

# The 2015 MGA 60th Anniversary

## Land's End to John o'Groats Tour

By Edward Vandyk

**T**wo years in the planning, and to celebrate the 60th Anniversary of the MGA, Stuart Mumby, George Dutton and others, on behalf of the MGCC MGA Register, organised a tour from Land's End to John o'Groats. From September 7-17 a total of 77 MGAs participated in some of the sections with 46 cars joining to do the whole 1,552 mile planned route, of which 45 made it.

This report is designed to put on record the key points of the Tour but necessarily



cannot cover in any depth the many and varied places visited, the many stories about the people involved, the friends they made, the pleasures they encountered or the challenges they faced. Stuart needs to write the book as he did with the MGA 50th Anniversary Round Britain Tour!

Doug Wallace from Bali kept an excellent blog from which I have drawn, with many photos, on his personal perspective of the Tour which he drove with Derek Simpson. This is available at <http://douglasrpwallace.com>. They did the Tour in the 'White Lady', 768 PMK, with its 1840cc five main bearing engine and five-speed gearbox, out for the first proper drive in 26 years.

Participants came from afar including 21 couples from Australia who shipped 18 MGAs over in containers, from Madeira and, of course, Doug from Bali.

David and Laurel Godwin from Queensland, who have recently driven their MGA from the southern tip of South America to Alaska, left their car in Vancouver and borrowed a car from Geoff Barron in the UK.

Initially it was thought that 60 cars might participate but this number was soon overtaken, leading to the necessity of arranging additional hotels. In the event there was only one night when it proved impossible to accommodate all participants in one town or village. On that occasion the group was divided between Dundonnell and Ullapool, some 25 miles apart.

The Tour involved travelling the country from one end to the other without using motorways or major A roads and incorporating many of the great scenic highlights that Great Britain has to offer.

The route was suggested, not mandatory, and there was no element of competition. The road book was divided into days with both a route, with alternates in some cases, and a description of key features relevant for each day.

The Tour was supported by a number of sponsors including NTG Services and Peter Best Insurance. Support and assistance was

provided by Classic Car Safe LLP, our car storage company, along with our mechanic, Dave Cook, assisted by his wife Mandy, who followed the Tour from hotel to hotel with van and car trailer, dispensing advice, maintenance and a parts package supplied by Brown & Gammons. During the whole trip they only had to recover one car although the list of repairs included numerous coils, dynamos, a master cylinder change and the like.



Sunset over MGAs at Land's End



MGAs on parade before the 'Off'

Getting to Land's End was down to each participant but on the evening of September 6 and in glorious weather, in stark contrast to the miserable August the UK had suffered, some 50 MGAs were on display at the Land's End Hotel, with Stuart handing out the Tour packs and selling ferry tickets for the crossing of the Firth of Clyde.

There had been two casualties at this stage. Russell and Barbara Anderson's car shipped from Perth, Australia broke its crankshaft the day after arrival in the UK. It ended up being repaired by Martin Cawte of Classic MG Services in Fareham and joined the Tour for day four; they participated in a modern Audi hire car until then. Darryl Robins and Ralph King's car suffered clutch failure on arrival at Land's End, the car subsequently being transported to Brown & Gammons for repair and able to re-join the Tour later. Colyn Firth's wife, Chris, had the misfortune to break her ankle at the Land's End Hotel but after a three hour wait at Penzance Hospital and the application of a plaster cast they just carried on.

Land's End also saw the first of many convivial dinners with noise levels routinely a challenge to those of us with impaired hearing. I wonder how many nonsensical responses were made to half heard conversations? The first dinner also led to Stuart's edict of at least one non-Aussie per table.

The itinerary below attempts, in few words, to give the highlights, flavours and anecdotes for each day. It is in part necessarily both incomplete and personal and draws on stories from others.

**Day 1.** Land's End to Barnstable. September 7. 132 miles. Clear blue skies, sunny and warm.

A leisurely 'start when you want' set the tone for the Tour, with MGAs being packed up and cars moving out when their crews were ready for the road. The coastal drive from Land's End up the north west coast of Cornwall started on tiny roads with passing places. Superb sea views and old tin mines illustrate Cornwall's past.

This was an area we knew and the route took us past such well known places as St Ives, Newquay and when we reached Wadebridge we decided to visit Padstow for lunch.

