

## **The 5,791 day restoration**

by David Lake, the restorer's apprentice

They say the restoration of an automobile will either take longer than first expected, run over budget, or if you're unlucky, both. Like anything worthwhile it has to be worth the wait. The result, after 5,791 days, was definitely worth the wait. 5,791 days. When you say it quickly it is really not as long as it sounds, but if you had to live through it, like I did, well let's just say, it was a little under half my life.

Welcome to a short story about a man, a wife, four boys and his project car. A 1960 MGA 1600. Just like the one he owned when he was a younger man. We all saw the black and white photos. A flash British racing green sports car finished with a fibreglass hardtop, custom tail lights and a Webber carburetor. The year was 1962. In 1962 the MGA was still in production and being sold as an accessible sports car. It was very desirable, built with reliability, performance, 0-100 in 15.2 seconds with a massive 78bhp and modern equipment for the time. It allowed my "parents to be", a great deal of freedom and enjoyment. I said "parents to be" because, at this point in time, the kids were way off the radar. The first wasn't due till 1967. But, as with the life cycle, sacrifices were required. Soon after the wedding the much loved MGA was sold and replaced with a far more practical Renault R8. Dad always said he should have kept the MGA and just bought a trailer, because after he bought the Renault R8, he bought a trailer.

Anyway back to the future. The year is 1990. In a moment of madness or nostalgia my Dad decided to relive the easy years (pre-children) and began the quest to find the right MGA to restore. He looked at a number of different examples only to turn them down as they were not "exactly as he wanted it" or 'too expensive'. Finally an advertisement was found describing just "the right car". "Half completed restoration, only finishing touches required". Wow, too good to be true. Half completed and the price was right, about half the price of all the other cars he had seen. Could this be the one? Well, yes. The price was negotiated, the papers signed and the money transferred. Following the transaction, the car was rolled onto the trailer, next the body panels were safely loaded and secured, then all the boxes of parts, the jars of nuts, the tins of screw, bags of bolts, the collection of washers, loose switches, lonely springs and other bits and pieces were all carefully placed on the trailer or into the Volvo wagon. I remember wondering at the time how could such a small British sports car completely fill a car trailer as well as a Volvo wagon.

Day 1 of 5,791. As soon as the car arrived home it was all hands on deck and the car was unloaded. The first stage of every successful restoration project requires all the parts to be inspected, cleaned, sorted, tagged and stored for future restoration purposes. We used a very clever system to sort the parts. Unfortunately, over the years the system was forgotten. After a while all boxed car parts in the shed were either identified as British (MGA) dad's car or Japanese/Australian/Swedish, the boys' cars. This system seemed to work well. Work progressed on the MGA during periods when dad didn't have much else to do. I personally spent a great deal of time stripping, sanding, preparing and painting all the small parts which make up an MGA. But then the time came. Like all good children at some point you have to leave home. I'm not sure if my leaving home was the reason or not, but the progression of the MGA

slowed down and finally stopped. Over a period of time it began to look like a mobile shelving unit with bits and pieces of shed and farming equipment stacked on top and underneath the poor old girl. Then one day it simply disappeared. Not to be seen for a long time.

To help restore the enthusiasm for the restoration of the MGA, a number of concerned members of the MG car club organised a day run and concours in the front paddock of our farm at Tamborine Mountain. This was too much for the boys to believe. A car show in “our front paddock”. Whilst lining up the gathered MGs for the display somebody joking commented that a vehicle with “no doors attached” is considered a “rolling chassis” within the confines of a concours. So quicker than you could recite the firing order of a four cylinder motor, the farm tractor quickly recovered the MGA from its restoration hibernation buried deep within the shed. The doors were promptly removed and the MGA given a quick wash and she was lined up with all the other MGs. There was no trophy awarded, but we did win the best rolling chassis of the concours on that fine day. As the last MG left the farm on its way back to Brisbane, the MGA was rolled safely back into the shed (without its doors replaced I might add) and was not to be seen for many years to come. My father, during 1997, bought himself an open wheeler racing car, the Axtell Suzuki. This car really caught my brothers’ attention. It was very flashy, with fat tyres and big yellow wings, and boy was it fast. It was very hard for the MGA to compete for attention. The MGA was handy though, as again it served as a shelving unit to store the racing car parts. All we could do now was bide our time. Every once in a while my father would mumble a comment like the MGA should be finished to partake in some family celebration. Something like a wedding. But the idea was quickly forgotten as the celebration date came and passed. At this point I was tired of waiting for the MGA to be finished, as it was now day 2,497 of the restoration, so I purchased my own MG. I found a very character ridden 1969 MGBGT. It was partly white with a black interior. To help it stand out from the crowd and to achieve 100mph a set of blue racing stripes were added for good measure. A very fine car indeed, but not quite an MGA.

