The Life and Times of 'Wiggy' the MG Midget

By Ken Klemmer

Part 1 of 3: Searching for his Father

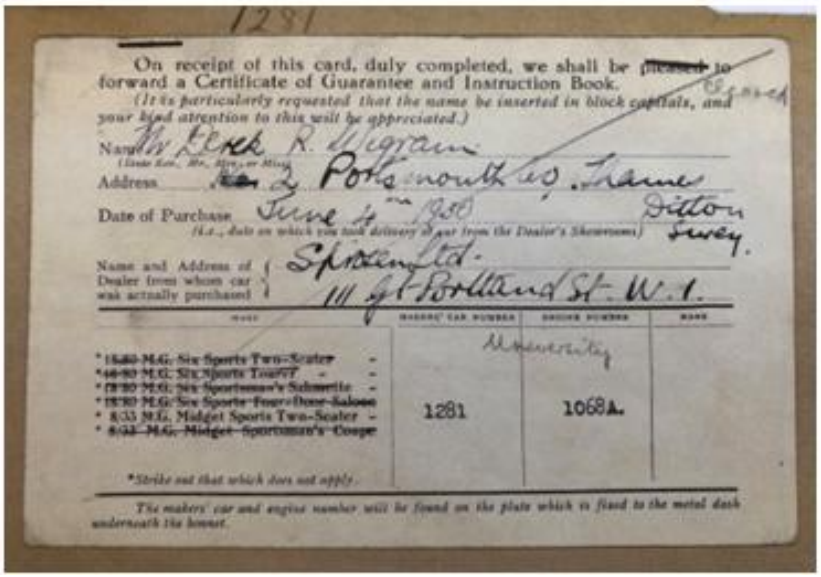
Shortly after acquiring M Type 2M1281, known to us as 'Wiggy', I began the task of trying to track down his early history. The car came with a buff logbook which had somehow remained with the car since it's importation into the US in 1965. The records in the logbook went back to about 1953 and ended in 1960 with the ownership of the mysterious P. Shore (a story for our next installment!).

The only other early information we had was a photo probably taken in the 1950s that showed the car with the fabric scuttle replaced by metal and trafficators cut into the sides. This was probably done to be in compliance with the newly introduced MOT requirements for indicators in the 1950s.

Wiggy's ca 1950 photo also shows a rather rare MG L Continental model parked alongside, BLN 19; this car survives too, although no longer with its original body.

I was told that the car was first sold to D.R. Wigram. I did an Internet search in the UK for any Wigram surnames I found there was a Wigram who resided near the original sales location of Thames-Ditton, and was an OBE, Order of the British Empire. It turned out this Roland Lewis was the father of Derek R (Roland) Wigram, born 18 March, 1908. Derek had a son and daughter, and the son, Richard Wigram, appeared to still be alive but I was unable to find a current address or any contact information.

About the same time, I inquired about the original records from the MGCC (MG Car Club). The records from the MGCC confirmed the original owner was Derek R. Wigram, as of 4 June, 1930, and contained some other interesting information. While we have much to be thankful for in the MGCC factory records, a maddening complication is that, in typical pre-war fashion, is that they often refer to first names only as initials and only surnames detailed. In this case, I got lucky!


1281

On receipt of this card, duly completed, we shall be pleased to forward a Certificate of Guarantee and Instruction Book.
(It is particularly requested that the name be inserted in block capitals, and your kind attention to this will be appreciated.)

Name: Mr Derek R. Wigram

Address: 2 Portsmouth Rd. Thames Ditton Surrey.

Date of Purchase: June 4th 1930
(i.e., date on which you took delivery of car from the Dealer's Showroom)

Name and Address of Dealer from whom car was actually purchased: Sprosan Ltd. 111 & 112 Portland St. W.1.

MAKE	MAKERS' CAR NUMBER	ENGINE NUMBER	BODY
*18/80 M.G. Six Sports Two-Seater			
*18/80 M.G. Six Sports Tourer			
*18/80 M.G. Six Sportsman's Saloon			
*18/80 M.G. Six Sports Four-Door Saloon			
* 8/33 M.G. Midget Sports Two-Seater	1281	1068A.	
* 8/33 M.G. Midget Sportsman's Coupe			

*Strike out that which does not apply.

