

“A Bit of Detective Work” - by Martin Ingall

The 10 ex-works Sprite prototypes - then, and now.

Did you realise that over a 10 year period, following the Sprite's announcement, it was developed from its standard 43 bhp at 5,200 rpm and top speed of just over 70mph to the last of the 'works' Le Mans versions which consistently lapped the Sarthe circuit at over 100 mph, and was recorded at 154 mph on the Mulsanne straight, its engine by then producing some 110 bhp at 7000 rpm?

Having been developing my website, sebringsprite.com for nearly 12 years I came to realise that I was very unclear as to which of the later 'works' Sprites (the streamlined wind-tunnel cars) raced when, and where, and with which drivers. So began my research, assisted by some of my regular site contributors - especially Neil Anderson in the States, Pete Taylor, Ian Turner and others. When I began I was not even sure how many of these cars were built. One website said 12, I made it 11, and later realised there were in fact only 10.

It is now, (Nov 2014), almost exactly 50 years since Geoff Healey, Roger Menadue and the rest of the DHMCo work force were preparing the first of these aluminium-bodied Sprites for the 1965 Sebring 12hrs in March the following year. Registered in the UK as DAC 952C and with chassis no. HAN8-R-65-5 the car had a 1293cc XSP engine derived from the Cooper 'S', with a 45 Weber carburettor and a close ratio gearbox.



photo: Karsten Stelk



photo: Gregg Cameron

These photos (left) show the car, firstly under construction at the cinema in Warwick - it is distinguishable from the later cars by its smaller inner headlights, lack of a vent at the back of the roof, or side vents in the front wings, and originally had just a simple elliptical air intake beneath its nose. The 2nd photo shows it after completion and ready for Sebring. The car was painted in a bright orange and entered for Rauno Aaltonen and Clive Baker who took it to 2nd in class, and 15th overall. The third photo was taken during the race while chasing a Porsche 356, this clearly showing how on this early car the side panel continues up around the fuel filler. Bottom photo shows the car being readied for another 12 Hour Sebring race some years later (1969) by which time it was in the private ownership of Arthur Tuckerman. Today it is owned by Marc and Bruno Verstraete who have generously loaned it to the Healey Museum in the Netherlands.

I was surprised to find that after the Sebring race DAC was sold off by the 'works' as one might have supposed that after all that development work it would run in more than just one race. However the Healeys had built up long experience of the American sales market and it was clearly important for the car to remain on US soil for publicity purposes, as well as to recover some of the money they had spent on its development.



photo: Gary Kohs



416C after a recent restoration, back in original lime green. Photo: Kotaro Maruyama

However, the Healeys had two more cars at home, being prepped for Le Mans that summer and they were registered ENX 415C and 416C.

Due to the great speed differential at Le Mans, Geoff Healey had had the cars painted in a fluorescent lime green colour but, according to Geoff, when the French scrutineers saw these new streamlined cars they feared for the success of their own small capacity cars and rejected the Sprites as being a hazard to other drivers! The cars had to be hastily repainted in a barn in a much darker green though in some photos you can clearly see the lime green showing through.

Identification from black and white photos is made difficult by the same race numbers 48 and 49 being used on these cars as would also be used on two other cars entered by the team in the following year, but the lack of rear roof vents on the earlier cars is the clue.

No 48 was driven once again by Rauno Aaltonen and Clive Baker but unfortunately their engine broke on the Sunday morning. Paul Hawkins and John Rhodes took the No.49 car to 12th overall and 1st in class.

After the race both cars were sold to Richard Groves Racing whose team competed with them in international events over the following couple of seasons.



One car ended up on display in the Patrick Collection for a number of years, while the other disappeared to Scotland where it sadly deteriorated to a very sorry condition before being discovered and rescued in 1988 by Denis Welch who restored it to its former glory. His firm also later restored the other car, and both of them are now owned by Kazuo Maruyama in Japan.



Ready to leave for Le Mans



415C at scrutineering [photo: K.Stelk]



After repainting - in the paddock



Hawkins or Rhodes at speed



The Baker/Aaltonen Sprite at the Dunlop Bridge

[3 above photos copyright: Gasnorie]



Jack Wheeler's two Sprites, 7080 AC



HNX 455D leads the class at Sebring
(photo: Bill Stowe)



Red paintwork for Le Mans
(photo: Russ Smith)



The team gathers before the race
(photo: K.Stelk)



Photo: Karsten Stelk

Geoff Healey didn't make the researcher's task an easy one, inclined as he was to swap registration numbers and chassis plates from car to car. An example of this was the number 7080 AC which started life as a Targa Florio car (TFR 1) for Tommy Wisdom, then appeared on another Sprite assembled in the States for Stirling Moss to drive in the 1960 Sebring 3 hrs, and a bit later on Jack Wheeler bought a Sprite from Geoff bearing that number which he will tell you he is pretty sure had had a chassis change after an Alpine Rally mishap, so by then there were 4 versions.... and Jack still has two cars bearing that number today! – but that's another story. As you will see this didn't help our investigations.

