

# The amazing marathon MG Midget

*The Daily Express London to Sydney Marathon of 1968 was more than 10,000 miles of non-stop rallying. John Sprinzel, veteran Sprite campaigner, teamed up with Triumph driver Roy Fidler to tackle the epic event in the smallest car – an MG Midget. John Sprinzel recalls the adventure . . .*

'YOU HAVE to be mad' they said... 'to take a Midget on the Marathon. 'You'll be out by Belgrade... It'll never get to Istanbul' were other firm forecasts when Roy Fidler and I announced our intention to tackle the London-to-Sydney Rally in my veteran Spridget.

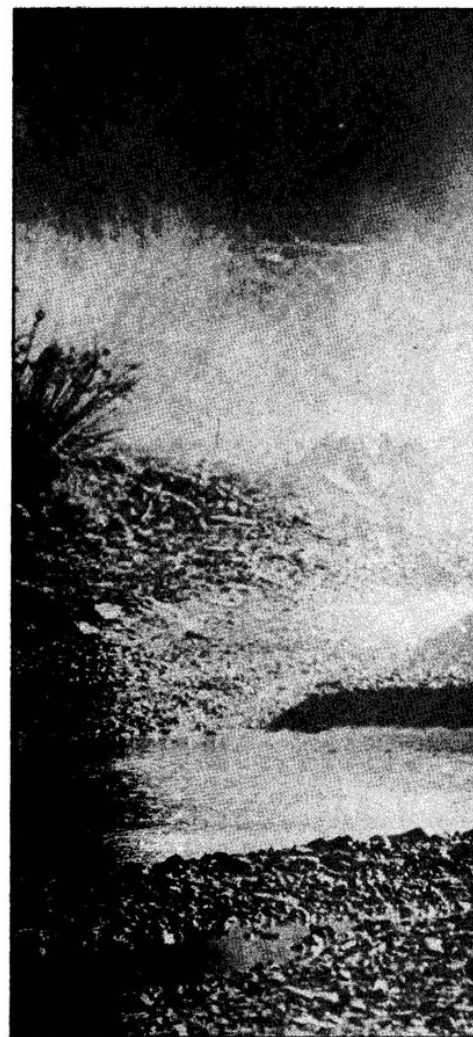
Most of the entry seemed to have chosen either the comfort of a Hydrolastic 1800 or the powerful reputation of the Dagenham saloons to challenge the Australian and German contenders, so perhaps our choice was more in the way of a protest for individuality than a serious attempt to gain an outright win. However, Roy and I had a secret belief that the privateer's award *could* be won by a Midget, and for months onwards business and family life had to take a back seat while plans, designs, theories, and maps were spread thickly on every table in office and home. Work in the garage almost ceased – as far as customers were concerned anyway – and the poor storekeepers spent eight hours a day chasing after vast lists of unobtainable parts for the Midget-with-a-difference.

Without going into too many details, suspensions were hand built, bodywork was mostly replaced by identical panels in light-weight glass-fibre, and the interior was trimmed with sound resistant padding. A five-speed gearbox (which had spent two seasons racing in Donald Healey's Sprites) was forced into the tunnel, and Don Moore's talents were used to rebuild and balance a very standard engine. Minilite wheels – using the same tyres as the factory 1800's (for very obvious reasons) needed quite a bit of persuading to fit in the widened wheel arches, and the whole thing once assembled looked like

the highest and widest Spridget in the world. Adding to this effect was the extra foot of hardtop, which incorporated three separate fuel tanks to give a total range of nearly 600 miles. Fuel stations in Turkey and Afghanistan are not exactly as plentiful as they are on the A5!