We knew that parking in Padstow was likely to be challenging. The MGA in fact came to the rescue! There was one car park space on the quay which was too narrow for anyone to get into. We saw people try, succeed and then be unable to get out of their car. In we went and out we got from both doors; lack of size has its advantages. So now to lunch, it being nearly 2pm. Padstow is dominated in restaurant terms, and in many other ways, by Rick

Stein, and bookings for the restaurants have to be made weeks if not months ahead. We saw a restaurant right opposite the car park which appeared empty so we walked in and asked for a table. Our request seemed to cause some surprise and we were given the last two seats at the bar. It was only when I saw the menu and the servers' aprons with discreet Rick Stein signatures that I realised we had somehow blagged a table at his premier venue.

A great start for us and on to Barnstable! The route skirted Bodmin Moor and we decided, because of the length of our lunch, to stick with the A39 rather than take the recommended route, and thus we went past Clovelly and along the north facing coast of Bideford Bay, re-joining the route near Bideford.

The first day's casualties included a water pump which turned out to simply be a gasket issue, and a dynamo, the first of three.

One of our Australian contingent managed to run out of fuel near Bude, the only time to my knowledge this happened. He was rescued by the local postman who went and got fuel and in his hurry to return nearly drove another MGA off the road.

**Day 2.** Barnstable to Congresbury. September 8. 146.8 miles. Again sunny and warm, however near the coasts there was a cold sea fret.

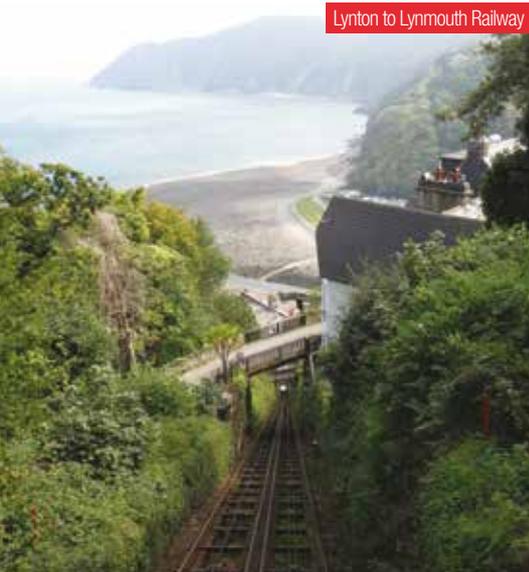
Today saw us continuing down the north Devon coast and crossing Exmoor. We then went inland into north Somerset across the Somerset Levels and through Cheddar in the Mendips before the ending at the Hilton at Cadbury House, Congresbury. Casualties today included a brake failure in Minehead. Brake light switches also started to fail.

First we had a Toll Road in the middle of a forest where there is an honesty box into which you drop your two pound coins, before proceeding gingerly along a road with cliffs to the sea on one side, forest on the other. This ●



Last minute repairs?

Lynton to Lynmouth Railway



was Woody Bay! The Valley of Rocks may be one of the most spectacular sights in this part of England with its rugged landscape of rocky outcrops and awe-inspiring sea views.

The Lynton to Lynmouth railway on the North Exmoor coast was interesting both mechanically, being water driven, and climatically, Lynton being warm and sunny, Lynmouth cold and damp. Lynmouth still commemorates the tragedy of 1952 when it was devastated by flooding. After the clear skies of the coastal stretch, the route took us up steep and narrow roads into the Exmoor Forest, the weather changing dramatically from cool and mist-covered moorland to desolate and far-reaching heather-covered highlands. On past Dunkery Beacon, the highest point on Exmoor and into Somerset. Following up on our gastronomic serendipity the previous day we thought we would try Minehead for lunch, a family resort not, to my knowledge, renowned for its fine cuisine. In the event the food was honest and value for money but it gave us a classic Fawley Towers moment when my son Tom asked

for his BLT bag as a sandwich. The rather imposing woman in the café on the seafront put her hands on her hips, looked us both up and down disapprovingly for what seemed an eternity and then simply said 'no'. You cannot argue with that.

There was then the option to visit the Haynes Motor Museum. After finding what could only be described as a real tea shop in Glastonbury to have a cream tea, this left quite a way to go through the Cheddar Gorge with not that much time remaining, especially as we got lost by missing a Y junction. Hence we arrived rather late at Cadbury House where we then had to join the end of a long queue for beer, as the hotel had seemingly only allocated one server at the bar for the evening.

