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FIRST CHANCE SALOONS

Saloon car racing began at Silverstone nearly 60 years ago. Time to take to the Grand Prix circuit and drive two rare survivors from those early days: MG YB and Jaguar MkVII, both in full race trim



This page
MG is lower and better tied-down in race trim, though it retains the cosy interior of the standard car. Engine power was almost doubled for 1954, thanks to some wild engine tuning. The car now runs a milder 1953 Stage 2 spec.



**1952 MG YB
(IN 1954 RACING FORM)**

- ENGINE**
1250cc four-cylinder, OHV,
two 1.75in SU carburettors
- POWER**
90bhp @ 6900rpm
- TORQUE**
Not known
- TRANSMISSION**
Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive
- STEERING**
Rack and pinion
- SUSPENSION**
Front: wishbones, coil springs, lever-arm dampers, anti-roll bar.
Rear: live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, lever-arm dampers
- BRAKES**
Drums
- WEIGHT**
1041kg
- PERFORMANCE**
Top speed c100mph. 0-60mph 19sec



**‘Ordinary saloon cars
being chucked round the
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the crowd’s attention’**

IT WAS ALL A BIT OF A LAUGH at first, this saloon car racing business, to some people anyway. When the British Racing Drivers’ Club added what they called a Production Touring-Car Race to the *Daily Express* International Trophy programme at Silverstone on 10 May 1952, they probably reckoned they had hit on a great wheeze, something to amuse the spectators between the real races. Whatever the thinking, it was a success. Ordinary saloon cars being chucked round the Grand Prix circuit certainly caught the crowd’s attention.

They enjoyed watching young Stirling Moss, driving a Jaguar MkVII and tearing away to a clear victory from Ken Wharton’s Healey and Sydney Allard’s eponymous Allard. They also saw this very same MG YB saloon, driven by enterprising MG dealer Dick Jacobs, fighting it out with the Jowett Javelins for honours in the under 1500cc class. *Autosport’s* reporter wrote that the spectators around the course were ‘thrilled by the fantastic driving of Dick Jacobs in his maroon, 1¼-litre MG saloon’.

Time and again Jacobs would draw level with Marshall and Bennett in their 1½-litre Javelins and cheekily pass them at Stowe, only to be overhauled on the long drag up Abbey Curve. However, Jacobs refused to give up and, to the great delight of the spectators, gradually outstripped those two Javelins and set off after the class leader, another Javelin driven by Bert Hadley. When Hadley’s engine expired in a cloud of smoke, Jacobs swept through to take the class victory.

Serious touring car racing began on that day, and that’s what this story is all about. It might have been an amusing sideshow to motor racing’s purists, but it was an important business to the participants. Jacobs was there to sell MGs from his dealership, Mill Garage in Chigwell Road, London E18. For Jaguar, the Silverstone races were a golden opportunity to demonstrate the crushing superiority of the magnificent, elegant MkVII saloon, which emerged head-and-shoulders above all rivals.

As the Production Touring-Cars had proved so popular, the BRDC kept them in the Silverstone programmes of 1953 and 1954, with Jaguar MkVIIIs the outright victors every time, and Jacobs also winning his class with the same MG on all three occasions. Our archive photograph, from the 1954 race, appeared in Dick Jacobs’ autobiography *An MG Experience*. The

caption, ‘Class winner Dick Jacobs lapped by Stirling Moss, car no 3’ is, however, incorrect. Ian Appleyard won that race in car number 3 and the picture shows him lapping Jacobs at Copse Corner, Silverstone. The fast Jaguars lapped the MG twice that day. Following closely behind are the two MkVIIIs of Tony Rolt (5) and Stirling Moss (4), the latter playing ‘catch-up’ after the starter motor apparently jammed at the Le Mans-style start.

Apart from a change in colour, the MG has survived intact. It is owned today by Marc Hanson, who contacted us to say that the ex-works MkVII of Tony Rolt is another remarkable survivor, and owned now by a great Jaguar enthusiast, Peter Burton. Marc wondered whether we would like to reunite the cars, some six decades after that significant race.