To tackle a 10,000-mile journey in so small a car did call for some sacrifices... carrying luggage was the first of these, and the total space allocated to personal effects allowed each person to have one tooth-brush, one razor, a box of Kleenex, two spare sets of underwear, and a rally jacket. The passenger seat was replaced by a 6'3" bed made out of two alloy tubes, Pirelli webbing, and a Dunlopillo mattress. In addition to allowing a wide choice of reclining positions, this also enabled us to carry about 2cwt of spares *under* the bed. Apart from one throttle cable, one set of rear brake shoes, and four spark plugs, I confess that *none* of the spares were used! We even finished in Sydney with one of the tyres fitted at Crystal Palace, and only punctures forced us to change three of the others that we carried. Four gallons of water each thickly laced with lemon and Glucose, five Horlicks survival packs, and a first aid kit containing enough medicaments to doctor an army, and preparation was complete.

These few lines of typed specifications took some 1,600 hours of actual preparation – the rest of the time was spent in raising sponsors. Everyone we approached had already been tackled by Terry Hunter and Vic Elford (who had obviously been trying to earn their retirement pension out of would-be sponsors) so that our requests for £100 here and £100 there often



met with slight sighs of relief. Even so, we set off on the brightest of sunny afternoons with £800 still to find. The 'Amateurs' award was £500, and bonuses for winning it would just cover our costs.

Crystal Palace has never looked so crowded. It seemed as if everyone had come to see the Marathon on its way, and Sir Donald Stokes stood on the start line offering all British Leyland crews £300 for finishing... which would really provide a slight profit if we could beat two Porsches, three Mercedes, and the horde of Cortinas and 1800's which were in private hands. Press estimates put the spectators between London and Dover at two million people all waving like crazy – except two rather dim bluebottles organizing the biggest traffic jam I have ever seen on the exit from Vauxhall Bridge. In the end three of the foreign cars with sirens blaring made a fifth lane which took the law completely by surprise, and finally permitted 30 or so crews to at least get out of London! Terry Hunter's Porsche was stopped and a copper – in very broken German – explained that sirens were verboten. Terry in equally broken English apologized delightfully, and all was well.



Dover customs procedure was the slowest of the event – it took about 30 seconds, but then they actually *looked* at the passports. The boat trip was short and pleasant, with the calmest of seas, and our last planned sitdown meal for seven days... but France welcomed us with her usual official dramas. Non! we were not to use the motorway, our route should tackle a horde of the little cobbled French sideroads. Rapid consultation of the regulations confirmed that choice of route was free, so crafty back doubles and rapid approaches on side lights coned our way past the gendarmerie, and we found ourselves (in common with well over half the entry) enjoying a quiet rest down the speedy motorway to Paris. Just as well too, for the fog got thicker and thicker. By the time we reached that vast No Man's Land which counts as a frontier zone between France and Switzerland the 'pea souper' was as British as anything we had ever seen, and Roy had made his first (and only) attempt to frighten me, a Citroën driver, and the driver of a large Saviem lorry which loomed out of the fog six tenths of an inch away from my left ear. I watched with bated breath and with professional interest while Fidler

added to his grey hair with a five-second display of polished cadence braking, controlled sliding, and width judging. Very interesting!

Italy demanded rally numbers to be covered – as if those gaudily painted and multi-labelled cars with dozens of lights and unwieldy 'Kangaroo guards' on the front could be *anything* other than rally cars – but the pouring rain washed away a good many of the taped up paper covers without anyone receiving penalty or penance.

Yugoslavia allowed us her motorways, the most rapid of customs ever, and a continuation of nastiness in the shape of fog, but the easy time schedules dictated by Western Europe's laws on rallying enabled the whole convoy to invade the *Hotel Metropole* at Belgrade for some 10 hours of sleep or work.

Peter Harper's fuel injected beastie had expired near Venice – with a lack of water, which seemed an odd spot for such a complaint, but this retirement also helped to prove the old rally proverb of not changing specification between test and event, for the problems were the direct cause of a repositioned pulley, altered *after* a very successful reconnaissance – and one

of the top favourites was out. Schellenberg's thundering Bentley continued along the course in a blaze of publicity and noise, the occupants frozen half to death with 1930-type opentourer ventilation. Bulgaria added no further hazards, and positioned a policeman or party official every few hundred yards – this helpful method of controlling traffic on the rally route was to be a feature of the event between Yugoslavia and India.

