

V8 Winter in France 2008

Gordon Hesketh-Jones (Harvest Gold 1904) has made many tours in Mainland Europe, Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in his MGBGTV8 with his wife Jennifer so is well used to a heavy workload in maintaining the car and preparing it for lengthy tours in all weathers. Here he relates how he took the V8 to France in mid Winter and suffered a series of frustrating problems caused by the unreliability of poor quality replacement fuel pumps. (Mar 08)

I've lost count of how many times we have driven to or across France, but it is somewhere between 35 and 45 trips, however every single one of these was during the months of May through to September, so we decided to try to see France at a different time of the year. If you think about Summer holidays your clothes will all be light-weight, but the reverse applies in Winter so you have to pack loads of heavy or water-proof clothing, all of which, being space-hungry, is a challenge in any Classic MG. Furthermore, to add to the potential stress, if we encountered serious snow, the new set of MOSS rear springs just fitted were so weak that almost half of the rear tyre is covered by the bodywork (see photo [DSC01411](#)) so I wouldn't be able to fit my snow chains - even if I could find the space to carry them! This therefore ruled out visiting our friends from MG Italia who were having a skiing week at Bormio in the Italian Alps.

Although we live in Cornwall, we did not fancy a eight hour sea crossing from Plymouth with the risk of Winter gales, so we headed for Dover where Sea France offer a return fare of just £86 in the Winter. Their modern ferries are so huge and have so many under-water stabilisers that you really don't feel the waves, even though the wind was blowing at Force 5 to Force 7. Obviously at this time of the year the ferries are 90% empty so that means that you can relax and/or sleep during the crossing. We could of course have crossed by using the Channel Tunnel, but after a 360 mile drive from West Cornwall to Dover the longer break on the ferry was welcome.

Improved heater performance

Having carried out the peer review work on Bill McCulloch's well-researched article into the over-heating in the MGBV8 (V8NOTE374), I took note of the fact that reducing the pressure level of the cap on the overflow tank will increase the running temperature by 3°F per 1lb of reduction. My heater in the V8 has always seemed to be pretty pathetic and certainly would not let us be comfortable in ambients of 4°C or less, so I removed the standard 15lb cap and fitted a 10lb cap instead. Certainly this immediately gave us a decent heater (at last) but the run up to Dover was in an ambient of around 12°C so the engine temperature climbed too quickly in traffic jams or when manoeuvring. So at Dover I reverted to the

standard 15lb cap – just as well as the weather for the rest of the trip would see ambients every day of between 10°C and 14°C. At least however the theory was proved and the 10lb cap is now in my on-board spares kit ready for cold spells.

First stop - Amiens

Our first destination after landing in France was to Amiens where we wanted to re-visit the beautiful cathedral. We found the IBIS Hotel without problems even in the dark, but whether the “steak” served as part of the meal that night came from a horse, a donkey or a camel I am not certain. Even our dreaded Little Chef chain would have been ashamed to serve meat like that. The following morning we headed off for the cathedral but currently the whole of the centre of Amiens is a huge construction site with tunnels, under-passes and fly-overs galore being dug out or built. Suffice to say that we saw the wonderful cathedral spire from North, East, South and West but never managed to find a way to it! After some 90 minutes we gave up the unequal struggle, admitted defeat and headed for the A26 motorway which would take us to the deep South.

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Living in crowded England it is difficult to express the sheer pleasure of burbling down a virtually deserted motorway at 2,500rpm in bright Winter sun, with the oil pressure constant at 41psi and the water temperature keeping us comfortable at 92°C. For the first 200 miles or so we rarely saw more than five other vehicles per mile in either direction – often less. I had fitted a **Pertronix electronic distributor kit** to the engine which not only audibly ran more smoothly, but was averaging better than 32mpg – a relief in itself as the motorway petrol prices were averaging £1.17 per litre including VAT @ 19.6% (£1.03 at supermarket petrol pumps).

