

Your **MG** stories

Everybody has a story to tell, and we want to hear yours. This could be a lifetime's experience of owning the same MG, initial impressions of the one you have just bought, memories of an adventure, or indeed any other angle.

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Highland MG owners go off grid



What do you do when your home is in the Scottish Highlands, already considered remote by many, and you want to get away from it all? Well, the Highland MGOC decided to go 'off grid' at Britain's most remote hotel, the Garvault House in Sutherland.

REPORT: RICHARD JENNER **PHOTOS:** RICHARD JENNER, TIM MOORE, RICHARD PENMAN

The Garvault is not near anywhere, but you could find it if you follow the River Helmsdale up through the Strath of Kildonan (A897 single track), turning off onto the B871 (narrow single-track road) at Kinbrace for a further 7 miles. The hotel is off grid in the sense that it is not connected to the national grid or mains water and relies on a combination of solar energy,

salt-water battery storage, wood and peat burning fires, with some generator back-up if required and a gas tank for cooking. Water comes from a hill spring and wastewater goes to a reed bed. Despite all this, there is WiFi and some 4G, but there are no irons, room kettles and only one hair dryer (on demand). If this paints a picture that is stark, nothing could be further from the truth – the hotel has a homely atmosphere

reinforced by the warm and personal welcome you will receive from Adrian Aderyn and his staff.

We took nine cars, and as our membership is scattered over an area bigger than Belgium, some went direct to the Garvault while five MGs met up on the first day at the Highland Farm Café close to Dingwall. The really fine spell of weather had inevitably broken, but it was at least dry, although the northerly wind was biting. After a coffee, Tim and Christine Moore in the CGT took the direct route (A9 to Helmsdale) to the Garvault as they had suggested the hotel and put together the Wednesday itinerary and wanted to be ahead of the rest of the field. The other four MGs (Malcolm Hope in the MGA, Dawn and Dave Tennant in an MGB GT, me in my Midget 1500 and



Tony Smith in his 85th TF) took the scenic route over the Struie to Ardgay, Bonar Bridge and the Falls of Shin, to lunch in Lairg. This is a much quieter route than the A9, which is part of the NC500, with excellent roads.

After lunch we left Lairg on the single-track A836 towards Tongue. We stopped to view the new wind farm at Creag Riabhach which will eventually have 22 turbines with a maximum tip height of 125 metres. Opinions about onshore wind are split, but there is something surreal in seeing a moving turbine tip seemingly appear from a ridge in front of you as you approach the farm. It will generate up to 72Mw.

At Altnaharra (often recording the coldest winter temperatures in Britain and certainly chilly), we turned off onto the B873 to run alongside Loch Naver. The B873 is quite narrow, but the surface was excellent as it benefits from forestry extraction funding. We stopped at Rosal to read about the township of more than 70 homes whose population was swept away by the clearances. At Syre, we turned onto the B871 for the final 10 miles or so to the Garvaul.

As well as Tim and Christine, Richard and Jane Penman were ahead of us



Richard Penman's MG TF.



Margaret Brock's Midget at Garvaul.



Garvaul, with Tim Moore's CGT.

in their TF, as were Margaret and Stuart Brock in their GAN5 Midget. Stuart is our treasurer, so it is always a relief when he arrives! Nick and Patsy Thompson and Nick and Jean Simpson completed our party, but sadly had to leave their MGs at home.

So 15 of us sat down together for a three-course dinner cooked by Ollie (from Switzerland) and served by Isobel (from Mexico) and Diego (from Columbia). Zach (from the USA) was the fourth member of staff – because of the remoteness, staff need to live

in and Adrian recruits via Work Away. He has a team of regulars who give him two hours of labour a day for their board and lodgings and are paid for the rest of their time. Dinner was followed by a quiz set by Tim and Christine – one round on cars and a second round of cryptic clues where the answers were the names of Scottish castles. It was a jovial evening.

We woke on Wednesday to cars covered in a light dusting of snow. Tim and Christine had put together the programme for the day and we set off individually to the Forsinard Flows RSPB reserve on the A897. The visitors' centre is in the former railway station, although the line (the Far North line, Inverness to Wick) is still active and trains still stop at Forsinard. As the RSPB explains, blanket bog is a rare type of peatland which only forms in cool places with plenty of rain and that covers the landscape like a blanket. The plants which grow do not fully rot away when they die, due to the acidic and wet conditions found, but build up





Malcolm Hope's MGA at the Struie.



The RSPB viewing tower.



Dave Tennant's MG BGT.

'Most of us with convertibles dropped the hood for the next leg of the journey, which involved about five miles of the NC500'

deep layers of peat. Sphagnum moss is the main peat-forming plant in the Flow Country, where bogs have been growing for over 10,000 years and the peat is now 10m deep in places.

Peat bogs are an important defence against climate change because the dead plants in the peat contain carbon. As long as the peat remains wet, this carbon stays locked up, preventing its release as carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Although peatlands cover just 3% of the world's land area, they hold nearly 30% of all terrestrial carbon. The Flow Country's blanket bogs alone store more than three times the amount of carbon found in all of Britain's woodlands. They are also areas of international importance for biodiversity and play a key role in water regulation and water quality, and pollen preserved within the peat acts as an important record of past environments.

