

ALAN GILG EXPEDITION 1933

By Harry Edwards.

From the Morris enthusiasts point of view, one of the most interesting documentaries to reach television viewers in the last few years was Yorkshire Television's "Turn Left — The Riffs have Risen" shown on our screens on March 6th. Behind this most unlikely title was the story of two Liverpool men, Allan Cameron Gilg of Hunt's Cross and Walter Kay of Blundellsands, who set out early in 1933 on an overland trip from Merseyside to Cape Town in a Morris Minor four-seater tourer.

In 1978, Yorkshire Television's researcher Grant Muter discovered the whereabouts of the two men who had not met for 45 years and saw in the epic journey good television material — particularly as records existed by way of 16mm movie film taken by Gilg and Kay; albeit some of this film was said to have lain unprocessed in the loft of Alan Gilg's Herefordshire home. Through the Morris Register a similar 1933 Minor Tourer was located, owned by Member Stuart Carey of Doncaster, and this car, "UG 1876", was used to film the reunion of the two travellers.

The journey through Africa was the idea of Alan Cameron Gilg but he needed a companion who was not only conversant with Africa but who was also a good mechanic. When he met pipe-smoking pioneer aviator Walter Kay in the Piccadilly Hotel on New Year's Eve in 1932 he had found just such a man.

The trip started on the 1st February 1933 when Alan Gilg and Walter Kay pointed the new Minor Tourer "HF 8547", supplied by Watsons of Liverpool, in a southward direction and made their way to Folkestone where the car was hoisted aboard ship for the short passage to Boulogne. From France into the (then) rather unstable Spain where they had been warned against motoring at night and where there was enough evidence in Madrid of the unsettled state of affairs to make the crossing of the frontier into British Gibraltar very welcome security.

Heavy rain was falling when they landed in Morocco and doubts were expressed as to their chance of successfully crossing the desert in such a tiny car with narrow tyres. In any case it was necessary for them to detour 900 miles to Algiers to avoid a Riff tribal uprising (hence the title of the T.V. programme) being put down by the Legionnaires.

On the 13th March Gilg and Kay reached a village called Bouktoub where the road proper ended. Before them stretched a plain of stone and sand bounded by arid black hills. This was the beginning of the desert. Vegetation was practically nil and the bitter wind blowing was accompanied by a cold rain. At dusk they reached a military post, Ain Sefra, where the only accommodation was a windowless stable-like room where the wind whistled through the cracks in the door and the rain continued to come down in torrents.

More desert-like was the sandstorm that greeted the travellers next morning but despite this they decided to press on in a broadside wind delivering sand through every cranny. Drifting on the "road" made a deviation onto an adjacent railway line more acceptable so that when they finally reached Beni Ounif it was prudent to shelter for the following 24 hours to allow the storm to abate. Colomb Bechar was the next stop; at that time the advance headquarters of the Foreign Legion — then onto Reggan on the 19th March where from the fort roof of this last outpost of the North, the pair could see for miles over the Tanzezrouf or "Desert of Thirst". Three hundred and twenty miles due south lay Bidon Cinq, the only refuge in the 700 mile route!



Liverpool, February 1933. Gilg and Kay set out on their adventure in the Minor — note the absence of markings at first, and the special spot lamps fitted.



Historic meeting of two Minors halfway across the Sahara desert. Alan N. Cooper, shown with his 1931 Morris Minor Two-Seater, was making his way to England from Nairobi (Kenya).

Before leaving Reggan, Alan Gilg and Walter Kay made contact with the Trans-Sahara bus and made an agreement with the Transsaharienne Company that in the event of non-appearance of the Morris Minor at Gao within five days, they would send a car in search. Bakkik, an Arab guide, was engaged and to make room for him in the Morris it was necessary to transfer suitcases and so on onto the bus. As it was, the remaining load was considerable, consisting of three people, fifteen litres of water in bags hung over the sides, food for five days supplemented by vitamin pills, mineral water, spirits, guns, planks, shovels and rope, besides maps and small articles. Water was a problem, particularly with a thirsty radiator which received "body liquids" from time to time!

At three o'clock in the morning of March 20th the small car passed out of the fort into the desert night where for the first hour the sand was very soft, putting a terrific load on the small 847cc side-valve engine but it pulled the trio through to the subsequent hard and flat surface where 40 m.p.h. became possible. The monotonous driving was broken only by white indicator signs every six miles and the periodic sight of an empty bottle discarded by bus



The dug-out ferries in Africa were a far cry from another well known ferry nearer home for the intrepid Liverpudlians.



Crossing a ferry in what was then the French Congo.



The Minor forcing a way along a "road" in British East Africa. "The grass was frequently so high that the car was hidden entirely".



