

THE MAN WHO MADE MG

Wilson McComb reminds us that Cecil Kimber was born 100 years ago



A 1936 picture of the Kimber family watching the Abingdon Trial. Rene Kimber was to succumb to a lengthy illness two years later. In the centre is their elder daughter Betty who was to marry RAC motor sport chief Dean Delamont. The car is a Singer, not an MG

On April 12, MG enthusiasts celebrated the centenary of the birth of Cecil Kimber, founder of the marque they so admire. Official MG Car Club functions were held in various countries — Australia, South Africa, the USA and elsewhere. This month's annual MGCC Silverstone festival will this year be known as the Kimber Centenary Trophy Meeting, and attended by his surviving daughter, Jean Cook.

Kimber died over 40 years ago — that's more than a quarter-century before WO Bentley, for example — and it follows that few present-day MG fans ever met the man. Their admiration is warm enough, though, if not always expressed conventionally; I know of an MG household ruled by a Siamese cat called Cecil, and more than one MG-borne pet dog answers to the name of Kim. At

Kimber's death, two months before his 57th birthday, a leading British motoring magazine said: "In many parts of the world, as well as in this country, MG owners will feel a sense of loss, for he had been closely identified with the car which he was responsible for building up, to a degree shared by few others in a comparable position... It is impossible in the minds of those who had known him to dissociate the man and the car."

This presented quite a problem for me — who did *not* know him — when I began a study of MG history almost 30 years ago. My colleagues at Abingdon could and did tell me many stories of Cecil Kimber, managing director of the MG Car Co Ltd, who had left them in no doubt that he was their chief (albeit a much-respected one). But what of the man himself? His widow had remarried and refused to see me. When I arranged a meeting with his two

daughters in the hope of learning more, it was like striking a match to find a gas-leak. I discovered that the elder daughter had quarrelled with him many years before, and his younger daughter (who had named her firstborn son Kim) was suffering from such an immense father fixation that she took a pair of scissors to our tape transcript! Ten years later, having recovered her normal sense of humour, Jean wrote of the occasion: "Wilson, of course, had no idea beforehand into what emotional minefield he had inadvertently strayed."

Cecil Kimber was born in the London suburb of Dulwich, but moved eight years later to Manchester where his father opened a branch of the family printing-ink business. The Kimbers had money, but trade declined, and there was no talk of university for young Cecil when he left Stockport Grammar School. Instead, he

trained as a salesman in the business and devoted his spare time to dashing about on secondhand motorbikes. Still in his early twenties, he was run into by a car at a Cheshire crossroads; one knee and hip were so badly smashed that he narrowly escaped losing his right leg and limped for the rest of his life.

Quite substantial damages were awarded to Cecil, who celebrated by buying a brand-new Singer 10 in 1913. Somehow he wangled for it an Irish registration, NI 91, knowing the local police would tend to confuse it with the Manchester number, N 191 — whose holder was doubtless kept busy fending-off unwanted tickets for speeding.

In 1914, obviously unfit for military service in the first World War, Cecil continued working as a printing-ink salesman until he was forced to leave home after a blazing row with his father, who was furious when Cecil refused to invest the remainder of his compensation money in the failing family business. Through AW Reeves, designer of the Manchester-built Crossley, he got a job on the far side of the Pennines with Sheffield-Simplex, makers of luxury cars, and thus entered the motor industry at the age of 27. In September 1915 he married Irene (known as Rene) Hunt of Fallowfield, and carried her off in another Singer — this time a modded T-head 14hp raced by a previous owner at Brooklands, and now fitted with a stark open body from an Hispano-Suiza (and of course registered NI 91). For a touring honeymoon, it was a magnificently unsuitable vehicle.

A year later Kimber was in Surrey, working as chief buyer for AC Cars with Rene as his secretary, but in 1918 he moved again to EG Wrigley Ltd of Birmingham, the well-known suppliers of steering gears and transmissions. During his time there, Wrigley's became involved in the ill-fated Angus Sanderson project, and the enthusiastic Kimber invested his own little nest-egg, too. He lost the lot, and was virtually penniless when in 1921 WR Morris (the future Lord Nuffield) appointed him sales manager of the Morris Garages in Oxford. This was a separate enterprise from Morris Motors

Ltd but quite an important one, and Kimber was rapidly promoted when the general manager inexplicably committed suicide in 1922. How Cecil and Rene Kimber then began designing new and shapelier bodies for the humble Bullnose Morris is, of course, the foundation stone of MG history.

