



What does it take to caravan around England in eight crotchety antiques? Patience, mechanical know-how, and, oh yes, finesse with those knotty roundabouts.

The Rally of the

relics

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Toys are tools of the imagination. When my grandsons play with their toy cars and knights on horseback, it's easy to see that they are jousting or racing through a wonderful place, far away from the livingroom floor. Toys for folks my age are more expensive, but they serve the same purpose. They can transport a person to magic, faraway places.

I own a 1947 MG TC, a small British roadster that compensates with jaunty style for what it lacks in power and mechanical refinement. TCs are balky, hard-riding, totally beguiling little cars. They are hard to keep running, and ownership consigns you to a social life that alternates between sunny, wind-in-the-hair drives and frantic searches for parts. Admittedly, they are toys, and they should take you to some fantastical place beyond everyday experience. Perhaps my greatest TC adventure started as mere whimsy, a musing in a column I wrote for the TC Motoring Guild's newsletter. My wife and I belong to the guild, a group of TC owners that meets once a month, chats about old cars, and goes on regular outings around Southern California. In the column, I proposed that, to determine if these old cars would function better in the country they were designed for, we ship them to England and have one of our monthly outings there. Perhaps the cars might run cooler in the British climate. Maybe the winding English country lanes would be better-suited for the TC's tendency to wander on the road—a hair-raising experience when driving between 18-wheelers on California freeways. The column got surprising enthusiasm. Before I could explain that I was only kidding, the club had organized a committee to make the arrangements and had started recruiting participants. Eight couples eventually signed up for the trip, which was dubbed the Grand Rallye Around Britain—the “GRAB.”

One couple took charge of accommodations. They were directed to find quaint country inns, preferably historical, with ample secure parking for the cars and, of course, priced at less than £100 a night.

Another couple organized the route. The assignment was to layout a three-week, 1,000 mile circuit from London covering the maximum number of magical places. We were drawn to towns with charming names. We would see a place called Giggleswick.

Auto-shipping companies initially didn't take the club seriously. Many people ship cars from England to the United States. A few ship cars to England. But nobody ships cars over there and back. The shipping committee finally found a company willing to consider the job. After careful measuring, the company determined that eight TCs could be fit into a large container by putting in four end to end and then building a wooden structure around them to support four more cars above.

One committee planned for the inevitable mechanical problems. Each car was assigned certain spare parts to carry in the pitifully small toolbox under the hood or in specially designed boxes made to be mounted under the body near the rear axle.

When the big day arrived, we drove our cars to a warehouse near the port of Los Angeles and watched the eight of them being loaded into the container. The spacing was so tight that the man who drove the last cars in had to drive with his head below the top of the dashboard, following voice directions. He then crawled out over the cars. We ceremonially locked the container with an antique brass railroad padlock. The occasion was light-hearted, but all of us were somewhat concerned about the fate of our precious classics as they crossed the ocean.

The group gathered a month later at a hotel near the London docks. At the freight yard, we found that Her Majesty's customs had been there before us and had broken off our ceremonial padlock. Not a very friendly gesture, but apparently we had been cleared.

There were the foreseeable difficulties getting the old cars started after a month at sea, but with an afternoon of tweaking and push-starting, all were running well enough to caravan back to the hotel, where we gathered in the parking lot. Holding our first pints of English bitter, we toasted our initial success. We were ready for the big adventure.



stopped. Then there was the matter of turning around. The road was narrow, there were no driveways, and the TC has the turning radius of a canal barge.

When we got back to the center of Windsor, we found that one of the cars had simply quit running and that the rest of the group was lined up behind it along the road. We all pulled over and assumed what was to become our standard breakdown formation. The women remained in the cars, well away from the heated language emanating from the huddle of men around the crippled TC. The unlucky owner sat in the driver's seat following instructions to operate the starter or



The estimable old cars are unloaded in their native land. (left); When the touring gets tough, consult a map. Then guess.

No daily drive was to be longer than 200 miles, and the first day's run was to be shorter than that. Our first stop would be Bath, a mere 100 miles down the M4 from London. But, of course, we were not going to take the M4. We had agreed to avoid the main motorways and take the scenic country lanes the cars were built for. And there was much to see between London and Bath. We had to see Old Windsor, and Salisbury was just a bit out of the way to the south. We couldn't miss that.

