

PLASTIC SURGERY

Take one Frogeye Sprite or – better still – a new Frogeye shell, add a set of Brian Archer's glassfibre panels, and you could have a perfect replica of the ultra-rare competition-bred Sebring Sprite coupé. Jon Pressnell investigates a painstaking conversion

The little silver coupé certainly caused puzzlement as it picked its way through outer Birmingham. Vaguely familiar yet at the same time annoyingly unidentifiable, it had the 'wattle it do mate?' blokes in their Transits perplexedly scratching their ponytailed heads.

To get that effect from an Austin-Healey Sprite isn't bad going, but then Brian Archer's Sebring Sprite recreation is quite an eyecatcher – a smooth-lined semi-fastback which has the aura of both chic coupé-about-town and race-bred sportster.

"I used to compete against Sebrings in rallies and sprints and hillclimbs, and I thought they were one of the most attractive sports cars around – a bit like a Lotus Elite," says Archer, who for the last 12 years has specialised in Spridget repair/restoration at his small garage on the Birmingham outskirts.

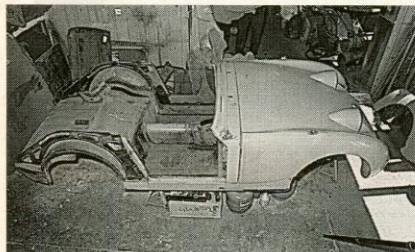
Five years ago he decided to attempt a replica Sebring, and made up a bonnet from

photos. It wasn't a success: working by eye, the dimensions were so far out the bonnet wouldn't close over the carbs. This unfortunate beginning did however lead to contacts with two Sebring owners and to the discovery of an alloy Sebring hardtop at the workshops of Austin-Healey restorer Brian Wheeler – owner of the Archer replica here.

The project was on its way. Archer borrowed the hardtop, restored it, and took a mould from it; then along came a glassfibre Sebring bonnet, which again was borrowed and copied, as was a set of alloy-skinned glassfibre Sebring doors. A set of the special Sebring sidescreens was then located and reproduced, along with a laminated glass front screen and a rear Perspex screen. None of this was the work of a moment. In particular, the pattern front screen was badly smashed on one side, and the correct shape had first to be mapped as a mirror-image of the intact side before a windscreens specialist



