

1960 Austin-Healey


 SPRITE

Seldom in the course of human endeavor have so few dollars provided so much fun to so many

BY PETER EGAN
PHOTOS BY JOHN LAMM

WAS EVER A car more aptly named than Austin-Healey's Sprite? In factory-project form it was simply known as the "Q car," while those who worked on its design nicknamed it the "Tiddler." Fortunately, Donald Healey placed great importance on a car's name and spent a long time ruminating before he settled on "Sprite," a name borrowed from his old employers, the Riley company. The choice, in retrospect, seems not only apt, but the only one possible. It suggests everything the car was, and still is: quick, small, alert, charmingly gnomish and full of spirit.

The "Bugeye" or "Frogeye" Sprite, as it was called immediately by almost everybody, was revealed to the world in May of 1958 and lived in its original, cheerful smiling form for only three years before metamorphosing into the "improved" but less distinctive Mark II Sprite and Mark IMG Midget in 1961.

A Fifties' design with one foot in the Sixties, the Bugeye Sprite was another of England's Greatest Turn-of-the-Decade Hits. Like the Mini, Lotus Seven and E-Type, it created an instant cult and symbolized the uncorking of real fun in what had been a rather gray and fogbound postwar industrial economy.

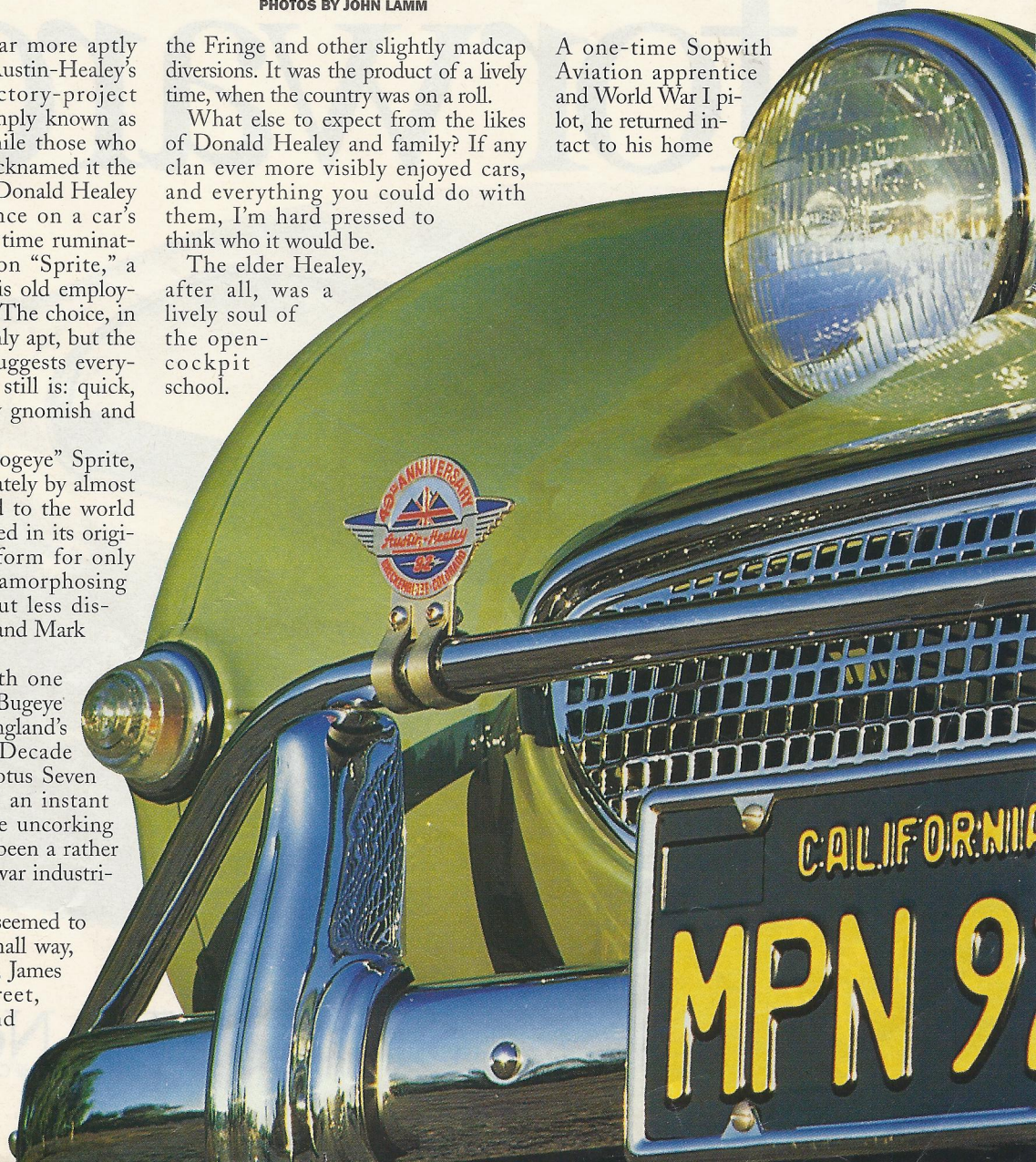
Culturally, the Sprite seemed to anticipate, in its own small way, the arrival of the Beatles, James Bond, Carnaby Street, Richard Lester, Beyond