The makers' car and engine number will be found on the plate which is fixed to the metal dash underneath the bonnet.

As an aside note, the car was delivered to the dealership, Sprosan, Ltd. This was the dealership owned by one Norman Black who had another career in racing of MGs and Singers.

At this point, I went to that worldwide network of connections, Facebook. I had joined several groups related to British sports cars and put out the request for any

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information with someone who might be able to point me towards Derek R. Wigram. Through the VSCC (Vintage Sports Car Club) I found that Derek was appointed headmaster of the Monkton school, in 1946 and attended Peterhouse College at Cambridge.

I then wrote to both Peterhouse and the Monkton school. At the same time, I sent Facebook friend requests through Messenger to every Wigram in the UK. The letter to Monkton paid off: the receptionist said she would forward information on to the archivist for the school and I soon received an email from Jacqueline Burrows, who once lived in Abingdon and took a great interest in the search. Sure enough, she was able to find a current email address for Richard Wigram and passed on my note.

A few days later, I received a short message from him stating how happy he was to hear that his father's car was still around. He was in the process of moving and would hunt for any early pictures. At the same time, my Facebook messages, sent in November, also bore fruit and by January heard from both David and Helen Wigram, Derek's grandchildren. They were both excited to hear the news but thought I would get the best information from their father.

Unfortunately, the photo search was not successful but he did tell me that he discovered one of his dad's diaries. In it he found that Derek owned the car until 31 January, 1936 and found it sad to sell on. One imagines it was probably pretty well used up by then, as six years of daily use in all weather conditions on a wood and fabric bodied car must have been quite hard on it; it's recorded mileage was 44,420. By this date Derek was 24 and ready to move up in the world. He did it in style, trading the little M Type for a new Aston Martin (very likely a Mark II 2/4 seat, 1-1/2 litre, about £600!) that he picked up at the factory in Feltham, but to his dismay found it did not fit in the garage very well being approximately 40" longer and 12" wider than the MG.

As it turned out, our M Type was responsible for a lifelong love of sports cars, not only for Derek, but also for his son Richard. Derek was the envy of the boys at the schools he was headmaster at for his exotic British motors (Alvis, Aston Martin, Bristol) and enthusiastic driving style.

Derek R. Wigram 1908-1996

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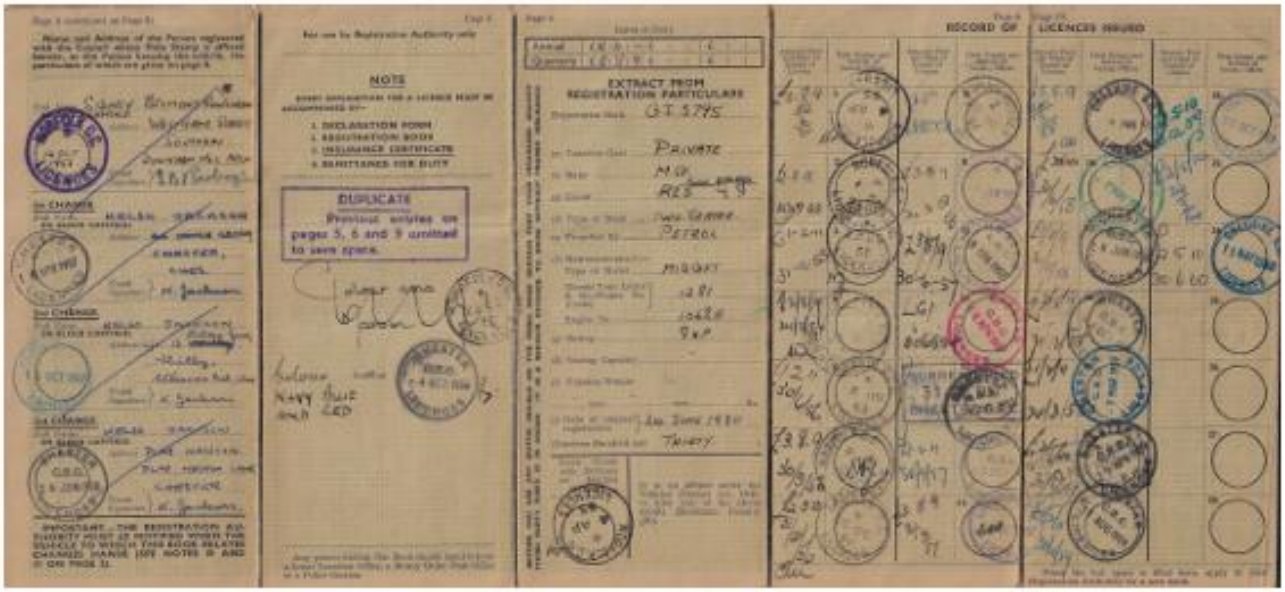
Part 2 of 3: Searching for his Father By Ken Klemmer