To continue my story: those first 3 cars of 1965 were fairly simple to identify, but then, for the following season came 2 more new cars, painted initially in Dayglow orange for the Sebring 12 hours and UK registered HNX 455D and 456D. They also had consecutive chassis numbers HAN8-R-143 and 144 and engine numbers in the opposite order of XSP 26044 and 043.

Paul Hawkins and Timo Makinen drove chassis 143, No.67, (left) which came 18th and **won its class**. In this photos from the rear the little roof vent is clearly visible. Baker & Aaltonen were in the similar car, No.66, and finished 29th.

For LE MANS - presumably to avoid a repeat of the problems experienced the previous year, the cars were repainted in a darker, more sober, red. They were also fitted with MGB overdrive gearboxes – the only time these were used.

Hedges and Hopkirk drove 455D (No.49) while Clive Baker shared 456D with John Rhodes (No.48). Unfortunately both cars suffered engine failure with just 4 hours to go to the end of the race.

We discovered that the registration number HNX 455D was returned to Warwick Council immediately after the LM race, and that car was apparently then sold to Fred Royston, a BMC distributor based in Florida in the USA. According to one of his staff (Ron Light) Royston repainted it in BRG before selling it on. The other car remained with the Healeys. After many years in the USA, HNX 455D now resides in Scotland with owner, Jim Prentice.

So, up to this point, identification of the 5 cars built appeared simple enough.

BUT then we learned of another car, in the States, which Jeff Brenner had owned for some 15 years and which he believed had raced at Sebring. It had the No.67 on the doors and was painted BRG. When I first questioned Jeff about its chassis number he told me it had a HAN9 prefix which suggested it was built post-October 1966, the date when the 1275 Sprite and Midget were introduced. So now we have 6!



HAN8-R-202

The MYSTERY car becomes the DISPLAY car!

We initially began by looking to see if this car might have been the No.67 entry for Sebring in '66 which would have entailed giving it the 455D number plate. But it had no roof vent. Further enquiry led to Jeff correcting the chassis number to one with a HAN8 prefix and confirming he could find no evidence of any roof vent having been on the car. It was fitted with an XSP engine but had a standard MGB gearbox. Its headlights and exhaust had been changed and the interior civilised for street use. Ron Light told us that having had one car (455D) go through his hands Fred Royston wanted one for himself and painted this 2nd one in the same green. He also told us that Royston converted the car for street use so his wife could use it for shopping – some shopping car!

To help us try to fathom out where this car might have raced, Neil Anderson in Chicago prepared some spreadsheets showing all the 'works' Sebring, Le Mans and Targa Florio entries along with all the information we had on each car. We pontificated long and hard over whether this mystery car might have been substituted for another on some occasion but none seemed to fit. In doing so I upset Jim Prentice the current owner of 455D who was worried that I could damage the provenance of his car. An inevitable result in carrying out this task but happily since remedied.

Although the Brenner car had some Dayglow orange on parts of its suspension and may originally have been painted in Sebring colours we eventually had to come to the conclusion that this car was not raced by the 'works' at any of the major events. Exactly when it was shipped out to the US remains unclear. We decided that having briefly owned one of cars before, Royston must have bought this one purely for display purposes and applied the No.67 to give it the credibility of a class-winning Sebring Sprite.

Very much later I received some photos of the car in its earlier days including a black and white one showing the car in a showroom, dark in colour with the No.67 on its doors plus other decals, exactly as it is today – the photo is dated March 1968! So the Mystery car finally became the Display car. Unfortunately these conclusions were a big disappointment to the car's owner Jeff Brenner.

On to 1967:

The remaining car, HNX 456D, went once again to Sebring and, in the capable hands of Clive Baker and Rauno Aaltonen, it finished 13th in the Prototype class.

It ran alongside the standard-bodied Sprite LNX 629E in the hands of **Carson Baird** (USA), **Roger Enever** (GB) and **Alec Poole** (IRL) finishing in 18th place, 3rd in class – this car recently sold to Paul Woolmer at auction in the UK.

To come: in Part 2 of this history – the final 4 cars produced in 1967 and '68, a road-going version, 2 Targa Florio cars and the long debate over which car actually raced at Le Mans in that final year before BMC support was withdrawn from the Healey team.



Above photos: Jonathan Whitehouse-Bird



photo: Bruno Verstraete



HNX 456D at Sebring in 1967



photo: Billy Turner