

# HISTORIC Healey

Words by Suzanne Keane,  
Photos by Andrew Pollock

It might have the kind of cute-faced looks normally reserved for toy cars, but with the right preparation the Austin Healey Sprite is no plaything, and is well able to show bigger cars the way in historic motorsport. Trevor McIlroy's Sebring Sprite is a perfect case in point.







*Trevor's been in and around MGs and Healey Sprites since the seventies, both on the road and in the motorsport arena.*



Intended to be a spiritual successor to the various sporty and racing versions of the Austin 7, one of the pillars of pre- and post-war motorsport in this part of the world, the Austin Healey Sprite Mk1 was introduced in 1958 as a small, fun and relatively inexpensive sports car. Despite being such a small car paired with a low-powered 948cc engine, the Sprite soon gained notoriety, mostly due to its impressive handling abilities. At the start of the 1960s a number of special-bodied Mk1 Sprites were released, and when a young up-and-coming racing driver, John Sprinzel, left Speedwell to join Donald Healey at his newly-opened showroom in the West End of London, the streamlined Austin Healey Sebring Sprite was born. The name was taken from the famous Florida race circuit where works Sprites had done well from 1959 onwards, including a class win by Stirling Moss in 1960.

While the genuine Sebring Sprites built under Sprinzel's time at the BMC Competition Department had a quite exotic specification including four-wheel disc brakes, straight-cut gearboxes and more powerful engines, many private customers soon wanted similar specifications for their own Sprites. The Healeys modified Sprites to a similar style for customers in period, as did other companies like Speedwell, and of course there were more than a few road-going cars that were modified to look Sebring-ready too, with the streamlined nose and fixed coupe hard-top. In later years there have been several Sebring replicas also made available, one being the very attractive type you see on these pages, which was produced by Archer's Garage in Birmingham in the 1990s, although with the new sections made of lightweight fibreglass as opposed to the aluminium alloy of the original Sebrings. Approximately 103 were made in their day, but only about 70 Archer Sebring Sprites are now thought to survive.

Belfast-based Trevor McIlroy has a long history with MGs, Austin Healeys and motorsport, going all the way back to the 1970s when he first competed in the UAC Ormeau Park Belfast Sprint with an Austin Allegro, then progressing onto auto-test Minis, MG Midgets and Austin Healey Sprites. In 2010 he spotted an Old English White 1959 Sprite, XXC 818, for sale in London, which had been lying idle in a garage for a few months. This unusual car with red interior trim had been purchased by Gary White back in 2002, and was fitted with an Archer's Sebring body in 2005. Gary's car was fitted with body number 51 of the approx 103 built; Gary was well known for racing Lotus, Aston-Martin, Mini and MGs cars over the years, and was the owner of the Frogeye Spares company up until 2008, when he retired to Portugal with his beloved Sprite and Mini Cooper S. Unfortunately, not long afterwards Gary became ill and returned to the UK, passing away towards the end of 2009.



*The long-distance races at the Sebring circuit in Florida were the scene of many of the Sprite's early motorsport victories, producing lots of public demand for this capable little sports car.*

