

# JOHN SPRINZEL AND PMO 200 REUNITED

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Words: Tom Coulthard Photography: Steve Havelock, Paul Webb



He's such a star, John Sprinzel. Not in the way of drummers driving Royces into swimming pools or hefting televisions from hotel balconies, but a true hero who can bring inspiration into the lives of us mere mortals. Here at the Goodwood Revival meeting he's chatting with fans, joking, signing autographs and generally holding court with amazing energy. It's no surprise the American car clubs vie with each other to have him as their guest of honour, or that next year the Japanese are hoping to tempt him over. It's just a pity that he seems to be accorded less honour in his own country than he might be. A man who won his class in the inaugural British Saloon Car Championship (within an ace of winning the title outright) before going on to be double British Rally Champion the year after. A man who notched up seconds and thirds in European Championship rallies in a 1000cc car. Someone who

founded one of the bestknown tuning firms in the world – Speedwell – and was a works team driver for BMC, Triumph, Saab, Porsche, Peugeot, Rover, Ford and Datsun. Someone who as a privateer could take on the might of those works teams and cock the occasional snook at them, as in his fourth place on the 1964 East African Safari rally in a secondhand Mercedes 190. Someone who went on to a career in journalism and television which drew even more people into motor sport. That John is not better remembered doesn't dampen his high spirits one bit when I mention it. He quotes Lawrence Durrell at me: 'Suddenly, one day you wake up and realise with complete certainty that 95% of the activities of the human race, to which you supposed you belonged, have no relevance whatsoever for you.' Now, at the age of 75, John might be thought entitled to this Zen level of calm, but my

weekend is spent trying to get through to the 'real' Sprinzel, the one who in the 1950s and '60s was said to be a complex and volatile character. At Goodwood's pre-event cricket match I further my assault on John's good nature with a bit of a googly. A renowned historian writes in one of his books that John 'added experience if not outright speed' to one works team. 'That's part of the 95%!' Sprinzel chuckles, but adds that he was team captain at the time and therefore it was his job to make sure the whole team performed well, not be the young charger setting all the fastest times. 'Remember, I'd been a member of the BMC team under our captain, John Gott, a wonderful man whom I had huge respect for, so I'd seen at first hand what a great team captain could do to hold things together and motivate people. We'd got Roy Fidler in that team, for goodness' sake, and later Vic Elford, who is still the last

Englishman to win the Monte Carlo Rally.' In the lull before Lord March begins the Drivers' Briefing, I remind John of the International Manx Rally of 1971, where – at the age of 41 – he set a fastest stage time by a clear second in an MG Midget, despite the field including both Roy Fidler and Roger Clark in works Escort RS1600s. 'Yes, it was a good time – but I don't know – maybe we got a "flyer"!'. John can be impossibly self-effacing. After the briefing, John admits that he isn't that keen on watching motor racing. 'Now, doing it – that's another thing! But when I was a young racegoer you could still see what Grand Prix drivers were doing. I remember the Argentinian Froilan Gonzales: he literally took hold of his car and wrenched it around corners and around other drivers. His fellow countryman Fangio, on the other hand, was so gentle, it was poetry in motion. He would be on the same line every time he went around Woodcote at Silverstone. When he drove the Mercedes streamliner, he just touched the oil barrels marking the inside of the corner on every lap, nicking a bit more of the front wing every time – unbelievable.' Just then a Supermarine Spitfire and North American P-51 Mustang zoom and swoop overhead. Himself a former RAF pilot, though too young to have fought in the war, John finds it deeply evocative. 'The sound of those engines really gives me chicken skin.' Er, chicken skin? 'Goose bumps,' John corrects himself. '...two nations divided by a common language and all that.' This is another reason why John is not as well remembered as he should be – he's been out of the country for most of the last 30 years. 'The oil crisis came along in 1973 and by then I had a string of garages selling powerful, expensive sports cars. Overnight the market for those cars just disappeared and suddenly you couldn't give them away. I got out and went "back to nature" and we did our own version of The Good Life, only with Felicity Kendall played by my lovely wife Caryl. 'After a while of that we sold up and bought a boat and sailed round the Aegean for a few years,' John says, going on to mention, quite in passing, that they both represented Greece at the windsurfing World Championships – three years running. John and Caryl have flown the 8000 miles from their current home in the Hawaiian islands specifically to see Saturday's Fordwater Trophy. This is for special-bodied GT cars that competed in long-distance events on Continental race-tracks such as Le Mans, Monza





