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From 0-60mph in five seconds, top speed 130mph SPRINZEL SEBRING SPRITE REPLICA

THE PURISTS may scorn but replica cars are improving both in quality and popularity. But Brian Archer's Sprite is more than mere imitation, it's a pocket supercar - as Derek Hamlett found out.

OF THE BRITISH SPORTS cars to emerge in the '50s one immediately stands out from the crowd, the Austin Healey Sprite.

The car's visual character, in its Mk 1 'Frogeye' form, stemmed from what you could say was its basic ugliness. Cost control aimed at bringing the car a 'popular' price bracket, plus a requirement to meet lighting regulations determined that the luxury of pop-up headlamps was outside the accountants' remit.

Similarly it was considered that a lid to gain access to its cavernous boot was an unnecessary luxury. Geoff Healey's design was based on a formula where vehicle mass, material and production costs, plus power to weight ratio and the resultant economical performance were prime factors in the successful reintroduction of low cost sports car motoring to the general public. There were Fairthorpes, Falcons, Elvas, Marcos, Turners and such like in the market at the time, but none were rolling off purpose built assembly lines at a programmed hourly rate that would fill the niche.

Introduced in May 1958, the 'Frogeye' as it is now affectionately known was powered by a twin-carburettor version of the already well proven BMC 948cc A-Series engine and running gear from the Austin A35 model range.

True to British sports car tradition and practice, it was not long before the car was engaged in club, national and international competition. The specialists were soon devoting their attention to tuned versions and elements of 'body tuning'. In particular hardtops and alternative bonnets were appearing on the market. In parallel with this 'open' market activity, Healey from their home base at Warwick had mounted their own competition programme, which would prove successful. North America in the 50s and 60s was a highly lucrative market for Triumph, MG, and Austin Healey. Sales promotion relied heavily on the sporting appeal of these three marques and their ability to perform reliably and competitively in rallies and circuit racing.

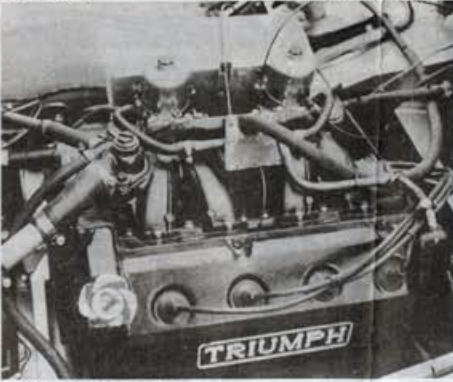
The word Sebring was written in italics in the American sports car enthusiasts dictionary, the Florida airfield circuit hosting, annually, America's international status, 12 hour sports car race. In 1960 the organisers introduced an additional four hour race for the small capacity GT cars. Because of the wealth of top line race drivers being on hand for the '12 hour', there was naturally an overspill of this professional talent into the shorter distance event, duplicating their 'works' drives.

The importance of this Florida appearance can be gauged by the ten car BMC entry spread across the two races in 1961. In addition to three Warwick factory Sprite entries for the four hour race, Londoner John Sprinzel entered two of his Sebring Sprites to run in both the 12 and 4 hour races. The driver 'pull' that these specially prepared Sprites attracted can be measured by the names who were lined up over three years. Walt Hansen, Bruce McLaren, Stirling Moss, Pat

Moss, Paul Hawkins, Briggs Cunningham, Innes Ireland, Pedro Rodriguez and Steve McQueen are just a few that found their way into 'works' and 'special' competition Sprites over the years.

The interwoven connection of John Sprinzel, with Healeys at Warwick, with Speedwells, with body shell men Williams and Pritchard and Speedwells with aerodynamicist Frank Costin, contribute to the eventual development and the existence of 'Sprinzel's' Sebring Sprite. Costin had worked on the classic shape of the Lotus Elite, and this was reflected in the Sprinzel Sprite roof line and form.

PMO 200 tested by Autosport's John Bolster in February 1961 sported aluminium skinned doors and an aluminium bonnet. GRP seats and a GRP hardtop. A 62bhp rally engine revving to 6000 rpm was fitted, the gearbox had standard ratios, stopping power was provided by Girling discs and Dunlop shod 13 inch wire wheels supported a car weighing around 12cwt. Weighing in at approximately 2cwt lighter than the standard road going hardtop Sprite, the car's exceptional road holding capabilities were aided by an almost perfect 50/50 weight distribution.



• Dolly sprint power.

A Sprinzel Sebring could be specified with one of four steps of engine tuning, 55, 62, 70 or 80bhp, the latter were based on engines increased from 948cc to 995, and the 80bhp unit was a full Formula Junior (single seater formula) engine with a special crank. Sebring Sprite, registered S 221, which has recently received Brian Archer's expert attention, is the ultra lightweight example driven by Stirling Moss at Sebring in 1961. It has an aluminium tail and even with its 12 gallon tank and spare wheel stowed, only weighed 11.75 cwt.