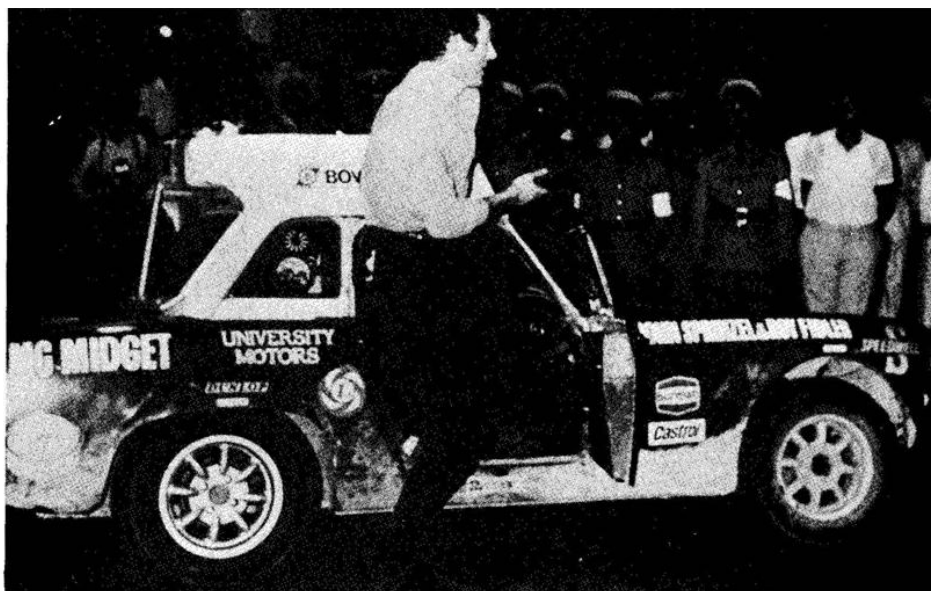
The Midget had given us two heart-stopping moments; the first when the gearbox appeared to be using quarts and quarts of oil, (but clearing the breather pipe cured this potential disaster) and the sudden cessation of power in the midst of the *Autostrada* – near Turin at rush hour time. Fortunately this was only a broken throttle cable, and there was a spare taped neatly alongside the faulty one. Apart from these seconds of apprehension, everything was going like clockwork and no oil had been needed in the motor. Our maximum cruising speed of 78mph (which also was our maximum speed in the indirect fifth gear) gave 20mpg on the very cheapest 88 octane petrol. The mini-bed was working fabulously and both Roy and I had had more sleep on the run through Europe than we would ever have had at home. The reclined safety harness, also served to 1. hold the passenger in his chosen position, and 2. prevent the passenger from sliding that one inch to right which would have helped to change gear.

Istanbul was unfortunately viewed at dead of night, with heavy rain streaming down, and even the trip across the Golden Horn in the Bosphorus 'ferri-bot' was lacking in the expected glamour because of the moist darkness. The Turkish lorry drivers had obviously read all the terrible reports about themselves, and kept very well over to their side of the road (I think this was to the right, but customs changed so often on this trip it really was quite difficult to decide!).

The national pastime in Asia Minor is definitely tipping-lorries-up-onto-their-sides, and many picturesque views of the undersides of ancient camions are dotted along the route. I understand that the Bentley joined in this sport, but as he was running far behind us in the convoy we were unable to inspect the nether regions of this wonderful old machine. A brave and valiant effort by a crew who were considered to be even more 'mental' than those engaged in the contest with baby sports cars.