In our last installment, I covered the search for Wiggy's "father", original owner Derek Wigram, ending with Wiggy's sale to fund a new Aston Martin. But what happened after that?
The MGCC (MG Car Club) shows no further factory records for #2m1821. But since his original license number, GJ 5795, stayed with the car throughout time in England, we know quite a bit after 1950. It was in 1950 that the log books changed format and most of the original ones turned in at their registered municipality and destroyed. A few owners somehow kept theirs, but unfortunately Wiggy's original log book did not get saved. As an avid reader of historic motoring books and magazines, and especially because of Wiggy's early proximity to Brooklands, I am always poring over old photos, hoping to spot the GJ 5795 number plate, but no luck to date.



1952-1960 log book

His "new" buff colored log book, issued October 14, 1952, shows that he moved around a lot, through many owners in Norfolk, Chester, Etham and London. With the beginning of World War II and petrol rationing, many automobiles that were not essential to their owners livelihood were simply laid up for the duration of the war or saw extremely limited use. Once the war ended, life in England did not immediately return to normal. Jobs and ready cash were in short supply and all automobile production, itself a long time coming due to the destruction of most factories, was especially geared to export markets. While

Photo of car sent to Jack Cooper from P. Shore. note no valance or visible number plate

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this seems today to be a sad state of affairs, it meant that many prewar British cars, instead of being scrapped, lived far longer and more useful lives. Any sort of transportation was better than walking, so the used car market was very lively, with cars being imaginatively repaired and rebuilt throughout the postwar years of austerity into to the 1960s.

Wiggy's coachbuilt construction meant that while the mechanicals were relatively robust, the wood and fabric body suffered, especially in the English climate. By the time that the MOT-mandated updates and inspection program was implemented, Wiggy was an "old" car, nearly 25! This can be seen in the 1950's era photo with part of the fabric body partly repaired in metal, with trafficators cut into the scuttle, and the early 1950s style lighting installed as well. Keeping the body together and metal parts rust-free (an MOT disqualification) meant frequent paint application was necessary, generally using whatever was handy and cheap! Every owner added their own touches, and Wiggy changed from his original red body with black wings to blue, maroon and a red/blue combination during the years. spent far from London.

In 1960, he fell in with an interesting character, a P. Shore. It was in October of 1965, after several years of ownership without registration, that Mr Shore, sensing a quick pound or two, advertised 2 cars in Road and Track in the US. One 1927 Rolls Royce and one little MG, a **1929** #2m**2068**, in "100% original, good condition." Then he waited for someone to take the bait.

J. M. COOPER
228 W. 2ND AVENUE
ESCONDIDO, CALIFORNIA

In full payment for 1929 MG, Registration No. RB 2517, Chassis No. 2M-2068, Engine No. A-37905.

480

October 5 1965

90-1845
1222

PAY TO THE ORDER OF P. A. Shore $435.00

Four Hundred Thiry-five and no/100---------- DOLLARS

ESCONDIDO BRANCH
FIRST NATIONAL BANK
OF SAN DIEGO
303 W. GRAND AVENUE
ESCONDIDO, CALIFORNIA

90088

THE CHASE MANHATTAN BANK N.A. 0C5485 LONDON STREET, E.C.2

J. M. Cooper

⑆122281845⑆ 161-52804?⑈ 0810 ⑈0000043500⑈

Cleared check, note memo for car #2m2068

In California, near Escondido there lived a man named Jack Cooper. He had other interesting cars and wanted an early MG. And so he wrote to Mr Shore requesting a photograph and information. The photo was duly received and the price of the little car set at $435 USD plus freight ($211), a fairly high price for a 35 year old car. The transaction did not go as planned. The money was sent and no shipping information or car appeared. Letters were written and months passed. Finally an answer, the car was being shipped out on SS Taranger to arrive at Long Beach, California at the end of December. When Mr Cooper went to pick