the Fringe and other slightly madcap diversions. It was the product of a lively time, when the country was on a roll.

What else to expect from the likes of Donald Healey and family? If any clan ever more visibly enjoyed cars, and everything you could do with them, I'm hard pressed to think who it would be.

The elder Healey, after all, was a lively soul of the open-cockpit school.

A one-time Sopwith Aviation apprentice and World War I pilot, he returned intact to his home



in Perranporth, Cornwall, to run the family garage and tune racing cars. During the Twenties and Thirties, he won dozens of important rallies in the cars he personally prepared, working for both Riley and Triumph.

During World War II, Donald Healey designed armored fighting vehicles for Humber, and here he met the engineers

and businessmen who would form the core of his new Donald Healey Motor Company, working with sons Geoffrey, John and Brian.

After the war, the company quickly put itself on the automotive map, achieving success with its Silverstones, Nash-Healeys and Big Healeys—the famous, swooping 100 Fours (1952–1956) and later 6-cylinder cars, first produced in 1956.

It would be nice to think that the Bugeye Sprite was a longtime dream Donald

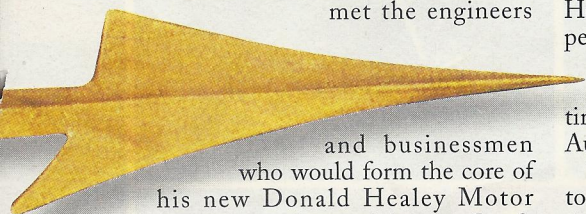
Healey carried around in his fertile imagination, but the incentive to build it seems to have come from a short (but amiably pointed) conversation Healey had with Austin's Leonard Lord in 1956.

Lord mentioned the sports-car market was shrinking as prices climbed and suggested it was time for Healey to build "a bug," a small, inexpensive sports car that anyone could afford. There was a gap in the market to fill, and it was high time someone filled it. Using lots of Austin parts, preferably.

The Sprite went from suggestion to reality in a remarkably short time. Its basic chassis design was set down by Barry Bilbie and a tentative set of body lines was penned by Gerry Coker, who drew a full-scale outline of the car on a factory wall for Donald Healey's approval. While there were 55 separate

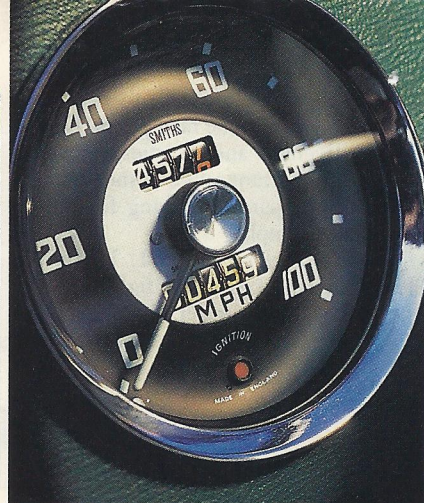
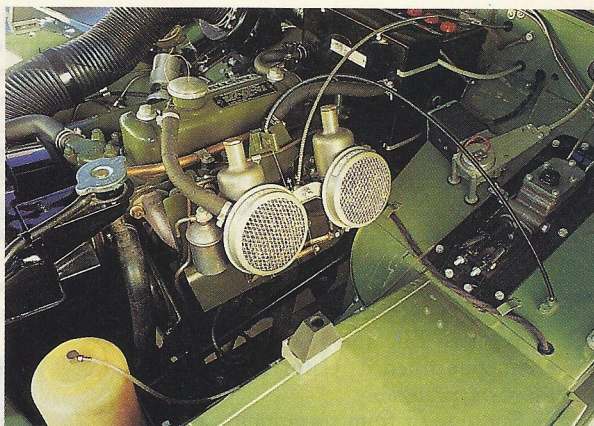
stampings in the welded-up chassis pan, the end product looked minimal and well-conceived.

