

Chapter 3 An MG at Emerald

At the time of my arrival in Emerald, in October 1951, the town had a population of less than 2000 people and was principally a railway town. As well as being the junction for the Springsure and Blair Athol branches of the railway, it was a major steam locomotive depot and crew change point for the line from Rockhampton to Longreach. The first diesel electric locomotive came to Emerald while I was there but electrification for an expanding coal export trade was still unthought of.

The first stretch of road out from Rockhampton of about 39 km had a bitumen surface but the remaining 240 km was of badly corrugated gravel with at least one stretch of loose deep sand. The section over the Gogango Range was extremely rough and very winding.



In one spot, just as you crested quite a steep rise, you found the road turned left quite sharply much to the consternation of anyone new to the road. In the same range was a stretch of tree prickly pear scrub where the pear was at least six metres tall and dwarfs the MG photographed beside the road. On corrugations, an MG TC shakes its bonnet and everything else like a terrier shakes a rat. After a few months of this treatment, the holes in the door catches become oval and so badly worn that the doors are inclined to pop open unexpectedly. On one occasion the postmaster's daughter was almost deposited on the roadway. Not all TCs, of course, carry a postmaster's daughter. At the time of my arrival there was not a strip of bitumen surface in the town or on the roads radiating from Emerald. After further pounding over the corrugations the constant vibration also cracks the brackets holding the scuttle to the chassis and later

the ones which fasten the radiator to the bar bracing the two mudguards together via the headlamp brackets. Apart from these irritations it was necessary after every long trip to check, and usually tighten, most of the bolts associated with the bodywork.

For the first few weeks in Emerald, the MG was parked alongside the Post Office in the street used by many of the students homeward bound from the State School. For the first few days it was surrounded at such times by curious onlookers. Up until that time, no one had been foolish enough to bring such an unpractical car as an MG. During the two years I spent in emerald I saw only one other MG pass through the town. I wasn't able to talk to

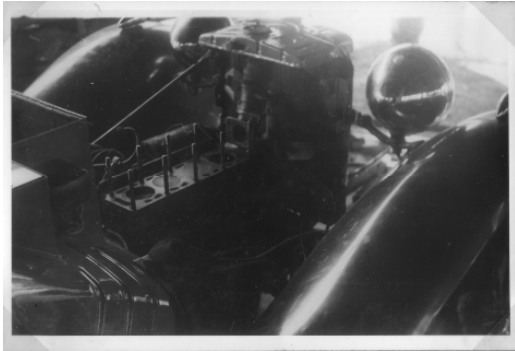
the driver but I am quite sure that he regretted making the trip as no matter which way you went, the road was atrocious and, in wet weather, usually untrafficable. In fact the road to the west was considered so bad that the PMG (now Telstra) technical staff at Emerald were instructed not to take the official vehicle, a Morris Commercial light truck, beyond Anakie 34 km further west. To get to the end of the Emerald Technicians' district at Bogantungan we had to go by train or with line staff in a heavier truck. It didn't seem to make such sense as any motorist going through Emerald on their way to Alpha, Barcaldine or Longreach and beyond, and places in between, had to use the same road no matter what sort of vehicle they were driving.

There are two incidents concerning the MG and Emerald I recall with some amusement. On the first occasion, after careful scrutiny of the MG, a young schoolgirl remarked to her friend, "My daddy couldn't fit into this car, he's a big man!" In the second incident, a young boy stepped into the gutter beside the car and ran his hand from the top of his head to the top of the fabric hood of the car. He then remarked to his mate, "There, I told you I was taller than this little car!"

Some months after arriving in Emerald, it became obvious that the car was in need of a tune-up and it became necessary to decide which garage would have my custom. Not that there was much choice. After some consideration, I realized that the local mechanics knew about as much as I did about tuning twin SU carburetors, virtually nothing! The decision made was to learn myself rather than pay someone else to learn on my car. With another MG to come and also a Triumph TR2, both with twin SUs, it was a good decision. It was also the reason I bought the book "Tuning and Maintenance of MGs" referred to earlier. A year or so later I was also able to obtain two copies of the MG Car Club magazine 'Safety Fast' which contained an article on tuning twin SUs. I still have the magazine and on many occasions have photocopied the articles for other MG owners.

There are now quite a number of books about MG cars in my possession but unfortunately not an MG car apart from a Dinky Toys MG TF and a Matchbox MG TC. There is also a Triumph TR2 and a Porsche 356 by Dinky Toys. I have owned a TR2 and aspired to a Porsche which is why I keep the models as pleasant reminders of days gone by.

While sharing a house with one of the postal clerks, and being within easy walking distance of the exchange, I took the opportunity to give the engine a top overhaul and to replace the valve guides and springs. While the cylinder head was at the local garage I had time to repair a number of the broken bars in the radiator grill. Later when I moved to a boarding house, where it was still possible to keep the car under cover, I embarked on a project to repaint the car. It was done a section at a time, using a brush, after rubbing down each section with wet and dry abrasive paper. It proved possible to closely match the existing colours from the Dulux range of enamels. By keeping the tin in hot water, it proved possible to obtain a finish almost free of brush marks. The dash panel was also rather weather worn at the ends and was resurfaced with some Laminex. It was not standard but looked better than cracked sections of peeling varnish.



