

Jonathan Wood's The MG Story

Part One — The early days. How an accident involving an elderly solicitor and a young motorcyclist led to the creation of a household name.

If a young man working for his father's Manchester printing ink business had not, in 1910, suffered the misfortune of being involved in a motorcycle accident, there might never have been an MG marque.

The individual was 22 year old Cecil Kimber, and the incident ended his brief involvement with two-wheeled transport. Unfortunately the injuries he sustained left the young motorcyclist with a limp; the result of his right leg being shorter than the other. But it was not all bad news; the offending vehicle was a car and its driver, an elderly solicitor, subsequently paid Kimber some £700 compensation.

With the purchase of a motorcycle out of the question, Kimber decided to spend £185 of the settlement in satisfying his 'overwhelming attraction towards motor cars' by buying a Singer Ten early in 1913.

His disability made him unfit for military service, so in 1915 Kimber joined the Sheffield-Simplex company as a buyer. It was the start of a lifelong involvement with the motor industry and, six years later, he was appointed sales manager of The Morris Garages in Oxford, based at the company's Queens Street headquarters.

The garages' proprietor, William Morris, would within three years become Britain's largest car maker, as his famous no-frills Bullnose Cowley and smarter Morris Oxford began to be seen in increasing numbers on the country's roads.

Once again, fate intervened because, in March 1922, the company's general manager Edward Armstead suddenly resigned and then, inexplicably, committed suicide. His place was taken by Cecil Kimber, who had just

celebrated his 34th birthday.

There is no evidence to suggest that, at this stage, Kimber was intent on producing a sports car; his particular interest at the time was special coachwork. He had a fine eye for line and form; a reflection perhaps that his mother had studied art, possibly at the Slade in London, and was an accomplished watercolourist.

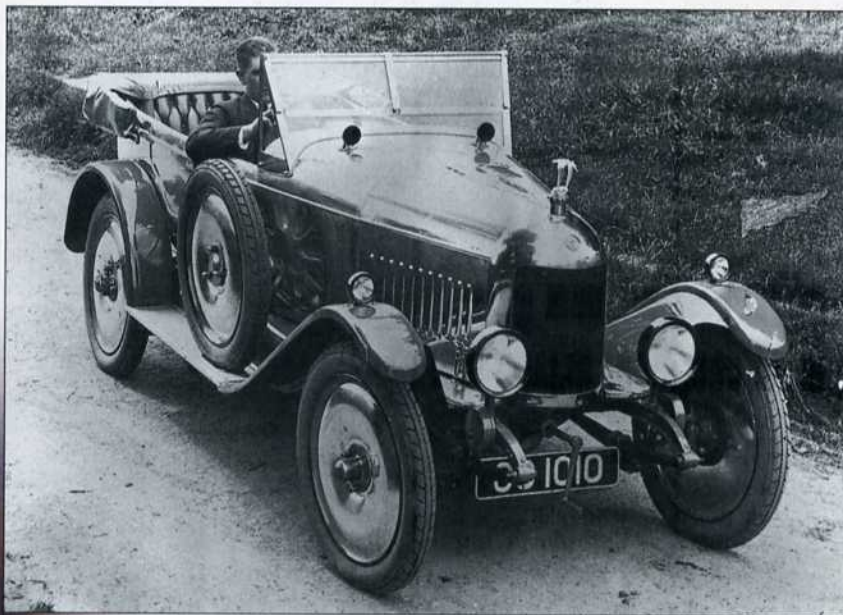
His first effort was the pastel-hued Morris Garages Chummy of 1922, which was based on the standard Cowley chassis. Created in the traditionally slack summer months, it emanated from the firm's Oxford Longwall premises.

The Chummy was slightly lower than the standard car. This was because Kimber had the car's upper quarter elliptic rear springs moved from their location beneath the chassis to the top of the frame. In the first instance, the work was undertaken by another Cecil. This was Cecil (Cec) Cousins who, like so many of his contemporaries, remained with MG for the rest of his working life.

A two-seater with rear dickey seat had been a feature of the Morris car

Old Number One has been in corporate ownership since 1932, and has been used many times for publicity purposes by successive owners of the MG marque. This shot was taken by Leyland Cars in the 1970s. You can see the car for yourself at the Heritage Motor Centre at Gaydon, Warwickshire, England.





