

SPAWNED

*Hidden away on the Isle of Wight,
a tiny company is building new
Frogeye'd Sprites.*

*Jane Hughes crosses the Solent to
compare this recent arrival to the
charms of the original Sprite Mk1
Pics by James Mann/Mick Walsh*

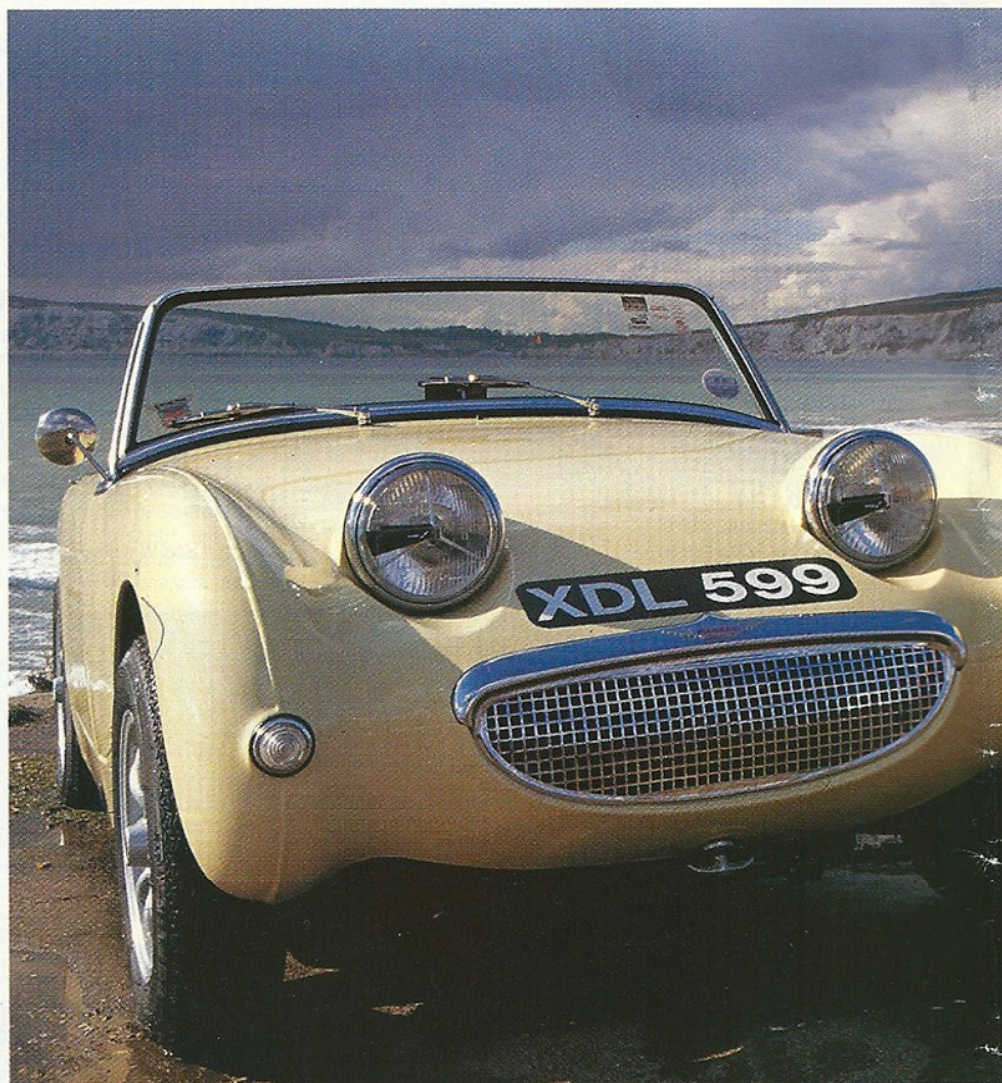
Looking back on it, I can't help wondering whether I too would have been fooled by the sight of two immaculate Frogeyes at rest on the cliffs at Freshwater Bay. Like the gentleman whose curiosity led him to wander over and ask how old they were.

I noticed the owner of the Primrose yellow Sprite made no effort to step forward and confess the truth...

