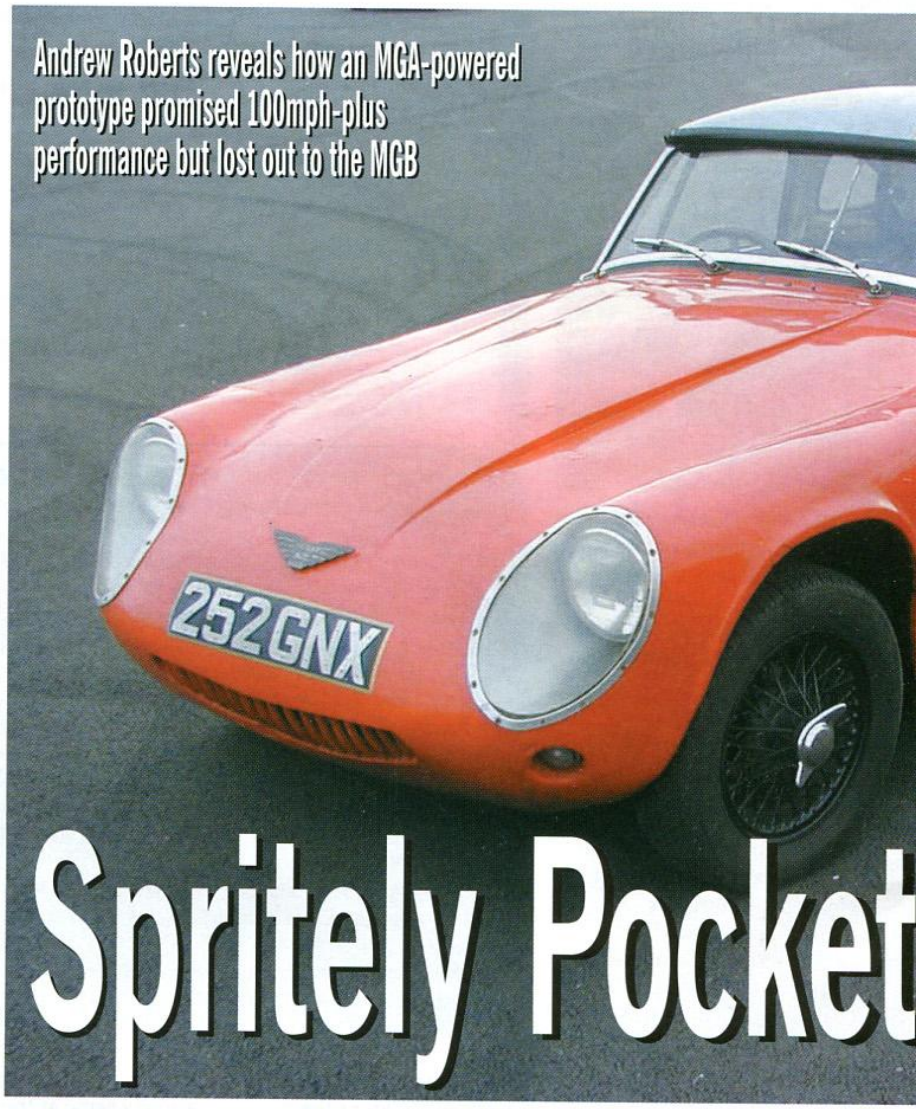
Andrew Roberts reveals how an MGA-powered prototype promised 100mph-plus performance but lost out to the MGB

