

## JOHN TWIST



John Twist opened University Motors as a full time business on Saturday, January 25th, 1975, three years and two months after he had embarked on his path towards becoming an MG dealer. It was a premature step, but he had come a long way since the birth of his dream. He had only a clue of the events of the next 22 years.

John's first MG experience was in high school in Marshall, Michigan. His best friend had received a 1957 MGA from his father, and it was in this MGA that John first rode, first opened a workshop manual, and first was towed by another car. While accompanying his friend to a foreign car workshop in Battle Creek to have the SU carburettors adjusted — a task no mere mortal would consider — John spied a gold MG TD in the corner of the workshop. Never especially interested in cars, certainly never a “gearhead,” this MG grabbed his attention — and kept it! He resolved to purchase a MG td at the earliest

opportunity. This was 1964.

John attended Kalamazoo College and took a college job with the Lorain County Regional Planning Commission in Elyria, Ohio, correcting plat maps. Ohio has the largest number of MGs per capita in the nation (or did then), and, as he was making a little money, set out to find a TD he could use for daily transportation. He looked at six ranging from \$500 to one which was more than perfect in every respect for \$1800. Remember that you could buy a NEW VW as well as a number of American cars for that price. He finally settled on TD28822, owned by Scotty Haislett of Grafton, Ohio and paid the princely sum of \$1050 for the car. It was the largest check he had written. He borrowed the money from his father after writing several letters describing his search, his findings, and the attributes of this specific MG Red roadster. Within the month he drove the MG home to display his new purchase. “This is not the car you described to me,” were his father's first words. Love is blind. It was 1968.

Service in the army and a long presence in the cold could have a bad effect on his male qualities. Various helped to maintain male strength .

John quit college in the late summer and joined the US Army (RA 68050921). After basic training he was assigned to training headquarters at Fort Knox and brought the car onto base. That winter was especially harsh and more than once he had to hand crank it to start! It was here, at the base motor workshop, that he first discovered British wrenches, that he first worked on the brakes, the exhaust, and even dropped the sump. While John was fascinated with the mechanical functions of the car, it was the owner's handbook and workshop manual which truly intrigued him. Written in beautiful, stilted British technical language, with words and phrases as

“paraffin, stands proud, strike smartly, drive home...” and line drawings which equal the skill of any artist, this work of antiquated mechanical systems and electromechanical devices, as well as the positively devilish combination of measurement systems, made for the most fascinating reading he had ever found. On a trip back to Fort Knox from Marshall, the top of the number two piston separated for the rest, the TD rattled to a stop and did not run again for several years. This was 1969.

A Tour of Duty in Vietnam kept John away from his TD, but not the Moss Motors catalogue. For an entire year, John planned a restoration of his vehicle. Discharged in San Francisco, John made a bee-line to Moss in Santa Barbara and purchased everything they had available for the restoration. Glen Adams received his \$850 on the front counter and sent the parts to Marshall. In a carefully detailed plan, John figured that he could dis-assemble the car, get the engine rebuilt, the body repainted, the interior recovered, switch everything to right hand drive, then re-assemble the car all in a period of about eight weeks. No one told him any better! At that time you could buy Proto BSF wrenches right off the hanging displays at the auto parts store. His father’s advice: “Don’t buy a bunch of tools you won’t need later on.” The car would return to the road, briefly, in 1975. This was 1970.

As the “restoration” lagged further and further behind schedule, and when he discovered the clutch fork reversed, John put the project on hold and returned to college, an error more foolish than his proposed eight week restoration. By the spring he had teamed up with another MG aficionado, a fellow student, Thomas Lange. They successfully reworked the frozen engine of a 1950 TD, for a customer, in the parking lot of one of the dormitories. It was by this first job, for Harold Hybels of Kalamazoo, that John entered the MG motor trade. This first MG venture was a partnership named MG “T” Series Specialists. He and Tom continued working on other TDs until the summer when Tom graduated and moved on. John then entered a partnership with Alan Lanphear of Kalamazoo which they named British Motor Service. He and Alan worked on TDs, MGAs, and a few MGBS over the next months while he pondered his future. One building in which they had rented some storage space caught John’s eye. He imagined a production restoration facility – disassembly on one side, reassembly on the other. This production restoration is now a part of University Motors!

The war was raging. Students were protesting. Passions were high. Everyone seemed to be “doing something.” John tried another school, but that did not succeed. Friends were joining VISTA and the Peace Corp. Friends were graduating from college and moving on into graduate schools, or into jobs. What was he to do? In November, the light flashed. John could combine business and his passion for MGs. “I’ll be an MG dealer!” THIS was his goal. It was 1971.

