

Team Spirit TF

This very early TF160 enjoyed great success under MG-Rover's Team Spirit banner in the early noughties, with Powertrain engineer Steve Wood at the wheel in the Midland Speed Championship. It survived MG-Rover's collapse in 2005, and is still a regular at Curborough in the Midlands with new owner Chris Gillie in the hot seat. We met up with both men at a rain-soaked Sprint Circuit to get the full story.



Interview and pictures: Simon Goldsworthy

MG Team Spirit was an initiative set up by MG-Rover to encourage enthusiastic employees to race and rally the group's products. The idea was that members would build and prepare the vehicles in their own time, but with technical support from MG-Rover, and all staff who had an interest in motorsport were eligible. Steve Wood was one of those who took part. An employee who training is an apprentice lorry in 1971, he was too of the newly created MG Sport and Racing, offered Steve the use of a factory-owned MGF Trophy for sponsoring and hillclimbing. However, after the TF had been launched in early 2002, this no longer fitted the initial brief of advertising the company's current products.

'MG-Rover's Sports Car Vehicle Line Manager John Rowson had been co-driving the MGF with me, and he spotted a white TF sitting in the trim shop,' recalls Steve. 'It had been used to look at different dashes, consoles, seats and so on, and then after the TF had gone on sale, it had just been left there. I'm told it was one of the first four made.'

'We've since done some further research,' adds current owner Chris Gillie, 'and we think it was the third TF built.' 'Ah, well you got further than I did investigating that,' comments Steve. 'Anyways, it was going to be crushed, so

wasn't far behind, coming 20th overall and third in class. And this included driving to and from events rather than making the much of the day's work. Despite never being fitted with an engine in the factory before, it was appreciated by Brian Giffin, the TF had been road-registered from the start, which is why it has a 51 plate. Steve's lap record here at Curborough was finally beaten by a Honda S2000 a couple of years ago,' says Chris, 'and despite having 80bhp more, the Honda only beat it by a couple of hundredths. I think that is down to the agility of the TF as well as the skill of its driver.'

'The TF160 was very underused,' agrees Steve. 'I don't think anyone really appreciated the drastic transformation after we ditched the 1.6 litre. That was so variable depending on temperature, and only the MGF Trophy with its uprated Hydragas units really handled well. The F was a popular car with a decent ride and a proper heater, but it was never really what I would call a real sports car. The TF's ride quality was awful when compared to the F, but it became a proper racer. The mid-engine layout was ideal, of course. Most sprints and hillclimbs give the first 64 foot time as a measure of acceleration, and FWD hot hatches like Clio Sports probably do 64 feet in about 2.7 seconds. The TF does it in 2.4.'

'2.5 seconds when I'm driving,' laughs Chris, 'but it can be enough of an advantage to win events on that alone.'

This is all in the standard class remember, because unlike Steve's earlier MGF, the TF is unmodified. The engine in it even still carries an RAC seal because the scrutineer for the ZR race series came and witnessed the engines being built down the track. That means this cylinder head has never been taken off despite all its competitive history, and the gaskets are still the original single-layer iron fitted at the factory.

This does not surprise Steve, who says 'This TF is always

Above: A TF won't set any lap records in the rain.

Below: The scrutineers at Curborough know this car well.



Brian said he would move it from the MG-Rover vehicle fleet to the Sport and Racing fleet and we could use that. All we had to do was source an engine. Well, I had power-rated 25 engines for the first year of the 160 ZR race series, and we were able to have one that didn't get used. We then moved the seats, wheels and tyres across from the MGF and were ready to go.'

