

The British Racing Green ‘Streamlined Gem’



Martin Evans had a dream. He wanted to build a car of his own design like many of us want to do. Unlike the majority of us he actually went ahead and put his thoughts into metal. The result of his endeavours was on show this year at the MGCC MGLive! at Silverstone. Those who saw this British Racing Green ‘Streamlined Gem’ were stunned: 183FFM really is a beauty, standing still 183FFM looks as if it is doing 100mph! Here is his story.

“On a sunny day at Silverstone back in June this year I met a certain Neil Cairns who enquired about my car saying that he had seen pictures of it, at a time when I had asked the Car Club to certify that it was the original YA it purported to be, so that I could obtain a new V5. He is a very nice man and generously described the car as being most impressive but the downside is that he is also responsible for providing script for *Safety Fast!* and, before you know what has hit you, he wants a 3,000 word article on the subject because the car certainly does not look like a YA.

183FFM needed a new V5 because it had been off the road for over 30 years and has only been returned there after some extensive surgery. I bought the car because I happened to see it advertised close to where we lived in the late 1970s and at £50 even then it sounded a good investment since I could have sold it for spares at a

profit. That of course was not my intention; it was a non-runner, partly dismantled with the body and trim too far gone to restore economically but I could remember driving one back in the mid sixties with some enjoyment and thought it would make a good basis for some kind of special.

The car was stripped of every last nut and bolt and put in boxes but then, like many such projects, it became almost forgotten about, we moved house, had a second baby, I changed jobs etc. so that the project only started some years later on the prompting of my young son when I had explained that the metal ladder in the garage was in fact a car chassis.

The first task was to have a rough idea



of what the body should be; it would have to be a simple open two seater tourer, substantially lower to cut down on drag and finished with cycle wings. Looking at the engine and considering that I did not really need a thermostat, I decided that the radiator and grille could be cut down so that the bonnet ran immediately over the rocker cover, and following the line back at that level meant that it would be simpler to step in (à la Lotus 7) so avoiding the complication of making doors as well as stiffening the body to minimise any scuttle shake. A streamlined rear end was adopted as the Y fuel tank is set horizontally in the chassis and a boat tail arrangement could be built over the top of it. I also decided that the body could be somewhat slimmer with the chassis outriggers trimmed. So far so good but at this stage I did not realise some of the difficulties that would result.

The build itself started with a trip to Father’s, helping to thin the hillside and finding an ash tree large enough to supply all the timber necessary. While this was cut and left to dry, the engine and running gear were stripped and re-assembled with the addition of a homemade heat shield, twin 1.5” SUs and a combined inlet/extractor exhaust. The chassis surprisingly only needed slight welding below the rear axle before being primed with red lead while the gearbox and back axle were otherwise found to be in remarkably good condition, perhaps because the car had apparently only covered 34,000 miles in its first 20 years on the road (though it did have a Gold Seal engine). The brake drums were skimmed by a local engineering shop and the brake cylinders overhauled but the integral jacking system was removed partly to save weight, but also because it would obstruct the new bonnet valances.

By the time we had a rolling chassis we moved house again and once more the project was put on hold – for longer than planned as the thought of building the body from scratch was a rather more daunting prospect.

Work on the ash frame was always going to involve some steaming which (like most of the work) I had never undertaken before but with the aid of an old kettle, a piece of drain pipe and a former (a plank of timber with a neat curve of 4” nails), the

steamed 2" x 1" frame began to take shape. I wonder whether any other readers have had the experience of lying in bed for hours trying to imagine not just how to design something but how to build it, before finally falling asleep; anyway the rear section was formed round an extended ply parcel shelf, leaving only a small void in the back with side extensions covering the shortened chassis ends and fuel tank; the neck on the original tank now just protrudes through the body enough to connect directly to a flip top cap. The bulkhead had gone so a new one was made up in plywood with sheet aluminium stuck to the front; it was clear that there was insufficient space on it for the battery so this is now accommodated in a compartment under the parcel shelf behind the passenger seat. A layer of veneer was stuck to frame and then covered with two layers of fibreglass; not the usual way round but, having no mould, this was the only option; it involved much smoothing and filling but the local body shop made a good job of painting it. The ply dash board was veneered and fitted with the original dials and switches supplemented by a Smiths RVI rev counter and a temperature gauge.