To form his path towards this goal, John imagined incredibly stiff competition. “Suppose one MG dealer were to set up across the street from another dealer. Which dealer would be successful? Which dealer would lose?” Dealerships are comprised of several essential parts: Sales, Parts Sales, and Service. Sales is the most important; Parts Sales offers a profit; but it is SERVICE which makes or breaks a reputation. John calculated that he would get an excellent background in service, then work parts, then work sales, THEN buy or open a dealership. He wrote to British Leyland and asked for factory service training. They offered none. John then travelled to Grand Rapids to land a job at the local MG dealer. “Kid, what experience you got?” the dealership demanded. He explained that MGs were his passion, that he had worked on a number of older MGs, he had the British wrenches, why, he had even had his own MG business – two in fact. “Kid, what WORK experience you got?” John had never had a long lasting job with an employer. “You go off and work at a gas station for six months, kid, then we’ll talk to

you.” Pumping gas and working on Chevies was not in the cards. John regrouped and considered: “If I went to England and worked there for six months, then when I was standing in front of the employer’s desk, next to some other kid who had worked an Don’s Arco for six months, who do you think would get the job?”

John had seen an MG TC at the Checker Motor Company carrying a small tag “University Motors Rebuilt Unit.” When he travelled to England in February, to look for a job, he looked in the phone book and there was University Motors 538-6644, located in Hanwell, London W7. He spoke to Mr. Jim White, the service manager, who invited him to come out for an interview. Again, John explained his passion for MGs, his desire to become an MG dealer, the path he was taking, and the great service to MG that Mr. White could accomplish if only he would offer a job to this young Yank. Jim White hired John on the spot. Because of extremely rigid government requirements, John had to return to the US to wait for his work permit. This was 1972, John was 23.

By May, University Motors believed they had secured the proper authority to employ our subject. John formally ended his partnership in British Motors Service, finished his MG jobs in Kalamazoo, secured his belongings, said good-buy to his girlfriend, and flew Icelandic Airlines into Luxembourg. From there, he took the train to London. At Dover, 16 June, immigration officer #300, Mr. Taylor, asked the reason for his visit. “I have a job!,” beamed the young man. “Then let me see your work permit,” the officer replied. “I thought it was sort of a concept,” said Mr. Twist. “No, it’s a piece of paper,” said Mr. Taylor. While very proper, and really, very nice, throughout the ordeal which included several phone calls, John was denied entry, placed in a small lockup, and, as soon as the ferry was ready to depart, his passport was handed to the ship’s captain, and John was returned to his last port — Dunkirk. He was thwarted, not defeated.

John spent about ten days in Brussels, where he had worked a summer job in 1966, visiting some friends, until he dared try entry again. Entry on 27 June was successful, but the normal three month visitor visa was restricted to one — and employment was forbidden. John immediately called on University Motors who were most apologetic. A visit to the Labour Office could not result in a work permit — he was in country. A visit to the Export Office to explain that he had come to work in England for low wages \$1.37 per 1/2 hour so that he could learn to work on MGs so that they would be better serviced in the United States which would result in more being sold — brought smiles — they didn’t issue work permits. The month was ending, John was beginning to get desperate when the director of his grandfather’s business in London offered to take him to meet Cicil Parkinson, Member of Parliament (and later Minister for Trade). His speech was, by this time, perfected, and it must have made an impression on Parkinson as he replied, “They should give me an OBE.” and, two days later, all the papers were in order.

The six month stay was later extended. John lived in South Kensington near the Gloucester Road tube stop, rode the Piccadilly Line out to work every day, used the government health services, paid income taxes, joined the union, and completely immersed himself into the workforce. He found and resurrected a TF which he was able to drive for several months, he attended MG Car Club functions including the Blackhorse Car Production Trials at Aldershot, and learned a great deal about MGs (and Morris Marinas) working on the floor at University Motors Ltd, then the largest MG dealership in the world. He was exposed to soccer, Communists, real beer, a big city, walking, Spanish girls, electric fires, single bedsitters, right hand driving, hashish, Indian Tandoori, the Bulgarian Embassy, hamburgers eaten with knife and fork, Kit-Kat bars. John wrote the dealership in Grand

Rapids and again asked for the job. It was waiting for him when he returned from England in June. This was 1973.

John worked at the dealership for several months. It was not the situation he or his employer had imagined. He left in October to work as the manager of an independent foreign car shop in Grand Rapids, still following his regimen of service education. This shop, troubled when John was hired, failed about nine months later. During this time he began trading MG parts and registered the name of University Motors as his own. In addition, he had the excellent fortune or foresight to purchase a building (\$3500 cash) he would call home for the next twenty years! This was 1974.

He then entered the parts world – but at a local VW dealership. After three months in parts, the body shop manager's job opened. "Body Shop!" John thought that would make a good background for restoration. John was hired and introduced to the body shop employees. They all quit on the spot. A pawn of the general service manager in a battle for control of the dealership's employees, thing went from bad to worse. January 24th was his last day as an employee. University Motors Ltd. opened for full time business the next day. This is 1975.