The car was a simple shell, stiffened by its rocker panels and transmission tunnel, with twin box sections reaching forward under the hood to support the engine and suspension. The hinged, one-piece bonnet was originally designed with fold-down headlight housings, but these were nixed in the name of simplicity and low cost. The headlights were left in the up po-





■ Twin SU carbs help the Sprite's 948-cc cast-iron four make 48 bhp. Interior offers just the basics: thin-shell buckets, hollow doors, simple instrumentation.



sition, giving the car a pair of permanently startled eyes to go with its smiling grille.

Austin's A35 engine, independent front suspension and rear axle were used, while the rack-and-pinion steering came from a Morris Minor. Rear suspension was dead simple, a live axle bolted to the ends of quarter-elliptic springs, like a barbell held out on two extended hands. Upper trailing arms kept the axle from rocking, and Armstrong lever shocks did the damping all around.

The 34-bhp, ohv A35 sedan engine was a somewhat antediluvian design with three main bearings and a non-crossflow head, but Morris Motors' engine man, Eddie Maher, boosted output to a heady 48 bhp at 5000 rpm. A pair of 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ -in. SU carburetors replaced the single Zenith downdraft, while sturdier bearings and clutch were installed to handle the load. With a bore and stroke of 63.0 x 76.2 mm, displacement was 948 cc and the compression ratio was 8.3:1.

Everywhere in the car, simplicity reigned. Doors were hollow and windowless—plastic sliding side-curtains were used—with map pockets screwed onto them; door latches consisted of a bolt, spring and striker plate, like something from a stable door.

The starter pull-button yanked on a cable that went straight through the dash to the starter switch. The tach cable ran off a small gearbox on the back of the generator. That way, when revs suddenly dropped, you knew the fan belt was loose. Or the tach drive had seized again. Or the cable was broken. Or the tach. In any case, it was easy to fix.

The car was an instant hit with the press. Healey took advantage of the 1958 Monaco Grand Prix by issuing Sprites to the gathered reporters and turning them loose on the local mountain roads, and the accolades



came pouring in. Here was an affordable sports car that put the fun back in driving. Not a fast car, in the world of high-performance automobiles—typical road tests of the era had the car doing 0–60 in 20.5 seconds, a 21.8-sec. quarter mile and a top speed of 82.9 mph—but nimble and spirited. It had that enviable quality of feeling faster than it was. And a good thing too.

Austin-Healey started racing its new car almost immediately, fielding nearly stock Sprites, or aero-bodied variants, for every major sports-car race—Le Mans, Sebring and the Targa Florio. The Sprite acquitted itself well, often doing battle with the more exotic progeny of Carlo Abarth, though it didn't hurt that Healey managed to get some very fine drivers behind the wheel: Tommy Wisdom, John Sprinzel, John Colgate, Paddy Hopkirk, Bruce McLaren, Pat Moss, Stirling Moss and others.

In the 1958–1960 era, there were few \$1795 sports cars whose owners

could say, "Stirling Moss races a car like mine." The effect may have been incalculable.

At the amateur level, the Bugeye reinvigorated SCCA Production racing in the U.S. to a pitch probably unseen since the MG TC invasion. It was then, and is still, 38 years later, the H Production car to beat. It was cheap to buy, simple to work on, inviting to tune, and relatively unthreatening to drive. Also, the parts didn't weigh much. Two people could lift an engine easily; one person could do it with only minor disc injury, after a kitchen-table rebuild.

If this seems like a personal comment, it is.

During the early Seventies, yours truly owned no fewer than six Bugeye Sprites, restoring and selling four of them at a huge profit (about 25¢/hour for my labor) when I first got out of college. An H Production Sprite was also my first racing car, and I drove a British Racing Green, right-hand-



drive Bugeye for almost three seasons.

Meanwhile, I kept acquiring Sprite parts cars. People knew I raced and worked on these cars, so they'd call with backyard sightings of derelict Bugeyes, all of which I dutifully bought and dragged home. My garage, for a period of about six years, was piled to the rafters with Sprite parts, and at one point I had three spare bonnets sitting along the wall.

There is just something about these cars that makes them cluster in the garages of those who like to restore and fiddle with machinery, probably because they are irresistibly uncomplicated to work on. (I used to joke that the driver's door of an E-Type Jaguar contained more separate parts than an entire Bugeye.)

Still, it is no small task to restore one to factory-original perfection—or, more correctly, factory-original imperfection.