The cars were somewhat balky, and two or three had to be push-started. Eventually, we became accustomed to this, pushing at least one car every morning. On our first day, we finally got every car running by about 11 a.m. and set out toward Windsor.

How stubbornly rosy one's outlook can be, even when realistically planning for problems. I had pictured our cars meandering down quiet country lanes. None of my visions included maneuvering eight cars in a row through bumper-to-bumper traffic in industrial South London among towering lorries while driving on the left side of the road and trying to follow a map, keep sight of the car ahead, and decipher strange traffic signs.

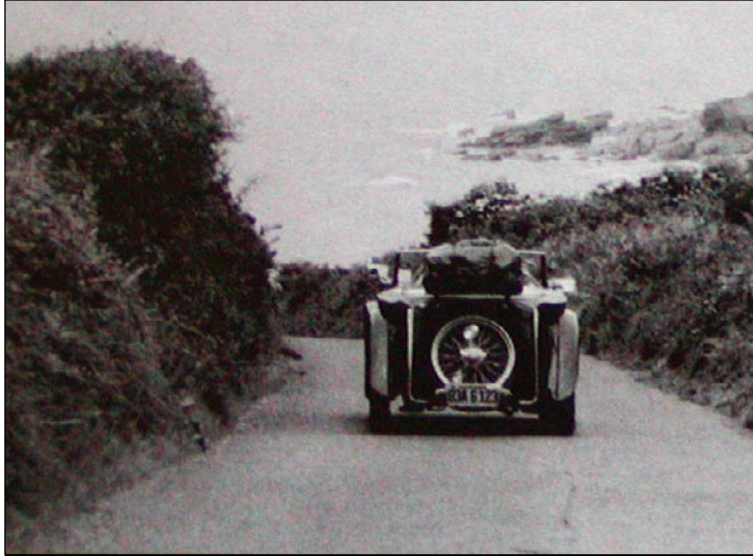
After about an hour of this, we had traveled 11 miles to the town of Old Windsor. Traffic was much lighter there, and when I finally was able to unclench my white-knuckled hands from the steering wheel, I looked in my rear-view mirror and discovered there were no cars behind me. I honked my horn, flashed my lights, and finally got the attention of the car in front, but there were two more cars ahead of him, and it took about a mile to pass the signal up the line and get everyone

jiggle this or that. The rest of the men formed concentric circles around the invalid. In the center, with their heads in the engine compartment, were the two men who actually knew something about mechanics. The next circle consisted of those who knew nothing but wanted to appear knowledgeable. Their function was to lean over the inner group and from time to time offer inane suggestions that everyone ignored. Then came the circle of those with no pretense of expertise but a desire to display sympathy. Finally, those with neither expertise nor sympathy just wandered around, checking their watches. In Windsor that day, we experienced the first of many bits of automotive good fortune. A local car buff in a later-model MG drove by and was amazed to see a line of shiny old MGs along the road. He was on the way to his own MG mechanic in town, and when he related what he had seen, the mechanic rushed back to see for himself. He was greeted with great enthusiasm and had the car running in about five minutes. He refused pay or a pint at the local pub but did accept thanks and a handshake all around. I still have a grease-stained driving glove as a souvenir of the experience.

By this time it was midafternoon, and we decided to push on to Salisbury. How we actually got there is still unclear. At one point, the confused little group entered a roundabout—we in the United States call it a traffic circle—with several exit roads and emerged in smaller groups going in different directions. The driver chosen as the first day's leader had been confused when we left London and was now beyond confusion after abandoning his map. Ultimately, each of the fragments decided to make its own way to Salisbury in hopes of a rendezvous there. We had all blundered our ways to the Salisbury

Cathedral by late afternoon. It was a thrill to pull into the parking lot and hear the attendant excitedly tell us, “Your mates are here! They came in 15 minutes ago.”

We stopped for lunch and then browsed through the cathedral as if we had all the time in the world. By the time we left, it was about 7 p.m. and starting to rain. Bath was 75 miles away. We held a drivers’ meeting in the parking lot over soggy maps and decided to replace our leader for the day, to his evident relief. We reviewed the route, the new leader professed to have it completely mastered, and we all promised to stay together behind him.



Sometimes, it was all worth it as on the road approaching Lynmouth. (left); The Abingdon plant was the TC’s place of birth.

