

# SEBRING

# SPRITE



## EDITOR'S CAR ON TEST

**I've had my standard MK1 Sprite since 2009 and have loved everything about it, even when it causes me headaches such as when the engine blew a valve, on the way back from Perranporth. You can really "feel" a Sprite's handling and there is something special about flinging it round country lanes. It's a real B- road type of car and the thrill of bouncing it through the bends, in any gear and at any speed, trying to maintain the car's momentum, is great fun.**

It had always surprised me how many small kids smile as I pass by – and by how many fingers get pointed in its direction. Whilst driving through the town once, just after school kicking out time. I was stationary at a road junction as a young lad passed. He looked at the car, then at me and said "Cool car mate", holding a thumb up. That felt good. Opening the bonnet at a car show (actually on any old car) acts like a magnet, drawing people in. A lot of people seem to want to have their picture taken, whilst sitting at the wheel and, of course, I always oblige.

The only time that I have ever felt exposed, in the little car, was at the top of a motorway slip road, on the way to Spa, for the Classic. A lorry was on the main carriageway and my head was about the same height as the lorry's wheel nuts – and I don't think that he saw me. It got a bit tight but was OK.

Having managed to retire early from work, a couple of years ago, Mrs. G kindly allowed me to buy myself a Sebring Sprite Coupe, in April 2022.

I had spent a year, keeping my eyes open for one, finally falling for this beautifully built, specified, handling and presented car. It is absolutely stunning and draws admiring smiles and comments each time that I take it out. Actually, I was really looking for a car for mainly road use, so 5116 HN is over specified for the purposes I will put it to - but it is so nice that I couldn't resist it.

When my wife and I went to collect the car, from Ben at Mather Collectable Motorcars in Blockley, Gloucestershire, he also had Charlie Clegg's 184 FGJ in the workshop, so I was able to take a snap of the two cars, together. Charlie (and his father Chris) were on their way to compete at the Goodwood Members Meeting, that weekend. We were able to chat and compare the cars. Thankfully, my wife found that 5116 HN was not nearly as loud as Charlie's "out and out" racer - or I am not sure that she would have sanctioned the purchase. I knew that Charlie's Sebring had one of the original aluminium fastback bodies on it, but hadn't appreciated that his was the body from which the Archers mould was taken – and therefore from which my Archers Fastback body was created.

My Sebring is based on a 1961 Sprite MK1 which, between 2008 and 2010 was turned into an Austin Healey Sebring (Peel) Fastback Coupe, with Speedwell Monza Bonnet. The car was built-up using a new Wheeler and Davies bodyshell but also had large sections of steel replaced with aluminium, including the doors, footwells, front inner wheel arches and central tunnel. It was fitted with a Peter May 1,330cc balanced engine, with a Weber 40DCOE - and the trouble was taken to cut away and box



a small section of the passenger side wheel arch, to allow the air to be sucked straight into the these, without the need for curved inlet pipes. The engine is mated to a Jack Knight close ratio, straight cut gearbox. The car has a Panhard rod fitted at the rear, and Peter May damper droplinks at the front. Cooling is by a very efficient electric fan, which seems easily able to cope with, both the heat generated by the engine and our recent heat wave temperatures. Having accidentally dislodged a sensor wire, which stopped the fan from working, I hastily fitted an override switch.

It has a pair of Archers steel reinforced flame retardant seats, which are replicas of the DHMC Speed Equipment items.

The Sebring is painted in Mazda Arctic Blue, an unusual and slightly metallic colour, which enhances its curves. There are some photos of the car, taken during construction at the premises of both Archers Garage and Peter May Engineering, giving additional credibility to the finished car.

In short, the car was beautifully made and very highly specified – especially for the purposes which I will put it to. It's even fitted with a courtesy light in the boot. My problem was that having tried this car first, before seeing another, I found that I was unsatisfied with all aspects of the other car, which although very nicely made, was underpinned with relatively standard engine and running gear.

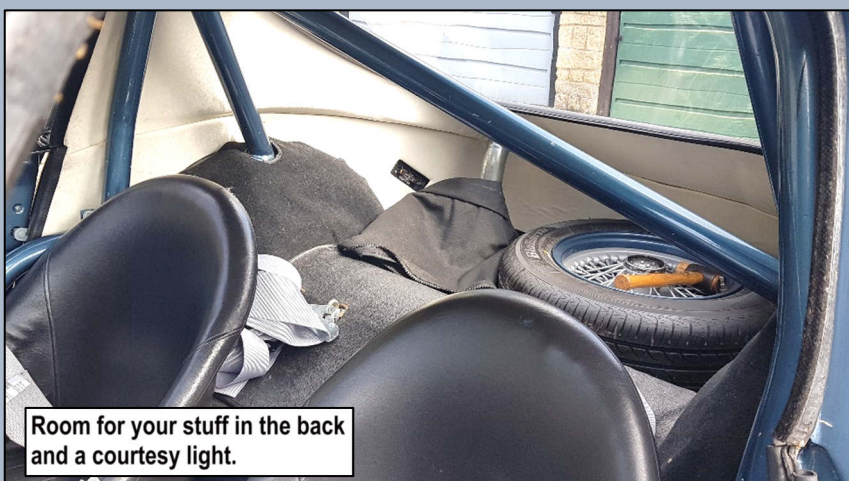


As regards the car's handling and performance, I suppose that I can certainly say that it's not like a standard Sprite.

