

# The MG Badge

By Jonathan Wood. Reproduced, with permission, from *Enjoying MG*, June 1997



MG's famous octagonal badge has been around since 1924. But who designed it? I confess that I had always imagined Cecil Kimber, with his strong artistic sensibilities, and creator of the famous MG radiator, was also responsible for the eight sided motif.

However, back in 1981 I interviewed for *Classic Cars* the individual who claimed to have been responsible for the badge and, after hearing his story, I have no reason to doubt it.

Edmund (Ted) John Frank Lee was born in Oxford and in 1915 entered the city's High School. He did well there, excelled at math and was also placed top in the art class. His aptitude with figures suggested a financial career and he decided on cost accounting. As it happened he knew Cecil Kimber and "he offered me a job with Morris Garages and agreed to pay half my tuition fees."

For his part Kimber had joined that business as sales manager in 1921 but took over as general manager following the death of Edward Armstead in March 1922.

Ted Lee wasted little time in responding to Kimber's offer, he continued his studies and was soon established at the Morris Garages offices that he remembered "over some fifty shilling tailors" in Queen Street, Oxford. "I was very keen on American cost accounting methods and this was the system I introduced."

As is well known, in 1923 Kimber introduced the Morris Garages Chummy that, in retrospect, can be seen as the first link in a chain of events that lead to the creation of the MG marque.

This special open two seater version of the Morris Cowley, with coachwork by Carbodies, had an occasional rear seat with lowered back and was finished in a choice of cheerful colours.

Ted remembered the Chummy well. "This was because, whenever Kimber and I went out in one, he used to drive like the devil and frighten me to death. But I used to criticize him because the Chummy's proportions were on the small side.

You see Kimber was rather short himself and I suggested that, if you altered the seating arrangement, he could sell to taller people! And he took notice, we were quite friendly."

In 1924 Cecil Kimber had ordered six open two seater Raworth bodies for the 11.9 hp Cowley chassis and followed this with a 13.9 Oxford-based "M.G. vee-front saloon." With the appearance of the M.G. name, Kimber was clearly intent on creating a make that, diplomatically, did not distance itself from its Morris roots.

The use of initials provided the answer and he may have been inspired by the precedent of AC, a firm with which he was familiar, having worked for the Thames Ditton company between 1916 and 1918.

Later the May 1924 issue of the *Morris Owner* carried a full page illustrated advertisement of one of the Raworth-bodied cars that was described as the MG [for Morris Garages] Super Sports Morris. The stylized initials were presented, for the first time, within an octagonal outline that had been designed for Cecil Kimber by Ted Lee, who again takes up the story.

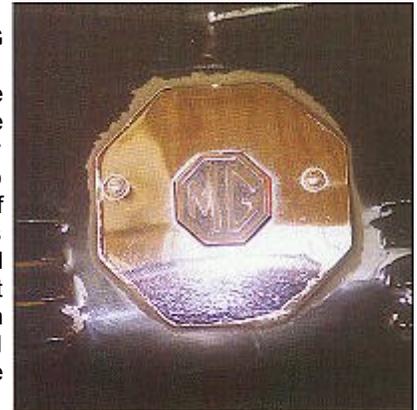
After the general manager had explained his plans to Ted, "he cleared off to his office and I stopped in mine. Then I drew out this badge with a little ruler I'd brought from High School. I was good at art and have painted for years. Kimber saw it and said 'that's just the thing'." I was interested to know why Lee had opted for the eight sided shape and he said there was no particular reason for choosing it. But it should be remembered that such angular designs were very popular in the nineteen twenties and they are what we know today as Art Deco style.

It was important that William Morris approved of the badge and Ted recalls that when he saw it he said that "it was the best thing that has come into the company" 'adding, "and it will never go out of it."

Later when MG moved from Oxford to Abingdon, Ted Lee also made the move but subsequently returned to the city to become group chief accountant for Morris's other companies and remained at what became the British Motor Corporation until his retirement in the 1960s. His badge had, in the meantime,

become one of the motoring world's most memorable trademarks although Kimber initially applied it sparingly to the Morris Garages cars. A representation was painted on the nearside scuttle of "Old Number One," the famous Hotchkiss engined open two seater with Carbodies coachwork that he ran in the 1925 Lands End Trial and for which he was awarded a Gold Medal.

The two seaters and saloon had been joined later in 1924 by a handsome aluminium bodied open four seater that was marketed as the 14/28 M.G. Super Sports Model. In 1925 a closed two door car, named the Salonette, joined the range. By then the octagonal badge was appearing on the cars' sills plates although its arrival on the radiator was a more



protracted process.

In September 1926 the bullnose Morris on which these early MG's were based was replaced by the flat radiated Cowley and Oxford 14/28. The MG version of the latter, that appeared in 1927, initially perpetuated the 14/28 designation and evolved into the 14/40 Mark IV. It retained the Morris badge on its radiator that was complemented by a German silver MG octagon mounted on the honeycomb

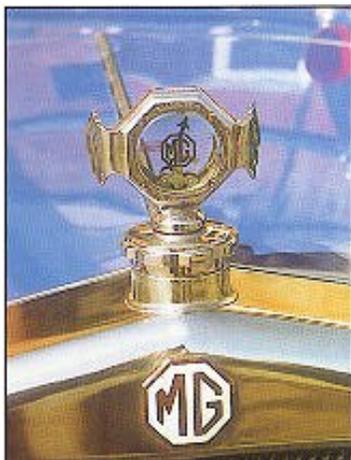


Some cars had also featured a miniature version in the centre of the Morris Oxford radiator badge.

But at the 1927 Motor Show the 1928 season models were distinguished by the octagonal badge positioned in its rightful place on the flat nosed radiator shell. The now familiar chocolate hued initials were set against a cream background,

surely not a coincidence that this colour combination this made famous from 1922 on the carriages of the Great Western Railway trains that served Oxford?

MG demonstrably emerged as a make in its own right with the arrival, in 1928, of the 18/80 which sported the now familiar subtly tapering oblong radiator with distinctive central rib, designed by Kimber himself with advice from Radiator Branch's Ron Goddard. From thereon the octagon and the MG became inseparable. Drivers read from eight sided instruments and that included the Calormeter water temperature indicator. The shape was even applied to the outlines of scuttle ventilators.



Once the MG company was established, in Abingdon, octagonal clocks appeared, along with eight sided table napkin rings in the boardroom whilst the firm's typewriters were fitted with a special "octagonal" key.

For its part, the badge remained essentially unchanged until the arrival of the TC model for which the original colours were replaced by black and white livery. Other backgrounds, namely red, golden for the 1975 "centenary year" cars and even blue followed and it

was not until the appearance, in 1993, of the MGB-based RV8 that the original chocolate and cream combination made a welcome reappearance. This is perpetuated on the current MGF

So William Morris's prophecy to Ted Lee back in 1924 that the badge would never leave the company has proved to be an accurate one. But although MG, along with Rover, is one of the handful of the industry's marques to survive into the 21st century, the Morris make that made possible its creation is no more.

*Jonathan Wood*



Ted Lee could never have imagined how prolific his creation would be, nor in how many ways it would be used. Our own club logo has recently been beautifully transformed to not only include the MG Octagon and Ambassador Bridge, but to also the flags of our two countries and a hint of the Union Jack.