

Production Car Racing with M.G.

Five Years of Competition—From TCs to Magnettes

By R. W. (Dick) Jacobs

HAVING read *Maintaining the Breed—the Saga of M.G. Racing Cars*, anyone with a personal knowledge of its author could be expected to think during some passage or other, "I can just hear John saying that". The modest way in which John W. Thornley has gone out of his way not to mention his own part in this story is typical of the man who is now managing director of the M.G. Car Co., Ltd. He has played down his immense enthusiasm and the more than generous help he has given to those men who wanted to race M.G. during the early post-war years.

The history of M.G. racing is more than adequately covered up to the war, and events leading up to Le Mans 1955 are also dealt with by John Thornley in his book, but behind the scenes many M.G. successes in post-war years had his enthusiasm and help behind them. The following story covers only some of the events in which M.G. cars at least did not disgrace themselves. Those dealt with are limited mainly to production car races and naturally are reported from my point of view, and therefore I crave indulgence for any errors that may have crept into the text.

By mid-summer of 1949 George Phillips (AUTOSPORT chief photographer) and I had been sprinting, hill-climbing and racing at nearly all the events in this country; Phillips had run at Le Mans and we had both competed in the B.R.D.C. Manx Cup race in the Isle of Man. We were by now getting a little help—but not much encouragement—from the M.G. factory. We were given the impression that they thought push-rod and racing could never be successfully combined.

About this time the B.R.D.C. and the *Daily Express* started talking of a genuine production car race—genuine in the fullest sense of the word "catalogue".

George Phillips, and I agreed that although the catalogue M.G. TC was not up to the standards we were aiming at in our own cars, we should at least attempt to interest the works in this forthcoming production car race.

Many gallons of fuel were used to visit Abingdon during July and early August, and an almost equal amount of tea was consumed whilst discussing the prospects. Looking back now, it almost seems that it might have been the result of our efforts and much bullying of poor John Thornley which sowed the seeds of events to follow.

We pulled strings with Desmond Scannell, then secretary of the B.R.D.C., to keep entry lists open and generally made ourselves a nuisance to all and sundry: it was still touch and go whether or not M.G.s would be running 48 hours before the entries closed. Finally, to our delight, our entry was made by John Thornley personally on the very morning that entries closed. Three cars were accepted, and the drivers nominated were George Phillips, Ted Lund and myself.

The 1949 race was to be held at Silverstone on 20th August, using the full Grand Prix circuit, with a Le Mans-type start. The drivers received instructions to be at Abingdon at 8 a.m. on Thursday, 18th August. This, as is usual with motor racing, involved rising in the middle of the night. We arrived on time at the

factory and saw the three cream M.G. TCs for the first time.

All the cars were identical in every respect and were strictly catalogue with no tuning whatsoever, and we were given no choice of vehicle; each driver was allocated a car complete with competition number and a mechanic to nurse us, with Alec Hounslow as chief. Much to our disgust we were told to drive in convoy with the three 2½-litre Rileys in competition numerical order through the city of Oxford on our way to Silverstone.

In practice we, that is, Ted Lund, George Phillips and I, were shaken by the really hectic manner in which the cars cornered.

We each did three laps at speed and clocked 2 mins. 38 secs. then were sent out again to see if we could improve; we finally managed to clip off 2 secs., *i.e.*, 2.36 (66.66 m.p.h.). An average lap of nearly 67 m.p.h. may sound slow today but in 1949 this was really not bad, when it is remembered that the standard TC definitely had very little hope of exceeding a genuine 75 m.p.h. especially on this short circuit with a prevailing wind head on along the only fast downhill stretch to Stowe Corner.

Our chief rivals in the 1,500 c.c. class were the H.R.G. team and we were alarmed to learn that that excellent driver Eric Thompson, Peter Clarke and John Buncombe had from five to eight seconds better times than ours.

There followed a period of suggestions, arguments and general dissatisfaction in which everyone, including John Thornley, the mechanics and the drivers all got hot under the collar. Nothing was settled, the cars were taken back to

TOURIST TROPHY 1951 (above) Dick Jacobs (50) leads away the M.G.s from the start. On the left is Ted Lund (51) and behind Brian McCaldin (52) and George Phillips (53).



THE TEAM. John Thornley with his drivers of the 1949, '50 and '51 seasons—Dick Jacobs (left), Ted Lund (second from left) and George Phillips (right).

the works, and we came home a very miserable lot.

I must give John Thornley credit for the fact that nothing would move him to do anything which was contrary to the catalogue specification. Personally, I had a very restless night trying to scheme out a way of improving the road-holding, as I was certain that better times could only be found on the corners, if tuning was forbidden. On the Friday, by the time we arrived at Silverstone—this time in my own M.G. special—I had a plan in mind which was within the wording or meaning of the regulations.

After much persuasion, John Thornley agreed to this experiment on my car and said he would be interested to note the improvement, if any.

