



Peter during a trial in his blown Morris Minor. Inset: his first race car - an MG P-Type



The Early Years

A country race track "somewhere in Victoria" in 1961. A Morris 850 had suffered a DNF, due to oil on the clutch, on its maiden run. It was an inauspicious start for a pairing that would soon become synonymous with each other – Peter Manton and racing Minis.

Gerald Peter Manton was born in Melbourne in 1922. He lived with his parents, then later his mother, in Orrong Rd, Toorak. He had two sisters, Audrey and Judith, and was considered by all who knew him as a true gentleman and all-round good bloke.

He was not very scholastic – apparently, he failed his leaving certificate five times at Melbourne Grammar School "before they gave up in despair and sent him to university without matriculation".

He raced a variety of cars for over twenty years before he got his first Mini, but it is the Minis for which he became, and remains, famous. His first competitive drive was in the 1939 Sun Rally, in his mother's Austin 16 – borrowed without her knowledge. That wouldn't have gone down too well, as he broke the differential on the event.

Peter was declared unfit for service during the war, due to a duodenal ulcer, and went to work at the Government Aircraft Factory at Fisherman's Bend. He did a two-year apprenticeship, augmented by part-time study at university, but never qualified as an engineer. He worked in Product Engineering and by the end of the war was in charge of the Main Assembly Workshop.

During this time he met Neville Watts, an engineer who worked in Planning Detail, who shared Peter's interest in cars, particularly for making them go faster.

Peter left GAF in around 1951 and went to work for Jack Ould at Monaro Motors (named after the nearby Monaro Rd, where it had probably originated) in Malvern Rd, Malvern. They were selling MGs and manufacturing various improvement parts, like alloy aero screens, side covers and rocker covers.

This began the performance equipment business in Australia, as Monaro Motors was the first of what would later be called Speed Shops.

In December 1970 Bill Tuckey reported in *Sports Car World*, in a retrospective on Peter's career, that "Monaro's were agents for Wade superchargers and he ran a puffed side-valve (Morris Minor) in rallies, but for racing he made up what was to be the first twin-carburettor outfit for the little Miceys".



Early Australian Morris 850 - Templestowe 1962



Sprite in action - Albert Park, 1960.

"The thing snowballed rapidly and from making a few sets of twin jugs they became the sole Victorian distributors for SU... Manton swung over to design and research after spending his time on the lathe, buying car after car and inventing twin carburettor manifolds for each new one."

Brother-in-law, long-time friend and one-time employee Stephen Wilkins recently recalled; "They did all sorts of wild things with Morris Minors. They put superchargers on, altered the suspension around a bit and made extra bits like special valve springs. I had one then, and they put the valve springs in mine, and it transformed the thing. Then they got onto Austin A30s and MG TCs. They had lots of parts for those – aero screens, filler caps, all sorts of modifications, and fins to put onto the brake drums for cooling."

Peter's first racecar had been a prewar P-Type MG, which he stripped and completely rebuilt. His first "proper" race was in this car at Mt Druitt, but he mainly used the MG for hillclimbs and the occasional trial.

Then came the blown Morris Minor, and by the mid-1950s he was making a name for himself in a seriously modified Austin A30, and an MG TC. He drove Jack Ould's Porsche 1500 Speedster once at the Albert Park in 1956, with dire results. Coming into Power



Racing the Morris 850 at Sandown, 1962. Photo by Autopics.

House Corner he shot off the track and turned end-over-end, finishing up on one of the greens on the golf course, and putting him out of racing for six months.

By 1960 he was a regular in his supercharged and lightened Morris Major, entered in races as the Monaro Major, and breaking class records at circuits and hillclimbs across the country. This was one of the fastest Sports Closed cars in Australia and was compared favourably with Bob Holden's Repco-powered FE Holden, and Gavin Youl's MGA Twin Cam-powered Austin Lancer.

Neville Watts had been helping Peter out with most of these engineering feats, and remembers the extent the pair went to with the Major. "I joined the Light Car Club about 1944 or 1945, and he was in the club at that stage. He used to come out here, and I was quite friendly with him, and I'd say I'll fix that, and that sort of thing."

"I remember that Morris Major. He supercharged it, and it had a Derrington alloy head on it, twin-cam conrods, and it used to have sodium-cooled exhaust valves. They were £10 each at the time and I thought they were frightfully dear. The stems were hollow, and they were filled with sodium. They were like aircraft valves. He had a Marshall blower, and it was always out at the agents in Airport West being serviced. We had trouble driving it. It required 15hp to drive the blower, and



Early UK Mini - Templestowe 1962

an A-section V-belt wouldn't take 15hp, so we chain-drove it. It had the duplex chain from a B-series Morris engine, but the chain used to go blue and destroy itself."

According to Bill Stuckey; "Manton was very friendly with Frank Hallam, Charlie Dean and the rest of the Repco boys in those halcyon days when Repco could smile benignly on the bunch of itinerant hot rodders in what was to become its design department. Between them they pioneered a lot of Australia's dyno testing techniques on Manton's Marvellous Major."



Peter also raced one of the first Austin Healey Sprites in the country, suitably modified, as he recalled to Stuckey in 1970. "I decided there was not enough potential in the A-series motor and I bought a new 1100 Climax. John Sheppard was working on the car then and it was a real little dart, with close-ratio box and fibreglass nose."

By this time, Peter was a partner in Monaro Motors (buying Ould out when they moved to Spencer St. in the city) and had formed lasting friendships with many people at BMC. In the Armstrong 500 at Phillip Island in 1960, he was in the official BMC factory team, driving a production Major alongside Barry Topen - finishing fourth outright and second in class. It was around this time that he met Brian Foley, who was in the BMC team in an Austin Lancer.



Peter at work in his office.

Peter always believed that light weight and a good power-to-weight ratio were critical for a successful racecar. With his experience with the A-series engine and his relationship with BMC, he was understandably impressed by the Mini's potential right from the start.

He obtained one of the first Minis in Australia (perhaps one of the imported evaluation cars) and, after that false start mentioned earlier, was soon making people take notice.

Australian Motor Sports were very complimentary in their report on the Hume Weir races of 17 September 1961. "The most crowd pleasing exhibition was put on by Peter Manton in the Morris 850, otherwise described on the day as the "Mini Minor" or "Matchbox Morris". Manton won the Division 2 Touring Car race and later kept all at bay to win the principal event of the day, the Albury & District Car Club Trophy Race."

With Neville Watts' assistance the car was stroked to 1000cc and many other problems sorted out, as Neville recalls. "The first time he drove it, the clutch filled with oil. They had a pressure feed on the rear of the primary gear.

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997cc Cooper - Sandown 1963.