

Thirties MG works trials cars

Three Musketeers

From Magnettes to TAs, the Musketeers ran as semi-works team cars from 1935-9.

C. A. N. May, who competed against them, recalls their trials and tribulations

IN THE sporting, cross-country trials of the thirties the non-stop hills, or observed sections, and the tie-deciding tests against-the-watch were spread out over an area of countryside necessitating the use of public highways and byways (mostly the latter) to travel from section to section, very much on the lines of a contemporary stages rally.

As a consequence competing cars had to be fully road-equipped (and taxed, of course) and, for the rigours of winter night-time "runs-in" to the trials area — a feature which was steadily abandoned — a degree of creature comfort was usually incorporated. But there were no modern convenience fittings, such as heaters, windscreen washers-and-demisters, or halogen headlights. Although, until the latter part of 1938, after which protests about the depositing of mud on public highways by trials cars led to new regulations, the use of "competition", or "knobbly", tyres was almost universal, these were usually of the same section as the normal road tyres, that is to say extremely "narrow-gutted".

This was the background from which evolved the great one-make teams, such as "The Grass-hopper" Austin Sevens, the "Candidi Provocadores" white Singer Nines, "The Tailwagger" V8 Ford-engined Allards and, possibly best remembered of all, the two factory sponsored MG trios, "The Cream Cracker" Midgets and the 6-cylinder Magnette-engined "Three Musketeers".

Apparently the least well documented and possibly less familiar individually than the "Cracker" cars and, it has to be confessed, the least successful in terms purely of TEAM performance, was the very first trio of chocolate-and-cream coloured cars to bear the famous names "Athos", "Porthos", "Aramis". These were suitably modified versions of three of the original sextet of NE Magnettes built specifically for the 1934 Tourist Trophy road race over the Ards circuit in Ulster.

They were refitted with examples of the rare K2 bodies — slightly larger than, but the same shape as, the contemporary P-type Midget bodies — with large, exposed slab petrol-tanks, fully road-equipped (they even had roller-blinds in front of the radiator operated from the cockpit by Bowden cables) and carried the almost obligatory pair of competition tyre shod spare wheels.

Registered JB4606 ("Athos"), JB4608 ("Porthos") and JB4750 ("Aramis"), they were driven by Lewis Welch who, although not directly employed at Abingdon, became a sort of "man Friday" to the various works teams, and two actual factory employees, Sam Nash and Freddie Kindell (and, once or twice), Alec Hounslow drove).

All three drivers were "clean" in the 1935 London-Lands End trial, the occasion of the team's competition debut, and also in the London-Edinburgh trial, but ironically a minor time-keeping error spoiled their chances in the "Abingdon-Abingdon", the MG Car Club's own trial, starting from and finishing at the very factory in which the three cars had been built. The trio's first and, according to my records, only major TEAM award was then scored, not in a trial as such, but in the Welsh National Rally, which Sam Nash also won outright.

The rocks and boulders of the wilder parts of Derbyshire tripped up all three drivers in the M.C.C. One Day Sporting trial and only Welch was "clean" in the Singer Motor Car Club's trial,

centred on startlingly steep Rushmere, and again in the since-defunct Sydenham Motor Club's Spa Trophy trial.

Transferring, on a "one-off" basis, to the three P-type Midgets which had competed at Le Mans, under the aegis of George Eyston, but driven by all-feminine crews ("The Dancing Daughters"), Welch, Nash and Kindell tried hard to repeat the Welsh Rally successes in The Motor Cycling Club's Torquay Rally but, although all three drivers qualified for 1st class awards, were beaten by a whisker for the team award by the Le Mans Singer Nines of Lawson, Richardson and Westwood.

