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MGB

FROM LONDON TO SYDNEY

Karol Wiechczyński | Photos and Author

Half a century ago, what mattered most was the rivalry of drivers, who fought not only with time or competitors, but also with adversities, brought on by the realities of the then roads, or with the unreliable technology available at that time. Participation in the rally itself was motivated not only by the desire to test oneself against the competition, but above all, by the desire to experience an adventure - that of which greater when discussed today, with such marathon rallies organised over a distance of several thousand kilometres, now forgotten.

And it was this call for adventure that attracted a petite Englishwoman to the start of the London - Sydney rally in 1968, who, navigated by her friend, wanted to prove to all doubters that she, and a privately prepared MGB, would be able to cope with the hardships of this murderous event.

"People's Games"

The second half of the 1960s is an interesting period in the history of Great Britain. On the one hand, the industry, rebuilt after the Second World War, showed enormous potential to arouse the expectations of citizens, on the other - the vision of Great Britain as a superpower collided brutally with the reality of a decline in exports and an increase in the cost of living, due to the falling value of the pound. It was only a matter of time before despondency began to dominate the social mood.

In order to divert the public's attention from economic problems, Sir Max Aitken, the owner of the popular Daily Express newspaper, and two of his journalists, Jocelyn Stevens and Tommy Sopwith, decided to create an event that was to attract the attention of the whole world - an international car rally, with a route running through 12 countries and 3 continents, starting in London and finishing in Sydney. The high prize of £10,000 funded by the "Daily Express" was an intended magnet to attract crews from all over the world. Aitken made contact with his friend Sir Frank Packer, owner of the Daily Telegraph, a newspaper published in Australia who could help organize such an event.

Since the pioneering times, motorsport has been devoid of any element of romanticism accompanying motorists. Today, even rallies over a distance of several thousand kilometres are focused on the meticulously calculated efficiency of all components of the car, reducing its crew to the role of operators, whose sole task is to ensure the machine runs flawlessly.





MGB



REGULATION

Four-wheeled vehicles were allowed to participate in the event, with the proviso that the drive cannot be transmitted to more than one axle. They could have a maximum of 6 seats, carrying all the tools, parts, as well as fuel and water needed to complete a specific stage. Any repairs with the need for third parties, i.e. mechanics, could be carried out after the completion of the stages. It was forbidden to replace the engine and bodywork. The regulations also included a requirement that each car must carry at least one firearm for protection against wild animals and a supply of ammunition for the entire duration of the event. As the event was held in road traffic, time limits were set for each stage of the rally, which theoretically would allow participants to cover the planned distance without exceeding the speed limits. For 1 minute of delay on a stage, 1 penalty point was added for the crew. For the lack of confirmation of passing through the time control point at the appointed time - 1440 points, the equivalent to 24 hours of delay.

Cooperation with Packer quickly resulted in the securing of media promotion for the Australian section of the event and funded prizes for second place, to the amount of £3,000 and third £2,000. The Daily Telegraph had also prepared a prize of £2,000 for the highest-ranked Australian driver. The whole team of organisers, both on the British and Australian side, was actually as few as 8 people! These kind of "people's games" were not only to raise the morale of the British, but also to provide excellent publicity for the British automotive industry, because a mass participation of English cars was expected. To allow enough time to prepare the cars for the hardships of this treacherous event, detailed technical regulations and a list of major cities on the European and Asian route of the rally were announced in October 1967. Details of the Australian leg were to be given at a later date.

The planned distance of 16,000 km, combined with daily reports from the rally route, turned out to be a huge attraction for factory teams. The cost of participation could also be dizzying a further factor favouring large teams. However, despite the costs, a large group of daredevils submitting applications turned out to be drivers for whom motor sport was a great way to spend their free time, and the London-Sydney rally itself seemed to them an adventure of a lifetime. Jean Denton was also in this group.

Quick decision

Born December 29, 1935 in Wakefield, Jean Denton, despite her maiden name being Moss, showed little interest in vehicles. It emerged most likely, as she herself mentioned, from the social status of her parents. From an early age, she loved public appearances. After graduating from economic studies, she started working in her profession. Good earnings lead her to decide to buy a car at the age of 26. To be able to drive



it, she had to gain a driver's license. The relatively late age to obtain the license did not prevent her from buying a sports MGB. Equally impulsively, she decided to try her hand at the race track. And here it turned out that the Englishwoman had a real predisposition to driving a car fast. Later came rallying, but it was racing on the track that brought her the most titles. In 1966, behind the wheel of a Formula 3 Cooper, she was included in the prestigious British Racing Driver Club, and in 1967 and 1968 she won the title of Women's British Motor Racing Champion at the wheel of the MGB. She also did not shy away from long-distance races, taking part in the legendary Nürburgring 1000 km. So it came as no surprise that for the ambitious Englishwoman, the marathon rally from London to Sydney was a must-do. The only problem could be money, because despite the good earnings of Denton and her husband, who encouraged her passion, the

initial costs and those to cover the logistics during the event were overwhelming. The women's magazine "NOVA", for which Denton occasionally wrote columns, came to the rescue. All that remained was to submit an application for the rally and wait for its acceptance, with the organiser's entry list limited at only 100 places and over 150 applicants already applied before the end of 1967.

