

## A VISIT TO THE SPRITE ROOM



Should we be surprised that there are as many as two museums in the world dedicated solely to the Austin - Healey, an automotive brand that died nearly half a century ago, or should we wonder, given the continuing strong interest in the marque, why there are only two?

The newer and much larger of the two is the Austin-Healey Museum just south of Amsterdam, in Holland. This is large enough to house at least a dozen display cars (some very rare) as well as much memorabilia and an archival collection of Geoffrey Healey's personal files. It even has its own gift shop and small café. Manned by enthusiastic Dutch Austin-Healey Club members it is a "must see" for fans visiting Holland. Sprite owners will be especially impressed with the entrance passageway – the ceiling is the underside of a Bugeye Sprite parked on top of the side walls!

The older museum is Ray English's one man effort, the "Sprite Room", right here in Victoria, although it is really too big to fit in one room (the latest version of the Sprite Room is now large lounge room sized, although still crowded). Ray has been collecting anything related to Mk-1 Sprites for as long as I have known him, and thankfully he started this before any of the rest of us thought that it might be important to preserve what has now become known as memorabilia, otherwise it might have been lost to us.

Whilst he was living in Sassafras in the early 80's he formalized his growing collection into a permanent display in the spare room, and thus was born The Sprite Room. This room grew as it moved with Ray to Nambour in Queensland then to Eagle Point on the Gippsland Lakes and now to Wy Yung on the outskirts of Bairnsdale in eastern Victoria. Ray (and Di) have built a new home on a scenic site, owned by Erin and Brendan, Diane's daughter and partner, in Overy Road, and from his Sprite Room Ray can look out at the native ducks walking across the front yard to the adjacent large dam or to the distant horizon over rolling hills.

I have visited Ray and his Sprite Room many times over the years. Along the way I've been fortunate enough to chauffeur some interesting passengers including John Sprinzel (who must have got goose bumps looking at the extensive collection of items dedicated to him, it is a virtual Shrine); Bill Emerson, American author of "The Healey Book"; Martin Ingall, English webmaster of the Sebring Sprite site; and Nev and Troy Mansfield, Queensland Sprite enthusiasts. When we arrive at Ray's place I invariably find a quiet corner to situate myself and access some part of his archives whilst Ray gives the visitors the "Grand Tour" of his displays.

On a recent Sunday Kerry and I decided to visit Ray and Di once more to check out the new house and the newest incarnation of the Sprite Room. As we travelled down through Gippsland on the Princes Highway we were surprised to observe much activity along the adjacent railway line – lots of families standing around or returning to their cars – something was up. In the distance was a discernible haze and as we sped up the haze became smoke and we decided that we were chasing a steam train? At Moe we caught up with a long steam enthusiast's excursion train propelled by not one but two large R class locomotives – a double header! Naturally we stopped to look at this rare site, as had half the population of Gippsland. Whilst the train rested at Moe station, I was amused to think how interesting it was to see a pair of vintage steam locomotives defying political correctness and rigid EPA and workplace safety laws. These monsters belched smoke, soot and steam, lubricating oils and ash all over





Then onto the Sprite Room, which takes up the entire end of the house. Upon entering we greet a permanent resident standing alongside the door- a shop mannequin clad in an original pair of John Sprinzel workshop overalls which Ray acquired from a Tasmanian employee of John Sprinzel Ltd in London. In front of us is a full size glass cabinet with scores of various model Sprites crowding its shelves. Behind it are more cabinets and bookshelves crammed with sales brochures and other ephemera. The walls are filled with photos and posters, together with rally plates. Even the vaulted ceiling is starting to be used for display.



Everything in the room is related to Sprites, much of it rare or obscure and is testimony to Ray's ongoing search for anything to do with Sprites. There are children's books, postage stamps, even chocolate Sprites, Donald Healey Motor Company promotional drink coasters and car club badges from around the world. Among the gems of this collection are some really special stuff – John Sprinzel's rally suitcase, now battered, but sporting miniature rally badges all over its flanks, a rare 16mm film of the Grand Prix driver Roy Salvadori and BBC commentator John Bolster testing the new Austin-Healey Sprite at Silverstone, scrutineering cards for Stirling and Pat Moss's two Sprites at Sebring in 1961, factory blueprints detailing panel gaps and assembly of the Sprite, dealer posters advertising the Austin Healey Sprite, even a silver engraved cigarette case given to John Sprinzel by BMC chief Leonard Lord marking the Sprites first international success on the 1958 Alpine Rally. Ray's archive files fill several bookcases and cover almost anything to do with Bugeye Sprites. If you want to know about a range of hardtops offered, or how to install a Shorrock Supercharger or who drove what car on the 1960 Liege-Rome Liege



farewelling Ray and Di and driving back to Melbourne in the evening. A great outing for any Sprite enthusiast! I can guarantee if you visit Ray, you'll go home knowing more about Sprites than when you arrive.

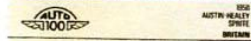
Tony Bennetto

rally ( he might even be able to tell you what sandwiches they ate) – it is bound to be catalogued in his files - (he can certainly tell you what luggage John Sprinzel took!)

There is always something new and interesting on display. On this occasion I was surprised to discover a pair Ashley GT Badges, and then Ray and I spent some time pouring over a photo of Sprites in production uncertain of where the photo was taken before deciding that it was probably Pressed Steel at Swindon as it shows unpainted bonnets being fitted up.



LEADERS OF THE WORLD - LEADERS OF THE WORLD



ST. VINCENT 5c



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Ray also maintains a comprehensive register of Bugeye Sprites (using car / chassis numbers for identification) as well as editing and printing "Marque One" newsletter from a corner of the Sprite Room. He answers queries that come in every day from around the world.

We paused for a late afternoon tea where we devoured the Stratford Honey Roll before

