

Full Bore Land's End Pilgrimage

Fifty years ago Cecil Kimber gained a Gold Medal on the Land's End Trial in his MG Special; **Michael Bowler** takes the same car back to the same hills

[With acknowledgement to the published works of Lytton Jarman and Wilson McComb for the history of FC 7900]

DESPITE its formidable test hills, its difficult course, and the generally stiffened-up conditions, the 1925 London to Land's End Trial will surely go down in history as the most enjoyable of all the classic events ever organised by the Motor Cycling Club. That was how *The Motor* opened its report on the Land's End Trial of 50 years ago. The secret of our interest is contained a few paragraphs further on.

"An interesting vehicle was the MG super-sports driven by C. Kimber. Built by the Morris Garages of Oxford, it incorporated many parts (including the radiator) of the Morris chassis although it had half-elliptic rear springs and a 1486cc overhead-valve engine. This was said to be one of a small number of special engines made by the Hotchkiss concern when they used to build the Morris engines. With a streamlined dark-grey body, the car looked very workmanlike."

For many years this car was thought to have been the first MG and although a number of 14/28 MGs were built prior to the date of the first registration of that Kimber special – 27 March, 1925 – it has been suggested that Kimber, who was then General Manager of The Morris Garages, started work on this car as early as 1923 and indeed the engine was of a Hotchkiss design, but one of a series built for Gilchrist Cars from 1920 onwards. Thus there is some confusion as to the original birth of the MG car; The Morris Garage was founded in 1910 although, apart from the first Morris prototype of 1912, no car was built there until 1924. So the MG Car Club celebrated the 50th anniversary in 1974 although the company prefer to look upon 1925 as the start of MG production; it wasn't until the 1927 Olympia Motor Show that MG were to be exhibited. We'll return to the history of the Kimber special later, but meanwhile back on the 1925 Land's End Trial...

The event started on Good Friday night from the Slough Trading Estate driving westwards through the night at an average speed of 20mph – too much for the friction-drive GWKs as none of the team of three reached Land's End. Porlock Hill was the first test hill, unsurfaced in those days, of course. The cars started just before the bottom right-hand hairpin on a 1-in-6 gradient and were then timed over a ½-mile which had to be covered at an average of around 20mph to gain a gold medal.

"After the majority of the 250 motorcycles and combinations had made more or less faultless ascents, the cars headed by the Morgan three-wheelers began to enliven things. Collier (Morgan-Anzani) approached the top bend, which was also thronged with a great crowd, at a terrific speed with the inevitable result when he tried to turn. The car cart-wheeled, nearly demolished the *Motor* photographer, was righted again by willing hands and shot off again quite happily! Russell (Morgan-Blackburne) provided an even greater thrill, for he, too, approached the top bend too fast, turned over right-handed and then bounced back until his left side was on the ground! His lady passenger was quite impeturbed, for almost before anyone realised what had happened she was out of the car, starting handle in hand all ready to wind up the engine again..."

"As some of the 1500cc cars were really fast, things began to happen when they appeared. Cocker, who like the other Clyno drivers, made a magnificent restart, was going at speed on the second bend in his saloon when one of his rear tyres burst with an alarming report. This caused him to wobble all over the road and so balked Goodfellow (Clyno). A few moments later Jefferies (Frazer-Nash) came charging up at speed, turned completely round on the top bend, partially ran over a spectator on the inside of the turn, and eventually came to rest with one or two burst tyres. After this he retired... Lewis, in another very rapid Frazer-Nash

almost met the same fate, but got away well, leaving a perfectly good tyre and tube from his off rear wheel on the bend... Really outstanding performances in this class were made by Denley's Rhode, Kimber's 1½-litre Morris garage-built car..."

All spellings are as printed!

Obviously Porlock was more exciting than it is now. "The notorious acclivity of Lynton Hill was in good condition and presented no great difficulty..." Then on to Beggar's Roost. "This formidable test hill reared skywards from Barbrook Mill, and those waiting their turn to ascend could almost see the floorboards of the cars climbing the red and rocky precipice. The Hill was roped off and clear of spectators, who thronged the banks in thousands, and although dry, the surface was loose and in places very soft, owing to its having been churned up by the rear wheels of sidecar outfits... Kimber (MG sports) made a fairly good ascent although he looked somewhat worried..."

