

Chasing Daylight

Words by Patrick Quinn.

Photos by Patrick Quinn unless indicated.

It may not look it, but the car on these pages is an Austin-Healey Sprite - at least, under the skin. It is one of a handful of prototype cars built by the Donald Healey Motor Company that took part in long-distance races at Le Mans and Sebring. It is now in Australia and set to take to the historic racing circuits here.



Then as now, Le Mans commands attention. To win at Circuit de le Sarthe brings notoriety as well as important sales in the showroom. The first 24-hour race at Le Mans was held in 1923 and while this year's winning Audi may not resemble the models on the showroom floor, the success would have certainly been worthwhile for the German manufacturer. After all, Audi cars have crossed the line in first place eleven times since 2000 (12 if you count the Bentley in 2003 - Ed).

Audi's Le Mans record is certainly enviable as are those of many other manufacturers over the years. Take the Donald Healey Motor Company (DHMC) for instance. From 1949 to 1970 there were a total of 28 cars entered in Donald Healey's name.

At the age of 47, after a history of working

for and driving such diverse marques as Triumph, Riley and Invicta, Donald Healey established his own motor company not long after the end of WW2.

DHMC produced bespoke motor vehicles for the upper end of the market. Initially the mechanicals of Healey cars came from Riley, when it was part of the Nuffield Group. While a fine driver and automotive engineer, Healey was also a shrewd businessman who knew that the best way to promote his cars was through motor sport.

First Le Mans Outing

The first production Healey car was built in 1946 with a special lightweight chassis,

coachbuilt aluminium body, electron alloy front suspension and Riley drivetrain. It started to make the Healey name as a manufacturer in such events as the Alpine Rally and Mille Miglia. However it was Le Mans where the Healey was to leave its mark. In 1949 a lone Healey Elliot saloon ran at the 24 Hours of Le Mans, finishing 13th after completing 1,524 miles against 1,986 miles of the winning Ferrari 166MM. Not an auspicious success, but enough to inspire the cash-strapped English manufacturer.

Then, as happens, fate stepped in. Donald Healey met George Mason, the General Manager of Nash Kelvinator, while travelling to the US by ship in 1949.



Photo by Bill Stowe

Sebring 1966 - behind Matra of Hanna/Decker and in front of Triumph TR4a of Vega/Kingham/Byrne



Photo by Bill Stowe

Sebring 1967, showing the tape applied to prevent the headlight covers from coming off or being stone damaged.

It was a meeting that not only led to the Nash-Healey sports car but also an almost fairytale success at Le Mans. In 1950 a Nash-engined Healey came in fourth place, and was sixth the following year. However, success was sweetest in 1952 when one of the two Nash-Healeys entered finished third, behind two Mercedes but in front of Works entries from Ferrari, Cunningham, Talbot, Aston Martin and Jaguar.

In late 1952 the joint venture Austin-Healey was born (see *BMCE* Issue 2 for the full story) and as part of the deal with BMC the DHMC had responsibility to promote the new marque through motor racing. Two Austin-Healeys ran at Le Mans in 1953 alongside a couple of Nash-Healeys.

The DHMC also focused its attention towards the 12 Hours of Sebring and record breaking at Bonneville in Utah. With the Austin-Healey released on to the burgeoning US market it was important to gain racing exposure there.

New Breed

In 1956, Donald Healey and BMC's Leonard Lord agreed that sports cars were becoming expensive and there was a need for an economical breed of sports car that used as many parts as possible from the BMC "parts bin". Healey was contracted to design and develop the car, which, like the "big" Healeys, would be built by BMC.

Launched at the Monaco Grand Prix on 20 May 1958, the Austin-Healey Sprite was well received, despite some less than complimentary comments about the car's cheerful "frog-eye" frontal treatment. While built at Abingdon, the home of MG, it once again fell to the DHMC to promote the Sprite through motor racing. The first event was at Sebring in 1959 where slightly modified Mk1 Sprites managed first, second and third in class.

At Le Mans, Sprites were entered almost every year from 1960 to 1968 hoping for class wins. For the 1960 event the 996cc Sprite was fitted with a Falcon fibreglass body and performed admirably, completing over 2,067 miles in the 24 hours, to finish 16th.

For 1961, 1963, 1964 and 1965 each Sprite was bodied in coupe form, to gain aerodynamic advantage along the long Mulsanne straight. The coupe body design of the 1965 cars came about following extensive testing at the Austin wind tunnel. The MkIII Sprite floor pan was significantly modified with the replacement of the steel floors and footwell panels by aluminium, glued and riveted to retain strength. Other fittings included light-weight alloy Girling four-wheel dual circuit disc brakes, cast magnesium Healey wheels and a full undertray.