When the original Mk1 Sprite was launched in May 1958 it was immediately hailed a success, described by enthusiastic road-testers as 'the perfect little two-seater'. That just under 50,000 cars were sold in the three years of production, and that very few alterations were made to the initial shape or specification, speaks for the popularity of the 'Frogeye' Sprite. It's ironic to think that the then two main points of criticism – the lamp treatment and bonnet, are now largely the reason for its classic status.

Thirty years on, the Mk1 Sprite lives again, on the Isle of Wight. The reticent owner of that Primrose yellow Sprite is Keith Brading, the father of the new Healey Frogeye.

Keith is just one of many enthusiasts who, remembering the fun of the Sprite first time round, yearned to re-live that 'first love affair'. It was the early eighties, he had five mouldering Sprites in his yard and he decided to rebuild one. Then doubt



set in. Old steel Frogeyes rust.

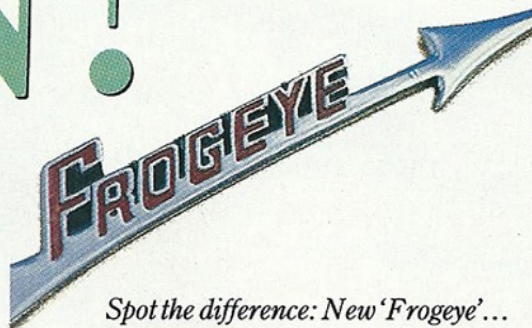
"I realised that I didn't really want a restored 30-year-old car, prone to rusting and unreliability. What I did want was a car suitable for the present day, and that is really how this project evolved."

Then he read an article in *Old Motor* and one line kept repeating itself in his head. "The article was a profile of the Mk1 Sprite, and the line ran something like this: 'Could anyone build a car like this today? I doubt it'. Well, it struck me that the closest anyone had got was with the Fiat X19, and then the Japanese built the Miata."

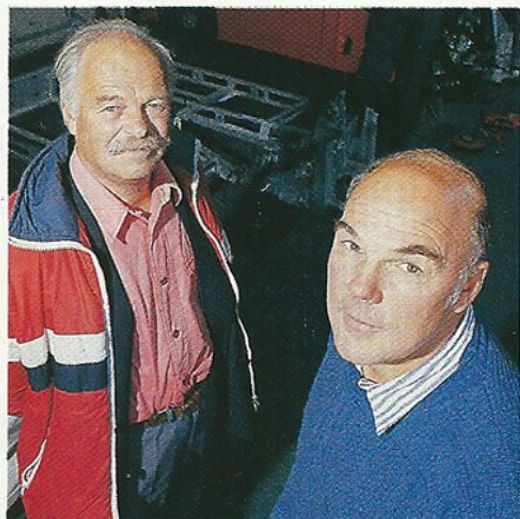
It didn't take much thought for Keith to realise that there must be an entire market out there of enthusiasts like himself who loved the appeal of the little car and either yearned to find a Frogeye, or perhaps already owned a Sprite or Midget in need of repair, but who were not prepared to put up with the ravages of rust, and the unreliability of old age.

"The appeal of the Frogeye is its smiling face," says Keith. "It is cute, and I knew that for any project to succeed, that cute body shape had to stay. People love the looks, indeed they want the car for its looks, but also want improved mechanicals."

AGAIN!



Spot the difference: New 'Frogeye'...



Geoffrey Healey and Keith Brading



...and old 'Sprite' arrow badge

and that's where Keith started. In 1985. What was needed, Keith realised, was a glass-fibre body/chassis assembly which, obviously, wouldn't rust, and onto which mechanical components salvaged from old Sprites and Midgets could be fitted. It would be called the Restoration Assembly, a kit, which would attract the wrong market. He asked John Ackroyd, designer of the Thrust car,

**"It was just like the old Sprite,
I immediately felt at home
behind the wheel."**

living on the island, for a chassis design, and to Gerald Finlay whose experience with glass-fibre after eight experimental moulds, to the monocoque mould they now use. With their help, Keith's own enthusiasm and experience, his premises and money, the project got underway. The initial plan was just to produce restoration assemblies, but the press and public response to his demonstration car was so

great, that Keith suspected there was also a market in complete cars.

And he was right. Four years, 17 cars and numerous restoration assemblies later, business is booming and his customers rave about him.

