Super Bee

Words by Dr Iain Corness.
Photos as indicated

Photo by Darin Mandy - Digital Realism

According to British Leyland, the fastest MGB in the world in 1971 raced in Australia, competing in the Prodsports class and was a member of the British Leyland (Australia) factory team known as the Leyland Young Lions.

"Fastest MGB in the world" was a big claim, for sure, but while impossible to confirm (or deny), it probably was.

This car, known locally as "Super Bee" had lap records all over Eastern Australia, with one lasting eight years. It was faster than the 2lt Autodelta lightweight Alfas; it was more highly developed than the British Leyland backed MGB's in the UK; and in Australia it set similar lap times to the V8 Mustangs of the day. Simply, Super Bee was a brute! I should know, because I built it and I was the driver.

If its sheer speed is not enough, there is another amazing facet to the saga of Super Bee, because after I sold it, it spent 30 years sitting in a shed until it was purchased by an enthusiast in 2008 and restored faithfully to its condition as it was in the early 1970's. Perhaps the world's fastest barn-find?

However, to understand this Aussie MGB, a little of its history is required.

After I raced an MGA for a couple of years my wife Carole and I went to the UK to complete my medical degree in 1967, and while there met up with BMC-backed MGB driver Bill Nicholson. This led to an invitation to visit the MG factory in Abingdon, and an introduction to all the engine parts needed to convert a standard MGB 1800cc engine to Stage 6 tune. The decision was made in 1968 to return to Australia and build an MGB purely for the race track.

I had worked my passage back to Australia as a ship's surgeon on a cargo ship, the *Adelaide Star*, and with me was a suitcase containing a nitrided steel crankshaft, a competition camshaft, four 80-thou oversize competition pistons, eight nimonic valves with hidural valve guides, strengthened rocker posts, and 16 competition valve springs. These were all the subject of a somewhat dodgy invoice just in case the customs people got interested.

I was a little worried about getting all these parts into Australia, but had a lucky streak. After signing off from the ship's register in Melbourne, I returned to my cabin to pack, but delayed my entry into Australia until late

First iteration of Super Bee was rough and ready, but seriously quick.

Super Bee I at Lakeside, 1969. Note hinges on bottom of door & Mini wheel-arch flares.

Lakeside, 1969.

that evening. With my arm muscles bulging, the important suitcase and I walked along the docks to be accosted by a customs official.

"Where are you going?" he asked. I replied, "I'm the doctor from the *Adelaide Star*." "Oh, OK then Doc, good night," and I mercifully clanked into Australia with the makings of an MGB race car. (Thank goodness the statute of limitations has been exceeded. I was luckier than Al Capone!)

Returning to my home in Brisbane, the next step was to find an MGB to prepare and I bought a nice 1965 model. In fact, it was too nice to race, but the five-bearing engine was yanked out so that work could start on building the Stage 6 power plant.

The road car was then put on blocks and I continued to look for a tatty MGB.

Once more I was lucky, and an MGB shell was found in one of the local wrecking yards. This car had been stolen, stripped and then set fire to, but the damaged shell was just perfect for my needs.

It was a lightweight, as the fire had removed all the sound deadening insulation, and all the lead from the body seams had melted and run away. The shell was brought home and put on blocks beside the road car.

A word or two about the workshop won't go amiss at this point. Think of the high-set houses on stumps in Queensland. The underneath had a dirt floor and the head-room was 5'10". At 6' tall I spent the next few weeks in a state of semi-concussion.

We had no tools other than an electric drill, a lead-light and some spanners and the most important self-grip wrench! "We" was myself and a young pharmacy student, John Campbell. My wife Carole made the coffee.

We built the entire car in six weeks, but it was an exhausting six weeks working 6pm to midnight Monday to Thursday, then all night Friday through to Saturday, then, after a break, Saturday 6pm until 10pm. Sunday was the day of rest, but nothing of biblical significance: it was just sheer exhaustion.

