

MODERN HISTORY – Ian Mawson’s Supercharged PB

Graeme Jackson relates the history of Ian Mawson’s MG PB (PB 0749) and other stories...

Three people have been instrumental in the performance development and competition successes in Australia of PB 0749. They are John Cummins, Geoff McGrath, and of course Ian Mawson who is still campaigning this potent MG sports car on the road and track. Each of these colourful characters has a tale to tell.



We will start the story of the MG PB by recalling and paying tribute to John Cummins (left), Australian Grand Prix driver, raconteur, racing commentator, traditional jazz fan, unmatched performer of the cake walk, MG P type owner, instigator of countless “Chinese deals” and larger than life all-round good bloke. Until his death in his mid-80s a few years ago, “Cummo” would be everywhere that motor racing was happening, usually on the public address system exercising his “golden tonsils.” He had an inexhaustible store of funny stories and it seemed that no race meeting was complete without “Cummo” in the commentary box. Originating from Melbourne he worked for a time as an engineer at Chamberlain Tractors in Western Australia, before moving to Sydney. In 1952 he brought from England, an engineless Type 37A Bugatti, chassis number 37332, a car already modified with the distinctive, protruding, Bellamy independent front suspension. A hotted up Holden grey motor was fitted to the Bugatti, one of the first Australian racing specials to use to great effect the humble locally made engine. He

campaigns the Bugatti-Holden at many race venues and hill climbs, and once achieved a scorching 135mph down Bathurst’s Con Rod Straight. Then, in Cummo’s words, “After trying to drive the Bugatti-Holden upside down up Mountain Straight at Bathurst and failing, it took some time to recover both mentally and physically”. His rehabilitation was aided by some most efficacious MG therapy as prescribed by his mates, racing Geoff McGrath’s PB 0749.

As a race commentator sometimes his “golden tonsils” let him down, most memorably in 1978 at the 50th Anniversary celebrations of the first Australian Grand Prix at Phillip Island. During the historic race on Sunday, John Needham, of close ratio gearbox fame, driving his Austin Seven, ran short of radiator water mid-way through the contest. He drove across the grass to the lake in the middle of the race track, jumped from the car, sprinted to the lake and scooped up a crash helmet full of water to refill the radiator. This performance was being breathlessly reported by Cummo over the public address system as the procession of other cars circulated unremarkably. Radiator filled, the Austin Seven battery stubbornly refused to turn the electric starter, so Needham resorted to the crank handle. An over-excited John Cummins spluttered those immortal words: “my goodness, he’s hand wanking it”.

It should be recorded here that John Cummins somehow acquired the mortal remains of PA 1809, and opportunistically collected stray MG bits over many decades, and “completed a forty year trip through the Cummins School of MG Reconstruction to appear at Amaroo as a complete car”. The attractive car in dark red livery was sold to an English buyer, Howard Harman, in 2006. Cummo’s Bugatti-Holden has been rebuilt in New Zealand as a factory specification Type 37A, without the Bellamy front end, and is owned by Victorian, Andrew Cannon.



John Cummins’ restored PA1809
Photo from John Phillips Collection



PA1809 is now in the UK
Photo from John Phillips Collection

Geoff McGrath ran the Sydney Speed Shop in Crow’s Nest, and “worked on just about every car that raced in NSW during the 1950s and 60s, built Formula Vees, then going on to develop the Corolla motor as a Formula 3 engine during the 1970s.”

John Cummins continues our story “I didn’t meet Geoff McGrath until midway through 1959 after returning east from W.A. That meeting changed my life forever. In those days Geoff was living in Ashbury with his mother and he had a small workshop at the rear of the garage. Parked in the corner of the yard was a PB MG purchased from Peter Molloy, who maintained that he would never get it to run, and that was about all Geoff needed to make sure it would. It was decided to turn it into a race car after about four different people robbed it of parts to complete original type rebuilds. About this time Don Glanville, then Secretary of the North Shore Sporting Car Club, acquired a nearly new Roots J 100 blower. The manifold and adaptors, blower drive etc. soon “appeared from the workshop”, together with lightweight guards, matching bonnet and an extractor assembly.