and the fearsome Nordschleife of the Nürburgring, and it will feature at least nine cars built by or connected with the tuning companies John founded. Among the drivers, pride of place must go to Sir Stirling Moss, who will be piloting the same alloy-bodied Sprinzel Sebring Sprite coupé, registered PMO 200, that he drove (for John as entrant) at the Sebring raceway in Florida on March 24, 1961, in

the International 4 Hour GT race. 'Managing to secure the services of the greatest English driver of all time was a huge honour for me in 1961,' John says, 'and I will be every bit as honoured to see Sir Stirling drive my old car again 45 years later. 'Goodwood was always my favourite racetrack – partly because I drove my first race here in 1957. My very first event had been the 1955 RAC Rally,

which I'd read about in Autosport. I put in an entry without really expecting to get accepted and when I was, I realised I didn't have a car they would allow, so I asked my mother if I could borrow her little shopping car – a black Austin A30. I didn't want to worry her so I told her I wanted it for a "touring holiday in Wales and the Lake District". Unfortunately, your start number was still decided by ballot in those days – and I'd drawn number one. The RAC Rally was a big deal then and they featured the start on the evening television news, which my mother saw back in Golders Green! But, bless her, she soon forgave me and we managed to finish a pretty respectable sixth in class from a total entry of 130. 'I was bitten by the bug and bought a TR2 for the 1956 season, and did reasonably well, but it wasn't until I got hold of one of the new A35s that I began to be noticed. Marcus Chambers (who's still as bright as a button at the age of 96) asked me to join the BMC works rally team on the 1957 Sebring Rally and I had a great time. The Continental rallies used to have circuit tests in those days, partly to stop you using too low a back axle ratio on the Alpine hill-climbs. So I thought I ought to gain some experience of circuit driving – which is what brought me here to Goodwood on the Whit Monday of 1957. 'It turned out that the meeting was being televised – live, of course – and as if winning my first race had not been lucky enough, the telly people found that they needed a few minutes of "fill-in" until the next race. So the legendary John Bolster – in his trademark deerstalker hat and plus fours – sat me on the pit counter, me in the blue check shirt and jeans that I'd been racing in, and asked me about the "remarkable speed" of my car. Well, I had to say something, so I said the car had been tuned by "Speedwell of Golders Green" (actually the name of the local telephone exchange!) and on Monday morning my father's print works was besieged by phone calls from impoverished enthusiasts wanting us to make their Austin A35s go that quickly. 'Speedwell was a huge success, but at the beginning of 1960 Donald Healey headhunted me to set up the Healey Speed Equipment Division at the London showrooms in Grosvenor Street. He sweetened the deal by offering me works drives at the Sebring 12 Hours and at Le Mans... After the best part of a year with Donald I left to set up on my own at Lancaster Mews, where we produced the alloy-bodied Sebring Sprites.' (See page 90 for the history of PMO 200 and the Mews). Friday's