Time slowly rolled on. A few years later my parents were to become grandparents. This title permitted them both to slow down a bit and enjoy their retirement. Soon the farm was sold and they moved to Tallebudgera Valley, a small rural retreat behind the Gold Coast. The MGA was dutifully uncovered, packed, shipped to the new shed, unpacked then re-buried.

On day 5,547 of the restoration, the MGA’s time had finally come as the Axtell Suzuki racing car was sold. After a number of years of racing car competition and development it was time to sell the car and build a new one which would be flashier and faster. My time had come. Either strike now and convince my father to finish the MGA or resign myself to the fact that it would never be finished. My wife and I quickly produced a restoration proposal of 32 pages which listed items requiring attention, a program of work required and, of course, a realistic budget. The proposed restoration period was 6 months (182 days), the program of work endless, the budget to finish the work \$5,000. After many long drawn out negotiation meetings and proposal amendments, an agreement was struck. I was to sign up to labour every weekend for the duration of the restoration until it was completed. I really should have informed my wife about that clause in the fine print before we celebrated. Anyhow we were off. As the restoration had begun 5,565 days ago, a great deal of the chassis,

engine, gearbox, running gear and major panel work had been completed. Now all we really were required to do was to put all the little bits together. Over the last 5,559 days, unfortunately, all the parts tags had either faded or fallen off. Luckily we had a copy of the "Moss Motors" parts catalogue (USA). 75 pages of dream parts and accessories, and the book "Original MGA", plus other MGA's to refer to, to sort out what went where, when and how.

The first step of any good restoration is to sit down and read the parts catalogue and decide what is and what is not required to be ordered to complete the work. As the weeks went by we soon discovered that there is less of the "what is not required" and a lot more of the "what is required". Dad was unusually at ease with the spending money part. He found it easier to give me the Visa card and let me do all the hard work of spending the money. And to this day I believe I spent it better than anybody else could have. Still, my mother disagrees. With the use of the internet (Moss Motors USA, eBay) and the telephone, parts soon began arriving from all over the world as well as from the local Brisbane suppliers. With each shipment Dad did become a little nervous but he does agree the shiny parts do look nice and really finish the car off rather well. New and freshly restored MGA parts were soon being spread throughout the shed and into my mother's guest room. We were frequently referring to the parts catalogue looking for that particular part we hadn't noticed which constantly held up the restoration proceedings. Parts were being painted (and re-painted) and then very carefully shelved or stored in the "guest room" for later installation. Oh, by the way, the paint colour is a very nice version of British Racing Green.

The wiring system, gauges, switches and lights all needed attention. Every component was cleaned, tested and readied for installation. As it was the year 2006 it was decided it was a good time to update the electrical system to early 70's technology. On the internet is a site called MGAGURU ([www.mgaguru.com](http://www.mgaguru.com)). It's hosted by an American called Barney Gaylord. It would have to be one of the best resources for MGA maintenance and restoration information on the internet. It contains over 1000+ pages of restoration and maintenance hints as well as MGA history, photos and topical information. It's better than a book. Why, you might ask. You can ask questions of the MGAGURU and he will provide detailed responses of the best ways to complete MGA related tasks or at least direct you to where the answer may be listed and it's available 24 hours a day. Anyway, back to the story. To update the electrical system we installed an alternator and separate fuses to allow each section of the wiring system to blow without disabling half the car. The MGA now has 8 fuses rather than the factory fitted 2 fuses. It's all neatly hidden under the dash board on the inside of the fire wall. If you do get the chance to have a look, please do, as it is a really nice piece of workmanship. Too bad it would lose points at a concours.

As my father is a very handy man, he is willing to have a go at anything. Once the car was painted and all the mechanicals and electrical parts were installed, the interior was next on the list of jobs. We both spent many a long night in the shed and over dinner discussing what colour of tan the interior should be. At any concours you may find a multitude of tans, some with tints of cream, and others with tints of red and others just plain awful. We finally settled on a light creamy tint. Here is a hint. If for your restoration you need to buy vinyl, as it is so cheap, please buy an extra couple of metres as you will need it. Because when you screw something up it is either the size of a door panel or a dash board. As it was dad's money I was spending I had already

covered this precaution and purchased some emergency stock, much to my dad's relief. At about day 5,676 the MGA was really beginning to look like it was going to be finished.

