

PROFILE

Andrew Roberts tracks down Abingdon's first production MG PA

New England Survivor

Seemingly there could not be a greater contrast between the World Championship-winning Subaru Impreza of Richard Burns and a 1934 MG PA Midget domiciled in New England. Yet separated as they are by some 67 years, both represent the zenith of off-road competition in their respective eras, the Subaru fresh from its triumph on the 2001 MSA Network Q Rally of Great Britain and the PA one of the foremost exponents in the long distance trials of the 1930s, which were very much the counterpart of today's international rallies.

The classic trials of the '30s drew enormous interest, difficult for us to appreciate today. Linked by non-competitive road sections, they comprised the toughest of off-road hill sections, which would make some of today's forest tracks seem like a stretch of newly surfaced motorway. With the exception of Brooklands and Donington Park, and the

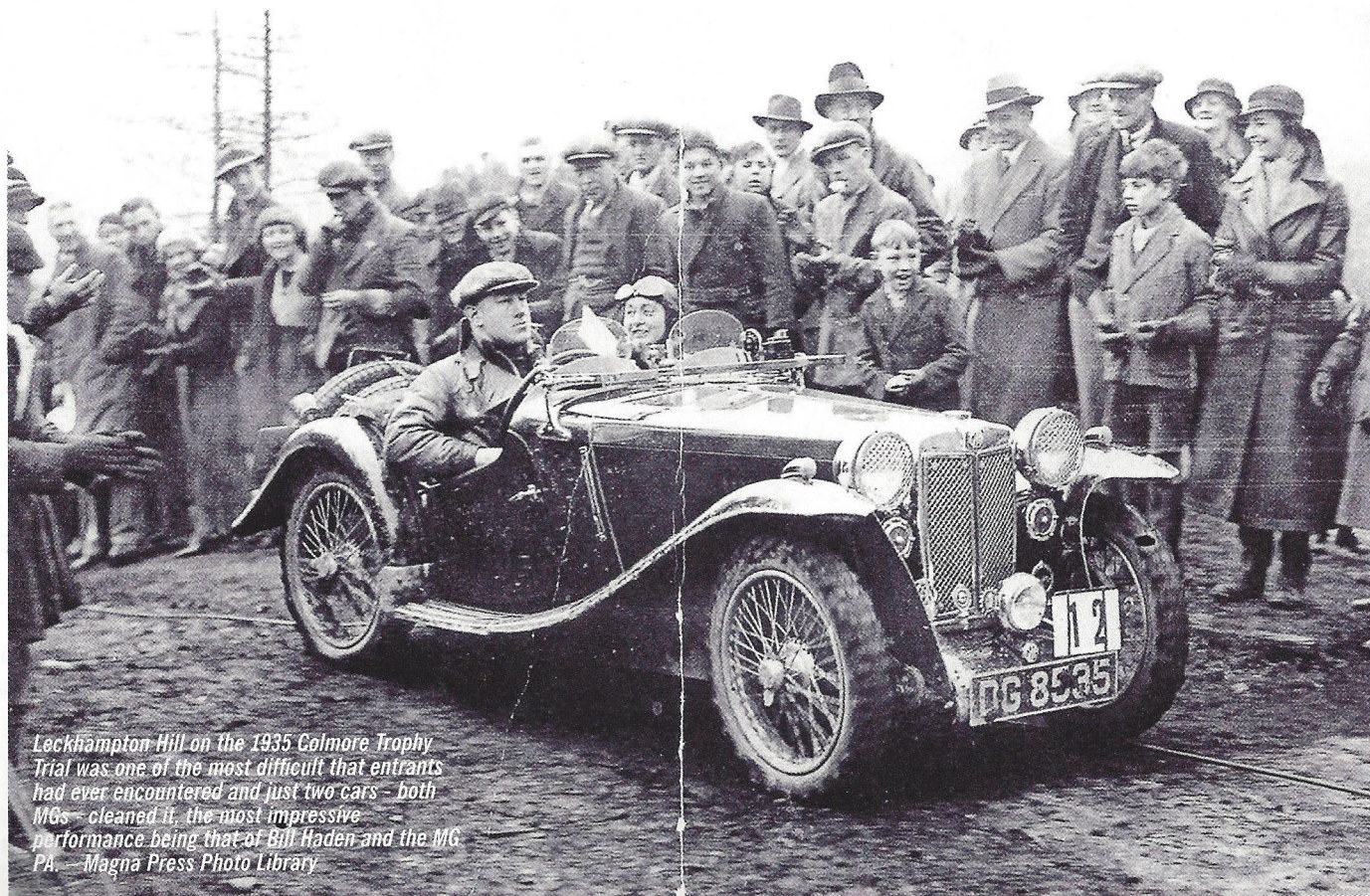
famous hillclimbs of Shelsley Walsh and Prescott, they provided the only form of accessible motor sport and literally thousands turned out to watch them - even to the extent of special trains being laid on to certain events.

