to the start of the Reds in as fit a state as possible. The only times when we departed from the plan was when one of us was so



shattered that he could not drive safely any more. I can remember a particular nadir in the French Alps when we drove for a quarter hour each just to keep the car going until by sleeping for this period you found you could drive for half an hour and then slowly build up the pace again.

It was crazy, anti-social, wonderful event which can never be held again. In places and especially of course in Italy, the roads would be lined Mille Miglia fashion with spectators and above the noise of the engine you could hear the shouts and cheers of delight and encouragement. Groups would light bonfires on the high passes and watch on their favourite corners. The more people the more dangerous the corner, or so we reckoned and drove accordingly. As you came down the Vivione through its swerves and hairpins, you could see in the darkness

below two rows of lights apparently marking a runway. When you finally 'landed' in the valley, you found a village street lined with the flaming torches of the entire population.

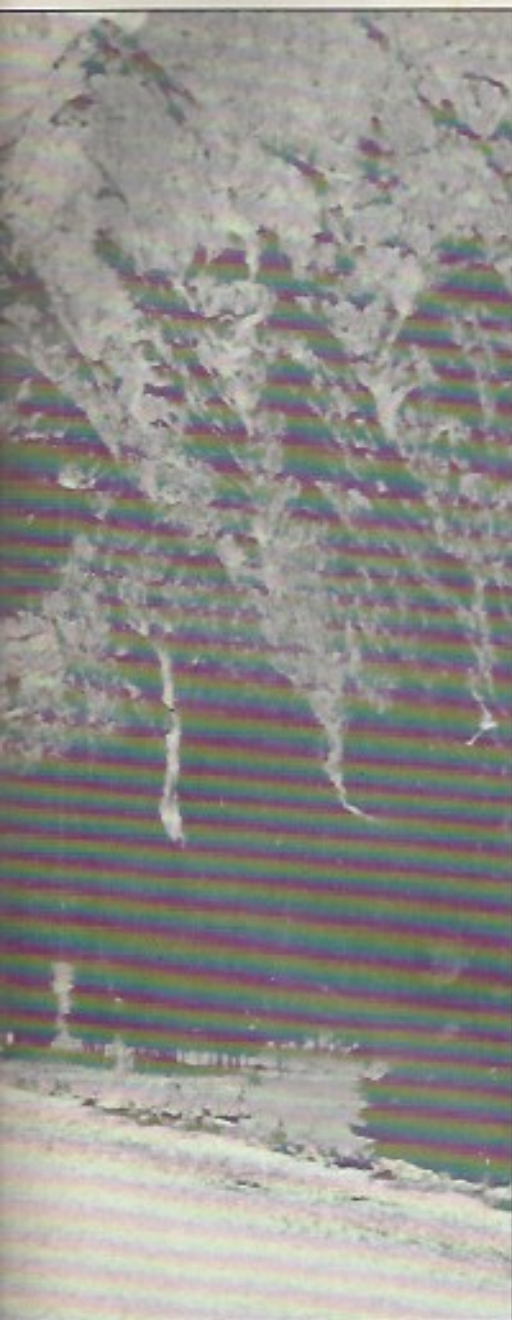
In '56 the event was won by Willy Mairesse (later to become a works Ferrari driver) who apart from dropping only nine minutes in the 3200 mile route broke some sort of record for determination by doing the last half of the Marathon with fuel cans in the car supplying the engine through rubber tubing. A punctured fuel tank was not going to cheat Willy of his leading position. It was that sort of event.

There was also a Porsche whose engine bearers had given way, and were replaced by rope slings from a tree branch laid across the engine compartment. But the MGA stayed intact.

Support was supplied by Marcus and

Pat Chambers and the Abingdon Comps mechanics who had a marathon of their own to meet up with us just about once a day. Their adventures were as exciting as our own and at the end of it all they looked as tired as we felt. However, such was the reliability of the MGA's that they had little to do and the most important servicing I remember was hot thick green soup served up somewhere in Italy.

On the first morning after the midnight start from Spa, as the sun came up on the road to Munich I can recollect yawning and thinking "Help, another 85 hours!" On the fourth and last morning you realise that there only another seven hours of main road motoring to do and unless you or the car give up, you are going to be one of the elite, a finisher on L-R-L. That is when you start to worry about every little noise on the car, about taking the



wrong turning, about losing the road book, about falling asleep at the wheel.

I was fortunate to be a finisher in '56 and '57, and John Gott went on to make it three in a row with Ray Brookes and the MGA Twin Cam the following year. This rare feat on one of the most demanding of the world's motor sporting events underlined the MGA's quality and John's unrivalled experience and determination.

As this is a personal account and not a team narrative, the reader must look in the attached panel for the team names and results. We did not win the Team Award on either occasion as we had set out to do, but the Ladies' first and second awards in '57 received good publicity. Again, the car had received a lot of attention and their good finishing positions had been noted in the press. BMC had of course gained valuable experience which would pay

off in a very big way when the big Healeys tackled the L-R-L.

My last article on the Tulip Rally finished by saying that 'our' Morris Minor NMO 933 would soon come of age. In the '57 L-R-L in the hands of Pat Moss and Ann Wisdom it came a gallant 23rd overall and fourth in its class, the first under 1000 cc British car ever to finish the event. It was an epic drive. In the following year, Pat was to do even better in a 2.6 litre Healey 100/6, she made fourth overall... and in 1960, finally winning outright. That was B.M.C.'s first international victory, the first win by a Ladies crew and Abingdon also took the team award. Sprinzel's Sprite was a remarkable third.

The last great bash over Europe's worst roads ended in 1964... the winner was an Abingdon Healey... and so ended a truly amazing era.

Chris Tooley

MGA crews and results

1956 86 starters 35 finishers
MJB 191 John Gott/Chris Tooley 13th overall 6th in class
MBL 867 Nancy Mitchell/Anne Hall 26th overall 16th in class
MRX 43 John Milne/Dick Benstead Smith 14th overall 7th in class
MRX 42 Gerry Burgess/Sam Croft Pearson Struck rock and retired.

1957 102 starters 52 finishers
MJB 167 John Gott/Chris Tooley 14th overall 8th in class
OBL 311 Nancy Mitchell/Joan Johns 16th overall 9th in class. Ladies Award win.
MRX 43 John Milne/Bill Shephard Crashed when passenger door flew open Harris/Hacquin Suspension damaged in crash on Giau. (Non-Works MG)

Note: Abingdon won in 1960, and the last, longer and tougher Liège, in 1964 Chris Tooley will write on the Healey years in a following *Sporting Cars*.



Through the lens!

When you are a professional co-driver it's a trifle difficult to take pictures... Chris Tooley, however, managed to snap these shots at the 1957 Liege marathon. They show what it was like to hound a Porsche... taken through the dirty windscreen. Despite the vibration, despite the fading colours of the transparencies, they do capture the spirit... including the winning Mercedes leading a 'grid' through the streets...





On the lonely Vivione Pass... a through-the-windscreen-snap as John Gott presses the MG on the tail of a Porsche.