I left the ferry at Ryde with a doubt or two in my mind as to pedigree, purity etc etc. Yes, I own an original steel Frogeye which suffers from rust and unreliability (hence my arrival in the photographer's car that morning), but surely the fact that this 'new' Frogeye bears the name Healey, and has Geoffrey Healey as consultant to the company, means this ain't no ordinary replica?

So I was chuffed to discover Geoffrey Healey himself had crossed the Solent to join the fun and games. And in between cloud-bursts, he told me of his involvement, chuckling as he remembered driving Keith's prototype round his old testing grounds in Warwickshire. Apparently Keith had been somewhat alarmed at the way Geoff Healey handled the prototype so nonchalantly within minutes of climbing in. The reason was quite simple.

"It was just like the old Sprite," he explained. "I felt immediately at home behind the wheel. The car

behaved just like one of the old works Sprites. A few things had to be altered. The car was too noisy – noisy exhaust system and heater fan, and the bonnet catches needed redesigning."

"Over the years many people have come to me with prototypes, but I was impressed with this car from day one. It is a natural progression from the original."

To look at, and to sit in, the Healey Frogeye is virtually identical to the original Austin Healey Sprite. The standard of workmanship, the trim, detail and thought which has obviously gone into each car is impressive. The glass-fibre dash an image of the original, all the switches and knobs still in place, including the non-returning indicator switch.

The starter is now a more reliable push-button system and the driver is faced with the smaller Motolita steering-wheel. The leather seats are exact copies, the aluminium screen surround taken from an old car. Even the beading where the panel seams would be is perfectly duplicated. And the lines are faultless. A thoroughbred Frogeye to the curve of the grille, all cuteness and smiling face.

But there are a couple of clues. Firstly, the



transmission tunnel is wider and square. Surely it should be round? Beneath it lies the backbone to the steel chassis. Being square, the transmission tunnel also helps strengthen the longitudinal structure of the car. And it is cheaper to carpet...! And then the bonnet lifts forwards. (A definite advantage. No longer need you dread the bonnet dropping and decapitating you.)

It is what the body is made of and what lies under it that makes this a car for the present day. That the new car weighs the same

as the Mk1 speaks much for the strength of the glass-fibre body. Those who remain doubtful get the Keith Brading treatment: he jumps up and down on one of his cars and dares them to do the same on their original Sprite. Few have taken up his challenge.

The body shell rests on a square steel tube 'backbone' chassis, galvanised to protect against rust. Designed to fit within the confines of the GRP floorpan (itself an exact replica), it cleverly incorporates the original front chassis longitudinals, cross-member and suspension carriers. By retaining the original front chassis rails, liability for car tax and Q registration is avoided, as the original factory build number and type approval plate are on the rails. So to all intents and purposes, each Healey Frogeye is a

restored Sprite. (Keith reckons that 90 per cent of each complete car he builds is new, the remainder made up of non-wearing parts (gearbox and axle mounting) and a few items no longer available new.

At the rear things have changed. No longer the slightly harsh 1/4-elliptics and lever-arm shock

By retaining the original front chassis rails, liability for car tax and Q registration is avoided

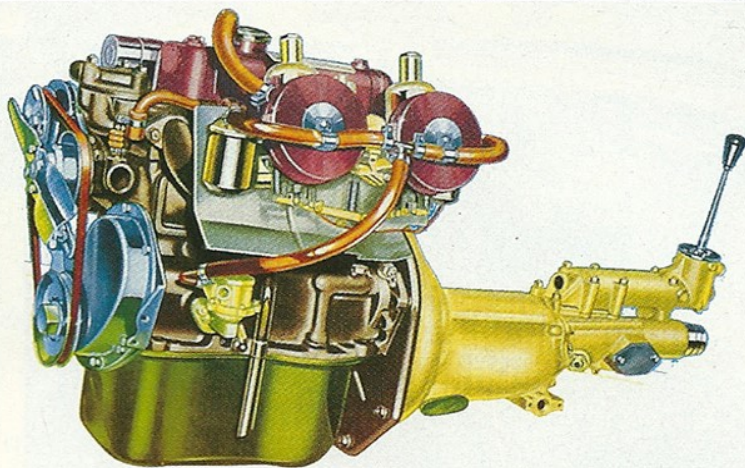
absorbers, but a rubber-in-torsion suspension system with telescopic shocks and a rear axle located by twin parallel radius arms.

