

Posed before Turin's impressive 18th century Basilica on the Superga mountain.

Hope for the new cars – including MG's 1¼ litre saloon – ran high in 1947, when Europe was still recovering from the ravages of war

MG Magazine's Editor recalls driving the then latest MG from England to Italy on a Continental trip, to assess Italy's innovative motor industry and to cover the first Mille Miglia for seven years
by John Dugdale

When it was first introduced in May of 1947 we simply knew the latest MG as the new 1¼-litre Saloon. We never called it the Y Type. All this nomenclature has become the fascination of the car collector and historian but it was not always an important factor at the time. Bugattis certainly were known by their type numbers and Jaguar had cottoned on to the marketing attraction from the SS100 into the Mark V and XK series. Nowadays collectors invariably refer to the Y or YA and the car is looked on as a rather rare, well equipped and likeable saloon with some innovative features for MG cars; and really that is just about what we thought of it at the time of its introduction all those 35 years ago.

MG had always been best known and best liked for its two-seater sports cars and it continued to live on the reputation of its 1930 to 1935 machines, the years of Abingdon's greatest creativity of such marvellous high performance cars indeed usually known by their type names of J2, L K, N, P and Q. Later from 1936 to 1939 the T Series, with their push-rod operated engines, took over and were not regarded in such high esteem. We found it hard to concede that the lower-revving, larger engined cars did the same job better than our overhead camshaft favourites, and were easier to build and maintain. But it was beginning to dawn because the works' trials teams with drivers Toulmin, Bastock, etc, immediately became as successful as ever.

As is well known, after the war, production started all over again with a slightly wider TC sports car which was destined to be the MG first to capture the American market; and the 1¼-litre was the first new saloon offering. Some of us had never really taken much notice of the MG saloons, yet they were very good looking and beautifully equipped. Lets face it, they were overshadowed by the success of the Jaguar line of 1½, 2½, and 3½ litre models. Yet the 'Y' seemed a genuine desire by MG to take a step forward in design with its independent front wheel suspension, one of the earliest among British cars and which was ahead of Jaguar. It was quite lavishly equipped for its price and to car journalists like myself — starved for new cars to write about and impatient with the postwar recovery — it was most welcome.

Anyway it was the writer's good fortune in June 1947 to take this new model on an extensive Continental run. It turned out to be an enjoyable and successful trip and really resulted from some business manoeuvring to find an excuse for a trip abroad again!

Objectives of the Trip

First there was the Mille Miglia revival, quite an event in itself, as the last remaining city-to-city road race which covered some 1000 miles from Brescia in the North of Italy to Rome and back. Italy had abandoned racing during WW2 only with the greatest reluctance. Seven years had gone by and the Italians were itching to get going again. Already there had been a couple of postponements from the usual opening of the season March date.

Second, Italy which had surrendered to the allies as early as 1943, was finally completely cleared of Germans by 1945, and ever since had been involved in a most surprising renaissance. All those wonderful independent machine shops in Turin and Milan and Modena sprang to life again. A long lead in special bodies was set by the two Farinas and by La Touring; and they even developed some entirely new makes of car such as Cisitalia and Ferrari. It was time someone from the victorious countries such as Britain - still locked in rationing of food, clothing and furnishings, etc. - had a careful look to see what was going on and what was to be learned.

So the writer went into executive attack at his magazine The Autocar on these three fronts. 1. We must cover the Mille Miglia revival. After all there were scarcely any international races to report. 2. There were things for the awakening Coventry industry to learn from the fast moving, less regulated Italian industry. 3. MG had just produced their first postwar saloon, which could be demonstrated on a quick dash across Europe.

Evidently there was not much resistance from managing editor E.J. Appleby nor from Editorial director Geoffrey Smith, the men who had to give their approval to what is now so rudely referred to as a 'junket'. It all fell into place and to my immense gratification John Thornley quickly found me a car and we began the then quite lengthy process of car documentations, Channel boat crossings, hotel reservations (a real struggle), even gas rationing coupons. We English were as keen to get back to the pleasures of France and of the Continent after the five year gap, as had been the case over a century before, after the 20 year gap of the Napoleonic wars!