Spritely Pocket

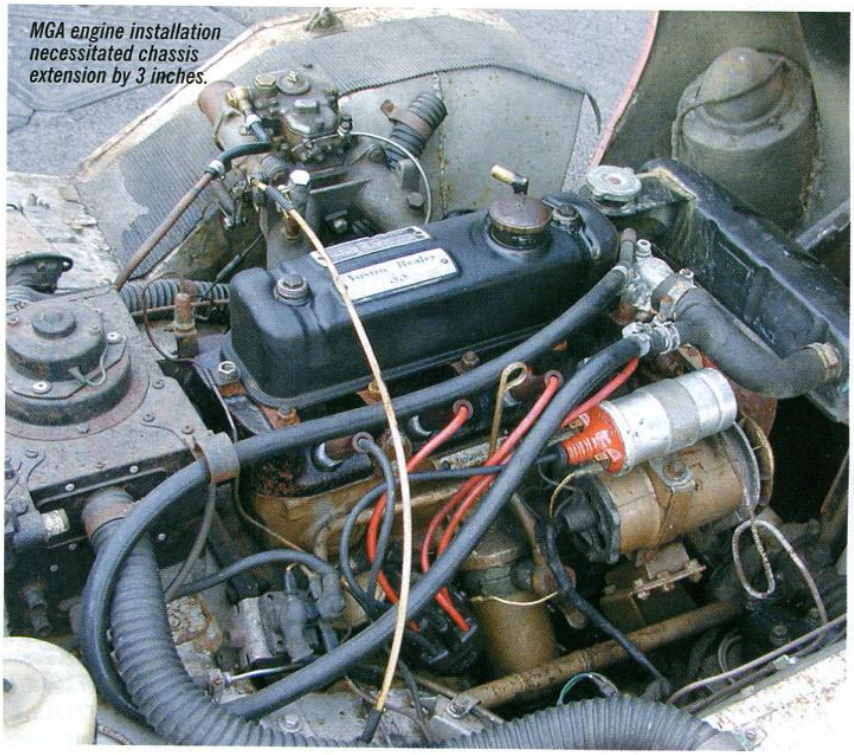


When the first Austin-Healey Sprite in its immortal 'Frogeye' guise was launched in 1958, its 948cc A-Series engine was producing a relatively modest 43bhp.By the time the last development of the car, the Triumph-engined Midget 1500 left Abingdon 21 years later, power output had risen to 65bhp. In between times, both the Donald Healey Motor Company and the MG Car Company explored ways of increasing the power outputs of what was always a minimalist and entertaining sports car, regardless of whether it wore the Austin-Healey badge or the MG octagon.

Inevitably, the number of development cars which survive after their factory careers are over, is minute. The fate of such vehicles is normally the cutter's torch and unless their life has been documented, their history can vanish into the ether. One car which has defied the odds is a very special Donald Healey Motor Company Austin-Healey Sprite, powered by an MGA engine. Although known in Austin-Healey Club circles, it has by-passed devotees of the MG Midget, until its appearance alongside the WSM cars at MG 80, propelled it into the limelight.

The idea of a more powerful power unit for the Sprite had been recognised as far back as 1960, just two years after the model's introduction. Code number EX221 was assigned to the Syd Enever-inspired project which would see a 1622cc MGA engine shoehorned into a standard Sprite floorpan. As other special builders had found, there were problems. Despite a more than useful increase in performance, the Sprite's legendary handling was compromised if the engine was moved forward, which induced considerable understeer. Conversely, if the B-Series engine was mounted further back to overcome the handling problem, it reduced the cockpit area and, worse still, generated huge amounts of heat to the discomfort of driver and passenger. With the MGB on the horizon, the project quietly faded away, although a 1798cc MGB engine was subsequently fitted to the car and raced with some success by Roger Enever.

The Donald Healey Motor Company was able to draw on a development budget from BMC and although they increasingly worked alongside Abingdon, a number of independent projects were instigated at Warwick. The majority of these carried names of consumer products, including detergents and cleaners, as well as food products. So, such unlikely Healey names as Daz, Omo, Ajax and Vim appeared for what



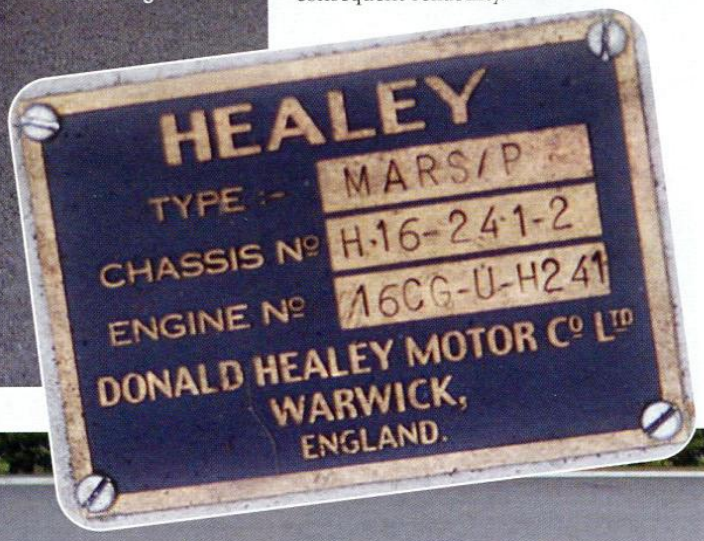
MGA engine installation necessitated chassis extension by 3 inches.

