

An MG Life – Colin Upchurch

It was a damp, cool winter's night and there I was, losing control, about to leave the road and head for the footpath. With a god-awful THUMP I had mounted the gutter and swerved across some hapless resident's berm desperately trying to slalom my way passed those old-style metal dustbins back to the road without hitting anything. Pretty scary stuff for a 17-year-old heading home a little too enthusiastically after the Avondale College school ball. I was driving my families near new MG 1100 saloon that had been loaned to me for the occasion. I will spare the reader from the details of the damage, the confession, the insurance claim and the associated family ruckus. Suffice to say that I had begun my association with MG motorcars and the thought that it might be a wise thing if I learned a bit more about car control. Well, some would say that it is taking a while!

As a young man, I then dabbled with motor bikes, motor scooters, a few old cars, tennis, skiing and sailing. All the while studying Accounting part time at ATI or AUT as it now is. I graduated in 1968 then, in 1970, was conscripted into the army under the Compulsory Military Training (CMT) regime. Not fun! - although I did pick up some 4WD driving tips that were to become useful later. To this day however, Waiouru still doesn't appeal.



Waiouru 1970

My escape was to gather up my best mate and set off for some "OE" on the good ship RHMS Ellinis bound for the UK. I shudder to think just how green as "the proverbial" we both were. Looking back now it is a strange feeling to see in a photo taken in New York (1971) that the World Trade Centre twin towers were under construction. Who could have known how history would play out thirty years later?

"Swinging" London was a fun place in the 70's and I relished plying my trade as a contractor in the darker months and travelling in Europe each summer. Finland to Turkey and a lot in-between.

After a sojourn as a "camp counsellor" at a summer camp for kids at Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire USA I joined my friends for another European camping tour that was to be a test run for more driving adventures to come. You see, not long previously two of my friends and I must have had a little too much to drink one night in London as someone said "why don't we drive through Africa?" and we all agreed that sounded like a good idea! Well, not long past before we had committed to this scheme by jointly purchasing a 1958 Series 1A, LWB "safari top", 1997cc petrol Land Rover for £400 and a matching military trailer at an Army surplus auction. We then began spending all our spare time repairing,

rebuilding and kitting out the well-worn beast for the challenges that were to come. After our European “test” we left Berkshire (not far from Abingdon, in fact) in early November 1972 with 4 paying passengers. The “Secret Seven” set off for a marathon that was to finish at Cape Town after 16 weeks, 1180 gallons (5,364 L) of petrol, 15,573 miles (25,062 km), 21 punctures and a few unplanned adventures. What a workhorse that vehicle was. Underpowered and seriously overloaded everything broke at one time or another except that puny 52 bhp engine! Fabulous memories from that trip through 15 countries with highlights being crossing the Sahara, river crossings on dugout canoe ferries in the jungles of Zaire (now known as Democratic Republic of Congo), the wildlife of east Africa and the politics: - Uganda (Idi Amin!); Mozambique (rebel fighters); Rhodesia (rising black nationalism) and South Africa (the height of the apartheid regime).



Zaire Bridge (left) and dug-out ferry 1972

The springtime in England of 1973 felt pretty good after the deprivations of 4 months of camping and that is when my next BIG IDEA came to me. Purchasing a new car tax free in the UK for export was all the rage at the time and with the help of a family loan I scraped together the necessary and ordered my MGB Roadster from the showroom in Park Lane. Very posh. Purchase price £1200. When it was delivered in June 73 it sure was a step up from the beat-up Anglia 105E I was sharing at the time and took a bit of getting used to.



Berkshire 1973



As many of you will know, that B is the car that I still own and drive today. Some things just grow on you! By now Cynthia and I were together and we both enjoyed the summer driving “Emma” exploring the UK countryside, attending MGCC noggin & natters, trials and the annual Silverstone event.

(Left): Silverstone 1973

In the winter, we had a major a trip to Austria with skis on the top of the newly purchased hard top - we did look cool! Driving your MG with chains on is not something everyone aspires to.

Right: Chains on in Austria 1974



“Emma” was delivered to the docks in Liverpool in June 74 for shipping home to Auckland just as a dock workers’ strike began. That turned out to our advantage as by the time it was over my car was over 12 months old before export and qualified at the NZ end for duty free entry as “personal effects”. Perfect! Landed cost when it reached home was NZ\$3,000.

It was now time to save some cash and plan our escape to NZ and so it was that we set off in October on the “Hippie” Trail”: 9 weeks overland by public transport through Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and to the east coast of India at Madras (now Chennai) then flew home via Singapore.

When we arrived at Auckland we found my parents had delivered my car to the airport so Cynthia and I were able to have our ride home as we meant to continue – in an MG! Who would have thought we would still continue to enjoy this car for another 33 years and counting!

Key MG recollections since those early days have included: taking our first born home from National Women’s Hospital in 1980 in Emma (much to the disapproval of Matron [Symbol]); great north and south island National Rally tours; trials/tours/motorkhanas/motorcross/track day events; auditing club accounts for many years; organizing the Ellerslie Concours classic car tours; Cynthia discovering her “speed skill set”; gaining 2nd place in the 2015 Ellerslie Survivors Class series with Emma (many thanks for the preparation help from the club volunteers).



National Rally, Wigram, March 2010

But best of all of course is meeting and making friends with the wonderful people who own and care about MGs. I have been treasurer of the club since 2014.

In addition to my MG, I am still enjoying my skiing and sailing. Cynthia and I recently competed in the World Masters Games and we were surprised and delighted to achieve a bronze medal for our age/class sailing our Weta trimaran. You never know what you can do!

Ka kite ano!

Colin Upchurch

EMMGEE.

