

SPRITE DONE RIGHT

Some thoughtful modifications make this **1965 Austin-Healey Sprite Mk III** more fun in every way

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID LaCHANCE





The British Motor Corporation would have had to have been mad to have offered a car like this Austin-Healey Sprite back in 1965. The interior, with its beautifully tailored upholstery, luxurious carpeting and careful attention to detail, likely would have eaten into the market for high-end cars like the Vanden Plas Princess, while the car's performance, abetted by its heated-up A-series four, would have intruded on "Big" Healey territory.

But today's enthusiasts have no such concerns. In fact, they're egged on by the spirit of Donald Healey himself, who always intended the Sprite to be a fun, affordable car that could be tailored to suit by owners of modest means—especially those owners who wanted to go faster.

As a basis for such a project, it's hard to find a better candidate than the MkII through Mk IV Sprites. Overshadowed as they are in the marketplace by their charismatic Mk I "Bugeye" predecessors and the bulldog "Big" Healeys, these so-called "square" or "box" Sprites are one of the most outstanding bargains among British sports cars. In fact, you might be surprised to learn just how little this particular Sprite cost to build. (Go ahead and make your best guess—all will be revealed.)

Ron Galbraith of Nashville, Tennessee, is the current owner of this one-of-a-kind Sprite. A former Triumph TR3 owner, Ron got the urge to buy another British sports car in late 2013. His browser led him to the website of David Silberkleit, aka the Bugeyeguy (www.bugeyeguy.com) in Branford, Connecticut, and the two began corresponding about the Mk I Sprites in David's inventory.

The two eventually turned their attention to one of the few non-Bugeye cars in stock, this 1965 Sprite Mk III, which David had bought from its builder, Bill Meade. "Of course, it was not a Bugeye, but I was fascinated by what had been done to it... the

quality and the thoughtfulness that had been put into the restoration, or what I call the transformation," Ron says.

David, who sees far more than his share of Sprites, was impressed, too. "I knew it had been built by someone who put far more into it than most people do," he says. Bill, who lives in Watsonville, California, "is definitely a hard-core guy. There's a commitment to quality that's evident when you talk to him." David had seen the Sprite written up in *Healey Marque*, the Austin-Healey Club of America magazine, and did not hesitate to strike a deal with Bill when it came up for sale.

The Mk III, as the name implies, succeeded the Mk II, which itself had been introduced in 1961 as the replacement for the bug-eyed Bugeye. It was with the Mk II that the rounded fenders and protruding headlamps of the Mk I had been replaced by more conventional bodywork, as BMC sought to shore up sagging sales (and increase the little car's popularity in the all-important U.S. market). Healey redesigned the front end and MG, which was to market its own version of the car as the Midget, the rear. Fortunately, the two design teams talked with one another, and the result was a happy marriage.

The Mk II was more civilized in many ways, with an opening trunk lid—no more fishing about in the dark cavern behind the seats—and a conventional hood in place of the hinged front end. Initially equipped with an improved version of the 948-cc A-series four, the Mk II eventually got a 1,098-cc engine, and front disc brakes as well.

The very similar bodywork of the Mk III, launched in March 1964, cloaked yet more improvements. Responding to major competition from the new-for-'62 Triumph Spitfire, Austin-Healey gave the Sprite roll-up windows, a new windshield, vent windows and exterior door handles and locks. The 1,098-cc engine was



The car's original 1,098-cc four was replaced with a 1,275-cc four from a Mk IV Sprite, bored to 1,380 cc. Fitted with high-compression pistons and an aluminum cylinder head, it makes about 100 hp. No upgrade from the original SU HS2 carburetors was necessary.

upgraded to 50 hp, and the earlier car's quarter-elliptic rear leaf springs were replaced with semi-elliptic units for a better ride.

This was the specification of Ron's car when it came into the care of Bill Meade in 2003. Bill, a member of the Golden Gate Austin-Healey Club, had been offered the Sprite by friends who were moving to Hawaii, and couldn't afford to have the car shipped to their new home. He had owned and loved three similar Midgets in the past, and thought they were "as much fun as any car I ever owned," he says. "My first thought was, gosh, I'd love to own one of those again." For \$1,000, the car became his.