More than 20 years later, in December 1957, I received a lengthy letter from a gentleman named G. R. Stokes, at that time trading as Chiltern Cars, in Leighton Buzzard. "JB4750", he claims "came into my hands (literally) sometime in 1936 or early 1937 when I assisted in its overhaul for the late Peter Monkhouse who kept the car until just before the outbreak of war, but never before this time was it bodied as you suggest, but had its original pointed tail" (The italics are mine).

That a car bearing registration plates JB4750, and fitted with the K2 body and exposed petrol tank, was a member of the 1935 "Three Musketeers" trials/rally team is confirmed in numerous photographs, including one in Wilson McComb's authentic "The Story of the M.G. Sports Car". In his text McComb also confirms my belief that all three of the trials cars WERE refitted Tourist Trophy cars. So, was JB4750 quickly converted back to racing trim before being sold to Monkhouse or, dare I suggest it, could there have been a bit of number-plate swapping?

Stokes further advised me that in the early war years he traced the ex-Monkhouse version of JB4750 to Lambley, in Nottinghamshire, where the then owner, named Fitzpatrick was said to be "in the process of removing the tail". Certainly the version of JB4750 raced by Tom Dargue, at the early post-war "club" meetings at Silverstone, had the exposed, slab petrol tank, and K2-type body. On the last occasion on which I saw a car carrying registration plates JB4750 it was owned, and was being driven on the road, by an enthusiast named Pat Green. It was, more or less, to "Musketeer" specification but the actual body fitted at

that time was "replica" (for want of a better word).

In the meanwhile the factory had been building up, from a clever amalgam of Magna, Midget and Magnette components, what almost amounted to three "trials specials", but fully road-equipped including even hoods and sidescreens. Although primarily aimed at the 1936 season it would appear that the three cars were first registered, JB6865, JB6866 and JB6867, as early as August 22nd, 1935.

It wants some visualising now but at that time it was considered "not quite playing the game, old boy" to have factory entries (we were still in the era of "gentlemen AND players") so, although it was difficult to pretend that the cars themselves were anything but works entries, it was decided to have a trio of "private" drivers.

Macdermid and Jack Bastock were asked to transfer from the highly successful "Cream Cracker" team and Archie ("The Little Man") Langley was persuaded to transfer his allegiance from the Singers, with which he had been doing very well, including an outright win in an "Experts" (today the Championship), to complete the team. Interestingly none was directly associated with the motor trade at all, Macdermid, who lived in Whiteladies Road, Bristol was with that city's electricity supply department, Langley and Bastock were builders and public works contractors living in Birmingham.

For many enthusiasts this will always be thought of as the "Musketeer" team. With the basically NE 6-cylinder Magnette engines bored out to 1408cc and, for most of the time, Marshall super-charged, the cars were certainly the most potent to carry the now legendary names "Athos", "Porthos", "Aramis" and the choice of drivers was to prove a happy one.

The new team's competitive debut, all three cars normally aspirated, was made in a hitherto unimportant, but always enjoyable, "half-day sporting" trial organised by Sunbac, for the Shell Cup. Run in the Worcestershire countryside, in which the Junipers and Widlakes did not rear their so steep muddy heads, the destination of the principal awards was determined mainly by a series of tests against-the-watch, albeit on very muddy surfaces, so that the outcome for the team was slightly inconclusive. Langley won the Goodyear Bowl (for "Best over 1100cc") but Macdermid and Bastock failed to score.

But shortly afterwards the team hit the jackpot, by winning the prestigious team award in the old North West London Motor Club's "London-Gloucester" trial over a route which included Juniper, then new to trials, as well as a dozen or so of the other well-known Cotswolds "terrors" of the time. For this event (and subsequently) Macdermid's car was fitted with a Marshall super-charger and its performance dominated the trial. It also used a locked differential (more often banned than permitted at this time), competition tyres of course, and carried nearly 2cwt. of lead ballast as a further aid to wheelgrip. It was said to have climbed every "section" in second gear and Macdermid won the Gloucester Cup outright. Jack Bastock won his class and Langley was one of only a select few competitors to finish "clean".