What the 1¼-litre MG was like to drive

Four days were taken to cruise the 800 miles out to Turin because this particular new MG was scarcely run in at its 1500 miles. On the return it took three days, covering no fewer than 411 miles from the Italian border to Paris on

Tazio Nuvolari, champion of Italy and probably the greatest racing driver the world has ever known, eats a frugal supper before his late night start in the Mile Miglia



The new Cisitalia people were intrigued with our brand new 1¼ litre MG saloon. (L to R) Nuvolari, the Cisitalia race team leader who nearly won the 1000 Mile Race; Piero Dusio, the founder; with his chief engineer.



one. Remember these were not freeways or modern Auto-routes. They were the old Routes Napoleon at best, with width for just the two lanes and often with heavy camber. The MG 1½ proved fast and reliable for this kind of use. It could hurry, although it did not have a high maximum. With two persons, luggage, two jerricans full of the necessary spare fuel — gasoline could be difficult to find in Italy — we did not exceed a speedo reading of 75 mph. Just cruising at 50 to 55 mph was easy, and 60 and 65 mph could be held and was.

We had crossed the English Channel on the Dover to Calais Townsend ferry and set forth via Boulogne to Abbeville and Amiens, all names of rather sinister significance then. This was the first time for seven years that I had driven along the pavé of those Northern French cities; and the last occasion had been on night convoy with what was known as the British Expeditionary Force during the retreat to Dunkirk and the sea.

But soon we were pressing South to more romantic names — Chalons, Dijon, Lyon and into the mountains of Grenoble, a long day's run but the best way to get there.

The entry into the great industrial city of Turin, after crossing the Alps, remains vivid. I had pre-arranged visits to Fiat, Italy's largest manufacturer and to Lancia, perhaps the most innovative. Fiat then and now is Italy's biggest industrial enterprise. That capable executive Signor Valetta was in charge, pulling together many plants and concentrating production on the most economical models. At the same time Fiat found time for competition and although its name had not been associated with Les Grandes Epreuves since the 1927 days of the fabulous 1½-litre V12, the company was behind the scenes with many a 1947 independent such as the new Cisitalia and later Ferrari. Yet it was quite surprising to find in the Mille Miglia entry list that year some official Fiat 1100 cc coupe entries prepared especially for the great race. They were good looking fast backs which proved quick and sturdy but without the true racing look of the Cisitalias. Lancia was less in the competition picture, although Aprilias won the Touring Class that year, they were still a family business run by Arturo Lancia, son of the founder. His policy continued to be to build cars of highly individual design with 4-wheel independent suspension, unit body/frames and low angle V4 engines, decades ahead of their time. But Fiat was a far greater commercial success than Lancia and eventually absorbed it.

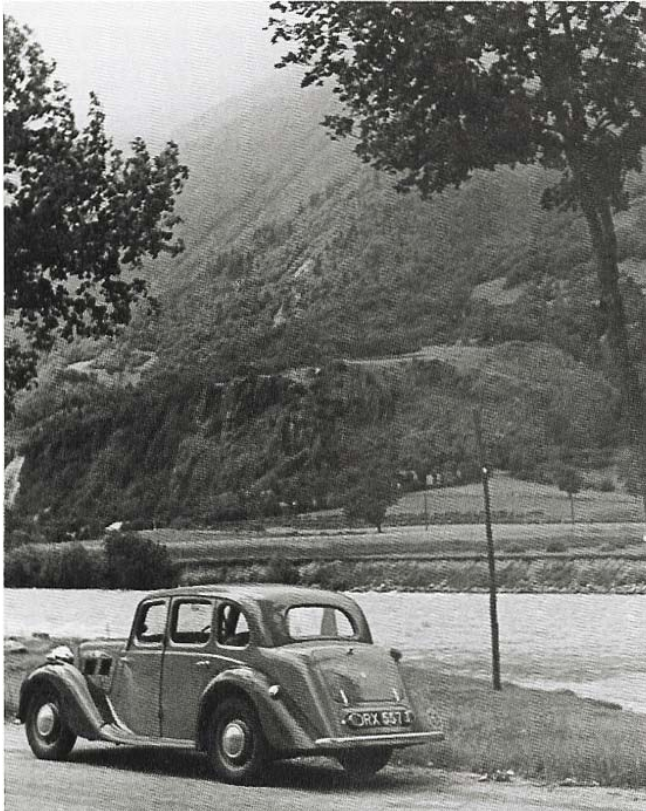
One of the main objectives of this trip for The Autocar was to take a look at the entirely new constructor Cisitalia, founded by Piero Dusio, who was already going great guns building tiny, single-seat 1,100cc racing cars, so light and fast that they could hold their own with the bigger, heavier 1½-litre Maseratis. He had laid down about 40 of them and they formed a minor international circus which went to Cairo and Buenos Aires. For the Mille Miglia Dusio was turning this pure racing car into a so-called sports car to meet the race regulations but he had gone farther than that and had Pinin Farina design two superb bodies — a Spyder, and a Coupe with tail fins on the rear mudguards, echoing Harvey Earle's Cadillacs, the first to adopt the P38 look. To drive these lovely *bolides*, Dusio had attracted as team leader none other than Tazio Nuvolari, Italy's champion and just about the most daring and skilful driver in the world.