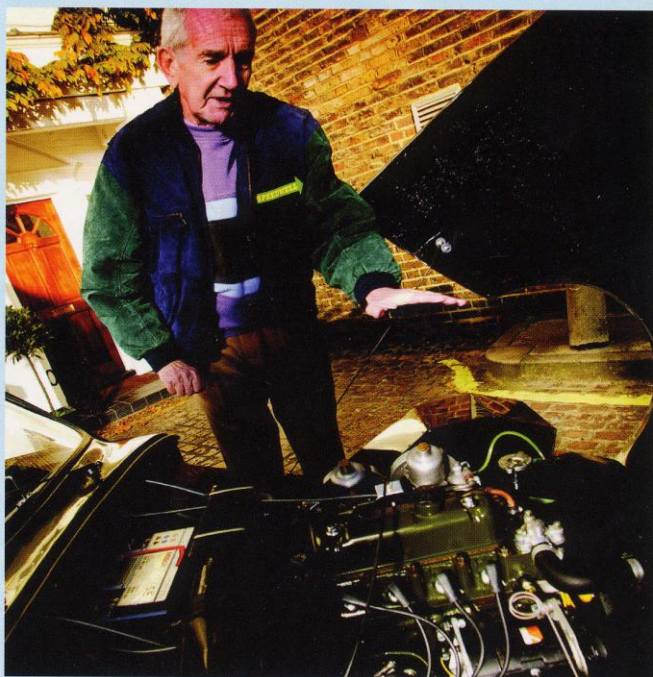
practice for the Fordwater Trophy goes very well in warm sunshine, and although PMO has some fuel starvation problems John clearly enjoys catching up with dozens of old friends, particularly Sir Stirling and Susie Moss. Saturday morning at Goodwood dawns dry but overcast. John is full of energy, as ever, but seems slightly nervous, as if he's anxious that everything should go smoothly. By the time the cars head for the assembly area, he is as jumpy as a kitten – we get a glimpse of how things really were when manufacturers' and drivers' reputations were at stake. The cars on this grid with which John has been associated include two Speedwell GTs, Williams & Pritchard Sebrings S 221 and PMO 200, Peter Jackson's and Jack Wheeler's Sebrings, as well as the alloy-bodied Morgan SLRs, which were the product of a joint venture between John and Chris Lawrence, known as Sprinzel-Lawrencetune Racing. As the cars go out onto the track, the skies open and the circuit turns skating rink – fortunately the Sprites avoid too many triple toe loops. One of John's cars wins the race (the Morgan SLR of Keith Ahlers) and the first Sprite home is the wonderfully original ex-Adrian Boyd Speedwell GT, piloted by David Wylie. Chris Clegg finishes well in S 221 and Sir Stirling wins an epic battle with that doyen of MG racers, Barry Siderly-Smith in the ex-Le Mans MGA. Sunday's highlight for Sprinzel fans is the final part of the saloon car race: the extraordinary performance of the Rae Davis A35 vividly recalls John's achievements in his cars 119 KMH and MRX 342. John is ecstatic with the whole weekend. 'We've had a great time here; I said hello to Sir Jack Brabham and Sir John Whitmore... and Sir Jackie Stewart cried out "John, hi!" and made a point of coming over to chat. And Sir Stirling reunited with my old car. it doesn't get any better than that!'

From a small London mews, John Sprinzel built cars that took on the greats – and often won. When he returned with old colleagues and one of his most successful cars, the memories came flooding back Words: Tom Coulthard Photography: Ian Dawson, Sebring Sprite Register The address 'Lancaster Mews' brings a wistful gleam to the eye of race and rally enthusiasts of a certain age. For in December 1960 in this hinterland between Paddington Station and Hyde Park, John Sprinzel set up a motor sport preparation business that became known around the world. Forty-five years since he first set eyes on the place, John re-