The Sebring Sprite, a separate model and distinct from the Sprinzel car, was created by the Healey Motor Company, made up of engine and body tuning parts directly related to those successfully used by the Healey 'works' team in the Florida races.

The combination in the Sprinzel car of its Williams and Pritchard fibreglass/aluminium bodywork, the highly tuned Formula Junior engine, at a total cost more than double that of the normal road going Sprite, added up to exclusivity - only six were produced.



• Sprite replica - no slouch!

Brian Archer's replication of the Sprinzel Sebring Sprite is closely related to customer, supplier and good friend, Brian Wheeler.

Basically the two Brians collectively produce the components which provide a potential customer with a number of approaches to the ownership of a Sebring replica, from a kit of components to a near fully built car. All the parts have been faithfully reproduced using components from one or other of the original six cars as patterns, including the ex-Andrew Hedges, Cyril Simson and Ian Walker cars.

Power potential is an interesting subject and affords the widest choice.

when the car is to be used in competitions. Apart from this, it is easier and quicker to use the new shell, the car is back on the road sooner.

If you have the skills and facility to restore your own shell or wish to use a preferred restorer then the Archer's Sebring Replica is available in component form.

The body kit consists of six separately priced items. The Sebring bonnet includes radiator ducting, front hinge assembly, spring clips, retaining tube and mesh grille. The bonnet, and all six items are available in a choice of GRP, Diiolen or Kevlar and all can be supplied to a Class 2 fire resistant standard. The six bonnet variations, material and treatment, plus the additional items described above range £395 for untreated GRP to Class 2 fire resistant Kevlar at £635. All prices quoted are exclusive of VAT. The remaining body kit items consist of the hardtop, the rear deck or panella (replacement to the original steel form), Sebring pattern doors, lightweight seats and dashboard, a replica of the standard Mk1 dash. The price list extends the scope of supply to include another twenty individually priced items or packages.

Item 27 on the list consists of a new Wheeler and Davies Mk1 shell, fabricated to take either quarter or half elliptic spring mountings. In addition the rear deck/panella is in place and the following are supplied as part of the comprehensive '27' kit.

Major item is the coupe hardtop, complete with a laminated front screen and a perspex rear screen, a flock treated headlining is included. A pair of frameless lightweight side screens complete the '27' kit. This comprehensive basis to the Sebring replica costs £3600.00 + VAT.

Brian Archer suggests that a self build car, utilising an average tune '1 litre' A Series engine and gearbox, using a new Wheeler and Davies shell, based on a realistically priced donor, could be on the road in a presentable condition for around £7000.

For this price you do have a one donor replica of a famous 'period' sporting car which lends itself to domestic use or can be fettled, aided by a wealth of known and proven tuning data, for competition use. The donor range incidentally, covers every Sprite and Spridget, from Mk1 to the 1500, the later cars require additional surgery, mainly amputation of metal work, bumper mountings, etc.

As Brian Archer pointed out, 'The Spridget is a donor

that has no mystery attached to it. It's simple, straight forward, easy to dismantle, for most skill levels can be dealt with, with the aid of a Haynes manual, and the 'A' Series engine is an open book'.

A visit to the Wheeler and Davies premises, near Coventry, confirmed the expertise and quality that is built into the replica chassis/body shells.

Brian Wheeler's personal transport is of course a self-built Sebring replica, the only external difference being the Revolution wheels. Under the skin 773 RW, whilst possibly offensive to the purist, could be classified as exciting, even immoral!

The Wheeler shell is fitted with Archer's body kit, the front suspension is near to standard, save for the telescopic damper conversion kit and at the rear an anti roll bar has been fitted to the standard Mk1 'Frogeye' quarter elliptic sprung axle.

The exciting and immoral feature is the 16 valve Dolomite Sprint engine assisted by its 6 speed Triumph gearbox (4 direct plus two overdrive ratios). Brian Wheeler admits to the engine being 'slightly tuned, about 145 bhp', quote. This state of tune is only temporary - a high lift cam and twin '48' Webers are lined up for the near future!

The axle is Sprite with a 'fresh' 3.5 crown wheel and pinion installed, older high mileage examples have tended to display brittle qualities when full Dolomite power has been applied, understandable. Other axle arrangements are being considered, to accommodate the next stage of tuning. Road rubber is 185 Pirelli on 6J 13 rims, 60 profile, but these are due to be replaced.

0 to 60mph comes up in around 5 seconds, and the maximum in overdrive top is in excess of 130mph. You will gather that throughout its performance range, the car has a very competitive character and with development has more to give. The compact smoothness of the shell with its economic frontal area must surely make a useful contribution to the upper range performance.

The availability of the body component kit gives the enthusiast yet another choice when considering the restoration of a Sprite and the opportunity to recreate the distinctive style of the Sebring, a memorable period in the history of the Frogeye.

More details from BRIAN ARCHER, ARCHER'S GARAGE LTD. Telephone 021 236 8510

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