But look under the front-lifting bonnet. Keith believes the presentation under the bonnet is what sold five cars to Japan in his first full year of production. It is also an example of his careful approach to his potential market. Surrounding a reconditioned 1275cc Midget engine and gearbox, everything is well laid out, neat, tidy and easily accessible. The battery and tray have moved to the left, onto the left front bulkhead tunnel. In its place is the recirculating air heater system. Even the wiring loom has moved – no longer bursting through the front bulkhead and sprawling across the engine bay, it now appears under the right bulkhead tunnel.





'Extremely economical in use, this four-cylinder ohv engine has a lively response... develops up to 42.5bhp at 5000rpm'. Quote from the original Frogeye brochure



RESTORATION ASSEMBLIES

To purchase a Healey Frogeye, sprayed and trimmed to the customer's specification, would cost £12,200 before tax. You could go out and put yourself on the waiting list for a new Mazda MX5 for not much more.

This is where the restoration assembly comes into its own. It costs £3600, and is designed to accept parts from either the original Mk1 Sprite or the later Sprite and MG Midget range from 1961-79. Parts are not a problem. Those unique to the original Sprite are now being remanufactured by specialist suppliers due to the demand by restorers, and many others are still available 'over the counter'.

For anyone owning a battered or indeed written-off Sprite or Midget and to whom the costly process of restoring in steel, only to have rust problems again within a matter of years, an assembly is the answer.

Is it difficult? How long will it take? How much will it cost? Well, 'how long is a piece of string'? It can cost as much or as little as you wish really, depending on the level of finish and what you start out with. How long it takes, and how difficult? Keith states in his brochure: 'The Sprite Restoration Assembly "as supplied", represents no more than a straightforward body change that two people, with the aid of a Workshop manual, should be able to carry out in under 70 hours. If difficulty is to be encountered, it will be in stripping-out and reconditioning parts from a redundant monocoque that may have suffered years of ill-maintenance or neglect'.

The assembly itself is supplied as a completely assembled body/chassis unit, with the doors pre-hung and the bonnet fitted, dashboard in place; rear suspension system fully assembled with axle casing and fitted to the chassis.

Obviously, what the customer has to send first is the 'old' front cross member/suspension carrier. This is recycled and returned fitted to the chassis.

Modifications will have to be made, such as to the length of the steering column and propshaft, but if it is of any encouragement, Keith has had customers with no prior knowledge of vehicle assembly who have succeeded in building their own car. As for all the other necessary parts, a full list is provided with the instruction manual, stating price, where you can source them, either through Keith or other specialists. The other obvious alternative is to take them off your own old Sprite and recondition them.

Together with all this, you receive the 'Frogeye Arrow' rear deck badge, the identity plaque bearing the Healey winged logo, relative commission number and Geoffrey Healey's endorsement.

With the task completed, what Keith hopes the owner has, and what was, after all, his original vision, is a car they can be proud of, practical all year round, yet with the charm and character of the fifties.