Fitting the body to the chassis became the next problem (more sleepless nights); the steering column would not flex low enough and there was absolutely no room for the throttle peddle. Nothing a little welding would not fix, first with a Vauxhall joint for the steering salvaged from a scrap yard, though the steering rack had to be angled up so that the lowered column cleared the starter motor, and second by cutting both brake and clutch pedals at the

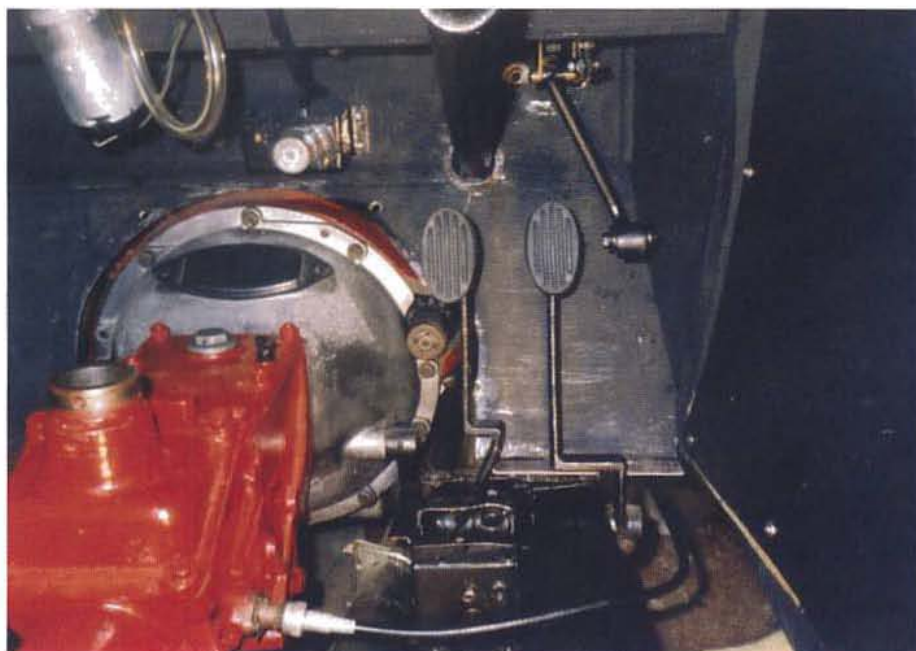


base and welding in steps to the left (but there is still little room so that I often drive without shoes). Other slight problems were that Ys do not have the gear box extension as fitted to T Types so the re-shaped gear lever is slightly difficult to operate in the confined space and obviously a smaller 13" steering wheel was needed to fit inside the narrow passenger compartment.

The rear lights are not where one might have chosen to put them; however, on reading up the MCT regulations it turns out that there is no minimum (or maximum) height, or indeed width for them to be apart, so long as they are fitted

equidistant from the centre; odd really – if they were too close together you might think you were approaching the rear of a motor cycle at night. Separate amber indicators match the replacement rear lights but the torpedo side lights double up at the front where white flashers are allowed and I fitted a foot controlled dip switch. A wiring loom for any special usually needs to be built up specially but finding short lengths of the numerous separate colours might have been difficult so another trip to the scrap yard armed with tin snips was necessary to relieve an old Montego of its complete loom; everything was then wired individually following the colours from the original wiring diagram where possible, and finally bound together. The bucket seats are the originals, cut down at the base of the ash trays in the back to shorten them, then bent round to make them narrower and the bases cut and welded to fit; the leather work was done by a man who used to work at 'The Jag' and remembered how he made bucket seats for E-Types.

Starting the engine after so many years should have been one of the highlights; however, even after overhauling the starter motor and a good deal of swearing, it failed to fire properly. I don't know why, but it seemed to be a good opportunity to take it to pieces again, have the head shaved raising the compression from 7.2:1 to 9.3:1 and fit the larger valves. Success, the engine ran, irregularly, but pulled well, helped to some extent by the reduced weight of the car no doubt.





