

FEATURE

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF THE LONDON - SYDNEY MARATHON

Which was run between November 24th and
December 17th, 1968

TEXT BOB RUPANI



The original London to Sydney rally is possibly the world's greatest motoring adventure. It covered 16,000 km and went through India with Dr. Bomsji Wadia also taking part. Interestingly, it was conceived because of the gloomy mood in Britain due to the devaluation of the pound. The Daily Express newspaper decided to create and sponsor an event that would raise spirits by displaying England's engineering expertise which would boost exports. The Sydney Telegraph also stepped in to support the event.

The idea of a rally from London to Sydney captured almost everyone's imagination. Many automobile manufacturers and the world's top drivers participated; with 98 cars starting from London's Crystal Palace. They went to Paris, then Turin, Belgrade onto Istanbul across the famous River Bosphorus by ferry, from there to Iran, Kabul and over the Khyber Pass to Delhi and then down to Bombay. From here, the first

72 cars to arrive (maximum capacity of the ship) were transported by sea on December 5th, 1968, to Australia. Amazingly, both Pakistan and India ignored their differences and opened the sealed borders for the competitors.

The leader at Bombay was British rally ace Roger Clark in a Lotus Cortina, followed by one of the early "Flying Finns" Simo Lampinen's Ford Taunus and Lucien Bianchi's Citroen DS21 in third. In Australia where the conditions were alien to most apart from the Australians, the leader board changed almost daily. There were many breakdowns and accidents with the drivers and co-drivers doing repairs on the cars, something unheard of these days. Eventually, 56 cars finished the marathon with Andrew Cowan winning in a Hillman Hunter, Paddy Hopkirk second in a BMC 1800 and Australian Ian Vaughan was third in his Ford Falcon. After Cowan's victory, Hillman dealers in Australia were flooded with orders! The event had achieved its aim.





50 years after the first London to Sydney Marathon took place, Dr. Boms Wadia says, "It was one of the most memorable adventures of my life. I loved it so much, that I even took part in the 1977 event. In the first one in 1968, my teammates were Farokh Kaka and K Tarmaster. All of us were amateurs and all I had was my love for cars and long drives. I also thought myself to be a skillful driver, but I was nowhere close to those international professional champions." Prod Dr. Wadia and he eagerly adds, "When it became known that I was keen to participate in the world's biggest motoring adventure ever, one of my patients gifted me a Ford Cortina Lotus MKII. Back then it was one of the most popular cars for competition and I got mine prepared in the UK itself and left it to the experts to decide what to do. The only thing I insisted on was that the car be painted red, my favourite colour. As many as 20 participants had opted to drive Cortinas in the rally, and the competition number I was allotted was 81. At the start in London, we had many Indians, mainly Sikhs and Gujaratis cheering for us and giving us a warm send-off."

Dr. Boms Wadia was one of India's leading and most respected gynaecologists at that time, and by all accounts did fairly well in the 1968 event. He and his team-mates did not have any support crew or big backing. They carried whatever they needed in the car itself and if they needed any mechanical assistance,

they approached local mechanics wherever they found them.

Dr. Wadia's team maintained a respectable pace, though they never really rivalled their seasoned competitors. Some of the best drivers in the world were fighting fiercely for every minute and the leadership position changed often. Shortly before the Khyber Pass, Wadia's Lotus Cortina ran into serious mechanical problems. By the time they got it fixed with the help of some locals, too much time had been lost. Dr. Boms Wadia did drive up to Bombay his home city, but sadly he was out of the competition and could not board the ship to Australia. But being the great sportsman that he is, he stood on the docks at Ballard Pier and helped other participants load their cars for the journey across the sea to Australia. He shouted instructions at the loaders in Hindi, spoke to the customs staff and ensured everything went smoothly for the others. This was appreciated by almost all the competitors. In fact many of them are known to have said that their Indian experience was unforgettable. They fondly recall the massive crowds, the cows, the biggest ever public reception in Indore, the many parties in Bombay including some fun ones at the Royal Yacht Club and Taj Mahal Hotel, and the resourceful mechanics who helped fix many a difficult problem.

Dr. Boms Wadia's Lotus Cortina was to be sent back after the event. But he had grown fond of it and applied for permission to the Collector of Bombay to keep it. Permission was fortunately

granted and later when it was announced that the second London to Sydney would be run in 1977, Dr. Boms Wadia decided to take part again. Air India stepped forward to help and flew the same Lotus Cortina to London for preparation. This time, his teammates were Adi Malgham and Suresh Naik, both very fine car tuners capable of fixing most problems. Despite this, they were sadly forced to drop out in Iran.