Doug made best use of the day to nurture the White Lady, teaming up with David and Laurel Godwin to go and see Terry Drinkwater. Terry very kindly agreed to give the White Lady an oil change as she had just completed 1,000 miles on the rebuilt engine.

**Day 3.** Congresbury to Telford. September 9. 170.9 miles. Dry with some cloud and sunny spells.

This would be the longest day's driving yet, 170 miles, likely slow going as many of today's roads were some of the smallest so far. Today's route took us over Brunel's Clifton Suspension Bridge, with an option to visit the SS Great Britain. Over the bridge and just past the zoo we got lost again. The next time we recognised anything we were in the gorge under the suspension bridge on a road that allowed no U turns. A ten mile detour got us back on track and thence into Wales over the old bridge. Down the Wye Valley and past the ruined Tintern Abbey to a stop at Tintern's excellent if unexpected bookshop. Tintern also had a railway station, now long disused, which is a tourist attraction providing worthwhile refreshment and where we met other MGAs. We then went back into

England and on arriving at Symonds Yat Rock found an MGA with bonnet up and with its dynamo, which had been running loose, being extracted. Through some dramatic scenery in the Black Mountains to Hay on Wye and its bookshops which we pillaged for every Jenkins published P G Wodehouse in the town, as my wife is an avid collector. Then after a too leisurely afternoon tea the realisation that once again we had no chance of following the route and getting to dinner on time.

Today's casualties included Doug! The White Lady decided enough for today at the day's end, and stopped! The loss of power looked very much like a fuel pump and Dave was called. He was at

Tour Assistance in action



Tintern Station



Down the road to Hay-on-Wye



Through the Cheddar Gorge



The Australians



the roadside within 15 minutes with van and spares, and quickly diagnosed a loose electrical connection on the SU pump – problem solved.

**Day 4.** Telford to Ainley Top, Elland. September 10. 102.2 miles. Overcast to start with but then sunny.

Our drive today was much easier than yesterday, just 102 miles, but with wonderful scenery passing through the Peak District National Park.

First we had to retrace our steps and see the Ironbridge, then through some spectacular scenery and on to the highlight of today's drive, the Georgian spa town of Buxton.

Buxton seems to be a town with at least two personalities. We started out at the poorer end by the town hall and, indeed, for a while despaired of finding anything smarter. The pubs served no food and the (fish and) chippy brought me a moving personal experience – my first, and I suspect only,

deep fried Mars bar. An opera house, no less, and the largest unsupported dome in Europe, The Devonshire Dome, built in 1779 by the 5th Duke of Devonshire. The dome (145ft) is larger than The Pantheon in Rome (142ft), and is bigger than St Peter's in Rome (138ft) and St Paul's in London (112ft). There are 122 steel support arms in the Dome. All this a long way from anywhere. Our drive after Buxton cut through the stunning scenery of Pennine Yorkshire, culminating in the border at the summit of Holme Moss. Then through some of the more industrialised, yet still rural Yorkshire, and to our hotel. Tonight was the first evening we were exposed to a brief after-dinner performance honouring the day's Tour and the MGA. The rhyming couplets were of high order, the harmonising less so. However I think this was performed with full insight and all credit to John and Pamela Boulton.

**Day 5.** Ainley Top, Elland to Wetheral. September 11. 151.2 miles. Again overcast to start with but then dry and sunny from about 11.30.

Today gave us a combination of the Forest of Bowland and the Lake District. Two routes were offered, one being the tough option of driving over the famous Hardknot and Wrynose Passes in the Lake District. Stuart, in his briefing the previous evening, gave the impression that the harder option was too tough. Surprisingly, it was later revealed that of the six cars taking that option, two involved more stoic crews: Beth Corbett driving solo in her Coupe, and Colyn and Chris Firth, Chris having had her plaster cast replaced in Doncaster. We intended to take the tough route ourselves but unfortunately it took us directly past the gates of a long-standing friend's farm on the southern edge of the Lake District. I had intended to drive on by but as the day wore on we realised something was missing –



'Haworth in the Pennines'



'Beth Corbett crests Hardknot Pass'

lunch. A phone call procured us the promise of a sandwich so up his drive we went to get it, imagining it would be a hand out of the window, a plastic bag with goodies, and thank you and goodbye. We were wrong and decided after the stop that even going the short way through the Lake District would present a challenge in getting to dinner on time. Nevertheless with some spirited driving we retraced our steps and made it via the easier route to the Crown at Wetheral. We were treated there to more post-prandial melodious rhyming couplets.