With newspapers and radio being the only media, in addition to the specialist motoring magazines, which included *The Autocar* and *The Motor*, it may seem surprising that there was such a huge following. But with the population being much less mobile than today - the mass ownership of cars was at least three decades away - wherever a trial took place, it was very much an event. Motoring and motor sport captured the public imagination, just as soccer and cricket did, so it was a natural medium for manufacturers like MG, to publicise their products.

The precedent for this had been set as far back as 1925, when Cecil Kimber took

the famous MG Special, FC 7900, to a Gold Medal on the 1925 Lands End Trial. As the early production MGs were delivered, a handful of owners used them in similar events which included the Motor Cycle Club's Edinburgh and Exeter Trials and arguably the most famous, the Lands End Trial. But it was not until the announcement of the M-type Midget and its successors, that there was large scale participation by MG owners.

The formation of the MG Car Club in 1930 and its rapid emergence as a sporting club organising its own trials, added momentum to an increasingly popular sport and support for the leading MG-mounted Trials exponents of the day, undoubtedly came from the MG factory at Abingdon. Ultimately, in 1934, MG was to support what was, to all intents and purposes, its own factory team with the new MG PA. Known as the Cream Crackers, its



Leckhampton Hill on the 1935 Colmore Trophy Trial was one of the most difficult that entrants had ever encountered and just two cars - both MGs - cleaned it, the most impressive performance being that of Bill Haden and the MG PA. — Magna Press Photo Library



Bearing the VSCCA competition number of Peter Ross which mirrors its 0255 chassis number, the MG PA has continued its competition career in both races and hillclimbs.

drivers included Maurice Toulmin, Mac Macdermid and Jack Bastock.

But ironically, the first production PA with the chassis number 0255, did not go to the team but instead to a trials driver with a considerable record of success, W.H. 'Bill' Haden, a dental surgeon from Cheltenham. He was the first winner of an MG Car Club event, the Chiltern Trial in 1931, in his M-type Midget and he also successfully campaigned an MG J2 Midget.

He took delivery of his PA, registered DG 8535, on March 6 1934, from Imperial Motor Mart of Cheltenham, although it had been delivered to the M.G. Car Company's Service Department on February 27. The records show that the PA was finished in green with matching leather and with full swept wings, unlike some of the Trials J2s which sported cycle wings. Bill Haden's intention was to use the car in competition and the PA was not only to achieve this with considerable success, but to continue this right up to the present day, through previous custodian Patrick Gardner and in the hands of its current and long-time owner Peter Ross in New England.

Bill Haden was clearly putting the PA to good use and piled on the mileage in his first month of ownership, the speedometer reading was 2,991 when the car returned to Abingdon for service. This became a top-end overhaul, with decarbonising and grinding-in the valves, tappet adjustment, tuning and adjustment, being charged to him at

£2.5s.0d. (£2.25). But rather more significant was the work carried out under warranty, including head removal, the withdrawal and reassembly of pistons and what is likely to have been bearing remetalling, together with the rectification of oil leaking on to the clutch.

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By now, the PA was ready to commence its competition career and the combination of the new Midget and an experienced trials driver quickly paid dividends. That first 1934 season saw penalty-free runs on both the Colmore Trophy Trial and the London-Gloucester Trial, winning the Team Award on this event. Bill Haden had joined Ken Crawford and C.A.N. May - the subsequent author of *Wheelspin*, one of the best accounts of pre-war trialling - at the instigation of Frank Kemp, the secretary of the Midland Centre of the

MG Car Club, who wanted a front-running trio to represent them.

The Gloucester was the first for the new team, in addition to the Haden MG PA the other cars were another PA for Austen May and the MG N-type Magnette of Ken Crawford. Because the cars were not identical and none were the same colour, the team was identified by its own badge. This comprised the MG octagon in the traditional cream, edged in brown and with a brown stripe diagonally across it. This was painted on either side of the vehicles' bonnet and positioned just behind the radiator shell.

