The original Austin Healey Sprite was a car that many would agree could stand some modifying. Designed to fill the gap left by the pre-war Austin seven sports cars the Sprite was not especially fast, certainly wasn't comfortable and even lacked a boot lid – you tipped the seats forward to load luggage.

So why were they so popular? A combination of chuckable handling and entertaining driving manners helped make them so endearing. A little brother to the Healey 3000, Frogeye Sprites were fun, cute and affordable – so they sold nearly forty nine thousand in the three years between 1958 and 1961. MG undertook design and development, and the Sprites were built at Abingdon alongside the MGA and Healey 100–6. The Frogeye (or 'bug-eye' in the States) moniker came about after it was remarked that the headlights looked like the eyes of a frog poking up from just under the surface of the water – adding to the cuteness of the car. The trademark headlights were actually an afterthought as Donald Healey's original plan to have retractable pop-up lights proved to be too expensive. The Frogeye became many people's first sports car and was also a popular choice for women who wanted something small and sporty of their own. The car was equally at home on either road or racetrack, the low purchase cost and straightforward mechanical parts making the Sprite a popular choice for racers then and now. Many drivers trying to get into notoriously expensive motor sport racing found they could just about budget for a new Sprite. In the late 1950s and early 60s it was a common sight to see a racer drive his Sprite into a club race meet. He'd then remove the four screws holding on the windscreens, empty everything out of the interior and boot, and take to the track. True grassroots motor sport.

At one time the Healey works team had a driver named Stirling Moss racing a Sprite for them – wonder whatever happened to him? But roadgoing Sprites were rarely quite as fast...
Only made for three years, but now more popular than ever, the Austin Healey Sprite is a great basis for a fast usable sports car. Mike Renault finds four modified examples that make a good thing even better.

They looked. Under that curvaceous front was a small in-line four engine that, along with most every other mechanical component on car, came from BMC parts bins used for staid icons like the Morris Minor and Austin A35. Side from a little factory tuning, much of the performance came from the fact that the Sprite of was tiny — it weighed a little over half a ton. After three years the MK1 Sprite got a redesign in front and rear styling, it got wind up windows, door handles and even a boot lid, but the same time lost a lot of its character. A more engineered version became available as the MG Midget, the cars often called 'Spridgets'.

The Froguey's bump top speed from just 80mph remained credible enough at the time, but so is a spectacular figure for today's roads. So to keep up with modern traffic you need to indulge in a little tweaking.

**ALAN COUCH - SPRITE 1098CC**

"The first change you need to make to one of these," says Alan indicating his dark blue 1959 "I don't know what it is about them... I think their simplicity just appeals to me."

Froguey, "is to upgrade the brakes." Alan has fitted discs to the front and a remote brake servo and reckons, "The stopping power is so much better now it really gives you more confidence? The Sprite is not a heavy car but in standard form the drum brakes are very prone to brake fade.

"The next improvement I made," remembers Alan, "was to fit a smaller steering wheel. The original one looked like it came out of a bus." Alan has had the new steering wheel machined so it retains the original centre. That's quite subtle, but certainly white leather wasn't originally an option on the Sprite was it? "Well..." says Alan, "I just really liked the look."

Alan originally owned a Froguey 34 years ago and never lost his fondness for the cars. "I don't know what it is about them," explains Alan, "I think their simplicity just appeals to me." Finding this 1959 model years later meant Alan was finally in a position to make it the car he always wanted. In
**Modifying | Frogeye Sprites**

**ALAN COUCH’S 1959 SPRITE**

The Sprite was a very basic car. Note the complete lack of door handles - you leaned in and pulled a handle to gain access. Even from bumpers were an optional extra. MG raided the Lucas parts bins for lenses so the taillights are the same as those fitted to the MGA, and the indicators are identical to those on the Triumph TR3A and London taxi to name but two.

**PERFORMANCE**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Power</th>
<th>59 bhp</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Torque</td>
<td>65 lb ft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-60 mph</td>
<td>13 sec (est)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top Speed</td>
<td>95 mph</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Modifications**

Higher ratio differential. Later model close ratio gearbox. Modified camshaft, freeflow exhaust manifold. Disc brakes on the front, remote brake servo, Kenlowe adjustable electric fan. Mk2 wire wheels.

Frogeye Sprites suit wire wheels - these are from a later car.

Interior benefits from modern additions like white leather and inertia reel seatbelts. Even dark blue car is diminished.

1958 this car underwent a complete rebuild. "Literally every nut and bolt was replaced," explains Alan proudly. Essentially this car is a Mk2 Sprite with a Mk1 body, although it has been breathed on with an upgraded camshaft, freeflow exhaust manifold and higher ratio differential to dramatically improve acceleration.