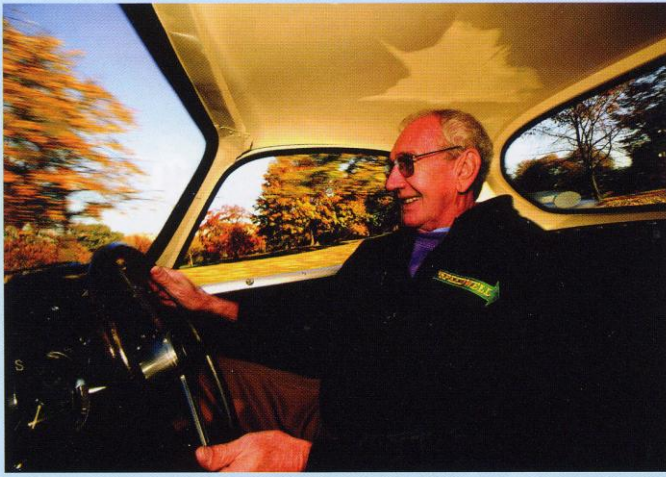


turned to Lancaster Mews to be reunited with the most famous car he built and competed in, the newly restored Sebring Sprite PMO 200. Some of the most successful Sebring racers – John's former customers – were on hand to help him celebrate, along with Louis Cassoni, who had been a colleague of John's at Donald Healey's London showrooms in Grosvenor Street and who joined him on the sales side at Lancaster Mews. Many London mews were built as garages for shop delivery vans, with one cobbled bay for the van and a narrower cobbled bay for the horse. Lancaster Mews was rather more upmarket, having been designed to house the carriages and horse teams belonging to the five-storey Regency stucco mansions of Lancaster Gate. Almost exclusively residential today, in the 1960s there were still many small businesses based here, including vintage and sports car dealers, body repair shops and car trimmers, as well as Bill Moss's racing team of pre-war ERAs. The residents mostly occupied the upstairs hay lofts and tended towards the bohemian or the younger end of the establishment: one of the two MPs living at the Mews was Jeffrey Archer. Local entertainment businesses thrived, too, including a night club and three brothels. Having left the Healeys, John set about building his own version of the Sebring Sprite, which had recently been accepted by the motor sport authorities as a model in its own right. The mechanical specification (which Sprinzel had drawn up with Geoffrey Healey) allowed a lower weight, a larger 995cc engine and Girling disc brakes. And it was the marathon rallies and endurance races that best suited a production-based sports car like the Sebring Sprite, being sturdily constructed but overweight compared with purpose-built 'sports-racing' cars. The Sprinzel Sebring had 'alternative coachwork' never separately homologated since it was permitted within the FIA regulations: once a mechanical specification had been approved, bodywork

could be to any design so long as it kept to the specified weight. John had already worked out a sleeker bonnet for the Sprite with coachbuilders Charlie Williams and Len Pritchard, and to determine the dimensions needed for an alloy coupé top John sat inside PMO 200 in their workshops in Edmonton while they bent wire around him. The striking beauty that Charlie and Len managed to give the bonnet and this coupé top stems from their training with pre-war bespoke coachwork companies and their shared natural love of flowing shapes. The original PMO 200 was one of the first 500 Sprites produced. Sent round to the Competitions Department, it was registered – John Thornley's name as first owner as with all the BMC works cars – alongside the very first batch of rally Big Healeys. John Sprinzel collected PMO from Abingdon the day before the Sprite's official launch on May 20, 1958, and took it back to Speedwell's premises in Golders Green. John, navigated by Willy Cave, scored a famous class win on the Sprite's International competition debut, the prestigious Alpine Rally. PMO went on to compete in four further Internationals and numerous important national rallies and races. At the inaugural Racing Car Show at the beginning of 1960, PMO appeared on a special display stand in the centre of the hall as the car of the British Rally Champion. By then it had a special body of complex curves by brilliant aerodynamicist Frank Costin. When John parted company with Speedwell shortly afterwards, this car stayed with them, and its subsequent history is a matter of conjecture, though Sprinzel retained the registration. Having set up a 'speed shop' at Grosvenor Street, John promptly set about gaining publicity for Healey Speed Equipment. On April 18, 1960, John drove a Nevada Beige Sprite at the Goodwood Easter Monday meeting in front of a crowd of 60,000 in the Fordwater Trophy race. He was in the three-car team with two customers, Cyril Simson and David







