

## The Milano MGs - Australian Beauties of 1959

Graeme Jackson muses on the use of glass fibre reinforced plastic to beautify old MGs...

During the period of post-World War 2 austerity, an acute shortage of new motor cars meant that many old vehicles were kept in service on Australian roads regardless of condition. Money was not a plentiful commodity, but vintage cars and worn out 1930s cars could be bought quite cheaply. Car ownership brought to a post war car-mad generation a freedom and status which clearly defined the identity of the driver. So what were the options for the would-be Stirling Moss (or Pat Moss) who did not have a hundred pounds for a well-worn, ten year old, MG TC? One choice was to pick up for a few quid, an old pre-war Austin Seven, Singer, Morris 8, or preferably an MG, and fit it with a fibre glass body to make it look like a Ferrari.

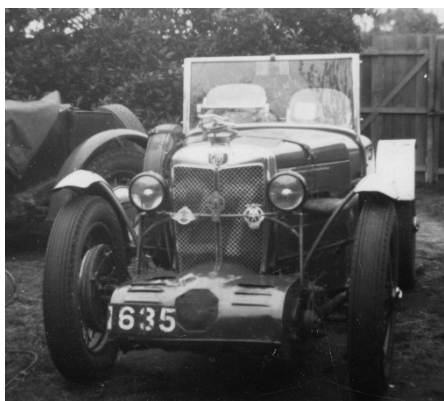
Glass fibre reinforced plastic composite dates back to 1936 but the technology was not sufficiently developed for use to make car panels until 1946 when William Stout produced the first car to have a fibreglass body. A solitary Stout Scarab Experimental, a futuristic rear engine monocoque, using a Firestone air suspension system, was built in Detroit Michigan.

Fibre glass is inherently light weight, strong and weather resistant, but the polyester resins are subject to contraction during curing, causing distortion. However, quite complex shapes can be achieved and the material is ideal for a motor car manufacturer who wishes to save high tooling costs. The 1953 Chevrolet Corvette pioneered mass production of a fibre glass bodied car. Early examples of the Corvette did not display a particularly high quality of finish but this improved as the resin technology developed. Other manufacturers have successfully utilised GRP bodies, for example Lotus, Daimler with the Dart SP250, Studebaker's Avanti and the Gogfather Bill Buckle's 1958 Australian designed and built Goggomobile Dart, the thinking man's E type Jaguar.



In 1959 Sydney based JWF Fibreglass Industries announced the Milano body, a Ferrari Monza look-alike. There were three standard wheelbases, 80 inch for LWB Austin Sevens, 88 inch and 90 inch. The mould could be varied to adapt to the 86 inch wheel base MG J2. 200 Milano bodies had found owners by 1962. Ian (Sam) Johnson, the "J" in JWF, also built one, possibly two, examples of the hard top GT Milano mounted on to a tubular space frame. He used an MGJ2 chassis for the prototype, and the remains of an MG TC in which he had managed an unscheduled stop against a rock wall. After lowering the chassis, the J2 front end was retained with the substitution of TC brakes and

steering, shortened tail shaft, engine clutch and gearbox and rear end. The TC wheels on 15 inch rims were chrome plated. Johnson clearly had his eye on the iconic 1954 Mercedes 300 SL Gullwing, the fastest production car of its day, examples of which now-a-days, change hands for \$1M to \$5M. For the GT Milano the gull wing doors opened on Morris Minor boot hinges permitting simple access after some practice, though the driver needed to avoid squashing her beehive hair-do as the door closed. A Triumph Herald rear window served as a windscreen. A Perspex oval rear window, and a dash populated with TC instruments completed the picture. The 12cwt car achieved 17.7 seconds for the standing quarter mile, and a top speed of 86 mph. Johnson's GT Milano has not survived and the fate of the J2 chassis and its chassis number are not known.



Bruce Leer purchased the MG C type, C 0291, from Cyril Nichols in 1954 and ran it until 1958. This is the Monthery Midget which ran at Le Mans in 1933 where it finished in 6th place overall, and was the first 750cc car to finish the 24 hour race. It came to Australia in 1935 and continued a very active competition life in SA and NSW but was controversially sold back to UK by Gavin Sandford-Morgan in about 2001. Bruce Leer ran the C type on 27/4/1958 at the ASCC Mount Druitt Record Attempts, and on 22/6/1958 at Foley's Hill Climb. In 1959 Bruce Leer turned his attention to building the open bodied Milano MG which is still being raced and enjoyed today, after 57 years of active life. The car was constructed using the well-proportioned, visually attractive, JWF Milano body on an MG J2 chassis. He retained the MG's front and rear axles, but substituted a Morris Minor differential centre and 10 inch Jowett Bradford hydraulic brakes with radius rods. A 1500cc TC engine running twin 1.5 inch SUs powered the device, driving a TC clutch and gearbox.

The Milano MG made its first competition appearance early in 1960 at Gnoo Blass circuit at Orange. By 1961 the MG held the under 1500cc lap record at Warwick Farm, and had bettered a top speed of 107 mph recorded on Con Rod Straight at Bathurst, with 120mph at Orange.

The current owner, Mike Gosbell, has been a frequent competitor at Historic Winton and other circuits in the beautifully presented Bruce Leer Milano MG, showing the adoring crowds how a modified J type can perform. The car is currently for sale and could be road registered as it has been previously. Our registrar Tony Sloan is keen to buy it, to lift the body to inspect the front dumb irons to discover the J type chassis number, and solve yet another of life's mysteries.



My thanks to Mike Gosbell for his help in preparing this discourse.

*Footnote: - Our dear departed mate and P type owner, Graeme Pain, made a mould and produced a number of fibre glass bodies which sort of, somehow, look a bit like a K3 MG and are crafted to drop on to a TA/TB/TC chassis. Aubrey Pavard drives a red one, Graeme Davies has a white one, and our editor has a green one, but to be patriotic we really need a blue one. John Lackey now has the mould, so who knows how far the plastic will spread?*

## Pictorial Feature



*The Milano-bodied J2, originally owned by Bruce Leer, now owned by Mike Gosbell  
Photo from Mike Gosbell*