



PARTY TIME!

We couldn't celebrate the Silver Anniversary of the MGF Register and the MGF itself this year due to COVID-19 but this was not the first anniversary or birthday celebration for the car.

With a **F**anatical following it was not surprising that there were several previous celebratory events—so let's party!

The MGF was officially launched at the Geneva Salon on 7th March 1995 but the production cars were not destined to roll on to customers driveways until September 22nd of that year.

Consequently the MGF would be like Her Majesty the Queen and have two birthdays—one actual and one official. The official birthday in September was chosen as the date to hold a first birthday party a year later. So, on the 22nd September 1996 the MG Car Company headed to the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust's Museum at Gaydon (Now the British Motor Museum) to organise a first birthday party. Everyone who had purchased a new car up to that point was invited and reports of attendance vary from 700 cars and 2500 customers to 2000 cars! Whatever the truth it was a very well attended event and unique for motor manufacturers.

The launch of the MGF was a high profile and exciting event with hundreds of orders being received for this brand new British built affordable sports car. Stephen Cox was the MG Regional Manager for the south of England at the time and remembers

"There were four of us plus the general manager, Guy Pigounakis, and the admin function in the office was managed by Gordon Payley. That was the entire team for the launch and management of everything in the Rover Group known as 'MG Cars' - we had to do everything related to sales and marketing. This was at a time when the car had been rushed into production so quickly that we had no electronic ordering system for dealers to use and we had to manage an overworked fax machine for dealers to send us their retail orders, which were being collected at an astonishing rate—we had seen nothing like this within the Rover Group since the 1980 launch of the Metro. This meant that we had to man the phones in the office on a rota, often with half the team in the office on any one day to answer dealer and customer enquiries—it was manic"



(c) Graeme Bishko (1996)

The first birthday party was a lavish affair with guests of honour, chief designer Gerry McGovern accompanied by TV star Anthea Turner, both posed standing on the seats of Gerry's MGF. All the cars were parked in order of colour, a much simpler task in 1996 with a limited palette.

Gerry gave three lectures during the day on the evolution of the MGF and stunt driver Russ Swift demonstrated the car in his show, he was notoriously known for an earlier Montego advert. Anthea even accompanied him on one of the two wheel demos.

Rover Motor Sport mounted a display on how to race your MGF and both the MGCC and MGOC had their own stands encouraging the new owners to join the clubs

Above the crowds Rover's own aerobatic team entertained with their two Extra 300 aircraft and the bakers had been busy cooking hundreds of small MGF birthday cakes adorned with the MG logo. To accompany them there were specially labelled bottles of anniversary Old Speckled Hen.

1996



Nick Fell, Jackie Stewart and Gerry McGovern at the actual "birth" of the MGF in Geneva March 1995



Pre-production MGFs at Gaydon ready for the press runs in September 1995.



We asked Stephen Cox what he could recollect about the first birthday party:-

"I can't remember the number of customers who turned out at the parties but around 2000 sounds about right, the birthday cakes filled a small truck!

This sort of event was unheard of within the motor manufacturing business as we were exposing ourselves to real customers, something not done often even today.

The customers loved it thankfully, they had never experienced anything like it either and we made a huge number of friends amongst the MGF community. Given the somewhat erratic quality of the early cars we didn't have a single customer who wanted to give us grief; anyone who wanted to discuss warranty issues had the chance to talk to us, the design team, engineering staff or our service technical people all of whom were on hand.

It was a wonderful piece of PR and all went home happy and relieved as it was seen as a risky thing to do. We learnt a lot about customer relations from those events.

I remember it as being very labour intensive to organise. We were a department of just six people and we had to manage a zillion owners turning up at once (one of the reasons we didn't continue the idea for many years!).

The personalities helped. We had Anthea Turner as an early customer and she was a real help, charming and enthusiastic, and Quentin Wilson came to the second party and was well worth the fee!

