

Chris Longridge had a mammoth struggle to establish his car's right to keep its original registration number. He uncovered some fascinating MG history in the process

Seven years of driving sensible modern hatchbacks is a long time and my memories of carefree motoring in my MGB were fading fast. A visit to the MG Car Club event at the National Motor Museum in August 1984 was the final straw. It was time, I declared, to get another MG — and this time my heart was set on an MGA.

Several months of diligent searching later and I ran down a likely looking MGA at a local dealership. It was showing the effects of a couple of years disuse and needed some restoration but was just about roadworthy so I purchased it and set about bringing it out of retirement. The first step was to get its licence renewed, a simple enough task, or so I thought. A quick visit to our local post office shattered any such hope. I was told that it was likely that the car's original registration number would be lost altogether as the previous owner had neglected to re-register its green log book with the DVLC.

I telephoned the DVLC who confirmed that at present the car's number, KMO 326, was void. The clerk at the end of the line was sympathetic but, as the regulations stated, they would only consider reallocating the original number if we could prove that the car had a special historical significance. Otherwise I would have to register the car with a new number with no relevance to the car. But did the car have any historical significance? Remembering what the dealer had said to me when I bought the car, this seemed a distinct possibility. It was time for Sherlock Holmes to go to work!

The dealer had mentioned that the car was once owned by Roger Enever, the son of MG Chief Engineer Sydney Enever, and at an early stage in its life had been used for MGB prototype development work. At the time the name Enever meant nothing to me, but as I researched into the background of

MG in an effort to establish my car's history I realised that Sydney Enever was just the person I needed to get in touch with. My first move was to contact the MG Car Club. They were most helpful, telling me that yes, there was a Mr S Enever on their list, a long-established club member. Was this the Sydney Enever of MG Works fame?

Another phone call established that it was indeed. I spoke to Sydney Enever's wife, who kindly passed me on to their son, Roger, who she thought could help me. With great excitement I listened to Roger recall his days with KMO 326, but he had more information than I could take in over one telephone conversation so we agreed to meet. Frustratingly, he was just about to embark on a lengthy business trip abroad, so the earliest date we could set for this meeting was several months hence.

In the meantime the MG Car Club advised me to write to Anders Clausager of the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust. This I did, giving full details of the car and quoting its chassis number. Imagine my surprise when I was told that officially my car didn't exist! The last recorded chassis number was 109070 and mine was 109071.

Eventually I was able to meet Roger Enever for an interesting discussion about the car. He confirmed that the car was a prototype, possibly the first of the experimental department's MGAs and recalled that surprisingly it had started life as a two-seater, being later converted for experimental work during the development of the coupé derivative. He also clearly remembered his father having to remove the original chassis number plate so as to give the car a normal chassis number when he bought it for him from the works early in 1964. Armed with this information I wrote back to the DVLC.

Their response was encouraging but posed me a difficult task: they would be happy to consider my application for the reissuing of the original number if I could supply documentary evidence from the manufacturer confirming the car's historical significance. Fair enough, but the leads were drying up; Roger Enever had mentioned that his father, now in his eighties, was not in the best of health and could supply no more information than we already had, while neither the MG Car Club or the BMIHT had any documentation of the car's existence. The one avenue open



was to contact the sole name on the green log book, Peter Cornwell, who owned the car before it was passed to the dealer who sold it to me.

After making inquiries I managed to contact Peter Cornwell who, it emerged, had enjoyed rallying the car during his 18 years of ownership and shared with me his happy memories of it. Unfortunately, he had no knowledge of the car's life before he owned it. He did, however, mention that he'd bought it through Parade Motors of Mitcham in Surrey, and his stepson recalled that while they were on a sailing holiday in Cornwall they'd met a sailing



Above, KMO 326, looking slightly tatty round the edges while awaiting restoration but with original registration number intact

Left, although it looks quite standard the car has several unusual features dating from its development days, including MGB front disc brakes



instructor who turned out to be an ex-MG employee who had been involved with the car at Abingdon. They couldn't remember his name, but they could remember where they had stayed — the Lugger Inn at Fowey. Sherlock Holmes now had two clear leads — Parade Motors and the sailing instructor in Cornwall.

Andrew Smith of Parade Motors confirmed that Sydney Enever had asked him to sell KMO 326 on his behalf. The car was bought by K R Clark of Chipstead in Surrey on May 8 1965, and he in turn asked Parade Motors to re-sell it a year later, when it was bought

MGA

EXPERIMENTAL

EXPERIMENTAL MGA

by Peter Cornwell. This completed the chain of ownership from the MG Works to the present day, but I still hadn't established the car's early history.