Getting out of town in the rain and traffic proved to be slow work, and by the time we found the correct route, it was getting dark and the rain had gotten heavier. The route to Bath called for a right turn on a road heading north. All of us apparently had memorized the route number—all of us, that is, except our new leader. As he passed the turn in the dark, we realized that he was now heading the wrong way. We followed, but he was driving at top speed and seemed to be pulling away. After about 20 miles of this it was clear that the group was not going to catch him. The driver of one of the faster cars sped off and eventually pulled him over. We found our way in the rain back to the junction.

But confidence in our leadership had been shaken. From the junction, each driver determined his own way to the city and the hotel. Oddly, we all arrived at the hotel about the same time from completely different directions.

A good pint and a late dinner at the hotel revived us and made the panic on the way to Bath seem a little silly. Nevertheless, a change in procedures was necessary or we were going to find ourselves scattered all over Britain driving in meaningless circles. The route had been carefully planned. We simply didn’t yet know how to follow it and stay together.

But most important, we had to figure out how to deal with the roundabouts. Since the British drive on the left, traffic on a roundabout circles clockwise. The rules are simple and quite effective—unless you’re in a caravan of, say, eight cars. Vehicles in the circle have the right of way. You must wait for a break in traffic to enter. When you enter, you circle until you come to the exit road you want, then turn left.

When our group tried to enter the roundabout, perhaps two cars might get in at a break in traffic, but those behind would have to wait. We got separated. Cars exited in different directions. Chaos ensued.

We tried having the lead cars pull over and wait after they exited. This didn’t work. When the leader pulled ahead too far he was out of sight. When he didn’t pull ahead far enough, cars backed up behind him, leaving the last ones sticking out in the circle with 18-wheelers bearing down on them. All in all, not safe.

Finally we hit upon the “carousel system.” Lead cars would continue to circle in a roundabout until all cars in the group were in. This usually took at least three or four circuits. Then the leader would peel off at the correct road, followed by the rest of the cars, which now would have the right of way.

The system worked well, but spectators found it hilarious. Eight little cars circling made the roundabout look like a toy merry-go-round and often had people on the sidewalks laughing and pointing. We waved and smiled and wished we could have provided calliope music.

The tour turned out to be a three-week celebration of British-American friendship, particularly among MG enthusiasts. I’ll always remember standing in a Cotswold pub under smoke-darkened beams, surrounded by fellow old-car fanciers. With a warm fire at the end of the room and a pint in my hand, I was musing on the unreality of the whole setting as the older gentleman near me in tweeds and a cloth cap told me how, as a lad, he had picked up his first MG at the Abingdon factory in the late ‘30s. In the midst of all this conviviality it was impossible to pay for a drink and difficult to leave the group and get to bed after a long day’s drive.

Even to Britons with no special interest in cars, the sight of eight old MGs, all bearing California license plates, created excitement. Each drive through a village became a parade. People ran along-side to ask about the cars and generally showed great pride in their automotive heritage. In almost every town, someone asked us to wait so that he could run home for a camera.

And, of course, we took a short detour to see Giggleswick. It's a peaceful village in Yorkshire, not far from the villages of Wigglesworth, Fox Up, and Crackpot. We had lunch at the Black Horse Inn, next to St. Alkelda's, a 15th-century church named for an Anglo-Saxon princess martyred by the Danes in the 12th century. I asked the publican how Giggleswick got its name. His expression made it clear that he didn't find the question funny.

Mechanical problems became part of the fun of our daily routine. Each of the cars broke down at least once. At least one broke down each day. Every problem was repaired on the spot, and the car continued.

Every car finished the tour, but some of the fixes were just short of miraculous. Once, one of the cars lost its generator. It was beyond repair, and finding a generator for a 50-year-old MG seemed like too much to ask for. As we sat along the road, an older man driving a modern car came by and stopped. He told us he had an old MG moldering in his garage a few blocks away and insisted that we take his generator. He helped us get it installed, then invited us to his home for lunch.

I remember one afternoon sitting in the TC on a country lane in the north Cotswolds. A line of trees and a low stone wall were to our left, and rolling fields dropped gently off to our right down to a distant village with a church rising from among thatched cottages. Our cars had stopped to allow a shepherd to drive his flock across the road with the aid of a very energetic little collie. The sun was warm on our faces, and autumn leaves were blowing gently across the road. My wife and I turned to one another, and words were unnecessary. We just grinned. Truly, even for old men, toys are meant to be played with, and the best ones are the ones that transport you to some magical place, far away.

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