

SCOTLAND THE BRAVE

The unique Ecurie Ecosse Healey Sprite suffered a disastrous debut at Le Mans in 1961, but it could have been a contender. So reckons **Richard Heseltine** after an exclusive drive

PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY BAKER

It was one of those phone calls you dread having to make. How do you broach the subject? It was a big accident, after all. Le Mans 1961 ended his competition career, and almost his life. So he might be less than keen to share his memories. Not a bit of it. "Oh, the Ecosse Sprite," laughs a commendably unfazed Bill MacKay. "Yes, that was an incredibly quick little car. We were running well before I lost it at White House, which is where all the dummies go off. To tell you the truth, I have no memory of what actually happened, which is perhaps just as well. But, having raced D-types and other powerful cars, it was pretty galling that I had 'the big one' in a Healey Sprite."

Pretty galling. An impression felt by the Ecurie Ecosse faithful when news first filtered down that the Scottish squad was planning to run something as humble as an Austin-Healey Sprite in the great race. This was, after all, the same team that had twice triumphed in the endurance classic during the previous decade. Nobody, not least MacKay and co-driver (and '56 winner in the Ecurie Ecosse D-type) Ninian Sanderson, seemed at all keen on the idea and the decision proved a contributing factor in chief mechanic Stan Sproat's departure from the equipte: there didn't seem much point in staying. Such hostility towards the little car, allied to its premature – and painful – exit from competition and consequent disappearance from view for much of the past five decades, has led to it being largely exorcised from Ecurie Ecosse lore. Until now, that is. Welcomed back in from the cold by arch Ecurie Ecosse fan Dick Skipworth, and reconstructed with love by Lynx, it's back.

Sitting in Skipworth's motor house, flanked by some of the team's more exalted hardware – C- and D-types, Cooper Monaco (the Sprite's sister entry in '61) and a Tojeiro-Jaguar – the Healey appears a mite out of place, the poor relation in a family of over-achievers. Which begs the question: why did Ecurie Ecosse principal David Murray bother with a small-displacement production sports car in the first place?

Answer: the Index of Thermal Efficiency. Much was made of the Index Energetique award at home, the patience-trying regulations being predominantly based on fuel efficiency using a formula relating to distance covered over the 24 hours, the amount of fuel used and the weight of the vehicle. A prize apparently created with the singular intention of ensuring that the locals won something, anything, in the Grand Prix d'Endurance, regardless of where they finished on the road. And Ecurie Ecosse at least had a French name in its armoury.

The Sprite was originally prepared at the Donald Healey Motor Company's Warwick facility for an attack on the March '61 Sebring four-hour endurance race, with standard 'Frog-eye' front-end. Driven by future Ford GT40 staple and Indy 500 irregular Walt Hansgen, it bounced its way around the bumpy airfield circuit to finish third behind a brace of factory Abarths. From there, the Sprite returned to the UK where it was sold to Murray for a tilt at Le Mans and given a streamlined nose in an effort to raise top speed down the Mulsanne Straight.

Drafted in alongside the experienced Sanderson, MacKay was very much the new boy. A skilled yachtsman, the Glasgow-born up-and-comer hadn't contemplated becoming a driver until a Healey 100S was taken as part exchange at the garage where he was employed. Only weeks after passing his driving test, he was persuaded to sprint the car and this led to drives

in an Aston Martin DB3S and Murray's D-type. Having made a positive impression in national-level clubbies, he was new to endurance events.

"Driving the Sprite was a bit of a come-down," recalls MacKay. "It wasn't a bad car at all, and was very easy to drive, but nobody had a good word to say about it purely because Ecurie Ecosse was known for racing big cars." The car didn't get off to a flying start when promised delivery dates came and went: the reworked Healey was finally delivered to the team at Le Mans. Predictably, there were problems: scrutineering for the 24 Hours back then tended to be something of a lottery. As was typical for an English entrant at La Sarthe, both the Healey and the team's Cooper didn't exactly sail through: the Sprite should have had its engine number engraved on to the block rather than on a plate attached to it. Naturally. With this triviality – and others – sorted, the car eventually passed. 'Fixing' the Cooper took altogether more time.