Fortunately, Denton qualified for the 100, and in early 1968 preparations for the car began. She didn't even want to hear about a car other than the MGB. The arguments of friends who advised her not to start behind the wheel of this classic roadster were not without good reason however. First of all, the rigidity of the MGB monocoque body could leave much to be desired in sporty operation throughout difficult conditions. The roadster's suspension coped perfectly well with the back roads of the British Isles, but the



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1. For the needs of the marathon rally, the MGB was equipped with an accessory hardtop roof.
2. The Denton / Boyce crew at one of the checkpoints of the Bulgarian section of the route.

3. The patinated interior with its every detail tells the wonderful story of Jean Denton and the London-Sydney marathon.
4. Replacing the radiator during the Australian leg of the tour was one of the biggest failures of the MGB.

5. The hero of the story at the finish of the rally in Sydney. At the end of the rally, the heroic MGB had to cover the same route on his way back to the UK.



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wilderness of Australia is a completely different story. In addition, the small dimensions of the car greatly limited the amount of "luggage" that could be taken with you, and the hardtop roof effectively eliminated the possibility of using it for mounting a roof rack. But Jean Denton was adamant. It even got to the point where her friends were taking bets on which stage of the rally the MGB would give up the ghost and for what reason, but Jean ignored all comments.

Preparations

Denton's co-driver Tom Boyce also believed in the MGB. It was he who meticulously planned the work that had to be done to prepare the British roadster for the hardships of this event. In addition to Boyce, the husband of the brave Englishwoman, Tony Denton, and his friend Pete Smith also took care of the preparation of the previously raced vehicle.

The body was meticulously welded in critical places and stiffened. Suspension mounting points, and its components, were also strengthened. Inside, a simple safety cage and a set of devices for the navigator, in the form of a POTI lamp and a speedpilot were installed. The left seat had been reworked so that it could be folded down, providing at least a little comfort for sleeping in a claustrophobic interior.

A Motorola radio for listening to music was also installed. Possession of a radio was required by the regulations as apart from the entertainment function, it was to be a form of emergency communication between the organisers and the competitors. Externally, the car was equipped with a set of covers protecting the front of the car from wild animals. A set of auxiliary headlights was also installed. At the rear of the car there was a tastefully extended rear bumper that also acted as a platform for water canisters. This was a necessity, as it was impossible to load the roof with such a large mass. Denton considered this an advantage, because the car without the roof rack had much better aerodynamics. It's hard to disagree with this, but in the case of a small MGB, every square centimetre of space turned out to be at a premium. The spare wheel was therefore installed on the boot lid, preparing a special place for it. In turn, a new fuel tank, enlarged to over 100 litres, with a filler for quick filling, was installed under the trunk lid. It was a gift from BMC's sports department. The original spoked wheels were replaced with aluminium counterparts, widened to 5.5 inches. The characteristics of the suspension were also changed, raising it by about 30 mm. Such external modifications could suggest massive mechanical changes. Here, however, disappointment awaits, because the car of the Denton / Boyce crew was equipped with an original drivetrain with a four-speed gearbox with an overdrive and a series B engine with a capacity of 1798 cc and 95 HP, which had only undergone balancing treatment.

MGB

The car prepared in this way was painted gold on the outside, leaving the interior and engine compartment in the factory British Racing Green. Unfortunately, the Denton/Boyce crew could not count on the technical facilities available to the factory drivers, so the entire car was filled with spare parts and tools needed to resolve a potential failure. The role of the staff of mechanics present in every large team was to be performed only by Tom Boyce.

MGB on the road

On November 24, 98 crews lined up at London's Crystal Palace, where the starting ceremony for the first ever London-Sydney rally took place.

The European part of the rally route was divided into 11 stages, which for most competitors was a mere formality. It was no different for the MGB crew. Apart from the speeding ticket from Turin to Belgrade, the crossing of Europe did not bring any unexpected events. However, entering the territory of Asia turned out to be a real challenge. In the face of almost non-existent roads, driving a low-slung MGB required a great deal of experience and sensing of the ground clearance. Denton passed this test very well, driving through Afghanistan and Pakistan without any delays over the regular time.

On the Indian section, crew No. 47 scored the first penalty points. It was caused not by a car breakdown, but by... a toothache. Denton had complained of a toothache before arriving in India, but the closer she got to Mumbai, the more severe the problem became, and eventually it became so severe that Boyce had to get behind the wheel in search of a dentist who could solve the aching problem. Only after several hours of dodging along the route in search of a doctor, the barely conscious Denton was helped by a local English-speaking Indian businessman, who showed the way to the dentist. The Englishwoman did not have to pay anything for having her tooth pulled out, but it cost her 319 penalty points.

After reaching the port of Mumbai, the MGB crew could finally rest, as the entire rally group was loaded onto the liner SS Chusan. An interesting fact is the approach of the organisers who, when chartering the vessel, assumed that no more than 65 cars would go on the nine-day cruise to Australia - the rest were expected to fall due to a breakdown. However, 72 rally cars appeared on the Mumbai wharf, forcing the organisers and the ship's crew to cram on the extra number of passengers.