I still have two of the birthday cakes (we gave one to each customer) in my freezer at home, they were a huge hit with the customers flocking to pick them up.

One of the most popular features was the talk given by Gerry McGovern in one of the presentation suites at Gaydon. He can talk for England of course and he did us proud with these events aided and abetted by Brian Griffin who was the Chief Engineer for the project and others from the engineering community"

Brian was the son of Charles Griffin who was Alec Issigonis's Chief Engineer for the production of the Mini in the late 1950s. It would not be the last we would see of them at the birthday parties either, as both appeared again at MGF10.



Russ Swift demonstrated the flexibility of the MGF at the first and second birthday parties.



The MGF Register's first stand at the First Birthday Party

MG Enthusiast magazine were offering a competition prize of a place on their MGF Champagne Tour to Reims (won by Mrs P Small of Loughborough). Another competition included the chance to win one of six heritage interior leather trim sets worth over a thousand pounds each whilst two signed design prints of the MGF by Gerry McGovern were auctioned in aid of the NSPCC.

The small birthday cakes were given to each customer at the show but there was a larger one in the shape of a red MGF that was officially cut by Anthea Turner to formally celebrate the baby MGF.

The displays included a unique MGF finished in green with a green hood which attracted a lot of attention as a special finish; another specially commissioned car for dealership Edwards of Stafford in Ferrari yellow; two of the MGF test cars still with their glass fibre "padding"; and the Metro "Mule" courier van with the K series engine in the boot (this car is now on display at Gaydon and has featured at subsequent MGF shows there).



Unique Heritage green MGF with green hood by the entrance to the Museum

One of the two disguised road test MGFs at the show



The MGF had not begun racing yet in its own series but there was a team of engineers at Rover who had built their own —Longbridge Team Spirit (featured in a previous edition of FastForward). It was driven by Don Kettleborough in the MGCC Anglia Phoenix Challenge and was displayed in a “Paddock” setting at the event.

It is safe to say that the majority of those attending were not club members or enthusiasts but had been drawn by the MGF itself as a brand new exciting sports car. The numbers were so great that extra parking had been provided in the field opposite the entrance to the Museum.



Colour coded parking in action at Gaydon



Anthea Turner cuts the first birthday cake



Overflow parking in the field opposite Gaydon



A piece of MGF first birthday cake—given out to all attendees.



Gerry McGovern and Register chairperson Julia Marshall with their MGFs



Team Spirit race car in its paddock display





Colour coded parking was back again for the 2nd party

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1997

The Rover Group and MG Car Company bit the bullet again in 1997 by returning to Gaydon on the 27th September. It was organised along similar lines to the first party and, as Stephen Cox has already mentioned, featured Quentin Wilson as star guest. Quentin gave four lectures focussing on the record breaking MGs including the EXF which had only just returned from Bonneville. Invitations were once again sent to every new owner of an MGF

The cars were parked in colour order again which made for a good looking display and with the limited number of colours still available was not too hard to arrange and this time a fairground was added to provide amusement throughout the day.

The adjacent Rover test track was utilised and customers could book to have a high speed run in an MGF. The air above Gaydon was used again with the Red Devils Parachute Team dropping in and an aerial display by the Firebird Aerobatic Team.

Back on the ground you could take part in a pit-stop tyre change challenge and Russ Swift was back putting the MGF through its paces on two wheels.

The Register was present, naturally, with its own display of Members cars surrounding a hexagonal Gazebo (the closest thing to an Octagon they could find).

Numbers were so great that extra parking had been arranged in a field opposite the entrance to Gaydon and owners had to walk in to the event from there.



Special 2nd anniversary bottle of Old Speckled Hen were on sale

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1998

By 1998 the MGF was selling like hot cakes and demand was outstripping supply so Rover decided that to organise a 3rd party may have been a party too far! Probably a wise decision at the time.

