

Dick Jacobs making the most of the Special's agility at a very wet Goodwood.



Again at Goodwood, this time in the 1500cc class of the Johnson Trophy Race...

Last Y-type is so special

When Dick Jacobs was given the very last Y-type chassis by John Thornley at Abingdon, he set about building something rather special to take out on track. Words & photographs: Dave Bowers

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or both road and competition use, the 1950s was the era of the lightweight special, a time when enthusiasts took matters into their own hands and built their own performance sports cars. They used a chassis and mechanical parts borrowed from production models, then added a lightweight body of their own design made of fibreglass or alloy that did much to improve the power to weight ratio.

The late Dick Jacobs needs little introduction owing to his success in motorsport, both as a works MG driver and also as a privateer for the Abingdon marque. After campaigning his TA Midget for many years in various states of tune, Dick was provided with a works MG TD for its racing debut, and he also rallied and raced his own MG YB with considerable success. Dick is also remembered for a day which didn't go so well and which ended his impressive racing career; he was one of the three works drivers entered for the 1955 Le Mans driving EX182 prototype MGAs, but he crashed sustaining major injuries in an event overshadowed by the tragic Mercedes accident that claimed so many lives.

Dick did much to advance MG's sporting credentials through his friendship with John Thornley and Syd Enever, a mutually advantageous relationship which resulted in MG's competition department building up a couple of lightweight Midgets for Dick's racing team in 1962. These then achieved many notable successes in the hands of capable drivers such as Andrew Hedges and Alan Foster.

There's every possibility that the inspiration for the lightweight Midgets, which featured alloy panels, a streamlined bonnet and a GT tail, owed its origins to a special which Dick built for his own use to a similar formula in the early 1950s. The Dick Jacobs Special, as featured here, was based on an MG YB saloon chassis, and this car has recently returned to the racetrack in MGCC and VSCC events following a sympathetic restoration by Stuart Dean of Blisworth, Northants.

Stuart, who has a long history of racing an MG TA behind him, explained how the one-off Dick Jacobs Special came his way: 'I knew about this car from 30 years ago when it was owned by David Rouse. He used the car to compete in MGCC race meetings after buying it in 1972. I can remember seeing it advertised in Exchange and Mart earlier that year for not all that much money, and recall thinking, "What the hell's that!"

'I was racing my T-type at the time, so David and I were competing in the same events. During the week, David's wife used the Special as her road car, although it was subsequently retired from both track and road use after a few seasons, remaining in a stripped down state for the next 17 years, which is when I came across the car in 2005. By that time I was competing in Howard McGuire's Playford MG [see MGE, Oct '06 - Ed], a car that always reminded me of the Dick Jacobs Special, which prompted me into giving David a call to see what had happened to this car.'

Stuart was pleased when David announced that the car, still in stripped down state, was surplus to requirements, as it was blocking up the garage. Following brief negotiations, he bought the car a few months later in March 2006. Normally, an MG with a heritage linked to someone as famous as Dick Jacobs would command a fairly hefty price, although the agreed purchase sum was reasonable bearing in mind the car's race-worn condition. Stuart recalls: 'It was obvious quite a lot of work would be



DICK JACOBS' Y-TYPE

needed on the bodywork, as the fibreglass was damaged. What's more, the chassis frame was out of shape due to a collision which hadn't been repaired all that well.'

That fibreglass body was bonded onto the tubular support frame with epoxy resin. Dick had fabricated the body at his MG dealership, Mill Garage in South Woodford, London, laying on sheets of epoxy coated fibreglass over the welded support steel frame. Stuart appraised the condition of the YB based chassis, numbered 1551, the very last to be built and which MG had donated to Dick Jacobs for the project around 1953.

Stuart recalled: 'The first major task we had to face was the need to cut off the front of the main crossmember, as the suspension mounts were out of true by 20mm. I knew something was seriously wrong when we attempted trial fitting the bonnet. This damage must have been the result of a fair old shunt! Following the collision damage, welding repairs had been made, but without taking any account of the chassis being out of line. So finding a replacement front section of the chassis became my next task. The tubular frame that supports the body hadn't added much to the car's structural rigidity; this all rested with the YB chassis. Alan Smith, who's a retired welder, offered to help me out, and he cut off the front crossmember and straightened and repaired the chassis legs, and then welded in a replacement section of a Y-type chassis that Frank Vautier, of Y-type racing fame, kindly gave to me.'