By the end of the weekend, Murray and his crew must have wished that they hadn't bothered. Bruce Halford crashed the Cooper on his 32nd lap, breaking his leg in the process. Worse was to come just eight tours later when, after taking over from Sanderson, MacKay lost control of the Sprite at Maison Blanche and rolled it. The car was reduced to rubble and the 23-year old was pinned underneath with one of his arms crushed. "I broke my neck and was in a bit of a bad way," says MacKay, his tone playing down the horror. Fortunately MacKay's father was an eminent surgeon, who flew out to France to supervise life-saving operations before his son was transported to Glasgow. Remarkably, a year of recuperation – and 15 procedures – later, MacKay made a full recovery to become one of



ECURIE ECOSSE SPRITE

Construction steel monocoque with aluminium bonnet and roof
Engine all-iron ohv 948cc A-series four; lightened and balanced, lightly ported head; twin SU carburettors; cr 9.0:1
Max power 55bhp @ 5800rpm (est)
Max torque 59lb ft @ 3000rpm (est)
Transmission close-ratio four-speed manual
Suspension: front wishbones, coil springs
rear live axle, quarter-elliptic leaf springs, radius arms; lever-arm dampers **Steering** rack and pinion, 2.3 turns lock-to-lock
Brakes discs front, drums rear
Weight 1380lb (626kg)
Top speed 105mph (est)
Price new n/a **Price now** £60,000



Below: despite its potency, LSD-equipped Sprite is well behaved on the road. Right: original 948cc A-series screamer runs twin SU carbs





Above: pretty one-off bodywork fashioned by Healey Motor Company. Left and inset: slippery nose helped little Sprite keep with the big guns on the Mulsanne Straight



Scotland's most successful skippers, although his embryonic motor racing career was over: "When anyone asks me about my driving days, I always say I used to race... badly!"

After Le Mans the remains of the crumpled Sprite were sent back to the Healey factory, where it languished unloved until future hill-climb king Roy Lane spotted it under a dustsheet. Geoff Healey agreed to sell the car with enough spares to make it race-worthy, along with a trick close-ratio gearbox, but the special nose stayed behind. With a self-built A-series from an Austin A40 in place, Lane began racing the car in late 1963 with some success before replacing it with a Lotus Eleven. Subsequent owner Richard Groves campaigned it sporadically until 1970, when the car was sold on. Fast-forward to 1989 and the Sprite was found in Essex in a decrepit state by Trevor Jarrett, who in turn sold it to Ron Scoma in Chicago. Scoma set about tracking down the original Le Mans engine and the Sebring spares that were left in the US after the 1961 race. Unable to tackle the restoration himself, Scoma sold the car to Skipworth in the

late '90s. "It arrived as a pile of bits in a packing case," Skipworth recalls.

Then followed the hard bit. The chassis and engine – or at least the block – are the Le Mans originals, but the distinctive bonnet had to be recreated in ally with the aid of scaled-up photographs. Skipworth was at pains to restore the Sprite to '61 spec and has thus far stopped short of having it race prepared: "People have tried to persuade me to fit a 1.5-litre A-series, close-cut gears and all that sort of stuff, but I don't plan to race it seriously." The car runs an original(ish) 948cc four-banger, sporting twin SUs, plus "a gas-flowed head and a few minor tuning mods".

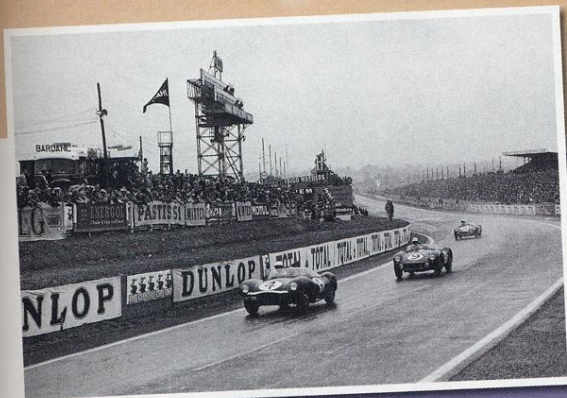
Mindful of one Ecurie Ecosse insider's ever so slightly chilling payoff about this being "a *very* unlucky car" (imagine Private Frazer's sombre delivery in *Dad's Army*), it's with a mild degree of trepidation that you approach the Sprite. Especially because the restoration took the best part of five years to complete. Don't want a repeat now, do we? Oh look, a black cat called Lucky Heather walking under a ladder. It's a sign...

