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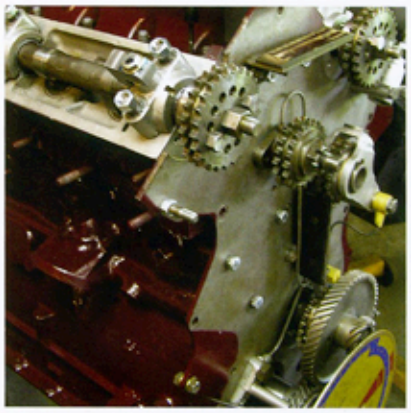
Spring 2012 NEW ENGLAND

MG's Need for Speed

words and photography by David Clark

The glory days were long in the past. It had been 20 years since MG was a dominant force, owning records for absolute speed in the classes between 500 and 2000 ccs. The engine in their 750 cc overhead cam record breaker, EX 127, ultimately made 145 bhp at 39 lbs boost. More power on a per litre basis than the über-dominant Mercedes Silver Arrow Grand Prix cars which were so generously subsidized by the Nazi regime.



MG founder Cecil Kimber had been sacked at the outset of World War II, allegedly for securing a contract to build control sections for the Albemarle Bomber, an undertaking which, unbeknownst to Kimber, had already been passed on by most of the British aircraft industry which simply couldn't even begin to fathom how to build it. In the end, the tiny workforce at Abingdon built nearly 1,000 of them before selling off the test rig they devised to prove its myriad electrical and hydraulic systems at war's end.

Peace brought a measure of prosperity back to "The World's Sports Car Factory," and an entirely new market opened before them—this time in the United States, where eventually more than two-thirds of total production would end up.

Of course MG went racing again, although now it was mostly in the hands of privateers, with some discreet support from Abingdon. Syd Enever built a Le Mans body for Autosport photographer George Phillips to campaign his TD with. After being sidelined for a few years so as not to take sales away from their new British Motor Corporation stablemate, the Austin Healey, the Enever project became the basis of the MGA, a completely modern MG which featured the new Austin "B" series 1489 cc engine in place of the Morris XPAG engine of the "T" series cars. It wasn't a particularly elegant design, but at least you could still tune it some.

By the late '50s Porsche had begun to make its presence felt in the same events that MG was contesting less and less successfully with the passage of time. With its intake and exhaust ports siamesed to camouflage its blatant Chevrolet "stove bolt" six-cylinder engine architecture, the "B" series was never going to breathe well enough to go head to head with the four cam Porsche Carrera engines. Something else was needed.

On the quiet, in 1955 Abingdon had installed two different prototype Twin Cam engines in the Tourist Trophy MGAs, one of which was completely new and one of which was designed to be machined on the existing "B" series transfer lines.

By early 1958 BMC management caved to the persistent demands from Abingdon for the Twin Cam, and the new model was announced. It featured a dual overhead cam alloy cylinder head with a 40 degree valve angle in hemispherical combustion chambers, operated by 3/8 inch lift cams with a fairly conservative 250 degree split overlap duration, the "B" series prototype.

Domed 9.9:1 compression ratio full float pistons were fitted initially, later reduced to 8.3:1 in an attempt to combat piston failures which actually were most likely the result of a periodic weak fuel mixture caused by carburetor vibration.

Early engines like the one pictured here were notorious oil burners. In a classically bad example of component matchup, the cylinder bores were chrome flashed to improve durability and equally durable chrome plated piston rings were also fitted, but the chrome rings in the chrome bores never seated, with disastrous results for oil control.

Fifty years on, the cylinders in this Twin Cam engine had no measurable wear at all, and after ball honing them and fitting a Hastings moly ring set, oil consumption is a thing of the past.

Visually striking and a small marvel of British slide rule engineering, MGA Twin Cams are rapidly appreciating investments, highly sought after today.

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