Into the Burgundy wine growing area

Our next overnight stop was to be at another IBIS and after Amiens I was deeply regretting having made the advance booking, however the IBIS at Dijon-Sud was quite the reverse, with a truly excellent restaurant and, as Dijon is the heart of the Burgundy wine area, an equally excellent wine list. Naturally the following day started off beautifully with a tour round the vineyards, seeing the famous Grande Cru and Premier Cru names we had only previously seen on bottles and indulging ourselves with a little tasting

The Burgundy wine-growing area covers 104 square miles and produces around 200 million bottles of wine annually, but sadly we didn't have chance to visit and to test a sample at every single vineyard. Next time perhaps? The Grande Cru

wines can only be from one specific vineyard, and do not have to name its village of origin although many do – for example “Gevrey-Chambertin Premier Cru Clos Saint-Jacques”. The Premier Cru wines are related to one or more villages and the wine is blended centrally for that village or area. “Nuits de St George” is a Premier Cru vineyard still owned by the founding family and until this trip we didn’t know that it comes from the eponymous village with its own named motorway exit! These two categories of wine however only account for 2% and 10% respectively of the total Burgundy area wine production.

White van man in France

Everywhere we drove we saw men working on the vines, trimming off dead growth or unwanted shoots, then using a wheel-barrow construction to burn the cuttings. Incidentally, in the UK a “white van” is taken to mean a Transit or similar usually seen doing 85mph anywhere you care to mention. In France however every single vineyard worker seems to own a small white van (Renault 4 etc) and often you can see 40 or more in the fields. Obviously just pruning vines all day can lead to repetitive strain injury so many fields have a compressor with long air-lines snaking out to the men who use air-driven secateurs. You can also tell a lot about the type of wine to be produced by looking at the spacing between the rows of vines. If they are spaced around 4ft apart then that means manual pruning and all Premier or Grande Cru vines will be on this spacing. If however the vines rows are around 7ft apart then the grapes will be harvested by machine and are definitely going to end up in blended wines. We met one of these strange grape-harvesting machines on the road once – quite weird to look at and obviously you could quite easily drive an MG through one from front to back.

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Unfortunately when we were heading towards Marseilles our feeling of peace and serenity was rudely shattered on the A7/E15 just South of Lyon at around 4.30pm when **the engine missed a couple of beats, ran smoothly for a hundred yards or so and then died**. Fortunately I was able to get onto the verge on an exit slip-road then started searching for the cause – in a cold but dry Force 8 gale. There was petrol in the filter, all connections seemed to be OK, so, having spent most of my working life in the electronics industry I naturally suspected that the Pertronix distributor – the only recent change to the engine - was at fault. I was just telephoning the RAC when a motorway service vehicle arrived so passed my

phone to him and the French-speaking RAC help-desk confirmed to him that they would pay from my recovery off the motorway. In France the motorways are “owned” by various different operating companies and only their service vehicles can authorise a recovery lorry to enter the motorway to collect you. After a fairly short wait a lorry arrived, the V8 was duly winched up, and off we went to Vienne, an industrial suburb just South of Lyon. The admin people there spoke to the RAC who again confirmed that they would pay for the recovery, then they started phoning round to the local BMC (sic) garages and to classic car specialists to see if they could find anyone to come to repair the car, but no success.

Then I heard a familiar sound – the mechanics had started my engine! The reassuring thing here was that there were two mechanics, one older and with greying hair obviously very experienced, the other quite young and with a pigtail. This was very good news particularly regarding the young chap as in my experience people like him are very intuitive even if they don’t have a life-time of experience. The engine was misfiring so Monsieur Pigtail donned his rubber gloves and started taking the plug leads off one by one, finding that numbers 5 and 7 were at misfiring. From this he felt that the nearside carburettor was at fault but he took some convincing that these two cylinders were fed from different carbs! From then it seemed that the distributor must be the cause of the problem so out came my spare distributor – from the former offside battery box now spares box underneath all our luggage – together with my Imperial tools and the handbook giving timing details etc. After some delay whilst he finished his assigned work on another car, the distributor was fitted, re-timed, road-tested – where he greatly approved of the V8 power – bill paid – a reasonable €63 (£50), and off we went at around 6.00pm to find our way back to head South on the A7/E15.

And then the XXXXXXXX engine died again!

And then the XXXXXXXX engine died again! By now it was pitch-black dark and the wind was now at Force 10, threatening to tear the open bonnet off. So, I telephoned the RAC again, who told me to walk to one of the orange emergency phones situated every kilometre and dial 1112, then to wait for the motorway service vehicle, which this time took over an hour to arrive, followed by a similar wait for the recovery lorry. At this point we phoned our guardian angels in the form of Al and Fiona Barnett who were at their home about 90 minutes further South and in true MG fashion Al immediately said that he would come out to collect us, once we knew where we would be recovered from.