However by this time an enthusiastic group had formed on the MG Enthusiasts Bulletin Board, the forerunner of the many social media outlets found today. Following discussions on the BBS it was decided to pick up the mantle and organise a third birthday party themselves. Most of those BBS members were also members of the MGF Register. But at the time the Register did not have such good means of communication.

Consequently the 3rd birthday party was much smaller in scale and the location was switched to another location with strong MG links, Brooklands Museum in Surrey.



3rd birthday photo on the Banking at Brooklands with MGF cake and Club MGF bottle of wine. Picture includes Rob Bell, Dave Livingstone, Martin Woods, Tom Randall, Andy Phillips, Mark Lucas and Kieron Lacey plus others

The September date for the party remained and happily coincided with a "Record Breakers" event being held at the Museum. Consequently there were many extra displays of interest to be seen including Richard Noble's Thrust 2, a Jordan F1 car and Don Wales' electric Bluebird car. Of particular interest to MG fans were the presence of a clutch of MG EX record cars including MGF EX255 which had recently failed to run at Bonneville.

There was a good contingent of MGFs, probably around a hundred or so that attended the event. Former MGF Register vice-chairman and MGs on Track Chairman Dave Livingstone (speaking in 2007) was one of those and he had just purchased his MGF and this was his first event. He remembers that he had



“heard about the first two official birthday parties at Gaydon from Steve Hill, a friend with an MGF. A ride in Steve’s car had persuaded my wife that getting my own MGF could be fun and so in February 1998 I took delivery of a brand new Flame Red VVC.

Steve had also introduced me to the Bulletin Board on www.mgcars.org and I expect I came to hear about the MGFs unofficial birthday party at Brooklands on there. Steve had something else on that day so I persuaded my daughter to join me and we tentatively went along, not knowing what to expect. It was my first trip to Brooklands and my first ever MGF event.

Now, my memory is pretty awful and the details of the day will forever escape me, but one thing really stood out—the enthusiasm and friendliness of the organisers. I do remember Paul Sharpe being MC of the awards and Andrew Phillips demonstrating the removal of an Fs front bumper (which encouraged me to undertake my first dark side modification with bright grilles).

Then, when it came to lining up the cars on the Banking for a photo I was encouraged to join in by a young chap called Rob Bell. He directed me to the front of the line up, and to park my car next to his BRG MGF. That photo and another showing a group around the 3rd Birthday Party cake capture the start of my own personal MGF experience.

I could never have imagined that all these years later I would be so actively involved with the MG community and some of the people at that event, particularly with Rob and Andrew on the MGF Register committee and Rob and Steve with MGs on Track. I could equally never have imagined that I would still own that 1998 VVC and that it would have tipped 100,000 magical miles.”



Some of the MGFs lined up on the Members’ banking for a photo - Dave Livingstone’s and Rob Bell’s at the front.

Club MGF had organised a weekend including a road run around “The Potteries” in Staffordshire on the Saturday at which a bottle of 3rd Birthday wine was given to participants. The next day they drove down to take part in the event at Brooklands.



The BBS team who organised the event were Rob Bell, Neil Willets, Spencer Planton and Martin Woods. Rob, of course is the Register's technical whizz and author of the long-running Project Shed articles in FasTForward. He remembers that

"The 3rd party was very much a BBS effort; the MGCC, MGF Register, Club MGF and MGC were all there as invited clubs. MGF3 was organised in a predictably short time frame, with Martin Woods providing much of the advertising material. We had our own website for the event which has now long gone and on the day there were car displays, trader village, access to the Museum and, of course, the opportunity to run up Test Hill. It was a big success with around 150 cars attending. It was a fantastic day and I have amusing memories of Spencer turning up late, still stoned from the night before!"



This picture of EX181 and EX255 in front of the Brooklands clubhouse amply demonstrates the large size difference between the two cars.