Builder's plate on the car when shipped

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up the car however, it was not 2m1281 or 2m2068! The builder's plate read 2m1211 and instead of "good condition" it was very poor. Mr. Cooper, realizing he had been duped, hired a solicitor in London, and Scotland Yard got involved in the case. Mr. Shore was arrested and his real name turned out to be John Smart. But before the case could go to trial, Shore/Smart posted bail and disappeared in mid-1966, ironically heading to California.

Jack was so disappointed in the entire turn of events, that he placed the car in storage, and never looked at it again. Jack finally passed away in 2006, and his heirs sold his collection of cars including a J2, a TC, three TDs and two TFs. The MG M was purchased in 2007 by Paul Brown, also of California, who later relocated to Georgia with the car, but had done nothing with it. Paul found the original chassis stamped number that perhaps Jack was unaware of. The result? The MG really WAS #2m1281, still with the original 1068a motor!

ca. 2007 When purchased by Paul Brown

I began to be infatuated with MG M Types around 2016 or so, and began looking for one. Paul Brown advertised this car for sale in 2019 for $12,000 and I inquired about it but decided it was too much work for the price, and continued looking. Not finding a suitable M Type that year, I ended up buying a 1932 Austin instead.

To be continued…

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Part 3 of 3: Wiggy Comes Home By Ken Klemmer

In our previous 2 installments, I covered Wiggy's early life with his original owner and search for family history, and then his history from 1936 to 2019. This period included being part of a fraud investigation and his abandonment.

After turning down the opportunity to purchase the car in 2019, I went on to other old cars, but was still keen on finding an early Midget. I planned to attend GOFC (Gathering of the Faithful - Central) in 2022 in Wisconsin. The GOFC by that time had become paired with the annual MMM (Midget, Magna, Magnette) meeting of pre-1935 MG cars. At the last minute, I was unable to attend, and so I asked my friend Jim Bryan to keep an eye out for interesting cars for sale while there.

Texted picture from Jim Bryan

I was in the garage working on my TC when a text from Jim came through…. "Found one," it read, along with some grainy pictures of pictures of a partly restored blue M Type, offered for sale by Lew Palmer in Minnesota. I met Lew a few years earlier at another MG event and rang him up. It was, you guessed it, #2m1281! Lew had purchased the car in 2019 and started a full blown restoration.

This seemed appealing to me at the time: a basically new bodied M Type with original restored chassis and running gear, untouched for nearly 60 years so very low mileage. What could go wrong? Lew had recently purchased another MMM car, an MG NA, and decided to devote all his effort into finishing it, necessitating the sale of the partly restored M Type, optimistically described as "90% finished."

We talked back and forth for the next few weeks and finally arrived at an agreement. My friend Les Miller and I would drive together with his truck and trailer to Minnesota to pick up the car. I realized then just how far Minnesota is from Detroit. When we finally arrived at Lew's house 2 days later I got my first real look at #2m1281. There was a lot more than 10% of the work left to do, nothing fit very well, and it had never been started. The steering wheel was rubbing the door. It was hard to feel much enthusiasm about the car, not to mention I couldn't fit in it! Looking for something positive, I pulled off the valve cover and saw the gleaming overhead

