

The Little Great White in the North

By Dave Barton

Editor's note: This article first appeared in the newsletter of the MG Car Club of Canberra (Australia), of which Dave was member while residing there from 1993 to 2000. Sadly Dave will be leaving our club as he is moving on again, this time to the UK. We wish Dave and his family all the best.

Even with good pacenotes, one is never certain of what is around the next bend and as our lives twist and turn, so goes the fortunes of our MGs. It's January 2009 and mine is shivering in a Michigan garage, afraid to come out for fear of savage attack by the evil Road Salt or, being small and white, getting lost in the snow until spring. Some of you may remember this car in the MG Car Club Canberra from 1993-2000 – fibreglass everywhere, pretty much black and white except for the engine painted Ford blue (I like that colour and always enjoyed the inevitable rise from the *Ayatollahs of Originality*). As an Australian Army officer, I was posted from Canberra to Melbourne in 2001 and the car then enjoyed a Victorian life for the next five years. The interior was redone in leather and everything that was tinkerable and tunable, was duly carried out. In late 2006, I rebuilt the engine in preparation for my retirement after Christmas that year. Then came late November 2006 and that "**Left Five**". This is where the story begins.

"*Would you stay on and take this job in Detroit, USA? It's just for a year.*" said the Boss (Andrew Libby – he gets a key role in all of this a bit later). I strained my thoughts through a bit of single malt over the weekend, ran it by the real Boss and said "OK" on the Monday. Now, what to do with the car? The one with 100km on the engine and everything working (well, alright, as much as a British car and The Prince actually work). Even though the Army would pay for almost half the storage fee, the thought of it sitting behind a shed in Dodgy Bros. Pty. Ltd. wasn't very appealing. At the other end of the scale, Melbourne has an excellent storage facility for classic cars (www.chequeredflagstables.com.au) and no doubt the little guy would have loved to settle in with the exotic mob of Jags, Porches and hair dressers cars. Unfortunately, it would have been like buying the car twice over if I stayed away too long. A call to John Harriott and Brian Cather was in order.

"*Maaaaaaate, have I got a deal for you blokes.*" They agreed to keep the car for a year. Rego and everything is sorted, so treat it like your own. "*Be careful Johnno, the B has awesome power...compared to a Midget.*" I ran the engine in on the drive to Canberra



Shivering in the garage

just before Christmas. The car comfortably settled itself in to Brian's garage and felt like it had reached MG heaven. The intent was to leave it in Canberra for a year and then shift it to England where we planned to spend the first couple of retirement years. I wasn't quite sure about the plan for the next phase but I reckoned I would have at least six or eight months to work it out. Or so I thought. "**Right Five**".

"*Would you stay on longer in Detroit, USA? It's just for a year.*" said the new Boss after I had been over here a few months. And Brian tells me that they are selling the house and moving to the Coast. There would be no room for the little guy. Need a new plan. "**200 to Crest**".

Why not bring it over? I didn't want to store it in Australia, you truly need two cars in the US of A and it would get it closer to the UK for the next leap. A temporary, resident alien importing a 1972 Australian made British car into the USA can't be all that hard, yeah? In most States there are two or three firms that transport cars. In Detroit Michigan, there are thirteen. No worries. I'll shop around and get the professionals to make it all happen. After heaps of phone calls with people younger than my car, I was drowning in a haze of Customs and Border Protection, licences, fees, duties, the US Environmental Protection Agency Guidelines and Regulations, condition and mechanical reports, Department of Transport rules, Michigan Department of State Certificate of Title, insurance, Federal Motor Vehicle Safety, Bumper and Theft Prevention Standards, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the War on Terror in general. Not a mention of how the car would actually get here. While none knew exactly what the car was nor why I was here, they were all keen to have several hundred dollars to work something out for me. So I cracked the you-know-what and decided to do it all myself.

A bit of research and a few calls to those who put things on big boats and the plan came together. As long as I didn't sell the car, took it with me when I left and promised not to leave too much used engine oil on Detroit streets, the US officialdom said I could bring it in with no trouble at all. The biggest part in the success of the move was the help back in Oz from John, Brian and Andrew. John retrieved the car from Brian's garage, put it on the Club trailer (not it's first time on there by a long shot!) and hauled it to Andrew in Melbourne. On 1 March, Andrew got the car on the *MV Tamerlane* bound for Baltimore. (see Wallenius Wilhelmsen Logistics at <http://www.2wglobal.com/www/wep/>) I then laid awake until 24 April thinking about all the things that could go wrong. I flew over to Baltimore early that morning and took a taxi to the Marine Terminal. The ship had docked a couple of hours earlier and the WW staff said they would let me know as soon as the car came off. I hardly had time to finish the coffee they kindly gave me when its arrival was announced. They even brought it around to the front door and handed me the keys. What excellent service!