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Best result of 1935 for the K2-bodied ex-1934 TT Magnettes was a team award in the Welsh rally which Sam Nash (Aramis) won outright; from left Athos (Welch), Aramis (Nash), Porthos (Kindell)



Three Musketeers

In the Motor Cycling Club's classic "London-Exeter", at the turn of the year (1935/6) "The Musketeers" shared the always coveted team award with their stable companions, the "Cream Cracker" Midgets. But in Sunbac's "Colmore" the team suffered a considerable set-back. Macdermid's car experienced supercharger trouble en route to the start and Langley's car was rendered hors de combat with a broken axle shaft. However Bastock completed the course, and was "clean" (all three cars were now supercharged).

Near disaster struck again in the old North West London Motor Club's Coventry Cup trial transferred, on this occasion, from the comparatively "mild" gradients in the Hindhead/Haslemere area to the rough and tough Exmoor tracks (Widlake, Cloutsham et al). Both Macdermid and Langley experienced transmission failures, Macdermid actually breaking down a second time after effecting hectic roadside repairs. By contrast Bastock's car, JB6866, which on this occasion was being driven by Ken Crawford, normally second man in the "Cracker" team — Bastock and Crawford had swapped cars for this one event — came through unscathed, although it did not climb Cloutsham.

By a stroke of irony the only competitor to complete the course entirely without fault was Lewis Welch, the man who had led the previous "Musketeer" team and who, on this occasion, was standing in for the "Cream Cracker" team leader, Maurice Toulmin who had been unable to make the long journey down to the West Country from his native Lancashire.

It was now painfully obvious that a laudable desire to maintain the use of standard production transmission components — which had seemed possible after the team had finished intact both in an arduous "Gloucester" and again in the "Exeter" — could no longer be realised. The always trustworthy E.N.V. Company came to the rescue with special half-shafts and very strong crown wheel-and-pinion sets. The latter had straight-cut teeth, instead of the almost universal spiral bevel, which set up a transmission howl you could hear, literally, a mile away.

Thereafter the team was able to realise its full potential, scoring in events such as the "Land's End" and the "Edinburgh", the Liverpool Motor Club's "Jeans" (nothing whatsoever to do with today's fashion wear), the Brighton and Hove's "Beer", the Mid-Surrey Club's "Barnstaple" (which Langley won outright), the West Hants Club's "Knott" and so on.

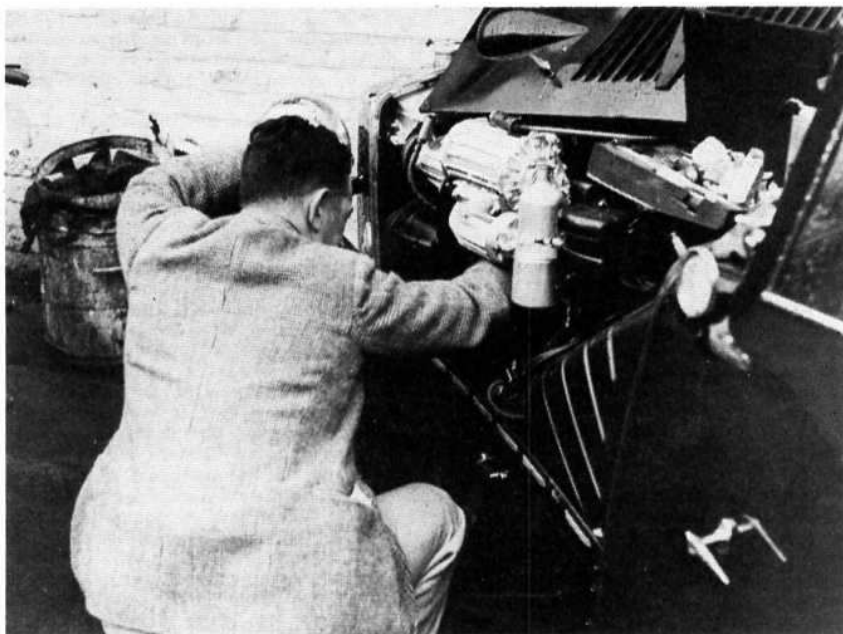
But by now production of the Magnette range, and that of the o.h.c. Midgets, had ceased at Abingdon, the replacement for both models being the series T cars, with the 1292 cc 4-cylinder "push rod" engine. Clearly, to continue with the existing cars, however successful they might continue to be, could only be of limited publicity value to the company. So for 1937 three series T-based cars were prepared and the existing "Musketeers" were "pensioned off". Subse-