A view from the Clubhouse tower showing three MGs in the central display—the two top ones are EX254 aka Supersports 1 and what looks like an MGF Cup car. Bottom left is EX255, the Bonneville speed car. To its right is another MG land speed record car, EX181 which Phil Hill and Stirling Moss drove to records in the late 1950s. They are joined by two other racing MGs—an MGBGT (possibly a V8) and MG Maestro.



Other speed cars on display at the 3rd Birthday party included Richard Noble's Thrust 2 (seen here with its chief aerodynamicist Ron Ayres; The Jordan F1 car in a display case and Don Wales's electric Bluebird 1 (Don is Sir Malcolm Campbell's grandson)

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The following year Brooklands was chosen once more as the venue for the fourth birthday party. Again it was organised by the MG enthusiasts BBS helped a little more by the MGF Register. This event was billed as the “MGF Birthday Party and Spares Day” and Rob Bell, who by this time was the events coordinator on the MGF register committee recalls:-

“This was the event where we had Andy Phillips fitting exhaust pipes and Sarah Frazer demonstrated ICE upgrades (particularly speaker installations). We also held an auto gymkhana and a pride of ownership competition. There was a “trader village” and , as in the previous year, there was access to the Test Hill. The young Gerry Hiorns “Golden Wheels” modified F was present at the event in quite a different guise to the one it finished in and we had a small motorsport display featuring Mine, Tom Randall’s, Paul Nothard’s and Graeme Bishko’s sprint/speed championship cars.”

The event took place on the 26th September 1999 and was not combined with any other Brooklands event this time. Various MGF traders were invited to have stands at the event and these included Brown & Gammons, Mike Satur and Stephen Palmer who displayed his MGF Cheetah modification kits.



Stephen Palmer's stand with the Cheetah on display and a line up of MGFs on the Members Banking

1999

5

The final flourish for the early birthday parties kept to the same September anniversary date taking place on the 24th September 2000 at an unusual venue, in that it had no MG connection, the Midlands Motor Museum in Bridgnorth. The event was organised by the MGF Register wholly for the first time led by committee member Martin Woods.

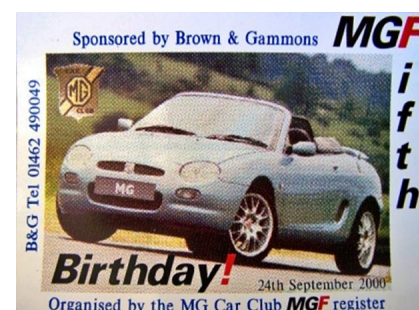
The Register produced an invite and programme for the event but there is very little photographic evidence of it having actually taken place.

It was a very grey and wet day and the attendance was consequently quite low. It spelled the end for any future annual birthday parties for a further five years.

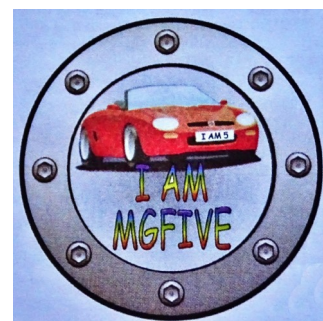
Su Joel remembers: “by the time we were half way to the Museum it started to rain. There must have been 40-50 cars there, which was a very good turnout in those days, although some didn’t stay very long. Unfortunately the Museum wasn’t open, so we couldn’t take shelter there. There were a few trade stands and there should have been an MGCC stand but we believe they lost the key to the car that was towing the caravan. There was a barbecue but , because, it was so wet, some of us went to a local hostelry for lunch. The only thing I remember was that instead of a PoO, there was an award for the dirtiest car there!”

It would not be until 2005 that the MGF Register resuscitated the idea of an anniversary event—this would be MGF 10 and e will find out more on that event and the subsequent anniversary parties in the next issue of FastForward.

2000



The 5th party was sponsored by Brown & Gammons and this is the invite



Design for a 5th birthday car badge to be sold at £35 through Kimber House - were any made or sold?