Manpower, as well as horsepower, was often required on the 13,000 mile journey.

passengers, or by involuntary stops caused by blocked petrol pipes to the S.U. Petrolift — an ever present worry for Walter Kay, the "mechanic" of the team.

Several hours into the desert the Gilg expedition met up, unexpectedly, with another Morris Minor! This was the two-seater being driven overland from Nairobi to Beaconsfield by Alan N. Cooper with his co-driver Walsh. Each crew were setting a record for the crossing of the Sahara in small cars. One North to South, the other South to North.

Bidin Cinq, "a resting place in the middle of nowhere" as Alan Gilg described it, was reached in mid-afternoon. Here, two buses were rigged out as sleeping quarters and, incongruously, petrol was available from a pump (10s. a gallon) and the two Arabs who kept charge of the place also sold water at 5s. per gallon.

Early the following morning, having left Bidon Cinq one hour before at 2 a.m., Bakkiik, the Arab guide, told Gilg and his partner that they had strayed from the track and were lost! A light in the distance gave them hope as it was probably the bus but after flashing the car headlights they found they had been signalling to the rising moon. There was nothing else for it but to retrace their steps until they regained the main track. By 7.30 in the evening they reached the first desert outpost of the south, Tabankort, and they were safely across the Sahara. A quick run the following morning brought the pair to Gao where they rested for a few days.

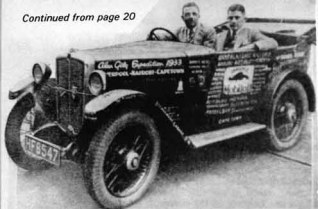
From Gao it was a long and arduous run through Equatorial Africa with days of almost unbearable heat and nights alive with mosquitoes. "The hardest leg of all" Gilg was later to say. After the 2,000 mile run from Kano, in Nigeria, to the Belgium Congo (as it then was), the insect bites put Alan Gilg into a Nairobi nursing home for a short time with malaria.

From Uganda the car was subject to much abuse, traversing roads which were not roads, struggling through

viscid black mud and bumping its way through spring-shattering drifts and river beds. On the worst days they covered only four or five miles. Rhodesia was next with its monotonous and seemingly endless bush (broken only by the amazing spectacle of the Victoria Falls) but they eventually reached their first tarmac road and so onto Johannesburg, then two weeks later to Cape Town where they were enthusiastically received on the 8th July 1933. Behind them the thick forest of the Congo, running the gauntlet of a forest fire, driving through swarms of locusts, crossing the many river ferries in Nigeria where payment was made in salt or cigarettes, and confrontation with various wild animals. (Tom Bourne, Secretary of the Welsh Region of the Morris Register, says that the roads in Central Africa hadn't improved much when he was there in

Walter Kay and Alan Gilg arrive in South Africa.





Southampton, August 1933. "HF 8547" before being unloaded from the Union-Castle liner Kenilworth Castle. The windscreen appears to have been removed for stowage

the late 'sixties. Although he had the benefit of a modern Daihatsu station wagon, it was quite easy to get bogged down, even on main international highways, and a pocket full of five bob notes was needed to bribe the locals to haul the car out!) The Morris Minor which had started out from Liverpool with the words neatly marked "Alan Gilg Expedition, 1933" along the bonnet was now covered all over with white painted place names and little drawings giving an idea of the rivers crossed and the desert country traversed en route. The adventure had taken the pair 13,370 miles in five months and a week, 437 gallons of petrol had been used together with 15 gallons of oil, 10 tyres and 13 road springs. The entire trip costing £800.

It may have been the publicity that the Gilg Expedition received in the press that prompted another group of people to purchase a second-hand 1932 Morris Major Saloon and a Rice folding caravan from Appleyards of Leeds in September 1933, and some months later journey with the ensemble to Kenya via the Sahara Desert. The French authorities at the last post of Reggan were so certain that the car and caravan would not make the crossing that they insisted on the vehicles being pledged as a guarantee in case they had to send out a rescue party.

The Morris Minor was hoisted aboard the mail boat Kenilworth Castle to Southampton and later (according to Alan Gilg) presented to Morris Motors Ltd. Back in England, Walter Kay went back to his flying and Alan Gilg returned to his career in horticulture. During the filming of the television documentary in 1978 the intrepid pair met again for the first time in 45 years — and for the first time Alan Gilg admitted that he had planned the trip not simply as an adventure but because he had been turned down by a girlfriend. *Cherchez la femmel*

(Sad to record. Alan Gilg died just before Barry Cockcroft's documentary film was completed.)

Walter Kay (left) and Alan Gilg (centre) on their return.

