

## The Tomlinson MG TA Replica

If we go back to about 1966 the late Geoffrey McGrath has a lot to answer for, he encouraged me and showed me all manner of MGs for sale – P Types and L Types and then Paul Hamilton advertised his TC Special for sale (this was the one for me). I still enjoy this car and have had my share of competition wins (not too many) and loses (lots) with it but I have had a great deal of fun. I became a confirmed MG enthusiast, there is no denying it, I have this dreadful affliction. The lust in me for a Pre-WWII racing car just wouldn't go away – I looked at all the advertisements in Motor Sport and saw there that someone had made a Q Type Replica from MG TA and TB components.

My good friend Graeme Louk found an MG TA chassis in Michigan almost in the middle of America! I sent the money and Graeme organised its transportation to Sydney (that's a tale for him to tell). I had been acquiring MG parts for some considerable time and at last acquired the basis of an MG TB engine and gearbox.

I knew what I wanted – a single seater Pre-War MG . Another good friend, John Phillips reappeared on the scene with reports from the Pre-War MG Register of Australia's Inaugural Rally to Beechworth – he started to talk about this fellow Allan Tomlinson, a Western Australian, who was in attendance. At that time October 2005, Allan was about 88 years of age - he was the winner of the 1939 Australian Grand Prix at Lobethal. The more I heard about Tomlinson the more I became entranced with what had happened all those years ago. I was amazed at the speeds (130+mph) that Tomlinson was reported to have achieved to win the 1939 AGP. Now I had real proof that an MG TA could be made to go – not the dog of the MG line up that everyone espoused.



*Allan Tomlinson winning the 1939 Australian Grand Prix*

Enter stage left one Robert Rowe, he is to blame for encouraging me, very subtly, further. Could the original car be found and acquired? The car had a very checkered career – it was raced again in 1940 at Lobethal by Allan Tomlinson only to be involved in a very major incident which put Allan in hospital for many months. The car was rebuilt by Allan's friends and sold after the war as by that time Allan had married and

had children – he stated that “car racing was a single man’s activity not for a married man with children” and so never drove competitively again. The car passed through many hands – to name a few John Barraclough, John Snow, Hope Bartlett, Curley Brydon and Alec Mildren who re-engined it with an XPAG motor (ex MG TC). Subsequently it became Holden engined with Holden front and rear suspension and the body went to John Ralston. What is left of the original car is the centre of the chassis and perhaps the front beam axle - Ross Alexander is its current custodian and he is not inclined to sell it.

So, why not make an Australian MG TA Special similar in looks and specification to that campaigned by Allan Tomlinson? Not an exact replica but a car very similar that would be representative of what was achieved in Australia all those years ago. So the team comprising Robert Rowe, Cliff King and I set to work. Graeme Steinfort and Ray Skewes in Victoria gave me an MG TA block complete with crank (cracked), pistons, rods, camshaft and cam followers. I bought an MG TA engine complete with gearbox and all ancillaries on that auction website. So now I had nearly all the bits, the basis of the car I wanted.



*Starting to populate the chassis with mechanical components.*



*Cliff King Carpenter extraordinaire complete with vintage carpentry tools finishing off the body frame.*

Finally Cliff King and I completed the body frame to everybody's satisfaction – not easy when there are eagle eyed people who can see more in a photograph than appears to be there at first sight! The chassis is finally on wheels with most of the running gear attached as well as the body frame and we pushed it out into the daylight.



*Body frame on chassis complete and ready for skinning.*

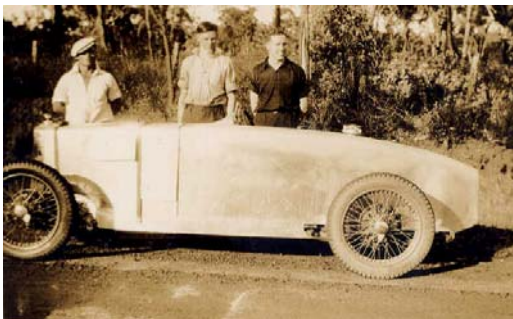
Then the car was delivered to Rodney Hoffmann and his son Gavin to put the aluminium skin on the frame. The first body panel executed was the front apron. Then came the fuel tank. Rodney made cardboard templates of each panel and fitted them to the frame before cutting any material. I rang Ed Farrar in Western Australia (he's Mr. MG over there and Allan Tomlinson's minder) to see if there were any other photographs of the car. Ed rang Allan Tomlinson in New York and within the week I had 28 tiny sepia photos that I scanned and then sent the originals and blown up copies back.