Early in the year the car driven by Rauno Aaltonen and Clive Baker at Sebring took a resounding success in its class, and finished

15th outright. This despite the torrential downpour late in the race that saw many cars swamped and water so deep there was debris floating along the main straight.

The second Sprite prototype, driven by Paddy Hopkirk and Timo Makinen, put on a spectacular display in the conditions and finished a commendable 18th outright.

Preparations for 1965 Le Mans were not without drama, when the cars arrived at the circuit painted in a fluorescent green. French race officials took one look at them and, realising that the French cars of the same Prototype class were up against some stiff opposition, insisted that the colour be changed on the grounds of "safety".

After some select words and arm waving, especially from Australian Paul Hawkins, the Austin-Healey team under Geoffrey Healey relented. Luckily, a gallon of surplus US Army WW2 paint was found and the cars ran in the livery of dark or olive green. One car driven by Hawkins/John Rhodes finished a very credible 12th overall (only 14 of the 51 starters finished) and, being first in class, defeated all the French competitors in the same class.

At Sebring in 1966 the DHMC again entered two Sprite prototypes: HNX 455D, driven by Hawkins/Makinen, and our feature car, HNX 456D, for Baker/Aaltonen.



Photo by John Ellison

Le Mans 1965 - Aaltonen/Baker getting passed by 6th-placed Spoerry/Boller Ferrari.

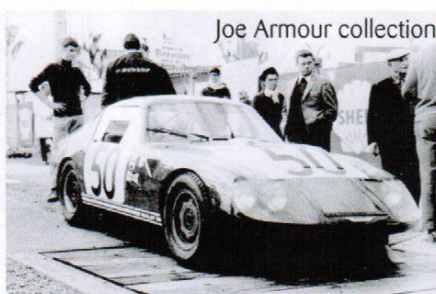


Joe Armour collection

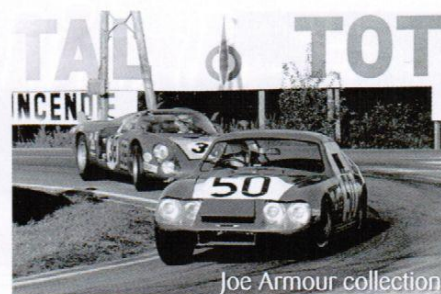
HNX 456D - Sebring 1966.



Le Mans 1967



Healey Sprite: Le Mans weighbridge 1968



Le Mans 1968

Things again went well for the team, with Hawkins/Makinen putting in an excellent drive to again finish 18th, and first in class, while Baker/Aaltonen were back in 29th, but that was good enough for second in class.

DHMC also entered two cars for 1966 Le Mans, but both unfortunately didn't last the distance. One of these was again HNX 456D – the car that has now found its way to Australia.

DHMC entered the car for Sebring in 1967, driven by Baker/Aaltonen, and finishing 1st in class and 13th outright. By this time, it was painted in the BMC Works team colour of Tartan Red.

This was the only car entered by the DHMC in Le Mans for 1967, and in 1968 the team entered this car and its 2lt Coventry-Climax engined Healey SR.

In 1967 the Sprite's engine developed 105bhp breathing through a single Weber carburettor and was dry-sumped. Enough to propel the car to 151mph down Mulsanne Straight, with an average of 101.5mph for the whole 24 hours. With a best lap of 108.13mph, the Sprite travelled a total of 2,422 miles and came in 15th, driven by Clive Baker/Andrew Hedges. It was the leading British car for the year, winning the Motor Trophy.

Lucas fuel injection and a crossflow cylinder

head were fitted for the 1968 Le Mans, and developed 111.5bhp. This was enough for 154mph down Mulsanne and an average of 95mph over the whole 24 hours, travelling 2,126 miles and again finishing 15th. The shorter distance and lower average speed than the previous year were due to the installation of the new Ford Chicane. The Healey team, with drivers Roger Enever and Alec Poole, again won the Motor Trophy as well as the Jaguar/Coventry Climax Trophy for the best performing British car. DHMC experimental engineer Roger Menadue won the award for Mechanic of the Year.

Interestingly, for its last outing at Le Mans the Sprite was known as a Healey Sprite as British Leyland (and therefore Austin) had withdrawn its financial support of the DHMC's racing programme.