"When complete, the car not only sounded good, but smelt good as well thanks to Castrol R. Don started racing it at sprints and hill climbs and later took it to Sandown for one of the early Vintage and Historic races. Les Murphy, standing next to Geoff, passing the time of day in the pits, remarked "Doesn't that old Q type of mine sound good, you can hear it all the way down the straight." (Referring to QA 0256). "Yes" replied Geoff, as the source of the sound hove into sight, a green PB with a grinning Don Glanville at the wheel. Subsequently it was raced by Ken Rowe, hill climbed by Colin Bond, and circuit raced by myself at Oran Park and Warwick Farm where it holds the pre-war sports car lap record. Much later, with the replica Q type body, it was raced by Bob Minogue before passing to Victoria, where Ian Mawson races it in MG Club events to this day".

Perhaps the best way of summarising the numerous successes of the MG PB in Geoff McGrath's ownership is to quote from the June 1966 edition of *The Vintage Car*. "The PB Type S/C that won both the handicap and scratch vintage races at the last Warwick Farm meeting, is a little car with a remarkable record. No NSW car has taken part in so many Vintage/Historic races. It has seldom failed to finish and has usually finished near the front. The winning of the Molyslip Trophy and the VSCCA was unexpected, well deserved and most popular."



Geoff McGrath in his newly-created PB0749 at an unidentified sprint meeting or hillclimb

One further anecdote by Bill Rose from the McGrath period is worth recalling. "Remembering back to the PB, I recalled a hill climb at Bowral in 1955. We didn't have a trailer, so Geoff borrowed the Don James Citroen trailer, but it was impossible to balance the MG on it, the trip to Bowral was a nightmare. But the hill climb was a quarry, so Geoff got a few blokes to help and we roped a piece of granite onto the drawbar. On the way home a policeman on a motorbike pulled them over and thoroughly inspected the rig. "You blokes have got the ultimate racing outfit here", he said, "Tow car, trailer, race car and headstone."



Ian Mawson (left and next page) has had a life-long passion for the real MGs manufactured at Abingdon-on-Thames between 1930 and 1980, and to be fair, Mawson-the-Magnanimous also quite likes Chinese food. Energetic and very well known to the old car fraternity, Ian is a Life Member of the MGCC, and has served as MGCC President and also as T Register and Pre-War Register Captains for many decades. He conducts club meetings with characteristic flair and good humour and has a way of involving the resident band of MG jesters in his audience, and often the ensuing comical chaos has left us helpless from laughter. At one time in a moment of misplaced optimism, he unwisely bought an elegantly styled post-vintage Delage, a heavy car further burdened with weighty French-built coachwork.

It was so spectacularly lacking in performance that at its maiden Early Morning Run it was passed at speed by a fully loaded Jackson MG VA tourer. Maws claims to know a lot about MGs, and had asserted that the MG VA model had been popular with the English constabulary before World War 2, not for pursuit vehicles, but for use as road blocks! Of course at the next MGCC meeting, the Delage was for sale. Voice from the audience: "It would be great parked in the back yard to house the chooks". Mawson: "No, it is a sedan not a coupe."

Ian purchased the MG PB from Geoff McGrath in May 1983. By this time the original body had been removed and sold, via John Cummins, to David Price for his creation of the desirable N powered F type Special now owned by Tim Shellshear. In its place Geoff had enlisted the help of Alan Standfield to produce an ultra-light, frameless aluminium body modelled on a cutaway drawing of an MG Q type. The car has hydraulic brakes, necessitating the fitting of radius rods to locate the front axle, and the fragile P type rear drive has been replaced by an MG Y type