So for a second time that day Harvest Gold 1904 was winched up onto a lorry and we drove

off via dark lanes to the village of St Claire-Du-Rhone where my car was off-loaded into the workshop of the local OPEL dealership. Again, all the luggage had to come out so that this time I could unearth the **spare new replacement petrol pump** ready for fitting. (see photo [DSC01433](#)). It was now around 10.15pm and bitterly cold but the driver said he would take us and some luggage into the village to find somewhere for us to wait – but of course the village was closed!

We were seated at a table and without being asked a bottle of good red wine appeared, followed by the biggest plate of smoked salmon I have ever seen!

Eventually he found a sort of hotel which had a restaurant which stayed open until midnight purely to accommodate the shift change-over of the local Gendarmes who all drank copiously whilst exchanging notes and information. We were seated at a table and without being asked a bottle of good red wine appeared, followed by the biggest plate of smoked salmon I have ever seen, and in turn then came quite presentable steaks with a mountain of thin dry chips, then a light dessert. In country restaurants like this there is no “menu” – just the dish/meal of the day. The total price for the two of us - €26 (£20) – you couldn't even get a decent one-person meal in a Little Chef for that! Quite unbelievable. By the time we finished this meal it was nearly midnight but my mobile phone rang and I heard Al and Fiona were in the village looking for us, to our great relief.

Visiting the Barnetts in Provence

We have never previously visited the Provence area where Al has a place, but, the following morning, were quite surprised at the beauty and the varied scenery with the 6,000ft outline of Mont Ventou on the distant skyline. It is famous as an old Monte Carlo Rally and Tour de France stage, and still used by enthusiastic motorcyclists as a real challenge. The weather was excellent so the best conditions in which to see the scenery, the forests, and the quaint villages. In the afternoon Fiona took Jennifer off shopping but Al and I had more important things to think about, so did a tour of several of the many local vineyards, where we tasted and bought wines various. The following morning we ascertained that the V8 was ready and once again Al and Fiona kindly drove up to St Claire-Du-Rhone where, to my joy, the car started perfectly; the cost this time €69.97 (£55).

Our next destination was in the Dordogne so we headed due West, however although the spare conventional distributor obviously had new set of points and condenser I had failed to do my standard modification when it came back from Holden – that of replacing the little rectangle of pathetic paxolin which is supposed to stop the points gap/dwell timing from varying, with a pair of

4BA locknuts or a 4BA Nyloc nut. These are fiddly to set up but at least once the gap is right – it stays right. By the way, you need a 3BA spanner to fit the adjustment bar. So, the journey was interrupted every hundred miles or so whilst I re-set the gap. Very frustrating, and it was quite late when we finally arrived – the last 150 miles being in heavy driving rain, however a welcome meal and a copious inflow of wine thawed us both out.

The following evening was the social evening in the local pub when all of the British ex-pats gather for a chat. I decided not to join the fun, being infected by alcoholic poisoning which Jennifer, with memories of our Army days, tartly described as a self-inflicted wound and extended zero sympathy. Anyway I decided to walk the two miles to the village to pick up a pizza and when walking back through the village I met a young mother pushing a baby in a pram. I politely raised my cap just as I had been taught in school many decades ago and said “Good Evening” but her jaw dropped and she stood still and silent whilst I walked past. Thinking about it, I suppose it is impossible for the youth of today to raise their “hoodies” or their “beanies” so another ancient and polite custom will have ended. Anyway, a couple of days later we met the aforesaid young mother in a supermarket – she had been on the way to the ex-pat meeting at the time of our chance encounter so had met Jennifer. She apologised to me most profusely – my greeting had been a total surprise and had shocked her into silence. Wish I had discovered this trick 50 years ago.

