

SEBRING SPRITE

*A touch
of class.*

Of all the sports cars to emerge, post 1945, one is immediately identifiable, the Austin Healey Sprite. Much of its visual character, in its Mk1 form, stemmed from what in fact was its basic ugliness. Cost control enabling the car to slot into a popular price bracket and a requirement to meet lighting regulations, universally, determined that the luxury of

pop-up headlamps was outside the specification. Similarly it was considered that a lid to gain access to its cavernous boot was an unnecessary luxury.

Geoff Healey's design was based on a formula where vehicle mass, material and production costs, plus power to weight ratio and the resultant economical performance were prime factors in the successful reintroduction of low cost sports



car motoring to the general public. There were Fairthorpes, Falcons, Elvas, Marcos, Turners and such like in the market, at the time, but none were rolling off purpose built assembly lines at a programmed hourly rate.

Introduced in May 1958, the 'Frogeye' as it is now affectionately known was powered by a twin-carburettor version of the already well proven BMC 948cc A-Series engine and running gear from the Austin A35 model range.

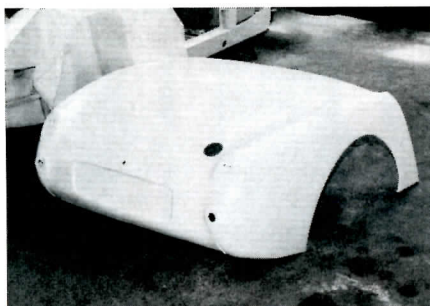
True to British sports car tradition and practice, it was not long before the car was engaged in club, national and international competition. Inevitably the specialists were already devoting their attention to tuned versions and elements of 'body tuning', in particular hardtops and alternative bonnets were appearing on the market. In parallel with this 'open' market activity, Healey from their home base at Warwick had mounted a competition programme of their own, which would prove successful.

North America in the 50s and 60s was a highly lucrative market for European sports car manufacturers, in particular for Triumph, MG and Austin Healey. Sales promotion relied heavily on the sporting appeal of the three marques and their ability to perform reliably and competitively in both rallies and circuit racing.

The name Sebring was foremost in the American sports car enthusiasts dictionary, the Florida airfield circuit hosting, annually, America's international status long distance, 12 hour sports car race. In 1960 the organisers introduced an additional four hour race for the small capacity GT cars. Because of a wealth of top line race drivers being on hand for the '12 hour', there was naturally an overspill of this professional talent into the shorter distance event, often duplicating their 'works' drives.

The importance of this Florida appearance can be gauged by the ten car BMC entry spread across the two races in 1961. In addition to three Warwick factory Sprite entries for the four hour race, Londoner John Sprinzel entered two of his Sebring Sprites to run in both the 12 and 4 hour races. The driver 'pull' that these specially prepared Sprites attracted can be measured by the names who were lined up over three years. Walt Hansgen, Bruce McLaren, Stirling Moss, Pat Moss, Paul Hawkins, Briggs Cunningham, Innes Ireland, Pedro Rodriguez and Steve McQueen are just a few that found their way into 'works' and 'special' competition Sprites over the years.

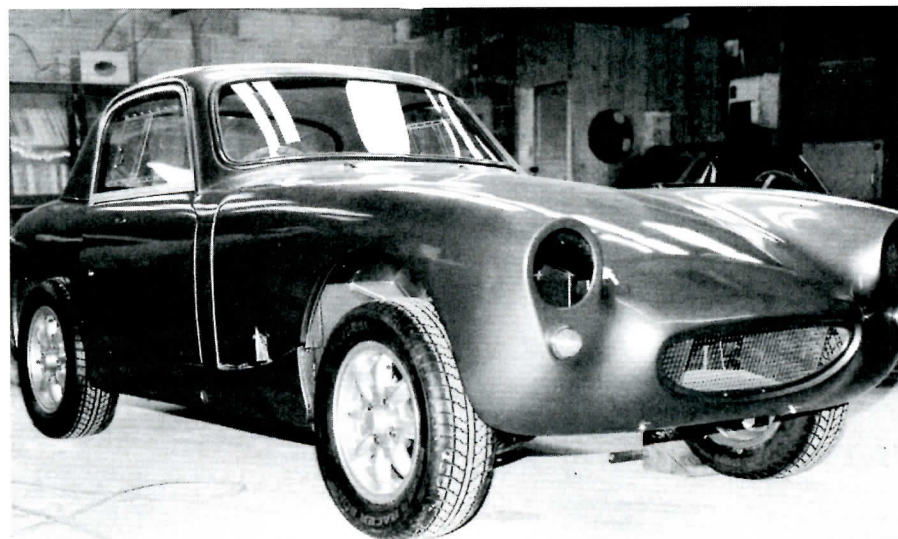
The interwoven connection of John



But it is not all steelwork.

