

Austin-Healey

MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2018



FAMOUS
is just one of the words
you could use to describe this car!

An Exceptional Tribute

John Sprinzel's PMO 200 Brought Back To Life

By Brett Pruitt

Few names are more closely associated with the Austin Healey Sprite than John Sprinzel. Most Healey enthusiasts know Sprinzel as a famous rally driver of the late 1950's and 60's or as the man behind the giant killing Sebring Sprites, the amazingly competitive coach built Sprite coupes of the early 60's.

Meeting a legend

I came to meet John ten years ago after he gave a talk at our local auto luncheon, Honolulu's "Auto Lunch Bunch". It's a group of like-minded car enthusiasts who meet once a month to talk cars and racing. This informal gathering was started by Bill Maloney, an old Healey 100/6 racer from the 60's.



Photos by Barry Maier

These beautiful photos were shot in the Ko'olau mountains and Kualoa valley in Kaaawa on the island of Oahu.

PMO 200 Brought Back To Life

I was so taken with John, and his stories of racing in the 50's and 60's, that I convinced him to take a short flight to Honolulu from his home on the island of Molokai to share with our British Car Club of Hawaii more stories of his life in racing. John brought along a film called Coupe des Alpes, the Story of the 1958 Alpine Rally. If you're a fan of British sports cars, this is a film you have to see. You can find it on YouTube by searching 1958 Alpine Rally. Standard Motor Co. (Triumph) also produced a film about the race titled Against the Clock. Oddly you have to search YouTube for the 1959 Alpine Rally, but I assure you the film is about the '58 race. Both films really give you a feel for the rally and what a monumental challenge this was to both the cars and drivers. Needless to say John's talk was a big hit with all the club members as it was delivered with John's charming self-effacing humor that has made him a hit with car clubs around the world for decades. He has shared stories about the tight fraternity of drivers that are now legends of British motorsport like Sterling Moss, Graham Hill, and Colin Chapman, among others. And of course any Healey enthusiast worth his salt knows Sterling Moss' sister Pat was the tenacious factory rally driver who dominated in a red/white 100/6 and 3000. Little known fact, John and Pat Moss were an item for a time. If you've been lucky enough to hear a talk given by John you will know this is a man that can tell a great story.

John Sprinzel told me that, "This photo is at the end of the 1960 Liege-Rome-Liege Rally. Pat Moss and Anne Wisdom came first, a Porsche came second and our little steel bodied Sebring Sprite came third. Our Abingdon team won just About every award, two team prizes, two classes, and as an after thought, the ladies award"



A few years pass and John gives me a call asking for my assistance in selling his beloved Bugeye. He and his wife Caryl setup a college scholarship fund for the children of the island of Molokai and proceeds from the car would be added to the fund.



I'm listening to this thinking here is an opportunity to own John Sprinzel's Sprite that is registered PMO200! Well, needless to say we came to an agreement before we even hung up. I knew immediately we were going to recreate the car that John and his navigator Willy Cave drove to a class win at the Alpine Rally in 1958.

History First

Back in 1958 when John was an up and coming driver and a rookie member of the BMC race team he was mostly racing Austin's small saloon car, the A35, and finishing regularly at the top of the podium. In May of that year Austin Healey introduced their new affordable sports car, the Sprite, at the Monaco Grand Prix.

The first test for the new Sprite would be the Alpine Rally, also know by its official name, Coupe Des Alpes. The race started in Marseille, France and wound its way for 2,400 miles through the un-fenced mountain passes of the French and Italian Alps.

The first of the three car Sprite team to tackle the Alpine was a car from the BMC Competition department at Abingdon driven by Ray Brooks. The second

The bottom image is John fixing the exhaust with bailing wire. Rally drivers needed to be able to patch their car together. In the 1958 Alpine race John hacked a hole in the bonnet after it was damaged, to allow them to top-up coolant and oil. Without this modification they would have never finished. [See photo above.]



car, was prepared by the Healey Motor Co. for Tommy Wisdom. In an effort to stretch his racing budget, Marcus Chambers, head of the Competitions department at BMC, loaned a third car to Speedwell Engineering to be prepared for John.



Speedwell was a tuning shop headed by John and Graham Hill. (Hill would later become one of Britain's greatest drivers and a Formula One champion). Speedwell specialized in squeezing more power out of BMC's "A" series engines for their customers. Speedwell went to work with a little over a month to prep the new, and untested, Sprite for a grueling 2,400 mile rally.

PMO200 took off from the start-line in Marseille on the first week of July, 1958. The little car turned out to be perfect for rallying as it handled great and could take the punishment. PMO200, with drivers Sprinzel/Cave, won first in class in the Sprite's first international race. This was a brilliant event for Team Sprite with a 1-2-3 finish in class.

Working on the Details

Trying to recreate a specific racecar would have been impossible without the help of the man who modified it. A lot can be gleaned from period photos and movies but understanding what was done and why was an amazing opportunity. The fact that John could remember most of the specifics 55 years later just blew me away. I can't remember things from last month! Some of those details were just unavailable so they had to be recreated. The word "un-attainium" reached a whole new level. The Delaney Gallay oil cooler was recreated using a modern core. The rally plates and decals were made using period photos as a guide. The Speedwell emblem was only possible with the help of a collector in the UK who was kind enough to take measurements and send photos. He would not part with his emblem as he had never seen another like it. This emblem was recreated

by a CAD designer using a 3D printer and then sent out to be chromed by a company specializing in chroming for models. The side vents are originally from a 1950 to 1954 Austin A70 Hereford. Through the Austin Counties Car Club in Wendover, UK, we were able to track down a pair. The vents arrived in Hawaii and were quickly shipped to Minnesota to be cleaned up and re-chromed. The tax disc was made in Britain by Greg Powell who recreates them for classic cars. He was able to get the stamp for the correct location and date for PMO200.

There were folks from around the world who helped with the details, from a fresh motor to the color of the cylinder head and all the details in between that made this project possible. If you're restoring a Sprite you should definitely visit a website by a UK gentleman named Martin Ingall (www.sebringssprite.com). The site is "a celebration of John Sprinzel's Sebring Sprite". There is an astounding amount of information and a network of knowledgeable people ready to help.

Finished Project

The goal was to build a period correct car so I could experience driving what John and the other heroes of the day experienced in international rally racing. These were incredible men and women who took on dangerous mountain passes in all conditions for thousands of miles in cars that by today's standards were death traps. When I asked John how the drum brakes handled going down the steep mountain passes, he replied with a twinkle in his eye "Willy and I would throw open the doors to help us slow down!"



It has been an honor working on this project with one of the legends in British motor racing. It's my hope that this car will endure another sixty years and be a lasting tribute to John Sprinzel.