We went off on various afternoon visits to ancient villages such as **Saint-Cirq Lapopie** (see photos [DSC01386](#), [DSC01387](#) and [DSC 01399](#)) set high in the mountains and approached by long winding roads with a mixture of hairpins and nice straights – but with the road surface probably left rough on purpose to act as a speed limiter. There were three parts to the village – upper, middle and you've guessed the third. There were only three businesses open that afternoon, a café and to Jennifer's joy, two fashion shops where she attacked our stock of Euros. There were tables outside the café, all inhabited by big leather-clad bikers whose animated conversation ceased as they carefully examined every new arrival – Honda Fireblade being the most favoured bike with absolutely no BMWs or Harley-Davidsons to be seen, however our V8 got nods of approval and various close inspections.

The lower village was quaint in the extreme and looking at the tiny doors, windows and buildings was a reminder of how small people were in the Middle Ages. There was a monument recording how the village had been sacked (rape & pillage) four times during the 12th to the 16th Century, Henry 2nd being the first of the two English attackers – he also destroyed in that same campaign Angoulême (better known nowadays for the fantastic Circuit des Ramparts event where

vintage and PVT racing cars “parade” at high speed around the town for six to ten laps) and he later became infamous for the murder of Thomas à Becket. Other aspects that made these Winter visits memorable were the drives back to our gîte – usually into the setting sun alongside limestone crags (see photo [DSC01394](#)) - but the outstanding memory each time is of driving 15 to 20 miles on the equivalent of “B” roads and not seeing another vehicle in either direction.

One Saturday afternoon we went to **Villeneuve-sur-Lot** (twinned with Troon in Ayrshire where we used to live) which has a population similar to that of Truro at just over 20,000, however as with virtually all French towns it has been blessed with an excellent perimeter ring road on which all of the equivalents of B&Q or Comet are clustered, whilst the town centre – a series of interlocking traffic-free squares all retaining the traditional shops with the unbelievable patisseries etc – remains virtually unchanged. These old towns are so different from most of the modern British town centres, where the bland replicates the bland. Obviously supermarkets like Carrefour and ALDI are to be found on the ring-roads but the town centres remain unique and virtually untouched.

Villeneuve-sur-Lot has for centuries been the centre of the French plum-growing area so there were various displays of this traditional industry. We found the huge church of St Etienne quite interesting; it was built in the late Gothic style but entirely of brick (rather than stone) with incredible detailing in the huge pillars; it must have needed several million bricks to build this structure but unfortunately I could not get far enough away to take a decent photo.

No sooner had we parked Villeneuve-sur-Lot than a Frenchman arrived, pointed at the V8 badge on the wing, and asked if it was true. We assured him that it was but had to open the bonnet to convince him and even then he kept saying that I had converted the car by putting a V8 engine as “The English do not make V8 cars”. This long argument was taxing my limited French so the only solution was to get the original registration document out of its hidey-hole and to show it to him. He also totally refused to believe that our V8 had covered more than 600,000kms, stating emphatically that “English cars do not last that long”. Even Jennifer was annoyed by this and took him by the arm to drag him round to the windscreen to see the stickers from Sicily, Romania, Bulgaria and the Artic Circle etc. His English was far more limited than my French but he did eventually get the message and departed, still shaking his head at how we had demolished two of his long-held credos. I was quite exhausted by this half-hour encounter but on looking around the squares Jennifer, to her great joy, found a quilting shop so I was able to relax in a café, glass in hand, whilst

she chatted merrily away to the shop-keeper – her equivalent of “bubbling”.

Mistletoe everywhere

Many years ago the orchard on our farm abutted the local lane and one day in December some gypsies knocked on the door and asked if they could buy the mistletoe off the various old apple trees. Foolishly I declined their offer and of course two nights later the trees were stripped of all of the mistletoe. There is however absolutely danger of that happening in France for in all regions we saw literally thousands of trees with huge clumps of mistletoe; (see photo [DSC01404](#)) quite unbelievable and something you can never be aware of if you only visit from May to September.

Our next destination was in the Bordeaux region

(it is no coincidence that all of our targets were in prime wine-growing areas) where the town of Montendre has the most amazing and huge street-market on Saturday, with the whole town centre closed to traffic. Our friends there had had little trouble getting their A35 registered onto French plates etc but had given up the struggle on their MG V8 Roadster – the French computers just cannot accept that such a car should exist! Their solution to this problem is to simply keep the car on English plates and to travel to the UK once a year for the MoT.