In *Wheelspin*, Austen May recounts how only four competitors came through unpenalised out of the huge field of 130

MARATHON GLOUCESTER

crews, both Haden and Crawford being in this elite company, with his own PA failing on Nailsworth Ladder. But this still gave the MGCC team a debut win on an event that *The Autocar* described as 'a Marathon Gloucester'.

The Haden PA was to inevitably undergo modification after its first trials appearances. Austen May observed how the greater weight of the PA over the J2 Midget he had previously trialled, adversely affected its performance. This had had led him to fit lower gear ratios, so it was not surprising that Bill Haden



While the setting is strictly New England, the former Bill Haden Trials MG PA of Peter Ross looks ready for an observed section, the gravel road recalling many of the hill surfaces it encountered in the mid-1930s.



Bill Haden and his PA attack Ibberton Hill, Nr Blandford, Dorset on the Motor Cycle Club

went down the same route. In November 1934, there is a factory memo from John Thornley, by then the M.G. Car Company Service Manager, instructing the supply an 8/47 crown wheel and bevel at a price of Three Guineas (£3.15). The fact that the price to be charged was noted in the memo is interesting, for it could well be clandestine Works support through the supply of discounted parts, for a prominent MG driver.

Like Austen May, Bill Haden was determined that his PA should become more competitive and in January 1935 he was bending the ear of George Probert, the M.G. Car Company's general manager in this vein. The outcome was rapid, for just days later a letter effectively confirmed 'covert' Works support, but stressing that it was a one-off assistance.

Following agreement with John Thornley, George Probert wrote, "Honestly we would like to do something with your car, but I am sure you will appreciate how very difficult it sometimes is to avoid incurring liability with various other competitors. Therefore, I would like to make it very clear that whilst we are prepared to deal with your own car, we are not prepared to do it for anyone else in

your district."

The letter then went on to outline the changes, George Probert continuing, "What we have in mind to do, if you will let us have your car for about a week is, to alter the compression ratio, lock the back axle, fit a clutch stop, if considered advisable fit J-type gears and fit new Vibrac axle drive shafts. The only other thing that could be done is to take some weight off the motor-car and this I shall leave to you."

All these changes were recalled by Austen May in a 1980 letter to the then owner, Patrick Gardner. He also confirmed that the PA was fitted with a rev counter and no separate speedometer - which he described as "very illegal" - and that all the team cars had lever-action 'quick-lift' filler caps on the radiator and fuel tank. The standard look of the Haden car was also commented upon. Wrote Austen May, "... appearance-wise, apart from the inevitable two spare wheels, this car really was very 'production', adding that the locked axle and low gear ratios "would not be suitable today."

So, the very standard looking MG PA, essentially a Works car in all but name, was now set for its 1935 season. This was to prove how successful the changes

Abingdon had made, with a succession of no-penalty events - the British Racing Green MG always being regarded as one of the front-running cars.

The MGCC Chiltern Trial and the MGCC Abingdon-Abingdon Trial were both completed with clean sheets. The Abingdon event, which started and finished at the MG Car Company factory, drew an entry of 115 competitors, the majority from MG and its arch-rival Singer, with representatives from Riley and Frazer Nash. The Haden car, with

PENALTY-FREE RUN

Crawford and May, formed the MGCC 'B' Team from the Midland Centre, which finished penalty-free.

But it was on the Colmore Trophy Trial that the Bill Haden PA covered itself in glory. The final hill to be tackled was at Leckhampton, near Cheltenham and was described as a 1 in 2.5 gradient with a slippery surface and like four Simms - the infamous hill on Dartmoor - rolled into one. In the event, Bill Haden and the PA were one of only two successful cars here - the other was an MG Magnette - and another penalty-free sheet was a seeming formality.



Club: London-Exeter Trial in December 1934. — Magna Press Photo Library



A traditional New England scene with a traditional British sports car, the former Bill Haden Trials car now owned and regularly competed by its owner, Peter Ross.

The little PA's season - and Bill Haden's competition exploits - finished with the Gloucester Trial of 1935. To his bitter disappointment he did not win the coveted Gloucester Goblet, awarded to competitors achieving a clean sheet in three consecutive years. The gallant PA was to fail on Juniper, the final hill, of the trial, robbing Bill Haden of the perfect retirement swansong.