Sprinzel, with Healeys at Warwick, with Speedwells, with body shell men Williams and Pritchard and Speedwells with aerodynamicist Frank Costin, contribute to the eventual development and the existence of Sprinzel's Sebring Sprite. Costin had worked on that classic shape, the Lotus Elite, and this was reflected in the Sprinzel Sprite top.

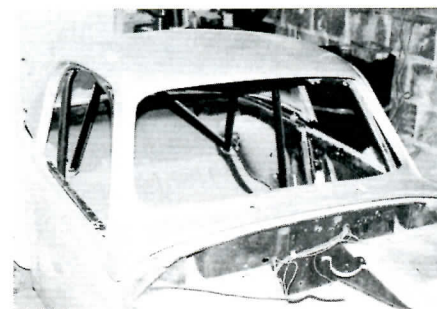
PMO 200 tested by Autosport's John Bolster in February 1961 sported a glass fibre bonnet, aluminium skinned doors and aluminium bonnet, GRP seats and a GRP hardtop. A 62bhp rally engine revving to 6000 rpm was fitted, the gearbox had standard ratios. Stopping power was provided by Girling discs and Dunlop shod 13 inch wire wheels supported a car weighing around 12cwt. Weighing in at approximately 2cwt lighter than the



Just add the finishing touches.

standard road going hardtop Sprite. The car's exceptional road holding capabilities were aided by an almost perfect 50/50 weight distribution. A Sprinzel Sebring could be specified with one of four steps of engine tuning, 55, 62, 70 or 80bhp, the latter were based on engines increased from 948cc to 995, and the 80bhp unit was a full Formula Junior (single seater formula) engine with a special crank. Sebring Sprite, registered S221, which is just being rebuilt by Brian Archer, is the ultra lightweight example driven by Stirling Moss at Sebring in 1961. It has an aluminium tail and even with its 12 gallon tank and spare wheel stowed, only weighed 11.75 cwt.

The Sebring Sprite, a separate model and distinct from the Sprinzel car, was created by the Healey Motor Company, made up of engine and body tuning parts directly related to those successfully used by the Healey 'works' team in the Florida races.



That is what you call replication.

The combination in the Sprinzel car of its Williams and Pritchard fibreglass/aluminium bodywork, the highly tuned Formula Junior engine, at a total cost more than double that of the normal road going Sprite, added up to - exclusivity - only six were produced. Brian Archer's replication of the Sprinzel Sebring Sprite is closely related to customer and supplier Brian Wheeler.

Basically the two Brians collectively produce the components which provide a potential customer with a number of approaches to the ownership of a Sebring replica, from a kit of components to a near fully built car. All the parts have been faithfully reproduced using components from one or other of the original six cars as patterns, including the ex Andrew Hedges, Cyril Simson and Ian Walker cars.

Power potential is an interesting subject and affords the widest choice, starting with

traditional A Series. First, all the known variations of the day when the original six were used in road and circuit competitions, are available. Then you can explore the developments of A Series, up to the present day, in blown or unblown form up to and including 1480cc. Beyond this there are Triumph engines that will fit under the bonnet, including Dolomite Sprint and a few 'foreign' four cylinder devices that could be easy to live with, and their five speed gearboxes. But, in the case of the latter, don't expect to gain approval or draw admiring glances from the purists.

Archer's Garage prime function is that of a restorer, mainly Austin Healey, but also MG and Triumph.

A digression into the world of original Sebring Sprite caused Brian Archer to reveal some of the physical and dimensional anomalies encountered in



ABOVE & BELOW: Traditional skills go into the Wheeler and Davies cars.



hand built special series sports cars.

Archer's Garage will take a basic chassis/body shell metal structure and restore it, ready to accept its conversion to Sebring replica form. If the shell is past redemption or would prove too costly to restore, then Brian Archer recommends the Wheeler and Davies replicated steel chassis/body shell. Brian commented, "We can understand an enthusiast wanting to rebuild on an original base, but the conditions of some shells we see are questionable. Long term durability and safety is an important factor, more so when the car is to be used in competitions. Apart from this, it is easier and quicker to use the new shell, the car is back on the road sooner".

If you have the skills and facility to restore

your own shell or wish to use a preferred restorer then the Archer's Sebring is available in kit form.