Having made it into the cabin – pull back the

sliding window, reach in to open the door, bump your noggin on the hardtop, swear, then ease yourself in while still cursing – and it's exactly as you remember a Sprite to be, if a bit more claustrophobic. You still need to adopt a bent-arms, elbows-constrained driving position, but then this is a very small car.

The flipside is that the key controls lend such a sense of precision. The steering is light and loads up swiftly, the gearchange has a delicious snicking action – it's impossible to grandma your cog-swaps in one of these – and, despite the leaf-sprung rear offering relatively low levels of grip, breakaway is easy to catch. That said, with a limited-slip diff it takes provocation to unsettle the tail: this is that rarest of things, a Sprite that understeers. If there's a criticism it's that the disc/drum braking arrangement is a little lacking, with not much feel at the top of the pedal, though the new pads had yet to bed-in.

In its current state of tune, the A-series has little urge below 4500rpm. It splutters and hesitates before coming on cam and then utters that familiar scream spliced with slight transmission



Left: Ecurie Ecosse D-type of Flockhart/Sanderson on way to '56 Le Mans victory. Right: cramped cabin



ECURIE ECOSSE: RACING FOR SCOTLAND

Following its race debut – and first win – at Charterhall in April 1952, Ecurie Ecosse swiftly grew into one of the most successful teams on the international stage, taking 68 victories over the next 10 seasons. Founded by pub-owning accountant (and former Grands Prix occasional) David Murray, the team began life with Esso backing and three privately owned Jaguar XK120s. By the end of the decade it had won Le Mans twice (1956 and '57 with D-types), and fielded a wealth of machinery including Cooper and Connaught single-seaters. It had also served its intention of putting Scotland on the motor sport map, the roll call of drivers including Ian Stewart, Ron Flockhart, Desmond Titterton and the decidedly non-Scottish Masten Gregory.

The 1960s wouldn't be so kind, the workshops in Merchiston Mews, Edinburgh being less active once the money ran out. Murray continued to juggle his outside businesses (which also included a Jaguar concession) with attempts to keep his

precious team afloat, but the crunch came in 1968 when he was served with a summons to appear before the Inland Revenue. He fled to the Canary Islands and died in hospital there seven years later. In his absence Harry Ballantine assumed the role of part-time manager, fielding Brabhams and a March in Formula 2, but the impecunious team folded in 1971.

But not for good: this most resonant of team monikers resurfaced under Hugh McCaig a decade later, racking up results from 1983-'93 in the World Sports Car Championship (winning the 1986 C2 category) and the British Touring Car Championship with lead driver David Leslie starring in both. More recently, historic racer and classic car dealer Gregor Fisker has attempted to revive the name, with third in class in the '02 Nürburgring 24 Hours in a BMW M3 and retirement in the '03 Daytona 24 Hours in a Porsche 911. And it's not inconceivable that the Saltire will once again return to its spiritual home of Le Mans.

whine. For a 1-litre car with a cast-iron boat anchor up front, the Sprite feels disarmingly fast: quick enough to beat up on cars of half its age and twice the displacement. You can just imagine it down the Mulsanne, getting a tow from one of the 3-litre sports-racers.

And imagining is all there's time for. Sadly, playtime is over all too soon because the road becomes covered in *merde* thanks to a passing muck spreader. Somehow rural Oxford doesn't make for a convincing Le Mans substitute.

For a car with such a vivid and calamitous past, it's almost a pity that the Ecosse Sprite wasn't given a chance to rewrite history at this year's Le Mans Classic, to finally record a finish 45 years on from its last outing. "You know, I think we stood a good chance of doing well in 1961," says Bill MacKay, "we were fast enough." So no lingering hard feelings towards the Sprite then? Remarkably not: "I'd love to see the car again, really I would, because it has been a very long time." Pause. "Actually, I wouldn't mind having a go at driving it again. But race? No. I don't think that would be a good idea." ■