We Meet the Great Nuvolari

After all these 35 years I can't quite remember our meetings with Nuvolari but my photos show him having supper at the start/finish at Brescia and probably back at the Cisitalia works in Turin. By now Nuvolari was in his fifties and it was well known that he was a sick man. Nobody ever told me quite what, but we assumed it was lung trouble aggravated by inhaling the fumes of racing engines both car and motor cycle, all his life. Racing was absolutely in his blood and he was to make one of the greatest and final efforts of his career in the coming 1000 Miles Race. He posed for a photo with our 'Y' saloon, being intrigued of course to see the latest MG, a make for which he had a great affection ever since he made the long journey to Ireland in 1933 to win the Tourist Trophy driving the K3 Magnette. With him were Dusio himself and his chief engineer. We also were intrigued to see their 1,100 cc unsupercharged Cisitalias (with engines smaller than the TC) which were probably getting much the same performance 15 years later as a K3 Magnette had offered. Besides this was the sort of machine we would like to have seen MG building at that time.

What happened in the 1000 Mile Race

From Turin and Milan we took the autostrada for the start of the Mille Miglia, which ran from Saturday evening to the afternoon of the Sunday. Swarms of the smaller, slower cars went off first from 8 pm, in many engine size classes including what looked like a prewar MG Midget, Number 93 out of the 245 entries. It was



Beside the River Isere in Southern France



The MG from England arrives at Brescia – venue of the 1947 Mille Miglia race.

Under the arc lights at the race start, Cistitalia Number 164, wit Piero Dusio himself at the wheel, preparing to set the pace.



complete with flowing mudguards and standard fold-down screen, so that there had been no attempt to reduce weight. Nuvolari was Number 179 and the very fastest cars did not get away until 3 am, starting last. But not for long because on the long run South along the Adriatic coast through Padua, Ravenna, on to Rome the fast boys began overhauling the field at a rapid clip. Nuvolari was in the lead at Rome! — with two companion Cisitalias second and third, an astonishing performance. He was still leading at Florence after 721 miles and over ten hours of driving. He handed over to co-driver Carena for a spell. They still led at Asti after 958 miles. To cut a long race short, torrential rain added to the drivers difficulties, so bad that it actually stopped some of the cars. Between Turin and Milan, Nuvolari's engine became swamped and they changed the magneto. Biondetti's 3-litre Alfa Romeo went on to win, with Tazio second and other Cisitalias third and fourth.

Our MG 'Y's real paces were shown on the return from the race at Brescia when we took the autostrada back West. With the tank topped up with 80-octane fuel as used by the race entrants (normal Continental fuel used to 'pink' painfully) we took only 1½ hours to reach Milan averaging 54 mph and covering 57 miles in the hour without fuss. Fuel consumption over the whole journey proved to be nearly 30 mpg (Imperial gallon). Of course that average speed does not sound much these days but remember that in 1947 it was quite respectable and there were very few cars on the market which could achieve 100 mph. Today they nearly all can.