A Morris Oxford-based MG Super Sports touring, introduced in 1924 with polished aluminium coachwork by Carbodies.

The ugly artillery wheels were hidden by polished discs, but the real thing can be seen reflected in the body behind the spare wheel!

The scuttle-mounted ventilators and triangulated sides to the windscreen were Kimber touches that persisted throughout the decade.

range since its 1913 inception. Kimber's car offered roomier, but integral, accommodation although – unlike the mainstream version – when the hood was raised the lucky rear passengers were also protected from the elements.

Once modified, the Chummy chassis was then driven the 50 or so miles to Coventry and the Old Church Street premises of the newly established coachbuilding firm of Carbodies. Set up in 1919 by Robert 'Bobby' Jones, this contract marked the start of a long association between that company and what was to become MG.

The little Chummy sold very well, to the extent that in February 1923, the modest operation was transferred to another Morris Garages outpost. This was a small mews garage in Oxford's Alfred Lane that had only been so occupied since 1922, and was near to the city's busy St Giles thoroughfare.

It was just a month after this move that Kimber – with a restaurateur friend, Russell Chiesman, as passenger – drove a tuned Chummy in the 1923 London to Land's End Trial. Although entitled to a gold medal, Kimber opted instead for a pair of gold cufflinks.

Perhaps inspired by this success, he approached Oxford coachbuilder Charles Raworth – who had been responsible for bodying the original 1913 Morris Oxford – and ordered six open two-seater bodies.

Kimber's design featured scuttle-mounted maritime-type ventilators and the windscreen had distinctive triangulated sides.

The first example was probably delivered in the summer of 1923, but the car was not a success – for £350 a customer could have bought the likes of a lively 10/23 Talbot, rather than a bespoke Morris Cowley powered by a 1.5-litre side-valve engine. Little wonder that it took Kimber nearly a year to dispose of all six cars.

He suffered a further blow when, later in 1923, Morris Motors introduced what it described as the Occasional Four, clearly inspired by the Chummy but substantially cheaper. As a result, the Morris

Garages manager began to look around for a new line.

He transferred his attention to the more expensive Oxford chassis, which in 1923 was offered with an optional 1.8 litre engine. This option was standardised the following year, and the model was subsequently accorded the 14/28hp designation.

First Kimber offered the Chummy body on the Oxford frame, but this proved to be equally unsuccessful. So he switched, in 1924, to four-door saloon coachwork. But again price was against it because, at £460, it was £65 more than Morris's own closed Oxford.

However, the really significant historical aspect of this car was that it was advertised, in March 1924, in the first issue of *The Morris Owner* as the 'MG vee-front saloon.' It marked the arrival of the now world-famous initials that stood for Morris Garages.

In creating the MG make, Cecil Kimber was able to separate his products from the bread-and-butter Morris range. However, in the short term, the association was publicised and no doubt looked upon as a positive one by both parties.

The same month of March saw one of Kimber's salesman – Jack Gardiner – take delivery, just before his 21st birthday, of a Morris Garages 14/28 Oxford graced with a very eye-catching, handsome polished aluminium four-seater touring body.

MG historian Wilson McComb suggested that the inspiration for this visually striking car was a special-bodied Oxford owned by Reg Brown of John Marston Ltd., which built Sunbeam cars and motorcycles. He had fitted it with wire wheels and the impressive polished aluminium body, upholstered with red leather, echoed the lines of his own Vauxhall 30/98 sports car. It was the work of Clarey Hughes, a Birmingham-based sidecar manufacturer. Gardiner's aluminium-bodied Oxford appeared in the April 1924 issue of *The Morris Owner* as the 'MG Special 4-seater Sports'. The only jarring note was provided by the utilitarian artillery wheels.

This car was soon followed by another, built for trials driver Billy Cooper. It was a visual improvement on the earlier example, having lower lines and with the offending artillery wheels concealed by Ace discs. The Carbodies aluminium coachwork made a pleasing contrast to the blue wings, valances and upholstery.

Mechanical modifications were modest, consisting mainly of flatter springs to enhance the lower lines, and modified steering gear. The parts were mostly produced in the Longwall machine room.

These popular, distinctive cars were unofficially allotted the Mark IV description, which might suggest that the Chummy was the Mark I, the Raworth two-seater Mark II, and vee-front saloon Mark III.

