



RISING FORCE

Which will be Whizzo's winner? Clockwise from the left: Austin-Healey 100/4, Morgan Plus 4, HRG 1500, Triumph TR2, MGA 1600

We wanted to know which Fifties sports cars gave the purest driving thrills. Barrie 'Whizzo' Williams joins us at Shelsley Walsh to reveal the answer

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HRG 1500

With its British Racing Green lustre and polished radiator surround and headlamp bowls, the HRG 1500 elicits a very different response from Shelsley's marshals. They tip a knowing nod and smile at the other cars, but they cluster round the HRG, crouching to admire its details. The reason is simple – it's beautiful, but in a spindly, delicate way that speaks of a more genteel time, all flat caps and picnic hampers.

Williams' appreciation of the HRG is somewhat different and is immediately evident when he returns to the paddock from what appeared to be a startlingly fast run up the hill, with the 1496cc Singer overhead-cam four snarling its way into the distance.

'Now that's a real sports car!' he roars, almost overwhelmed by his own ebullience. 'It's an amazing feeling, looking down that bonnet at those headlights, and all those dials in your peripheral vision telling you lots of things you don't need to know. Everything's perfectly placed – the driver's seat, the steering wheel – it's all so intuitive and it responds with such precision. You can drive it instinctively and it will go exactly where you point it.'

For the sake of balance Williams thinks hard, trying to find something – anything – he doesn't like about the HRG. 'You can't really heel-and-toe it, I suppose, and it doesn't like bumps.'

But even this quibble has Williams rethinking his view. 'There's a lot of steering kickback, but that's a good thing and the reason why it has a sprung steering wheel. You feel every bump, but in a nice way and a way racing drivers appreciate. The car is letting you know what's going on in the manner I've only experienced before in a single-seater. I'd change the axle ratio if I were hill-climbing it, but as it is, the long ratios mean you don't have to change gear as much.'

'It may look older than anything else here, but it's closer to a genuine racing car – and I mean Formula One of a certain era – than any of the others.'

With an endorsement like this ringing in my ears as I contort my left leg around the wheel and clamber into the Sopwith Camel-style cockpit, I'm seized with trepidation. Cars loved by racing drivers often spit average drivers into hedgerows backwards, and with its front beam-axle and lever-arm dampers, I'm expecting the HRG to be a severe culture shock.

Thankfully, what it offers is excitement. Everything about the HRG is intense, from the constant stream of information surging

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through the steering column to the way the body flexes through corners. Every part of my body in contact with this car is informing me about something, making minor suggestions about how close I am to its limits in a way that makes even aircooled Porsche 911s feel numb and isolating. Because of this I can forgive the painfully heavy and narrow clutch pedal, which feels like treading on a stubborn tent peg.

Beyond 3000rpm the Singer engine produces a distinctive, flattened snarl reminiscent of a Bugatti Type 25. This, coupled with those big chrome headlamps, makes the car hugely evocative of Le Mans in the Twenties.

However, there is a weak spot to the HRG. Cresting a B-road brow I catch sight of a tractor pulling out of a field. I squeeze the brakes progressively; they squeal a lot, but don't respond. Eventually I have to stamp through a very aggressive cadence-brake, the HRG squirming and locking, the awkward gearshift responding violently to a rushed downchange.

It may be an even greater sensory overload than an Ariel Atom, but the HRG's weakness is shared with the greatest competition cars of the era – the exciting edge of danger that accompanies its addictive intensity is very, very real. Get things even slightly wrong in an HRG and the consequences could be very grave. As a result I'm happy to walk away from the HRG, still fizzing from its sheer zest, but humbled by the sense of my own mortality it instils.

OWNING AN HRG 1500



'I've known these cars since 1960, when I bought my first,' says Ian Mahany, who has owned HRGs throughout his motoring life and whose son Will races an HRG 1100 in historic competition.

Their problem is rarity. Who do you go to for repairs? HRGs are rare cars built with unusual parts.

The Singer-based running gear is problematic. It's reliable, but if you burst a Singer 12 engine where do

you get a new one? Engine blocks, cylinder heads and so on are no longer available and the 12 wasn't a popular car, so even the owners' club struggles to get parts. The ENV rear axle is only shared with unusual cars too – the Lagonda Rapier and pre-war Lanchesters. Things have to be repaired rather than replaced, although much of the car is makable.'

The HRG Association has an organised and very active spare parts section. It also has the original engineering drawings.

1953 HRG 1500

Engine 1496cc, in-line four-cylinder, sohc, two SU HD8 carburettors
Power and torque 65bhp @ 4800rpm; 85lb ft @ 2400rpm **Transmission** Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **Steering** Worm and roller
Suspension Front: beam axle, quarter-elliptic leaf springs, adjustable friction dampers. Rear: live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, friction and lever-arm dampers **Brakes** Drums front and rear **Weight** 737kg (1625lb)
Performance Top speed: 86mph; 0-60mph: 15.7sec **Fuel consumption** 36mpg **Cost new** £1399 **Value now** £49,500



Nine-dial dash tells you everything you need to know – and a lot more



1496cc Singer motor yields a mere 62bhp, but at 737kg the HRG is the lightest car here

One of the last of the square riggers, but the HRG offers a thrilling drive



Performance is point-and-go – just hope you don't need to stop in a hurry