MG enthusiast

The magazine for the discerning MG driver

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Stirling Moss recalls his fastest MG drive in our special article on record breaking EX.181

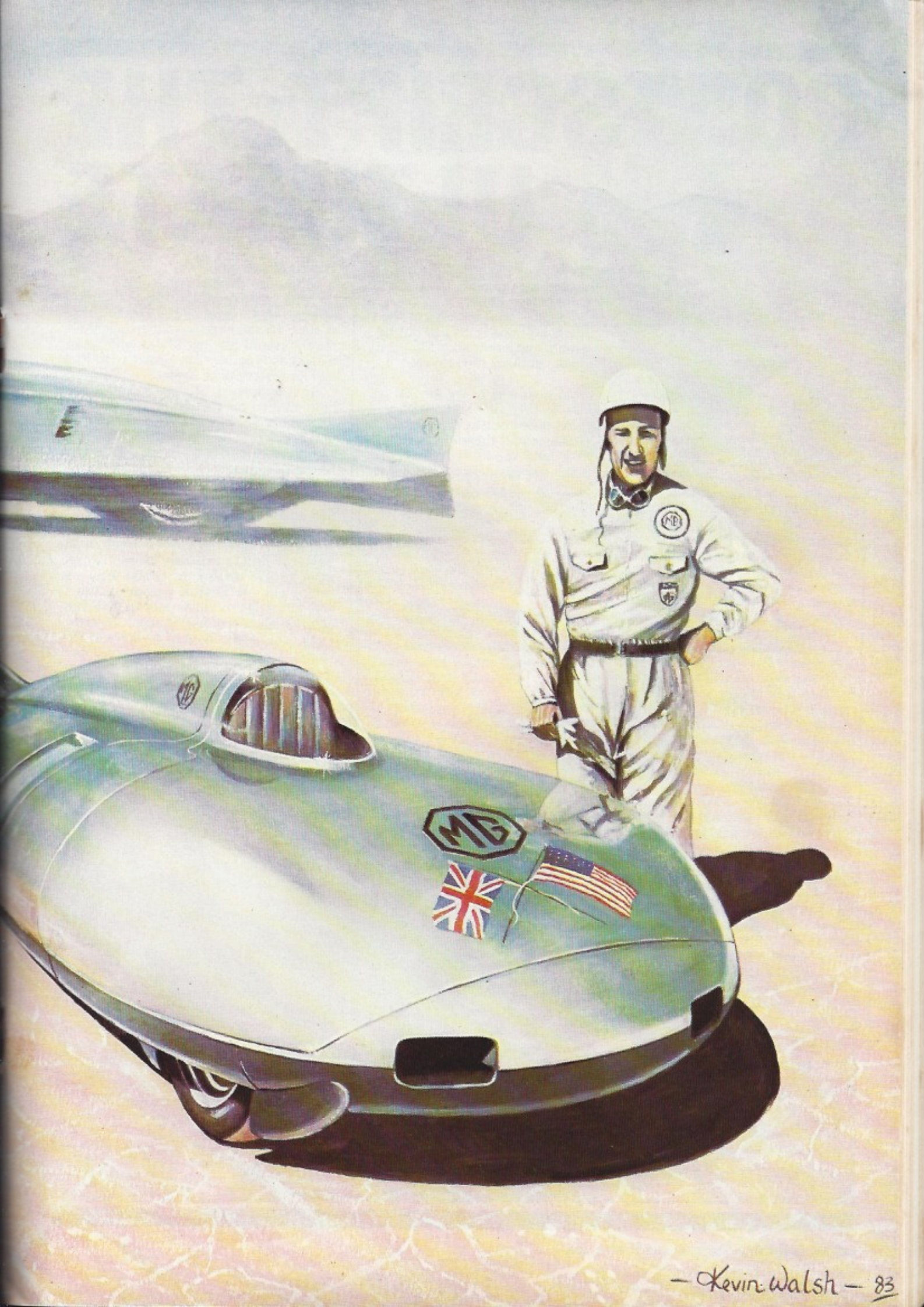
MG M-type in profile. Twin-Cam 25 years on. Plus features by McComb, Thornley, and Robson.