By this time, the make had a badge, because the May 1924 issue of the Morris magazine featured one of the Raworth-bodied Cowleys as the 'MG Super Sports Morris.' The parental suffix was soon dropped, but the initials were contained, for the first time, within the make's now famous octagonal badge. This was the work of Kimber's young cost accountant, Ted Lee, who was also a keen amateur artist.

At this time, the Alfred Lane team was still wholly dependent on Morris



Cecil Kimber (1888–1945)

There was little in Cecil Kimber's background to suggest that he was destined to be the creator of a legendary motoring marque. He was born in 1888 in West Norwood, South London, and his father, Henry Francis (H.F.) was a director of the family business, Hughes and Kimber, which supplied printing ink and lithographic plates to the industry. In about 1896 the family moved north to Manchester, where Kimber senior established a related, but seemingly precarious, printing ink business with his brother.

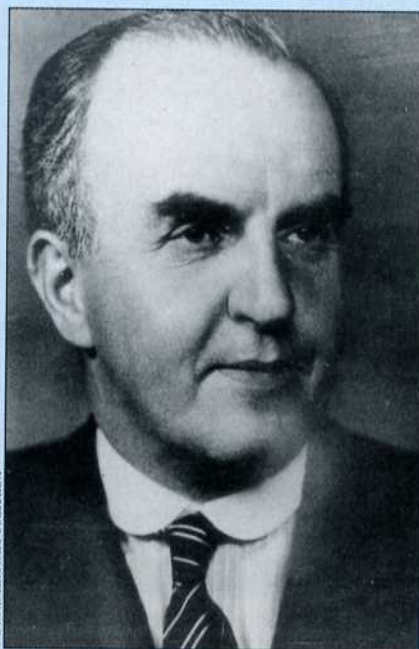
The young Cecil attended Stockport Grammar School, which he left in 1903, just before his 15th birthday, and entered his father's firm while continuing his education in the evenings at Manchester Technical School. He also studied accountancy and, in his later years, urged recruits to the industry follow suit; "hand in hand with study of the technical and production side."

But Kimber later recognised that his own early engineering training was of "the most sketchy nature." Confessing that, like so many of the industry's pioneers, "All I had was an overpowering attraction towards motorcycles and motor cars in general."

Soon after Cecil's accident on a friend's Rex twin motorcycle, H.F. suggested that his son put some of the compensation he had received into the family printing business. Kimber refused, which caused a rift between the two that was never healed.

Following the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Cecil Kimber variously worked for Sheffield-Simplex, A.C. Cars and Martinsyde Aircraft.

After hostilities ended in 1918, Cecil Kimber joined axle manufacturer E. G. Wrigley of Birmingham. "The managing director was totally unable to read an ordinary trading



David Knowles collection

account, and did not know the debit side from the credit side." In these circumstances it may come as no surprise to find that that Wrigley, which had allied itself with the makers of the Angus Sanderson car – a rival to Morris – found itself in difficulties. The unlucky Kimber had ultimately worthless shares in the axle business and, on arrival in Oxford during the depression year of 1921, he was in his own words, "Broke to the world".

By 1915, Kimber had married Irene 'Renee' Hunt and the couple had two daughters, Betty and Jean.

At MG, the slight figure of Kim, as he was known, was remembered as a strict but fair manager; although – on his own admission – a ruthless one when required. It is refreshing to find that the great man's interests extended beyond motor cars, which he listed as trout fishing, sailing and work – in that order!

Kimber himself described as 'the first MG'.

Unlike the vehicles being produced in small but growing numbers at Alfred Lane, this car was built at Morris Garages' Longwall premises in Oxford, and differed significantly in a number of ways from the Bullnose-based cars.

The Morris Garages

The firm from which MG derived its name had its roots in a business which pre-dated William Morris's career as a motor manufacturer. In 1903 he had opened The Oxford Automobile and Cycle Agency which included premises at Holywell Street – later renamed Longwall Street – that backed onto the old city wall encircling New College gardens. Later, in 1910, new premises – which survive today – were built on the site and the business registered as The Morris Garages.

In 1913 – coinciding with the arrival of the Morris Oxford – new showrooms were

A Cowley chassis was modified to accept half elliptic springs – as opposed to the rear three quarter elliptic springs of the original – and fitted with wire wheels. As already mentioned, the production Bullnose used a side-valve engine, but Kimber wanted a more appropriate overhead valve one for this car.