The front cross member and suspension came directly from the road car. My basic engineering knowledge came from reading as many books as I could lay my hands on, and that extended to re-working the front suspension geometry to get the lower wish-bones and the steering rack parallel to each other and the road. We bent the steering arms at a friend's garage, and just hoped we hadn't weakened them.

Heavier front springs were sourced from the local spring works and the valves in the Armstrong shock absorbers were turned upside down and screwed into the shocks. At the rear, the bottom two spring leaves were put on the top and anti-tramp bars fitted. The rear axle was also lifted from the road car, which was then destined to stay on blocks for the next few years.

The shell had come without door hinges either, so we devised "reverse gull-wings" as I called them, hinging the doors from their lower edge. There was also no grille, so I made one from alloy sheet, pop-riveting the grille bars in place. As we were fitting wide wheels we made four flares at the same time, out of Mini Cooper fibreglass ones.

Wheels came from one of the chaps in the MG Car Club with the knock-off centres and steel spokes and rims. They were very heavy, but should have been strong. Time was to prove the opposite.

Another engineering shop made me a small alloy fuel tank, which we put in the boot with the outlet leading to a swirl pot and then on to the carburettor.

It was starting to get there as a recognizable MGB, but it needed painting. Once again I struck it lucky. The chap next-door was tired of all the noise each night and came over to complain. It turned out he was a spray painter and he quickly worked out that the sooner we finished this project, the sooner he would get a good night's sleep.

He prepared the body and sprayed it in a Wildfire Green colour: I think this was the cheapest paint he could get. The bonnet and boot had been made in fiberglass, using the road car for the moulds.

There was no dashboard either, so I made one up, again out of alloy and fitted a tacho and water-temp/oil-pressure gauge.

Finally we got the engine and gearbox in, wired it up, turned the key and fired it up. The sound of the engine running was music to our ears.

Much other work had to be out-sourced, such as the roll bar, and more new front springs – as the initial ones made the car look like a preying mantis.

The good Doc & wife Carole - 1969.

Photo by Craig Watson

Super Bee was built from a wreck that had been stolen and torched.

We had set ourselves the target of the first race meeting of the year at the local Lakeside circuit and we made it! But then we had the first (of many) battles with the scrutineers. The fuel lines did not please the Don Athaldo 'scrut' as he hung on them under the car. No fuel line is expected to support a 15 stone human, but we humoured him and fitted extra brackets that evening.

That first meeting was reasonably successful. Very little got loose or fell off and the 69-second best lap, for both Carole and I, was the quickest any MGB had done at Lakeside. An auspicious start.

We called the car "Super Bee" and made a little bumblebee sticker for the boot lid. However, we were not to know just how apt that was going to be.

During the year (1969) we gradually improved the B, getting down to 65 secs at Lakeside and took the car to Katoomba (NSW) and Oran Park, outside Sydney. Again it was the quickest MGB by a country mile, near the top of the Prodsports category, but there was more to come.

The car and its drivers had begun to attract media attention, with a track test in *Racing Car News* giving it a very positive rap.

Now the luck came around again. We were approached by British Leyland with an offer to join the British Leyland Works Team, but they wanted the car to look a lot better than it did. In retrospect, it was very rough.

We said yes, if they could help us bring the car's appearance back to scratch. It was agreed that we could take the car to the BL workshop in Brisbane, where hinges were fitted to hang the doors correctly, bonnet and boot hinges and many other small items and then it was painted in 'corporate' colours of blue and white. (In actual fact, it was a Fiat colour called Mediterranean Blue!).

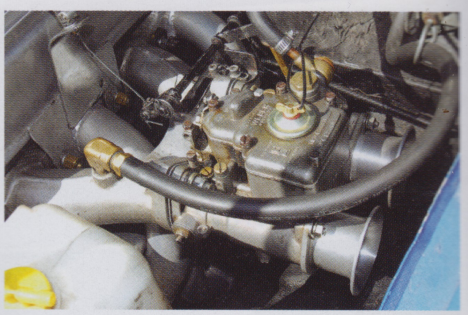
I also hand-made four new wheel-arch flares out of aluminium.

