


MGB IN THE PEAK DISTRICT

Winnat's Pass –
begging to be
driven

Pursuing the peak





The Peak District's spectacular scenery and twisting roads are so exhilarating, you could be forgiven for thinking you've crossed the Pyrenees. But it's right in the heart of England, so let's go

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experience

IMAGINE THE explosive noise of a squadron of World War Two Lancaster bombers, shattering the tranquillity of the most rural slice of England as they prepare for the dambusting raid. What a contrast to the gutsy beat of our MGB as it accelerates up the road to Derwent Reservoir, high up in the Peak District. The otherwise peaceful and vast Victorian pool was the training ground for the heroic mission, bouncing bombs dropping from the planes' underbellies, but today it's a welcome interlude during our visit to this spectacular area that has all the rugged beauty of the French Pyrenees.

But we're not just here for the scenery. We're fuelled with excitement at the prospect of bagging a bargain at H&H Classic Auctions' sale later today in Buxton, right in the heart of the peaks and dales of Derbyshire. Before we get our heady dose of auction fever, we're getting our adrenaline pumping with a drive through the best scenery in the country. The MGB's torquay engine, light steering and robust build will help us get the best out of the steepest and most convoluted roads I've seen all year. There's something touching about driving an MGB through the English countryside. See that octagon badge and familiar chrome grille pass by and you'll well up with enough pride to rival the sight of those Lancasters thundering overhead 64 years ago.

Less than two hours ago, we were in Matlock, the southwest gateway to the Peak District. Like Buxton, this pretty Georgian town was once loved for its hot spring baths, first established by the Romans. Now the bubbling waters have long since given way to shopping malls.

Heading north out of Matlock on the A6, the meandering route along the banks of the river Derwent gives the MGB a chance to warm up. There's no time to relax though: two miles out, you'll see a sign to Two Dales, Chesterfield. This is where the fun begins as you floor the MG's accelerator and let the road's steep hairpin bends propel you skywards to the East Moors. It's the first taste of the gutsy four-pot engine's reputation for stoic hill-chomping. Minutes later, you burst out between farmers' fields for the first glimpse of the sweeping Peak landscapes to the northwest. Their brooding character comes from the dark gritstone once quarried for use in flour mills. You can get up close to it in the miles of surrounding dry stone walls, but right now they make a great backdrop for reflecting the urgent exhaust rasp of the MG's exhaust note. Who needs an Alpine tunnel when you've got so many miles of wall to play with? >>>



Fast, open bends around Ladybower Reservoir get the blood rushing

Thoughts of mountain passes are a prompt to take in a little of the area's motor sport history, although we're not talking hillclimbs. Chatsworth House is the stately home where the likes of Colin McRae and Juha Kankkunen thrilled rally fans. Surprised? You will be when you see Chatsworth's stunning and immaculately designed lawns, an influential piece of 18th century landscape gardening history. In the Eighties and early Nineties, the grounds were a 5.6-mile stage on the Lombard RAC Rally.

These days, gravel-spraying Subarus have given way to busloads of pensioners gawping at the home's genteel furnishings. I'd rather enjoy the B's functional trim as we head on for nearby Bakewell. Yes, that's Bakewell as in the tarts. The almond-flavoured dessert is the result of a local baker's botched attempt at a strawberry tart a century ago. The Old Original Bakewell Pudding Shop (just before the Red Lion pub) will refuel your stomach for the route ahead.

Turning north towards Wardlow, the winding lanes straighten up and encourage you to stretch the 1798cc motor a little. When the straight runs out, I can't resist zigzagging playfully between farmers' fields, enjoying the crisp rack-and-pinion steering and light weight.

A few miles closer and you come across signs to Eyam. The Peak's rich cultural heritage owes a lot to this sleepy village: in 1665 it was infected with the bubonic plague, but a year of self-imposed quarantine by the village rector prevented it from spreading, saving thousands of lives. It's humbling to think of the sacrifice these people made. It got me thinking about how the MGB managed to have an impact at odds with its design, touching half a million lives through its 18-year production run.