Front three-quarter view shows bonnet influenced by Targa Florio cars. Chassis plate shows MARS coding.

GT

were lightweight cars, while the development Sprite which is the subject of this article, rejoiced in the name of MARS, after the long-running chocolate bar. The project dates from 1960/61, with BMC apparently - and somewhat surprisingly given the direction they were going in with the MGA replacement, EX214 dated 1958-59 - asking Healeys to look at a budget-priced mid-range sports car of enhanced performance to replace the MGA.

The late Geoffrey Healey, who briefly chronicled the development of the car in his book More Healeys, describes how the Warwick approach differed from that of MG. It seems, although the book does not say so, that they were aware of the shortcomings of the EX221 project and they were much more radical in their approach. Warwick were also apparently concerned at the way the A-Series engine was developing from 948cc into a long stroke 1098cc unit, particularly on the grounds of roughness, strength and consequent reliability.



Their solution was therefore to take a 1622cc MGA engine - as Syd Enever had done - and consider its installation in the Sprite. As an aside, the Healey Marine venture, which produced some 1,200 boats in its existence, used MGA engines amongst its power units and the MARS car's power unit is a Type 75 Marine engine. This would seem to emphasise that there was little Abingdon input to the project.

The Warwick team took a standard Mk II Sprite, cut the front suspension off and moved it forward by 3 inches and extending the front of the chassis with new members. This increased the wheelbase by three inches but significantly it kept the weight of the engine centred in the car. Using the final development of the MGA engine meant that power output was now 84bhp, a quantum leap from the Mk II Sprite in its 1098cc form, which produced 56bhp. Rather than the standard Sprite/Midget gearbox which was not considered strong enough to handle the increased power, a 4-speed non-overdrive MGA gearbox was specified, with an A-series 3.73:1 rear axle. The standard twin 11/2 inch SU carburettor set-up of the MGA was replaced in favour of a Weber 40 DCOE-2. Fuel tank capacity was increased from the meagre 6 gallons of the standard car to 15 gallons. To cope with the extra performance, bigger brakes were specified: 8.5 inch Girling discs with special calipers at the front and 8 inch Girling drum at the rear. The front suspension remained standard, although fitted with uprated springs and dampers.

Side elevation shows 3 inch longer wheelbase and attractive profile had production been achieved.

The rear suspension retained the quarter elliptical springs, with adjustable lever arm dampers. Wheels were 4.5 inch 60-spoke wires.

To accommodate the MGA power unit and the lengthened chassis, a front-hinging one-piece alloy bonnet clearly inspired by the special Targa Florio Sprites developed at Warwick, was fitted. The windscreen was deeper than that of the then current standard Sprite/Midget and the car was fitted with different doors with wind-up windows, which were to be launched on the Mark III Sprite and its Midget stablemate in 1964. It is likely that these were replacements for the original shallower windscreen and sidescreen equipped doors, which would have been standard Mk II Sprite.The car was fitted with an Ashley fastback hardtop, a popular aftermarket accessory at the time, which was bonded to the Sprite body.

The car was originally sprayed Healey Ice Blue but during its later life it was resprayed red and the hardtop covered in black vinyl. One-off badging was produced, both bonnet and fastback having the simple winged motif, which bears the name 'Healey', the engine capacity '1622' and the country of origin, 'England'. A 'Healey' script badge is also affixed to the bootlid of the Ashley hardtop and to the passenger side of the dashboard. Instrumentation and layout differs from the standard car. An immediately noticeable departure from standard is the addition of a contemporary woodrim steering wheel.

Because the MARS car was a development vehicle, it was never submitted to any publication for testing. Without access to contemporary figures, we have to draw on Geoffrey Healey's recollections of the car, which clearly delivered the kind of performance that

Ashley hardtop transforms MARS Sprite into classic 1960s GT.

Despite changes, cockpit is recognisably Sprite/Midget.

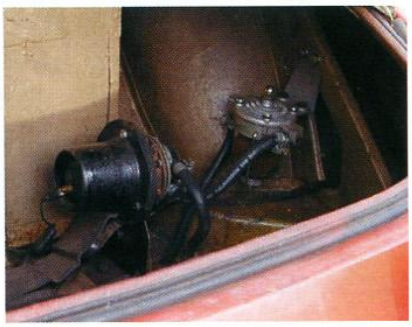
Side elevation shows 3 inch longer wheelbase and attractive profile had production been achieved.