After the very many delays to progress the car finally obtained its MOT, surprisingly, partly perhaps because the young man did not know where to start and could not test the brakes properly because I could not tell him how heavy the car was; what ever happened to Taplow meters? Actually I now know it is 14 cwt - five less than it was and four less than a TD. At this stage the car had no bonnet or windscreen; the original bonnet tops were cut down slightly to fit with a new centre hinge with sides and valances made up from sheet aluminium, cold hammered to create hinges and a bulge for the front air filter and I am modestly proud of the result; luckily I found a local engineer with some louver punches to finish it off.

On the road it became apparent that there were a few problems, the springs were far too strong so, remembering an article I had read about a rolled Y that was turned into a convertible, I took the two smallest leaves out of the rear and bought softer coils for the front. The oil pressure was slightly low and then all the water disappeared; anyone working on old engines should replace all the core plugs as a matter of course to save removing the engine again later!

This provided the opportunity to deal with the bottom end, have a re-bore, fit a Crane fast road camshaft and bearings. On closer inspection, the old cams were found to have worn considerably and to differing degrees which undoubtedly caused the erratic running beforehand. Now this is all sorted the acceleration above 3,000rpm or so is rapid as the engine now produces 63bhp compared to the original 47 which equates to roughly twice its original power to weight ratio. This figure was proven on a rolling road and was produced at

5,000rpm, equivalent to 75mph, the operator did not want to risk taking the engine any higher.

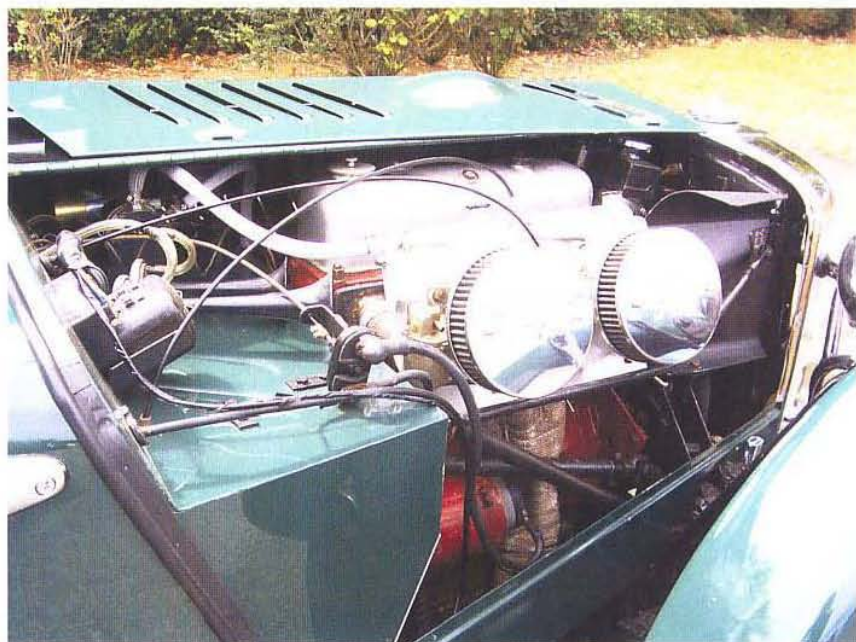
On the road today the car drives well, the engine is still very tight so starting from cold is tiresome, but easy once mildly warm, though it sounds very tappetty. On the move, first to third pass quickly, being so low geared compared to modern cars, but once in top it is flexible at low speeds, accelerates quickly to 70mph and is happier at this speed than at 50, with plenty more in hand. The steering is light and positive, the suspension is now much improved verging on too soft but makes for a pleasant ride; cornering is a delight on the open road at speed but tight bends are a struggle and a screech on the narrow cross ply tyres. One has to make allowances for the brakes of course since they are less efficient than those on newer

cars and the YA did not benefit from the twin cylinder front brakes on later models.

Overheating has been a problem, not so much while moving but once hot and stationary fuel evaporates quickly. I have made up an air scoop round the radiator to provide fresh air to the carburettors when on the move and lagged the fuel line and the exhaust; a delayed off switch for the electric fan might help but the problem will probably never be solved on hot days since there is such little space under the bonnet.