There was not a scratch anywhere and even the golf umbrella was still in the boot. After one quick signature, I flipped the top down and



headed for Detroit. It was a brilliant drive in the warm, spring sunshine. It was already ANZAC Day back home so it was just a wonderful feeling all around. The car purred all the way to the Motor City. Before long, it was proudly wearing its new Michigan licence plate with my not-as-yet patented Australia-USA adaptor mount.

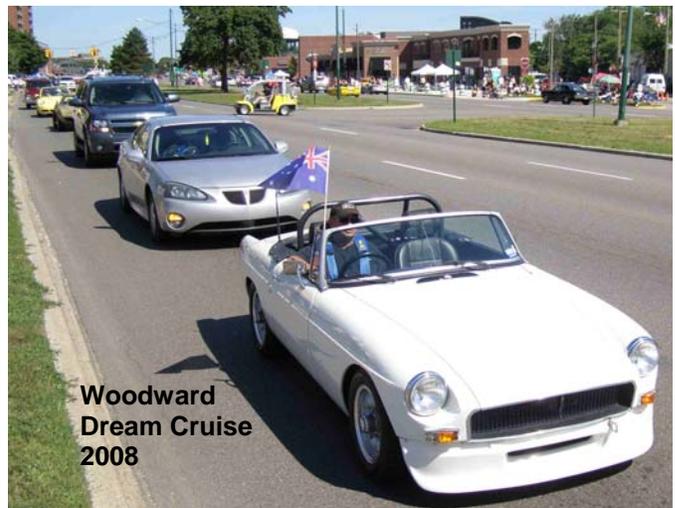
It's great fun zipping by and around the Detroit mastodons. I've become very familiar with hubcaps and eye-catching bumper stickers. I joined the Windsor-Detroit MG Car Club. The international camaraderie gives the club a unique character. Meetings alternate across the border so I have to remember to take my passport to every second one. We have felt very welcome in the Club and if you change the place names and accents, it's just like the MGCCC. I think the little guy enjoys showing the other cars the proper side for the steering wheel. Still, it's a bit of a stretch at parking garages when you are by yourself with the top up.

Last summer a few of us went over to the **British Sports Car Club of London Classic** in Ontario, Canada. There were over eighty cars with thirty-two MGs. The car took first place in its category. Must have been the Down Under novelty factor perhaps? There is an active undercurrent of British car enthusiasts in North America with no shortage of events. Each year the Detroit Triumph Sportscar Club hosts the **Battle of the**



Winner at British Car Show
London, Ontario

Brits which draws three hundred cars. In the last one, the WDMGC took the prize from the Triumphs for the greater number of cars. Now, THE major outdoor car event in Detroit is the **Woodward Dream Cruise**. On a Saturday in mid-August, more than 40,000 muscle cars, street rods, custom, collector and special interest vehicles cruise the 16 miles of Woodward Avenue. The natives, with lawn chairs and eskies, fill the verges along the route. Only in Detroit would over a million people sit on the curb all day to watch traffic! The car and I enjoyed a great day out flying the flag and thoroughly enjoying the automotive atmosphere. With



Woodward
Dream Cruise
2008

the right hand drive, it was easy to chat with the spectators as you ambled along in the traffic. I was having a word with a couple on vacation from Geelong until I was encouraged to keep moving by something that had more horsepower in his starter motor than I had in my whole car.

One of the WDMGC members, Rick Astley, is a bit of a guru on The Prince and has written a book on MG electrical systems. He rather liked the single, glass matt battery I had installed under the bonnet. Rick included this modification in the second edition so I must get a copy. He's an ex-pat Pom so things should be spelled correctly. Another member, Jeff Zorn, runs the **Little British Car Company** and sells Rick's book.

John Harriott came to Canada on business in October last year and was able to come by for the weekend. We had our first snowfall that Sunday. John and I had a great run in the car. It brought back memories of dashes home down the Tuggeranong Speedway after a long day in Russell Offices. Less the snow. That Sunday was the car's final outing before hibernation.

The two year tour was coming to a close in the autumn of 2008. The plan for next phase in England was still in

first gear when I should have been cruising in overdrive by that time. I was starting to fuss a bit and thought I had better get stuck into arranging for a big boat heading East. Or so I thought. "**Caution Road goes Right after Crest**"

"Would you stay on longer in Detroit, USA? It's just for a year." said the newest, new Boss. Apologies to the **Eagles** but it was starting to feel like **Hotel Michigan** – *You can check out anytime you want but you can never leave.* Anyway, you already know the answer as the little guy is still shivering out there in the garage. It was minus 20C the other day and I thought I'd turn the engine over. Just out of curiosity really. Buckley's! It was having none of that. I will have to wait for spring. So here we are for another year and looking forward to enjoying the car in its adopted land for one more season. And that is a happy thought as life is good here and Americans are a thoroughly enjoyable mob to share your motoring time with. After all, it is the Motor City.

I now have heaps of time to make a plan for the rest of the odyssey. A temporary, unemployed alien importing a 1972 Australian made British car into England can't be all that hard, yeah? Watch this space. ■