Glass-fibre bodysell and 'backbone' chassis



Finished bodysell, complete with roll-bar



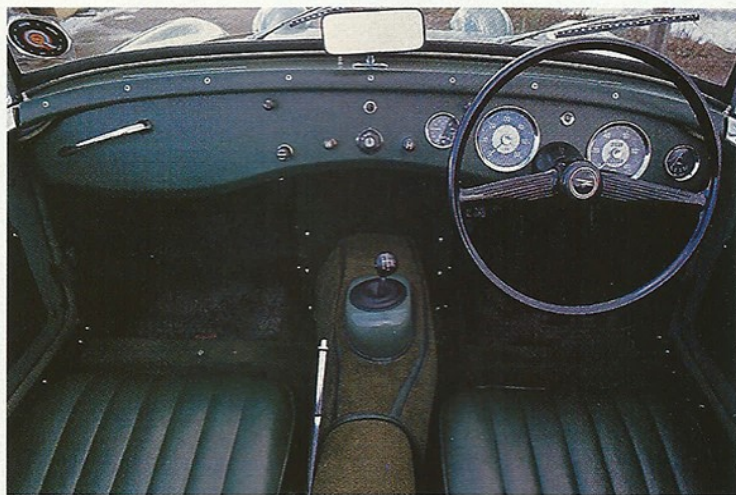
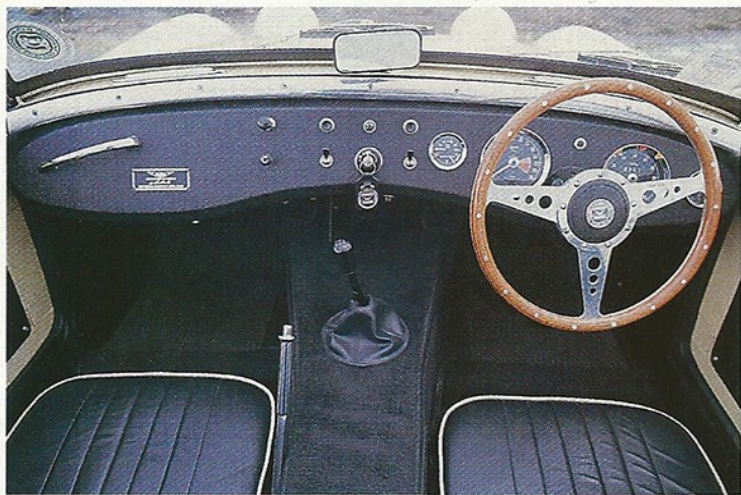
Glass-fibre dashboard in the making

Lecture over. Let's get out on those notoriously atrocious island roads and see what happens. We were quite a party by this time. Myself and Keith in the Primrose yellow car, closely (and noisily) pursued by Stuart Green of the A-H club in his mad-cap '61 Sebring Sprite, bravely passengered by Geoffrey Healey and soon to get quite a dowsing. Sedately bringing up the rear was Bob Dakin in his faultless, original, Spruce-green Frogeye Sprite.

We headed off across the island towards Freshwater Bay and the spectacular white cliffs, along narrow, winding lanes constantly hit by sweeping rain. With Keith driving first, I had time to consider the absence of the bone-jarring bumps I was used to whenever a passenger in my own car.

Then it was my turn. I missed the large steering wheel of my original. And where were all those familiar squeaks and rattles? Then I realised we weren't buzzing along at a happy 3500 revs, hitting a bump and being catapulted sideways as a result. We were breezing along at 75mph, leaving Bob Dakin a speck in the distance, the wheels riding out the bumps and holes in the ground. There was traction all the time.

Gear changes were a joy compared with my old lady. Smooth and swift, clutch and accelerator response direct. I learned to approach a corner rather differently too. Instead of hopping round corners, wondering how the old lady was going to



react, this car could be placed into a corner. Once you realise the lean is caused by the slight movement in the rubber bushes and that if the back end breaks away, it only needs easing up on the accelerator, then a slight correction with the wheel and all is back in order, the fun can continue.

It is still fun to drive. It has character. One of the distinctions of the original Sprite was its highly responsive steering. The rack-and-pinion steering has been retained. The fact that the ride is not perfect is a bonus, I think. This car still communicates like the old Sprite and keeps your mind focused.

Perhaps Keith should fit each car with its own squeak, just for the sake of posterity!

Even Bob Dakin, whose concours Frogeye defies criticism, surprised us, and himself. He placed his beloved car in my quivering hands, and drove the Healey Frogeye back to Ryde. He climbed out at the end, grinning and shaking his head.

"When I heard about the Frogeye Car Company, my first reaction was 'shock, horror'. This must be stopped, but it's like the old Guinness thing, don't like it - never tried it." (That is why Keith no longer tries to explain the truth about his car's age to casual passers-by).

"I think what actually started to make me change my mind was wandering around the premises this morning and watching the cars being built. The skill and enthusiasm of everyone involved is so impressive, and it shows in the finished product. I'm very impressed."

Part of the charm of the day has lain in the

tumbledown sheds and caravans which house the workshops of this venture, and Keith's own unassuming attitude. He has plans for the future, he sees a market growing in the UK and in Europe. He has an official representative in Oregon, USA selling the restoration assembly unit, and is very excited by its possible future in the States, particularly with 75 per cent of the original Sprites all disappearing Stateside. No spares problems over there.

But 1992 has affected his development plans. The question of homologation, of TUV (MoT) in Germany before they will accept the model, all this is preying on his mind. He has some more adventurous plans too. At the moment the future lies with a Ford engine set-up. Geoffrey Healey is arguing for a live axle - the Ford has independent rear suspension. They'll work out the best solution together.