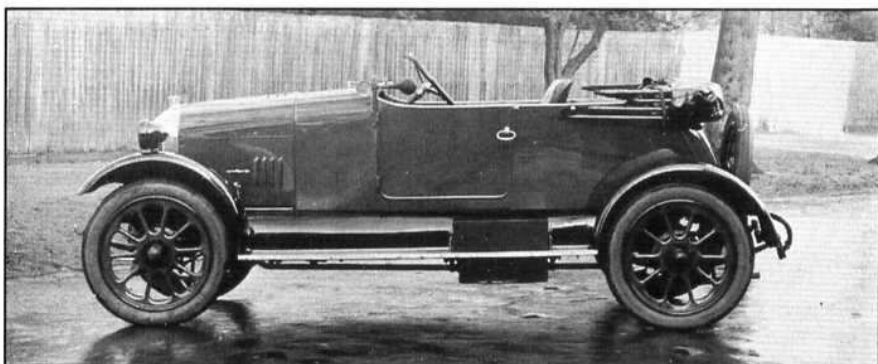
Just about 5ft 5in, Kimber had the Napoleonic drive of many small men — combined, in his case, with seemingly boundless energy. He strove continually to establish the separate identity of MG, and encouraged his chassis designer, HN Charles, to update and improve his

drove an MG all night long to run-in the engine for an important Brooklands race.

As an MGCC founder member, Harold Hastings of *The Light Car* (and later of *Motor*) knew him well. "You are quite right," he once told me, "in thinking that he had a very complex personality. In some ways, he was quite ruthless and uncompromising, but in others there was a very kindly streak. Above all he had enormous enthusiasm, and this, I think, produced the uncompromising ruthlessness which could make him a distinctly prickly personality at times. We in *The Light Car* used to regard him with



A rare picture taken on Kimber's wedding day with the couple's honeymoon car, a Singer 14 previously raced at Brooklands and later fitted with a Hispano-Suiza body



A Morris Garages Chummy, the real predecessor of the MG. It was one of these that Kimber drove in the Land's End Trial two years before competing in 'Old Number One'



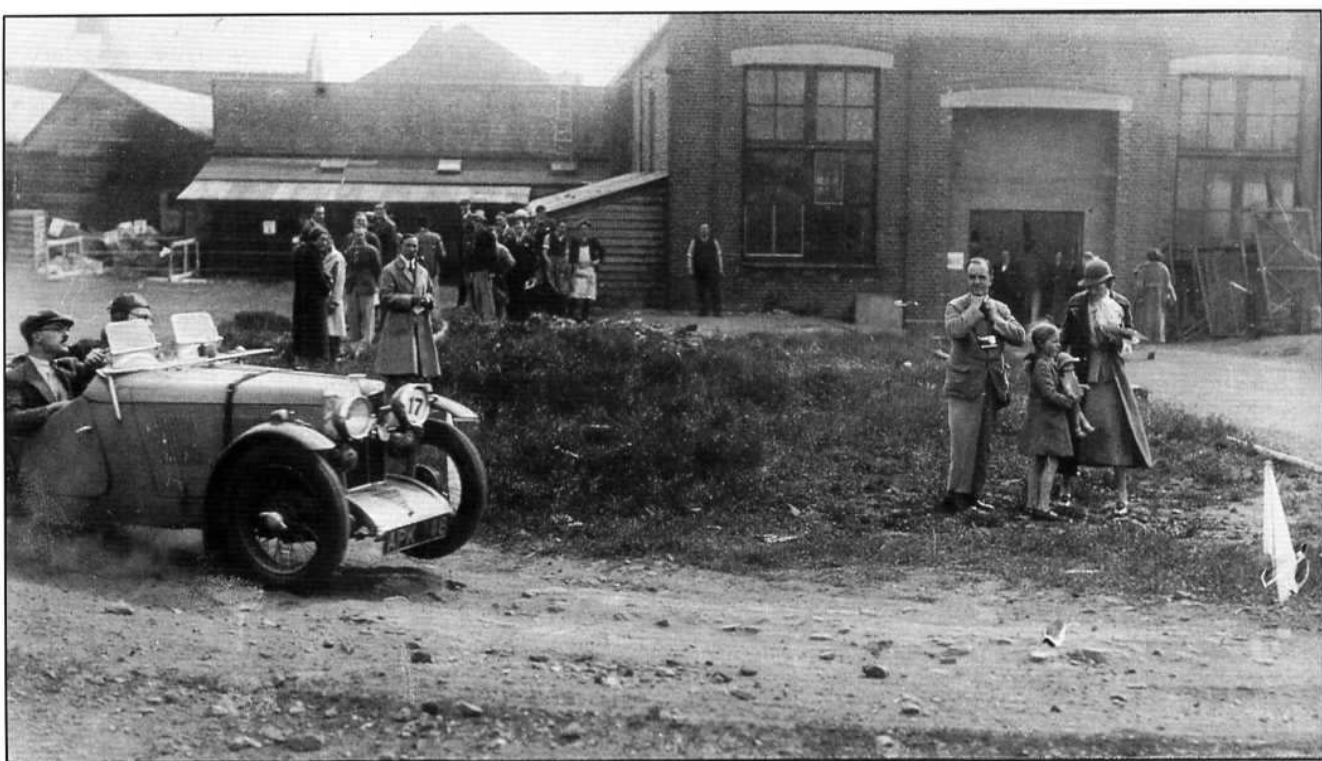
The diminutive Kimber and his financial backer Sir William Morris on January 20, 1930, the day of the MG Car Company's inaugural luncheon

