

MG K3

Michael Bowler track tests one of MG's faster production cars, a 1933 K3 rebuilt to the same specification as the class-winning Eyston/Lurani Mille Miglia car (see centre spread). [Thanks to Wilson McComb and Syd Beer for their assistance on K3 history]

IT is both an advantage and disadvantage that so many MGs look so similar; it is too easy to assume that something like the K3 won't be a lot faster in its class than, say, a J2 in its. That's the worst of a vintage upbringing; it can make you a bit blinkered. Which is all leading up to the fact that I was very surprised and impressed after a few laps of Silverstone in Philip Bayne-Powell's K3 Magnette; obviously if I were fully versed in all MG lore I shouldn't have been surprised but I'm afraid I was.

To start with, the engine was really smooth and responsive just when blipping the throttle in the paddock with very little flywheel effect. This car now has a Centric supercharger rather than the original Powerplus and doesn't oil its plugs quite so readily: the pull was quite strong from 2000rpm onwards but 3500rpm seemed to be the start of the useable power curve with the boost pressure soon up to 10psi. From 3000rpm onwards the exhaust note changed to that distinctive Brooklands silencer/fishtail crackle barking away in one's left ear to the exclusion of any other mechanical noises.

The large rev counter starts the green at 5000rpm with the red sector from 5500rpm onwards. Down the Club straight it was soon up to 4500rpm or 90mph despite the full-width screen; at the end the big drum cable brakes bit securely and pulled the speed down all square while a quick stab at the gear-change pedal and a heel blip on the throttle brought in the previously selected third gear. By the time the natural oversteer had been caught it was time to select four for the next change a hundred yards on - I do like pre-selector boxes for out of town use; oversteer is the predominant characteristic whether the power is on or off but it is always graceful and easily controlled on the lightish and direct steering, handling that must have been ideal for the Nuvolari-style when he won the 1933 TT in a K3 - it seems that he hardly used the brakes but set the car up in a tyre-scrubbing slide instead, just like a modern Mini racer.

Leaf springs all round a channel chassis suggests fairly vintage handling but the K3 felt pleasantly strong in the chassis which gives the suspension a chance of working as such. It skittered a bit on the bumps of Becketts without rattling and the vertical bounce was definitely vintage, but the car felt solid and all of a piece.

Behind the wheel you sit in the car rather than on and the long bonnet seems broad and part of a much larger car than a K3; in fact there is very little behind the two seats, so the overall length is much the same as that of contemporary rivals - it is just that it seems wider from the front view than many.

The K3 had a two-year currency during which 31 were built, apart from the two prototypes, and only five or six are still unaccounted for; that says a lot for the appeal of the car through the intervening years that so many have been conserved and also for its basic strength of construction - they were obviously well built for long distance races while the engine seemed to be as at home in a Mille Miglia as at 200mph on a German autobahn.

It was more than just a pity that the last MG to bear the Magnette name should owe nothing more than an octagon or two to its more illustrious forbears; it was the last of a progressively disastrous degradation of a great name and one of the bigger insults that badge engineering has heaped upon the past. But the first Magnette was the K-series, recognisably developed from the overhead cam 847cc M-type four-cylinder; the F-type Magnas used the same 57 x 83mm dimensions for their 1272cc with six cylinders. The L-types followed on with the same bore but reduced the stroke to 71mm for 1087cc, dimensions which were retained for the K-type Magnettes although the K1 saloon was on the longest wheelbase so far apart from the 2½-litre 18/80 at 9ft.

The K1 was announced in October 1932 with the suggestion that there would be a sports K2 and a supercharged K3 to follow. That the K3 took the form it did rather than the projected catalogue drawing is largely due to Earl Howe, who wanted to compete in the great Mille Miglia in a British car and was prepared to pay the expenses for so doing. With more than commendable speed Cecil Kimber rushed through two prototypes; the first which was a slightly stretched J-type Midget was run in the 1933 Monte Carlo Rally and finished, but made its biggest impact by taking fid at the hill-climb.

The second prototype was finished shortly before the Monte and had the longer 7ft 10in wheelbase with an unique radiator arrangement - the bottom sloped forward to dumb-iron level. No sooner was that finished than it was driven out to Italy with Howe and Thomas to practise for the coming race - Lurani, Rubin, Eyston and Birkin were waiting to have their test runs too as part of the team; the only member missing at that point was Hugh Hamilton who would appear to be the only one who had to work - at University Motors. A detour via Bugatti at Molsheim had provoked Le Patron's suggestion that the front axle be strengthened and this was duly relayed and acted upon.