**Day 6.** Wetheral to Irvine. September 12. 153.9 miles. Rain to start but this cleared by late morning leading to an initially overcast but later brighter afternoon.

Today we crossed the border into Scotland and discovered that the, or at least our, MGA Coupe leaked in quite spectacular 

Procession through Buxton



'Head-on in Straiton'



fashion albeit from places entirely different from the roadster. I don't think it had ever been out in real rain before. After Gretna we chose to visit the Devil's Porridge Museum rather than the Savings Bank Museum at Ruthwell. We then followed the Solway Coast Heritage trail to Dumfries, on to New Galloway, past Clatteringshaws Loch and through the wonderfully scenic Galloway Forest Park.

Just after the forest we found an excellent tea room in Staiton, a one road village of weavers' cottages, hence the wide front doors, soon to have the beautiful rolling backdrop bedecked with 120 wind turbines. After Dalrymple and Prestwick Airport, on to our hotel. At dinner we learnt about the prize to be given for a recommendation of the best story on the Tour, and also that the MGA was apparently the first British sports car into China after the revolution, coming in from Hong Kong.

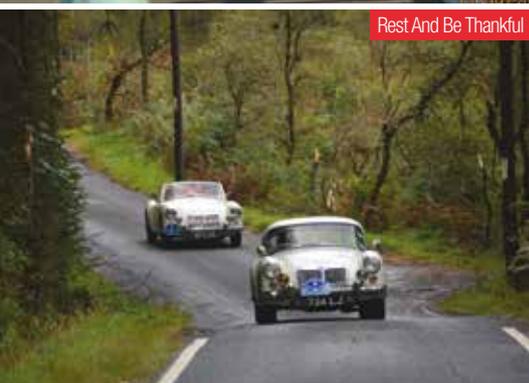
**Day 7.** Irvine to Pitlochry. September 13. 182.2 miles. Initially overcast with some lengthy sunny spells later.

Today's drive would be 182 miles over Scottish A, B and unclassified roads, the longest on the Tour to date. The first hurdle was to cross the Firth of Clyde by ferry at McInroy's Point, over to Hunter's Quay.

After alighting back on to dry land at the Holy Loch, the first section was through the narrow glen of the Argyll Forest Park to Strachur. The next section was on small B roads to the 'Rest And Be Thankful' site where motoring clubs use the old section of the road for hill-climb events. This was



Crossing the Firth of Clyde



Rest And Be Thankful



It's the coil!

named after military personnel in the 1700s who stopped there, having marched for enormous distances. Passing the shores of Loch Fyne and on to the picturesque town of Inverary, a wonderful drive followed through Glen Aray to Dalmally, then on B roads through Glen Orchy to Bridge of Orchy and onwards to Tyndrum and Crianlarich. After Killin and the rushing waters of the Falls of Dochart, the road followed the shores of Loch Tay. Again there was the choice of two routes, we chose the shorter but Doug chose the longer section over the isolated and unclassified road through the mountains of the Ben Lawers National Nature Reserve. The road climbed very steeply from the banks of Loch Tay with initially low gears needed. This road is as remote as one finds but the view back down to the loch is awe-inspiring. Then past the churchyard at Fortingall with the Fortingall Yew, believed to be between 3,000 to 9,000 years old. Doug reported that the route to Tummel Bridge proved as challenging as any yet on the Tour, with sharp bends, steep hills and undulating curves.

Today was the day we broke down, only a coil and correctly diagnosed. Problem was we did not have one, they were all in Dave's van. Lady Luck smiled on us as Roger and Tom Martin were the next car along and well equipped with spares, including a coil. Beth Corbett's clutch went today and a repair was organised in Inverness, with her rejoining the Tour on 15th.

**Day 8.** Pitlochry to Strathpeffer. September 14. 148.6 miles. Sunny to start with and at the end of the day but overcast in between.

Today was notable in part because kippers appeared on the menu for the first time. The route for today started north towards Blair Atholl, past Killiecrankie and past the House of Bruar retail outlet. Onwards north passing the scenic Glen Garry to The Dalwhinnie Distillery which is Scotland's highest distillery, making Highland

malt whisky. Some Tour participants had pre-booked guided tours of this famous distillery with everyone being offered a nip of Dalwhinnie 15-year old malt.