The PA changed hands in 1937, to a C.C. White of Moreton-in-Marsh, Gloucestershire, so it was never far from the scenes of its trialling exploits. The car survived the war, remaining in the same ownership until 1947. Its competition career was rekindled however in the hands of Patrick Gardner when it returned to the classic trials scene and competed in a number of MGCC race meetings.

Unlike most of its fellow Triple M survivors, DG 8535 has another claim to fame, in addition to its mid-30s competition heritage. At no stage in its existence has this PA ever been completely dismantled or restored and it remains in substantially the same condition as in its pre-war days. This is unusual in the extreme, for few 67 year old vehicles could make such a claim and the result is a vehicle whose patina is

utterly genuine.

DG 8535 has been lucky enough to be owned by individuals who have been keen to see it as a working vehicle and whatever work it has had carried out upon it has always been with this end in view. Mechanically, recent years have seen a cylinder head rebuild by Sports & Vintage Motors, overhauled carburettors, new pistons, gas-flowed induction tract, a new fuel tank, and such items as hood, tonneau and leather seats.

Fittingly, with its previous MGCC connections in 1934/35, it was the club's magazine *Safety Fast* which carried the advertisement when it was offered for

BRITISH STABLEMATES

sale in 1984. Peter and Rachel Ross who now live in New England decided to buy it and the PA now lives alongside the TC that Peter races regularly and which completed the New England MG T Register Ocean to Ocean T Tourist Trophy in 1986. Its classic stablemates include another TC, an MGB and an E-Type Jaguar, so it remains in good British company.

The name of Peter Ross was a familiar one in T-type racing circles in the 1960s -

indeed the racing TC is the same car campaigned in the UK - and there was never any intention that the PA should not be used competitively again. In 1989 the NEMGTR announced their 1,000 mile Lap of New England. The PA was entered - it was one of only three Triple M cars - and took the trip very much in its stride. It has attended several of the Register's Gatherings of the Faithful and the acclaimed British Sports Car Invasion Meetings at Stowe in Vermont. Circuit racing within the Vintage Sports Car club of America has seen the PA competing at Lime Rock, while in 2001 it has been hillclimbed. Fittingly, given its chassis number, Peter Ross chose 255 as his competition number in VSCCA events.

The competition activity where this PA's reputation was made is virtually unknown on the other side of the Atlantic, so classic trialling is out of the question. But not driving some of the finest back roads in New England, where traffic is light, the scenery stunning and where given a sharp rise, the little PA picks up its skirts as though it was back in the Cotswolds nearly 70 years ago.

In the state of Massachusetts, the PA is classed as an antique automobile and is subject to an annual roadworthiness



check. Other than that, there are no restriction on its use. But long drives to circuits or meets, with high freeway mileages, are not what the PA is comfortable with, so it is often trailed behind the daily-driving Jeep or pick-up.

The chance to experience this historic PA came in the glorious Fall of 2001 on one of those brilliantly sharp October days which demanded a classic MG. The PA would oblige with the kind of driving experience that lingers long in the memory.

It is hard to believe that the engine is a trifling 847cc - in production form its power output was a mere 34.9 bhp - because the brisk progress that the little car maintains, totally belies this. The roadholding and balance of the car, particularly its chassis performance on roads that are heavily winter-damaged is excellent and it is easy to understand the impact that MG's sports cars made when they were new.

But the one over-riding impression is that you are experiencing a genuine

piece of MG history. No-one would pretend that it is exactly as it left Abingdon as the very first production car of the P series Midgets - the factory always referred to it as a PA incidentally and not merely a P-type as has been claimed - and it is arguable whether some of the aluminium panels in the

But none of this matters and we should be grateful that this famous PA hasn't been restored within an inch of its life and lost its heart along the way. Instead, we should revel in the underlying impression that this little car leaves with everyone lucky enough to ride in it. Simply that it is absolutely



Crowd control was clearly as much of a problem in 1935 as it is in 2001 but like his WRC successors Bill Haden remains oblivious as he storms a slippery shale section on the Gloucester Trial. - Magna Press Photo Library

body date from its trials period lightening programme or later. Nor is there any pretext that the underbonnet is totally original - it isn't. There are essential safety modifications too, in the light of its competition activities with the VSCCA.

genuine and, whether driver or passenger, you are reliving what Bill Haden and his passengers experienced all those years ago. That is its great strength and in the hands of its current owners it is a living heritage that is jealously and rightly guarded.