

# Playing all the right tunes

With a raft of go-faster goodies and neat coupé styling, the Speedwell GT was a pricey but desirable choice for aspiring young racers, says **Graeme Hurst**

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**





If you wanted to blow the doors off your best mate's motor in the late 1950s, there was no shortage of choice when it came to boosting your entry-level BMC-powered sports car's pep and presence. Dozens of fledgling tuning companies proffered performance parts for Austin's popular A-series. There was trick suspension to be had, too. Oh, and wood-rimmed steering wheels and rev-counters. Basically, there was a bolt-on accessory for all tastes – and ambitions.

And that included racing. If your need for speed was not sated by the Traffic Light Grand Prix, there was one tuning firm that went a step further than the others. Speedwell in north London built its own Austin-Healey Sprite-based coupé: the Speedwell GT. Styled by Frank Costin of concurrent Vanwall and Lotus racing fame, just 18 of these pretty cars were made from 1959 to '62. They proved their worth at club, international and even world levels as rolling showcases for the company's products.

Given their performance and track focus, it's unsurprising that only a handful of the originals survive, and that many of those have long since lost their original body bits. But Speedwell enthusiasts Dave Grove and Bill McDonough have tracked down and owned four of them – including 5755 MM, which the duo rebuilt in time to contest this year's Fordwater Trophy at the Goodwood Revival Meeting.

The firm's origins stem from before the Frogeye Sprite, when it offered 'quick' bits for A35s. Named after the telephone exchange that served its Finchley Road premises, Speedwell

Performance Conversions Ltd was started by a trio of club racers – John Sprinzel, Len Adams and George Hulbert, after the latter had successfully reworked the head on Sprinzel's A35. In what would turn out to be a stroke of marketing genius, they took on rising Grand Prix star Graham Hill as a partner. His endorsement swiftly established Speedwell as the one-stop tuning and accessories brand.

But the company's most important move was improving on Donald Healey's Frogeye, which in bog-standard form offered a meagre 43bhp and a modest 0-60mph time of 20.5 secs. Although more power was easily liberated, Speedwell's improvements weren't entirely centred within the engine bay: it was its switch to a more aerodynamic bonnet, which weighed 38lb in aluminium compared to the 72lb of the standard steel item, and the addition of an ally roof that gave the car its GT identity. It was built by Williams & Pritchard until Speedwell balked at the cost and switched to the lesser-known Classic Motor Crafts Ltd of Barnet.

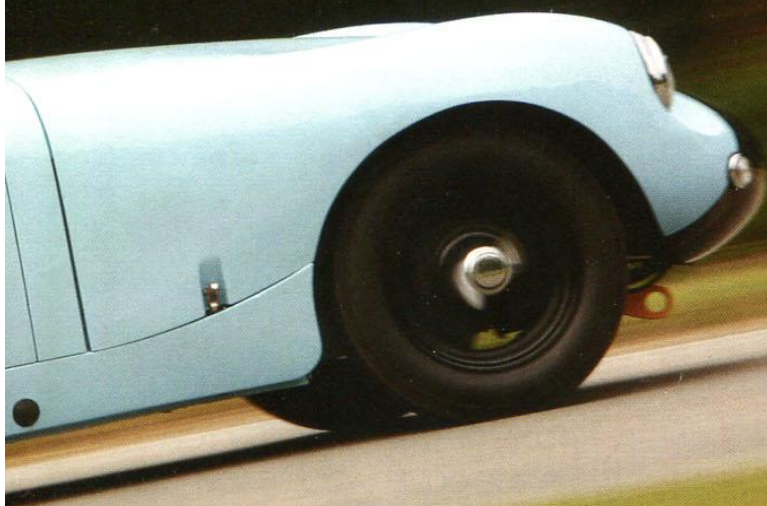
Four states of tune were offered. The £875 'Sport' was the mildest, while the wildest, the 'Clubman 60', its fully balanced 60bhp engine on Amal carburettors and featuring larger inlet valves, could be yours for a hefty £995. But in the main Speedwell marketed its engines – a Clubman 60 cost £180, fitted – and other bits separately. You could have your choice of back-axle ratio for £15 10s, or a close-ratio 'box for a not inconsiderable £37 10s (plus £12 10s for fitting); a set of front discs would set you back £11. Big on self-promotion, Speedwell also

bragged about its specially developed nine-spring competition clutch (in place of the standard six-spring job) and beefed-up half-shafts, but the reality was that these were standard Post Office A35 van items.

Keen to garner publicity for these demon tweaks, in the manner of Jaguar's speed-record boasts, Costin designed a streamlined Speedwell GT, complete with bubble canopy, for a record attempt on the Antwerp-Liège *autoroute* in April 1960. Hulbert set a sub-1000cc World Record at 132.206mph – not bad for a car giving 92bhp on a mix of methanol and nitromethane. Arguably even more impressive, though, was the 110.903mph achieved by Hill, who was behind the wheel to ensure this simultaneous bid did not go unnoticed by the press, in a 'standard' – albeit re-gear – Speedwell GT.

