

The Search for MG C-Type C0291 by Alastair Ward

In 1932 Mr. John Ludovic Ford, of Dove Mews, London, advertised for a trainee motor mechanic. My father, who was then aged 14 years, applied for the job and was successful. Mr. Ford's family also had country estates in Scotland and the West Indies.

In 1951 Mr. Ford gave my father a book entitled 'Circuit Dust', which covers the 1933 European racing season. As a teenager I read this book often. In March 2000, after a lapse of many years I stated to read the book again. This rekindled my interest in my father's racing exploits. I knew that Mr. Ford raced an M.G. Midget in 1933. My mother had some old photographs. These showed my father seated in the M.G. with the UK registration number JK 2340. I wondered if JK 2340 was still around. Therefore, feeling excited at the prospect of finding it, I began my research...



I started searching the Web and found an M.G. website where I posted a request for information on JK 2340. I did not know that this was an American site. Within a matter of hours I had my first reply from Brian Kelly in Kansas, who informed me that a Gavin Sandford-Morgan owned the car. Further searching of the Web I gleaned that Gavin lived in Adelaide, Australia. Next contact was with Russell Garth of the M.G. Car Club in Adelaide and he very kindly contacted Gavin and asked if he could pass on his address.

So, in late March 2000 I wrote to Gavin telling him about my search. In late April I had a reply from Gavin and over the next 18 months we communicated regularly, exchanging information regarding the car and my father. I began to know the car as C0291; its chassis number. I sent Gavin photographs of the car in the 1930s. He

sent me photographs and a video of the car as it is now, in its restored condition.

Gavin was able to give me a detailed history of the car. He first owned the car in 1947, sold in 1948 and then bought it again in 1965.

I bought a book on Le Mans, 1923 to 1939, and found a photograph taken after the finish of the 1933 Le Mans with Ford and Baumer sitting on the car having finished in 6th place. Mr. Ford's racing partner was Mr. Maurice Baumer. They entered various races in the UK and Europe. In 1933 they purchased M.G. Midget C-type chassis C0291, previously owned by H. Leeson, who had been killed racing. They entered the car in various races throughout 1933 including the following:



Le Mans 24 Hour car Race, 17th and 18th June 1933, Le Mans, France.

Car No. 41. Classified 6th.

International Mannin Beg Car Race, 12th July 1933, Isle of Mann

Car No. 12. Classified 3rd.

International Tourist Trophy, 2nd September 1933, Newtownards, Northern Ireland.

Car No. 28. Retired with broken steering tie-rod and crankshaft.

In 1934 Mr. Ford's mother died and he moved to Haddington, in Scotland, to manage the family estate. My father went with him to help Mr. Ford to run the estate and to work on his cars.

In 1939 my father was conscripted into the armed forces and was sent to France, he was captured June 1940 and was finally freed from POW camp in May 1945. Mr. Ford also joined the army and survived the conflict. After demobilisation both of them went back to Scotland to get the estate back up and running, but the days of car racing were over.

The spirit and attitude of adventure during competitions during the 1930s is highlighted in the book 'Circuit Dust'. Ford and Baumer are mentioned a number of times but the following paragraph says much about the way they raced in the 1930s.

'They discussed these plans during the day before the final practice, while they were perfecting their pit arrangements, and nine o'clock that night found them at the Café de l'Hippodrome for dinner, accompanied by the big Mercedes, which they intended to use for a last survey of the circuit. While Baumer was eating hors d'oeuvres, Ford drove the Mercedes for two laps, then came in to commence his dinner, when Baumer took the car around. He returned and handed over in time to start on the soup, and when Ford returned Baumer went out again. Between courses they achieved the distinction of each covering eight laps, a total of nearly seventy miles of fast motoring between hors d'oeuvres and coffee.'

This description becomes almost legendary. It is very hard to imagine this happening in today's environment of safety and conformity. I can imagine that several glasses of wine were consumed with the meal! Amidst the competitive spirit, the social scene was just as important.

The M.G. Car Company, whilst not entering an official works team, did give encouragement to the privateer drivers by offering discounts if the car was entered in various events. One of the invoices to Mr. Ford offers a 15% discount if C0291 is entered in the German Grand Prix and the Isle of Mann. I have not been able to verify its participation in that Grand Prix.