Late additions were the double duck tonneau and the windscreen which I made up, though the later still needs to be dismantled for chroming but work is never finished; I have no (present) intention of trying to make a roof but I am sure something else will occur."

Martin Evans



Now we have Mike Hewson with the story of FAP280 doing some rallying and winning.

"Some of us are just old enough to remember Production Touring Car races in the early 1950s at the Daily Express Race Meetings at Silverstone with Jaguar Mk 7s; Morris Minors; Jowett Javelins; Rileys 1.5 RMA and 2.5 RMC; Dyna Panhards and of course MG 1.25 litres taking part. The most effective of the latter was the



Motor 100 Regularity Run 2006

YB prepared by Dick Jacob's Mill Garage and driven by him to win the class in 1952, 1953 and 1954 – no mean achievement in a YB for by this time the Y Type was becoming somewhat dated as it was a pre-war design. Later in the 1970s nearly all MGCC members have recollections at race meetings and hillclimbs of seeing Frank Vautier's stirring and exciting efforts in the 'Golden Bullet', a supercharged YA with lots of modifications.

It was never our intention to use our YA for anything other than a road car. We bought FAP280 following Caroline falling in love with a two-tone blue one at Knebworth, but this MG was not a particularly good example. Soon afterwards in December 1995 Jim Thompson of Pioneer Automobiles, a long-time friend, phoned to say he had found just the thing, a three-owner YA with just 76,000 miles that had been restored then kept virtually unused in a collection. As usual with an unused motor car there is a fair amount of sorting out to do, which

involved suspension, engine and electrics amongst other things. Once the car was sorted with rebuilt shock absorbers and a new set of Avon tyres we began to appreciate the superb handling that sets it way above so many of its contemporaries that were newer designs; and we were dry and warm on cold, wet days. It even has a heater, a great advantage over a J Type Midget with limited weather equipment. After one or two touring runs around Lincolnshire we decided to enter the 1.25-litre for the MGCC Holland Bros Trophy Rally in 2000 and surprised a number of other competitors when we motored off down unsurfaced white tracks where they dare not take their MGBs and Midgets. Our son Jon navigated for me; it was his first proper rally and we won.

Thereafter Caroline decided that she should drive and I was sometimes consigned to the navigator's role. The Y competed over the next few years four 100-mile 'Motor 100' Regularity Runs gaining finisher's plaques on each occasion.

In 2006, Jon navigated for Caroline and achieved a second place in the MGCC Jubilee Trophy Rally; and Caroline and I won this event outright in 2008 against strong opposition and with by far the oldest car taking part. To show that our car 1.25 litre was no disgrace in appearance Caroline decided to enter the new MGCC Lincolnshire Centre Landlords Choice Championship for The Abbey Lodge Trophy in 2007, this involved travelling hundreds

of miles to events. FAP280 won the championship and her score was so good that she also won the Centre's Overall Pride of Ownership Championship for the Hall's Rosebowl.

Caroline and the 1.25 litre repeated both of these successes in 2008 and 2009. In addition, a class win at the MGCC Petwood Summer Concours d'Elegance was achieved in 2007 following a second class in 2006.

The Peter Leech Trophy, presented by Peter Leech to the XPAG-engined MG or MG special that has made the best performance of the year in competitive events has been won by a number of illustrious names and cars over the past 40 years. Names that have made outstanding contributions include Bryan Bowles (TC) – T Register Newcomers Race Championship winner and Californian Cup Register Trophy winning team; Dave Mason (TC) – T Register standard class race champion on six occasions; David Peebles (TC) – T Register race champion in three consecutive years. The trophy has also been won by various TDs and TFs, but in 2006 our 1.25 litre in Caroline's hands won it, the first time by a Y Type, repeating the win in 2007 and 2008. As you can see the Y Type's sporting heritage is as effective today as it was in the 1950s, and so I hope more owners will use their cars in competitive events.

During all of this time FAP280 was regularly used as it was originally intended, acting as our second car during the months when there was no salt on the roads. When Caroline is in the Y she does wonder why people stare until she remembers that she is in an old black car which is very easy to forget when you are going shopping in a 60-year-old car that drives like a modern one and keeps up with the traffic.

Mike Hewson



MGCC Petwood Concours d'Elegance 2007 winner