

MOTOR TREND

IND

OCTOBER 1968 35c

**CUSTOMIZING
ON A BUDGET**

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FIRST '59 TEST!

ALL-NEW

BUICK — "Detroit's Most-Changed Car"



**Also — Tests of New
Cars from England, Japan,
Germany and Sweden**

austin healey SPRITE



It's small — but not a miniature... a near-perfect example of a low-cost, economy, pure-fun sportscar.

MTEST BY WAYNE THOMAS



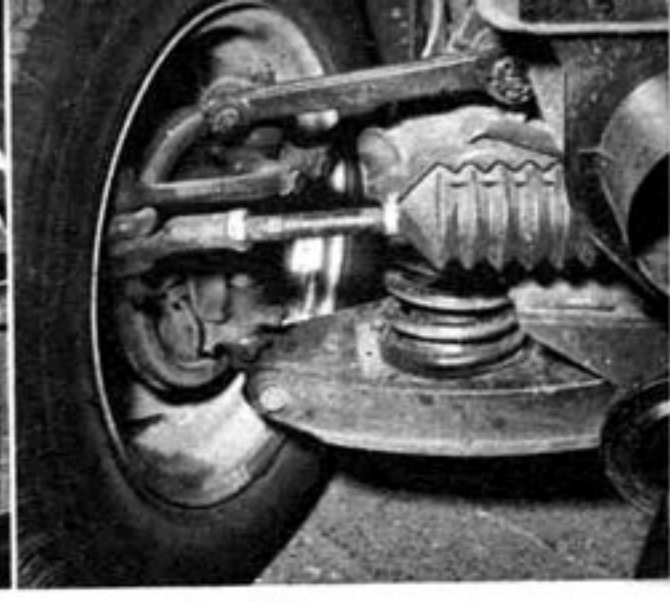
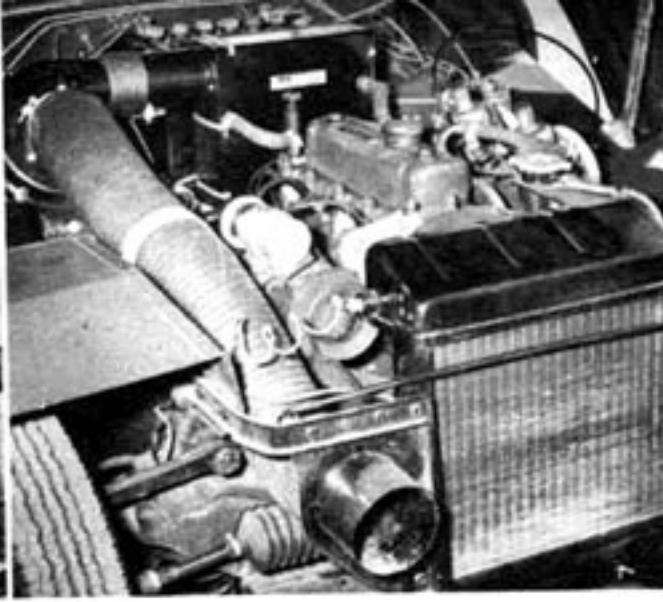
SPARE TIRE is a long reach and tricky removal problem from behind the seats at the bottom of luggage space. Sprite has more suitcase room than most small sports-cars but lack of deck lid makes access inconvenient.

"THE GREATEST THING to hit these shores since the coming of the MGI" said one observer about the Austin-Healey Sprite. And that enthusiastic opinion sums up the feeling of nearly everyone who has come in contact with the Sprite. If you weren't a sportscar enthusiast back in the MG-TC and subsequently the TD days, it is only necessary to be aware that these were the cars which enticed thousands of novices into sports motoring. We predict that the Sprite will do the same thing on a larger scale.

Our appetites whetted by Gordon Wilkins' early report from England (July MOTOR TREND), we were anxious to drive the car, curious to see if it is as good as he claimed. It is. Frankly, I haven't enjoyed driving a car as much since I climbed into my first MG in 1949. The Sprite gives you that first-ride-in-a-sportscar feeling—only better.

It is possible to pick any car apart—some writers seem to delight in it—but a car must be judged in the light of the problems which the designers attempted to solve. In view of this there isn't much bad that can be said about the Sprite. It is small but definitely not a miniature. It is a near-perfect example of a low-cost, economy, pure-fun sportscar.