WIN A FREE-FITTED SUNROOF

NEW

MG EX.181

On August 23, 1957, at Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah, Stirling Moss drove the 1.5-litre supercharged MG EX.181 to five International Class F records including the flying kilometre at 245.64 mph. The new records established were: One kilometre – 245.64 mph; one mile – 245.11 mph; five kilometres – 243.08 mph; five miles – 235.69 mph; ten kilometres – 224.70 mph.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– Kevin Walsh – 83

POSTSCRIPT: THE ULTIMATE

Privately convinced that the car he designed was capable of at least 250 mph, Syd Enever was disappointed that because of the 1957 weather conditions it missed out by less than 5 mph, and eventually MG decided to make another attempt in 1959.

The original plan was to try for 250 mph in Class 'F', then fit EX.181 with another engine bored out by a whisker to make it 1506 cc and therefore eligible for Class 'E' – 2,000 cc – in order to pulverize some records held by Piero Taruffi at 180 mph.

Otherwise the main difference in the car was to fireproof the fuel tank and arrange an automatic fire-extinguishing system for the engine compartment, at the request of Stirling Moss, who was named as Number One driver with Phil Hill as reserve once again.

As it happened, Stirling and Phil were both entered for the Italian GP on September 13, Moss in a Cooper and Hill in a Ferrari. They finished first and second, then climbed aboard a DC7 with Stirling's manager, Ken Gregory, and flew from Monza to the USA.

There they found the weather at Utah had again turned sour, so Phil headed for his home in California while Stirling and Ken delightedly spent a week in Las Vagas at BMC's expense. When George Eyston called to say the course was drying out, the English pair drove the 450-odd miles to Utah, only to find that another rainstorm had flooded the Salt Flats completely. Booked to drive in the Oulton Gold Cup race, Stirling had no choice but to fly home without driving the MG at all.

Time was now running out on the MG contingent, for Mickey Thompson was due to make an attempt on the Land Speed Record on October 9, and if *that* succeeded, the publicity value of MG's record would be nil. Eyston and Thornley decided to fit the bored-out engine so that, if the course dried out even for a short time, the lower-speed Class 'E' figures could at least be taken from Taruffi.

As soon as the weather began to improve, Phil Hill left his home at Santa Monica and joined the waiting party at Utah. At the beginning of October he climbed into the MG record-breaker late one afternoon and did his two runs on a surface that was still wet, as it had been for Stirling two years before. Despite this he established six new records in International Class 'E', his highest two-way average speed being 254.91 mph.

So Syd Enever's faith in EX.181 was justified at last . . . except that Abingdon didn't really know *when* their car made its fastest-ever run. By the time a weary publicity man sent the news by Telex it was almost 7 pm on Friday October 2 in Utah. In England, it was the small hours of Saturday morning – and all the press releases gave the date as October 3 instead!

A period advert run in the national Press shows the MG Car Company were not slow in using the record breaking publicity to benefit their product range.

MY FASTEST MG DRIVE

by Stirling Moss

People often say that speed is what matters in racing. But it isn't really true. Racing involves braking, accelerating and cornering, and doing all these things faster and more efficiently than the opposition – but on many circuits, the opportunities for flat-out speed are virtually non-existent. Yet absolute speed in a straight line has a fascination of its own, and a long line of exotic record-breakers has been built over the years to put up higher and higher figures into the history books. And, although I drove in virtually every kind of competitive event during my racing career, there was only one occasion when I became involved with this single-minded pursuit of speed for its own sake. And very frightening it was too.

Stirling Moss squeezes himself into the cockpit of EX.181 for a fitting session at Abingdon in May 1957.

It started with a very special MG indeed. Identified as EX.181, it was based very loosely on the production MGA two-seater of the time. But the twin overhead-camshaft 1489 cc engine of the production car was supercharged and souped-out of all recognition, to turn out a staggering 290 brake horse-power.