Like most older sports cars, the Sprite can benefit from a few updates—later disc brakes, front anti-roll bar, a later 1098- or 1275-cc engine conversion, etc. Many owners have made these changes, so it's rare to find a flawless stock example that appears to have been driven off the assembly line only moments earlier.

Such as our 1960 Salon car, chassis number AN5-L/35806, shown here.

Owned and restored by Rob Garofalo of Thousand Oaks, California, it is the first Mark I Sprite ever to win a Gold award at the once-per-decade Austin-Healey Concours d'Elegance, which was last held in Breckenridge, Colorado, in 1992.

Garofalo bought his first Sprite new in 1958, but confesses that “like everyone else, I just ran it into the ground.” He must not have abused it too badly, however, as he put 100,000 miles on it with no engine repairs, before selling it to a friend.

“I am no mechanic,” he confesses. “Before I started restoring the green Sprite here, I had never even changed the oil on a car. But I always had a dream of restoring a car. Every kid does. And at fifty-something, I was still a kid. I decided to restore a Sprite and collected everything I could find on Bugeyes.”

His car turned up in the classifieds of a club publication in 1989, along with a 1961 parts car, \$5000 for both.

Garofalo says the 1961 car was heavily modified and the other was disassembled. It belonged to Kay Howard, whose husband Mike had started a restoration while ill with cancer and had recently died. She wanted the car restored the way he would have done it—no RX-7 engine conver-

sions—just a nice original.

“A lot of boxes came with this car,” Garofalo says. “The engine was in boxes, and the brake master was on the seat.” He checked the production dates stamped on the shocks, turn-signal flashers, regulators, etc., and found the car to be at least 90-percent original.

Sending the chassis number into British Heritage Trust, he learned the Sprite had been built between March 30 and April 2, 1960, and shipped to Fort Worth, Texas. When Garofalo bought the car, it was burgundy, but it had originally been Leaf Green with a black top and green trim.

He did an exact color match using some unviolated paint under a taillight, acid-dipped the chassis, and built an elaborate plywood rollover jig to hold the body. He researched the original direction of factory cotter-pin and grease-nipple installation and used an X-Acto knife and magnifying glass to reveal the proper grades of gloss or dull black paint used on suspension pieces.

While searching for original tires, Garofalo stumbled across the unimaginable—a set of brand-new green factory rubber floor mats, owned by a man in Iowa. How much did he pay for them?

“A lot,” he says, wincing.

Original, unworn 5.20 x 13 white-wall Dunlop Gold Seal tires were

■ A Sprite shared by Tommy Wisdom and Bernard Cahier takes a set through one of 702 curves of the 1959 Targa Florio. The tiny Austin-Healey went on to finish 3rd in class, 18th overall.

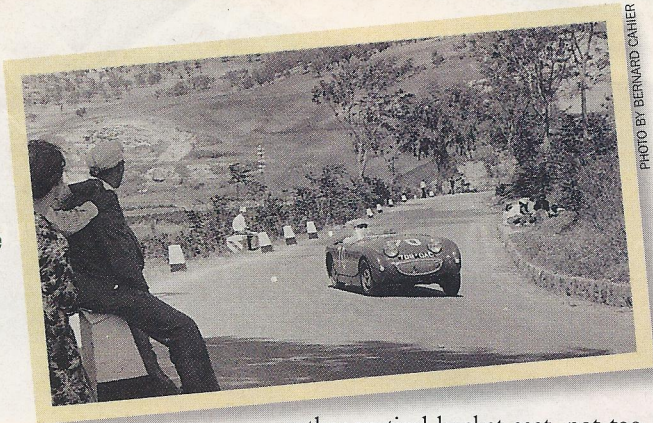


PHOTO BY BERNARD CAHIER

tracked down—two from Connecticut, two from Northern California and one from New Jersey.

The engine (still with standard bore) was rebuilt by friend and mechanic Lou Ghibaudo who, along with another pal, Otis Mullen, spent hundreds of hours helping Garofalo with the project. Garofalo's wife, Betsy, a house-proud perfectionist, made the ultimate sacrifice and let Rob keep a Sprite bonnet on a blanket in the living room when he ran out of garage space. The car was finished in one and a half years, just in time for the Concours.

Out of 1000 possible points, the green Sprite scored 990. Where was the flaw?

Judges said the 30-year-old tires, though unworn, had tiny age cracks in the sidewalls and took off two points per tire.

So what we have here is a car so perfectly restored that only another perfect Sprite with tires out of a time warp will outscore it. Garofalo is satisfied. He has a Gold certificate signed by members of the Healey family, as well as the surviving members of the original Sprite design team. Sadly, Donald Healey, who died in 1988, never got to see this reborn example of his fine work.