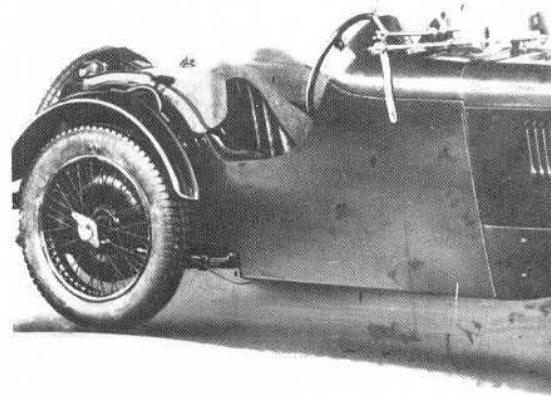
That second prototype spent five weeks away from Abingdon thrashing round the Mille Miglia course, as a result of which the gear ratios were changed and hubs and wheels redesigned. The bad weather had saved the brake drums which were to split in official practise a few weeks later; new ones were sent out from England before the event.

By 11 March, three "production" K3s had been built and these were shipped out to Genoa for the Mille Miglia together with the refurbished No 2 which was again to be used as a practice hack. In the event Birkin/Rubin were to go as fast as possible to break up the 1100cc Maseratis, which was successfully achieved by one third distance. Birkin had averaged nearly 88mph from Brescia to Bologna, but by Siena the engine had dropped a valve and they had to retire; however by this time Eyston/Lurani were comfortably leading the 1100 class from Howe/Hamilton and a Fiat special. The Fiat got closer than should have happened because the K3s were consuming plugs at an appalling rate - the supercharger lubrication was set on the generous side to avoid seizure which oiled the plugs

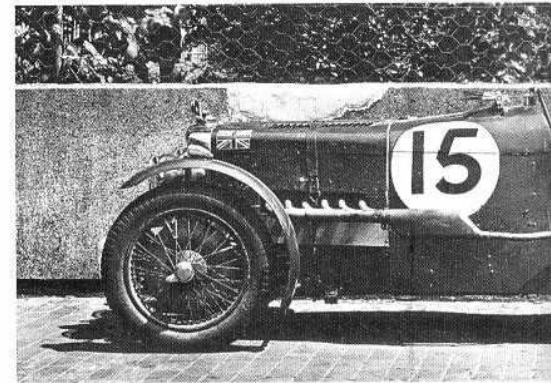
on the overrun and in towns, to the extent that Eyston/Lurani apparently changed something over 150 plugs during the race.

However the two remaining cars finished first and second in the 1100 class, 1½ minutes apart at 56.9mph. I have recounted the background to the 1933 Mille Miglia and the birth of the K3 in a fairly bald matter-of-fact way, but I find the time-scale of the whole exercise quite incredible, particularly given the slower rate of communication of those days. That Kimber could show a long wheelbase saloon K1 in October with only a sketchy idea of the subsequent sports derivative, build one car that could finish a Monte Carlo rally in January, another that could withstand five weeks Mille Miglia testing over the same period and then build three more by the beginning of March was a tremendous achievement, not forgetting the redesign of front axle, brakes and hubs. That those three cars could then go out, challenge and beat the established 1100cc opposition on their own doorstep only three months after the first prototype was built, is almost unbelievable.

One can begin to explain it by saying that the various aspects of the design were tried and proven already, but a new assembly of tried components which haven't previously met each other is not guaranteed to work. The chassis was a typical



The second prototype K3 was used for the 1933 Mille Miglia recce and as training car later; brake drums were subsequently enlarged.



open-channel frame with tubular cross-members and cruciform bracing under the seats; although obviously shorter than the K-type it is also some three inches narrower. Presumably by this time the MG men had a good idea of the right spring rates for given weight distribution and desired handling, so there wasn't too much that was new in that department.

However the power output was going to be considerably greater than MG had transmitted before with around 120bhp at 6500rpm, although the red sector started at 5500rpm; the Wilson pre-selector had shown itself capable of taking the output but the new axle survived the Monte Carlo rally and the Mille Miglia and it wasn't until the Mannin Beg that the differential needed a redesign due to the twisty nature of that circuit.

