

THE

Jon Pressnell meets the Bedfordshire garagiste who masterminded the intriguing and rare 'Wuzzum' WSM-Sprite

Doug Wilson-Spratt explains, in his low-key gentlemanly way, the fashion in which his dinky little WSM-Sprites were built: "It was skilled craftsmen we were using – not a load of bodgers. I think that's important," he says. Outside stands the evidence: a red WSM owned by son Tony. Thirty years on the panel gaps are tight, and the alloy panels and grp bonnet smooth. When Wilson-Spratt did a job, whether building caravans or mini-GT Sprites, he did the job properly.

The first WSM-Sprite was completed in 1962, but its design philosophy can be traced back to a Bentley special Wilson-Spratt built in the '50s. This was when he was running caravan-maker Marlborough, having left the Bristol car division where he worked after war service on the aircraft side.

"I owned nine vintage Bentleys over a period of some years and about half way through the sequence I decided to collect together all the items I needed to build the ideal 4½-litre. I had a 9ft 9½in chassis made up from a 10ft 10in frame by George Burton, a well-known Bentley man working for Buckler. Into this went the right gearbox, a close-ratio D-type one, the right axle, and a cone clutch. I converted it from a plate clutch because I was used to cone clutches and because they saved weight. My philosophy has always been to start by lightening, and afterwards to turn to the powerplant. I ended up with a car 5cwt lighter than a standard tourer."

Bodied in aluminium over a steel frame, the Bentley was full of ingenious detailing – including weight-saving French-sourced side-lights in aluminium shells. With equal attention to airflow, evident in touches like the boxed undersides to the Delahaye-like quick-release wings, the car was both indecently fast and good for 20mpg. It was also safe: after turning a 3-litre on its head, Wilson-Spratt vowed his cars would have a roll bar, and one was integrated into the Bentley's rear deck.

In '54 Wilson-Spratt closed the caravan business and bought a Leighton Buzzard Austin garage. Renamed Delta Garages, it was the platform for a decade of amateur competition with Triumph TRs, until Wilson-Spratt got wind of the Austin-Healey Sprite and pressured BMC into letting him have one of the first three off the production line.

WUZZUM WIZARD



JAMES MANN

"We had it about a month before announcement and had it all run-in and ready to go by launch day. Two days later we won the Sporting Owner Drivers' Club rally. I claim it as the first event a Sprite won – even if it wasn't a very significant one!"

Although Wilson-Spratt's initial reaction was "God help us if that's what we've got to compete in for the rest of the year", he soon warmed to Donald and Geoffrey Healey's creation and, early in '59, entered the Monte Carlo Rally. He retired when a fanbelt broke and he discovered the spare was the wrong size.

By then the Sprite bug had bitten, and Wilson-Spratt was sketching coupé versions, just as he'd done for the TR. As with his TR doodles, nothing was built: instead an alloy-top Sprinzel Sebring Sprite was commissioned.

"There were a few special modifications to

it. By chance my local car electrical people had a spare pair of Rolls-Royce tail lamps, and these were incorporated. I also put in a bootlid, to get the spare in and out more easily."

The car competed in the 1962 Monte Carlo, but by then Wilson-Spratt had joined Healey Drivers' Club founder member Jim McManus to establish a London-based enterprise known as The Healey Centre: the first WSM – Wilson-Spratt McManus – was only months away. First, though, came a WSM-by-adoption, an ally-shelled Sprite built for Peter Jackson, Healey Centre works foreman.

"I sketched it out for Peter, who wanted something along those lines. It used a Speedwell 'Costin' bonnet, to keep costs down, and it didn't have the inset tail lamps of proper WSMs, but you can see something of the WSM shape in the fastback. Technically it's

pre-Wuzzum, but we accept it as one now."

Part of the reason is that the Jackson car was built immediately before the first WSM-Sprite, and by the same company – Peel Coachworks of Kingston, Surrey, a small outfit which worked for Cooper and Brabham, and had built the bodies for the HRG. It also rebodied Bugattis and built the very last Frazer Nash, the BMW-powered Continental.

Intended as a one-off for Wilson-Spratt's own road and competition use, the first car was ultra-lightweight, its all-alloy body having a spaceframe rear structure to cut down on surplus pounds. This predated the spaceframe rear of Healey's own race Sprites by a good few years. With a wide range of features such as extensive drilling, aluminium headlamp bowls, and an ally gearlever turret, as well as starting from a brand new shell without pounds of



Son's WSM purchase re-ignited Doug Wilson-Spratt's interest: new models now in pipeline