The final major purchase to complete the restoration was a set of wire wheels and tyres. It was decided to purchase a set of 72 spoke wire wheels in silver paint finish and wrap them in Yokohamas' latest tyre tread pattern. In relation to the cost of modern fashion "mag wheels", a set of "wire wheels" really are very well priced.

The day had finally come to test all the work we had completed over both the last 242 days as well as the previous 5,540 days. The family gathered around, the battery was connected, the S.U.s primed, everything had been checked.....the key was turned..... and an almighty silence fell over the gathering. The women soon got bored and promised they would return when they heard the roar of the exhaust. It was to be a little while before they returned. As my father has a property with a long driveway we felt it prudent to do a proper driving test and complete a number of climbs up the driveway. Upon each descent we went back into the shed to either fix a leaking hose, release a sticky (locked) brake or to adjust the clutch. Soon all the problems were ironed out and the MGA was deemed ready for its road worthy and registration. It was day 5,791. "R" day had arrived. Restoration, Registration and Rest day.

Once registered, the MGA was fuelled and ready for some running around. Come Sunday we thought it would be a good idea to take the MGA to Mt Cotton to show her off a little bit and to enjoy our first outing. As it was our first trip further than 10 kilometres from home we felt it was prudent to have a service/recovery vehicle follow along in case of an unscheduled cessation of operation. The MGA was running sweetly, the sun was shining, it was a beautiful day, the MGA was firing on all four cylinders; then three cylinders, then two cylinders, then one cylinder, then none. Could it be a mechanical problem, no? Could it be an electrical problem, no? Then dad started scratching his saying something like .. "we can't have run out of fuel, I put in twenty dollars (\$20) at the beginning of the week". The service/recovery vehicle was quickly issued instructions to gather some fuel to just "top up the tank". We were soon back underway and arrived at the Mt. Cotton hillclimb without any other problems. Really you can't blame my father for the lack of fuel quantity. In 1990, the year of the beginning of the restoration, the price of fuel was approximately \$0.65/litre. (This was just prior to the Gulf War One when fuel raced up to \$0.85/litre). Today the price of fuel is approximately \$1.20-40. So, therefore, it was once possible for an MGA to travel such vast distances on \$20 of fuel.

The MGA was finally completed and the story is nearly told. But what else, you might ask, had happened to the Lake family over this same 5,791 days. The family has enjoyed 3 weddings, Andrew and Michelle, Simon and Danielle, David and Jodie. We have also welcomed into the world 5 grandchildren, Sahra (13), Brighton (6), Campbell (2), Jackson (5) and Lachlan (1). The entire family is very proud and relieved to see the MGA finally on the road. Years ago we invented the slogan "An hour a day gets the A on its way" and so it did. All we did was collect all those hours, combined them and used them in the last couple of months.

So if you do see my father out and about enjoying his MGA please give him a wave and say hello because he has endured a long but very rewarding MGA restoration of 5,791 days.

Now if you thought that the 5,791 day restoration held some form of record for being one of the world's longest restorations you would be forgiven for being wrong, because inside dad's garage is another (another) MGA under restoration, a 1956 MGA 1500. The MGA 1500 was purchased prior to the MGA 1600. But that my friends, is a story for the future. See you in the year 2025. (Unless it's sold in the meantime).



*Chris Lakes original MGA 1600  
1962 at Sandown Raceway.  
Car shown with aero screen.*



*Chris Lakes original MGA 1600 in 1962 in  
at Sandown Raceway*



*Chris Lake's original MGA 1600 in 1962 with  
fibreglass hard top and Sebring style tail lights. Does  
anybody recognize the number plate and know the  
whereabouts of this car?*



*The very early stages of the 5,791 restoration,  
early 1994. The body and chassis are  
separated.*





*The MGA on approximately day 5,700 with the paint work to the body completed and awaiting finishing.*



*The finished MGA*



*The finished interior*

*Day 5,547. Jackson Lake helping to convince Granddad to finish the MGA so he can really go for a drive with him. MGA 1500 in background.*



*Grand children from left to right. Campbell, Brighton, Jackson, Lachlan, Sahra.  
Adults from left to right. Simon, David, Chris Lake  
Grand children from left to right. Campbell, Brighton, Jackson, Lachlan, Sahra.  
Adults from left to right. Simon, David, Chris Lake*