Also improving the 0-60mph times is a close ratio gearbox. Improving the looks, meanwhile, is a set of 13 inch wire wheels from an MG Midget.

"The beauty of these cars," explains Alan, "is that so many parts are available off the shelf and lots of newer cars contain parts that just bolt in." Other additions to this Frogeye include front bumper, tachometer, screen washers and a heater - but these were non-standard specification options that were dealer-fitted when the car was new. That’s a stark reminder of just how basic these little cars were when new.

**JOHN CARRINGTON - 1293CC SPRITE**

"It fills with water when it rains..." grins John, "and turns into a duck pond. Compared to a modern car it’s very basic, and it really skips around on the bumps. I’ve just asked John if there’s anything that he’s not happy with on his 1959 Sprite, and after long consideration that was really all he could find to fault.

The 1295cc A-series Mini engine under the bonnet benefits from a fast road cam and stage two large valve head. Fully balanced it also has a lightened bottom end. The exhaust is an LCB extractor system. As well as electronic ignition, the Sprite has an electric fuel pump and Herts torque starter. In common with the other cars here a Kenlowe electric fan has been fitted.

But it’s behind the engine that probably the most unusual part lurks. After some research amongst American Sprite specialists John found that the five speed gearbox from a Datsun 510 would bolt into place with very little effort. The box even has the gearlever gate in the same position so the stick uses the existing hole in the floor - very useful to know. John reports no problems all using the Datsun box although he does point out that the Datsun parts are not as plentiful as they once were.

"But," explains John, "the Datsun unit is much
JOHN CARRINGTON’S 1959 SPRITE

Minilite wheels are a popular addition. Well thought out modifications mean John is not concerned about driving his Sprite long distances. Amongst other trips he has been to Vienna and Florence with the Euroclassic tour.

One unrecorded advantage of the Sprite’s tiny 120 came on a club trip to France when John discovered the Sprite windscreen was lower than the height of the barrier at a tollbooth. “No one was about and we couldn’t see a camera,” smiles John, “so under we went.”

Modifications
The 1293cc A series engine has fully lightened and balanced bottom end, stage 2 large valve head, a fast road cam, twin 1 5 inch SU carbs, electronic ignition, electric fuel pump and a Hi-torque starter. An electric fan has been fitted. Standard suspension with 9/16 inch anti roll bar. Dunlop 120Y five speed gearbox gives an 0.82 final drive ratio.

PERFORMANCE

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>78 bhp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torque</td>
<td>Not given</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-60 mph</td>
<td>Not given</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top Speed</td>
<td>scary above 70 mph</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

John noted that’s a clue to the real nature of the car. Another giveaway is that winged badge on the front – a replica of the original Donald Healey supercharged one. Chris bought from Australia. This 1961 Sprite started its new life back in 1992.

“a rare Shorrock boost gauge in the dashboard gives a clue to the real nature of the car”

with an almost complete Wheeler & Davies Stage 2 bodyside. Underneath, the modifications include the later “tubbed” Mk2 spec gearbox and 5/9:1 final drive, front anti-roll bar, front disc brakes, and a 12G295 (Cooper) head. A specially fabricated exhaust manifold aids engine breathing but the biggest change is of course the supercharger that runs in conjunction with a 1.5 inch SU Carburettor. Chris found that dropping the engine’s compression ratio to 8.5 psi avoids any danger of detonation, and the booster runs most effectively with around four pounds per square inch of boost. Although the blow off valve kicks in if pressure ever exceeds seven PSI.

CHRIS YATES - SUPERCHARGED SPRITE

It’s got a van engine (a 1098cc from an Austin A35 van) and it’s modified using almost entirely period parts. Chris’ attractive Iris blue Froegey might well look factory standard from outside, even down to retaining the original steel pierced disc wheels, but look a little closer and you’ll spot a rare Shorrock boost gauge in the dashboard.

Chris revealed period sales literature showing the original cost of the supercharger was £122 plus a £34 fitting fee. “They advertised it as turning the 1098cc performance into the equivalent of a 1500cc”, reckons Chris.

Chris has also made an effective lockable
CHRIS YATES' 1961 SUPERCHARGED SPRITE

Supercharged badge (above) is replica of an original. Smaller Motolita wheel now fitted.

Shorrock supercharger is a positive oil fed C75B model. Modern ones are still available but originals rare.

"I do find people in modern cars want to race me."

Chris' Sprite works well because it has very little period modifications, so the uninteriorated car appears to be very standard. Even the supercharger is not as noisy as one might expect - you have to listen carefully to detect the blower's whine as the car zooms past. Chris has even elected to keep the original steel wheels.