Harris, with all three cars sporting Girling disc brakes, anti-roll bars and Healey hardtops. The identity of John's car is believed to have been chassis AN5 33174. This is the identity of the car you see on these pages, which has been so lovingly restored by owners Sharon and Paul Woolmer. Now, competition cars often have more complicated private lives than ordinary motors, and the fact has to be faced that the Woolmers' car has never been Nevada Beige. This apparently led one previous owner to try to remove every scrap of original paint from the shell, and refuse to let anyone see it. It is believed the Nevada Beige car was re-prepared as the striking all-black PMO 200, which John drove on the Acropolis Rally which started on Thursday, May 19. The only Frogeye Sprite recorded as having been built in black comes at the end of production (as a colour test for the MkII), so the Acropolis car must have been resprayed – and what colour could be more dangerous on dusty Greek roads than Nevada Beige? Unfortunately, a crash while the co-driver was at the wheel broke John's wrist and denied him his works Healey drive at Le Mans. The wreck was shipped back to the UK and the mechanical parts transferred to a brand new shell – which very adequately explains the lack

of beige paint on Paul's car. This new black car was built up for the 1960 RAC Rally, and took John to second overall, sporting an alloy back end and the prototype Sebring bonnet, but still with a glassfibre Healey hardtop. Research has established that the same car was later raced by Pat Moss at the Boxing Day Brands Hatch meeting, was then fitted with an alloy coupé top, resprayed silver, and flown to Florida to be driven by Stirling Moss at the Sebring Raceway in March 1961. Stirling was due to drive S 221, but a slipping clutch meant he swapped cars with his sister Pat on the start line. PMO 200 thus became the only car known to have been raced by both Stirling and Pat Moss. The same PMO was then driven by John Sprinzel in International and major national rallies throughout 1961, finishing second in class on both the Tulip and Alpine rallies, winning the Silverstone Six-Hour Relay in August and the Godiva Trophy Rally in September, culminating in an outright win on the Targa Rusticana in March 1962. After that, the car was re-registered 248 DXN and sold to racing PR consultant Mike (Spike) Ducker, passing to Mini racer and rollbar maker John Aley in 1963. For two seasons the car is known to have been raced by Malcolm

Continued below, on Page 5



Sears for owner Michael Bradley. And in 1969, 248 DXN surfaces again, owned by Ted Walker, now the proprietor of Ferret Photographics. Ted clearly remembers the car still having its buff log book with John Sprinzel's name at the top and former registration PMO 200. No-one who saw the remains of PMO when it was bought by Sharon and Paul at auction in 1999 can fail to be impressed by the scale of its transformation. In addition to the ravages of the years, the car had been badly damaged by the collapse of a shed roof. But Paul could see that what remained of the chassis underframe was remarkably sound. Paul drilled out virtually every single spotweld on the car until he had a large pile of frogeye shards, which he sent off to be blast-cleaned. At this point, he enlisted the help of the only man in the country with a dedicated Frogeye chassis jig, Brian Wheeler of Wheeler & Davies. With his help, Paul was able to piece together the Sprite underframe to the point where it was ready for the new alloy rear end and repaired alloy roof which had been made up for PMO by Brian's colleague Colin. Brian himself often tried to persuade Paul that it would be much simpler to use pristine new steel. Paul's success in resisting Brian's kindly advice can be seen as soon as you look inside PMO: the propshaft tunnel is clearly... not perfect, and the floor panel behind the seats isn't... immaculate. You can see the holes in the inner rear wheelarches where John Sprinzel bolted a rollbar to protect Christabel Carlisle's pretty neck on the 1962 Monte... and you realise what Paul was aiming for. He has managed to imbue the car with a kind of 'structural patina', an intangible but remarkable achievement. He readily acknowledges much help from many quarters, particularly Paul Webb of Colmworth Classic Cars. Of course, John Sprinzel drove many other cars that were registered PMO 200. After March 1962, the number plate was seen on a TR3A, an Anglia Allardette, a Cortina GT, a Cooper 'S' and from 1966-on a succession of MG Midgents, in honour of John's franchise at Lancaster Mews, which would become the largest-selling MG dealership in the country. There were (and are) even other Sprites with some claim to being a former PMO 200, 'lent' the registration for one event only, or for display purposes. Essentially, though, there were only two competition PMO 200 Sprites, and Paul's car is the alloy-bodied Sebring. And John Sprinzel was delighted to be reunited with it.