Then the engine had to be capable of withstanding the output – a longish stroke of 71mm with bore 57mm whistling round at over 6000rpm was quite a novelty. The Powerplus 9 eccentric vane supercharger was driven at 75 per cent engine speed from the nose of the crankshaft to deliver around 12psi; MG were used to Powerplus 6 blowers on the front of the J3/4 engines but to get it right first time on the extended version of the ohc engine, give or take a slight lubrication problem, was a very good achievement with over

100bhp/litre in 1933 from what was basically a production engine. The crank is in fact an L-type Magna one with standard rods although later ones were fitted with rods developed for the R-type; K3s had a larger sump than standard K-types both of elektron. The 1934 K3s were to have the Roots-type Marshall 87 blowers to develop the same power with greater reliability and reduced appetite for plugs.

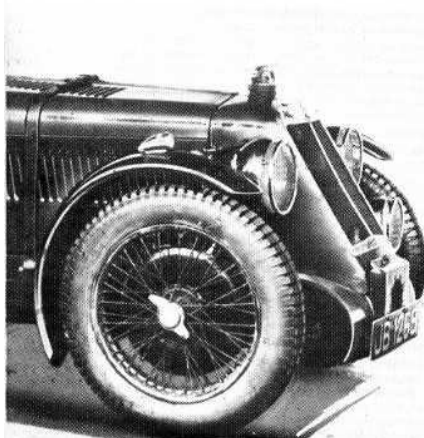
In fact Syd Beer tells me that the MG men would have been developing blown versions in the L-type Magna days but I still think the development time to produce a strong, fast, well-balanced and successful car is remarkably short, although Syd says that the NE Magnette was created in a mere three months.

However, back to 1933, another three cars had been built by the time the Mille Miglia cars returned and four of the six competed at the International Trophy Race; Eddie Hall finished second to Brian Lewis' Alfa-Romeo in one new one, Manby-Colegrave didn't finish in the other while Elise Wisdom came third in the Eyston car with Howe fourth. At the British Empire Trophy Manby-Colegrave came third at 106.9mph while fourth was Ron Horton in the offset single-seater K3 including a fastest lap at 115.5mph, an impressive speed for 1100cc.

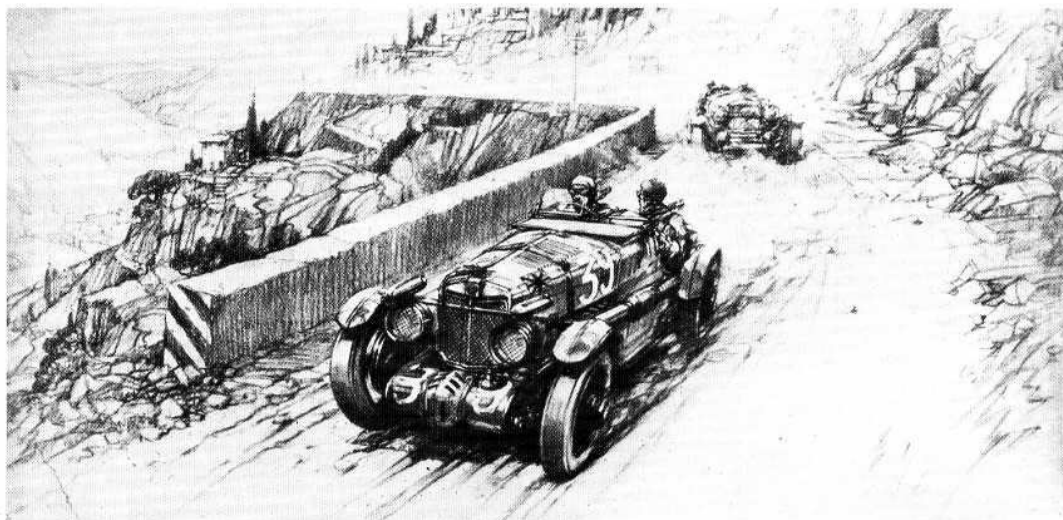
At the Mannin Beg race all six K3s retired, three

of them with differential failure already mentioned and Eyston's with vertical drive failure. The Eyston car was less seriously affected and was driven by Sammy Davis for the *Autocar* when the cutaway of the 1933 K3 was first published. It had the intermediate 4.89 final drive – 5.7 and 4.33 were other choices – and lapped Brooklands in Mannin Beg form at 104.8mph with an estimated maximum around 110mph; most impressive though was the 0-75mph figure of 14.6sec. The car had had a rather skimpy body installed before this possibly as a result of an incident on the way to Shelsley Walsh, because it was in this form that Nuvolari drove it at the TT. Nuvolari had obviously seen how well the cars went in the Mille Miglia, but it was probably Whitney Straight's victory at Pescara against the Maseratis that convinced him of the K3's suitability for the TT. In fact it was Straight's TT entry that Nuvolari took over and according to the results Straight received the £600 as entrant of the winning car, although it was nominally the Eyston factory car. A comparison with the Eyston car as tested by Sammy Davis and the Nuvolari TT car and a process of elimination on available K3s suggests that it was one and the same.