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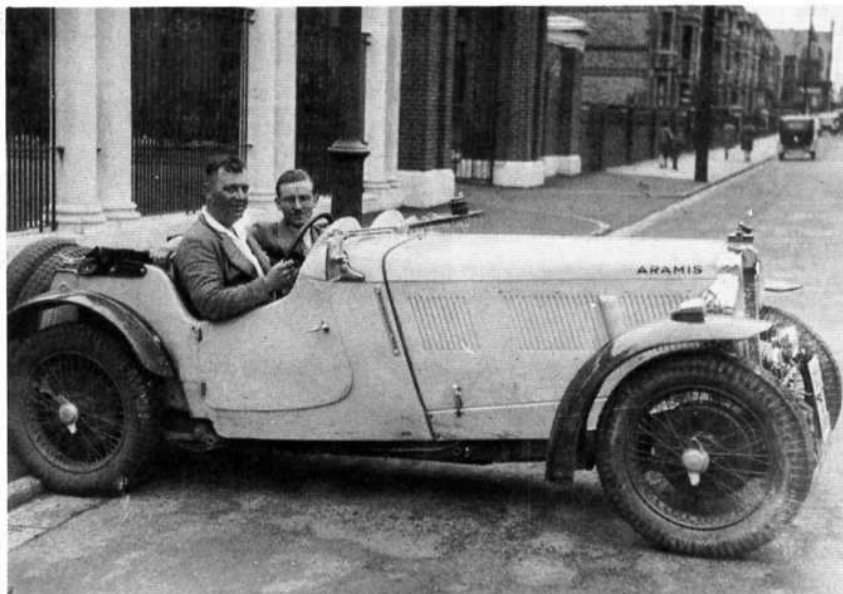
*Perils of trialling with a Cream Cracker
Marshall-blown PB submerged in the 1936
Experts trial*



The 1936 Exeter saw the three run as Marshall-blown 1408 cc NE Magnettes still in Abingdon colours of chocolate and cream