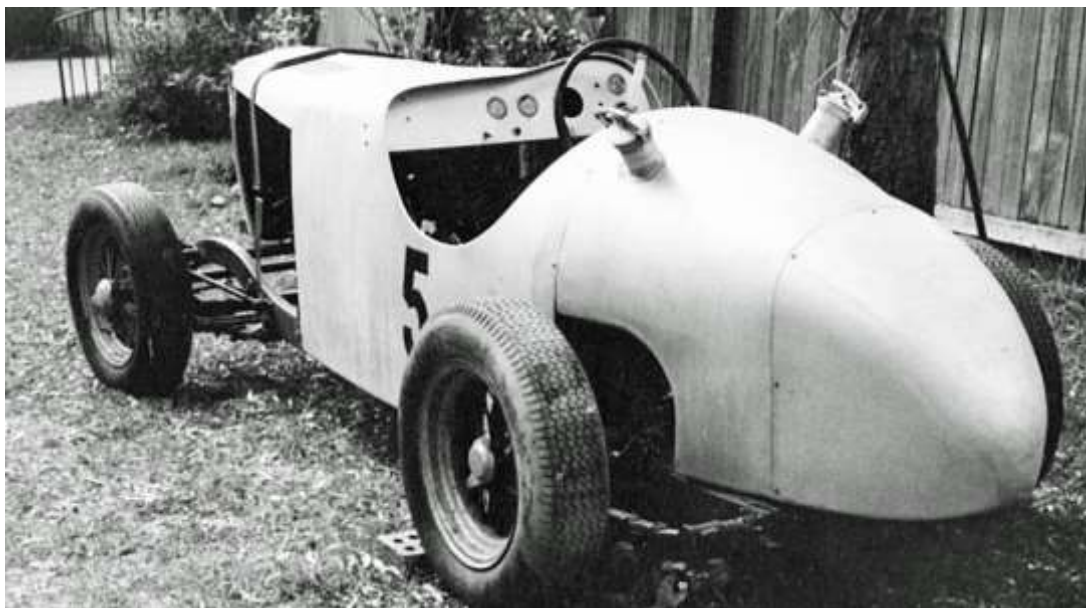
differential with heavy duty half shafts. The standard P type clutch and gearbox had proven up to the task of transmitted the power from the supercharged engine. A mostly under-bonnet mounted Marshall J 100 Roots style blower is driven at 1.5 engine speed by V belts. In racing tune it produced 16 psi boost, and with a standard compression ratio of 6.5 to 1, and would happily pull 7,000 rpm! A serious mechanical failure occurred in the early 1970s at Warwick Farm when the MG was being driven by Bob Minogue. A gudgeon* broke causing a connecting rod to emerge from the side of the block. The racer languished, the remains of the ventilated engine and the gearbox went missing. Eventually Ian bought it and assiduously hunted P type parts to return the MG to its former lively specification. He wisely fitted readily removable lights and cycle guards so that the powerful, yet docile MG is now used regularly on the road.

The MG PB's 35 year history in Ian's hands is summarised by Ian. "I think my first competition drive in the P was at Templestowe hill climb. Since then I have run numerous Winton events, Sandown, Phillip Island, Wakefield Park, Simmons' Plains in Tasmania, Mallala, a number of sprint meetings including Geelong, and Rob Roy hill climb. At Mt Tarrengower hill climb I had a serious "off" which actually prompted me to detune the car and make it a little less menacing. I have done some memorable road trips through the high country over Hotham, Omeo, and then back over Falls Creek, but nearly got hypothermia over the high plains, and also drove the Great Alpine Road from Thredbo covering over 300k in the day, what a fantastic drive! Then there were the memorable events at the AGP in Adelaide, actual supporting races, not just historic demonstrations. It was like racing down a concrete tunnel in some sections of the track. We almost got banned from the meeting when Tony Molina in the MG TB Special launched himself over the chicane in order to get in front of Ian McDonald's Holden powered monoposto on the first lap, it was spectacular if slightly crazy. I remember that I actually managed to pass Harry Firth, a crafty driver in his notoriously quick MG TC."



The blue MG PB is a veteran of the Pre-War MG Register's Beechworth, Bathurst, and Yamba National Rallies, gaining attention from the entire touring assembly at the recent Yamba meeting when it shed its voluminous carburettor float bowl from the Marshall supercharger, and failed to proceed. A score of octagonalists braved the snakes and bull ants, searching the roadside tussocks for the missing bits which were eventually found. The retaining bolt was refitted, but properly tightened on this occasion with a genuine Whitworth shifter.

PB 0749, modified for competition, has a cherished history of racing successes which form an essential part of its identity. Now 85 years since it was dispatched from the MG works, it is no relic of past glories, but an attractive, much admired, well sorted, lively MG. With the heaps of available supercharger boost and impeccable road manners it is simply exhilarating to drive. Current custodians Ian Mawson and brave Loris, smiling from the passenger seat, can look forward to endless hours of pleasurable motoring for many years, and will long continue to be active participants in the MGCC and Pre-War MG Register events.



Acknowledgements: The authors of a number of references used in this piece could not be identified even though they are "copied right". The writer sought legal opinion from his friend Barrister and Queen's Council, Ian Mawson, whose advice is as follows: "Never let facts spoil a good story. Invoice attached, prompt payment appreciated".

*PS The stupid spell check will not accept "gudgeon" which again leaves the writer in high dudgeon.



*John Cummins driving PB0749 at Hume Weir c1985.
Photo from Graeme Jackson*



*Ian Mawson in PB0749 at speed on the track at Winton in 2017
Photo from Malcolm Robertson*