Whilst the body builders were hard at work Robert Rowe and I were busy making bits and pieces for the engine and clutch. The con rods were to be made locally (we thought) but the firm had been relocated to Malaysia. The order for the con rods eventually took over twelve months to complete and then they were not exactly what we wanted – so we ended up using some sample con rods that were made available when the initial order was made. The blocks were repaired by Barry Lang at Woy Woy – what a fabulous job he did. The cast iron blocks were warmed up in an oven for about 4 weeks. The welding required was carried out a little each day until complete. The crankshaft was turned up by a local CNC Machinist to Robert Rowe's specification (MG B big ends, fully floating little ends and Lister Tractor main bearings so that we wouldn't have to have the bearings poured & scraped).

Every step along the way seemed to be filled with drama – we couldn't find a suitable supercharger but with the help of Graeme Louk a brand new old stock Marshall Supercharger appeared (more on this subject later). In the box with the supercharger were the correct T Type oil and water temperature gauges and a black/brown faced tachometer. Rodney made a dash panel and the octagonal bezels for the instruments. The man who made up the push rods made them to an incorrect length and so these had to be remade. The five minute jobs were all turning into five hour plus jobs – every component had to be refurbished, cleaned and carefully assembled. Robert designed the bracket to mount the supercharger and we had the inlet and exhaust manifolds manufactured. In the 18 pages of notes from Allan Tomlinson was a copy of the original

oil cooler drawing from 1938. A firm in Victoria stated that they could make such a cooler – however disappointment again reared its ugly head and I sent their effort back. Fortunately we were able to get a modern equivalent manufactured in Queensland and painted it black.

There were three photos from circa 1938 - on completion of the body works Michael Conway found a lens with a similar focal length and took the 2009 versions – they are here for comparison purposes.



*Left hand Pictures -Circa 1938 Bill Smallwood, Allan Tomlinson and Clem Dwyer 3 of the team of “Kids from the West” Right hand Pictures - 2009 Rodney Hoffmann, John Lackey and Robert Rowe*

Finally the body work was completed, so off it went to the painters to be painted a “smokey blue” as described by Allan Tomlinson. We had some misgivings about the

pedal arrangements as Allan had stated that the pedals were in the normal places that you would expect in a TA! I sat in the car and couldn't get both my feet onto the right hand side of the gearbox – we decided to put the clutch pedal on the left hand side and just to be contrary the accelerator is in the middle just where you would expect it to be on a vintage car, with the brake pedal to the outside on the right hand side. This arrangement worked well – the clutch still running in oil as the TAs used to but with a Kevlar lining. The gear lever fell easily to hand and seemed not to be too difficult to use.



*At last - paintwork completed*

The No. 2 engine and gearbox were removed and the No 1 engine and gearbox were installed. All the linkages connected up. Supercharger fitted, carburetor attached, pulleys and the drive belts were aligned and tensioned. Wayne Rowe gave up a couple of weeks of his life to help us drill this, mount that, put this screw there and that nut elsewhere – he was truly wonderful. We put in a couple of late nights – the date for completion was drawing closer. The inlet manifold appeared to be distorting the body of the supercharger. Allan Tomlinson used copper to make his manifold. The copper allowed the supercharger some room to move without distortion – ours was steel, so Robert cut the manifold in half and I went and bought some turbocharger tubing and that provided sufficient movement without distortion. Everything was coming together and it looked as though we would make the deadline required so that we could be in Lobethal in time. Allan Tomlinson had already left New York! Robert and Wayne had worked every day for the last two weeks. I was the gopher, I picked up the methanol, all manner of nuts and bolts from Lee Bros in Parramatta, the magneto from the magneto man etc. In the middle of this Wayne ran in the Sydney Marathon and achieved a Personal Best and came 67<sup>th</sup> overall! Well done Wayne! Both Robert and I drove the car up and down the road outside Robert's works. It appeared to be going well. Norm Bice came over a couple of times to buy us a meal and cheer us on.



*Norm Bice tries the TA out for size*

We booked a session on the dynamometer to tune and run the car in. But the best laid plans of mice and men! Murphy was going to have his input now after all the effort. We put the car on the dyno and within 20 seconds the supercharger seized. Less than eighteen hours to go before we were due to depart for Lobethal! Robert determined that perhaps the car could run on petrol if we disconnected the drive from the supercharger and set the vanes so that there was a passage through for the mixture. So later the next afternoon we were back at the dyno with petrol in the tank and tuned the car to run with a major flat spot – but at least it was running. We put the car on the trailer and made ready to depart for South Australia the next morning.

Graeme Louk towed the TA to Lobethal and picked up John Medley and his son Benny on the way. Robert and I took my TC over the mountains and met up with Graeme, John and Benny at Kyalite the next morning. We had an uneventful run from Kyalite until just out of Hahndorf when we were informed that Allan Tomlinson was awaiting us in Hahndorf and that the ABC film crew was ready in the hotel car park to film the car and interview Allan. So we pulled up just around the corner from Allan's hotel and got the car off the trailer. I drove the car into the car park and Allan saw the car for the first time – I saw a tear roll down Allan's cheek. The "smokey blue" colour was perfect. We stood around and discussed various aspects of the car with Allan and the film crew – lots of photos were taken.