Into the truck, note nothing on the car was straight

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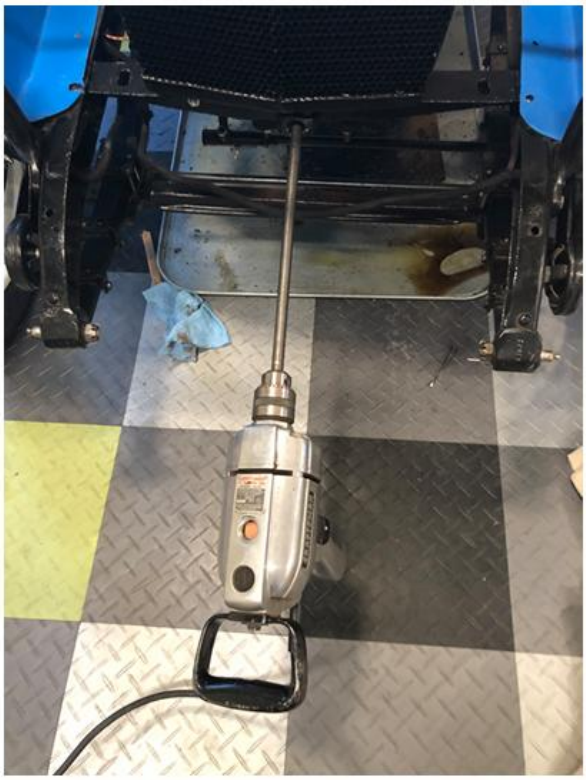
cam…my heart melted, this was a proper MG! Extra pieces were gathered up, money exchanged hands, and the little MG went into the trailer for the trip, if for no other reason than I didn't want to return empty-handed.

Upon arrival home, full of buyer's remorse, the pieces went into the garage and Les departed. Within an hour I was back outside sorting through the bits and assembling the car enough to take stock of what I really had and then put together a project plan for completion with about 30 tasks to accomplish.



Improvised F1 starter

Chrome and glass hadn't been started and while there isn't much on an M Type, it needed extensive repair work. The engine was "rebuilt" but never run, apparently due to a defective starter. Seats needed to be completely redone (they were stuffed with 6" of foam). Doors needed to be rebuilt so they matched and closed, wings and bonnet needed repair and paint and… well, you get the idea.

It appeared the starter or dynamo and probably both hadn't worked since the Chamberlain years, since both the crank and frame guide for it were half worn away. After a thorough check of valve timing and ignition it was time to see if the motor would build oil pressure and run. I built a starter shaft for a 1 hp drill and used that to turn the engine over; I could not get enough speed with the hand crank given very low compression due to the rings not yet seated. I could get a pop or two and that was it. After a day of this I realized I mixed up the plug wires. It finally ran under its own power for the first time in nearly 60 years. I was able to nurse him around the block but couldn't develop much power before dying entirely 500' from the house. After all the diagnosis I realized 2 things wrong: there was water in the oil and the fuel tank was contaminated with sawdust.

Eventually it all got done and the first real voyage took place. The car was fairly quick but had erratic oil pressure, only somewhat resolved once I realized it had an early sump which was perpetually overfilled by a factor of 3. Shifting the 4 speed "crash" box was a joy, with the center throttle making heel-toe driving fun. During a trip up north, disaster struck when a severe knock began. While we assumed the crank had broken, it turned out the big ends were melting, causing the pistons to

A brilliant drive ends in failure. Melody and Monique pushed him on to the trailer, while John took pictures

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misalign, damaging the bores, etc. We pushed him aboard the trailer but despite his ailments, still managed win an award at the show next day. The oil pump was assembled wrong, accounting for the poor pressure and the tiny sump (2.5 pints) meant the oil ran very hot.

Now after nearly three years since “the meltdown” a very high grade engine rebuild is nearly complete, increasing displacement from 847cc to 910cc. There is a new forged crank and rods and +.080” pistons, lightened flywheel, new bearings, high capacity oil pump & sump, and improved clutch. I briefly toyed with the idea of a supercharger but was unable to find the correct one. The scuttle mount fuel tank needed a reserve and baffles so that is in process, and a rev counter is also sourced. New tyres in the correct size are ordered.

New pistons & rods, everything balanced

Head rebuilt for proper timing, low friction and inertia

While waiting for the motor, I also spent time continuing body improvements, including finishing the wings properly in original black instead of dark blue, all in preparation for an eventual body recover in original red. My tendencies toward historic objects are more inclined toward preservation rather than restoration. Had I purchased the car back in 2019, I probably would have preserved more originality, warts and all, than what I have now; I think it would have kept more of Wiggy’s “soul.” An eventual change back to original red would help in this regard, so the black wings and wheels will help simplify this when the time comes. I think Derek Wigram would approve.

Flywheel lightened to race spec, improved flange mounting