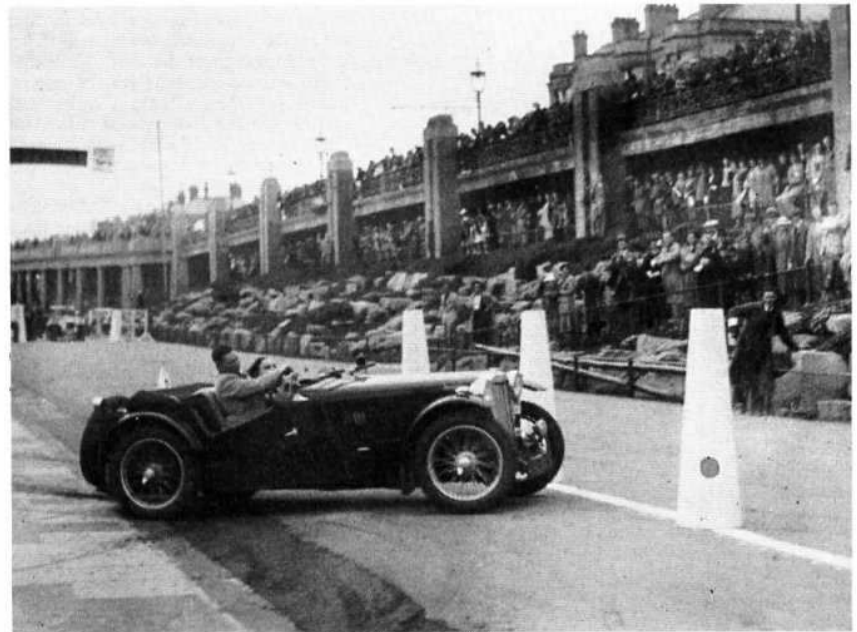


Above, Bastock's Marshall-blown TA engine in the 1938 Colmore; below, Sam Nash who won the 1935 Welsh rally in Magnette





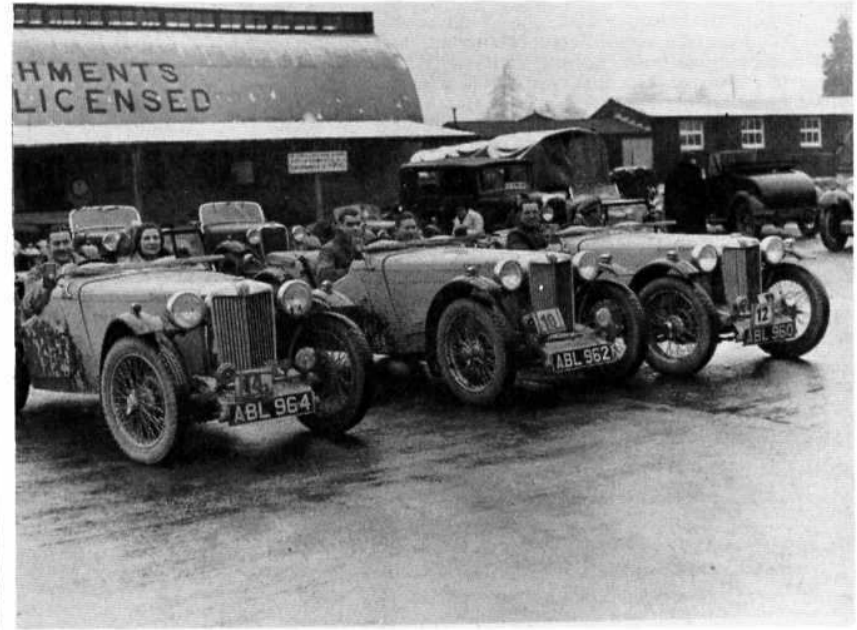
For 1937 the Musketeers became MG TAs painted red using Wolseley gearboxes for low first and second, seen here at the 1937 Colmore gaining a team award



A. B. Langley taking part in the 1937 Blackpool Rally with MG TA Aramis



Above, Langley's supercharged TA on the 1938 Colmore at Kington; below, Langley gaining a Premier award on the 1936 Exeter



Above, 1937 Cream Cracker team (Toulmin, Crawford and Jones) used identical TA Midgets to Musketeers. Below, Macdermid on Leckhampton during the 1938 Colmore with supercharged TA



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Bastock in NE Magnette on the 1936 Exeter

quently "Athos" (chassis number COM/N/1) was written off in a smash but I have no knowledge of the eventual fate (present whereabouts?) of the other two.*

The new "Musketeers", ABL961, ABL963 and ABL965, were of a very different calibre both to the three purpose-built cars and to the original team of converted T.T. cars, and would almost have been eligible for a Production Car Trial nowadays. The chief mechanical mods. were the fitting of the Wolseley gearbox, to give the low first and second gears needed for the conditions of the day, and heavy duty shockers, and weight was

*I understand JB6867 has survived.

Author C. A. N. May bought one of the 1936 Cream Cracker supercharged PBs and is seen tackling Knotts Hill on the 1937 Colmore

saved by panelling the cars in aluminium and fitting the very small mudguards which were original equipment on the early J2 Midgets.