Modifications

Chris' Sprite has a 1098cc engine with a period Shorrock C75B supercharger. It has a stainless steel exhaust and specially fabricated manifold. The brakes are upgraded with 8.25 inch discs on the front and seven inch drums on the rear, there is also an 0.875 inch bore tandem master cylinder. The handling is tightened up with an anti roll bar on the front and rubber bushed mounts front and rear.

Performance

| Power | 63bhp @ 4934 rpm |
| Torque | 78lb ft @ 3200rpm |
| 0-60 mph | 15 sec |
| Top Speed | 92 mph |

ALAN ANSTEAD - SPRINZEL SEBRING

There were only six coupes originally built by John Sprinzel, though only one of those is thought to have survived. John Sprinzel's Speedwell tuning company developed the aluminium bodied Sebring Sprite fixed head coupe. The cars competed in various races at Sebring and many rallies, including the Monte Carlo, during the early 1960s.

Built by Alan as a retirement project this Sprinzel coupe is a replica, but Alan has gone to great lengths to make it a convincing one - even down to the Sprinzel manufacturer plates on the silts. "I found them on eBay," smiles Alan. Alan's car has a fibreglass top that has been moulded off an original piece. "I waited two years for that to arrive," remembers Alan, "and I hadn’t realised how much it looks like the top from a Mk1 Lotus Elite. You can’t help wondering if there was a Lotus parked nearby during the design process."

The windscreen is unique to the Sprinzel and had to be specially made by Pilkington Glass. "I’ve got another one in the loft just in case," says Alan. Photographer Phil has taken a shine to the coupe suggesting “it looks like a little TVR.

On the front end is a fibreglass flip-front bonnet (the original Sebrings also had a fibreglass bonnet). Differing from the original specifications is a five-speed gearbox from a Ford Sierra. "You really need that fifth gear on the motorway," explains Alan, and under the bonnet is a 1330cc A-series engine.
ALAN ANSTEAD’S SPRINZEL SEBRING COUPE REPLICA

This is a slightly more extreme example of what you can do to a Frogeye but it certainly is different and attracts attention. Alan’s car has more of a race car feel about it than the others but it is still a competent fully legal road car with excellent handling. The amount of fibreglass makes it comparatively light in spite of the coupe roof.

Modifications

Alan’s Sprinzel Sebring replica has a 1330cc with twin SU with a half SU manifolds. Alan had added an Aldon distributor, plus a Millon LCB manifold and exhaust system. The gearbox is a five speed Ford Sierra unit. Front brakes are vented discs and Greenstuff pads. The rear brakes are drums with a Sebring pedal box relocated. The front is standard except for an anti roll bar, the rear suspension has lowered springs and SpaX telescopic shocks.

PERFORMANCE

<table>
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<th>Power</th>
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<tr>
<td>Torque</td>
<td>Not known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-60 mph</td>
<td>Not known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top Speed</td>
<td>approx 120 mph</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The bonnet on Alan’s coupe flips forward rather than being hinged at the windscreen cowl as on the standard Sprite, but there is still ample access to the engine. Sliding windows make toll booths fun.

The best addition Alan has made is uprating the non servo assisted brakes “I used to get serious brake fade,” laughs Alan, “and all through the build my wife was asking to have a drive of the car. When she finally did she screamed ‘there’s no brakes!’ – well that put her off driving it.” But Alan is not scared of using the car, even having taken it around the official Ferrari test track in Fiorano.

On the day it was all we could do to keep Alan and his Speedwell Blue coupe in a straight line. “He has a reputation for getting the back end out,” laughs fellow club member John.

So it’s a bit of a surprise to find that Alan has never tested his Frogeye’s top speed.

“I get 20mph per 1000rpm,” reckons Alan. “So, if we assume I generally rev it to 6000rpm then, theoretically, I might get 120mph. I really must try it one day.”

And as for a 0-60mph time? “Well a pukka Sebring did it in 10.8 seconds so I’d hope for a time only a little slower than that.”

Certainly the coupe top greatly aided aerodynamics on the original Sebring race cars, so who knows?

But Alan is not scared of using the car, having taken it around the Ferrari test track in Fiorano.”

CONCLUSION

Watching these tiny vehicles hurtle down the country roads I can really see the appeal of the Frogeye – they are fast and attractive and, with some modification, very usable. Chris compares the Frogeye to a modern Mazda MX-5: sporty, popular, tunable and affordable. If you are not afraid to use modern parts there is a real wealth of readily available bits you can fit or adapt.

Thanks to:

The four Frogeye Sprite owners.

Terry Horler & David Wright of the Midget and Sprite Club (www.mgcarclub.co.uk/midgetspriteclub)
The St. George & Dragon public house, Henley on Thames for the main location.