We did exactly that. Life is somewhat less relaxed these days, however, especially at Silverstone, but Stuart Pringle and his staff at the BRDC took the trouble to accommodate us free of charge so that we could try the cars on the Grand Prix circuit and capture an image of them together again at Copse Corner – which happens to be the one part of the circuit that hasn’t changed since 1954. The BRDC is conscious of the history of the club and of the circuit, and we are very grateful to all concerned.

Out on the circuit, it was obvious that both these cars are extremely well maintained and almost unbelievably original – they’re just as they must have been when Jacobs and Rolt raced them all those years ago. On my first lap in the MG, it dawned on me that the introduction of production car racing in the 1950s was of extreme significance, bringing about a host of rapid improvements in everyday family saloons.



'It's great fun to drive this important racing saloon, and wonderful that it has survived'

It's easy enough to produce a list of all the faults in these cars but that's hardly the point, except that it's interesting to appreciate just what the drivers had to overcome when racing them back then. The MG YB was still essentially a pre-war design, a perfectly charming small sporty saloon, with its 'suicide' doors and heavy construction, but distinctly out of date even in 1952. It feels very slow today despite its 'Stage 2' tuning, which lifted the power and speed considerably from the 46bhp and 71mph of the standard model. It has MG TD-type twin carburettors, plus bigger valves and heavier valve springs and is as it raced at Silverstone in 1953.

In 1952, the cars were meant to be standard showroom models but that Stage 2 tuning was permitted in 1953. When the rules were further relaxed for 1954, Jacobs went for a pretty wild engine specification that he claimed gave him 100mph. As that made the car almost impossible to drive in normal traffic, Marc has opted wisely for the 1953 specification.

The MG feels quite stiffly sprung and poorly damped but it handles safely and predictably, despite occasional yet harmless little skips on the limit through a fast corner. There's no denying that the outside front suspension plunges rather uselessly as you turn-in and the body rolls a lot in heavy cornering. A shift of direction when negotiating an ess-bend exposes the lethargic response of the antique chassis design.

That's the plain truth but it's still great fun to drive this immensely important early racing saloon, and it is a wonderful thing that it has survived. We have to respect Dick Jacobs' achievements, understanding what he was up against in those early days.

Approaching Peter's Jaguar in exactly the same spirit, we can note the excessive body roll in hard cornering and there's no doubt that the Jaguar drivers had to manage the rather weak drum brakes when racing these cars. Jaguar, of course, was already pioneering disc brakes but the saloons were still on drums. The MKVII is much bigger and heavier than the little MG and it is also immensely faster. Through the many direction changes at the very fast Becketts section of Silverstone, the old Jaguar turned out to be much more responsive than I expected; yes, it does roll a lot but it's not

a wallowing great barge. It can be wound up and almost tricked into flicking through those bends quickly, and with surprisingly little steering movement. It was, in short, a hell of a good car in its day and Moss, Rolt and Appleyard must have felt like kings of the GP circuit back in 1954. All three shared the outright fastest lap at 2min 16sec, an average of 77.48mph.

The BRDC had put production car racing on the agenda at Silverstone very effectively but it was the Brands Hatch-based British Racing & Sports Car Club (BRSCC) that took it a stage further. Led by enterprising BRSCC Club Secretary Ken Gregory, Brands Hatch was expanding fast. The Kentish circuit had been extended in 1953 with the addition of Druids Hill Bend and plans to create a Grand Prix circuit were already in place by then. Gregory and his fellow directors were looking for ways to increase spectator attendance at Brands Hatch and the other circuits at which they had started to run meetings. Production touring cars, or saloons as they called them, fitted the bill perfectly.

If I could go back in time and see just one saloon car race of the past, it would be the BRSCC's International 'Sporting Life' Trophy for Production Saloon Cars at Oulton Park on 27 August 1955. This long-forgotten event seems perfectly astonishing now. There was one foreign entrant, Swedish driver Jo Bonnier in a very fast Alfa Romeo 1900, and he won the 15-lap race by 12.4sec from Ken Wharton's Austin A90 Westminster.

