

SPRITELY REVIVAL

from
Mike Wylie



The Speedwell Sprites of Antonio Bertini and David Wylie battle for dominance followed by the Sebrings of Paul Woolmer, Christopher Clegg and Sir Stirling Moss (PMO 200), while the Lenham modified Triumph Spitfire of Mark Wright goes the long way round. Photo: Glenn Summerbell.

Perhaps encouraged by rumours that John Sprinzel would be present, and that Sir Stirling Moss would race the original Sebring Sprite PMO 200, custodians of original competition Sprites made a special effort to attend the Goodwood Revival Race Meeting for the Fordwater Trophy Race on Saturday 2nd September 2006. Described in the programme as a 'Fourteen-lap race for endurance racing sports and GT cars of a type that raced between 1960 and 1966', of the 28 starters no less than 15 were Sprites, including, in that number, the Dick Jacob's Midget of James Willis and the WSM Midget of Jim Lowry. For those who may not be aware, WSM stands for Wilson Spratt Motors and applies to a limited series of specially bodied Spridgets and MGBs designed

by Douglas Wilson Spratt. This wonderful gentleman still attends every event with his son Tony who owns an example of each type, and had entered the MGB version for himself, and the WSM Sprite for Ian Hulett. Invitations had been sent out only to owners of cars with a known provenance, and the numbers of suitable Sprites that have been brought up to racing standard in recent times has greatly increased.

On the 2.4 mile Goodwood Circuit, it was clear, even in the prevailing damp and overcast conditions, that the Sprites would be outclassed by the sole Porsche-Abarth Carrera, and a brace of smooth-bodied Morgan Plus 4 SLR coupés, but, as the latter had been built by John Sprinzel and Chris Lawrence to compete at le

Mans, John was delighted that they had been shipped from Holland for the race. Other former le Mans cars were Robin Blunden's Sunbeam Harrington, driven by Mark Hales, Keith Hampson's Kamm-tailed Sunbeam Alpine from 1962, Barry Sidery-Smith in an MGA Twin Cam-coupé, the unique twin-cam Triumph TRS of Arwed and Mike Otto, and the blue ex-Eurie Ecosse Sprite of Richard Skipworth. Skipworth appears to have cornered the market in former Ecurie Ecosse cars of all types and has recreated their famous Commer Transporter. In the 'bound-to-be-faster-than-us' category, two Abarth-Simca 2000GTs also looked threatening, as did an OSCA Maserati-Abarth 1600 GTS Zagato, and an ex-David Hobbs Jaguar XK 140C special bodied

coupé.

The crowd were on their toes to watch an exciting battle for the lead between Keith Ahlers in one of the Morgan SLRs and Italian driver Michele Tommasi, in a surprisingly rapid 1965 Ashley-Sprite GT. Drivers of the earlier frog-eye based cars were 'let off the hook' when Tommasi slid inextricably into a gravel trap. After a brief challenge from Antonio Bertini, who then spun his Speedwell GT, it was David Wylie from Belfast, driving his father's Speedwell (505 BZ), who was best able to survive the slippery conditions for 14 laps to be first Sprite home, in fifth position overall. This car had previously been both raced and rallied successfully during 1961 and 1962 by his uncle, Adrian Boyd, who was one of the many

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'oldies' present to add a patina of authenticity to the day. Another was Cyril Simpson, there to 'bond' with Christopher Clegg, the current owner of Cyril's former Sebring (S 221), and, quite unexpectedly, an interested paddock visitor turned out to be the brother of Timmy Conroy, who, with his father, had been mechanics in the old Speedwell days at Lancaster Mews. Further paddock interest was provided by Tom Coulthard, an actor and co-author of Sprinzel's biographical 'Spritely Years', who, having compiled the second half of the book and the appended 'Register' of historic Sprites, was on hand to dispense further nostalgia, innuendo and accuracy, as and when appropriate. Tears of emotion were rarely far from the eyes of John Sprinzel, now unable to race, who had, with Caryl, made an epic trip specially from Hawaii to watch so many of his old cars in action. He has since returned home to their island haven, where he has a Sprite locally registered as PMO 200, a contented and happy man.

Much credit must also be accorded to Sir Stirling Moss who drove a disciplined race to finish eleventh while nursing the responsibility of a newly restored car, and to Paul Woolmer who had made Herculean efforts to finish the restoration of PMO 200 so that Moss could race it on this very special occasion. It was unfortunate that Paul ended his race with the yellow special coupé (46 BXN) on its roof in a gravel trap, a poor reward for all his work, both in this instance, and for the good of the 'Sebring Sprite movement' over many years.

It is three years since these cars last raced at Goodwood, and one problem inherent with racing so infrequently is establishing an accepted engine size. Some cars, for the sake of authenticity, retain their original 1098 cc engines, while other owners had declared engine capacities as high as 1350 cc. It was noticeable that some Sprites were significantly faster than others on the straight, but six of the main contenders all had fastest laps within a second of each other and the drivers were delighted with the closeness of the racing considering the conditions. Rather than wait another three years, and as 2008 will be the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Austin Healey Sprite, perhaps the Earl of March can be prompted to give some thought to a Sprite Only Fordwater Trophy Race in celebration of this practical, and greatly loved little British sports car.



David Wylie leads the WSM MGB of Tony Wilson-Spratt through the chicane followed by the Sebring Sprite of Jack Wheeler, driven by Martin Davidson, the Dick Jacob's Midget of James Willis and the WSM Sprite of Ivor Miller. Photo: Phil 'The Scoop' Broster.



Don't believe a word of it. Tom Coulthard (centre), the Sebring Sprite historian listens intently while John Sprinzel swaps stories with Cyril Simpson. In the racing suit behind Sprinzel is Christopher Clegg, the current owner of Cyril Simpson's former Sebring (S 221).



John Sprinzel, co-founder of Speedwell with Graham Hill, savours success with David Wylie who brought his father's Speedwell Sprite into 5th overall and first Sprite home in the Fordwater Trophy. Photo: Mike Wylie.