Bill knew that he wanted to do something special with this Sprite, envisioning it as a period-correct "club racer," with improved performance and a more aggressive appearance to match, without straying too far from the car's basic Sprite-ness. "The whole idea was to make it perform as well as it could for what the car was."

From the beginning, he intended to get the project done on a modest budget, to demonstrate how unlocking the Sprite's potential need not require a huge financial commitment. To do that, he knew he would have to do much of the work himself. Fortunately, the car was in reasonably good condition, with no extensive rust.

Starting with a 1,275-cc A-series four, the engine that had arrived with the Mk IV Sprite launched in the fall of 1966, Bill turned to Mini specialists Seven Enterprises in Auburn, California (www.7ent.com), for a performance rebuild. The engine was bored out to 1,380 cc, and fitted with a ported Longman-style aluminum head, Hepolite high-compression pistons, a Moss fast-road cam and a lightened flywheel. A Mallory dual-point distributor fired the plugs, and a Pacesetter header and Monza muffler dealt with the exhaust.

The suspension was rebuilt with urethane bushings, with a front anti-sway bar added, and the car was lowered by 1½ inches front and rear for a lower center of gravity. Braided lines and competition pads and linings made the brakes more capable.

One bit of equipment that made a dramatic improvement in the Sprite's performance lay between the engine and driveshaft: a five-speed gearbox from a Datsun 210, bought complete with all of the necessary conversion parts from Morriservice in Portland, Oregon. In addition to making better use of the engine's torque than the four-speed fitted at the factory, the taller top gear made the Sprite a more relaxed highway cruiser, cutting the revs from 4,575 to 3,900 at 70 MPH.

To make the Sprite as much fun to look at as it is to drive, Bill



1965 AUSTIN-HEALEY SPRITE MK III

Engine	Inline four-cylinder, cast-iron block and head
Displacement	1,380 cc (originally 1,098 cc)
Bore x stroke	73.5 mm x 81.28 mm
Compression ratio	Approx. 9:1-9.5:1
Horsepower @ RPM	100-110 (est.) @ 5,500
Torque @ RPM	N/A
Main bearings	Three
Fuel system	Twin SU HS2 carburetors
Ignition	Mallory dual-point distributor
Exhaust system	Pacesetter header (originally cast-iron manifold), mild steel exhaust
Gearbox	Datsun 210 five-speed manual (originally BMC four-speed manual)
Differential	Hypoid bevel gear, 4.22:1 ratio
Steering	Rack-and-pinion
Brakes	Lockheed four-wheel hydraulic Front: disc Rear: drum
Chassis & body	Steel unit-body
Suspension	Front: Lower A-arms, coil springs, kingpins, lever-arm shock absorbers, anti-roll bar Rear: Live axle, five-leaf semi-elliptic springs, lever-arm shock absorbers
Wheels	Alloy with knockoffs (originally pressed steel, with wire wheels optional)
Tires	175/70R13 (originally 5.20-13)

WEIGHTS & MEASURES

Wheelbase	80.5 inches
Overall length	138 inches
Overall width	54 inches
Overall height	47.8 inches
Front track	47.2 inches
Rear track	45 inches
Curb weight	1,560 pounds

CALCULATED DATA

Hp per liter	72.5
Weight per hp	15.6 pounds
Weight per cu.in.	18.5 pounds

PERFORMANCE

0-50 MPH	N/A (originally 9.7 seconds)
Top speed	N/A (originally 91.8 MPH)

PRICE

Base price (new)	\$1,925
Market value (today)	N/A

 Visit the Hemmings Car Clubs pages at www.hemmings.com for news and information on over 1,400 car clubs!



Careful attention to detail sets this interior apart. To hold down costs, the restorer specified “leather-touch” vinyl, rather than leather, and made his own carpets. A Derrington-style steering wheel and wooden shift knob add to the car’s “club racer” vibe.



opted for Jaguar British Racing Green paint with bold, Mazda yellow racing stripes, done by TJ’s Classic Restoration in Freedom, California. Adding to the aggressive club racer look were a pair of driving lamps, Bugeye bumper guards front and rear and Raydot aluminum racing mirrors. He also splurged on a set of knock-off alloy wheels, believing that what they added to the car justified the expense.

