



Chuck Hudson, left, shown with his 1948 MG TC, Henry Giffin, with his 1934 MG NA, and Vince Groover, with his 1950 MG YA, are all members of the Tidewater MG Classics car club, which celebrates its 25th anniversary in May. Giffin's MG NA is the oldest MG in the club. Instead of car shows, the club holds tech sessions and social gatherings, some with a British theme.

MARK P. MITCHELL photos  
The Virginian-Pilot

# Club proudly hails MG as a car “made to be raced”

BY MARY BURNHAM

MG owners talk of a mysterious illness, “MG disease.” Symptoms include paying any price to save this British sports car from the junkyard, towing it any distance and then risking marital harmony by keeping as many as will fit in the garage.

Chuck Hudson of Virginia Beach has even given the syndrome a motto: “Save an Octagon,” referring to the shape of the MG hood emblem.

Preserving the historic racing marque is the mission of the Tidewater MG Classics car club, celebrating its 25th anniversary this month. Reaching the quarter-century mark is a tribute to the staying power of both the cars and their owners.

“True MGs were built tough and made to be raced,” said Mark Childers, Tidewater MG club president, who has made a career of restoring British cars.

“The founder of MG wanted to provide a cheap, fast car that was easy to make and maintain, and for the most part, they remained so.”

Rising from humble beginnings, the first MGs were actually hybrids, nothing more than sporty body work attached to a Morris Cowley chassis at the Morris Garages in Oxford, England.

While ironically William Morris was not a racing enthusiast, his company would go on to define the sports car until the last one was produced in 1980.

The now-famous MG initials, first used in



Mike Ash, left, owns a 1955 MG TF, Doug Kennedy has a 1969 MGB Mk II Roadster and Frank Linse has a 1958 MGA coupe. Most club members believe MGs are made to be driven. Because the cars need quite a bit of care, they say, it also pays to own several.

1923, stood for Morris Garages, the company started by William Morris to build and sell cars. In 1925, MG adopted the octagon logo, and in 1928 the MG Car Co. was established and started building cars that were MG originals through and through. In 1930 the company moved to Abingdon, England, where it remained for the next 50 years.

Cars owned by the Tidewater club's 140 members represent nearly the entire history of this legendary racing marque.

The oldest is a 1934 NA, owned by Vice Adm. Henry Giffin of Norfolk Naval Station. A founding member of the club, Giffin has

four MGs, all pre-1948, and enjoys vintage racing. The 50th anniversary of Watkins Glen, N.Y., racetrack this September will likely find him reliving the glory days in one of his MGs.

Giffin recalls clearly the moment he fell for an MG.

It was in the 1970s, when his friend pulled up in one with the windscreen flipped forward. Giffin began scouring the countryside and found a 1953 MG TD in New Hampshire. It had chickens living in it. Still

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# MG: Knowing how to fix sports cars is a must

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today, he enjoys driving with the windscreen down, a throwback to old-time driving: "Wind in your hair, bugs in your teeth and all that," Giffin said, smiling.

From the oldest to the newest, the latest model MG in the club sits in Chuck Hudson's garage. The limited production 1986 Metro 6R4, bears the MG logo, but was built by the company that bought MG, now known as the Rover Group. The four-wheel-drive car, one of only 150 produced, can do zero to 100 to zero again in nine seconds. Hudson doesn't experiment too much with it, though; it has only 362 miles logged.

Instead, Hudson prefers to drive his 1948 T-series Midget, a throwback to pre-war race cars and the days of unrestricted motoring. The Midget made a big splash when it hit the United States, reviving enthusiasm for racing at a brand new track in Watkins Glen, N.Y.

In the post-war years, MG continued building a reputation for sports cars, notably with the 1950 YA, the first MG to utilize rack-and-pinion steering. Vince Groover of Virginia Beach owns a complete original, save paint and tires. He had the car shipped over from England "sight unseen" 21 years ago.

"MG owners are very loyal," noted Giffin.

Their loyalty is not the museum variety, however. Most club members firmly believe MGs are made to be driven. Since they require quite a bit of TLC, however, they also say it pays to own several.

"The club saves a lot of MGs," said Frank Linse of Norfolk. "You'll find them in barns, squirreled away." Knowing how to fix them is a must. A benefit of club membership is the expertise, help and encouragement offered by other members.

Ask any dedicated MG owner how many cars he has, and you'll get a chuckle and some evasion.

"Eight, I think," answers Mike Ash, a Brit who emigrated to America on the Queen Elizabeth in 1967. Onboard with him was his cherished 1955 MG TF. It's one of four that he now drives. The others await his retirement for restoration. It was Ash, along with club founding member Dave Barrows, who first came up with the idea for the Tidewater MG Classics. Barrows, now 92, still lives in Virginia Beach.

Linse readily admits to owning five MGs, four of them driveable. But that's not counting a "couple of junkers" he purchased in North Carolina and has yet to go pick up. His regular driver is a 1974 MGB; his wife, Gloria, drives a 1978 MGB.

Linse also owns a 1958 MGA coupe, a car that at the time signaled a dramatic change for MG. When first introduced in 1955, the model's streamlined body was a sharp departure from MG's pre-war cars. The MGA grew to become the most popular sports car of its day, until it was replaced by the MGB in 1962.

Doug Kennedy of Virginia Beach caught the "MG disease" from Linse, who helped him restore his 1969 MGB Mk II Roadster.

"Sometimes you might feel like giving up on a lengthy restoration, but there's always someone to help," Kennedy said. He and his wife, Betsy, found their car in Pinelake, N.C., in 1993.

"The owner was about to have the car scrapped and because we loved it at first sight, we quickly made a deal to save it from the junkyard," he said. They towed it back to Virginia, got it running, drove it for six months and realized it needed a total restoration.

The MGB model proved to be the siren song for the MG Car Co., with the last one rolling off the line in 1980. Five club members are lucky enough to have MGBs of that model year, Hudson said. However, due to enthusiast demand, the subsequent owners, British Leyland and now the Rover Group, have tacked the MG logo onto selected cars such as the Metro, Montego, Maestro, and most recently, the MGF.

Instead of car shows, the club holds tech sessions and social gatherings, some with a British theme, like gourmet potlucks, and in August they're planning a croquet party with British attire suggested.

"Sometimes we have a pig roast and give a prize for Best Boot or something like that," Kennedy said.

Monthly meetings begin with "tyre" kicking at members' homes on rotating first Tuesdays and Wednesdays of the month. For more information, call the club president: Mark Childers, at 473-1757, or Chuck Hudson at 425-6882.