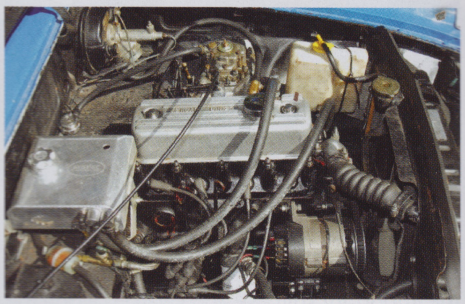
The car emerged looking fantastic, the BL painter Derek Allison had fallen in love with it, and it was showroom standard.

To celebrate this, we called the car "Super Bee II" to get rid of the memory of the rough and ready "Super Bee I".

The new car looked so different, most people thought it was another car. In fact, I even met a character one evening who told me that he had bought Super Bee I and was turning it into a road car! I just smiled.

In addition to the bodywork, we began the development of the suspension. Telescopic shock absorbers were fitted to the rear and phosphor bronze bushes made for the lower suspension arms in the front. These had





Engine today is basically Super Bee II spec, with 45mm Weber.

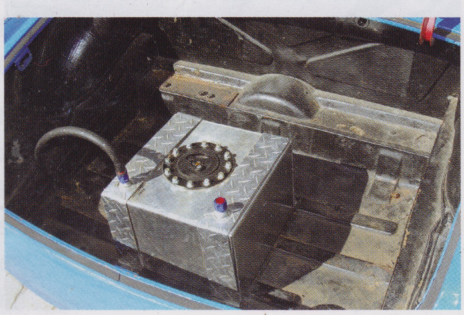
an eccentric hole, so that we could dial in negative camber at the front, but had large washers each side so it was not obvious to prying eyes. The bushes were held in place with the grease nipples.

Telescopic adjustable rear shocks (from Lionel Ayers' MRC Repco V8) were fitted and a thin rear sway-bar as well. The gear-box was re-bushed inside, as it was getting snarly, and I built a race seat from steel tube and alloy.

To pare the weight, we gutted the doors, but left a small piece of Perspex visible at the top of the door to make it look as if there actually was a window there. The winder handle was held in place with a bracket over it so we couldn't "wind it up". A hole saw (or rather several hole saws) were used to remove weight where it would not be noticed.

The factory door hinges are exceptionally heavy, so I spent nights drilling holes in them, then wrapping the hinge in plastic and painting them black. I have no idea how much this helped, but I felt good about it.

Around this time I was visited by the late Peter Manton, the Shell Racing Team Mini driver. Peter showed me that you could drill



The car is basically as it was 40 years ago, from alloy fuel tank and knock-on wheels to the basic-looking dash.