The interior got the custom touch, too, though in a more cost-conscious way. Ray’s Upholstery in Watsonville, California, remade the seats not in leather, but in a convincing “leather-touch” vinyl, at a cost of about \$200 per seat. Bill chose the material not only for its more modest cost, but because he knew it would keep its appearance better than leather—particularly on an open car like the Sprite. In another cost-saving move, he cut new carpeting from five yards of material and had the pieces edged. The interior door and footwell panels were covered in matching vinyl. A Derrington-style wood-rim steering wheel and matching shift knob completed the look.

So, what did all of this cost? Bill reports that the total for paint,

interior work, component rebuilds and major parts was just \$8,511. Even adjusting for inflation—the work was done about eight years ago—the total is still shy of \$10,000. “Even today, you can probably get a little box Sprite for a thousand bucks,” he adds. Bill figures that hiring a shop to do all of the work would have easily pushed the cost to \$25,000 or more.

There are many ways to modify a Sprite, some more sensitive to the car’s basic nature than others, and it’s all too easy to lose the crisp handling, light steering, decent ride and delightful engine note that make the car so enjoyable. “It’s possible to push the envelope too far,” David says, “such that the cars just don’t work. The cars can’t withstand it. You end up with broken axles or overheating issues or engine clearance issues.”

Not so with Ron’s car. It’s like a stock Sprite, but one that now goes to 11. The engine still produces those wonderful A-series sounds, though the exhaust note is quite a bit throatier than what Donald Healey had signed off on. The road feel is still exemplary, while the wider-than-stock tires are not so wide as to weigh down the steering. The stiffer suspension eliminates body roll, without

destroying the ride quality. It all still feels taunt and nimble, as a good Sprite should.

It’s quick, but not so quick as to get its driver into trouble, as David notes. “You can have a lot of fun at lower speeds. In a Sprite, even going flat-out around a low-speed turn, there’s not a lot to worry about.” It all adds up to a different kind of fun: “Instead of a fast car that feels slow, it’s a slow car that feels fast.”

When Ron purchased the car, he knew that he’d be putting miles on it, and so he had David install seat belts and brighter LED lighting in the interest of safety. David also went through the car, replacing the five-speed’s lubricant with Redline synthetic to protect the notoriously weak synchros, and doing a bit of sorting made necessary by the car’s lack of recent use.

“I wanted it to be a car that I could drive,” Ron says. He and his wife, Faith, are members of the Nashville British Car Club, and enjoy the club’s regular tours on some of Tennessee’s Sprite-perfect back roads. Between club events and pleasure drives, he estimates that he added something between 1,000 and 1,200 miles to the odometer in the past year.

What Ron most appreciates about the car is its reliability and usability; it’s not the sort of car that demands constant attention. “The only thing I have to do occasionally is to tune up the carburetors, and that’s more a seasonal thing than anything,” he says.

He also gives a thumbs-up to the five-speed, which, he notes, allows the Sprite to cruise at 75 MPH without strain. The quality of the ride came as a surprise; expecting that the performance suspension would make the car into a kidney-bruiser, he and Faith were delighted to have their fears dispelled. “It’s a very smooth-riding car,” he reports.

“This is just a very tight car that feels very competent and very unintimidating,” David concludes. “That’s the best thing any steward of an old car can do—make it the best it can be.”

OWNER’S STORY



“Ownership” seems a bit too commercial or legal as a way to define the pleasure of having this 50-year-old British car residing in my garage. “Custodian” or “compulsive caretaker” might better describe my role—always accounting for the predictable leaks and ever vigilant for the potential scratch. Even “conciierge” fits as I find myself memorizing all the places providing pure gas within a 100-mile radius. However, the smile on my face each time I pull the choke, turn the key and hear this ‘65 Sprite rumble to life and the smirk I must have as we cruise the back roads really say it all. You can just call me “happy.”

Thankfully, this car comes without a computer to monitor everything, no quad sound system or GPS mapping and not a cup holder in sight. I am not even completely certain the heater works. It insists on being temperamental at first in cold weather, resists having the top put up and does indeed “mark its territory” on my garage floor. Delightful, wouldn’t you say? —Ron Galbraith