The car and mechanics were whisked away behind a farm shed, all the springs lagged with insulation tape, the 4.50 x 19 ins. wheels and tyres removed and the 17 ins. wheels were fitted off the special, giving 4.50 x 17 ins. tyres front and 5.00 x 17 ins. rear. It is interesting to note here that all three cars required a new offside front, i.e., inside of circuit, tyre after eight laps on Thursday's practice.

We were all sent out again and I was instructed to do two laps steady to get the feel of things and to try hard on the third lap. On completion of this lap the entire pit staff frantically waved me down and I was not allowed out again; 2 mins. 27 secs.—9 secs faster than the previous day, average 70.74 m.p.h. and this was second fastest in the class to E. Thompson (H.R.G.) who did 2.24.

This started a country-wide search for smaller wheels for Ted Lund and George Phillips, but although a supply of 4 x 16 ins. wheels for the rear was produced and they taped their springs, they had to run on normal front tyres.

Eventually the great day dawned, the flag dropped and off we went with much cutting and carving at Woodcote corner. I really forget how we came round at the end of the first lap, but I remember we were mixed up with several cars

including Peter Clarke and Buncombe in H.R.G.s. When we finally settled down I found, after about 30 minutes, that I was receiving a rude pit signal from Freddie Crossley, my personal assistant at all these meetings, and it took several minutes to sink in that he meant I was second in class.

I gathered afterwards that we were gradually catching Eric Thompson's H.R.G.; unfortunately I later took the left hand sweep into Beckett's flat out in top, just got positioned for the right hand corner and when I lifted my foot the pedal stayed down. I was travelling fairly rapidly and having very little choice of action I took the straw bales on the outside, fair and square with the front.

However, we all finished and the M.G.s were fifth, sixth and seventh, having each covered nearly 70 miles in the hour.

I was full of apologies to John Thornley for bending the M.G., but he was most kind and consoling over it all. The mechanics had to force the drop-arm off the steering box and move it round two splines in order to get the car home; it was later found to have twisted the sector shaft in the steering box.

The most amazing thing about all this was J. Thornley's pleasure at the three

cars having finished—nearly 70 m.p.h. at that!—as they were the most standard sports cars in the race and were complete with all equipment including screens.

We were never certain what eventually happened to them but they were three jolly good TCs.

Around the end of October we discovered that there was a queer-looking M.G. two-seater in existence at Abingdon which resembled a cut-down, open top, two-seater version of the 1½-litre saloon, and after a few leading questions had been fired at those in command, Phillips was given the job of trying it out one day.

When I next saw Phillips he was full of the amazing two-leading shoe brakes and all the things he liked, also lots of rude remarks about the things for which he did not care.

This was the first series M.G. TD!

By now the famous (or should it be notorious?) M.G. tuning handbook, which was drawn up primarily for the U.S.A. market, had received a lot of publicity in the motoring journals, and this is the point at which Syd Enever and Reg Jackson first appeared on the post-war racing scene. They had always, since the war, been interested in Goldie Gardner's efforts, but were not responsible for anything on the TCs.

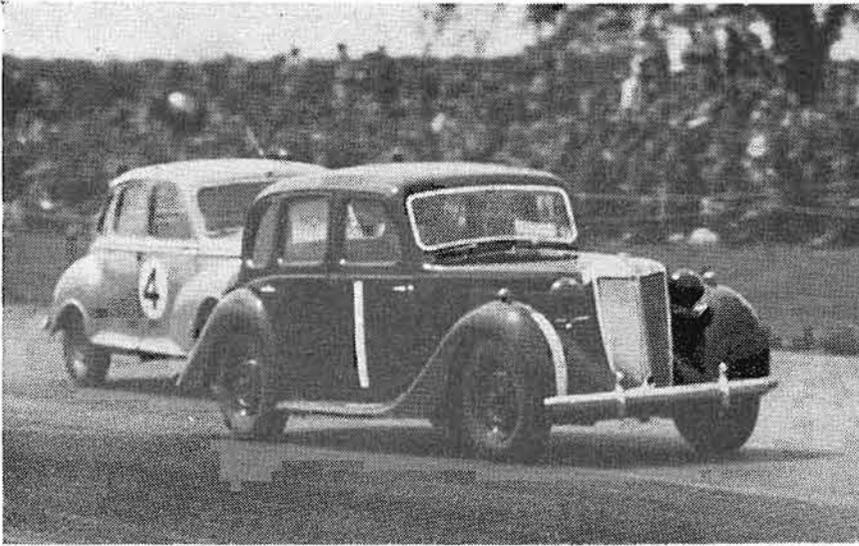
We—that is Phillips and I—continued to worry John Thornley during the winter, and when the TD was announced, we pressed for some idea as to what was likely to happen regarding a team for the production car race and, of course, the T.T. which had been announced as also being for production vehicles.