Anyway, the TT story has oft been retold but it was of course a handicap event with scratch cars doing 35 laps of the 13½-mile Ards circuit; blown

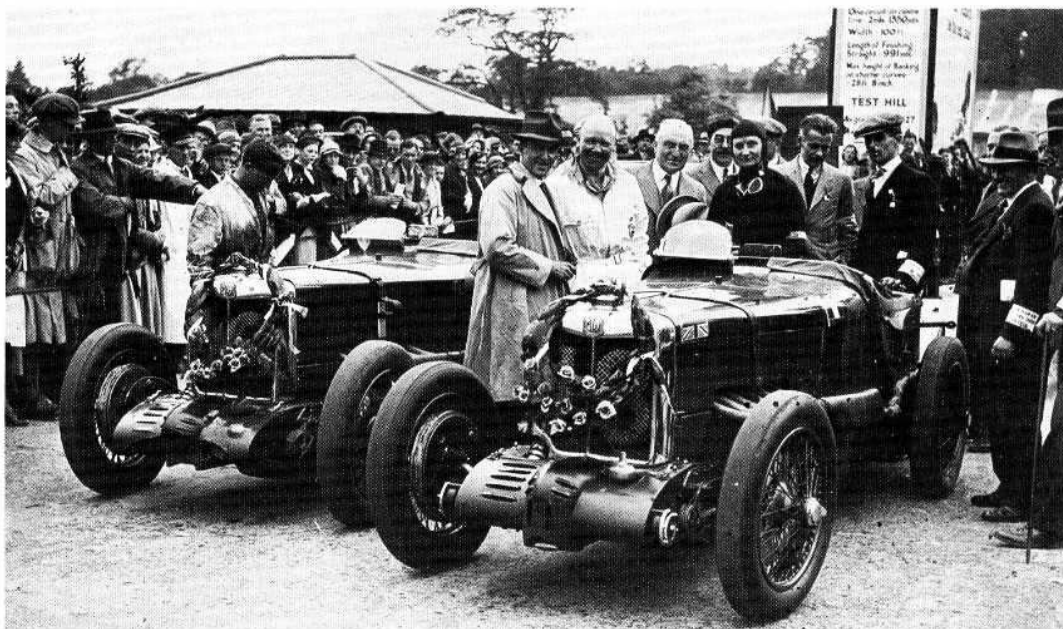
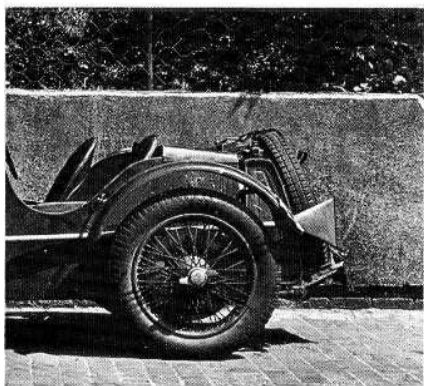


Below, K3003 as raced by Eyston at Mannin Beg and tested by Sammy Davis (Aug 1933); skimpy body installed after road incident.



George Eyston and Count Lurani winning their class in the 1933 Mille Miglia despite changing over 150 plugs.

Below, Mrs 'Bill' Wisdom having finished 3rd in the 1933 International Trophy in the Eyston car while Eddie Hall, alongside, was second.



Left, Tazio Nuvolari and Alec Hounslow after their victorious drive in the 1933 Tourist Trophy – note passenger's grab handle.



MGC^{K3}

750cc cars like the J4 MGs were much fancied with three laps start: unblown 1100cc received two laps and in fact started 13 seconds before the J4s; blown 1100s and 1500s had a nominal lap and started 1m 35s behind the 1100s; and the scratch cars were 5m 39s after the 1100s; thus there were fractions of a lap involved all worked out by the RAC Committee.