The engine was fitted at the back of a new tubular space-frame, with modified MGA front suspension and a de Dion rear end, and the whole was clothed with a body shaped like a flattened teardrop, with faired-in wheels and a smooth, swept-back tail. In fact, just about the only problem with the design seemed to be finding room for the driver.

The driving position must have been one of the most uncomfortable I've ever come across in any kind of car. You had to lie flat, with very restricted visibility inside a kind of streamlined canopy fairing rather like the hood of a fighter plane, but you had far less idea of what was going on outside. The only thing to be said for it, was that you shouldn't need to avoid any obstacles – this was strictly a straight-on, foot hard down piece of driving. The intention was to go for the Class F International Record, and break four miles a minute – which was a fair task for a 1.5 litre car.

Unfortunately, there aren't many places in the world where you can find enough space to build up to that kind of speed, to keep it up for a mile or more, and then slow down and stop again afterwards. In the old days, they had used banked race tracks but for us, there was only one place where it might be possible – an amazing place near Salt Lake City in Utah, called Bonneville Salt Flats which could have been designed for speed records, as the salt is hard, flat, and covers a vast expanse of shimmering white stretching almost to the horizon.

My fastest MG drive

In recent years, people like ARt Arfons and Gary Gabelich have taken jet-powered cars to speeds of more than 500 and even 600 mph here, but in 1957 when I had my appointment with EX.181, 240 mph seemed quite ambitious enough.

The session didn't start all that well. I had an awful flight to Salt Lake City, and next morning we found the salt surface was too wet to risk a high-speed run. We spent the whole day waiting for it to dry out, trying to pass the time until conditions improved. On the following day the salt was still too wet, and there was nothing to do but go into town sightseeing.

Next day, Friday August 23, it was still too damp at five in the morning, so we waited to see if the day's heat would dry it off sufficiently. We came back at four in the afternoon, and it was still damp, but good enough for us to have a go at last.

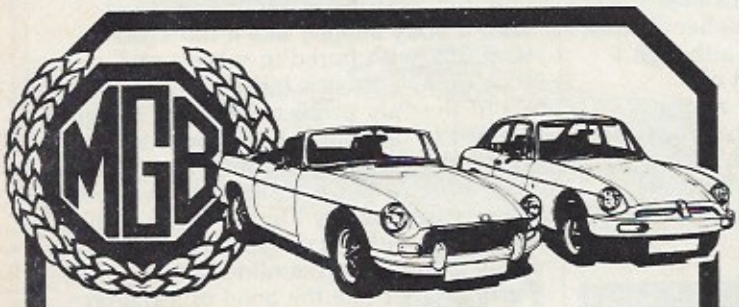
So there I was, shoehorned into a car which I seemed to have very little real control over. I felt I could hardly see where I was going, and trying to steer the car seemed as difficult as trying to steer a rocket or an artillery shell. I kept watching the big rev-counter dial on the panel in front of me as the speed built up.

It felt all right, though far more frightening than any racing car, because you felt it would go exactly where it wanted to, regardless of what you did – but the needle on the dial climbed to 6900 rpm, and the car felt stable enough apart from a rather odd feeling, as if the wheels were caught in tramlines, perhaps because of ripples in the salt.

We turned the car and I started on the second run. This time all was going well, when I suddenly discovered I had no third gear. The only alternative was to go as high as I dared in second and then change into fourth, which was going to take much longer, but hopefully wouldn't affect the top speed too much.

We had just enough time for a third, and last, run and the rev-counter climbed back to 6500 at the start of the measured mile, and reached 7000 rpm as I passed the five kilometre post. Then it was time to start unwinding the speed, and another unpleasant surprise was just how long it took to bring the car to a stop again.

My first speed record attempt was over, but when the figures were worked out we found we'd done it with a small but worthwhile margin, with an average of 245.64 mph. And with just a few moments to spare, at the end of the last day . . .



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The first 500 prints will form a limited edition and each will be signed and numbered by the artist Kevin Walsh. Priced at a modest £2.95p each (including UK postage and packing), the attractive prints will grace any home or office.

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