



By general consensus, 2023 marks the centenary of the MG Marque, and the worldwide regard and affection for proper British MG cars constitutes an honourable achievement that merits acknowledgement of its often-acclaimed founder - Cecil Kimber, who was affectionately known as 'Kim'. Jon Pressnell is a perfect choice for this task as he is a very experienced motoring historian, journalist and author, with a wealth of relevant material already gathered for his previous books and articles, including of course his 2013 book 'Morris - the Cars and the Company'. He was also in recent times the editor of the MGCC magazine and he has, incidentally, been a member of the Morris Register for nearly 50 years. He and his publishers have certainly achieved their aim with this huge top-quality book with many superbly reproduced mainly historic photographs. Despite the title, the book actually tells not only Kim's life story, but also that of his family, the MG Car Company and its sporting achievements, and the development and details of the many MG models produced during and after his lifetime. Inevitably there is much here to interest Morris enthusiasts, as these cars and their maker form the foundations from which MG was built.

A chapter is devoted to William Morris and he is very much part of the story throughout.

The author has acknowledged the help he had from Kim's surviving family members and he has been able to use many personal family photos - many taken by Kim - and information from memoirs: particularly those of Kimber's late daughter Jean who adored and celebrated her father. He has also been able to draw on other important sources to write a compelling narrative.

After some family history, we learn that Cecil Kimber (Kim) was born on 12 April 1888 in West Dulwich, later moving to Merton, Streatham and in c1896, to Stockport where his father Henry then ran a printing ink business. He had a sister Phyllis. Kim's parents were inattentive and evidently had an unhappy marriage. Kim was educated at Stockport Grammar and Free School where he showed a talent in drawing and painting. He also developed a love of sailing, fishing and photography, which lasted all his life. Once mobile, he cycled for miles to watch motor cars which fascinated him.

He worked unenthusiastically for his father as a printing ink salesman and went to evening classes to study accountancy and some other subjects.

In 1910 aged 22, he sustained serious and life-changing leg injuries when he was hit by a car whilst riding a motor cycle. This left him with a limp. He received £700 damages and he used some of this to buy his first car, a 1912 Singer Ten. Kim's mother Fanny died at this time and his father Henry asked him to put the remaining compensation money into the ailing family business, but he refused and after a furious quarrel, the two never spoke to each other again.

Kim worked for Sheffield-Simplex, which made a high quality 6-cylinder car and here, he was 'full of innovative ideas.' At about this time he co-authored a paper on 'works organisation' which he presented to the Institution of Automobile Engineers.

On 4 Sept 1915 in Chester, Kim married Irene 'Rene' Hunt, a translator and secretary. Her father had warned him of her temper and the lack of compatibility, but he didn't take notice.

Several other moves led to Kim being employed with E G Wrigley & Co Ltd where he invested and lost the remainder of his compensation money on an ill-fated Angus Sanderson car cooperative venture.

Without doubt the most important man in Kim's professional life was William Morris who in 1921 employed him as sales manager in The Morris Garages, where he rose to become General Manager in 1923. There are many interesting and varying recorded views on Morris as a person and businessman included in this book. Suffice here to say that this was a fortunate coming together of two different, but complementary personalities.

With Kim's energy and enthusiasm, and Morris's support, The Morris Garages became very much a shop window for Morris Cars.

In his new post Kim decided to market a special Morris Garages version of the Morris Cowley for the 1922 Motor show - the 'Chummy'. In March 1923, he entered a Chummy in the Land's End Trial winning a gold medal. This was the start of a long history of competition success for what would become the MG marque. The now-famous octagonal MG Badge was used in advertisements from this time. After producing a number of special bodied cars based on Morris chassis with outsourced coachwork, came the 1924-26 MG Morris Oxford Super Sports built by The Morris Garages, that changed Kim's fortunes and marked a clear starting point for the first generation of MG cars. It was badged as a 'Morris Oxford' with a surrounding ring reading 'The MG Super Sports'. The Morris historian and author, Lynton Jarman, is quoted as saying: 'Kimber's real genius lay in the way he could completely transform a car with the minimum of modification and consequently offer such excellent value for money'.

The car which would play a major part in shaping the destiny and fame of the MG marque was the 1928 Morris Minor with an 847cc 4-cylinder OHC engine. The author uses the story told by former MG engineer and historian Mike Allison, which has Kim needing significant persuasion from three trusted work colleagues to use the 'Minor chassis for a small MG sports car. The MG Midget, which was launched with the 'Minor at the 1928 Motor Show, went into production the following spring. [Here the author has made a rare slip-up by using a photograph of the wrong Morris Minor chassis - a c1932 example with a side-valve engine].

The early success of the Midget with the tripling of MG car sales from 1928 to 1929 led to the move to a former leather tanning factory in Abingdon and MG had found its famous home.

The celebrated success of the privately entered factory-supported Midgets in the 1930 JCC Double-Twelve Race at Brooklands, winning the Team Award, begins the most famous and well documented part of MG history. [It is a pity that the photograph of the Midgets at Brooklands in this momentous event is reproduced so small]. The story and technical details and development of the 'Triple M' Midget, Magna and Magnette sports and racing cars, and the record breaking specials, which brought success, fame, but not fortune to Kim and MG, is well told here, as is the story of the Abingdon factory with its unique atmosphere at that time: 'a happy go lucky place operating in a somewhat improvised fashion, despite the improved facilities at the works – rough, almost primitive in some ways, but a marvellous place to work.'