So finally we headed North on empty roads to an overnight stop at the IBIS at Rouen-Sud before heading to Calais next morning. However the engine was still not running as smoothly as it should and I still had to fiddle with the points regularly. In fact it was not until we got to the Clacketts Lane M25 service station where I put on the third set of (Lucas) points and condenser that the engine ran sweetly. The annoying thing about the constant fiddling with and changing of the points was that I knew that I had a perfectly good Pertronix distributor (see photo [DSC01445](#)) in the car – but I had failed to pack my stroboscope so could not fit it and of course it was too late to find anyone to help in Dover.

Iodine bulb upgrade really works on a V8

When planning the trip I knew full well that we would have numerous sessions of night-driving so had fitted the plastic LHD beam deflectors to the headlights. In France I had been reasonably disappointed with the new P700 headlights with Iodine bulbs but at Clacketts Heath I took these deflectors off and, when driving late at night down the deserted A30, saw just how good these new lights are. In fact, changing up from Halogen to Iodine is as great a step-change as going from Tungsten to Halogen bulbs. To welcome us back to England the sky kindly put on a magnificent sunset display (see photo [DSC01412](#)) equal to or better than the Northern Lights we saw in Norway a few years ago.

We covered 3,419 miles and despite the odd “minor” problem greatly enjoyed this unusual trip around France so urge other members to try this different experience.

Photos from the V8 Winter trip to France



DSC01411

Ride height and new rear springs

In general terms the bottom of the rear wheel-arch should be roughly level with the top of the tyre, assuming that you are using the standard 14 x 175/80 tyres. As this photo shows, when using the brand-new rubber bumper 1800 springs (in theory of 450lb rating) just supplied by MOSS, it can be seen that almost half of the rear tyres were covered by the bodywork making the fitting of our snow-chains impossible. The ride with these sub-standard springs was absolutely awful – far worse than with the standard V8 springs. My V8 springs (550lb rating) are only two years old so will be sent to Brost & Co who will first raise the ride height and second they tell me that they can make the springs less harsh. This should be interesting and will be reported on the V8 Bulletin Board in due time. These springs would have been equally useless on Jennifer’s rubber bumper 1800 MGBGT!



DSC01433

Replacement SU-Burlen fuel pumps

Spot the difference – the SU-Burlen electronic pump on the left covered 17,000 miles before going intermittent on a French motorway – the second such failure when on the other side of the Channel. The pump on the right is yet another new one which Burlen have kindly supplied to me FOC. Our next modification is to arrange to have the petrol plumbing changed so that we have two petrol pumps, with an electrical change-over switch for when the next disaster occurs again.

Gordon Hesketh-Jones – 5th March 2008



DSC01386 Upper town

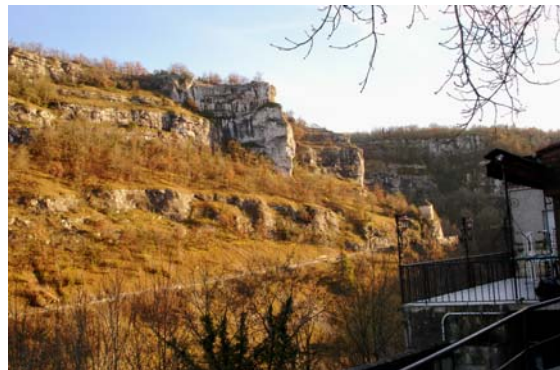
Two views of Saint-Cirq Lapopie with the upper town (with church and café) above, then the lower town with tiny doorways and the monument mentioning Henry 2nd is below. The setting sun made taking the second photo difficult for this amateur.



DSC01387 Lower town



DSC01388 Tiny doorways



DSC01394 – Limestone crags



DSC01404 Mistletoe everywhere

I could have taken several thousand photos of mistletoe in the trees but felt that just one would be sufficient.



DSC01412 Setting sun back in the UK

Taking a photo out of a moving MGBGTV8 with our hard suspension is never easy, but this late-January sunset was worth capturing.



DSC01445 Distributor

Seeing the trace of one of my "Rebuilt by Holden" distributors on a Krypton tuning screen – with no two signals (for example the firing point) being the same was a sobering realisation of the cumulative effects of wear on the pinion, the bearings and the cam. That particular distributor had only covered around 70,000 miles since its Holden rebuild. Once the Pertronix system was installed and set up, all of the firing points were identical and the effect on the smoothness of the engine was unbelievable.