Our road after Dalwhinnie continued to Loch Laggan and through Glen Spean, where the mountainous landscape changed again, now with higher mountains in the far distance, Loch Laggan close by the road on our left, with patches of snow on the upper peaks, left from last winter. Arriving at Spean Bridge, a must see was the Commando Memorial looking out over the confluence of the glens with a vast mountain vista as a backdrop. This much-visited imposing bronze statue of three Commandos is to honour all the Commandos who lost their lives during the Second World War, 1939–1945. This part of the Highlands of Scotland was where the first Commandos endured their tough and rigorous training. After Spean Bridge our route turned north, the picturesque road following the banks of Loch Lochy and then Loch Ness, to Fort Augustus, Invermoriston and reaching curves.



Commando Memorial at Spean Bridge



Swing bridge over the Great Glen



Urquhart Castle

Urquhart Castle at Drumnadrochit. The Tour route after Drumnadrochit took us to Beaulieu. The first couple of miles resembled more a competitive hill climb than a normal road!

Through Beaulieu and on to Muir of Ord, and then a final sprint to Strathpeffer for our night's stop.

**Day 9.** Strathpeffer to Dundonnell or Ullapool. September 15. 180.2 miles to Ullapool. Dry to start with then hours of drizzle. However the day's end was dry and sunny.

This was the day when some of us were going to end up 20 miles away in Ullapool, the other side of the loch. Our drive today was perhaps the most challenging of the Tour to date. Leaving Strathpeffer, our route passed Achnasheen to Lochcarron and on to the peninsula where Applecross looks over the Inner Sound to the island of Raasay. To reach Applecross one has to cross some of Scotland's most inhospitable country. Road signs advise drivers not to attempt this route in wintry conditions. Today was not winter, however low cloud cover hung over the mountains and as we ascended higher towards the Pass of the Cattle, heavy drizzle and dense mist reduced visibility to 50 metres. The Roadbook described this road as one of the few in Scotland that is engineered similarly to the mountain passes of the Alps, with tight hairpin bends that switch back and

forth up the mountain. This road boasts the Beinn Eighe mountain complex. At Poolewe we stopped to visit the world famous subtropical Inverewe Gardens, a very worthwhile experience. The last 25 miles in the late afternoon skirted the shores of Little Loch Broom until we reached our night's hostelry at the Dundonnell Hotel.

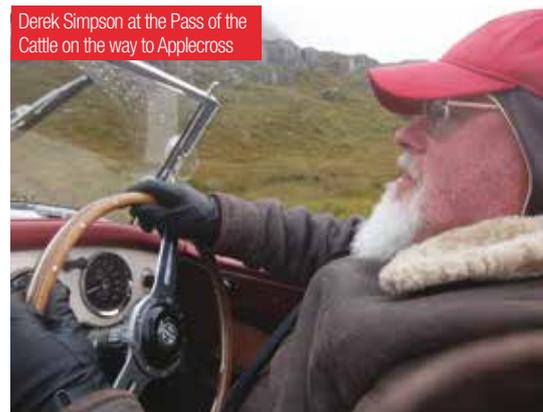
Today was also the day when the Jebbs encountered Scottish road rage on a single track road with passing places, which may well have been an 'A' road in the north of Scotland. A big 4x4 driver seemingly was fed up with other MGAs holding him up on the single track road, so decided to drive the innocent party off the road when he was frustrated by what he saw as possibly a further delay. However north Scotland's single track road with passing places are a bit like Melbourne's hook right turns in that the passing places are counter-intuitively designated not only for passing traffic coming the other way but also for overtaking slower vehicles. Nevertheless, apart from the shock, no harm done thankfully.

What a beautiful setting at Dundonnell with the sun setting over the loch a sight to behold. Then to bed before the last whole day of the Tour with the sound of a wonderful rendition of *Waltzing Matilda* by all the Australian contingent in the bar after dinner still fresh in the memory. But the midges! I had heard about them and even warned about them but this was the first time I saw them. Luckily I was wearing a long-sleeved shirt because 48 hours later my head and hands had taken on a rather more mottled look and texture, still not completely gone a week later.