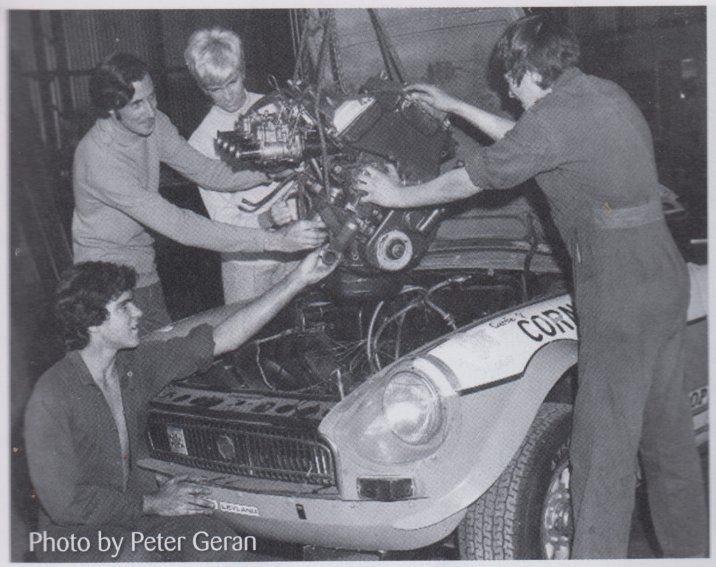


Photo by Peter Geran

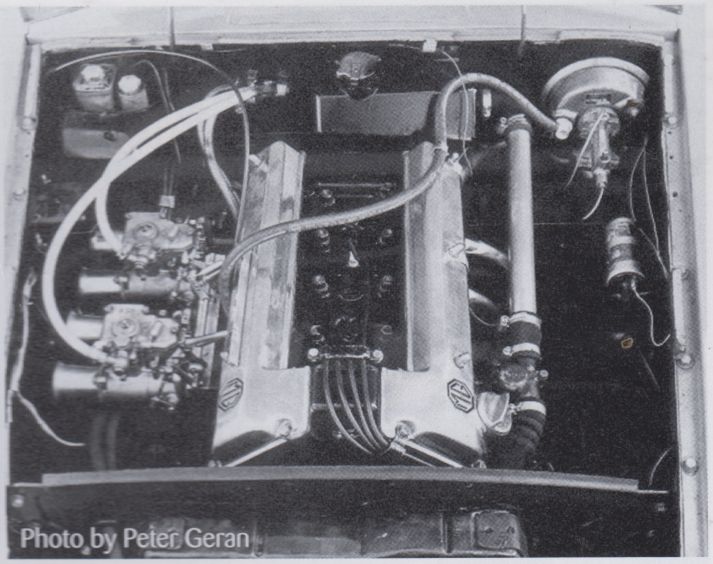


Photo by Peter Geran

The centre-piece of the Super Bee III was the MGA Twin-cam head mated to the 1953cc 5-bearing MGB engine.

out the centre of bolts, split the nuts and chop off any bolt protruding through the half nut. We did some, but it was very time consuming and I wondered just how much weight it did save.

It was now 1970 and Super Bee II hit the tracks of Queensland and New South Wales. Lap times at Lakeside were now down to 63 seconds, Oran Park 51's and Warwick Farm around 1 min 45. There were no Bs anywhere near us, but we were running a tantalizing second to New South Welshman Ross Bond with his very well prepared (money no object) big Healey.

We finished 1970 knowing we had to do more to beat the Healey, and our next 'demon tweak' came from Gatton on the Brisbane hinterland – a rural town and not a hot-bed of engineering ingenuity.

However, Col Vaughan, a very gifted mechanic who I had known for many years, had retired there and he came across an MGA twin-cam engine which had been abandoned. It was Col who suggested that if we could graft the twin-cam head on the MGB block we would still be within the Prodsports regulations; which said the head design was free (Bondy was running a 12 port alloy head, for example).

So we embarked on the biggest engineering project I had ever been part of.

There is a brilliant engineer in Brisbane, Ivan Tighe, now in his 80s, but a good friend. He agreed that we would get no more horsepower from the Stage 6 pushrod engine, but that potentially a twin-cam could produce much more.

It was a very difficult task. For example, the B is an 11 stud block, while the A's twin-cam is a 10 stud head. The capacity in the T/C head is not big enough, as you end up with a 15:1 compression ratio. The combustion chambers were then scooped out, but to get them large enough you get into the waterways, so that then required lots of alloy welding. The oilways in the MGB block do not feed the T/C oilways.

And so it went on, but Ivan got over them all, even making a false nose for the crankshaft to drive the overhead cams, as the regulations stated that the crankshaft had to be standard.

Ivan gave the cams a Repco-Brabham grind and designed new pistons which were made by the CAC (Commonwealth Aircraft Corp) in Melbourne.

Wizard pipe man Brian Payne (Transzac) bent up the exhaust pipes as a four-into-one and also made the inlet manifold for the twin 45DCOE Weber carburettors. The night it fired up I rang Col Vaughan, holding the phone to the car so he could hear it! The world's first MGB Twin-Cam with an eight port crossflow head.

This was now 1971 and there had been some minor cosmetic changes to the current model MGB, so these were incorporated in Super Bee (steering wheel, tail lights and recessed grille), which was then called Super Bee III.