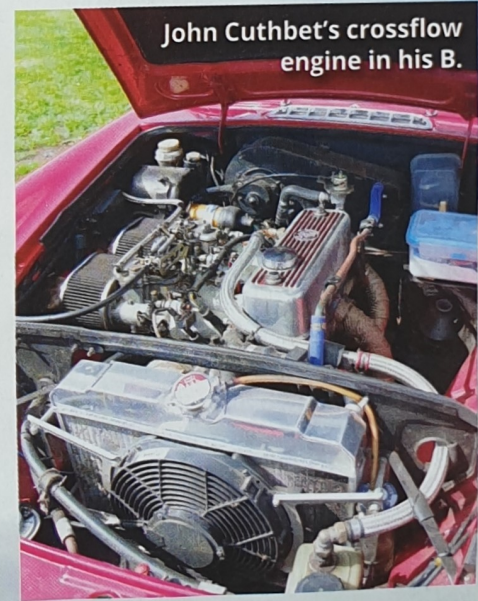
We walked on boards to the viewing tower which opens up a spectacular panorama of bog. Returning to the cars, most of us with convertibles dropped

the hood for the next leg of the journey, the drive to Halkirk in Caithness. This involved about five miles of the NC500 before we turned off onto minor roads just past Reay. Orkney was visible between showers (most of which missed us), as was the famous nuclear power station at Dounreay which is being decommissioned.

Halkirk claims to be Scotland's oldest planned village. It lies on the River Thurso and the grid pattern of streets confirms the planned nature of the village. Caithness stone and slate is much in evidence in the buildings, some of which are quite grand. John and Val Cuthbert who live locally joined us for lunch in their impressive BGT which has an MSX (made in the USA) alloy crossflow head and twin Weber 45 DCOE carburetors. John has gas-flowed the head, raised the compression ratio and re-profiled the valves. The inlet manifolds have been matched to the ports and carburetors and the exhaust manifold is by Manifold. He has an electronic ignition system – the one

downside to the crossflow with the big Webers is that the distributor is totally hidden. John and Val had completed the MG Liège-Brescia-Liège in July 2022; just getting to the start involved an epic journey from Caithness! Apparently, the engine never missed a beat over the 10 days of hard driving, but the brake fluid boiled descending the Stelvio.

Our main purpose though for visiting Halkirk was to tour the Halkirk Heritage and Vintage Motor Centre. The centre



John Cuthbert's crossflow engine in his B.



opened just a year ago (the society had formed in 2006) and is in an old school building. It was the dream of the local garage owner (a Rover then MG-Rover dealership), the late Edward Sutherland, who had an extensive collection of cars. We were welcomed by Chris Eyre, the society's chairman, (and the owner of a BGT) and a group of volunteers who had opened up especially for our visit.

There is a good display over two rooms of cars, some pre-WW2, and with a lot of related memorabilia. MG is well represented with posters, books, signs and a beautiful MG ZB Magnette. Nothing is cordoned off and you can get right up to the cars, and even stick your nose through the windows for that indefinable old car whiff. Chris was on hand to open bonnets for those who like that sort of thing (me!). Other rooms cover local heritage, including an impressive and thought-provoking display of models and dioramas by local World War One historian John Brotherston. If you are doing the NC500 or touring in the area, you should find the time to visit.

Following our visit to the Heritage and Vintage Motor Centre we had a 60-mile drive back to the Garvaut. This involved going through Thurso to allow a refuel (E5 available at the Bridgend Filling Station) then following the NC500 route to Bettyhill where we turned off onto the B871 back to the hotel via Syre. We all sat down again together that evening for another three-course dinner and the craic was good, although a few were flagging after a full day and much fresh air.

On our last morning we breakfasted together at the slightly later time of 08:30am before gathering to pay



The ZB at Halkirk.

our bar bills. While some had paid as they drank, Adrian runs individual bar books for his guests and had the bills, all handwritten, ready in discrete envelopes. Although the hotel does have WiFi, the signal is not strong enough to support a card machine, so Adrian takes cash or cheques, but his preferred method of payment is that you take your bill home and then BACS him the payment – trust in his guests indeed. We then headed to our homes on a wet day (the only day when my roof stayed up) with most of us taking the Helmsdale road. This turned out not to be as direct as we hoped, and we were caught in re-surfacing which closed the single track for around 45 minutes. I passed the time listening to Long Wave on the original radio cassette in the Midget 1500 – LW worked where FM would not.

Highland MG Owners' Club (area 0102) is a small group of around 40

family memberships, though not everyone resides in the Highlands. We run a Spring Saunter (two nights) and an Autumn Amble (three nights) every year as well as monthly drives to lunch from April to September (including a Drive it Day event). We also attend a few local car shows as a group. With everyone spread far and wide, our events tend to be quite small, perhaps a dozen MGs, but we like the intimacy of our small group of friends. It also means that the organizational overhead is fairly small.

For our trip to the Garvaut, Tim and Christine sorted out the Wednesday route, arranged lunch and the visit to the Halkirk Heritage and Vintage Motor Centre as well as the Tuesday evening quiz. We are always happy to join up for a chat with MG owners visiting the Highlands and provide advice on routes. Our contact details can be found in the Regional News.