The legend continues ....

John Twist first rode in and drove an MG in Marshall, his home town, in 1965. It was a green 1957 MGA roadster which belonged to his best friend. At A shop in Battle Creek, John spied a forlorn gold MG TD forgotten in a corner. This MG grabbed his attention – forever! Understand that until this day John was not interested in automobiles. His grandfather had sold cars, his father's dream was to own a dealership, but John had never been interested in (and is still not intrigued by) any automobiles – EXCEPT MG. By 1968 John was an MG owner (TD 28822) and quickly began servicing his car. Upon his discharge from the US Army in 1970, John began a feverish restoration of the TD, eventually slowing, then stalling. He returned to college, only to abandon his studies to work with another MG fanatic on other people's MGs –for money. By November 1971 John realized his goal in life was to own an MG dealership and he began on a route which would take him to England where he worked for the original University Motors in London for a year 1972-1973.

He returned to Grand Rapids where he worked for the local MG dealer (who still refers to John as "the only honest mechanic I know"), for an independent shop, and for a Volkswagen dealer.

Soon after moving from London to Grand Rapids, John registered the name University Motors Ltd and acquired a sales tax licence. This was 14 August 1973. He was 24.

When he arrived in Grand Rapids, John owned his TD, still not restored, two TFs (one disassembled, one together), and he quickly acquired several Magnettes and MGAs, an Austin America, and an MG YT. He needed a building to house his collection of rusty autos. He noticed an old brick garage within the inner city on his way to and from work. Upon first inspection there were wet mattresses on the floor, an old Cadillac lying on its side, and the building was old, cold, and filthy. He chased the land contract owner and offered him \$3000 for the property.

They settled on \$3500. John had assembled the cash in anticipation of purchasing the entire stock of MG parts owned by Bob Beck #11, East Liverpool, Ohio — but that deal never came to fruition. For John, the building was a better deal, for 614 Eastern Avenue SE was his home for the next twenty years! This was December 1973. He was 25.

His first “real” job, trading as University Motors was a tune-up of an aconite 1974 MGB belonging to Cedric Ward in November 1974. At this same time, a local Volvo fanatic and mechanic, R James Blett, Jr was looking for a site in Grand Rapids where he could be closer to his customers. In the middle of January, 1975, when John learned for certain that his job was ending at Norm Burruss Volkswagen, John made one last attempt at employment with a local firm in Grand Rapids, “Bridge and Frain” then the most respected name in town for British work, but to no avail. So, he and Blett arrived at a business proposition. Jim could share half of the building and pay half of the expenses in exchange for John’s use of Jim’s heavy shop equipment –jacks, jack stands, compressor, sandblaster..... John was University Motors, Jim was Swedish Car Service. This arrangement lasted until the spring of 1977. University Motors commenced full time business on Saturday, January 25th, 1975. John was 26.

Both Jim and John had a telephone, and the lines began to ring. John distinctly remembers trying to fit a twin front exhaust pipe to an MGB. He nearly had everything balanced and the first nut started when the phone rang. He dropped everything and caught the phone. He tried again to fit the pipe, but was again thwarted by a ringing phone. It was time for an assistant.

John’s first employee was Ted Badgerow, a drama major from Aquinas College. Ted later had his picture in Time magazine as a micro-brewer, long before the micro-brewery fad began to sweep the country. Soon, John hired Holly Sturges to answer the phone and keep books. Dave Zuiderveld and Jeffrey Tapper came to work. Holly left and George Chertos took her place. George’s days were numbered when he picked up the phone, unsure of which line (Swedish Car Service or University Motors) and answered “ Ah, Swiss Motors?” Throughout 1975 and 1976 John had a number of part time assistants, helpers, and employees: Marvin Chipman, Robert Hoffman, Ken Kelley, Peter Mitchell, Gregg Murphy, Steve Beswick, and probably others. During the winter, 1975-1976, John drove a blue MGA, without a top, which had a British Flag painted on the bonnet. It was a cold, lonely winter.

John sold his first MG, the 1953 MG TD in 1976. That same year he received a call from an MGA owner who needed a new engine. John went to inspect the car — and to his surprise found a 1962 MGA Mark II Deluxe — with a scrap engine. John estimated a replacement engine at around \$800. This was more than the owner had paid for the car and his wife was not pleased! Would you consider selling the MGA, John queried. They settled on a price of \$750 — a wonderful bargain for the owner AND John. The former had purchased it for \$500, blown up the motor, and was selling it for more than he had paid for it. John was buying the Deluxe he drives today.

