

Going the Distance

Andrew Coulson has driven his YA to the Hebrides, Holland and France and even competed in the Monte Carlo Classic. Can a 60 year old MG handle such use and abuse?

Words and pictures: Rob Hawkins



I don't abuse it,' comments Andrew Coulson on how he drives and uses his 1951 XPAG powered YA. 'I wouldn't compete in a hill climb for instance, but it's been on a 450 mile round trip to Kent and back in a day.' And why not? During the 1940s and 1950s, the Y-Type saloons and Tourers were used by many families as their daily transport. Despite pre-war body styling (it was designed in the late 1930s, but war delayed the release of it until 1947), the mechanical components of these cars were ahead of the competition. Take the Y-Type's

independent front suspension, which was a first for the Nuffield Group and was designed by Alec Issigonis (who went on to create the Mini) and MG's draughtsman Jack Daniels. Using a crossmember with coil springs, Girling dampers and upper and lower wishbones, the same essential design was used throughout the TD, TF, MGA, MGB and RV8.

Other modern components for the Y-Types included rack and pinion steering instead of a steering box, allowing right and left hand drive models to be produced (Y-Type Tourers were officially only available for export, but in both LHD and RHD form). The brakes were hydraulically operated, with

drums and leading shoes all round.

The star of the Y-Types was undoubtedly its XPAG 1250cc engine mated to a four speed gearbox. This overhead valve engine provided adequate performance in the Y-Type saloon, producing 46bhp at 4800rpm with a single SU carburettor. The same engine had been fitted to the TC with twin carburettors and so the Y-Type Tourer followed suit, enabling its power output to be raised to 54.4bhp.

Aside from the basic Y-Type design, the attention to detail and features is just as impressive. There are wind down windows on all four doors of the saloon and a wind out

windscreen (the Tourer's windscreen can fold down, allowing flies in your face motoring). The windscreen wipers on the saloon can be manually operated or controlled via a motor, whereby one or both wipers can be operated. The steering column is adjustable fore and aft, and the driver's seat can be similarly moved forwards and backwards.

The spare wheel is tucked away inside its own compartment, underneath the substantial boot. And there's no need to carry a jack, thanks to a hydraulic Jackall system. This consists of four rams to raise the corners of the vehicle via a hydraulic pump unit located under the bonnet. Using a detachable handle, the

Above: A setting to suit the car - MG Y-Types were always a rather classy option.



Above: The styling may look a little antiquated, but the YA's ride and handling were bang up to date.

darkness in a garage that looked too small to fit even the compact dimensions of the YA.

The YA wasn't the Coulsons' first foray into MGs. Andrew's wife, Arlene, had succumbed to a 1978 rubber bumpered BGT a couple of years earlier. The couple have since added to their collection with a Y-Tourer, a Y-Type modified into a pickup and an everyday MGF, but if pushed a bit they admit that the top of their classic wish list is a pre-war Lagonda. Sadly they have found that neither their garage nor their bank balance could accommodate one.

Since 1996, Andrew and Arlene's YA has been kept on the road continuously, with the only exceptions being periods in rebuild. The first major work was brought about by a sheared crankshaft one Sunday evening. 'The subsequent examination revealed how much in need of a full rebuild the YA's engine was,' Andrew recalls. 'The job was given to XPAG specialist Peter Edney in his then Selby premises, along with an unleaded conversion and a new steel racing crankshaft. We collected the car from Selby on a Thursday, and 48 hours later left in it for a trip to Islay and Jura!'

In 1999, Andrew and Arlene took part in the Monte Carlo Challenge, which starts at Brooklands and takes place during winter (quite a challenge in a car without a heater). The YA in general doesn't have a particularly successful history of



Above: 1250cc XPAG engine was rebuilt in 1998 after the crank sheared, and has done well since.

front, rear or all the jacks can be operated to raise the vehicle. The standard of trim boasts leather upholstery, a wooden dash and individual ash trays for both driver and passenger. In the saloon, there's even a sliding sunroof.

Sadly, the Y-Type had a short production life, probably thanks to its delayed release and consequently dated looks. Sales commenced in 1947 and despite updates to the model resulting in the later YB, production ceased in 1953. The Tourer's production life was even shorter, starting in 1948 and finishing in 1950. Total sales of all Y-Types was recorded at a mere 8336. Nowadays, a YA or YB restoration project will cost at least £3000 and a roadworthy example in need of some TLC is at least double that figure. Recently completed projects or original examples of the saloon are now starting to demand a five figure sum.

Saloon Touring

The YA pictured here was bought by Andrew Coulson in 1996 for £4200, having been substantially restored at a cost of £4300 (excluding labour) by its previous owner. The bodywork, interior trim (except rear seats), electrical items, brakes, suspension and instruments had all been done, leaving the engine and drivetrain untouched. 'The car had an MoT and was delivered with a boot full of essential spares,' comments Andrew, whose first challenge was to park it in December

completing this event. Records show the first YA was entered in 1950 with an all-female crew. Sadly, they only completed some 100 miles before crashing. The following year, Major and Mrs Pownall completed the event in their YA, finishing 45th overall. This was to be the only successful completion of the rally in a Y-Type, so the Coulsons were under pressure.