Contacting the Lugger Inn in Cornwall was the next move. A telephone call revealed that the sailing instructor in question still lived in the area. He turned out to be John Sharpe, who had joined the MG Car Company in August 1959 as Technical Assistant to the Development Department. Discussions with John proved fruitful. He revealed that he had actually driven KMO 326 on his first day with the company, to a meeting in Swindon with Pressed Steel. Later he drove the car for many miles of development work, which included carrying out cooling tests and exhaust system assessment. In due course the car was converted to MkII 1600 mechanical specification.

John recalled that, accompanied by test driver Tom Haig and foreman fitter Cliff Bray, he had taken the car, along with a black fixedhead MGA 1600, to Germany for maximum speed durability testing: "The aim was to maintain maximum speed over 25,000 miles", he told me. "We used the *Autobahn* between Munich and Hof, at the East German border. This was the old Munich-Berlin highway, little used after the war as the road had been destroyed at the border.

"Dividing our mileage by our elapsed running time gave us an average speed of about 100mph — not bad a quarter of a century ago, when you compare it with our present day overcrowded roads and speed limits! We had trouble with one engine which was caused by pulling valve crash in top gear. In fact both cars were used for the test.

"One of the last tests I recall using a fixedhead MGA for was to assess MGA versus MGB maximum speed capability with the same engine and using optimal final drive ratios and tyre sizes. The MGA proved to be 4mph faster than its replacement, the MGB!"

John suggested that to fill in the car's very early history I should contact Henry Stone, pointing out that "At Abingdon our budget was not large — our staff consisted of Syd Enever, Chief Engineer; the Chief Development Engineer and myself; Chief Chassis Draughtsman, Chief Body Draughtsman, approximately 10 Draughtsmen and 10 Fitters; unfortunately no archive keepers."

I met Henry Stone at the 1986 MG Regency Run. He recalled that my car was originally the first prototype MGA development tourer, painted in Tyrolite Green, and believed that the chassis from this tourer was later used to produce the first prototype coupé, subsequently given the registration mark KMO 326.

Shortly after meeting Henry, I had a real stroke of luck. Former MG Chief Engineer, Don Hayter, had seen KMO 326 mentioned in an MGA Register newsletter and sent in a letter which to my delight verified Henry Stone's

"The MGA proved to be 4mph faster than its replacement, the MGB"

memories. He confirmed that "this was indeed one of our development cars, specially ordered from the bodies branch as the first representative production standard-build car. It did many miles using development parts and comparative alternatives supplied by manufacturers, and was at that time painted gold and brown.

"However, the registration number wasn't on this car originally, but on a Tyrolite Green MGA Tourer — also an earlier development car, one I used myself on almost daily journeys to Coventry and MIRA. I also used it when I got married so it has strong personal associations for me."

All the information I needed to confirm that the car had played an important part in MG history was now verbally complete but I still had to produce documentary evidence for the DVLC. After discussing the matter with Don Hayter he kindly offered to take on the task of obtaining this vital proof.

At the next year's Regency Run he was able to hand me copies taken from the Roneos kept by Cliff Bray, and

originally signed by Alec Hounslow — the Chief Development Engineer then responsible for the complete MGA programme. These confirmed the Experimental number and the Autobahn test carried out in September 1961, and identified KMO 326 as a development shop car in August 1963. Don Hayter also found that before it was bought by Syd Enever the car had been used for detailed development of the 1,622cc engine and suspension and brakes later to be fitted to the MGB. Now I understood why the dealer who sold me the car had told me that MGB front discs were fitted and that the car had been used for MGB development work.

Finally, 2½ years after I first tried to re-register KMO 326, I was able to write to the DVLC giving full details of the car's history and documentary evidence of its significance in the development of the MGA and MGB. A week or so later the DVLC's reply arrived. In trepidation I opened it to read, to my elation, that "in view of the historical significance of your particular vehicle it has, exceptionally, been decided to allow registration under the number KMO 326."

And with this matter brought to a successful conclusion all that remains is the straightforward — by comparison — task of restoring this fascinating and unique MG. **A**



Above, previous owner Peter Cornwell on his way to a class win in the Lands End Trials



Left, pictured in September 1961, KMO 326 takes a brief pause from high-speed endurance testing on the Munich to Hof Autobahn