The MGA was painted orange and looked tough. John fitted an 1800 five main engine to the car, along with an early electric tachometer. Caroline and John drove the car to New York City for Pat and Holly’s wedding the summer of 1977, never erecting the soft top. Caroline received a sunburn, lines from which took five years to totally fade! Later, John fit a Judson supercharger to the car. It looked neat, and sometimes ran REALLY fast, but was generally a pain — he sold it quickly, once advertised.

Holly, determined to find John a suitable mate, enlisted the assistance of her boyfriend, Pat Kelley, to set John up with the niece of Pat's employer, who had just been hired at Allen's Bookstore to sort out her uncle's accounts. It was a perfect match. This was November 1976. John was 28.

By January John and Caroline were partners and by May, she replaced George Chertos and assumed full control of the bookkeeping and records of University Motors. She continues that job today. Soon more names and faces were associated with University Motors: E K Cargill, Steve Hoult, Stuart Borthwick, Joe James, Henry (Sonny) Bloem, Marvin VanHouten, Ronald Beechem, James Vasquez, Craig Wood, and others.

In the beginning, John worked on all foreign vehicles: Minis, Saabs, Triumphs, Austins, Morrises, Fiats, Austin Healeys, Datsuns, Humbers, and more. He still has a scar on his right forearm from Ginny Schierbeek's Toyota. Thompson E Clay, local filmmaker, proposed to John that he quickly restrict his trade to "just MG." As soon as Caroline started, John narrowed his focus to "just British" and within the next year, 1977, to just MG.

John and Caroline opened the front of the shop to walkin trade this year. There was no modern heater, but a wood stove which they fired up every cold morning. It was often so cold that the frost would not leave the front windows until late in the afternoon. The shop itself was lit by a series of 150 watt clear incandescent bulbs. It was a coarse existence!

During the summer of 1977, John, Caroline, and Gregg Purvis attended a GOF in Detroit (the westernmost GOF ever held) to trade Gregg's MGA Twin Cam Coupe to Gerry Goguen for a tough MG TF1500. They spent the evening and early morning hours assisting Rick Smith fit a freeze plug to the rear of the engine, then drove home in the dark, using cigarette lighters to occasionally inspect the oil pressure. Impressed with the potential of the meet, they returned pledging to host their own event. The University Motors 1st Annual MG Summer Party was held at Kirk Park with some 14 MGs attending: Dan Durham, John Bergstrom, Gregg Purvis, Rick Pearce (who with John and Caroline has attended EVERY official function of UML), Denise Stover, Peter Robinson, Marvin Van Houten, Sonny Bloem, Jeff Knudson, and others. This was September 1977.

The next Spring, Gordon Duncan asked if John could finish the restoration of his RHD 1950 MG TD. Without hesitation John replied, "Of course," without knowing how he would accomplish the task. That summer, Ron Beechem left his job teaching industrial arts at a local high school and hired on as permanent staff. He made quick work of the TD! John, Ron, and Caroline were proud to present the freshly restored car to Mr Duncan – John boldly offered a 12,000 mile guarantee. (As of this writing, Gordon has only 8,000 miles on the restoration and John pleads for mercy when Gordon brings the car to the shop.) This was April 1978. John was 29.

Determined to improve the appearance of his Deluxe, John began disassembling the MGA in January 1980. Soon, he and Ron had the body cut in half and removed (do not try this at home!). He was into a full blown restoration. John rebuilt the brakes, clutch, engine, gearbox, differential, heater motor, wiper motor, EVERYTHING!! (with the exception of the gauges and the shocks). With assistance from Caroline, Denise Stover, and Ron, they had the car totally disassembled and completely reassembled in five months. By arising before six, then working at the shop for four hours every day before customer work, they accomplished the task. John is one of the few who saw the original television broadcast by President Carter at 6:00am one cold January morning to announce the failure of Colonel Beckwith's air assault to free the hostages in Tehran. After a 37 mile

test drive, John and Caroline set out for Connecticut for her brother's college graduation. The car was off the road only once, when a carb needle and seat stuck closed. This was May 1980.

John was 31.

John wanted to write technical articles. His first "Proper Use of the Choke" appeared in MG Magazine in 1979. Soon he was writing a regular feature in that magazine. He also began to write for the newly formed American MGB Association. Steve Glochowsky, Chairman of the AMGBA asked John to become Technical Chairman. This was the Fall of 1980. John was 32.

The late 1970's were the tough years, the combat years.

Money was tight, days were long, repairs took a long time, and John tried to repair every part at least once! John laboured diligently to ensure that every job was clean and right, and that he charged his customers fairly. Business grew steadily. His reputation expanded beyond the confines of Grand Rapids. John never achieved his goal of becoming an MG Dealer, but he had come a long way since the birth of his dream. He had only a clue of the events of the next twenty years.

The legend continues ....

EDIT