Suffice to say that the car handles surefootedly. There is no rear end skipping through corners, which is instead replaced by a confident and stable platform. There must be some body roll but, because the suspension is supple and not too harsh, I don't sense it, when on the move. It just sticks to the road. I feel that it is my confidence in my own abilities of the car, which is the limiting factor. It just entertains me – whether pressing on or just cruising along.

I like the fact that it has retained a 4 speed gearbox, even though it is upgraded to deal with the increased power and performance – and is designed for more competition, than I am ever going to

put it to. The action of the box is certainly confidence inspiring. It has a very positive and predictable action, as you accelerate the car through the gears. First gear doesn't sound that much different from the traditional (even slightly agricultural) action and sound of the standard car. However, once you change into second, the difference comes. It has a short throw, from first and the power of the 1,330cc engine is felt straight away, by comparison to the standard car – even to a standard 1,275cc car. The scream of the straight cut gears builds swiftly and has you reaching for 3rd, quickly. I had always found third gear to be the most flexible on the standard car. In the case of the



Room for your stuff in the back and a courtesy light.

Sebring's Fastback's pretty rear end



Sebring, though, you quickly arrive at an appropriate speed to change up once again, as it screams through the rev range. Selecting fourth gear, results in a change – in two respects. Firstly, it is immediately a lot quieter – so great for cruising – but it carries a sting in its tail, as the scream is replaced by a growling, as the engine sucks its fuel and air through the Weber trumpets. And it does growl.

I do have one issue with the car, which I must get to grips with. The seller said that the clunking sound, in the back, was because the spare wheel was loose in the back. Having secured it, I found this not to be the case. Initially, I thought that it was a problem connected to the Panhard rod, so disconnected it, thinking that it might perhaps be bent. No difference. I then realised that I had been looking at it, by lifting the car by the axle, which compressed the springs. When I looked after lifting it by the body, I could see, straight away, that the issue lay with some springs having been removed (possibly to lower the car – they should have used a wedge). The problem was that having done so, the same spring clamps were then refitted, instead of a smaller pair. As the car unloads, the springs open. Clunking together when the suspension compresses. If left, it risks a spring breaking, so I have ordered some clamps and am awaiting their arrival – hoping that these resolve the problem.

I have wondered about the noise – and whether I can have some sound / vibration padding installed to help with this. It doesn't worry



me, but it does make conversation difficult (unless you are cruising in fourth gear).

These cars all seem to suffer, to varying degrees, with flapping side screens. This car has leather straps fitted to the leading edge of the sidescreens, with a small circular snap together fitting, which mates with its opposite, affixed to the A pillar. They don't really work so, temporarily, I got hold of some bungee toggle straps, which I wrapped around the roll cage frame and through which the strap can be slid and pulled tight. It will work for now, until I think of something better.

As a 6 footer, I was worried that I might, perhaps, struggle with the driving position, but we all know that Sprites are surprisingly roomy, once you are in them. In this case, though, although the window line is higher than a standard Sprite's (with a hard top or side screens on).

Against this, though, the car is fitted with a full roll cage. Thankfully, though (and I was conscious that Ian Ashfield who built the car was also tall) – and had made sure that the roll cage design, allowed for those of us with longer legs. I soon developed my own way of getting in and out – head first in and backside first out. It works for me.

Once inside, I found the DHMC Speed Equipment seats to be very comfortable and hugging. Having said that, at the end of a long days driving, on the way back from Le Mans, I was suffering from a numb posterior. On lifting out the seat pads, I noticed on the underside, some pencilled writing saying "Shallow", suggesting that Ian was worried about having too much padding on them. I may have to change that. When I got the car, it was fitted with a set of wide 4 point harnesses. Lovely though they are, it wasn't too long before I decided that these were unnecessary for my use. With them properly fitted and tightened, I couldn't reach anything. A set of nice chrome classic belts (using the existing fittings, which will allow them to be swapped back) dealt with this and now, setting off is a much swifter operation.

On the move, it is a comfortable car to be in although, it does get hot. There is a plate fixed, in the engine bay, over the place where the heater / ventilation fan and matrix are usually situated. In the footwells though, the ducting, into the car, is in place. I am thinking that, for early morning demisting and general ventilation, I might rig something up.

I had always wondered how much of a compromise these cars were. Now, having one and a standard Sprite to compare it with, I find that, for me, the compromises are well worth it – for the smiles.