Soon after in 1980, the first ever Himalayan Rally was held and Dr. Boms Wadia participated in a Toyota Celica GT that had again been gifted to him by a patient. His co-driver was Suresh Naik and Dr. Wadia also met the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at the Himalayan.

But what of the Lotus Cortina? Well, as you can see in the photographs published here for the first time ever, it still survives and is very much in our country. Almost the entire body is intact and both the engine and gearbox remain in the car. Due to Dr. Wadia's advancing age and several health related issues, he has been unable to really care for it and the neglect and passage of time have taken its toll on this illustrious Cortina. But it can still be saved and restored to all its glory. It will of course require a fair bit of money and lots of dedicated work. But it can be done. I am very keen to see this car brought back again to life and we at OVERDRIVE are willing to commit ourselves to this project. But we need support. In case you are willing to help, please contact the author at bob@overdrive.co.in.



DR. BOMS WADIA

Is the only Indian to have participated in both the first (1968) and second (1977), London to Sydney Marathon Rallies



RESTORED MGB

...that participated in the 1968 London to Sydney was recently revived and brought to life with support from enthusiasts

This MGB took part in the 1968 London to Sydney Marathon and finished in 42nd place overall. It was driven by Jean Denton, who was well-known for her rallying exploits. Later she enjoyed success as a business woman and as a government minister, becoming Baroness Denton in 1991. The car was prepared by her husband Tony Denton and her co-driver Tom Boyce, whose preparation work included double-welded seams, uprated headlamps and a double fuel tank that filled the boot. The passenger seat was modified to recline into a bed, which could be converted back into a seat for use during the day, while a selection of spares was stowed beneath it.

She reached the Bombay control having accumulated 319 points. But it was not her performance that was bothering her, but a painful tooth. It seems that she met an Indian businessman who took her to his dentist and got her infected tooth removed and no payment was taken, as she was participating in the London Sydney marathon.

Not much is known of what happened to the MGB after the 1968 event. Around 2015, the MG Car Club's MGB Register found and rescued this works-backed Jean Denton MGB from a scrapyards in Southampton, England. It had been painted purple and looked like a regular MGB apart from the bracket for the additional spare wheel on the boot, a roll bar, some badges, the Halda Meter, extra filler for the additional fuel tank, etc.

The MGB Register decided this car was a valuable part of Britain's motorsport heritage and it needed to be restored and preserved. They asked their members and other auto enthusiasts for support and collected donations to fund

the restoration of the MGB. All those who contributed an amount of over 25 pounds have their names displayed under the boot or bonnet. A team of experts restored the MGB to its period works condition, with support from British Motor Heritage, and Bicester College's Motorsport students, who are part of the Federation of British Historic Vehicle Clubs' apprenticeship scheme. Interestingly, during the 1968 event, the MGB had bust a radiator and the MG Club Australia Members who were providing backup to Jean, replaced it with one pulled out from one of their members cars! So this MGB has always enjoyed the support of club members.

The fully restored black and gold MGB with competition no 47, was displayed at the MG Car Club's annual show MG Live and attracted a lot of attention. Enthusiasts and common folk alike were happy to see it, and this really makes me hope and pray that we are able to do something similar to Dr. Bomsji Wadia's Lotus Cortina, featured in the previous pages.



HAVE MG WILL TRAVEL

by Jean Denton

Jean Denton was 26 before she had ever driven a car. A year after gaining her licence she was racing with such success that in 1968 she won the British Women's Racing Drivers' Championship. The same year she also competed in an MGB on the London to Sydney Marathon driving the only sports car to complete the gruelling event. She also finished 18th out of 46 entries in the 1970 Mexico World Cup Rally.

Today Jean is Managing Director of Electroline and an acknowledged leading businesswoman. Not surprisingly she is also in demand as a speaker and writer on all aspects of motoring and the motor industry. She is a regular broadcaster who has presented her own award-winning programme on commercial radio and writes a regular column for Women's World magazine.

An avid MG enthusiast, Jean recalls her days association with the marque and, in particular, her Marston success.



The restored MGB was unveiled by Pete and Sharron Smith, both of whom helped build the car originally with Tom Boyce and Jean's husband, Tony Denton