Early Memories

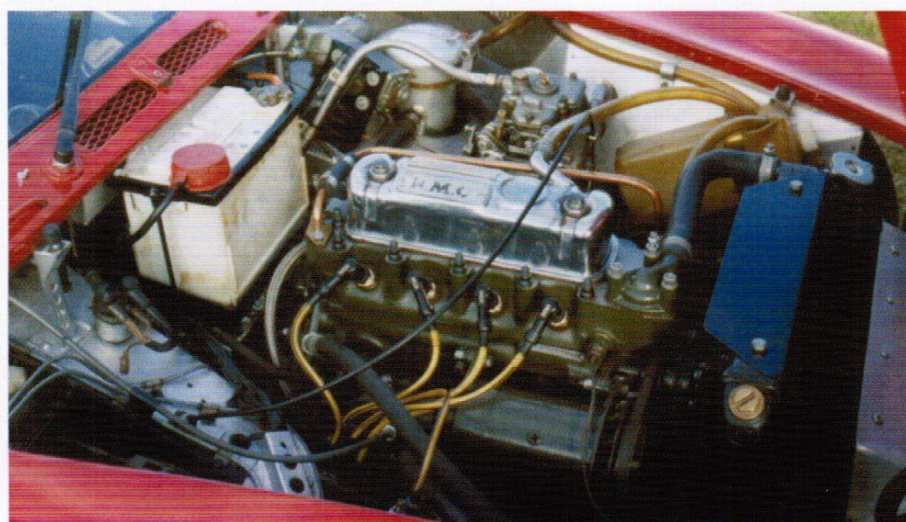
Joe Armour could best be described as the archetypal Austin-Healey enthusiast, starting out as a young bloke growing up in the NSW inland town of Griffith, when he was an avid magazine reader at the town library. Between Joe's home and the library was the local BMC dealer and on the showroom floor was a brand new Austin-Healey 100/6. Joe was bowled over by the car and its shape influenced his motor vehicle tastes for the rest of his life.

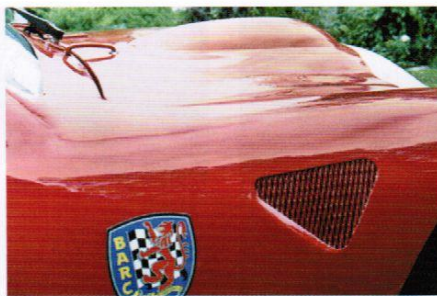
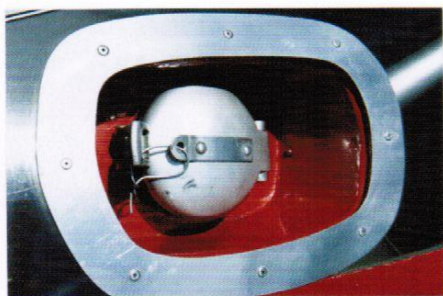
At 17 he got his drivers licence and, like most of us, was busting to get his first car. His choice was between a Holden sedan with a single Weber, a Triumph TR3A and an Austin-Healey 100/6. Joe chose the 100/6 and had a ball with it.

Joe was a founding member (1969) of the Austin-Healey Owners Club of NSW and is the club historian. Over the years a number of Austin-Healeys have passed through his hands and in 1976 he bought the Works 3000 that ran at the 1965 Sebring 12 hour. A few years later he became interested in the Sprites prepared by the DHMC.

"I first heard of the Le Mans Prototype Sprites over 25 years ago", Joe said. "Australian Paul Hawkins had driven my 3000 at Sebring and also drove Sprites at Le Mans. I became very interested in his career. The 1968 race was the last time a Sprite Prototype ran at Le Mans, and then displayed at the London Motor Show at Earls Court."

"It was then sold to Speed Sport Publications, the publisher of British magazine *Cars and Car Conversions* for use as a promotional vehicle. After that it passed via John Sprinzel into the hands of a member of the MG Car Club who had intentions of running it in the Targa Florio. However as happens, plans were changed and it was sold again in 1975 to a keen motor racing fan, Ian Polley."





(L to R): Fuel filler; front fender and bonnet; rear Kamm tail - with 1968-spec spoiler & quick-lift jacking points.

"The car had been returned to its 1967 Le Mans specification, with the single Weber and dry-sump engine, prior to Ian buying it. Ian used it extensively in competition over the years. Besides circuit racing, he also ran in the Brighton Speed Trials and hillclimbs. During his ownership the car was never rebuilt, just maintained in racing trim."