"After the check at the top, followed a regular 'blind' to make up time – a process which was not essential, but desirable. The road, desolate rough and tortuous, wound its way to Simonsbath over a wild and barren moor. J. L. Goddard took a right-angle corner so fast that he turned his Morgan right over, wrecking it very successfully. He left it and walked to the nearest doctor for treatment. Only a mile or two farther was J. Rose's "Experimental GN" wrecked through trying conclusions with a traction engine, while within a few hundred yards was Schwalm who had ripped a wheel off his Frazer-Nash and put the chains out of alignment passing a cart in a narrow lane. At length came Launceston, with lunch in the Town Hall, and the long drive across the moor to Bodmin, where there was a secret check on the London side of the town. Then more rough, dusty lanes to Perranporth, where tea and cakes, hospitably provided by Healey's garage, were enjoyed before tackling the last ordeal – the twin hairpins of Bluehills Mine."

Kimber didn't get a mention for Bluehills but must have ascended quite comfortably as 54 out of the 61 in the 1500cc class climbed the hill. And so the cars made their way to Penzance. "Here, headlamps flinging searching fingers over the Cornish countryside, the last cars wended their way through the maze of twisty lanes to Land's End, where, in the wind-swept hostelry high on the cliff above the roaring Atlantic, the final checking sheet was signed."

When the results were published

Kimber and Matthews at Bluehills Mine in 1925 on the same hairpin that is shown 34 on the front cover 50 years on



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Kimber's MG was one to qualify for a gold medal, which, incidentally, the winner could have exchanged for gold cuff-links or a silver ash-tray; in fact of the 131 cars that started, only 24 retired and only three of the remainder received no awards, while 52 qualified for golds.

That was 50 years ago. At that time the cars being sold under the MG name were modified Cowleys and Oxfords; not only were the bodies different but the handling was considerably improved with better suspension and damping and the engines were hotted up. This car, however, was not just a Morris Garages Cowley Special; the chassis was specially built with the front part following the pattern of the Cowley/Oxford design to take an H-section beam front axle on semi-elliptics. At the rear, though, a new channel section was built extending over the axle to take half-elliptic springs which give better lateral location; the back axle features a torque-tube from the back of the gearbox with bracing rods from the box to the outer ends of the axle casings. Apparently the car was tested before the trial; since that was held from 10 April and the car was first registered on 27 March there wasn't a lot of time unless it had been used earlier with trade plates or on private ground. However the testing revealed chassis cracks and the channel was hurriedly reinforced the night before the trial by the usual expedient of "boxing" – closing the open face of the channel where possible.

At that time it was fitted with the 12-inch Oxford front brakes on the production axle but these have been replaced at some stage with the 9-inch ones from the Cowley; they were rod operated via the Perrot system. The rear drums were unusually wide and contained four shoes operated by the handbrake lever.

Outwardly the 1921 engine – the date of the block casting – looks fairly modern with its chain-driven push-rod operated overhead valves and a cross-flow cylinder head all with clean neat castings. The block and crankcase are cast in one and contain three main bearings pressure fed. The cross-flow head is a little short on porting with just a single port for a large SU – it used to be a bronze one – and siamesed centre exhaust ports; the design is very similar to that of the popular Meadows of some six years later which continued in use up to the war. The magneto is driven from a skew gear from the nose of the crankshaft on the right of the engine while there is a blanking plate on the left which might have had a dynamo or water pump on the Gilchrist; on the MG the dynastart is belt driven from the crankshaft and is rather crudely mounted on the side of the block under the fabricated exhaust manifold. Also in the belt train is a rev counter drive. Water cooling works on the good old thermosyphon principle with a radiator-cap thermometer.

The Morris Cowley of that era had dimensions of 69.5 x 102mm, 1548cc against the earlier 69 x 100mm, 1496cc. Period figures for the Gilchrist were variable with 69.5 x 102.7mm quoted in February 1922 changing to 69.7 x 102.5mm

in April, 1564cc or even 65.9 x 105.7mm, 1593cc although it comes to 1442cc. Kimber's engine was prepared by Charlie Martin with the bore sleeved down to 69mm and a 100mm crank to give 1496cc.

Output must be of the order of 38bhp in a car weight of around 15cwt – the body was panelled in steel on wooden framing and appears to have been styled after the 1922 Fiat 804 GP cars complete with the wind-diverting scuttle-top flaring and staggered seating – Carbodies of Coventry started building it on 13 March. The wings were vestigial, particularly the inverted guttering at the rear. Lighting for the night drive wasn't too strong either, with just a couple of oversize side-lights above the mid-mounted spare wheels.

I first met the car down at Mousehole, a Cornish lobster-pot village, where we were foregathering to take the car back to some of the old Land's End Trial hills. We included the men from British Leyland and Syd Beer, MG specialist, who looks after the Kimber MG for British Leyland and brought the car along from Cambridge on a trailer. The idea was to do the testing part of the trial in reverse direction; thus after a photographic pause by the water wheel illustrated on the centre page we set off to Land's End where the "wind-swept hostelry" was closed.