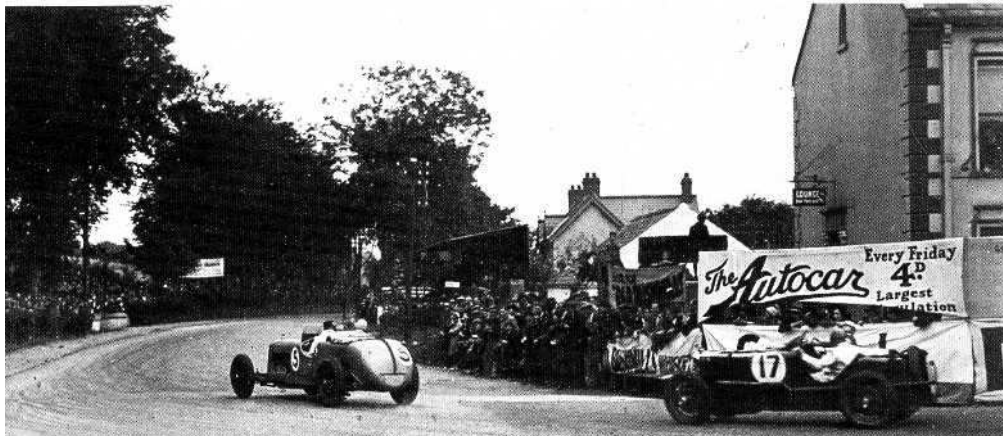
Soon it was obvious that it was going to be a race between Hugh Hamilton in the J4, Nuvolari in the K3, the Alfàs of Brian Lewis, Lord Howe and Rose-Richards, Dixon's Riley 1100 and Hall's K3. In practice Hamilton had lapped at 75mph and Nuvolari 78mph; the Italian ace adapted to the K3 and its pre-selector very quickly and was revelling in the handling, throwing the car around with very little recourse to brakes. He was going faster and faster reducing the lap record regularly but so was Hamilton; Lewis was leading the Alfàs but suffered transmission trouble. After around one third distance, Hamilton was still ahead with Dixon second from Nuvolari and Hall on K3s, and Rose-Richards in the Alfa.

Nuvolari's style reduced one rear tyre to the canvas after 13 laps which prompted a stop; they refuelled as well and were away in 3m 9s. Hamilton was still circulating and broke the 750 record at 75.77mph but his pit-stop was a disaster and every-

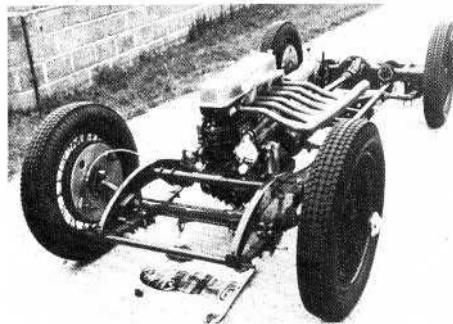
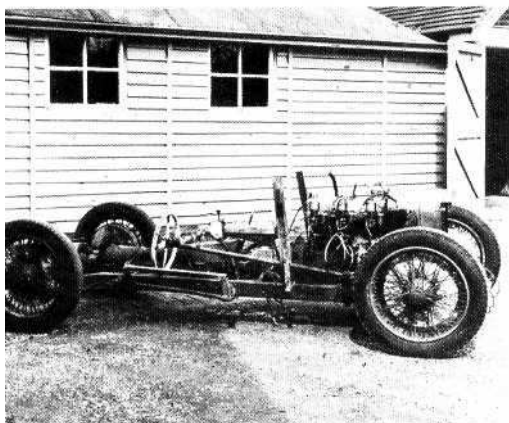
thing seemed to go wrong – the jack didn't work, fuel was spilt and then the mechanic's clothes caught fire when the starter failed and he had to complete the circuit with a spanner; this was remedied but the stop took 7m 15s and the lead was badly reduced. Hall, Dixon and Howe all changed wheels and took on fuel in around four minutes. After this Nuvolari had gained considerably on the Midget, the Alfa had slipped back and then Dixon's car had trouble with its exhaust system. It was an MG battle.

Nuvolari's laps were getting faster – 80.22, 80.35, 80.48, 80.88 and then 81.05mph – but so were Hamilton's – 76.77, 20mph – while Rose-Richards had earned the fastest lap of the race with 83.06mph. Both MG pits were signalling flat-out and fuel was being consumed at an unprecedented rate, so much so that the J4 had to stop at the end of its penultimate lap for 20 seconds and Nuvolari went by into the lead only to have the main supply of 284 gallons run out about 4 miles from the end and require the 2 gallon reserve – they had to refuel before completing the necessary tour d'honneur. Hamilton was second, Rose-Richards third, but Dixon was excluded after his exhaust system came apart which gave fourth to Hall from Howe, Baird's 1100 Riley and Manby-Colgrave seventh in another K3. Nuvolari's average speed was 78.65mph while the third-place Alfa recorded 78.71mph, a remarkable tribute to man and machine.

