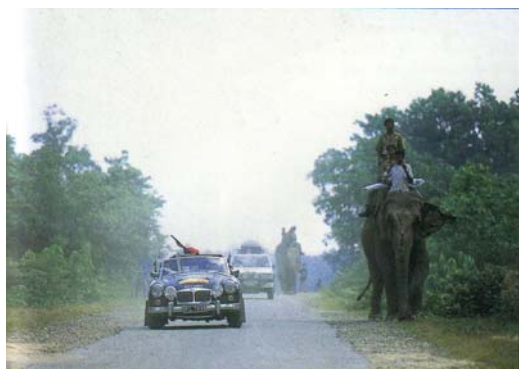


**I**n September 1997 ninety six classic cars set out to mark the ninetieth anniversary of the original 1907 Peking to Paris Rally. Support mechanic Mike Leahy, an MGC owner and enthusiast, followed the fate of the two competing MGs as they battled against the elements to finish the gruelling ten thousand mile event.

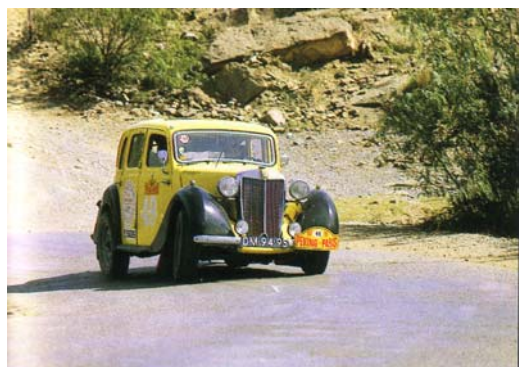
The Peking to Paris classic car challenge was a tough event covering 10,000 miles of poorly surfaced roads in seven weeks. During this period the rally passed through the contrasting and often striking terrain of 11 countries including the high mountain passes of Tibet and the scorching deserts of Pakistan. Ultimately a Willys Jeep won the rally incurring only 17 minutes in penalties. It was followed by two huge Ford Club Coupes separated by a much modified



*MGA passing through the Royal Bharida National Park flanked by elephants*



*The Wong MGA emerging from a Nepalese river crossing*



*The YB climbing the Bolan Pass in Pakistan*

Ford Cortina. Other top twenty finishers included a brace of Holdens, a selection of Mercedes, a Land Rover and an Aston Martin DB5 with ground clearance of Range Rover proportions. In contrast to these large and sometimes heavily uprated vehicles were two diminutive MGs, an MGYB special piloted by Lisa Klokgieters-Lankers and a 1954 MGA roadster crewed by the fanatic Wong family of Malaysia.

The little MGYB special was a very potent device, the standard 1250cc engine having been replaced with a 1622cc MGA unit and front brakes converted to discs, also sourced from an MGA. This gives the car a top speed in excess of eighty miles an hour and lively acceleration with brakes to match. Cautioned for speeding and subject to a disciplinary hearing after knocking over a rally official, the enthusiastic Ms Klokgieters-Lankers finally coaxed the little saloon into Paris in fortieth place overall and seventh in class. By this time the vehicle was running on modified Toyota Corolla big end shells after one or two mechanical crises.

The bright-yellow YB first broke down on the remote roof-of-the-world section in Tibet. This was a potentially disastrous location to falter as there was no prospect of finding a local workshop. The incident proved to be a source of embarrassment to co-driver, James Wheildon; indeed he cites it at his worst moment of the rally. All the vehicles in the event were affected to some extent by the extreme altitude, 5,200 metres (17,000ft) at some points but the little MG was also suffering from a misfire. This was later thought to be caused by a distributor problem. A misdiagnosis caused in part by the debilitating effects of high altitude was initially made and ultimately the cylinder head was removed. Up until this point the car had been well up the field, reaching fifteenth place overall. Eventually the engine was re-assembled, the genuine fault remedied and the car carried on for another three thousand miles until well into Iran. Here, after the crew had fought their way back up to thirteenth place, the car suffered a major engine problem when one of the big ends gave up the ghost. The local mechanics and engineers were extremely helpful in Iran and potential disaster was averted when an engineering shop ground just three thousandths of an inch from the crankshaft and equipped the con-rod with Toyota Corolla shells. Whilst a little narrower than the originals, the bearings fitted well and thus equipped the car was driven to Paris, other problems were limited to leaking rear axle oil seals and a holed fuel tank.

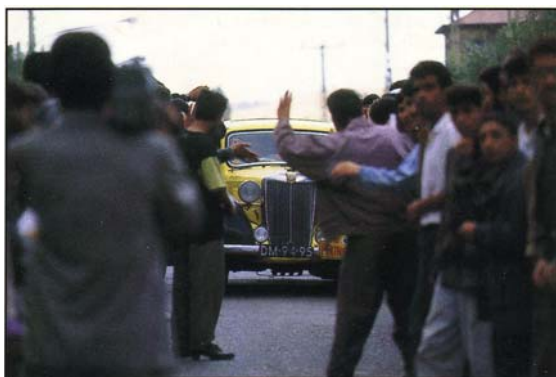
On the face of it the MGA appeared to be one of the less suitable cars for the Peking to Paris Challenge, because while others were running on raised suspension and high profile, armoured tyres as advised by the Classic Rally Association, the smart dark blue MGA was lowered with aluminium coil over telescopic shock absorbers at the front and wide, low profile tyres. There was also very little room for kit, a major handicap when crews were expected to be self-sufficient, carrying tents and sleeping bags. If the car was easily overlooked it was impossible not to notice Mr Wong, a pipe smoking Chinese Malaysian who had built up a successful aluminium fabrication business in Kuala Lumpur. Standing