The now Classic Monte Carlo is still a challenging event. Competitors have to carry their own spares, need to drive throughout the night during some stages and be able to decipher the route book, which consists of a series of road numbers, some of which are wrong and others which have been changed. 'Among the key preparations was locating severely knobbly tyres for the 16in YA wheels,' comments Andrew. 'Arlene located these in Northern Germany and a set of five was shipped over for the car. The treads proved almost miraculous, there being no occasion when we needed snow chains and the YA easily cruised past lines of frantically spinning competitors with poorer tyres and inadequate chains.'

A fair share of trivial as well as major incidents followed during the 1900-mile rally, most of which was in sub-zero temperatures with large parts driven on packed snow and ice. 'We followed a 4.5L Bentley tourer in which the navigator (a senior gentleman) was seen to be literally standing on the rear bumper while bouncing to improve traction!' remarks Andrew.

Unfortunately, disaster struck near Aix-les-Bains when descending a mountain pass (the Col du Granier at 1134m). 'The previously three synchro 'box lost synchromesh, and gear

choice became limited to first, reverse and occasionally fourth,' comments Andrew. 'Draining the gear oil showed slivers of roller bearings and a phone call confirmed that the lay gear had disintegrated. A replacement gearbox was located in Selby, flown out by DHL and then fitted by a small rally-friendly garage in Aix-les-Bains, who for some reason kept throwing me out every time I tried to help!'

Well behind schedule, but technically still in fifth place for their class, Andrew and Arlene re-routed to join the main body of the Rally, catching the pack in darkness at a service station overlooking Monaco. They completed the Monte Carlo Rally, finishing unclassified overall, having been unable to make a key check point before it closed because of the gearbox failure.

Undeterred by the gearbox problem, Andrew and Arlene have continued to tour in their YA, visiting Holland, Brittany and completing several club runs around the UK from St David's in Wales to islands in the Hebrides. Andrew doesn't flinch at the prospect of driving his YA from the north of Skye in Scotland to his home in North Yorkshire in one day; a total of 350 miles. 'It's a lovely run,' he says, 'although having the throttle return spring break while careering through Glencoe made one of our trips a bit more memorable. Having pulled across the oncoming traffic to a safer stopping place, I was joined by excited Japanese tourists from their tour bus who



Above: Andrew Coulson, at the wheel of the Y-Type that he says will never be sold.



Above: Andrew has added flashing indicators to his YA since most drivers do not notice the semaphore arms.



Above: Steering column has telescopic adjustment that combines with seat movement to ensure you get comfy.



Above: Chrome headlamps set either side of the radiator and sidelamps on the wings in the best pre-war tradition. >



Above: Control knobs allow one or both windscreen wipers to be operated manually or electrically.



Above right: Essential items for the 1940s and 1950s included dashboard mounted ashtrays for both driver and passenger.

Below : 16in wheels and shallow rear wings mark the YA out from the YB with its 15in wheels.

seemed to prefer the under-bonnet views of an XPAG to the Pap of Glencoe. The trick when replacing the spring – if you’ve remembered to carry one of course – is to avoid burning your knuckles on the block while explaining the workings of the car to the many video cameras being fielded by non-English speaking spectators...’

MG YA Specification

- Year:** 1951
- Engine:** 1250cc XPAG OHV with single 1¼in SU semi-downdraught carburettor, alloy inlet manifold, cast iron exhaust manifold
- Gearbox:** Four speed manual with no synchromesh on first gear
- Brakes:** Hydraulic single circuit system with single leading shoe drums all round
- Front suspension:** Independent coil springs with integral hydraulic lever arm dampers
- Rear suspension:** Semi-elliptic leaf springs interleaved with rubber, lever arm dampers and a Panhard rod
- Chassis:** Shaped steel box ladder frame with tubular transverse members and a pressed steel front suspension crossmember
- Bodywork:** Pressed steel panels and tub with coach built doors
- Modifications:** Front and rear mounted indicators, Land Rover Series I headlights
- Wheels:** Five stud 5.25x16in diameter steel wheels

Other problems have sometimes been similarly easy to fix. Loss of the oil dipstick tube while driving to Dover required no more than an unobtrusive hammering in of a replacement. Water ingress around the windscreen/bulkhead is a common problem in the Y-Type, resolved by carrying waterproof trousers. But aside from problems en route, Andrew hasn’t neglected his YA and in 2004 it was resprayed. The sills have also been replaced, the front suspension rebuilt and the brakes overhauled. Other aspects of the YA have been modernised, so the trafficators have been replaced with flashing indicators, the headlights uprated with sealed beam units from the Series I Land Rover and a heatshield fitted between the SU carburettor and exhaust manifold to cure fuel vaporisation.

Andrew has discovered a particular approach to driving his Y-Type. ‘I now stick to around 55mph,’ he says. ‘The engine starts to use oil at 60-70mph. Whilst the brakes are acceptable if used with forethought and frequency, the tendency for modern drivers to rush past the YA and then pull in too tightly in front of us does make for some prayerful drives on motorways.’ Having said that, Andrew finds his YA has very positive and direct steering and the suspension is firm enough to keep you in contact with the contours of the road without seriously damaging either the car’s or the driver’s rear end. ‘The YA has a tendency to roll slightly more than the later YB, which benefits from an additional anti-roll bar,’ he adds.

With a fleet of old cars to play with, the YA is the one that will never be sold. ‘You’ll have to wait until the will is read to see where she goes next,’ remarks Andrew. In the meantime, he and Arlene still have a few more Scottish islands to visit, and are now planning a drive to Rome. Ⓜ