Magnettes continued after this, of course, to gain many achievements, including the Magic Magnette which was to attain over 200mph with Goldie Gardner as EX 135, many of them were converted to single-seaters and they suffered from considerable interchange which makes it very difficult to be certain of the history of any subsequent registration plate.



Nuvolari hanging on to Rose-Richards' Alfa in the 1933 TT, above. Right, George Eyston back behind the wheel of a K3 that might have been his – present owner in passenger seat survived the trip.



Chassis then and now. Left, as found in 1956 in a sorry state and right, in the throes of the recent rebuild with everything immaculate.

The car whose history I have so far recounted was K3003 originally registered for the road as JB 1475 both numbers having belonged to the Eyston 1933 car; the probability is strong that it was the same one that Nuvolari drove to win that TT. After that the Nuvolari car was sold to a German named Theodor Fork by which time it had been restored to more normal K3 looks with another body; Fork complained and wanted the actual TT body which he received. He wasn't very happy about the condition of the car as received as it had suffered damage in shipping including a cracked radiator and block because water was left in it, this was obviously repaired since he used the car to compete in the 1934 Mille Miglia where he retired and at Avus where he finished fifth in the 1100cc class on one occasion – he was still complaining about the car to Kimber in March 1935 by which time he had sold the car to Hungarian Josef Moritz; Moritz used the car for various record attempts in Hungary in October 1934.

That much is the definite progress of the Nuvolari car which was K3003; however in the last month K3003 has reappeared in Germany and the JB 1475 plates are still with it, although it was registered for Germany, and it has apparently been in the same hands for some 15 years which would explain its non-appearance.

The following history of Philip Bayne-Powell's car has emerged from working backwards from the present day but it leaves an uncomfortable gap in the middle which we would like to close if any readers can help. We have to go back to the Ron Horton offset single-seater K3007 which was very considerably developed into a successful Brooklands track car; without an offset prop shaft the only way to sit lower was to sit alongside it and Horton recalls that his thigh was virtually in contact with the rotating shaft. Goldie Gardner acquired this to attack the 1100cc records in 1937 which he lifted to just under 150mph; with the ex-Eyston offset transmission, EX135, Gardner had the chance to sit even lower and thus was born the Rafton-bodied Magic Magnette using Horton's engine.

Come 1939 and one, Mick Jennings, was viewing the remaining bits and bought a collection which included the Horton chassis K3007, the original EX135 engine and radiator in Humber form and shipped them out to Singapore where a local body was built up on it. At some stage shortly after this the car was dismantled and the bits scattered around against it becoming a spoil of war; subsequently Mike Hawke set about the task of gathering the bits together again but could only find half the chassis, the other half having been used for a cart and now lost – so that's what happened to K3007.

However, the body was apparently offered for sale separately and was bought by Sykes and Robinson who advertised the car as the Horton single-seater body on "K33" – I haven't actually seen this advert. Now whether K33 is the wrong version of K3003, a number attached to a spare chassis, or what, is very much open to question. I have also heard that Bartletts were also involved in selling that collection plus a spare two-seater body.

The car appeared at Toulmin's post-war, still with the single-seater body, but this was removed and replaced by one that looked very like an aerodynamic HRG; the dumb-iron chassis number was ground off and TMI stamped over the top – Toulmin Motors 1 – and the car reregistered PML 469 in 1950. At this point it still had the blower but when the car was next unearthed in 1956 it was bodiless and wearing triple SUs; it was found at a local scrapyard by Toulmin employee Tom Davis. He sold it to Mike Ellman-Browne who instituted forensic research into the number under TMI – X-rays can reveal what was originally stamped by the stress patterns underneath. This came up with K3*03 which certainly suggested K3003 and the rebuild has continued with subsequent owners on that basis. Dr Stuart Milton acquired the car next and the engine had been rebuilt by Hoffman and Burton before Philip Bayne-Powell became the present owner; he completed the restoration to the Mille Miglia form; Len Goff from Paulerspury built up the wood frame to measurements from the USA – a haven of K3s – and Wakefields of West Byfleet did the metal panelwork.

Whether the car is the Mille Miglia, TT car or not doesn't matter a great deal; it is now an extremely nice 1933 K3 Magnette which goes as well as they did in the days of Eyston and Nuvolari. ●