The car still uses the 1968 block, but with the earlier cylinder head. However, the brackets for the fuel injection pumps and pulleys, etc remain on the car.

First Sight

"I first caught sight of the car (with chassis number HAN9-R-237) back in 1996 at the International Healey Meeting in the UK", Joe recalled. "It rather surprised me that everyone was running about paying a great deal of attention to other cars and not to a light alloy ex-DHMC race car. I started talking to Ian Polley and found that we both shared a keen interest in the work of the DHMC and later kept in touch. Some time after, I offered to buy the car and he said that I would have first refusal."

"True to his word, Ian called me at the beginning of 2000 and after some lengthy phone calls we agreed on a price. However there was one catch to the deal, one that I didn't find much difficulty with. Ian said that the car, along with others, plus the Bentley Drivers Club had been invited by Association Sportive de l'Automobile-Club de l'Ouest to

take part in a historic parade before the 2000 Le Mans race."

"I thought it was quite fitting", Joe added. "Then Ian suggested that I might like to attend and that was quite fitting as well. It was certainly an introduction to what was soon to be my car. We met at Brooklands for breakfast on the Thursday before Le Mans with the intention of following the route of the original Bentley team and arriving on Saturday morning."

"The cars in the convoy were just simply amazing. Long and short nose D-Types, Testa Rosa Ferrari, two GT40s, Aston Martin DB3, Talbot Lago, a couple of OSCAs, Ferrari 275GTB, Lancia Aurelia and of course a brace of Bentleys – including No 8 that had run at Le Mans. I remember sitting there thinking how it was so very much over the top, like something out of a 'Boy's Own Annual'."

Lapping Le Mans

"At Le Mans we were all ushered onto the track and parked on the grid", Joe continued. "Each car was then introduced and all drove off for four high-speed laps of the whole circuit. My first real introduction at speed was sitting in the passenger seat watching the tachometer nudging 7,200rpm in fifth gear, which would have been around 140+ mph. I think the top speed of the car certainly surprised quite a few of the others."

"Ian and I stayed at the circuit to about 3am

the following morning just soaking up the atmosphere and visiting such significant corners as Indianapolis and Tetra Rouge."

"I came back to Australia with plans to ship the car as soon as possible", Joe said. "Then Ian called me to let me know that the car had received an invitation from Lord March to attend the Goodwood Revival. People are not invited, just the cars. By that stage the car was mine, but what could I do but agree? Ian then went ahead and arranged for John Rhodes, a Prototype Sprite driver from 1966 to drive the car."

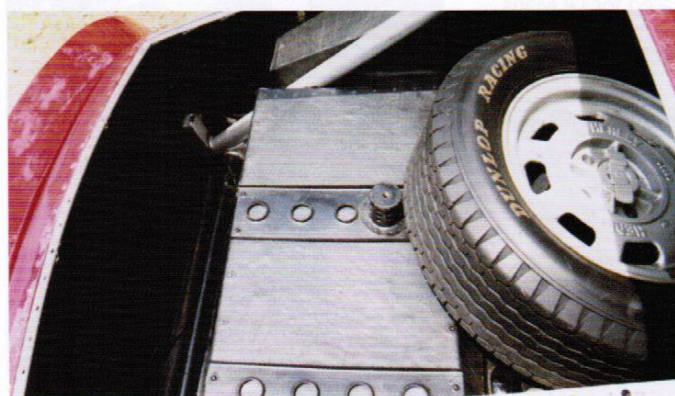
Finally Arrived in Australia

Joe's car ran at Goodwood before finally arriving in Australia in early 2001, along with a file of documents, spares, trailer and even signs from the 1968 London Motor Show. Like many enthusiasts, he has since further investigated his car's early history.

He was particularly interested in tracking down the link between the use of the British registration number HNX 456D in the 1966 Le Mans race, as well as at Sebring.

What really heightened his interest was when he chipped some paint from the rear of the bonnet opening, only to find it had at one stage been painted fluorescent orange, the same colour of the two Sprites that ran at Sebring in 1966.

His research was aided by copies of the long-defunct MG publication *Safety Fast* that included articles by Peter Browning,



Petrol tank and spare wheel. Note the Healey magnesium wheel.





Two views of the car when it arrived at Joe's place in Sydney.

who at the time was the BMC Competitions Manager. It was in a series of articles by Browning during 1967 that drew the earlier connection between the Le Mans entries and that for Sebring.