An almost identical trio of cars was also prepared for the "Cream Cracker" team and to distinguish the two sets of cars visually the new "Musketeer" cars were now painted bright red, the "Crackers" retaining the Abingdon "colours" of chocolate and cream.

Contrary to many expectations, the cars being only so mildly modified, the new team had quite a rewarding 1937. There was a team award plus an outright win for Jack Bastock, and also a Cup for Archie Langley, at the very first time of asking, in the Margate and District's Wye Cup trial, run in the hinterland of Kent. Further team awards were won in Sunbac's "Colmore", in which all three cars finished "clean" and Bastock won the Bernard Norris Cup, also in the Liverpool Motor Club's "Jeans", which Langley won outright, and in the "Abingdon", with Bastock again taking one of the individual cups.

Macdermid won the "Brighton-Beer", cups in both the "Knott" and the "English Riviera" — a hair-raising event in the West country — and tied for outright best performance in a tough "Gloucester", losing to redoubtable Philip Flower on a final "against-the-watch" tie-decider.

This encouraged the factory went to work to provide the three drivers with something more potent for 1938. Still series T-based, BBL82, BBL83 and BBL84 had very special engines, with Marshall superchargers, which were claimed to give nearly 50% more power than the standard units. The front ("cart") springs were set up with a substantial camber, to give increased front-end ground clearance, and the body panels and big bonnet were of aluminium. Larger section rear tyres were used.

But competition had increased, in particular from the works Austin Seven team, "The Grasshoppers", and the "brute power" V-8 engined Allards, as well as the "new" breeds of H.R.G. and Frazer-Nash-B.M.W., and team awards came far less easily. Outside influences, however, spoiled the team's chances in the "Exeter", early in January. The three drivers started from the Stratford-on-Avon control and within only a few miles Macdermid, leading, "lost" the car on an unexpected patch of ice in the middle of a corner

and "Athos" went up on the grass verge and overturned. Langley's car spun but fortunately remained on the road but Bastock's car mounted the verge and hit a telegraph pole.

After the cars had been sorted out, with the help of following competitors, Macdermid, astonishingly, elected to carry on. Not only did "Athos" complete the course but actually qualified for a first-class award. Langley, whose car had not been damaged in the accident, also won a "first" but Jack Bastock was not able to continue.

Subsequently Macdermid won cups both in the West of England Club's "Spring Cup" trial and in the "Abingdon" and Langley collected a cup in the "Jeans" and then went on to win the "Beer" outright, with the team scoring a win also. The "Barnstaple" was won by Dickie Green, who later replaced Macdermid in the "Musketeer" team when Mac opted out to build a "special", and to whom had been temporarily loaned one of the 1937 cars, ABL965 ("Aramis").

Largely to offset increasing complaints about mud being carried onto the public highway by trials cars the R.A.C., in its wisdom, decreed that, as from January 1st, 1939 the use of competition tyres ("knobbles") would be banned. A number of leading clubs anticipated the new ruling and most of the autumn and early winter events were run on a "comps. barred" formula. It did seem that the two M.G. teams were more affected than some by having to run on "standard" tyres and most of these events were won either by the Allards or the "Grasshopper" Austins.

But in 1939 using the same cars, but with Green replacing Macdermid, the team won the team award in both the "Lands End" and the "Edinburgh", which looked promising for the team championship. But the 1939 season was cut short, of course, by the outbreak of the second world war, immediately before which Green scored another "Barnstaple" win.

Macdermid served with distinction in the Royal Navy during the second world war but, afterwards, did not seem able to settle down and, most unhappily, died prematurely and rather tragically. Langley passed on about four years ago, then in his middle seventies. At the time of writing Bastock and Green are alive and well but have not had a finger in the motor sport pie in many a long year. ●