Life for us had developed into a firm battle with Rob Slotemakers factory DAF – which improbable machine now has a Renault motor (and which was supported, it seemed by the whole of Holland wearing green and orange uniforms while being flown around the world in the oldest Dakota still in





captivity). We both seemed to have identical top speeds, except against the wind when our higher frontal aspect slowed us down to 1mph under the DAF's speed.

Roy, Rob, and I are all ex-Triumph team drivers, so that rivalry naturally continued along every inch of the route — giving the resting passenger yet another reason to bless the Britax harness!

Somewhere around here, the transcontinental-highway-tour was momentarily abandoned for a period of activity over the Sivas to Erzincan section, where Roger Clark slid into the lead hotly pursued by lots of 1800's and things. The brief 'special stage' provided a little excitement for the great control at Teheran, where the Phillips factory had laid on the most splendid facilities to revive tired crews and jaded cars.

The Ford camp were hard at it with flood-lights — front suspension struts and gear-boxes receiving attention, while the 1800 'pits' seemed more concerned with restocking food parcels and opting for the passenger beds rather than the driving seat. Teheran to Kabul provided a little more excitement for the works 1800's who took the shorter, rougher route and had to do a bit of repairing during the two hours they saved, and for us, who had to average just over 70mph — with a top speed of 78mph — and this for 23 non-stop hours. We buzzed in with petrol pumps ticking and two minutes only in hand after what proved to be the most tense day of the rally for us.

The barren expanse that is Afghanistan — and which really must look very much like the surface of the moon. Kabul — the capital — was the only official sleeping-half and was the coldest spot on the route. We were surprised at the civilization which greeted us at Kabul — the hotel even had American canned beer — and we were all well fit and rested to tackle the pre-dawn classic stage over the Lataban pass. This boulder strewn pathway across the mountains is no longer in

use, as a perfectly sound main road has been built along the valley. But I suppose the organizers had to sort some of us out before Bombay, if only to provide half way results for the newspapers during the long boat trip ahead.

Clark confirmed his enthusiastic skills by taking still more time from us all, but Bianchi, Lampinen, Hopkirk, and Cowan — all wearing the most civilized of touring saloons — were close behind the twin-cam racer. Australians, oddly enough, were only ahead on the bull contest — for in driving ability the best lay a distant seventh in spite of a lot of horses — but to listen to the stories (and we had about nine days of confinement ahead in which to receive the full range of tales) it was merely a matter of reaching the big dusty continent before the first six crews would disappear into the wombat holes of the Nullarbor desert.

The Khyber Pass was a sell-out — six bends on a good surfaced road with no steep gradients, no signs of either the ghost of Errol Flynn or of the wild tribesmen. Pakistan and India were a different story, with millions of people packing the route, defying the progress of the convoy only to part ranks at the last minute in a rather unusual game of 'chicken'.

Any halt in the progress, and the crowds descended on the cars, which though bearable in a Mercedes or 1800 was sheer hell in a Midget. The flimsy glass-fibre doors were all but torn off their hinges, both head-lamp glasses broken, reverse lamps torn off the body and finally, the windscreen shattered by this unwelcomed enthusiasm. Few Matra-throneers will ever forget the almost terrifying hordes through India.

After all this the boat trip on the P & O liner *Chusan* was certainly an anti-climax; more than 70 cars made it to Bombay, although only 35 had less than three hours of lateness penalty. This margin of lateness would be the maximum allowed for the first part of the Australian route, so that prophecies of only 35 at Bombay were not really

so far from true. The wide margins allowed in Europe and Asia, together with well-policed routes, speedy customs, and oft re-graded road surfaces had made the organizers planned route far easier than ever could be foretold. The Indian route from Delhi to Bombay alone had been covered with some 12 hours of time in hand, and yet the same stretch under practice conditions had penalized almost all who had surveyed what had been a road teeming with undisciplined pedestrians, trucks, and animals.