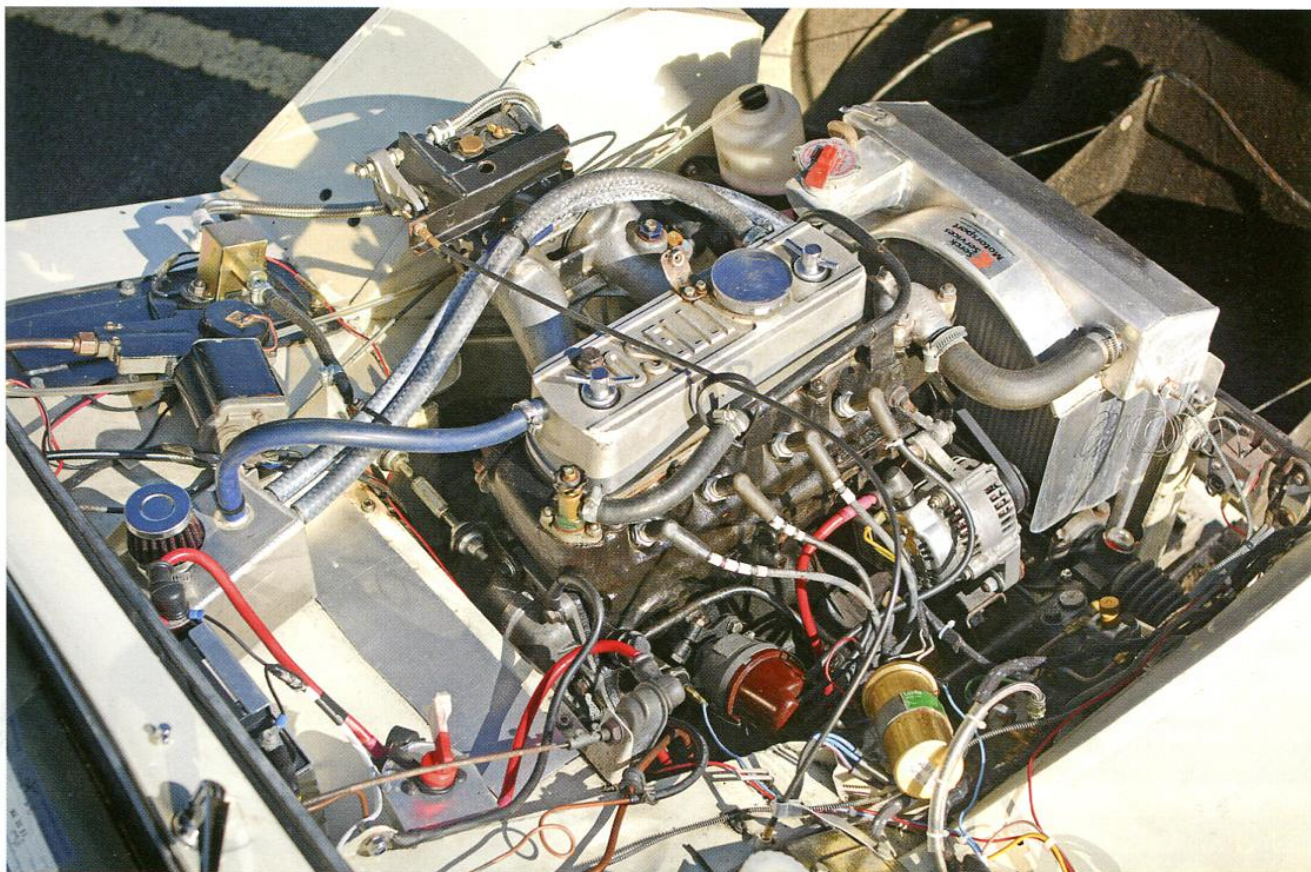


*Trevor tackles the hill at Cultra in 2015.*

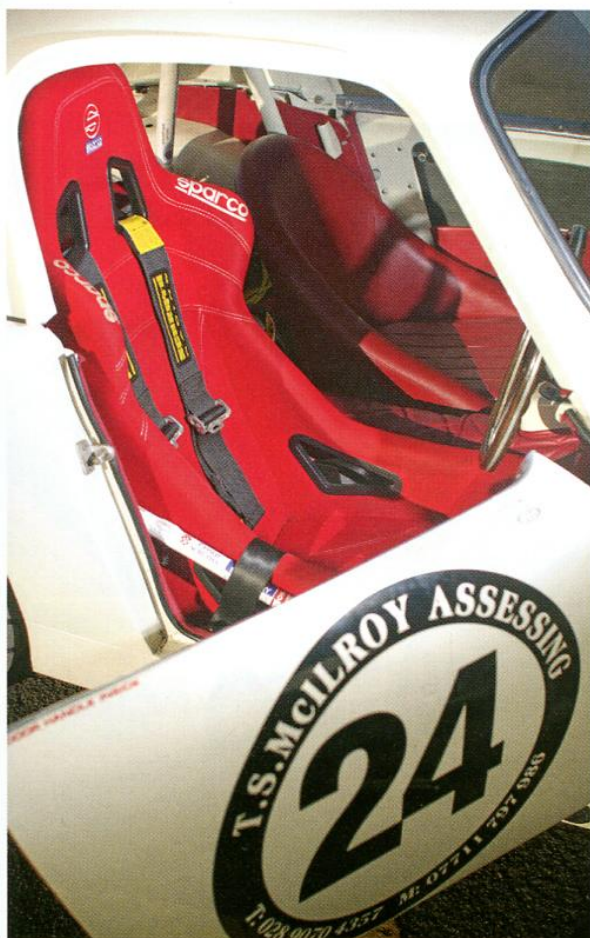


*Unlike many racers, this one's beautifully finished inside, although very much still focused on the task at hand: speed.*





Running on a big single Weber, the full-house 1,380cc A-Series is a whole world faster than the 998 that this car would have left the factory with.