In September 2001 Gavin Sandford-Morgan told me that he had sold C0291. It was on its way back to the UK. I tracked the car down to Bill Ainscough in Lancashire, England. I arranged to see C0291 at his house in early January 2002. Upon seeing the car for the first time, what struck me initially was how small it looked. The car was in immaculate condition, in its British Racing Green. After looking at the outside of the car for quite some time, I sat in the passenger and driver seats. Sitting there brought a lump to my throat. I imagined what it must have been like to race these cars with the noise, dust and vibration. My admiration for these drivers and mechanics is truly immense.

I was born in July 1951, with Mr. Ford becoming my Godfather. We lived in a flat above the stables at Clerkington. Mr Ford left Scotland in 1952 and moved to Jamaica, where he had an estate. My father was offered the opportunity to go, but having a wife and a new baby, he decided to stay. Mr. Ford died in 1956, in Kingston, Jamaica and my father died in 1997, in Haddington, Scotland.

In January 2007 I saw C0291 advertised for sale in the 'MG Enthusiast' magazine. I emailed the advertiser asking if he would be so good as to let me know contact details for the new owner when the car was sold.

Much to my surprise and delight I had a reply from Martin Chisholm inviting me to come and see the car at his premises in Cheltenham.

So, on Friday the 2nd February 2007, Derek and I set off to Cheltenham. We arrived at Martin's premises around 10:30, expecting to be there for an hour at most. Little did we know how wrong that idea was.

Martin first of all had to move a Ferrari 250L and a Bentley 4 Litre to allow access to C0291. She looked great in her British Racing Green. So small looking. Listening to the Ferrari and the Bentley certainly wetted the appetite for all these great cars. Just lovely noises but also so contrasting.

Finally C0291 was pushed to the entrance of the garage. But, she wouldn't start. The battery appeared to be flat. Poor Martin was so embarrassed, as he had made sure that the battery had been on a trickle charge for the past few days. He tried various jump packs and other 6 volt batteries but no luck. She would start but there wasn't enough power in the battery to keep the fuel pumps running and the engine died when the fuel in the carburettor float chamber ran out.

Martin decided to jump start the M.G. from his Mitsubishi and see if that would help. By now I was sitting in the driver's seat starting her up on Martin's instruction. I felt like a small boy with his new toy. Just so happy and thinking that my Dad had sat in this very seat and started her up on many occasions. I was getting a bit emotional.

Martin was still trying to keep her going but every time we disconnected the jump leads she just died. I said to Martin that I was more than happy just to see and hear her running and to sit in her, and for him not to take any more of his valuable time up. But he said that no way was he having me drive three hours to get to him and for me to leave without driving her.

He then had the brilliant idea of putting a battery in the passenger seat-well with jump leads going to the car battery behind the passenger seat. Martin said that he would sit in the passenger seat with the other battery beneath his legs!!

So we did that and she fired up and kept running. We would be okay so long as I didn't stall her as the spare battery wouldn't start her again.

'Right, off we go' said Martin.

No pressure then!! Just drive a priceless M.G. on the public road, don't stall her and make sure you don't damage her. No, not a lot of pressure!

My feet were covering all three pedals without even moving them, so making sure I had my feet on the right pedals at all times was certainly taxing my concentration. The steering was so direct that the slightest movement of the steering wheel and she responded instantaneously. That was exciting. We set off down the narrow country lanes, the solid suspension, the vibration and noise making it feel as if I was doing 100mph although I don't think I went over 30mph (no speedo fitted). We continued along the lanes for about ten minutes, the engine exhaust, just a couple of feet away from me, blasting its crisp note into the air. By now I had a couple of vans behind me, so Martin suggested that we turn her round at the next cross roads. Much to my relief I managed to turn her round without stalling her and we set off back down the road. All too soon we pulled into her premises and came to a halt. I was very emotional now and I couldn't help but shed a few tears. We then went to Martin's office where he enjoyed looking at all of my research on C0291 and I was more than pleased to let him have copies of whatever he wanted. I can't thank Martin enough for taking so much trouble to let me drive C0291. A real gentleman. An experience that I will never forget.

I now have a photograph of myself sitting in the car alongside a photograph of my father also sitting in the car in 1933.