**Day 10.** Ullapool to Thurso. September 16. 162.5 miles. A beautiful sunny morning but cold and overcast later.

First we had to catch up at Ullapool and this involved a stop at Corrieshalloch Gorge and the Falls of Measach first. A brisk walk through the pine trees helped to clear the head and then crossing the small

Derek Simpson at the Pass of the Cattle on the way to Applecross



suspension bridge we gaped in awe at the incredibly deep gorge with thunderous waterfalls over the steep rock face.

The main route today took us deep into spectacular Assynt, set amidst some of the wildest and most remote mountain and coastal scenery. Having passed Ullapool we then followed the tiny unclassified coastal road with seemingly unending rugged mountains and small lochs, devoid of habitation. We came to Lochinver, on to Unapool then skirting more mountains to Scourie and Laxford Bridge. The true north coast was sighted at Durness, passing Loch Eriboll to Tongue. Today George Dutton broke down on the very last leg of the day to Thurso, about 60 miles out. We sailed past him with bonnet up, he waved in what we took to be a positive sort of way, and we spent the next 15 miles debating whether the wave was positive or anguished and whether we should go back for him. Happily when we got to Thurso we learnt that George had arranged recovery prior to our drive-by.

As this was the last evening before finally arriving at our destination, John o'Groats, all participants who completed the Tour met for drinks, dinner and presentations at the Royal Hotel, Thurso. More than 120 in total!

MGA Register Chairman Peter Morgan thanked all those who had supported 



Sunset at Dundonnell

Our saviours on Day 7, Roger and Tom Martin



This was an 'A' Road!



This was also an 'A' Road



this magnificent event, especially George Dutton for making all the hotel arrangements, Dave the mechanic who had gallantly helped so many cars and drivers, and numerous others who have given their help.

Stuart Mumby was given a resounding thank you for his outstanding efforts over the past two years, planning from scratch and bringing so many MGA enthusiasts together, especially the large Australian brigade who had made the event truly international. Ian Prior led the Australians in a special rendition of Waltzing Matilda with an MG theme. The piper who played Flower of Scotland, Scotland the Brave and other tunes was arranged on the initiative of the Australian, John Crighton.

Beth Corbett won the prize of an MGA beer engine label as nominator, or was it nominee, of the best story.

All that remained was to down one more wee dram then turn in, before the morning drive to John o'Groats.

**Day 11.** Thurso to John o'Groats. September 17. 21.6 miles. Dry and generally sunny.

This then was it, the finale. George had been recovered and was busy in the hotel car park putting in a new cylinder head gasket. Everyone else was off to John o'Groats for a 10am photo shoot



The Jebbs in their MGA 50 Round Britain T shirts at John o'Groats

and then on our way. The Australians, as ever up for more, were going even further north the next day to Orkney. There was a general scrum around the iconic signpost as we managed to get many of the MGAs up there right next to it before and after we had the big group photograph.

The man who made it all happen, Stuart Mumby, was asked to stand in front of the vast collection of MGAs and accept the accolades of all the participants.

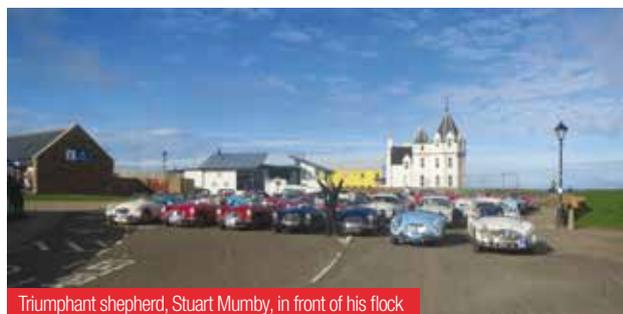
We were then off to Wick and a flight home whilst Dave and Mandy had the long trip south with the MGA in the trailer and one overnight stop in Glasgow.



George Dutton with MGA head gasket.



The Australians Waltzing Matilda at the last night at Thurso



Triumphant shepherd, Stuart Mumby, in front of his flock

Thus ended a truly amazing experience, making good friends and pushing our MGAs to the limit. Luckily our sturdy steeds were generally more than up to the task. The MGA was a truly revolutionary design 60 years ago and was, in my opinion, the first MG that could really keep up with modern traffic and keep going. It proved it once again! On to the 75th anniversary.

POSTSCRIPT – I met up with the Australians again when I took the unused spares back to Brown & Gammons. Here is Ron Gammons helping out an unfortunate Antipodean who had somehow got diesel in his MGA ●



How did that happen?