*Allan Tomlinson first sight of the MG TA Special – Ed Farrar looks on*

Allan got in the car – not a word was spoken about the siting of the pedals. Allan stated that he liked to drive with his arms extended and that was how he did it in his Ferrari. I responded telling him that he drove with the steering wheel quite close to his chest in 1939! I had the photos to prove it! It was well known that Allan did not have an Australian driver's licence so I asked him about driving on the road. His retort was that they couldn't take something away that he didn't have! I pointed out that maybe they could put him in gaol to which his reply was "an old man like me?" The engine was started, Allan engaged first gear without comment and drove off out of the car park and onto the road outside the rear of the hotel. He then proceeded up the hill across the road and then back to the corner opposite the car park. Now it was Ed Farrar's turn to have a drive. Ed drove the car up and down the street at an indecent rate showing all just how it should be done.



*Allan Tomlinson age 93 drives the MG TA Special*

We had missed the "bump in" time at Lobethal and so had to make arrangements for early the next morning. Allan stated that he would not drive the car on the circuit as the car was not right and that he was having balance problems with his ears. He didn't have to prove anything – He did it all those years ago when he won the AGP on the 2<sup>nd</sup>

January 1939. His winning average speed was about 80 miles per hour - an average speed not to be exceeded until 1956 by Stirling Moss at Albert Park in the work's Maserati.

Saturday morning dawned cold and overcast. It was drizzling, on and off. We "bumped in" and were scrutineered and were ready for the first event. My son Christian let the tyres down to Robert's recommended pressure to deal with the moisture on the track and coolness of the day. Wayne had assembled our sandwich board with some of the pictures of the car from 1939. People didn't seem to have any inclination of what we were on about. The pit marshal started blowing his whistle, the Alfas were started and warmed up. Hard plugs were substituted for start up ones. We warmed the TA up and when the man with the whistle pointed to me I moved off at the head of the queue. I moved up to the start line. Glen Dix was there with his immaculate white coat and Australian Flag. I had to switch off the engine as there were some VIPs who had to make speeches. At last I was given the sign that I could start up. Glen Dix gave the flag to Allan. The flag went up and down - I was away on my first lap! Only not to go too far - the inlet manifold iced up and the engine stopped before completion of one lap! Of course after the ice melted the engine started again.



*Waiting in the pits at Lobethal*

On the Sunday morning most of the people in the pits were aware of what we had achieved. Lots of photos were taken, lots of questions were asked and responded to, and everyone was sympathetic about our icing up problem. Some terrific solutions to our problem were proposed. Allan autographed the car "authorised by Allan Tomlinson" a car so very close to the original - now worthy of being called a replica.

Over the weekend I think I managed about 3 laps if you add all the attempts together. But I still had a wonderful experience. I hope other members will put together some of their experiences at Lobethal.

The ABC managed to film the start and it was shown on the Seven Thirty Report on the Monday the 5<sup>th</sup> October of the long weekend. If you didn't see it this link will



enable you to replay it on your computer  
[www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2009/s2705445.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2009/s2705445.htm) .

I wish to thank the following people for without their help the project would still be a pipe dream:-

**Robert Rowe** for his patience, his incredible knowledge and engineering ability with our types of cars and his unbelievable tenacity to see the project through. A major, major effort – I don't know how I can thank him enough.

**Wayne Rowe** for worrying about his dad and me as well as his artistic abilities to get the stickers aligned properly, drill holes in the correct places and his patience to see each and every task given to him completed.

**Rodney and Gavin Hoffmann** for making the best body and under tray and all sorts of other bits and pieces from the drawings and photos.

**Cliff King** for his wood working experience and assistance with the body frame.

**Graeme Louk** for sourcing some of the unobtainium (a term coined by John Cummins) that always are required.

**John Medley** for access to his files on the 1939 AGP and Allan Tomlinson – John has all the details of lap times and the cars and drivers (a very comprehensive file).

**Graeme Steinfort** and Ray Skewes for encouraging me by giving me an MG TA block with crank, rods, pistons, camshaft and cam followers.

**Tony Parkinson** of Vintage Motorsport Carnivals Pty Ltd who staged the 2008 Lobethal Grand Carnival enabling Robert Rowe and me to have a most amazing weekend and who staged the Carnival again in 2009 and organised Allan Tomlinson to attend.

**Ross McMurray** for digitizing & scaling the photographs of the Tomlinson MG TA.

**Kevin Willis** for technical details, copies of articles and photographs and information I had no idea that it existed.

**Members** who have actively encouraged and supported me in this enterprise.

John Lackey  
Sydney, November 2009  
Addendum



*John Lackey in the MGTA Tomlinson Replica, now with roll bar fitted, negotiating Honda Corner at Phillip Island March 2010*