Through Hathersage, the allure of the towering peaks to the north pulls us ever deeper into this landscape and its string of

Norwegian fjord-like reservoirs. Their tranquil setting begs you to stop, look and appreciate the great views, but not for long as there's another stretch of Tarmac itching to be scratched further along.

A few miles west of Derwent, you'll find Snake Pass. It's a stretch of challenging A-road that will reward with a chance to get up close to the brooding mass of Kinder Scout peak to the south.

The Snake is most fun on weekends, when the road is less likely to be jammed with labouring trucks on their way to Manchester, but don't let that stop you if you tackle it mid-week. The views of the high peaks to the southwest alone could almost

have you yearning to ditch the MGB for an Ordnance Survey map and a pair of walking boots. Almost.

Whether you stop off at Derwent, blast up the Snake or do both is your choice, but either way you'll need to drop back down to find more of the Peak District's gems, tucked away at the foot of the Hope Valley.


Head east for Castleton and Speedwell Cavern. That might sound like an emporium for engine goodies by Sixties tuning ace John Sprinzel, but don't get too excited:

Speedwell is one of several underground caves in this area and the result of thousands of years of erosion within the underlying limestone rock. Those ancient geological processes also made Speedwell a rich source of minerals. A century ago, the cavern thronged with miners siphoning its veins of lead. Today, the lead is long gone, but the cave is still a treasure trove of glistening stalactites and stalagmites.

If the Speedwell tuning connection has your automotive pulse quickening, you can indulge in a quick stop at Castleton Garage on the town's edge. Don't be deceived by the building's quaint and slightly run-down look. Tucked inside its workshop, there's everything from a basic Austin Seven to a Bugatti Brescia undergoing mechanical tweaking. It's a step back into the Fifties >>>



Clockwise from top left: The Cat and Fiddle Inn; great roads; The Old Original Bakewell Pudding Shop; Chatsworth house; Bugatti Brescia at Castleton Garage; not at all at sea



The **tranquil** setting begs you to stop, look and appreciate the great **views**, but there's another stretch of Tarmac waiting

Derwent reservoir is a peaceful spot for reflection before more Peak experiences



If Winnat's Pass doesn't excite you, see a doctor



that extends outside too – owner Roger Thorpe stocks four star petrol on his forecourt and will happily fill the tank for you.

Now the MG's tank is brimmed and ready for tackling Winnat's Pass to take us over the notorious Mam Tor, known to locals as the shimmering peak. At 517m, it's the area's second highest hill. That's probably why the Romans built a string of fortresses along its crest, although they clearly hadn't heard about its reputation for frequent landslides that led to the name. The most recent, back in the Sixties, was severe enough to block this road, but right now nothing is in our way as the MG's twin-SU carburettors slurp in loads of fresh mountain air to power us up Winnat's deep ravine.

As the road rises, the MG's exhaust note takes on an urgent beat. Halfway up, the pass's tight turns are a chance to explore the car's cornering abilities again. A quick heave on the small and chunky leather-covered steering wheel and the MGB noses round easily, its live rear axle

lightening up enough to hint at oversteer. At times, the steep incline has us dropping into second gear although that's always a pleasure with the deliciously crisp and precise gearchange. Swapping cogs is so easy you'll do it just to send the tachometer needle spinning for the hell of it. Thankfully, the cast-iron engine feels burst-proof. Sure, it lacks the aural delight of a six-cylinder or the peaky race-bred feel of an Italian twin-cam, but it's got a down-to-earth charisma that's as warm and comforting as seeing steak and ale pie on a pub menu.