Morris's engines were manufactured by Hotchkiss in Coventry, until he bought the business in 1923 and renamed it Morris Engines. In its independent days the firm had produced a 1.5-litre unit for the by then obsolete Glasgow-built Gilchrist car. This used a Morris-based block onto which Hotchkiss had grafted an overhead valve cylinder head.

One of these rare engines was tuned and mounted in the modified chassis. The famous Bullnose radiator was retained and Carbodies produced a stark, open two-seater grey-painted body with a pointed tail. Top speed was a rather blustery 80mph plus.

At Easter 1925, Kimber – accompanied by Oxford insurance broker, Wilfred Andrews – returned to the Land's End event that he had entered two years before. Once again he completed the trial and, on this occasion, accepted a gold medal.

Such successes could only have aided MG sales, in particular, of the increasingly popular four-seater tourer, which ensured that production was soon outstripping the limited confines of Alfred Lane. During the summer, the loyal workforce had become used to starting work at 6am in the morning, and not finishing until 10pm or even midnight. It was clearly time for yet another move.

Kimber – who was still employed by Morris – kept his eyes open for suitable sites, and found an ideal plot of land in Bainton Road, about a mile to the north of the mews in Oxford. He may even have harboured hopes of MG establishing its own factory there but, in the event, the works that Morris built was occupied by his expanding radiator business. As compensation for his find, Kimber's infant business was allowed, from September 1925, to occupy two bays of the new plant.

By this time the workforce had grown to some 50 individuals, so Kimber appointed a works manager, George Propert, who was destined to become another long serving MG stalwart.

opened in the more central 36 and 37 Queen Street. The following year came the acquisition of a large garage in the Clarendon Hotel Yard Cornmarket.

By the 1920s, the business occupied a variety of additional premises throughout Oxford, namely in Magdalen Street, Albion Place, St Cross Road, Alfred Lane (renamed in the inter-war years Pusey Lane) and Merton Street.

Although, inevitably, the Morris Cowley and Oxford were the firm's principal output, the Morris Garages also sold such respectable middle-class makes as Arrol-Johnson, Humber, Singer, Wolseley and Standard.

The MG badge

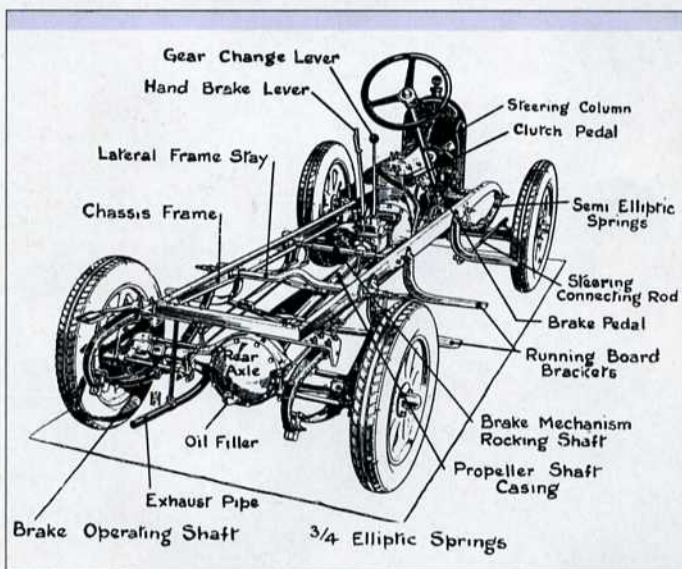
Edmund (Ted) John Frank Lee, was offered an accountancy job by Cecil Kimber while he was a pupil at the City of Oxford School. He displayed a flair for mathematics, but the Morris Garages manager would have also applauded the fact that Lee was also an amateur artist. When he joined the firm, it paid half Ted's tuition fees and he worked at the Queen Street head office.

When I interviewed him in 1981, he recalled a particular meeting when Kimber explained his ideas for MG. This was probably in early 1924. "He cleared off to his office and I stopped in mine. Then I drew this badge with a little ruler I'd brought from High School. Kimber saw it and said 'that's just the thing'."

Lee says he did not opt for the eight-sided shape for any particular reason, although today the badge's angular lines and lettering can be seen as a typical Art Deco motif.