products all the time (save only for using hydraulic brakes, which Kimber disliked (and distrusted). He demanded the highest standards in an office (MG office staff were told that all customers' letters must be answered *the same day*) or a factory ("By the time he'd finished with Wrigley's," his brother Vernon told me, "you could eat your dinner under any of the machines."). He had what Harold Connolly (the artist responsible for most prewar MG catalogues) described as "A lovely flair for line, a lovely idea of what the young lad of the village wanted . . . He always said a sports car should look fast even when standing still, and that was the basis of all his designs." Far from inaccessible, Kimber appeared at most social functions of the MG Car Club, which he supported enthusiastically from its foundation in 1930. He attended many British speed events, and on one occasion

an odd mixture of affection and respect, coupled with a measure of apprehension as to what he would find to grumble at next!"

Bravely disregarding the frequent pain of his damaged hip, Kimber became an agile tennis-player and a good ballroom dancer. An early Leica owner, he was working in 35mm at a time when many serious photographers were still wedded to 1/4-plate glass negatives. Another hobby was fly-fishing, but his greatest love was to get aboard his little six-tonner and sail right away from land-based worries.

The combination of small stature and a strong stubborn streak encouraged Kimber to design some fairly cramped vehicles. His first MG employee, the 6ft 3in Cec Cousins, never forgot a supremely uncomfortable ride in the prototype MG Midget of 1928, at the end of which all criticism was brushed aside. As Cousins



Cecil Kimber with wife Rene and daughter Jean in 1935 watching a J2 tackle the annual trial organised by the MG Car Club at Abingdon. The windows behind them on the left were those of the author's office from 1959 until 1969 . . .

said later: "How can you tell your boss that he's just a little short-arse?" Worse still, Kimber's "enormous enthusiasm" led him to bend the truth quite shamelessly at times, adopting such type designations as 14/40, 18/80 and 8/33 for models that actually produced no more than 35, 60 and 20bhp respectively. To distance one six-cylinder engine in customers' minds from the similar Wolseley unit, he added an imaginary millimetre to its stroke, making its capacity a fictitious 1286 instead of 1271 cc. Some press cars — not all — were extensively tweaked to ensure a favourable road-test report.

Believing implicitly in the importance of motor racing to develop and publicise his cars, Kimber had to tread warily with Nuffield, who thought it a wasteful indulgence. Then he had to go carefully with Leonard Lord, Nuffield's righthand man, who took control of Abingdon when the MG company was sold to Morris Motors in 1935. Said HN Charles: "Lord didn't like him much, and at that time Kim could have got backing to build a CK car. Perhaps he *should* have gone into business on his own. Like Morris himself, Kim was a good boss but not a good servant." Harold Hastings saw Kimber as an idealist: "This was evident in the way each MG departed farther and farther from the basic Morris equivalent as time went by, until he was rudely brought to earth by Len Lord. What part he could have played in the post-war motoring world (had he remained with the Nuffield Group) is difficult to foresee, as his idealism would have become steadily more out of keeping with the hard commercialism of recent years."

His powers much curtailed, Kimber remained at Abingdon after the takeover, only to fall foul of yet another ambitious Nuffield Group director. In 1940, Miles Thomas became vice-chairman on the death of Lord's successor, Oliver Boden,

and soon started gunning for Kimber — backed by the straitlaced Lady Nuffield, who had disapproved of Kimber's second marriage, a few months after Rene's death in 1938, to a much younger girl he had known for some years. When Kimber secured an important wartime contract for Abingdon without first seeking Nuffield Group approval, Thomas demanded his resignation. It was a disgraceful thing to do, and in normal times the Kimber family would have taken legal action. But this was November 1941, with the war going badly for Britain on all fronts.

Kimber was hired by Charlesworth, the coachbuilders, to prepare their factory for aircraft production. Then he moved to Specialoid Pistons, and early in 1945 he

got in touch with Harold Connolly again: "Hadn't changed a bit — still just as nice; kind, thoughtful, and never went up-stage. But I knew that Thomas and Lord had hurt him badly; he was very unhappy." By this time the war outlook had improved enormously, and Kimber said he wanted Connolly to meet Sir John Black of Triumph, two weekends later, to discuss his post-war sports car designs.

That appointment was not kept. The previous Sunday, February 4, 1945, Cecil Kimber was killed in a freak accident at King's Cross when travelling to Peterborough on behalf of Specialoid. After 40 years of fast motorbikes and cars, he was fatally injured in a railway carriage going backwards at no more than a walking pace.



Kimber's Marshall-blown Magnette with drophead body by Corsica which he used in 1934 was allegedly good for 100mph on the road. It still exists today and was recently bought at auction for the Basil de Ferranti collection