And go they certainly did! With sponsorship from Lichfield and Tamworth main dealer Frisigate, Steve came third in the 2004 Midland Speed Championship. He did it convincingly too, winning his class in seven of the 12 events, coming second in the other five and setting six class records along the way – at Three Sisters (short circuit), Curborough (single lap), Polespit, MIRA, Three Sisters (long circuit) and Farnley. John Rowson

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MG Power Girls at Friarsgate Dealer

History of the Team Spirit TF

Steve Woods was a senior combustion development engineer who worked on the K6 engine development program with the company Powertrain that was sited at Longbridge during the 1990s. Steve also raced MG's and had considerable success with his competition prepared MG Sport & Racing MGF Trophy from 2001 to 2003, in both sprint and hillclimb competitions, being sponsored by the **Friarsgate MG Rover dealership** of Lichfield at the time. Meanwhile, the MG TF was being developed in 2001, as a successor to the MGF and by 2003, was in its second year of production. Steve was still racing his MGF Trophy car at this time.

After the takeover by John Towers and the rest of the "Fab 4", (Beal, Edwards and Stephenson), Sport & Racing became a proper department and brand. 'Team Spirit' was then "created" to try to promote lower level MGR competition interest, whilst the company pressed on with the "BIG" stuff, - for example Le Mans, Touring Cars, and Junior World Rally Car. Steve says; "During 2003, Sport & Racing Chief, Brian Griffin said he couldn't justify supporting the MGF, as the MG TF was in production. So John Rowson, (who was MGF Vehicle Manager, and my MGF co driver), discovered that **a pre-production MG TF car, road registered by MG Rover Group: BU51 HYK was due to be 'pensioned off'** from its development program and probably scrapped, having been the trim and hardware 'slave car' from new. Brian Griffin then 'signed the car off' and the car was saved for a new chapter in its life – competition racing under the 'Team Spirit' banner"

The MG TF was transferred from the trim and hardware shop to the Sport & Racing fleet, via the Methods Build Workshop, where it was converted from LHD to RHD. All of these workshops were on Longbridge factory site. The trim was replaced minus any of the NVH pack to save weight. The wheels, tyres and 4 point harness racing seats were then transferred over from the old MGF Trophy car. Around the same time, it had the distinctive black stripes and 'MG' decals applied, identifying it as a 'Team Spirit' competition car. A 'blue-printed' exhaust system was fitted, and is the actual one that was used on the Government witnessed TF160 Engine Power Homologation (and the 135 Homologation). The steering/suspension geometry was then set up on the MG Sport & Racing Hunter Chassis Rig, and rechecked a couple of times later during the 2004 season.

The car was used as the new 'Team Spirit' car by Steve Woods and John Rowson, replacing the old MGF Trophy car up to the end of 2003 in a few events in road modified class, as they were using the MGF Cup car hard-top and the exhaust system off the Trophy. All of these mods were subsidised by Steve's sponsor – Friarsgate MG Rover of Lichfield.

At the end of the 2004 competition season it was decided to put the car back to standard spec because of the times it recorded. As the car never had a soft top or frame, Steve's sponsor, (Friarsgate MG Rover of Lichfield) donated an MGF hardtop, sprayed it to match the car, as their sponsorship for the 2004 season, (approx £1,100).

During the 2004 season, competing in the Midland Speed Championship, with the car driven to and from all events (Pembrey, Prescott, Curborough, MIRA, Three Sisters, Loton Park, Shelsey Walsh etc), Friarsgate MG Rover of Lichfield supplied a set of the optional lightweight TF wheels and new tyres which were then scrubbed down to 3mm (approx £1,200). At the same time, the original engine which had stood for two years prior to being used, was very noisy at the end of the 2004 season, so Steve Woods obtained one of the spare ZR race series VVC engines of which 25 had been built. This he then 'ran in' and rated on the test-bed. This engine still has the original MSA seal to show it was a witnessed production build from Powertrain Ltd. The original engine (18K4FN 35 470110) was then returned to Sport & Racing to be rebuilt as a spare for the Trophy race car.

When MG Rover went into administration in 2005, Steve Woods (who was looking after the car at the time), bought the car from auditors - Price Waterhouse Cooper. Steve continued racing the MG TF until 2011, by which time BU51 HYK had established an impressive competition history.