It was an amazing year. The extra power systematically broke everything from the flywheel bolts backwards. It dropped valves; it broke pistons; it threw rods; but even though it was unreliable, it set lap records and won races.

But it was a very physical car to drive,

Photo by Brier Thomas


Photo by Ian Elliot

Surfers Paradise (left) & Amaroo Park. The extra power made Super Bee III "a brute to drive", so Iain was the sole driver for 1971.

The MG has been faithfully restored, with some changes to meet current racing rules.

requiring more strength than Carole could muster, so in 1971 I was the solo driver.

The Lakeside time of 61 seconds remained unbeaten for eight years and Super Bee only lost that when they opened the class from under 2 litres to under 3 litres, and Alan Hamilton's Porsche took the record away.

We did find out where the Achilles Heel was in the engine, but not until the end of the year, and as I still have a pile of MGB Twin-Cam bits, I intend to rebuild that engine. My long term project!

However, the saga continued beyond the end of 1971. British Leyland was pulling the MGB out of Australia and was not interested in continuing to support a racing team, so the Young Lions team was disbanded.

On top of that, CAMS outlawed the top six cars in Prodsports by placing restrictions on the specifications for what had been the best, closest racing at the time.

Rear shocker mount is crude but effective.

I put Super Bee in the shed and went Moto-X racing instead.

Then, in 1974 the McCabe twins from Murwillumbah came to see me, wanting to buy Super Bee. Peter was going to drive and John was to be the mechanic. I sold it, without the engine, for a song.

They brought it back to Super Bee II tune (pushrod), but never enjoyed any success. It was entered in the Australian Sports Car Championship at Lakeside in 1977, with F2 driver Ray Winter at the wheel. Ray approached me in the pits saying, "How did you drive this thing? It's terrifying!" I smiled and replied it was a car you had to grow up with.

Shortly after this Peter McCabe was sadly killed at Lakeside, driving someone else's MGB, and the twins' mother extracted a promise from John that he would never race the car. Super Bee was put in the shed, again.

In 1990 I visited John McCabe to see if he would sell Super Bee back to me, but he declined. I got the feeling that the car was part of his memories of his late brother.

So it languished until 2008, when John died prematurely of cancer, and his widow advertised the car for sale. When I heard, I contacted her but I was two weeks too late; the car had been bought by Queensland enthusiast Ian Rogers, on the Gold Coast.

Ian then embarked on what was probably a bigger restoration than he had imagined. Cars which sit in sheds for 30 years do not drive out after filling the tank and charging the battery!

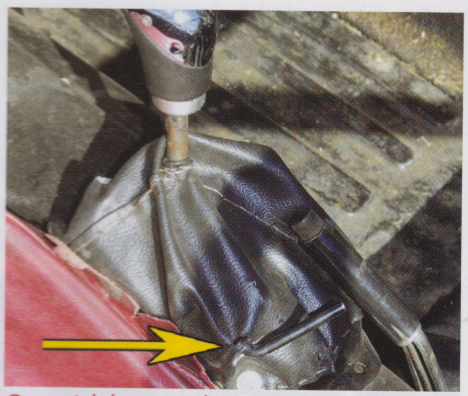
Passenger seat fixed flat for battery access.

Strap on door for added safety.

Ian found me in Thailand, and since there was not one bolt in that car that I hadn't personally tightened, I was able to explain some of the stranger items in the car, and why they were there.

However, it did run out of Ian's workshop in 2010 and he has been racing it in the historic class in Queensland. John Campbell, the chap who had helped build the first iteration of Super Bee has seen it and wrote to me saying, "It was like going back 40 years. The restoration is exact."

Ian Rogers keeps me abreast of Super Bee's competition outings and has promised me a drive if I ever return to Australia. I will certainly take him up on that!



Gearstick has simple reverse-gear lock-out.

Footnote:

There was a lightweight Super Bee IV planned for 1972. Leyland in the UK promised to run off an alloy body at the end of the production run of the MGB dies, but with the MGB being discontinued in Australia, the concept was still-born.