Speedwell had been swift to prove the car's merit in racing, too. Hill drove one (VXT 523) in the GT encounter at the 1959 International Trophy meeting at Silverstone, while Sprinzel secured a class win in that year's Liège-Rome-Liège marathon, navigated by Stuart Turner in PMO 200. The latter car is not to be confused with Sprinzel's later, more famous Sebring Sprite that bore the same registration number.

Returning US serviceman Richard Melville then offered Hill a co-drive in the Sebring Four Hours (for 1-litre GTs) in March '61: they retired after 33 laps. Another privately owned GT (585 MY) was raced in 1966 by Grahame White. Co-driven by Keith Grant, it finished 17th in the Ilford Films 500 at a very damp Brands Hatch in May. The same pairing finished



From top: closed cockpit feels intimate – handsome wheel is a Speedwell original; Frank Costin's lines – and Graham Hill's association – boosted sales of the pretty GT



35th overall – second in the 1300cc GT class – in June's Nürburgring 1000km, during which the car was timed at an alleged 140mph on the infamous switchback straight. The following month, this time partnered by Terry Hunter, White finished 50th on time in the Circuit of Mugello, its daunting 41-mile lap featuring not one but two Tuscan mountain passes, but was unclassified in the final results. Back home, XYU 383, which Grove and McDonough are now restoring, raced at Brands Hatch and Goodwood.

Sadly, little is known of 5755 MM's racing history, although it's believed to have been campaigned on several UK circuits by its first owner, Yorkshireman Trevor Smith, whose Pegasus Racing team sported an Ecurie Ecosse-style transverse stripe in red over a white bonnet. He had been given the car for his 21st birthday after turning his nose up at an MGA. And quite a pricey present it was, too. A '61 car, 5755 MM was one of the last GTs made and Speedwell specced it up to make it saleable: a Clubman 60 engine and fully trimmed 'Super Deluxe' interior pushed its sticker price to £1100, nearly double that of a standard Frogeye.

Smith moved it on five years later, after which it had several owners before being badly pranged at Donington Park in 1983. Fast-forward 15 years and its straightened remains came Grove and McDonough's way through a classified advertisement in a club magazine.

No two Speedwells are alike, apparently. That's because the donor cars weren't quite the same either. "Speedwell bought some cars from the factory, while others were insurance write-offs," says Grove. "If one had taken a shunt at the back, then it gained an aluminium rear end; if it had been hit in the side, it got ally doors." Simple. But it complicates matters today.

Whatever its background, 5755 MM was in a sorry state when its restoration began. "It was complete but had a standard steel rear and its bonnet was in bad way," says Grove. Putting the word out among the racing community steered this determined pair towards the original

supplier of the glassfibre bonnet (introduced in 1961). "They still had the moulds," grins Grove, who also used a glassfibre rear end as a buck to beat out the correct one-piece ally panel.

With Goodwood firmly in their sights, the pair switched to a 1380cc engine after a shake-down with a 980cc unit in March last year left them at the tail of the field. It still looks standard, mind. "We found traces of Speedwell blue on the rocker cover, and that allowed us to get the colour of the engine spot-on," explains Grove.

With a full-race cam and high-compression pistons, this little bomb is reckoned to be pushing out north of 115bhp. The engine lacks low-down torque as its massive 48DCOE Dell'Orto slurps greedily, but it comes alive above 3000rpm. Floor it and, as you pass 5000rpm, it screams away towards the horizon while you flick up through the gears of the straight-cut 'box (a later addition). The large wood-rimmed wheel (a pukka Speedwell item) keeps the precise steering light despite a goodly dose of negative camber that makes the car more planted than an ordinary Sprite. This is a delightfully responsive and controllable piece of kit, its enclosed cockpit and wraparound glass endowing it with a real GT feel. You can imagine hassling a GT40 in some twisty stuff – or rocking in the draught as a piece of Detroit iron hammers past on a 200mph straight.

Experienced Healey racer Neil Hardy, who also happens to be McDonough's brother-in-law, brought the car home in a creditable 14th place at the Revival, despite having to be gentle with a borrowed engine after suffering a burnt piston during practice.

That promising performance has accelerated Grove and McDonough's plans to finish XYU 383's restoration and return it to the famous Sussex circuit. Which is precisely where Speedwell intended its inspired little GT to end up. There, Sebring, Mugello and the 'Ring. 

Thanks to DJ Grove Restorations (01256 768678); Hardy Engineering ([www.hardyengineering.co.uk](http://www.hardyengineering.co.uk))



From top: yes, that is the correct colour for the engine; period line-up at Classic Motor Crafts in Barnet; svelte body is given aggressive edge by knock-off hubs and chunky Dunlop tyres