A few repairs were also required to the birdcage-type support frame, which involved bonding this into place over the frame members using Dick's original method employing coats of epoxy resin. Stuart also attended to any cracks or crazing in the fibreglass bodyshell, although some minor imperfections dated back to the car's original construction and were too difficult to eradicate. After concluding that these would be particularly noticeable with the dark blue paintwork that the car was then wearing, this dictated a change of colour to a lighter shade that wouldn't show up any distortions in the overall shape of the bodyshell. Stuart chose a pale pastel green colour, a choice which aptly matches the 1950s era as it was used for the Citroën 2CV in 1960 and which was dictated by Stuart's other sporting passion, racing a spindly Deux Cheveaux!

From the outset, Stuart was determined that the Special would be used competitively once more, so choosing a suitably modified engine became the next serious consideration. Replicating an engine to the same specification that Dick Jacobs had used would have provided the ideal solution. However, Stuart was aware that Dick popped engines in and out of his cars and changed the state of tune with the same regularity as some of us change our shirts, with supercharging even being employed at one stage. Since there were no firm guidelines to follow on this particular account, Stuart accepted that he had a free hand in this matter, and adopted a few period XPAG engine modifications that he felt were in the spirit of the times and the car's sporting MG heritage.

'The original engine that the car came with was very tired, which didn't bother me as I already had an XPAG block that had been bored out to 1350cc for a T-type racer,' Stuart explained. 'I then went to talk to George Edney of XPAG Engineering in Loughton, Essex, who provided valuable advice. Then Frank Vautier came along to assist George and myself to build up the engine with, among other things, a lightened flywheel, a reground cylinder head, new pistons, and also a new four-branch manifold as supplied by GRS of Brackley.'

'The car was then taken to Peter Baldwin's workshop and tested on a rolling road at Wimpole in Cambridgeshire to set up the engine, which now produced 118bhp at the flywheel. Quite a reasonable output for a 1350cc XPAG engine bearing in mind the standard unit produced just 54bhp!'

The suspension remains YB with lowered coils and leaf springs, although the rear suspension was adapted for radius arms and a Panhard rod set-up. New dampers were fitted at the rear, the front lever arm items were reconditioned and a couple of degrees of negative camber were given to the front wheels after trial runs indicated choppiness through corners at speed. This was fully eradicated at the fourth attempt in getting the suspension set-up just so by removing several leaves from the rear springs and adjusting the ride height.

Stuart remarked: 'It was a bit of a clumsy lump until we got the suspension set up properly. Adding negative camber did the trick, removing any tendency to roll and keeping the wheels upright through the bends. Particularly as the car's so heavy at 780kg, which also meant that the brakes required quite a bit of attention. More stopping power was needed, so I fitted new alloy drums at the front and new YB brake parts all round.'