Before we set off back to England, we looked in at Alfa Romeo to see the famous Type 158 Grand Prix car which was to dominate GP racing for the next few years. Ing Dr Gallo had it wheeled out for us and introduced Sanesi the works test driver and member of the racing team. We also took a look at the specialist coachbuilders. There were two Farinas then; Pinin which has survived as the most prestigious; and Stabilimenti Farina the older company run by the family of Giuseppe Farina, another Italian racing champion and at one time the leading postwar driver of them all. Pinin were building the more beautiful and avant garde bodies, especially some wild convertibles we saw with all-enclosed wheels on Lancia chassis. La Touring were specialising in lightweight bodies built on a frame of small diameter welded tubes and called by the trade name of Superleggera. It was the beginning of a trend which led to such as the 'Birdcage' Maserati. H.J. 'Aldy' Aldington, one of the famous brothers who ran Frazer-Nash in England, was out there supervising some special bodies for his Bristol/BMW-based revival of Frazer Nash, beyond the 'chain-gang' concept.

But MG of Abingdon, Oxfordshire, was still far from this modern scene. It was back in production with the new TCs and the 'Y' but it took the surprising success of their American market to lead MG beyond TC, TD, and TF to the beloved MGA and MGB. In spite of the conservative nature of the Nuffield management and in spite of MG's own tiny resources at Abingdon, MG succeeded in becoming the most popular sports car in the world by the Sixties. Glamour such as Cisitalia's

does not necessarily make for profitable business and indeed poor Dusio quite shortly went broke in the pursuit of full Grand Prix racing. It had been an instructive exploration, and now we set out on the 800 mile journey home, leaving Turin for the Italian/French Alps and crossing over by the little St Bernard pass.

It was here we did have a brief mishap. Between the Italian frontier on the top of one Alp and the French frontier post beyond on another, there was a gap of about 15 kilometres of no-man's-land. In a lyric valley, looking down over pretty mountain villages, we lingered for a picnic lunch of cheese, wine and a yard of bread. When it came time to restart the MG, there was that dull clatter at the starter switch which presaged a short. Sure enough when the bonnet was opened, there was smoke and some fire in the wiring. Somehow we doused it but had to continue without a starter. First we coasted in neutral at least ten kilometres downhill to the nearest village for some help and next day we pressed on to Paris, push starts being the order of the day.

All through, the MG gave a comfortable and silent ride. The steering lock was excellent on the mountain roads with their typical hairpin bends and quite comparable with Italian cars designed for such conditions. The new independent front wheel suspension by coil springs, with rack and pinion steering, brought the 1¼-litre a character quite different to the hard little MG sports I had known. This was all made possible by the quite rigid chassis/body. The roomy saloon body had its own advantages for touring. There was plenty of space for the packages accumulated on such a journey. In fact, we put the heavy luggage cases, suitably wrapped in rugs, between the front and rear seats to get the weight central and low. We came to respect the 'Y' for the way it achieved such a worthy performance with an engine the same size as the Midget but with one carburettor instead of two and with perhaps 500lb more weight. The new Lockheed hydraulic brakes took a real test on the downhill mountain passes. Our Italian friends, checking the 'Y', particularly admired the leather upholstery, the sun roof, the built-in jacking system, and the adjustable steering wheel, - all standard features. Indeed where has the adjustable steering wheel gone to now?

What Was Happening in the Motoring World of

1947

- MG produced its first production car with independent front suspension
- Nuvolari all but won the Italian 1000 Miles Race with an 1100cc Car
- To drive in Europe you needed gas rationing coupons
- In his Annual Report, Viscount Nuffield chair-man of Morris Motors, said "In the USA there is an insistent demand for our MG products"
- John Cobb became the first man to exceed 400 mph on land
- Cisitalia were in production with a series of 40 race cars
- Maury Rose won the Indianapolis 500 at 116.3 mph with a Blue Crown Spark Plug Special
- Ettore Bugatti died
- Isotta Fraschini produced its last car, a rear-engined V8 with 4 wheel independent suspension

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Typical Mile Miglia race scene—rain, crowds at the kerbside, and a lone Fiat 1100 approaching the finish after 17 hours of driving!

