

THAT SOMETHING EXTRA • No. **3**

SPEEDWELL

In this series of articles
Peter Garnier talks to the men behind the performance
conversion business

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IT wasn't altogether surprising, I suppose, that the local Espresso bar—traditional starting-off point of so many other "ton-up" ventures—should have seen the initiation of Speedwell Performance Conversions.

John Sprinzel had been racing and rallying a tuned Austin A.35 with a certain amount of success when his old friend George Hulbert, an *habitué*, like John, of the Espresso—offered to do some work on the cylinder head. The outcome of his efforts was that John won the first race he entered with the new head, at Goodwood on Whit Monday, 1957. A television interview with John Bolster followed as, subsequently, did a heap of letters from similarly inclined owners of cars fitted with B.M.C. A-series engines.

So, over lunch at the Espresso bar, John and George discussed the possibility of satisfying this nucleus of potential customers, and perhaps making it a business. It so happened that another regular luncher at the bar was Len Adams,

His B.A.R.C. badge, together with the stick-on registration numbers and absence of nameplates on John's A.35, suggested a certain common-ness of interest between the parties involved. Len was drawn into the scheme and tentative plans were laid down. Reg Venner, a gifted West Indian who to this day is working with John Sprinzel, was taken on to do the physical work of preparing the cars. Graham Hill, who had been taking up motor racing the hard way as a mechanic with Lotus Engineering, joined as workshop foreman ("So I could make both ends meet, and marry Bette")—Speedwell little knowing that they had taken on an eventual leader in the Drivers' World Championship—and, on 26 June, 1957, Speedwell Performance Conversions came into being. The name Speedwell, appropriately enough, is that of the Golders Green telephone exchange.

At first, the somewhat cramped premises consisted of a showroom, and John's flat, No. 7 Accommodation Road,

Golders Green. Secretary was Ann Wisdom, later to win the Women's European Rally Championship with Pat Moss on three occasions, and to become Mrs. Peter Riley; her "office" was John's kitchen. Three months later Accommodation Road began to burst at the seams, and they took over No. 763d Llanvanor Road, also near Golders Green. Stage by stage they enlarged their premises, working backwards down the alphabet to 763a, and eventually to No. 763, a most desirable corner property with a frontage on Finchley Road itself. Graham Hill and Reg Venner worked on the cars; George Hulbert did the development work; Len Adams looked after the sales and the customers; and John Sprinzel handled the office side and saw to it that the efforts of his colleagues received adequate publicity.

Salesman Arnstein

During the following year they were joined by Lutz Arnstein, whose forte was selling things. He had been working for some years in Sweden, subsequently coming to this country and joining Delaney Gally, for whom he sold RKN seat belts. To boost the sales of these he persuaded Speedwell to lay on demonstrations at the Hendon Road Safety displays using Miss Rita Royce as a model—which shows the business acumen possessed by Lutz. Eventually he left Delaney Gally to set up his own export business and, through his previous connection with Speedwell, started selling their performance equipment in fair quantities abroad. In fact, as he says, they probably sold more abroad in those early days than they did in this country.

While I was culling this information from Graham Hill and Lutz Arnstein in their modern office at No. 763 (or maybe 763a) a large crowd of small boys had collected at the door, plucking up courage to ask for World Champion-presumptive's signature. Graham got up and signed their books. "Sorry," he said, "but I've got an interview with *The Field* in half an hour. I must go and put on my jodhpurs and saddle my horse"—leaving me with Lutz. It was a very far cry from the days as Lotus mechanic. One couldn't help thinking of the present-day Graham, known—

and signing his autograph—in racing circles all over the world, helping to raise B.R.M. from almost nothing to their present leadership in the Grand Prix Constructors' Championship, fighting a real needle-match with Jimmy Clark for the Drivers' World Championship, and basically entirely unaffected by one of the greatest success stories in racing.

With Graham's diverting influence gone ("If you want to see the accounts, we don't keep any") Lutz got down to serious matters. "With what amounts to a world-wide business, people overlook the fact that a tremendous amount of packing and mailing is involved, so that the whole thing has got to be set up on a proper business footing. Everything we produce is properly designed and an engineering job. There are two ways of selling your wares. One is to have officially appointed area distributors; the other, which we favour, is to give our various stockists the best possible terms and the opportunity of getting a return proportionate to the amount of effort they put into the job of selling Speedwell equipment. If they work hard they can win their area to themselves. Thus, the stockists look after the individual enthusiasts, and Speedwell itself looks after the 'name'."

