

# Austin-Healey Sprite

*While the big Healeys went rallying the little Healeys went racing; Michael Bowler tries a Sprite from 1964*

**T**IME and the onset of historic status wait for no man. Take this Sprite for instance; I saw it racing at the Nurburgring in 1965, it now competes in our Rochas Classic Car Championship and Sprites or Midgets are still in production, albeit with an engine change last year, but the general layout of the present car is much as it was when the MkIII was introduced early in 1964, when semi-elliptics replaced the original frog-eye's quarter-elliptics. Donald Healey Motor Co were the "works" racing entrants for Austin-Healeys and Geoff Healey remembers this car well; they were competing in all the long distance GT events and this car was built specifically for the Targa Florio of 1964 where it was driven by Clive Baker and Rauno Aaltonen.

The basic monocoque is a lighter Sprite with the aluminium body carried on a tubular structure welded to the monocoque chassis; all changes had to be homologated and this included such items as the anti-tramp bars under the leaf springs, special camshaft, Weber carburettor etc. There was rather more latitude with the body; as a Targa Florio car it was designed to be as light as possible - 578kg, 11.4cwt - and to be practical, which meant short with good visibility. So practical in fact that it was driven to the Targa Florio taking some three days. In the race it broke a half-shaft which was replaced and they took third in class.

The Le Mans cars were more streamlined, so this one wasn't used again as a works car, although it was driven by Clive Baker and John Moore to win their class at Nurburgring 1000km in 1965; Richard Groves owned it at that time, then Alan Goodwin for club racing and more recently John Priestley has used it for hill-climbing before it became a road car. It is now owned by Charles "Chick" Barrett of Mid-cliff, Dunstable, Beds, who are building sub-contractors. He bought it in October 1974 logging some 500 hours in the rebuild. Then as now it competed in the 1300 classes having started as a 1098cc Sprite; the engine is an 1150cc unit which gives around 80bhp from 52bhp on a rolling road with a single Weber on the cast-iron head.

Martin Field, the regular driver, had lapped Club Silverstone at 1m 15s, using a 4.875 final drive, which gave peak revs somewhat before the end of the Club straight; with a 3.9:1 they were hoping for better, but in fact it was far too high for the power of the car when we tried it on the day before the AMOC meeting, and I could only manage 1m 21s about a second slower than Martin; they changed to a 4.22 that night, but a 4.55 seems to be the right answer.

Inevitably, as a closed road car with no sound deadening it was noisy; they sound

buzzy enough from outside, but it is considerably magnified inside. The car was coming up to its third race in the Rochas Classic Car Championship; the first round at Silverstone had seen a third in class on its first post-rebuild outing, but at Brands the big-ends went, ruining the crank, so we stuck to a conservative 6000rpm which left the ratio for Becketts tight right-hander somewhat awkward on the 3.9 axle, second needing selection before the exit. Initial response is somewhat go-kart like, the steering is firm, high geared and accurate; 5.25M-13 Dunlop racers on 5in rims have short, fat sidewalls and a lot of grip. In fact, the grip is probably too much for the chassis, which I imagine was more handleable at places like the Targa Florio where you need neat oversteer under power; what you get now is initial understeer followed by power wheel lifting, which can either be oversteer or a continuance of neutral. Either way it is very controllable but it needs a little taming, which could well be effected with softer springing/firmer damping or a softening of one or other, as the ride was very choppy and the live rear axle would skitter on the Becketts ridges.

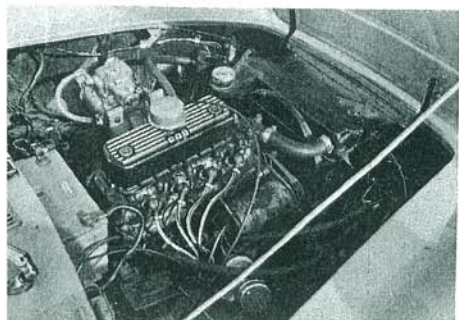
They were having a little trouble with the brakes that day, but a disc/drum combination on that weight of car is more than adequate and could be made to work very well.

Although the seat is low in relation to the scuttle level, visibility all round is good in racing terms; the standard instruments are retained with the rev counter twiddled to give a vertical 6000rpm. It is a road car but luggage space is fairly minimal as it has to sit on top of a vast 27½-gallon fuel tank for long distance racing. As a racer, it is good economical fun, you can get parts fairly easily and they don't cost a fortune; Barrett rebuilt the car in his own driveway and very nicely too; it is good to see someone caring for one of history's also-rans; they also run who never get on the leader board but quietly win their classes!

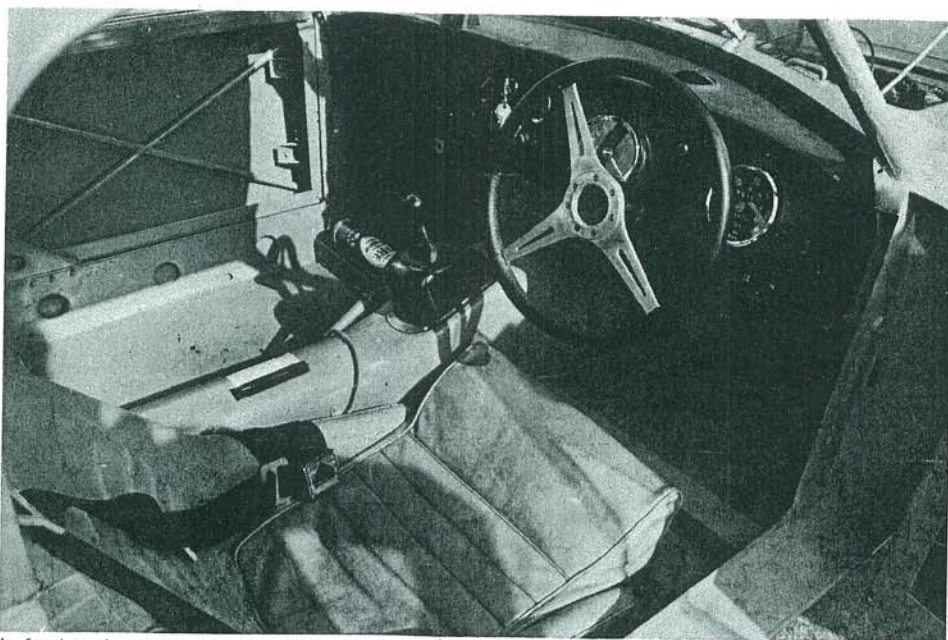
*Short and functional, the Targa Florio Sprite with Martin Field at Woodcote, opposite.*



*Driveway rebuild involved some 500 hours of restoration.*



*Left, there's nothing like an A-series for easy accessibility; siamesed inlets only allow one Weber.*



*Above, standard instrument panel contains standard instruments; trim is lightweight.*