Fairly early in March, 1950, John Thornley invited George Phillips and me to lunch with him at Abingdon; on arrival he told Phil to ride with him in a Riley, and I was to follow in a specially-tuned, cream-coloured TD which had 8.6 to 1 compression ratio and went like a ding-bat on Pool without pinking.

On arrival at a very nice hotel some 25 miles away I was completely out of breath and so was the TD. Poor John Thornley was quite disappointed with my remarks about the thing and promptly decided to take it back himself—after



SILVERSTONE 1951: Dick Jacobs on his way to winning the 1,500 c.c. class of the Production Car race at the Daily Express meeting in the M.G. YA saloon.



SILVERSTONE 1952: The Production Car race of the Daily Express meeting, when Jacobs again won the 1½-litre class, in an M.G. YB. Here he leads second placeman W. Bennett (Javelin).

lunch. On a nice part of the Oxford by-pass, Phillips, driving the Riley, went past him so fast that John nearly got out, thinking he had stopped.

This run in a tuned TD was followed by cups of tea once more and long discussions between the three of us in John's office and after pulling the car to pieces verbally we returned home rather down-in-the-mouth.

Once more I gave the discussion considerable thought and sent off a long letter with recommendations as to what I thought should and should not be done.

Briefly, as a result, they fitted bucket seats, Andrex dampers, a sports coil, 8.6 to 1 c.r., aero screen and a tonneau cover, air scoops on the brakes at the front and drilled holes in the wheels. I cannot remember everything but it was reputed to be a vastly improved car.

I finally talked John Thornley into allowing me to borrow this car, FMO 885, for the Blandford production car race in which it was eligible to compete, as the regulations allowed stages of tune, as in the official tuning book, but cars had to run on Pool provided by the club (at competitors' expense).

This event was on Whit Monday, 29th May, which involved practice on Saturday. Everything went off O.K. on the Saturday except that the scrutineers, whilst passing the car, could not agree that the sports coil was permissible. This I undertook to change before the race. On the Bank Holiday Monday, as objections were raised, not by the Morgan or

H.R.G. drivers, but by another M.G. driver, the organizers decided I should be permitted to race but in the unlikely event of winning a class award the M.G. Car Company would be asked for a letter stating that six identical models fitted with Andrex shock absorbers had been made and sold by 31st March, as required by the regulations.

My old rival and friend, Eric Thompson, in an H.R.G., had put up fastest lap in practice. As the road was very narrow he and I took the front row, cars being started in a long row of twos. The large capacity cars were started, I think, a minute before us and we had to move up on to the starting line with engines running.

The flag dropped and we were away with Thompson into the first corner just in front of the TD. This first corner has a very acute adverse camber and the only safe way to take it is close in all the way round. It is immediately followed by a steep downhill section, then over a flattened-out bridge—an equally steep uphill stretch about 500 to 600 yards long.

By virtue of the 5½ to 1 rear axle in the TD I was able to pass Thompson's H.R.G. up the hill, but his lighter weight and better gearing pulled him out of the next right-hand corner just quick enough to run alongside for about a quarter

MIDDLE of the pack at Silverstone 1952. Jacobs follows a Riley and a Bristol, and leads an A.C. and a Sunbeam Talbot.

mile where he pulled in front with a slightly better maximum speed. I slipped in behind him all the way down to the notorious Engineers' Corner and was very surprised to see from his stop lamp that he was braking very early. Gradually he pulled away from me and as we passed the pits he was about 40 yards ahead.

I knew by then that I must repeat my passing act on the climb up the other side of the bridge or lose him. This I almost managed, but rather than hog the corner at the end I gave way to Eric but hung on to him uncertain of what to do next. I am not sure what made me do it, but as we approached Engineers' I suddenly saw the stop lamp on the H.R.G. so I took a chance and nipped past on the inside. Eric Thompson then followed me through the twisting section in the army village, round the right-hand corner into the pits straight where he made a determined bid to get to the first corner in front—it was really my corner and I was on the inside and so we went into it together. The last I saw of Eric was the H.R.G. careering through the bushes on the outside of the course. He regained the road but was some 27 secs. behind me on the 10th lap and the TD was able to win the class.

The M.G. Car Co., Ltd., were pleased but regretted that they could not say that six cars had been fitted with extra dampers by the date required, consequently Thompson got the award after all and I was presented with a souvenir.

The entire development staff were at Blandford hiding in the beer tent trying to appear disinterested in the private entry, but after the race they came out in the open and proceeded to celebrate their first TD success.

Naturally, we learned a lot; one complaint was the complete absence of foot brake after about six laps (I actually used the hand for every corner). This was overcome by a change of linings and the use of Lockheed racing fluid. After this, certain improvements were suggested to J.T. including the use of 1½ ins. carburettors and, most important of all, the company decided to produce a team, three cars for the T.T. and Silverstone.

(To be continued)