Engine overhaul in Emerald



One long weekend, as I had not seen my sister for quite a long time, I decided to make the trip from Emerald to Charters Towers. At the time the road was of gravel construction for every one of the 481 km. The RACQ strip maps recommended that travelers on that road take sufficient petrol, oil and water for the trip as no such facilities were available after leaving Clermont. In fact, Clermont was a few kilometers off the main road 108 km after leaving Emerald with 373 km still to go. In addition to 15 litres of petrol in a drum I took with me some drinking water, fruit and sandwiches and a can of engine oil. The latter chiefly because old habits die hard! Fortunately the road was in fairly good condition having been freshly graded after fairly general rain. As a result I was able to do

the trip in 5 hours 50 minutes despite roadside assistance to a man, his wife and school-age child whose car had stopped by the roadside. Their small Ford van had stopped after running very badly for about 60 km and the owner had no mechanical knowledge. There was a strong smell of petrol and on opening the bonnet I saw the float bowl hanging loosely from the carburetor and held on by only one screw. Petrol was spilling everywhere. Having made the bowl secure, with screws from a tin of odds and ends I carried in my car, we checked his petrol tank. There was only enough petrol to get them half the remaining distance to Charters Towers. After checking that I had enough petrol, about half of the fuel in my 15 litre can went into his petrol tank and we continued on our way. On arrival at Charters Towers at about 10.30 am I visited the Post Office to send a telegram to my workmates in Emerald to settle a bet about how long it would take to make the trip. Post Offices in 1952 still remained open on Saturday mornings and postmen made two deliveries on weekdays in the bigger cities and towns. This is probably one reason we oldies talk of the 'good old days'. The next step was to buy petrol and as I turned the corner to head downhill to a garage, the last petrol in the tank was used up. There was still about seven litres in the drum should it have been needed. As I coasted into the driveway of the garage the people in the little Ford van were already filling their tank and again offered their thanks. The return trip proved to be uneventful.

In 1958 as part of our honeymoon my wife and I traveled the same road in my Triumph TR2. This time it was to see my sister, and also my mother who had shifted to Charters Towers after my father's death. The road was little if any better apart from the section of bitumen at the other end. There had been rather heavy wet season rainfall and in a couple of places there were great holes in the road. I don't mean potholes. These were up to two or three metres long and half a metre deep where semi trailers had been bogged.

Despite the shocking road to Springsure, it was not unusual to make the 69 km trip with one or sometimes two passengers to attend a ball or other social event. The road was a little better than the road to the west but still mostly of formed gravel with some sections of graded earth formation. On some occasions when races were held at Springsure there would be two trips as a ball would be held on both the Friday and Saturday night. Despite the bad roads and an occasional heavy load I only tore the speedometer cable off once while at Emerald.

One of the perils of driving in country areas, in the late afternoon and night, are those cursed hopping marsupials. Someone once said to me, 'It's not the silly beggar you see jump from the side of the road that you hit, it's the silly b....d that follows him across!' I only hit two in the two years at Emerald and they both got up and hopped away. I have hit only one since and that was many years later when driving a backup vehicle for a Citroen in the Repco Rally. There are certainly a lot of country people who run into the same problem as many times as that in one year if the carcasses by the roadside are any indication. The first effort was a wallaby which broke the outside rear vision mirror, tore the fabric of the hood above my head, ruined the rear sidescreen and left a great toenail scratch on the door just below the cut away section. There was a moment when I thought that I would be able to say, 'I once nursed a fully grown wild wallaby'. We were on the way to Springsure, to one of the previously mentioned balls, and I had slowed down

because of a group of wallabies feeding on the greenery in the roadside ditch. When all but two moved off into the scrub on the same side as the ditch I had put my foot down again just as the remaining two decided that the way to go was across the road in front of me. We had to straighten up the metal frame supporting the hood and put up with the wind blowing through the shattered rear sidescreen and through tears in the fabric of the roof. The hood, already badly in need of attention, needed further patches of canvas cemented on with Bostik. The celluloid of the rear side curtain was replaced with a piece of galvanized iron. The pieces of the broken rear view mirror were also stuck in place with Bostik. All of these items had to wait until I got back to Brisbane before they could be replaced.

My second kangaroo was a far bigger one. One night after supper at the boarding house, for want of something better to do, it was decided to take a trip 40 km down the road to Comet with one of the other boarders, a postal clerk named Reg Singleton. Not that there was anything at Comet apart from the railway station and some railway houses one of which housed the small manual telephone exchange. The fact that the road was gravel all the way, and invariably badly corrugated, indicates how much there was to do in Emerald on week nights if you didn't want to spend your time at one of the four hotels then operating. On the way back, a large kangaroo bounded over the railway fence, through the roadside drain, and straight across in front of the car. He was fully airborne when I hit him. The right hand headlamp got him at the base of the tail and the top of the radiator got him nearer to the tip of his tail. It certainly upset his equilibrium! As the car shuddered to a halt on the corrugated surface, I saw, out of the corner of my eye, the old man kangaroo struggle to his feet and head for the scrub. He was lucky to still be able to tell the tale to his children. There was a small dent in the radiator cowling and the headlamp, with glass unbroken, was pointing at the top of the trees. It was soon readjusted and the uneventful remainder of the trip passed a little slower than the outward journey. Comet was to achieve a little bit of publicity in 1987 when a local carnival was organized during the passage of Halley's Comet.

On the same stretch of road, when returning from Rockhampton, I saw an emu with a clutch of distinctively striped chicks. On another trip, what I thought was a log lying across the road ahead turned out to be a large python moving across the road into the trees. Plain turkeys, more correctly bustards, and wild pigs were also fairly common on the road to Clermont.

Another hazard in the area was of course the numerous cattle grids which, on gravel roads, soon develop a deep pothole on both sides to catch the unwary. If you are traveling too fast it is quite easy to burst a tyre with disastrous results. One such grid was just before the turnoff to the tiny township of dingo where the main road was several hundred metres distant from the main street with the railway line and lightly timbered country in between. It was quite possible to stand on the post office verandah and watch an approaching car hit the hole and then, shortly after, hear the thump! The bigger the dust cloud, the bigger you expected the thump to be.