Joe has done an enormous amount of in-depth research into the car. After all, he wants to make sure it is what he says it is.

He was fortunate to discuss the car at length prior to buying it with Roger Menadue, who had prepared the DHMC competition cars.

"He pointed out details of the car, how he prepared it for Le Mans and how he tested them after construction", Joe explained. "I had a second visit with Roger Menadue to look at photographs and he answered my enquires re the car's history."

The car's earlier history was cemented when Joe bought a set of Sebring programs, result papers and race notes through eBay. It turned out the seller was Ken Breslauer the author of *Sebring, The Official History of America's Great Sports Car Race*. Contained within the race notes were indications that the Sprite also ran at Sebring in 1966 and 1967.



Interior, as shown in *Road & Track* (July 1965) was spartan but comfortable.

Perhaps most importantly, though, Joe has been able to get copies of original papers from the RAC (governing body for British motorsport) and Association Sportive de l'Automobile-Club de l'Ouest (organisers of Le Mans) which show the engine number for the DHMC Sprite used at Le Mans in 1967 and 1968 is XSP 3063 - 13.

Joe has this engine, and matching gearbox, which still contains various stamps and marks made by the RAC for scrutineering purposes.

New Life Down Under

"I was pretty excited when it arrived", Joe said of his Sprite. "I like to use my cars on the road, for ordinary things like running down the shop on a Friday night for fish and chips."

"There have been a couple of competition events at circuits in and around Sydney where I have had a ball. Although with the five-speed 'box the car hasn't been able to extend itself, as the straights are nowhere as long as Le Mans."

"Driving the car with any enthusiasm the engine will rev its head off, as it's very easy to over-rev it. At one circuit it's possible to get into fifth about 200m before the end of the straight, while it's just a waste of time at some others. It's still geared for Le Mans."



Special Le Mans 24 headlights by Lucas are rarer than rocking horse poo!

"I would describe the performance from the car as from a fast road Sprite. There are no doubt many sprint cars that would be quicker, but I don't know if they could maintain the performance for 24 hours."

"The Friday night fish and chip run might take a little longer with the car, as it's just not possible to get in and drive away. With the dry sump lubrication, proper warming up is crucial, as there are nine litres of oil to warm up before you go anywhere. That takes about ten to fifteen minutes of letting the engine idle at 2,000rpm."

"I find the car very light, predictable and forgiving, plus it will rev and rev. The same engine fitted to Formula Junior cars will rev out to 10,000rpm but of course are far more highly tuned. While the Sprite has been mechanically rebuilt a number of times since Le Mans, the body and interior are as they were in 1968."

Since having the Sprite in Australia Joe has



A close look at the fixings for the Perspex rear canopy and fuel filler.



Photo by Peter Ellenbogen

2011 Australian Grand Prix support race. A crowd favourite until, unfortunately, the engine overheated after only a few laps.


run it a few times in its natural environment – the racing circuit. There have been a number of super sprints at Wakefield Park where, by the end of the straight, it was lucky to get into fourth. In 2009 Joe was certain that he was going to see his car reach its potential when he secured an entry at the Easter Festival of Sport Cars' Bathurst meeting. Unfortunately the clutch broke up causing a severe lack of balance, resulting in a broken crankshaft.



Then, when Joe received an invitation to run the Sprite in a supporting event to the 2011 Australian Grand Prix it was all hands on deck to prepare it in time. While he did enjoy a few laps of the Albert Park circuit, the car retired due to engine overheating.

This car, rare and significant in the history of the DHMC and BMC, is now enjoying a

mechanical rebuild and Joe aims to have it back on the track in the near future.

Many thanks to Joe Armour for allowing us a glimpse of his Le Mans Prototype Sprite. I'm biased, of course, but fellow Australian enthusiasts are indeed fortunate that there are people like him who recognise the true historic worth of such cars. 

HAN9-R-237 Race History:



- 1966: 12 Hours of Sebring**
No 66
Rauno Aaltonen/Clive Baker
2nd in class; 29th outright
- 1966: 24 Hours of Le Mans**
No 48
Clive Baker/John Rhodes
DNF
- 1967: 12 Hours of Sebring**
No 59
Rauno Aaltonen/Clive Baker
1st in class; 13th outright
- 1967: 24 Hours of Le Mans**
No 51
Clive Baker/Andrew Hedges
15th outright
- 1968: 24 Hours of Le Mans**
No 50
Roger Enever/Alec Poole
15th outright



Photo by Steve Oom