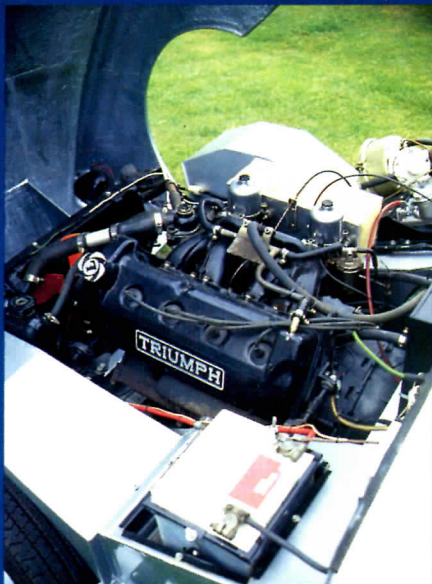
The body kit consists of six separately priced items. The Sebring bonnet includes radiator ducting, front hinge assembly, spring clips, retaining tube and mesh grille. The bonnet, and all six items are available in a choice of GRP, Diolen or Kevlar and all can be supplied to a Class 2 fire resistant standard. The six bonnet variations, material and treatment, plus the additional items described above range from £395 for untreated GRP to Class 2 fire resistant Kevlar at £635. All prices quoted are exclusive of VAT. The remaining body kit items consist of the hardtop, the rear deck or panel (a replacement to the original steel form), Sebring pattern doors, lightweight

seats and dashboard, a replica of the standard Mk1 dash. The price list extends the scope of supply to include another twenty individually priced items or packages.

Item 27 on the list consists of a new Wheeler and Davies Mk1 shell, fabricated to take either quarter or half elliptic spring mountings. In addition the rear deck/panel is in place and the following are supplied as part of the comprehensive "27" kit. Major item is the coupe hardtop, complete with a laminated front screen and a perspex rear screen, a flock treated headlining is included. A pair of frameless lightweight sidescreens complete the "27" kit. This comprehensive basis to the Sebring replica costs £3,600 plus VAT.

Brian Archer suggests that a self build





car, utilising an average tune 1 Litre A series engine and gearbox, using a new Wheeler and Davies shell based on a realistically priced donor, could be on the road in a presentable condition for around £7,000.

For this price you do have a single donor replica of a famous "period" sporting car which lends itself to domestic use or can be fettled, aided by a wealth of known and proven tuning data, for competition use. The donor range incidentally covers every Sprite and Spridget from Mk1 to the 1500, the later cars require additional surgery, mainly amputation of metalwork, bumper mountings etc.

As Brian Archer pointed out, "The Spridget is a donor which has no mystery attached to it, its simple, straight forward, easy to dismantle and the A series engine is an open book."

A visit to Brian Wheeler's premises confirmed the expertise that is built into the replica chassis/body shells previously described. The fully jigged chassis and its individual components are truly representative of the originals and are components used to supply the restoration market, worldwide. Geoffrey Healey has cast his expert and critical eye over the finished Wheeler and Davies product, at the same time expressing his satisfaction with the results. Brian Wheeler's personal transport is of course a self-built Sebring replica, the only external difference being the Revolution wheels. Under the skin, 773 RW is positively exciting and immoral.

The Wheeler shell is fitted with Archer's body kit. The front suspension is near to standard, save for the telescopic damper conversion kit and at the rear an anti roll bar has been fitted to the standard Mk1 "froggy" quarter elliptic sprung axle.

The exciting and immoral feature is the

16 valve Dolomite Sprint engine assisted by its 6 speed Triumph gearbox (Four direct plus two overdrive ratios). Brian Wheeler admits to the engine being "slightly tuned", about 145bhp. This state of tune is only temporary - a high lift cam and twin 48 Webers are lined up for the near future! The axle is Sprite with a "fresh" 3.5 crown wheel and pinion installed. Older high mileage examples have tended to display brittle qualities when full Dolomite power is applied. Other axle arrangements are being considered to accommodate the next stage of tuning. Road rubber is 185 Pirelli on 6J 13 rims, 60 profile, but these are to due to be replaced.

0-60mph comes around in about 5 seconds and the maximum in overdrive top is in excess of 130mph. You will gather that throughout its performance range the car has a very competitive character and with development has more to give. The compact smoothness of the shell with its economic frontal area must surely make a useful contribution to the upper range performance.

Brian Wheeler, as supplier of shells to Brian Archer, is of course in a position to supply a range of Sprite related restoration shells for other than the Sebring model. Starting with a base Mk1 monocoque at £2,000 plus tax. The two Brians have always co-operated, Archer's Garage specifying Wheeler components, because of the quality, materials and workmanship, not least for the accuracy required in high quality restoration work.

Brian Archer summed up. "We have a mutual respect for each other's work and standards."

Brian Archer, Archer's Garage Ltd. Tel: 021 236 8510. Brian Wheeler, Wheeler and Davies. Tel: 0455 220689.