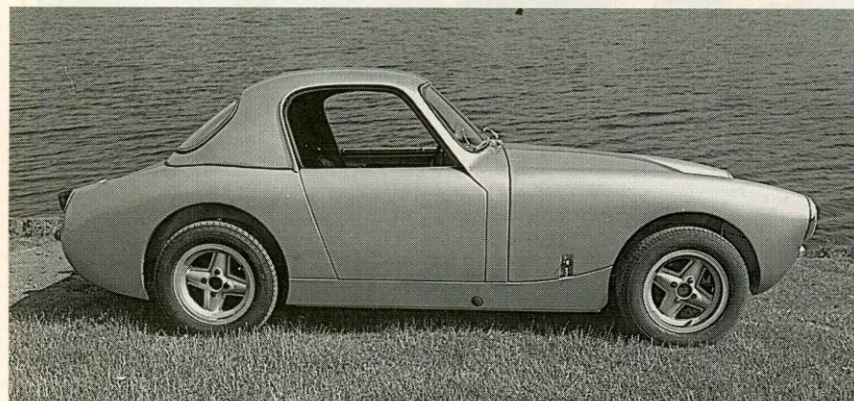
PAUL SHINTON



Frog, rear removed: bad rust on this shell



Full-frame and (rt) cheaper sidescreens



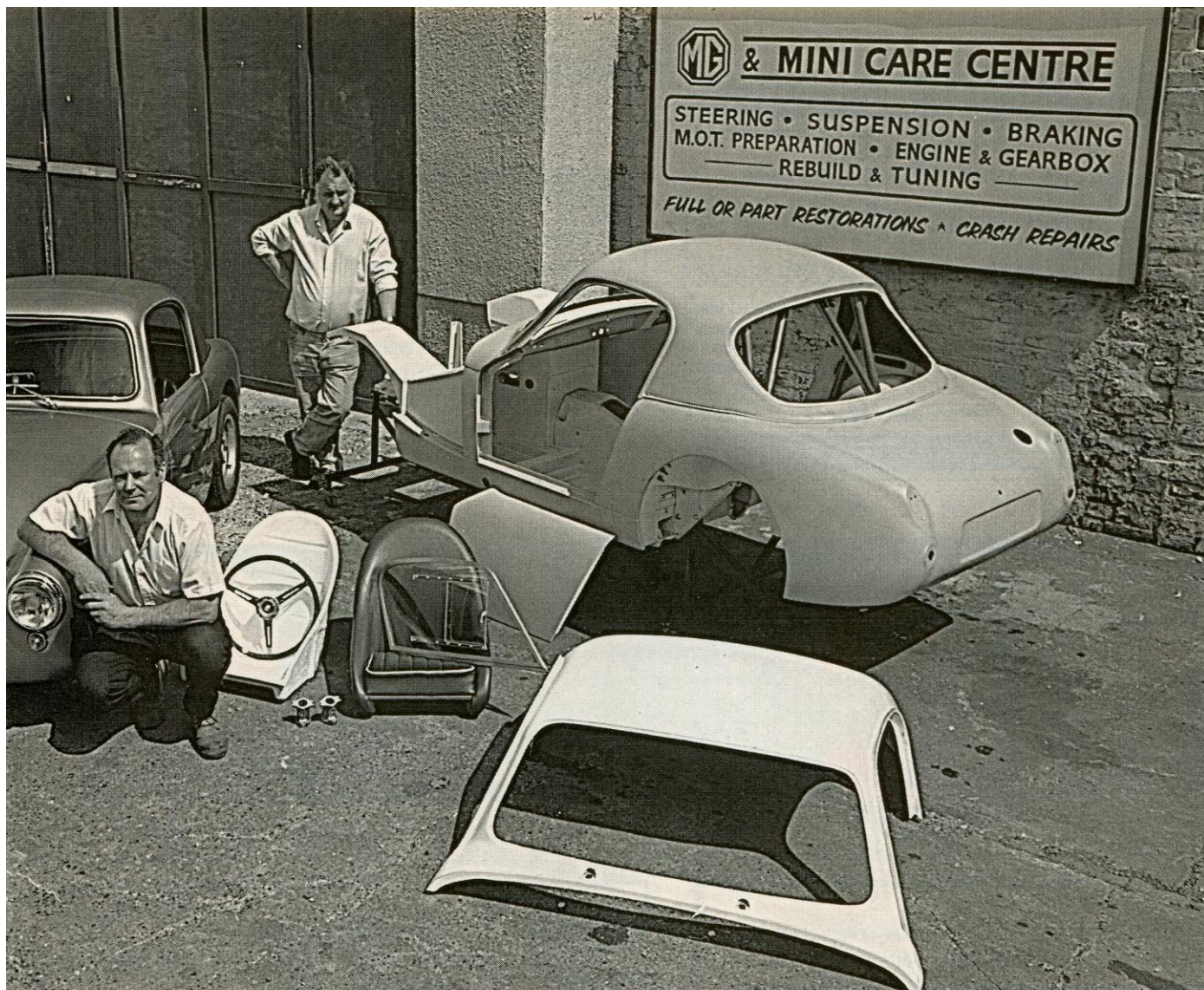
Hardtop sits on A-post and normally join is visible, as original; here, join is concealed

could be given the hardtop moulding so he could jig-up for the new screen.

Since then, Archer has had other Sebring items refabricated: the Healey Speed Equipment wood-rim steering wheel, the Healey intake manifolds, the lightweight Healey glassfibre bucket seat – and the splined front hubs to take the Girling disc brakes as used by Healey on the cars prepared by the Warwick works.

The result of all this is that Archer can now offer everything you need to convert a Spridget into a replica of the Sebring Sprite coupé – only it's all in glassfibre. At extra cost, the panels can be moulded in Diolen, a composite similar to Kevlar in its weave and its impact strength, but somewhat less expensive; Kevlar itself is also a possibility. Before going any further, though, a few words of clarification are in order.