But a Ford Sierra rebuilt to look like a fifties sportscar, all of 49¾" high? An interesting proposal. I wish him well.

ASSEMBLERS VIEWS

Mike North has had his Healey Frogeye on the road for 12 months and driven 7000 miles, including a recent touring holiday down to Monte Carlo. What he wanted was a practical, reliable, but fun little car he could keep on the road all year round, roof down and flying jacket on. The Healey Frogeye was the ideal answer.



"I had always yearned for a Mk1 Sprite, and nearly bought a steel one ten years ago, but I was disappointed by the performance of the 948cc engine and worried about the rust. I reckon it would have cost me £8000 to bring to concours condition, but what state would it be in now?"

By dint of detective work, Mike succeeded in tracking down a certain Keith Brading, who, rumour had it, was producing glass-fibre bodied Frogeyes under the approving eye of Geoffrey Healey. One trip to the works convinced Mike this was the answer. A combination of Keith's own enthusiasm and a bright red car sporting a white hard-top persuaded him.

Mike bought a very comprehensive restoration assembly - supplied painted, with minilite wheels (non-standard at that time), Connolly hide seats, soft-top and tonneau, heater unit and so on. "The restoration assembly was the ideal answer for me. I wanted a top spec road car which could be raced if I felt brave enough and it seemed silly to buy a complete car only to take it apart again."

Mike purchased the assembly for £2600 + VAT (February '89) and has since spent "in excess of £10,000". What he started with was a rusted shell with steering rack, front suspension wishbones, and



some instruments, but it did have the necessary vehicle identification. Wanting a top condition car, for the rest Mike used only reconditioned or new parts, some of which he bought through Keith, or sourced himself. This both saved time and caused frustration, at least to Mike's brother, a professional mechanic.

"The build process took us four months, working weekends and some evenings. Nigel took care of the mechanical side, whilst I concentrated on trim, detail and sourcing parts. We saved time by not having to strip an old car or recondition parts ourselves.

"However, I would not attempt to do it again without a complete donor car. Keith's instruction manual is invaluable, but it isn't a blue print. Having an old car there is the best diagram you could have."

With the car on the road Mike has spent the past eight months tweaking it, adding new parts as Keith develops them. The running gear has been updated to the latest specification, the 1275cc Mk4 Midget engine is fitted with 45 Weber carbs and Osselli inlet, a fast-road cam, a non-standard electronic ignition and front anti-roll bar. Since the trip to France, Mike has replaced the radiator with a customised one. In fact, Mike has had everything possible fitted under the bonnet, down to the tool box.

As far as Mike is concerned, he would not now consider an original one. "The Healey Frogeye is not a kit car, nor an attempt to duplicate the original. But it has all the character, the fun and the warmth – 'the smiles per miles' of the original without the worries. It is fantastic and it will go forever."

Ron's story is a very different one. His car is not so much a Healey Frogeye, as a rebuilt Frogeye Sprite. This is the beauty of the restoration assembly, it allows you the lee-way to build the Sprite you want.

As a student, Ron discovered a poor battered ol' Frogeye malingering in a corner of a barn somewhere in Oxfordshire. It had been there for three years and was in appalling condition. He paid the happy farmer £375 for it. Surprisingly the car passed two MoTs with no more than a little welding.

It was Ron's first ever car, and he "loved it to bits" – drove it into a wall. So the car was destined to another two years rusting in a garage, until quite by chance, Ron met Derek Small who had bought the first ever restoration assembly from the Frogeye Car Company. "Having run a rust-ridden steel car for two years, the option of a rot-free car, but with all the fun, had to be the way, so I shot off to the Isle of Wight and bought an assembly."

Ron purchased a basic assembly. He intended to use the bodyshell and chassis and rebuild his Mk1 Sprite on that.

"I took two weeks holiday in mid-August, and after a stretch of 11-hour shifts, I completed the job by myself. There were problems though with fitting the mechanics up; I drilled holes in the wrong places through impatience, and things like trimming and details all take time. I initially had trouble with the clutch cable. The way the cable was fitted to the pedal allowed too much flex and it broke twice. I now have an hydraulic system fitted, thanks to Keith.