BMC and the Donald Healey Motor Company had in mind. In More Healeys, he said, "I did a pretty big mileage in this car. It was extremely noisy, the 1622cc engine was a noisy unit and the small Sprite had little in the way of sound deadening. The performance was good but not spectacular, its top speed being 106mph with a 0-60 acceleration of 9 seconds." Consumption was in the order of 28-30mpg, which with the increased tankage, equated to a touring distance of 420-450 miles.

How does the MARS car rate as a prototype? What is immediately evident that this was a vehicle that was right from the outset. Performance and consumption were more than

Woodrim steering wheel was typical Healey fitment at Warwick.

Ashley hardtop was bonded to rear bodywork.



15 gallon fuel tank gave genuine touring potential.

Black painted wire wheels were original fitment.

competitive for the period, but sadly the idea of a relatively small high performance sports car, which would later be developed by Triumph with the Spitfire/GT6 and MG with the MGB/MGB GT V8, was fractionally ahead of its time. Geoffrey Healey's comment about the noisiness of the car would surely have been remedied in a production version. Underbonnet sound-deadening would have dramatically cut the engine noise, while the single-skin Ashley hardtop would almost certainly not have made it into production, its replacement being of metal construction as in the MGA Coupe. Personal experience of this hardtop on a Mk II MG Midget convinced me that good looks apart, the noise level this engendered was unacceptable, seeing me only too willing to return to the normal hood configuration.

Would there have been a market for a production version of the MARS car? The answer must surely have been in the affirmative, save for the introduction of the MGB. The performance figures of the new roadster which was introduced in 1962, are significant. Autocar's road test of October 26 1962 recorded a top speed of 103mph, a 0-60mph time of 12.2 seconds and a fuel consumption of 20-29mpg. So, almost certainly a production version of the MARS Sprite with its superior figures, would have eaten into MGB sales.

Looking forward to 1965 and the announcement of the MGB GT, the refinement of the MGB into a genuine Grand Tourer, the case against the MARS car becomes even more compelling. The MGB GT returned a top speed of 108mph and a 0-60 time of 12.1 seconds, according to the US publication Car and Driver in May 1966. Autocar recorded a consumption figure of 22.8mpg in March 1966. Undoubtedly a production version of the MARS car with greater creature comforts would have recorded figures less good than the prototype, but clearly it would have been competing in the same marketplace as the MGB and later the MGB GT. So, almost inevitably, it was a project that was not proceeded with by BMC.

After the decision not to continue with the MARS project, the car was sold in May 1963 and became the property of an Arthur Smith of Hilmorton, Rugby who kept it for eight months. The original buff log book records two further owners before entries were discontinued. Little more is known of the car until it appeared in the Bonhams Auction at the Racing Car Show at Olympia, London on January 9th 1988. The catalogue description threw little further light on the car's history, the somewhat sparse entry being based on the Chris Harvey account of the car in MG and Austin-Healey Spridgets.

Although not sold at the auction an after-event sale was achieved, the successful buyer being Healey collector and Austin-Healey Club competition secretary Tony Elshof. He purchased the car in its current red, but with the Ashley hardtop finished in black vinyl, very much the vogue of the 1970s. The car was subsequently stored and on Tony Elshof's untimely death his collection of cars was auctioned, the MARS car being among the lots. RTS Auctions handled the sale, which was held at The Royal Showground, Norwich on September 19th 1999. Healey collectors Paul and Sharon Woolmer were successful in their bid and since acquiring it have returned the MARS car to running status.

A car that is regularly used, this special Sprite has no trouble in keeping up with modern traffic and, say its owners, is a pleasure to drive in the true style of its production siblings. The long-term aim is to restore the MARS car to its original Warwick scondition. The hardtop has been stripped of its black vinyl and exhibits the remains of the original Healey Ice Blue.

It is the intention to return it to its original colour scheme as part of its complete restoration. But wherever the MARS Sprite appears it attracts considerable interest, as evidenced by the huge response at the MG Car Club's MG80 at Silverstone back in July. It is yet another tantalising glimpse of what might have been and a fascinating detour from mainstream Austin-Healey and MG history.

Paul and Sharon Woolmer are keen to fill the gaps in the MARS car's history and would welcome any further information. They may be contacted on 01234 376119 (evenings).