The Sebring Sprite we're talking about is the coupé offered by John Sprinzel between 1961 and 1962, and which was a successful competition car in his hands and in those of drivers such as Ian Walker, Andrew Hedges and Stirling Moss. Before setting up John Sprinzel Ltd, Sprinzel had been a director of tuning firm Speedwell, and was largely responsible for the Speedwell GT conversion for the Frogeye. This had an aerodynamic aluminium hardtop and a so-called 'Monza'

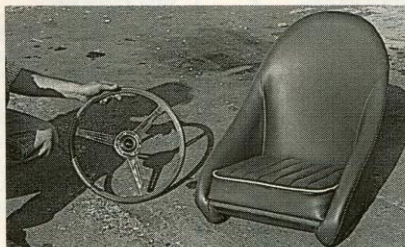


bonnet designed by Frank Costin and offered in various guises in both alloy and glassfibre. The Sprinzel Sebring coupé was essentially an evolution of the Speedwell, and followed its example in dispensing with the Sprite's bolt-on front screen and instead having a curved screen integrated into the hardtop.

The car had an alloy hardtop and rear end, and alloy-skinned GRP doors, with only the restyled bonnet in glassfibre. It is thought that six cars were built to this specification, by Williams and Pritchard. Additionally a handful were built by Peel Coachworks of Kingston, some with a fastback hardtop. Just to confuse Sebring spotters further, at least one Sprinzel Sebring ended up with a Speedwell bonnet, and quite a few Speedwell GTs circulated with a Sprinzel Sebring front.

All Sprinzel Sebring coupés were based on the specification of those competition Frogeyes converted by the Speed Equipment Division of the Donald Healey Motor Company. This outpost of the Warwick works was briefly administered from Healey's London showroom by John Sprinzel.

The specification of these competition Sprites varied, but always included wire wheels and Girling front disc brakes – a combination which had the beneficial side-effect of increasing the Sprite's track. The engines were tuned units bored out to either