Cosmetic excellence is one thing, as we know, but driving fun is what Sprites are about, so I was pleased to have a chance to drive Garofalo's car through the hills around Thousand Oaks one sunny afternoon.

He handed me a map of the area and insisted that I take it for a long drive by myself, to be alone with the car and my thoughts.

Ah, behind the wheel of a Sprite again; I had last driven one when my wife, Barbara, and I drove our own green Bugeye from Wisconsin to California in 1985.

A loud metallic *clink* of the driver's door, big plain plastic steering wheel with a little lightning-bolt emblem on the horn button. Comfortable but

rather vertical bucket seat, not too close to the wheel. Plenty of leg room and good pedal placement. You don't have to be small to drive a Sprite comfortably.

Set the choke and pull the starter knob (S) and the engine fires with a surprisingly mellow and throaty exhaust note, for 948 cc. Cold oil pressure 45 psi at idle, 6000 rpm on a tach with a 5500-rpm redline; 392 miles on the rebuilt odometer. This car is just being broken in and shaken down mechanically, so Garofalo asks me to note any adjustments needed.

Nonsynchro 1st is best engaged after 2nd, to slow down gearbox motion. It goes in with a click, and I am out of the driveway. Amazingly light, short clutch throw and an effortless gearbox with a tight pattern; 3rd is almost like going back into 1st. Delightful.

Sprite steering is so quick it catches most first-time drivers by surprise; it can twitch into corners with dolly-wheel abruptness, so smooth input is needed. Initially it always feels like a car with almost no caster, but this sensation goes away with familiarity and it feels merely alert and responsive.

Stock springs are relatively soft, allowing a fair amount of front body roll on turn-in; but once the car takes a set, it accelerates nicely through a corner with a slight front-loaded pitch.

Handling balance goes from mild understeer at lower speeds to general neutrality if the car is driven smoothly and not pushed too hard on its small stock tires. At the adhesion limit, however, the short-coupled Bugeye tends toward snappish oversteer and the quick spin, so you have to correct very quickly to catch it. (An experienced H Production Sprite driver can feel a spin coming on intuitively; the hair rises on the back of his neck.) A front anti-roll bar is a good investment, where originality is not an issue.

The brake pedal on Garofalo's car is on the low side, as he is just bedding in new shoes, but the front drums do a

better job of stopping the car than you might expect. When I started racing Sprites, some drivers were still using front drums, rather than the later discs, for their lighter weight—and winning.

Cruising down the boulevard near Garofalo's home at 45 mph with one elbow on the door, I note the tach reads 3000 rpm and the engine is putting out a wonderful hollow and resonant exhaust note. Forty-five to 65 mph is a nice range for the Sprite, which gets decidedly busy at higher speeds.

Strangers stop on the street to watch it go by; children in other cars are fascinated. A cop motions me to go first at a four-way stop, then follows the Bugeye for several blocks, with a grin on his face.

All of this is part of the Sprite's original and enduring appeal. In styling and function it achieved a balance very few small and inexpensive cars have managed, even in our own time.

It is cute but not cloying; inexpensive without feeling cheap. It has genuine racing history—legitimate as any legendary historic racing car you might find at Monterey—yet remains affordable to almost everyone. About 50,000 Bugeyes were made, after all, and not everybody wants one.

To be attracted to the Sprite, you have to see in that smiling face the reflection of something a little irreverent and mischievous in your own soul. ☺

SPECIFICATIONS

Curb weight	1460 lb
Wheelbase	80.0 in.
Track, f/r	45.4 in./44.8 in.
Length	137.0 in.
Width	54.0 in.
Height	48.0 in.
Fuel capacity	6.0 gal.

ENGINE & DRIVETRAIN

Engine	ohv inline-4
Bore x stroke	63.0 x 76.2 mm
Displacement	948 cc
Compression ratio	8.3:1
Horsepower (SAE)	48 bhp @ 5000 rpm
Torque	52 lb-ft @ 3300 rpm
Fuel delivery	two SU carburetors
Transmission	4-speed, nonsynchro 1st

CHASSIS & BODY

Layout	front engine/rear drive
Brake system, f/r	7.0-in. drum/drum
Wheels	pressed steel, 13 x 4 (wires optional)
Tires	5.20 x 13
Steering type	rack & pinion
Suspension, f/r	lower A-arms, coil springs with Armstrong lever shock absorber arm supporting top of kingpin/quarter-elliptic leaf springs, live axle w/upper trailing arms, Armstrong lever shock absorbers