No work on cars was allowed during the entire voyage to Australia. For the MGB crew, who checked in late at the port, this meant that the first inspection of the car after the end of the Euro-Asian leg would not be possible until Perth. Here, ready to help, was the Australian MGB Users Club, who had offered support before the rally.



Starting List

Among the participants of the London - Sydney marathon, Sobiesław Zasada with Marek Wachowski in a Porsche 911S should be distinguished, Rauno Aaltonen and Paddy Hopkirk driving an Austin 1800s, well-prepared in the BMC sports department, and Andrew Cowan in a Hillman Hunter. There was also representation from Ford. In this case, each of the countries producing vehicles of this brand (except the USA) entered its team. The Germans were represented by Herbert Klient in the Taunus 20M, the Australians by Vaughan and Hodgson in the

Falcon XTs, and the honour of the English branch of Ford was defended by a strong duo - Roger Clark / One Anderson in an Escort. It is impossible not to mention the Citroën and DAF teams, as well as the Moskvich factory team. In such a line-up, the homemade MG, with the starting number 47 of the Denton / Boyce crew had no chance of winning. However, in the case of this event, reaching the finish line should be considered a success, and reaching the finish line behind the wheel of the MGB - a miracle, as outsiders were to say.



1. The hallmark of rally cars at the turn of the 60's and 70's - Black matte surfaces of the hood and fenders. They protected the driver's eyes from the reflections of the headlights of drivers coming from the opposite direction on road sections.
 2. The spare wheel of the MGB went to the tailgate and the canisters landed on a special rack instead of on the roof as with most rivals of the marathon rally.



This was not the only form of help from the Australian club of MG users. They offered to "lead" the British crew through the more difficult parts of the route. Admittedly, this help turned out to be invaluable, because on one of the faster fragments of the approach section, Denton and Boyce's car was jacked up on an invisible pothole. When they "landed", they damaged the radiator. The failure was repaired in the middle of the bush by exchanging the damaged radiator with a replacement, delivered by one of the club members. Admittedly, aside from that one driver error incident, the MGB did not disappoint, despite the horrendous conditions in Australia. Denton herself received many compliments after each increasingly difficult stage, for technically good and very smart driving.

On December 18, after covering a distance of 16,000 km, the golden MGB checked in at the finish line of the rally in Sydney. Crew No. 47 scored 2,408 penalty points and was ranked 42nd out of 56 classified vehicles. The MGB was the second sports car in the field to finish the rally after the Porsche of Sobiesław Zasada. Such a result should be considered a great success, because after the completion of the rally, both the driver and the co-driver agreed that ... "Even though the MGB is a great car, it is as suitable for the route of such an event as an electric milk cart." It is worth recalling that after an accident involving the Citroën DS21 of Lucien Bianchi and JC Ogier, three stages before the finish line, the winner of the first ever London-Sydney marathon was the crew of Andrew Cowan / Colin Malkin / Brian Coyle. Sobiesław Zasada and Marek Wachowski were ranked 4th.

As a testimony of the times

After the event, the golden MGB fortunately did not share the fate of the vast majority of cars taking part in the marathon. It wasn't converted back to a road car and sold on the local Australian market. The owner decided to bring the car to the UK. To make it cheaper, instead of shipping it from Australia, she decided to overcome the same route as the rally route, only in the opposite direction. And this time MGB did not disappoint.



3. The green body chamber reveals the original color of the car.

4. The front end cover is the hallmark of marathon rallies.

After returning home, the car competed in a few more events, but due to the greater weight compared to the standard MGB racer, our marathon runner was not competitive enough and eventually went on sale in the early 1970s. The further fate of the car is unknown, it is only known that one of the subsequent owners converted it into a road car.

In March 2015, the hero of our story was miraculously found in one of the local scrap yards, waiting his turn for the compactor. The car was in a dilapidated state. Some of the surviving rally equipment caught the attention of a scrap metal worker who contacted the British MGB enthusiasts club. After positive verification that it was the same car that Jean Denton drove from London to Sydney in 1967, the club bought it back and began restoration. This would not have been possible without the support of British Motor Heritage, which not only carried out the lion's share of the work in restoring the lost rally fittings, but also helped to restore the body. The renovation took over two years. It was worth the wait

though. Today, the golden MG pleases the eye from the outside with faithfully recreated details and sleek bodywork, telling its wonderful but also turbulent history with the interior, which was decided to be left original.

And what was the further fate of Jean Denton? After the London-Sydney Marathon, she was hired by the BMC factory team to drive a BMC 1800 in the World Cup Rally from London to Mexico. And this time she showed great class finishing in 18th place.

Her sports successes allowed her to start working in the automotive industry, where within a few years she reached the position of Director of Public Relations at Austin Rover. She was also politically active, holding advisory positions in the Department of Commerce and the Department of Energy. For her merits, she was awarded the Order of the British Empire and knighted, which allowed her to sit in the House of Lords of the British Parliament. After a short battle with cancer, she died on February 5, 2001. ♦