Cresting over the pass, there's just time to take in the view across the Peaks, but there's an auction to get

1970 MGB ROADSTER

Engine 1798cc, in-line, four-cylinder, ohv, twin SU carburettors
Power and torque 92bhp @ 5400rpm; 110lbft @ 3000rpm
Transmission Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive
Steering Rack-and-pinion
Suspension Front: independent, wishbones, coil springs, lever-arm dampers, anti-roll bar. Rear: live-axle, leaf springs, lever-arm dampers
Brakes Discs front, drums rear
Weight 1060kg (2337lb)
Performance Top speed: 104mph; 0-60mph: 12.1sec
Cost new £1234 **Value now** £7000

to and the clock's ticking.

The fun's not over just yet: a few miles south of Kettlethume is the Cat and Fiddle, an A-road between Macclesfield and Buxton that packs enough entertainment to keep Michael Schumacher's knuckles white.

The road is named after what was once the highest licensed pub in England and it's regarded as a stretch of pure petrolhead nirvana. Turn left and you'll discover why. The Cat (as it's name is often abbreviated to) is a series of fast curves and switchbacks along the crest of a hill. It seems tame for the first half a mile as the gentle switchbacks lull you with views either side, but the curves get progressively tighter. Each one becomes a challenge to brake a little later and floor the MG's accelerator a little earlier. It's a thrilling but deceptive test of skill and nerve and

its reputation goes back a long way: take a nose around the pub and you'll see photographs of a group of Rolls-Royce Silver Ghosts parked outside. They were here on shake-down for the 1907 Scottish Reliability Trial.

Down to Buxton on the final few miles of this drive, the Cat elicits a renewed appreciation for Rolls-Royce's engineering. It's the same with the MG's abilities, in a way. The last few invigorating hours have shown how the B's combination of simple, no-nonsense engineering is as key to the driving enjoyment as its spirit-of-the-Sixties freedom is to its soul. Let's hope there's one inside going under the hammer. **CA**

TIME TO GET HAMMERED



If you've never been to an auction, prepare to be tempted by cars you never thought you'd buy

H&H CLASSIC AUCTIONS holds regular sales at Buxton's Pavilion Gardens and caters for every type of buyer, from first-timers hankering after a starter classic to connoisseur collectors. Its November 22 sale included a pre-war Lagonda Tourer, a Citroën DS21 Decapotable, two Jaguar E-types, a rally-prepared Porsche 911 and a Ferrari F355 Spider.

Just seeing the cars gleaming and on display is enough to loosen your wallet, but the bidders are a seasoned lot and aren't keen to part with cash in a

hurry. Which means bidding is initially slow, with a Big 'Healey struggling to make £15,500 (£18,000-22,000 estimate) and an equally nice Jaguar Mk2 for £8500 (estimate £10,000-12,000). But it all warms up when the top stuff comes under the hammer and H&H boss Simon Hope flexes his auctioneer skills to fuel the competitive atmosphere. Today, a 1931 Le Mans Talbot shoot up to a staggering £280,000 (see Expert Buyer, p98) before the hammer falls. It's all a little intoxicating at

times, especially when the numbers are so big, but there are plenty of bargains up for grabs: an Austin-Healey Sprite for £1600 anyone? Or how about a BMW 633CSI for £800. It's almost rude not to, although you needn't feel compelled to bid as spectators are welcome. Of course if you do, it pays to do a little homework on the value of the model you're keen on.

H&H's next Buxton sale is April 12. So get driving and get bidding. Just pretend it's a treat for Mothers' Day.

Thanks to Alan Dyer of the MG Owners' Club (www.mgownersclub.co.uk) for the loan of his MGB and The Pavilion Gardens, Buxton (www.paviliongardens.co.uk).



Where else in England could you beat the driving in the Peaks? Share your opinions on the forum at www.classiccarsmagazine.co.uk

There's something touching about **driving** an **MGB** through the English **countryside**



The viaduct at Mansal Head, between Matlock and Bakewell, provides good gawping. Ah, England