Perhaps the only thing to say of the nine day cruise was that the poker game was most interesting and, for me at any rate, quite profitable. Paddy Hopkirk summed up most of our sentiments on leaving the boat, when he told the ever-present Brian Robbins and his TV *Wheelbase* team: 'That was the best advertisement for flying I have ever seen.'

Perth welcomed us in great style. Almost the first sight as we approached was a line up of MGB's and Spridgets, with banners from the Healey and MG Car Clubs, and these same enthusiastic supporters were to drive us into the city, and later to lead us from the start to the British Leyland Service point just outside town. That our driver lost his way was perhaps unfortunate, because in almost every other way the fabulous enthusiasm and help given by this vast army of supporters was a feature of our journey through Australia. (The men of Broken Hill let the side down just a little tiny bit!)

The pattern for the final three days was soon set, with fairly easy rides throughout the day and early night, combined with real swinging sections around dawn, to give tired cars and tense drivers some challenging motoring. Not perhaps as tough as Liege or Safari, for the pressure just wasn't constant enough to prevent lots of repair work. The leading Cortina had so many changes of bits and pieces as it descended from the leader-board down to 10th place, that two cannibalized versions were left by the side of the road, and few of its original vital organs remained on the car that arrived at the finish.

Marvel Lock and Lake King provided early bumps and jumps, together with more than a fair share of Australian dust. The Nullarbor was mercifully covered with fleecy clouds and had been well rained upon, leaving a cool and dust-free run over what had threatened to exhaust most of us. The Flinders ranges which followed lived up to their threat, with plenty of close fought motoring along twisting and rough tracks much in the character of British forest roads during a dry summer.

After the Flinders we found ourselves in reach of our goal. Edgar Hermann's Porsche and the Michael Taylor

Mercedes were both now behind us in the privateers battle, and with only three 'tight' sections of the rally left, it looked as if the unlikely-to-win Midget would be in the money after all.

At Broken Hill we had a small split in the front suspension mounting arc welded in expert style, and off again at high speed (78mph!) to the Menindee control. the British Leyland service team here had the most magnificent speedy jacking system, and all the 1800's were whisked four feet up into the air even before the startled crews had time to get out. Wheels were changed with lightning speed — even though hardly anybody really needed a change of tyres — but practice they had and change they would!

Our Waterloo came just 14 miles later when the front nearside wheel disappeared into the bush to join the 5,300 sheep on John Caskey's station of 45,000 acres. A quick hitch in a brave Mini Cooper back to Menindee, during which I gleaned the presence of a Midget in Broken Hill. Then a 'phone call in between the levitation acts with 1800's and the complete front unit had been stripped and brought to a waiting charter plant (not as expensive as it sounds as everyone charts light planes out in the bush). The pilot landed on the bend of the dirt road where we were parked, but alas, the 'left side' which I had requested, had been transferred into the 'left-from-a-facing-the-front-car' and it was quite impossible to bodge up the car. Seven

hours had elapsed before three brave young ladies in a Morris 1100, still happily in the rally, arrived with the correct part (it had grown too dark for the pilot to manage another trip) and with only six hours of permitted lateness, our bid for fame and fortune had gone *hors de combat*.

A night on the station, with lamb chops at every meal, and a most interesting conversation with the young couple who ran these many acres all by themselves, and then, by virtue of a little short-cutting, Sydney was reached after all. We were the only Midget with three disc wheels and one wire wheel in existence, leaving a two-wheeled Midget owner in Broken Hill quite

happily clutching a set of disc pads and two IVB spotlights as a 'swop' for his entire front suspension and brake system.

That the six team 1800's all finished to take second and third place among this exotic convoy is now history, and at that two very normal family saloons from Britain should take the top two places is also on the records. But that 56 crews, many of them amateurs with hardly any rally experience, should have survived such a long and often difficult journey was a tribute to the courage of the drivers and the stamina of their cars. One thing is certain, the Marathon was a success albeit a far easier one than had been planned. □