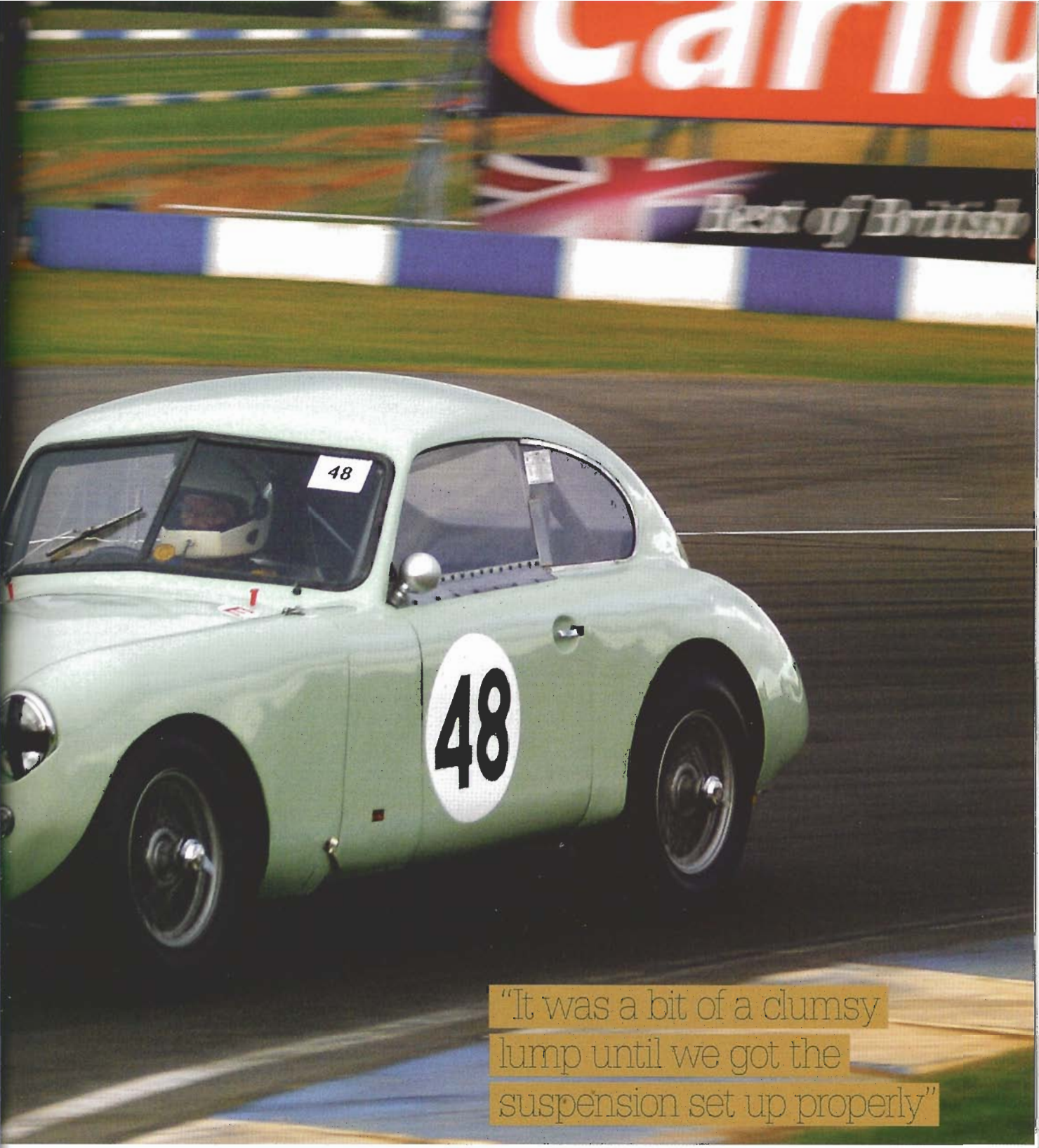
Dick completed the car in May 1954, although he did not use the car after the crash in the MGA prototype at Le Mans in 1955. Stuart



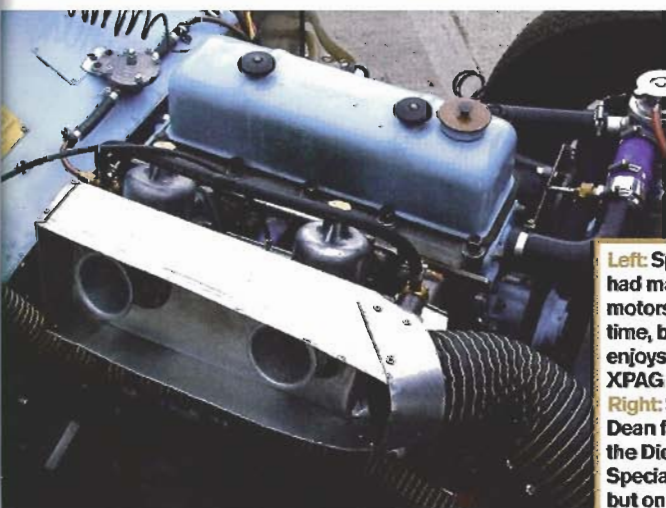
Above:
Fibreglass body and Y-type chassis mean this Special is too heavy to be truly competitive.

Below: Interior may be race-car spartan, but it is still far better finished than many specials of the era.





"It was a bit of a clumsy lump until we got the suspension set up properly"



Left: Special has had many motors in its time, but now enjoys 1350cc XPAG power.
Right: Stuart Dean first saw the Dick Jacobs Special in 1972, but only bought it in 2006.