In reply to the question "Does a manufacturer's guarantee become invalid if your equipment is fitted to a new car?" Lutz had this to say: "You can't—nobody could—expect a big organization like B.M.C. to let owners carry out whatever modifications they like, and still honour their guarantee. If something fails on a B.M.C. car we've worked on, and you take it to B.M.C., they'll send you back to us. If we tell them that it is a reasonable and legitimate claim, and one that does not result from the fitting of our equipment, there has never been any difficulty in getting B.M.C. to accept the claim. In addition, we guarantee our equipment for 12 months. Racing or rallying, of course, invalidates a claim. That is why we limit our sales to the public to "production tuning" equipment and work that will improve the performance, but not jeopardize reliability."

Speedwell also carry out advanced tuning for competition work, but this isn't the sort of thing they let out to the general public. However, as Lutz said, it is difficult to make

both ends meet financially on tuning alone—which is why they produce speed equipment and special accessories. Included in these bread-and-butter lines are such things as interior door handles for B.M.C. Minis, to replace the wire pulls; of these over 15,000 have been sold so far. Then there is the Speedwell electronic rev-counter, the only one of its type to be accepted by the British aircraft industry for use on light aircraft. There are the glass fibre bonnets for Austin-Healey Sprites, of which batches of three are sent by air to New York for £11; these, the hard-top for the Mark II Sprite and M.G. Midget, and in fact all the glass fibre bodywork conversions sold by Speedwell, are produced by Williams and Pritchard. Mini sump guards... Saab silencers... aluminium heads for the B.M.C. A-series engine... steering wheels with wooden rims... Volkswagen camber compensators for the rear springs... anti-roll bars for the Riley One-Point-Five and Wolseley 1500... all these and more make the money and help to pay for the more costly tuning side of the business.

Three people are occupied full-time keeping track of changes in parts on B.M.C. and other products, keeping



pace with the need for development of new equipment. So far as active racing is concerned, Graham Hill and Len Adams raced A.35s and Sprites in British and European events in 1958, 1959 and 1960, Graham winning his class at Rouen in 1960, and Len at Clermont Ferrand. In 1958 Graham, Len and John Sprinzel formed the team of Austin A.35s that won the Silverstone Six-Hour Relay race.

Currently they have a few Team Speedwell teams racing—one run by Ken Lee, stockist in Yorkshire, another by Tim Conroy, who looks after Team Speedwell Harrow, and so on—the pattern now being to let customers buy their own cars and subsequently to give them a certain amount of support and assistance.

As has been the case earlier on at Accommodation Road, the seams at Llanvanor Road, too, began to stretch—so once again Speedwell began shopping for new premises, eventually finding them at Cornwall Avenue, London, N.3. It is here that the engine tuning and preparation goes on, with George Hulbert as technical director and David Jones as development engineer; Peter Lacina, who used to work on army tanks in Warsaw, has been with Speedwell for four years and is now entirely responsible for the actual assembly of their fully modified engines.

Housed in a modern test shop, the intriguing sound insulation of which is a story in itself, there is a Heenan and Froude dynamometer; and among the machine tools there is a pantograph milling machine, on which I saw a five-port head for the B.M.C. A-series engine being produced, scaled down from a large wooden pattern. One of the main assets at Cornwall Avenue, however, is space; it is intended to move the Llanvanor Road stores and offices to the same place.

Speedwell have "arrived"—not without assistance from the world of competition which they serve. John Sprinzel left them in 1959 to set up his own business in Lancaster Mews; Lutz Arnstein is the guiding hand, and Graham Hill is still there, though much of his time is taken up, obviously, by his racing commitments. He is still of tremendous value to the set-up in his ability to diagnose and solve suspension problems. Amongst his achievements has been the sorting-out of the B.R.M. suspension and the development of a transverse rear stabilizer for B.M.C. Minis which, as he says, has now found respectability as a standard fitting on the new 1100 c.c. ADO16s.