The passenger has a minimalist period bucket to sit on, while the driver is clamped into a FIA-spec Sparco.

Thanks to his background with these cars, Trevor knew what he was looking at and didn't take long to make the decision to buy. Once back in Belfast the first job was to strip the car back to a bare shell to begin the work necessary to transform it into a road-going race car. Underneath the bonnet, where a 998cc A-Series would normally sit, there's now a far more potent version with a 1,380cc displacement, paired with a Jack Knight straight-cut gearbox. Handling ability comes through adjustable Armstrong lever arm units and race-weight front springs, and the front suspension top arms have been triangulated to cope with the stresses exerted by wider wheels and race tyres. Minilite alloys are wrapped in road legal Toyo Proxes R888 rubber, and hide the 9-inch front brake discs that have been fitted with MGB cast callipers. Braking power to the rear is provided by 8" Sebring drum brakes, while a triple-master-cylinder pedal box and aircraft-quality stainless-steel brake hosing have also been used. A gleaming coat of Old English White paint covers the bodysheet, which was seam welded and fitted with a roll cage, Sparco FIA race seat and Sabelt FIA four-point harness in preparation for the race track.

With the entire rebuild taking just six months, 2011 was a busy year for Trevor's Sprite. The first outing was the Cultra Hillclimb at the Folk & Transport Museum in Co. Down, after which the car continued on to England, where it competed at Silverstone in the International California Cup Autotest as part of the MG Car Club Ulster team's Silverstone Luffield Sprint. The year was rounded off by an appearance on the Sebring Sprite display at Burghley House, Peterborough for the MG Midget's 50th Anniversary celebration. In 2012 the Sprite was ready for more action, and competed in the Association of Northern Ireland Car Clubs sprint championship, taking home an impressive second-place finish in the Historic class. This success continued into 2013, when Trevor's Healey achieved third place in the same event and went on to win the concours d'elegance award for 'Best Competition Car' at the Bo'ness Hill Climb event - the oldest race of its kind in Scotland. 2014 saw the Sprite winning second place on day one and first place on day two in the Historic class at the Classic Crystal Palace Historic event in London. Over the past two years the car has competed in a number of other English events, and took third place in the Historic class at the famous Shelsley Walsh Hillclimb on Trevor's first attempt.



While it's now fully road legal, the Sprite is only used for historic motorsport events and the odd sunny day run on the open road. But, judging by the plans Trevor has in store for next year there wouldn't be much time for anything else! In 2017 he is planning to enter the Sprite in a number of historic hillclimbs including St Goueno in France, Chateau Impney and return trips to Shelsley Walsh in England, Bo-ness in Scotland as well as the Association of Northern Ireland Car Clubs sprint championship.

Trevor isn't the only McIlroy with a need for speed, as his younger sister Fel joined him back in the mid-1980s competing in hillclimbs, sprints and auto testing, before moving onto marshalling and Clerk of the Course duties over the years to become one of the most qualified female RACMSA officials in the UK. Between them, Fel and Trevor have an impressive collection of cars, including three round-arch MG Midgets (one for every year they were built), Austin Healey Sprites including a 1959 standard-bodied Monte Carlo replica, a 1959 Austin A35 rally car, a Caterham/Lotus 7 Super Sprint and a few Mazda MX-5s, along with a limited-edition Harley Davidson for good measure. However, I get the feeling this stunning Sebring Sprite is one of his very favourite machines of the lot.

### Club Membership

Trevor is Chairman of the Thoroughbred Sports Car Club of Northern Ireland, and is also a member of the Lisburn City Old Vehicles Club; for details on each, see [www.tscni.info](http://www.tscni.info) and [www.lisburncityoldvehicleclub.co.uk](http://www.lisburncityoldvehicleclub.co.uk).

### T.S. McIlroy Assessing

Luckily for Trevor, his love of cars isn't just a hobby – as an automotive engineer he runs T.S. McIlroy Assessing, specialising in consultancy work for insurance companies, brokers and the legal profession in relation to vintage, historic and classic cars and their values. For further information, call 028 (048 from RoI) 90704357 or email [tsmcilroy@gmail.com](mailto:tsmcilroy@gmail.com).



As mentioned, speed runs in the McIlroy family – this is Trevor's sister Fel tackling Knockagh in their 1959 Monte Carlo-replica Sprite.



The beauty of a car like this is that it's equally at home on sprints, hillclimbs and autotests, and is even road legal for the odd Sunday blast too.



The rear end is all business. Note the quick-release fuel filler and the reversing spotlight. There's a big exhaust box, but this thing still sounds very purposeful indeed.