The octagon appeared on the cars' door tread plates, and later a German silver-plated version graced the flat radiator honeycomb of the 1927 models. It finally attained its proper place as a radiator badge in the 1928 season on the 14/40 Mark IV – a model which, it has to be said, suffered from a positive rash of octagons.

And the badge's chocolate and cream colour scheme? Is it too fanciful to suppose that this was inspired by the carriages of the Great Western Railway trains that served Oxford? They reverted to this traditional livery – briefly surpassed by all enveloping crimson – in 1922, the year in which Cecil Kimber took over as The Morris Garages' general manager.



Above: The Morris chassis on which the MG models of the 1922/26 era were based, although the three quarter elliptic rear springs were repositioned above the frame. This is the Cowley unit initially used by Kimber; the Oxford one he subsequently adopted was very similar.

These improved facilities allowed more mechanical work to be undertaken on the cars. The engines were carefully dismantled and their valve ports polished before being refitted in the chassis and run in. These were straightforward ministrations and although Kimber's enthusiasm was infectious, his engineering knowledge was limited and he soon recognised the need for expert technical advice. Happily this was provided by the lanky figure of graduate engineer, Hubert Noel Charles, who had joined Morris in 1924 as technical assistant in the production department.

A mathematician of formidable ability, Charles listed the subject as one of his hobbies, and had qualified at University College, London with a B.Sc. degree in engineering.

Initially, his work for Morris Garages was on a strictly after-hours basis and he was a regular evening visitor to 339 Woodstock Road – the new semi-detached house which Kimber and his family had recently occupied in North Oxford. Later, in 1929, Charles took over official responsibility for all MG car design, a role which he undertook with great distinction until 1935.

In the meantime, the Morris range on which Kimber was so dependent was continuing to evolve. The 1927 season saw the arrival of the so-called Flatnose cars, which dispensed with the famous Bullnose radiator and chassis, complete with its archaic rear suspension, both of which were rooted in the make's pre-war origins.

The new shorter wheelbase tapering frame was both wider and heavier than its predecessor; but overnight it rendered many of MG's special chassis components obsolete. By this time approximately 400 Bullnose-based cars had been built.

The new Morris appeared, in Oxford 14/28hp and Cowley forms, at the 1926 Motor Show, although the MG equivalent – 'the car that takes the ills out of hills' – did not appear until 1927. Based, as before, on the 1.8-litre Oxford, the open MG Super Sports 14/28 used the smaller Cowley radiator with a false strip added along its bottom edge to make it appear to sit lower in the chassis than it actually did.

With output once again outstripping his limited production facilities, Kimber succeeded in convincing Morris of the need for MG to have

Meanwhile...

1910

Thomas Edison shows off his latest invention – moving pictures with sound.

1915

The Cunard passenger liner *Lusitania* is sunk by a German submarine, with the loss of over 1000 lives.

1922

Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon uncover the tomb of Tutankamen, which had lain untouched for over 3000 years.

1923

Germany is gripped by massive inflation as the Mark becomes worthless.

1926

John Logie Baird claims that his new invention 'television' could one day be found in every home.

1927

Charles Lindbergh made the first non-stop flight across the Atlantic from New York to Paris in his plane *The Spirit of St Louis*.

its own purpose designed factory. Financed out of profits at a cost of £16,000, it was built at Edmund Road, Cowley – just down the road from the Morris works on the edge of Oxford.

The business moved there in September 1927, just weeks before the Motor Show. Not only would the company have its first ever stand at the show, the 1928 season cars – designated 14/40 Mark IV – would carry the MG octagon as their radiator badge.

The Mark IV allocation was a publicised description which could possibly indicate that Kimber had by now looked upon the original Cowley frame as the Mark I, the 1923/25 Oxford chassis as Mark II, and the enlarged 1925 one as the Mark III.

Also, significantly, from 15 November 1927, Morris Garages began to issue its own guarantee plates; up until then they had relied on Morris Motors ones.

There was certainly no doubt now that the MG name was here to stay! **MGW**

Coming up...

In Part Two of The MG Story, Jonathan Wood recalls MG's move to the famous Abingdon factory; the arrival of the costly 18/80 and the first ever Midget – the M-type. He also looks at the immortal T and P-type open two-seaters, which established a line that endured until 1955.

This was the time of the Golden Age of MG racing – activities that were abruptly curtailed by Morris in 1935. Find out why in Issue Two of MG World.