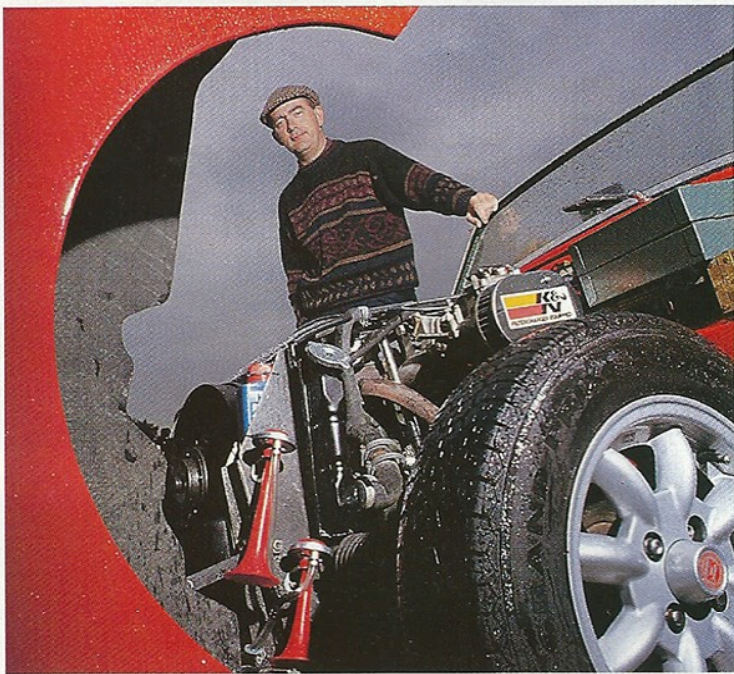
"Minor niggles did appear whilst running the car in. Soon after I completed the rebuild, the car developed a knocking sound. I rang Keith. 'Ah yes, I know what that is...' A bolt needed tightening.

"I have spent £5000 on the car, some of which has gone on having a reconditioned engine and gearbox fitted. I also wanted chrome wire wheels which are expensive, and all new chrome, courtesy of Spridgebits.

"The car is now much, much better. It looks just the same from the driver's seat, but is much stronger which gives me confidence having nearly been mangled in the wreck first time round. What I have now is a car with a respectable 0-60 in 10secs, a reasonable top end performance, and a comfortable cruising speed. I've driven 32,000 miles in it so far, and I'm not leaving it behind when I emigrate to Australia later this year. But I wouldn't mind an MX5 – as a second car, of course."



*Opposite page:
Almost identical –
Sprite interior (top
right) and Healey
Frogeye cockpit (top
left) with smaller
MotoLita wheel
fronting glass-fibre
dash. Note square
transmission tunnel.
Above: On the road,
speed and
performance favours
the new Frogeye.
Right: Mike North
with his completed
restoration assembly*



SPECIFICATION

Engine
Capacity
Bore/stroke
Valves
Compression
Power
Torque
Transmission
Brakes
Front suspension
Rear suspension
Steering
Body
Chassis

A-H SPRITE Mk1

In-line four
948cc
62.9mm x 76.2mm
OHV (pushrod)
8.3:1
42.5bhp at 5500rpm
52lb/ft at 3200rpm
4-speed manual
Drums/drums
Ind. by coils, wishbones,
lever arm dampers
Live axle, 1/4-elliptic springs,
trailing links, lever arm dampers
Rack and pinion
Monocoque, all steel

HEALEY FROGEYE

In-line four
1275cc
70.61 x 81.28
OHV (pushrod)
8.8:1
64bhp at 5800rpm
72lb at 3000rpm
4-speed manual
Discs/drums
Ind. by coils, wishbones,
lever arm dampers
Rubber-in-torison trailing-arm
system telescopic shocks
Rack and pinion
Monocoque, glass-fibre
16swg steel tube backbone

DIMENSIONS

Length
Width
Height
Weight

11ft 4 1/4in
4ft 5 1/4in
4ft 1 3/4in
12 3/4cwt

11ft 4 1/4in
4ft 5 1/4in
4ft 1 3/4in
12 1/3cwt

PERFORMANCE

Max speed
0-60mph
Standing 1/4 mile
Fuel consumption

81mph
20.3sec
21.2sec
38/42mpg

95mph
12sec
18.5sec
34mpg