

THE OFF-SIDE UNDO

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DISCOVERING MY INNER MECHANIC

By Steve Whitlow

Jackson MS - The Midget was my first car. I'd wanted one ever since that Friday night when I was in the 12th Grade and had sat in one on a used car lot downtown. My friends who gravitated to the American muscle cars all had a good laugh at my expense as I sat there shifting gears in the Midget. "How tight do you wind the rubber band to make it go?" they'd said.

They'd have laughed even louder if I'd tried to drive it-I'd never driven a standard transmission before.

Five years later in 1976 I still hadn't much experience with a standard but did manage to drive my new Midget off the lot without killing it in front of the salesman.

I had a great mechanic at the dealership. His name was Jim Gage and he really cared about the cars, or at least my car. I filled up one 'Passport to Service' and half of a second one before the Dealership closed in the early eighties. It was the end of MG-but just like that line from a Clint Eastwood movie 'The Outlaw Josie Wales' -"I endeavored to persevere".

Jim Gage worked on my Midget for another four years from his house-that's dedication for you. But finally, his wife made him stop. After that, I was adrift mechanic-less. It seemed no one really wanted to work on an MG anymore. The car sat for long periods now, first with a leaking brake master cylinder and then with faulty electronic ignition.

One day in 2006, I discovered a soccer dad on my daughter's team had a big Healey. He mentioned a fellow by the name of Jim Trunzler who had worked on his car for years. At last, I'd found another mechanic who loved these cars. The Midget was soon running again.

In the spring of 2010 it was time to have the car repainted. I quickly discovered unless I wanted to cut corners and tape off all the trim, etc. that it would cost several thousand dollars to have the car taken apart and reassembled again.

I decided to do this myself. And so, with the British Leyland workshop manual I'd purchased thirty-four years ago I began to take the car apart. By October she was ready to be prepped and painted.

Having done this, I still didn't consider myself a mechanic. I had not done any brake or engine work, just disassembled parts. A lot of parts mind you. I was worried about that too, all those miscellaneous bits,

electrical connections and the doors. The doors were the worst! It took three hours on the first one alone. The real question was-could I put it back together again?

While the car was being repainted I discover the English Motoring Club. Amazing! I'd often wondered if I was the only one still driving an MG in the State of Mississippi. Happily, I can say that is not the case.

What I've discovered is that many people in the club work on their cars. It's almost an unspoken code. What's even better is that they are willing; eager actually to help you work on your car too-especially if a favorite beer is in the offing!



Steve contemplating the next move

Photo Courtesy EMC

So with the help of some new friends who happen to be great mechanics-the Midget is back together. The doors were definitely a two person job-even with the tool to install the weather strip clips. I'd tried for several hours to tackle this alone without success. Not to worry, Gene Johnston provided a calm and steady hand and over the next two weekends the doors were done. Richard Hobbs helped me install the new convertible hood as well as walking me through an oil change, lube job and tune up. Keith Anderson sorted out the ignition timing and vacuum advance. Then it was Gene's turn again to lead Richard and me through changing our brake hoses, front pads and flushing the brake systems on his TR6 and my Midget.

And lastly, my Midget was the lucky recipient of attention at the Club's last Tech Session of the year at Gene and Martha Johnston's. The right rear bearing seal had been leaking for- well probably three years at least. So, while Keith Anderson was dealing with the hub bearing assembly, Club President Charlie Durning was walking me through the rear brake job. Jim Enzman was there sporting his new hip, looking fit as a fiddle and providing us with running commentary of a caliber that would have made Jon Stewart proud! It was great to see Jim in such good form after his mishap at the show in Fairhope. The rest of the guys watched and ate chili. I wanted to finish the job before eating and thankfully there was plenty of chili left for us 'grease monkeys'.

The project was challenging but not overly so. As Keith said, “ it isn’t fun if it’s TOO easy!”

So, with the Club’s help and encouragement, I’m slowly becoming a mechanic of sorts. There are still jobs I’d be reluctant to tackle; thankfully I can count on JimTrunzler to handle those. But I’ve discovered a tremendous sense of accomplishment in doing fairly simple, if sometimes maddening things myself.

Carburetor rebuild and oil cooler kit installation in the spring. Why not?

Vicksburg MS - On December 3, 2012 seven EMCers and friends gathered at the Clinton Welcome Center just before lunch for a morning drive over to the annual Christmas Party held again in 2011 at Pat and Barbara Cashman’s garage in Vicksburg. The night before my better half reminded me that it was going to be cool on Saturday and hood up would be the requirement of the day. Sure enough she must have been siding with the weather man as the early morning temperature was very close to the freezing mark. By 9:30am or so while out making her shopping rounds I got a call and permission to drive over with hood down as the temp had warmed up significantly. WHA – WHO! Down the Trace to the Welcome Center and after a exchanging good mornings with the other travelers we took off on the Trace picking up Highway 27 near Utica and the a short sprint over to the party location. On entering the garage there was a strong odor of bad gas, as in stale gasoline. Pat had the Armstrong Siddeley Station Coupe on the lift in pursuit of a fuel flow issue determining that part of the problem was the out of date gasoline. It’s amazing how a small amount of stale gasoline can really foul the air. Pat had wisely decided to leave the full blown tank draining until after the party.

As the meal came to a close EMC President Charlie During and Barbara Cashman presented Steve Whitlow with the first award for the year 2011, The Eager Beaver Award was given for Steve’s enthusiasm since joining the EMC. It was obvious that Steve was overwhelmed with the award and refused to let the fuzzy (what hair was left on it) little award away from his side. Wife Karen and daughter Megan were in shock that someone so close to them was presented with such a stunning award. Steve demanded that the Eager Beaver ride shot gun in his Midget on the ride home. While he and Karen (particularly Karen) weren’t sure where they were going to place the award, I’m sure they’ve found a special spot for E.B. Look for photos of E.B. in a future edition of the OSU.

Other Exhaust Rattles

EMCer Ken Dolhonde has had a bout of bad luck with the engine in his TR-6 with the recent sudden disappearance of the number 6 piston. This is the second time he’s had to perform some rather major internal repairs to the engine. From his notes I believe that he has determined that the engine is possessed and is replacing it with a fresh one. The old one I understand is going to be buried in the yard, far, far away from the garage.

Richard Hobbs has his TR-6 back up and running after some lower end issues. I wasn’t able to make a recent Sunday afternoon ride with Richard and Steve but I’ve seen photos and looked like they had a very nice weekend for a ride in the country.

Jim Enzman is back up and around and has made several meetings since his surgery. Good to see him out and about and looking in good shape and sharing his experiences.

Mike Glore got his ’64 Lotus Elan back on down to South Louisiana and it appears he has tracked down the miss fire issues he’d been working on to a miss-wired distributor.

Under the radar flyer Trey Decell has been busy in his garage. He recently posted some drive train shots over on the MGExperience. Hopefully he'll have his recharged MGB GT completed and back on the road in the near future.

Thanks to everyone that has contributed and those that have been able to participate in EMC gatherings during the 30th anniversary year. It has been a memorable and fun year. We hope that we see you out and about in your Little British Car during 2012!

The next EMC Gathering is scheduled for Saturday January 14, 2012. The search committee is busy looking for a suitable location for our 2012 kick off and awards gathering so stay tuned for details.

Merry Christmas and Happy Motoring from the EMC!