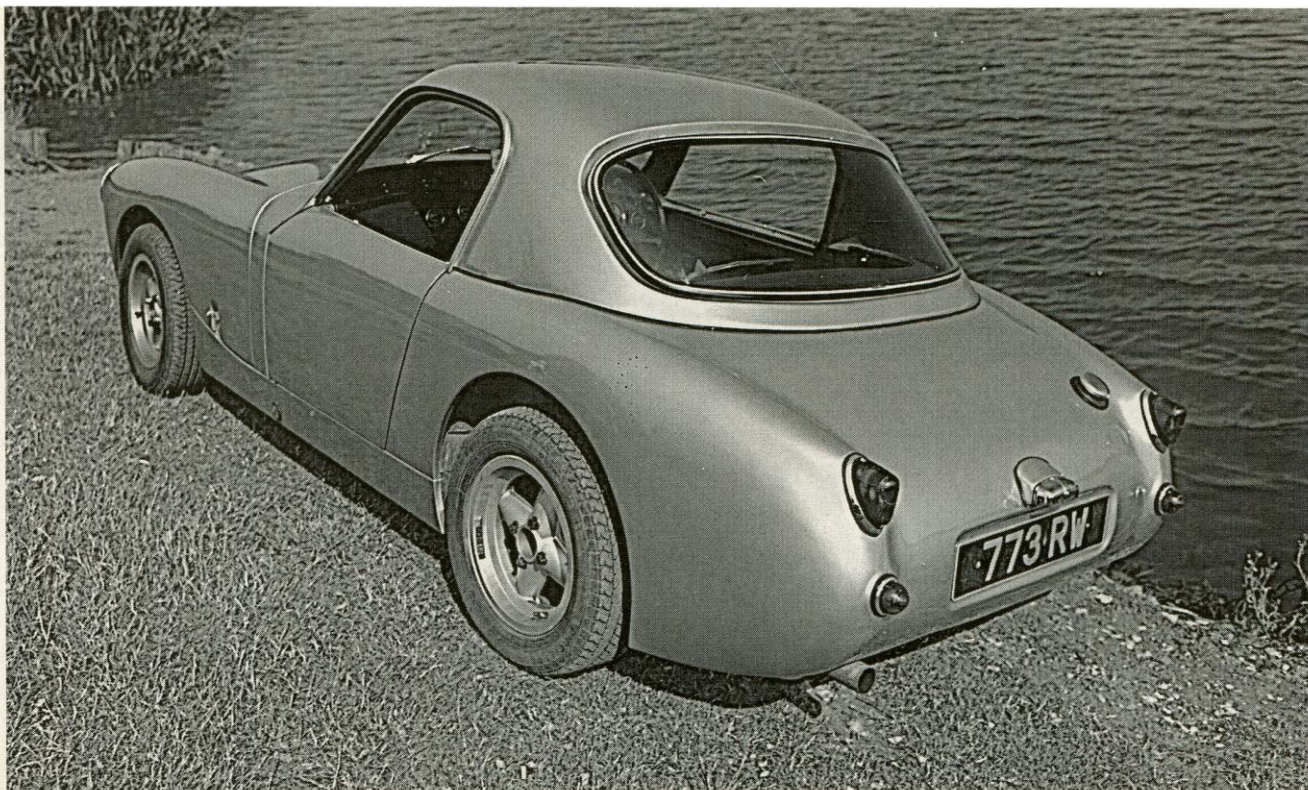
Repro Healey wheel and lightweight seat



The real thing – '61 pic of Sebring coupé



D Clark in Sprinzel coupé leads DJ Cole in Speedwell-bonnet car, Snetterton 1961



Hardtop bolts down at back, over beading; seams on GRP rear can be smoothed off, as on this car belonging to Brian Wheeler

978cc or 995cc. These cars, although retaining normal Frogeye-shape bodies, were also known as Sebring Sprites – whether or not they received the lightweight aluminium panels which were optionally available. All such Sprites supplied during 1961 were fitted with Sprinzel's Sebring bonnet.

Returning to the Archer kit, so far about half a dozen have been sold. If you're converting an existing car, the rear deck and wings need to be cut off, unless you want to retain the original Frogeye steel rear. The new (£259) rear – "far stronger than the alloy

Sebring original" – can be then be gelled and screwed in place. This done, the top (£635) is riveted on at the front and bolted down at the back. Before this, though, the rear deck is cut back to allow improved luggage access – bearing in mind that the further it is cut back, the more visible becomes one's luggage. Finally the bonnet (£464) is fitted, a straight-forward bolt-on operation.

All this presupposes that you're starting with a Frogeye, that it is structurally sound, and that you're happy converting it to a Sebring coupé. Archer favours a different

approach: build the car from a new Frogeye understructure supplied by Brian Wheeler, with running gear from a suitable donor Spridget. This will give you a good-as-new basis for the Sebring, and will also allow you to choose between a quarter-elliptic rear suspension – for authenticity – or a later semi-elliptic set-up for better ride and handling. Go for the latter, a no-extra-cost alternative when Brian is building your shell, and any type of Spridget can be used as a donor car – even a Midget 1500 if you're so minded.

Don't all rush at once, though: Brian Wheeler's company, Wheeler and Davies, takes three days to build each Frogeye shell, constructing the whole thing in-house with self-made jigs and tooling; ask nicely, and you can even order an alloy-panelled body. A few Heritage panels were used until recently, but supply problems means that these are now fabricated by Wheeler and Davies – and if you're after the full Frogeye shell this will have a part-wheeled and part-pressed bonnet that is also manufactured by this enterprising small Leicestershire firm.

So what's a Sebring going to cost you, built this way? For £4230 including VAT Archer offers a W&D shell with his GRP rear bonded in place, and with the bonnet and hardtop ready for fitting; a pair of his budget unframed sidescreens are part of the package, too. With a donor car that's halfways decent mechanically, you could be on the road for £6500 all-in, he reckons.

"That's about the same price as a new Mini, and you're getting a much more individual car – and one you can use on the road during the week and then compete in at the weekend," he claims.

CLASSIC



Jack Wochover's halfway-house Sebring has Sprinzel front but Healey works hardtop



Speedwell GT: different hardtop and nose



Works car: sometimes also called Sebring

Archer's Garage: 65 Pope Street, Birmingham B1 3AG; tel: 021-236 8510/9101.

Wheeler and Davies: Temple Farm, Temple Hill, Wolvey, near Hinckley, Leicestershire LE10 3HY; tel: 0455 220689.