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*MGYB on the Tibet Highway*

about five foot six tall with a characteristic wispy beard, he oozed enthusiasm, eyes constantly flickering this way and that. Spitting out words like a Gatling gun, he rarely stood still. Often provocative, sometimes whimsical and occasionally astute, there was no ignoring Wong. When he requested camel steroids from the rally doctor in order to maintain stamina throughout the long drive, it was impossible to decide if he was serious or not. Consequently he was furnished with a packet of re-labelled Smarties by Rick Bate one of the rally paramedics. Likewise when off guard one never knew when they would be the subject of another light-hearted surprise attack Wong would pick his moment and leap onto the unsuspecting victim



*The MGYB passing through village in the middle east surrounded by enthusiastic observers*

## The Peking to Paris story

The original Peking Paris rally of 1907 was very different to the 1997 event. Only five cars competed and they followed a more northerly route to that of 1997, passing through much of the former USSR. The race was eventually won by Prince Borghese in a seven litre Itala, his prize, a magnum of Champagne. In order to reach Paris, large areas were covered without the aid of roads or fuel stops and petrol had to be bought in by pack animals.

Laying on a Kenyan beach in 1993, Philip Young, chairman of the Classic Rally Association, was inspired by the 'The Mad Motorists', a book by Allen Andrews which described the 1907 Peking to Paris race. The idea of the second Peking to Paris challenge was born. Like the 1907 race the 1997 event was a major logistical achievement, largely because of the number of competitors and the quantity of border crossings. The route, over ten thousand miles long, passed through China, Tibet, Nepal, India, Pakistan and Iran and included the highest roads in the world. Fuel was bought to the Tibetan plateau in large bowsers and accommodation had to be arranged in the smallest of communities but perhaps Philip Young's most striking achievement was the opening of the Friendship bridge on the border between China and Nepal specially for the event. Before the rally the border had remained closed for many years.

manner of Kato, Peter Sellers' companion in the Pink Panther films. Mr Wong's wife had decided not to accompany him on this rally. It was too long and living conditions were not always comfortable so Mr Wong's son and two daughters were recruited. Sadly due to crew change regulations this meant that the car had to compete in the touring class rather than the more competitive classes.

Mr Wong's only mechanical failure on the Peking-Paris Challenge was in Xigatze, Tibet. Whilst the MGA was immaculately prepared by highly skilled Malaysian mechanics, the front suspension (fitted against the advice of Philip Young) was not best suited to the nine inch ruts, mud and boulders of the Tibetan plateau. Due to a particularly heavy impact one of the rock hard aluminium Moss shock absorbers had collapsed, the front of the car dropping so low that steering was rendered impossible. The telescopic shock absorber conversion was well designed and engineered however it was not intended for the rigours of cross country driving in the third world. Fulfilling my role as a rally support mechanic I lent a hand. After sawing through the badly bent chrome plated push rod at 4,000 metres (over 13,000 ft) above sea level I was seeing stars and gasping for breath, the effects of the altitude being exacerbated by the copious amounts of Chinese beer supplied by Wong.

Overall the MGA coped well in the conditions encountered on the rally with relatively few modifications. Following Philip Young's advice, a torquey 1.8 litre MGB engine adjusted to cope with poor quality fuel and high altitudes was fitted also a thick aluminium plate to guard the sump allowing the MG to 'sledge' across thick mud. Otherwise modifications were limited to roll bar and seat belts.

The only other mishap to hit the Wong team was a navigational error by May Lyn Wong who failed to

remove a cancelled Greek stage from the road book. After a scenic tour around Olympia the MGA arrived at the ferry crossing to Italy with minutes to spare. May Lyn hid behind our support truck whilst a visibly angry Mr Wong sat at the wheel of the MGA contemplating the fate of the crew were the ferry to have left without them. Whilst the crew were not awarded any extra points for completing the whole course neither did they incur punitive penalties and they arrived in Paris only two hours and eight minutes adrift. In comparison many of the 'serious contenders' had earned days in penalties. Had the Wongs not been required to run in the touring category they may well have finished in the top ten overall and somewhere near the top of their class.

Of the competing ninety six cars, eighty two finished. This belies the fact that many 'survivors' had been trailered very long distances. It was not unusual to see a convoy of trucks carrying a selection of Rolls Royces, Packards, Buicks and Aston Martins. Major breakdowns were often overcome by considerable effort and also in many cases, massive amounts of money. It is a great testament to the MGs and their crews that two such basic little cars finished the arduous marathon event under their own steam. That they did so well against competing cars that had cost anything up to a quarter of a million pounds to prepare is a great credit to the marque MG. Indeed the MGA is still working as a runabout and fun car in Malaysia. Now Wong is planning a tour of America and Canada, spanning two countries in the same car. As in the Peking Paris rally, during which Wong raised over a quarter of a million Malaysian dollars for charity, the proceeds will be donated to the Rumah Hope orphanage.

**Mike Leahy**

Photographs by Mike Johnson of the Classic Rally Association



*Lisa Klokgieters-Lankers in her MGYB storms through the desert*



## The Classic Rally Association

The Classic Rally Association held its first event, the Pirelli Classic Marathon in 1988 attracting big names such as Stirling Moss in the first ever transcontinental classic rally. Over the ensuing years the event has been followed by further classic rallies and the organisation now runs the Monte Carlo Challenge, Classic Cup and Classic Marathons annually. This year the Classic Marathon will be held in Morocco. Other events such as the Peking to Paris are organised as one off events and in the year 2,000 a major round the world adventure is planned. The Classic Rally Association can be contacted on (01235 851291)

**PEKING TO PARIS**

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