Incredibly, third place overall went to Tony Brooks, then on the brink of GP stardom but on this occasion driving a DKW to victory in the up-to-1100cc class. Brooks even beat the supposedly faster MG Magnette, entered by Dick Jacobs and driven by Alan Foster to victory in the next class up. It gets better. Believe it or not, Stirling Moss was driving a works Standard Ten in the up-to-1100cc class. Moss had, as ever, got away first at the Le Mans-style start and, although he was overtaken immediately by the faster cars to end up second in class, his conduct of the Standard was described as 'amazing'.

That was not all. While Bonnier cruised serenely ahead, Ken Wharton had a Longbridge-Dagenham fight of mammoth proportions on his hands. His Austin was swapping second place like mad with the Ford Zephyr entered by Raymond Mays. The Ford's driver was a certain Mike Hawthorn, standing in for Peter Collins at the last minute. Unfortunately, the Mays-prepared Zephyr's engine blew up but what a race that was. Reporter Cyril Posthumus called it 'a striking demonstration of the capabilities of the modern production saloon car, and excellent entertainment throughout.'



Left and below

Spot the difference? Tony Rolt in 'our' MkVII (car no 5); Dick Jacobs is ahead in 'our' MG, about to be lapped by Ian Appleyard (no 3). Stirling Moss (no 4) can be seen powering in, stage left.



1951 JAGUAR MKVII (IN 1954 RACING FORM)

ENGINE

3442cc straight-six, DOHC, two SU H8 carburettors

POWER

c210bhp @ 5200rpm

TORQUE

Not known

TRANSMISSION

Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive

STEERING

Recirculating ball

SUSPENSION

Front: wishbones, torsion bars, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar.

Rear: live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, lever-arm dampers

BRAKES

Drums

WEIGHT

1753kg

PERFORMANCE

Not measured

MG & JAGUAR RACING SALOONS

Production car racing had really arrived and Ken Gregory went on to introduce the first BRSCC British Saloon Car Championship in 1958. There were four classes based on engine capacity, modifications were strictly limited and it was a great success. Despite fanciful suggestions about competitors being able to race the family car and also use it for shopping during the week, saloon car racing was already a serious business and manufacturers were quick to become involved.

Marc Hanson's MG YB and Peter Burton's Jaguar MkVII must be the oldest survivors from the earliest British saloon car races, making them highly prized collectors' items. It helps that the histories of both cars are known. Dick Jacobs acquired his YB direct from the MG works at Abingdon, specifically for the 1952 Silverstone race. He sold it in late 1954 and it had a series of owners who hardly used it. A basic restoration was carried out in the 1970s, when it was repainted two-tone green but otherwise left essentially undisturbed.

After following the car for some time, Marc put in a successful bid at the Silverstone Classic sale in 2009. He had the engine rebuilt by MG specialist Peter Edney, had the suspension restored to as-new condition, and now uses the car in numerous suitable events such as the Brighton Speed Trials, Jersey International Motoring Festival and sprints at Goodwood and other venues. He has collected a few trophies and, as he says, it's the first time the car has won anything for nearly 60 years.

The full history of Peter Burton's imposing Jaguar is even better known. In 1954 it was the company car of Arthur Whittaker, director and general manager of Jaguar Cars Ltd, who had been working with William Lyons since joining the Swallow Sidecar Company in 1924, aged 20. The Jaguar boss was knighted in 1956 but he was still plain Mr Lyons in 1954. Even so, it's easy to imagine him announcing sharply: 'Whittaker, we're taking your car for Major Rolt to drive in the Production Car Race at Silverstone.' It was driven into the competitions department and specially prepared with C-type engine parts and a modified, close-ratio gearbox. The suspension was stiffened and the rear spats altered. After the race it was sold but has been preserved safely ever since. As a committed Jaguar enthusiast, Peter Burton acquired 'LHP 5' recently. He uses it on the Mille Miglia re-run and hopes to race it at a future Goodwood Revival.

As the sole surviving ex-works MkVII to have competed in a major race when new, Peter's Jaguar joins Marc's MG in a place of special honour in the history of British Touring Car racing – but we can still call them saloons if we prefer.

Chris



Below
Silverstone, not La Sarthe, but a Le Mans start was mandatory.



‘There were fanciful suggestions of racing the family car and then using it for shopping’



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