Above: Original XNO 1 number is there for show after registration was transferred to a Volvo some time in the past.

commented: 'At 780kg, this car would have been no match for the much lighter Lotus 9 that Colin Chapman developed, which only weighed about half as much using the same XPAG engine. Dick did campaign the car though in the Johnson Trophy Race for sports cars against the likes of C-type and D-type Jaguars, also two major events at Goodwood, and the Silverstone Grand Prix sports car race. I understand that as a result of his terrible injuries at Le Mans, Dick promised his wife that he'd give up racing. That's when any further thoughts of development for the Special came to an end, and from then on, the car was simply laid up. What happened to it next is a bit of a mystery, but I do know that before David Rouse bought the car, it was owned by a couple of RAF members who used it in competition wearing an MGA grille, with replacement wheels fitted which most probably came off of an MGA Twin-Cam.'

Although outstripped by Chapman's Lotus, Dick had a few successes in the Special, as recalled in his autobiography, *An MG Experience*, which also explains how the car came into being. As Dick said: 'During 1953, we had undertaken at Mill Garage to build a fibreglass two-seater on a new M.G. TD chassis for a customer. As this drew near completion, the urge to own a competitive M.G. grew stronger. John Thornley, as usual, was most helpful and I finally took delivery of the last YB chassis to leave the M.G. factory. This was fitted with a 1500cc engine and Wolseley 6/80 front brakes. We had to modify the back plates to fit the YB as they had a wider diameter brake drum.'

Dick goes on to mention that the car was fitted with wire wheels and knock-off TD hubs (features that Stuart has restored to it), and pays tribute to Ken Keemer for much of the development work. He also relates that working with fibreglass caused lots of discomfort due to the itching that ensued from all the dust particles that filled the air.

In the car's first event, the BARC Goodwood Members' Meeting – Sports Car Handicap, Dick reported the car went well, and he entered the car in the 1500cc class of the 21-lap Johnson Trophy Race at Goodwood on Whitsunday 1954. This started off with a Le Mans start, and by the first corner, he achieved a class lead, but was shortly overtaken by Colin Chapman. Dick recalled in his book: 'I realised that the Lotus was about 500lbs lighter than the M.G. and as I was using the same engine I was

never going to beat him.'

Nevertheless, Dick's prowess at the wheel in the 1954 British Sports Car Race at Silverstone prompted the following comments in *Autosport*: 'Dick Jacobs' very DB2-looking saloon was surprisingly rapid and shot away from lighter machines, its driver taking a beautiful line through Stowe.'

The car's next outing was a one kilometre sprint held on July 4, 1954 that marked Independence Day at the USAF's Weathersfield base in Essex. It was organised by the AMOC with cars running in pairs against each other, and Dick won outright in the 1500cc class by beating a Porsche Super 90 into second place. He also won an award for the fastest MG of the day. The car also performed well in the BARC Members' Meeting at Goodwood on August 21 when entered for the Saloon Car Handicap, came third behind two Lotus race entrants in the Brighton Speed Trials and in spite of giving away 500cc when entered for the 2000cc class for a race at Snetterton, Dick came third.

Although Dick was well known for driving his competition cars to circuit events, Stuart doesn't intend to follow suit and the car's original registration is now there merely to add a touch of authenticity: XNO1 was transferred at some time or other and adorns a modern-day Volvo today after, as Stuart explains, someone bought the car at one stage simply because they wanted the number plate.

Dick initially installed a development prototype MGA TF1500 engine in his special, although as we have already noted a supercharger was fitted to one of the later engines he developed for the car. 'You have to admire Dick's approach,' said Stuart, 'he was quite a radical engineer. He also built up a TD with coil sprung rear suspension.'

Stuart concluded with a few words on the car's performance: 'It's not too bad at all on acceleration, as the last time I took it out, it managed to beat a two-litre AC Ace. The main thing I find is that you need to get the car up to speed as fast as you can, and then keep it there by taking every opportunity not to slow down.'

'I suppose it's quite competitive; I also beat a Cooper Monaco and a couple of Frazer-Nash Le Mans Replicas last year. And I kept up with the Elvas at Silverstone, although the brakes were rather marginal after a fast ten-lapper! I'd like to do more events for 1950s/1960s drum braked cars and next season, I'm hoping to take the car to the Spa or Dijon circuits.'

'What this car represents in a way is that a very large part of British sports car racing owes a debt to MG's XPAG engines, as they were used in so many of the specials that were built in the 1950s, such as Lotus, Cooper and Tojiero. And although this particular Special was ultimately outclassed in period even in the supremely capable hands of Dick Jacobs, I can well appreciate that like me, he derived a lot of enjoyment from developing the car and driving it at the limit.'

"I kept up with the Elvas, although the brakes were marginal after a ten lapper"