Up to 1935, The MG Car Company had survived poor and inconsistent profitability because of the personal support and generosity of Sir William Morris / Lord Nuffield. Costs were however getting out of hand and there were worries at Cowley about Kim's ambitions for MG including in motor racing. On 1 July 1935 MG was unified with Morris Motors Ltd - along with Wolseley Motors - for corporate and other reasons and this and its devastating effect on Kim's professional life is covered in detail by the author, who unravels the rather complex story with commendable clarity.

It fundamentally changed the way MG was run and downgraded Kim's role - a blow to such an individualistic manager, who thrived with freedom of action and the ability to make quick decisions. He had been the personification of MG with a loyal workforce.

Through the 1930s, Morris was relinquishing personal control of his business and was taking lengthy holidays, but he remained a dictatorial figure.

This led to what the author describes as a 'Viper's Nest' at Cowley: 'a hot bed of intrigue and back stabbing and vicious power plays'. He delves right into it all and then scrutinises the sad but intriguing facts, including the successfully executed early war years' contracts won by Kim for MG from the Ministry of Defence, that partly led to his enforced resignation by Miles Thomas, the Vice Chairman of Morris Motors, on 26 November 1941. Kim was understandably very bitter about this after 20 years' service, and he told a friend that: 'Thomas had deliberately created a false situation that left me with no option but to resign'. The MG workforce and motoring press, and his family and friends were sad and bewildered.

Kim's post-MG professional life, mainly with the piston manufacturing company Specialoids, was not really happy and fulfilling, but very well paid. He had a yearning to get back into sports car manufacturing after the War and was courted by several would be employers and associates, but ultimately, he started longing for retirement and more sailing and fishing at a new home on Chichester Harbour.

Kim owned model trains including ones driven by steam and his friend The Earl of March 'Freddie Richmond' would come to Kim's house to play with the trains and then go fishing. It is a sad irony that Kim died in an extraordinary slow-speed express train derailment just outside Kings Cross Station on the evening of Sunday 4 Feb 1945, when he was going to Peterborough on Specialoid business. He was 58.

Kim's domestic and private life is interwoven with the other stories in sequence, but for this review they are separated. Kim and Rene had two daughters Betty and Jean born in 1919 and 1925 who turned out to have very different personalities. The author has gained much fascinating and worth-reading information about the lives of Jean and Betty to complement the story of Kim and Rene. Kim set out to try to give his daughters what he never had – parents who did things with their children.

Convivial holidays, often with friends, were spent in Devon where both girls learnt to sail. He was quite Victorian in his discipline, and he had to be obeyed without question or a spanking might be administered. There was an incompatibility between the intellectual and refined Rene and Kim, who was no high-brow and had unimaginative and not particularly cultural tastes. The unhappy Kim longed for friendship in his marriage.

In c1931/32 Kim met Muriel Dewer - 'Gillie' - an unmarried mother of a daughter Pauline - 'Bobbie' (b1920). It was love at first sight and was to lead to an affair from about 1935, which ultimately destroyed his marriage. Kim separated from a demoralised and ill Rene in the early spring of 1937. He seemed unaware of the seriousness of her health problems, and she died of complications from bowel surgery and ulcerous colitis on 21 April.

Two months later he married the cheery and unintellectual Gillie who seemingly everyone took to. The change in him as witnessed by Jean was amazing – he seemed liberated and there was 'lots of laughter, teasing and fun constantly'. She recalled that he had been 'so grim and stern – sitting for ages without saying a word'. She couldn't recognise the same man. Bobbie fell under his spell and he was very kind to her.

While Jean was a calm and easy-going girl, Betty had a different view of life and appears to have been a nightmare for Kim. Rene meanwhile wanted Betty to be a 'Deb' and marry well. This was not going to happen! Kim antagonised Betty by preventing her taking up a scholarship to Oxford University; 'because he didn't believe in educated women', which to her was a terrible injustice. She went instead to Art School where she became liberated and took to jazz and relationships with men. When later Kim refused to approve of her marriage to Dean Delamont [later to be head of the RAC] she became estranged from him.

The author has written postscripts on the family which for the reader are worthwhile inclusions. Betty who was classy, glamorous, stunning and full of fun, but also a radical feminist. Her husband didn't want children and so she had three with different fathers. Whereas Jean worshipped her father and reconstructed his life in her memoirs, Betty handed down largely negative stories to her children.

Assessments of Kim as a father, husband, boss and friend pepper the narrative throughout the book. He was a small man with a limp and yet he could ice skate, dance and play squash; he was an imperfect father, but he gave his children a sense of adventure and fun; he had an astute grasp of publicity and public relations, and his talent for art and design, and a 'lovely flair for line' led him to commission and befriend Harold Connolly, an accomplished artist for MG advertising; he was neither an engineer, salesman or accountant and yet he became an acclaimed industrialist; at the factory he was regarded with some trepidation: he could be ruthless, but was firm and yet scrupulously fair and he acted like the head of a large loyal family of workers; MG owners would regard him as a friend, to some of whom he was perhaps overgenerous. He was acutely individualistic and to a certain extent this was his downfall in the late 1930s / early 1940s Morris organisation.

This is a highly recommended magnificent though expensive book, that appropriately celebrates the life and work of Cecil Kimber, without whom there would have been no MG. The author surmises that Kim would not have reacted calmly when the nationally humiliating acquisition of the MG name by a giant Chinese state-owned car company occurred in 2005, but that 'he would surely have permitted himself a wry smile'. This reviewer is not so sure! ■

Ken Martin

Publisher: Dalton Watson Fine Books
Page Size: 254mm x 290mm, Landscape. 536 pages; 750 photographs and illustrations
ISBN: 978-1-956309-11-9
Price: about £110