Apart from scrambling the car along the paths to the first and last signpost where 50 years of MG Cars 1975 was inscribed on the adjustable bit, there was nothing particularly nostalgic at Land's End. By now I had driven the car a little and it felt very much like a slightly less bouncy version of an Anzani-engined Frazer Nash; it was stiff and responsive with adequate performance marred by three desperate Cowley ratios. A lack of rev counter took a little getting used to.

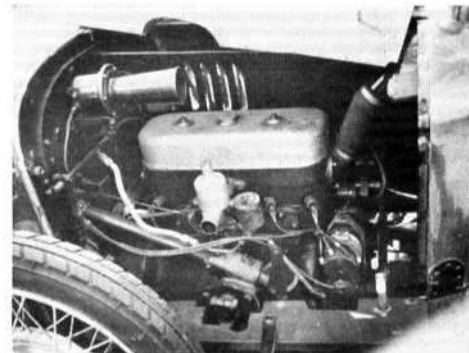
Mindful of the car's uniqueness – and I wasn't that sure that Syd really trusted me with his charge – I let it be taken on trailer to the next assault at St Agnes Head near Perranporth, or rather to a convenient lay-by as the start of the Bluehills Mine ascent is not the best place for a trailer.

I have done a number of the present-day MCC trials usually in a rear-engined modern – Imp, Fiat, Simca – and once did the Exeter in a Vauxhall 30/98; over the

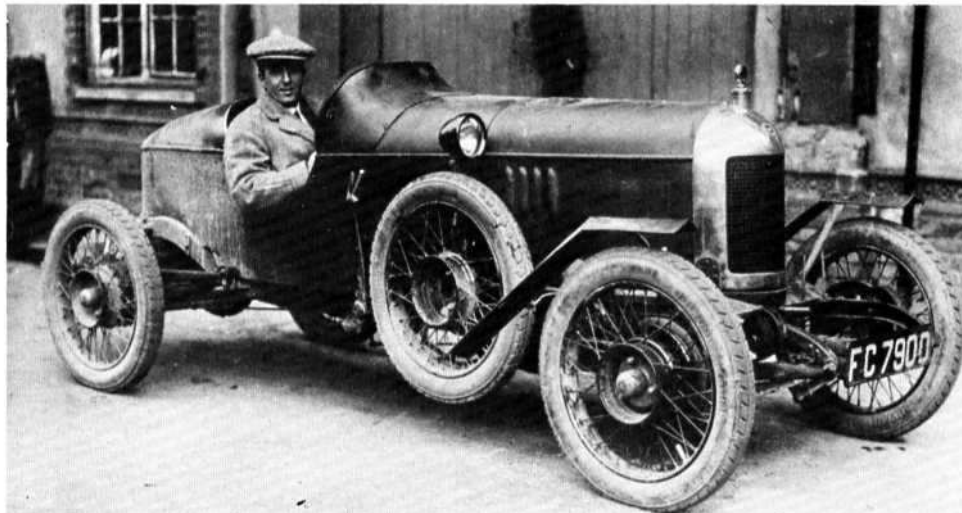
years they have made the hills harder by minor re-routing or just finding harder hills but the classic hills remain as long as they haven't been surfaced. Bluehills has now been largely surfaced on its original route which has considerably eased the once-tricky first hairpin by reducing the approach gradient – the MG approached in second, took an easy first in mid-corner and accelerated away with a few little squeaks from the inside wheel. The current route takes a right loop off the road before the hairpin and then continues up the rutted cart-track on the side of the hill by going straight on at the hairpin – much harder and I have never yet got up without assistance from the tractor winch!

The car reverted to its trailer after that until the lunch stop; I then drove it until dusk for some 3 hours to Blackmoor Gate. There's nothing quite like a little bit of driving in earnest – such as for photography – for gaining confidence rapidly. I said earlier that it felt like an Anzani Frazer Nash which means light and spidery with a 0–50mph in 12sec potential given a 4-speed gearbox; however the MG only has three speeds with a centre lever bent parallel to the floor. First is back opposite reverse – no detent – with second up and right while in third the lever flops over under your left knee. There's plenty of space for the clutch foot with which you don't need to be too dextrous – it's a slow change whatever you do. A tank pressure pump pivots on the floor just behind the

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Hotchkiss ohv engine of 1921 with detachable head, magneto ignition, and early SU fed from pressurised rear fuel tank



Kimber and MG Special after preliminary testing – chassis still unboxed and no rear wings. Opposite, stopped on Beggar's Roost. Centre, scenic stop off the trial route – by the working water-wheel at Sennen Cove; insets, the leafy lane at the top of Beggar's Roost