It's the pure-fun part which appealed to the MOTOR TREND staff. You get the feeling that you're onto something good from the moment you catch the inside door handle and swing into the driver's compartment—right leg first, careful



FRONT END lifts somewhat heavily to provide easy access to the 48-bhp engine, basically the same as in Morris

1000. Independent front suspension follows conventional practice. Large opening is air intake for heater.

to hit your knee on the parking brake alongside the tunnel. Settle into the firm, comfortable 17-inch-wide bucket seat and explore the ample leg- and footroom (the pedals are set for heel-and-toe downshifting). The shift lever is particularly well placed although on our test car it required he-man effort to change gears. If the Austin A-35 gearbox does not wear in after a reasonable period, the only solution is to have the offending gears removed and polished by a competent mechanic.

Switch on, pull the starter and the hotted-up little BMC B-type engine (the basic powerplant of the A-35 and Morris 1000) spins into life. If anything, the engine is too willing. There is a warning pie-slice on the tachometer between 5500 and 6000 rpm but there just isn't any valve bounce or sounds of strain at the upper limits. Even though we used 5500 rpm as a shift point during acceleration runs, the

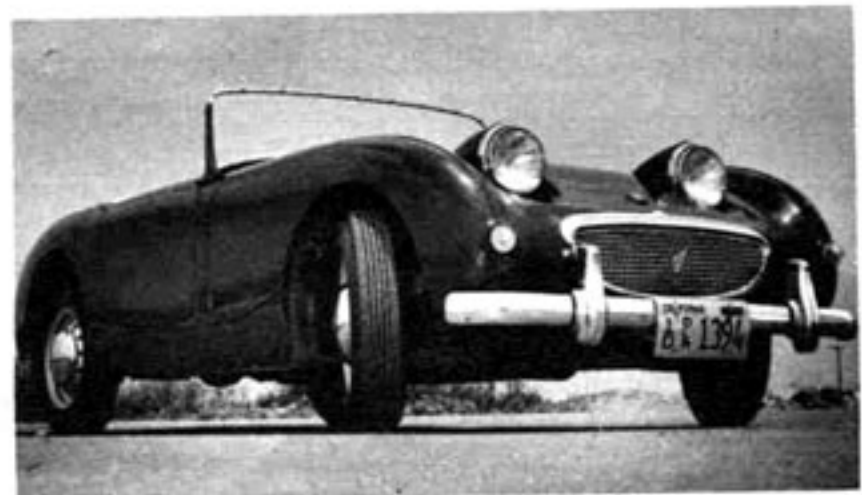
Sprite felt quite capable of taking much more without protest. Spacing of the gear ratios is too close between first and second and too distant between second and third.

It's in the handling department that the Sprite shines. Wheel position is just right and steering is light, precise and near neutral throughout the 2.3 turns lock-to-lock. Just the slightest trace of oversteer at high speeds helps break the rear end loose and the resulting slide is easily controlled. Exceptionally flat cornering lends a feeling of security.

We thought that the ride would be choppy and uncomfortable. With such a short wheelbase it could be—but it isn't. A high-speed 150-mile tour through mountains and desert, good and not-so-good roads, was a delightful experience in which fatigue from being shaken to pieces was never an issue.

The clutch is a weak point. Slippage after a series of full-power starts was apparent. Heavier springs would be welcome for competition work. Brakes, too, probably need competition linings if competition is the case in point. Our brake-fade test found them satisfactory for most conditions. A series of 60 to 20 mph hard stops produced some odor beginning at the third stop and slight fade on the fifth slow-down. Efficiency was down about 50 per cent by the seventh

ERECTING REMOVABLE TOP, bows and curtains, which stow behind seats, is a simple two-minute operation. Weather protection with top and curtains in place is as good as any other roadster. Headroom is quite ample.





HANDLING CHARACTERISTICS make Sprite a natural for competition. Flat cornering, accurate steering put car in true sportscar category.

SPRITE continued

ACCELERATION

From Standing Start
0-45 mph 11.5 0-60 mph 20.2
Quarter-mile 22.5 and 62.2 mph.
Passing Speeds
30-50 mph 9.6, 45-60 mph 11.2, 50-65 mph 14.7

CRUISING SPEEDS

Maintains 60-65 easily, higher where legal.

TOP SPEED

83 mph

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Stop-and-Go Driving: 26.9 mpg for 363 miles
Highway Driving—High-Speed Desert and
Mountain Tour: 29.2 mpg for 143 miles
Overall Average: 27.5 mpg for 506 miles
Fuel used: Mobilgas Special

BRAKING

During 10 slowdowns from 60 to 20 mph odor was produced on the third time. Slight fade began on fifth, building to about 50 per cent on the seventh. A few seconds cooling before 10th slowdown brought good recovery. No swerve at any time.

stop but there was no swerve at any time. The 10th stop was made after a few extra seconds of open running and recovery was excellent.

Admittedly, a somewhat slab-sided body line and an uninspired headlight-grille treatment serve to detract from the Sprite's appearance. Keeping body contours simple, however, has helped to keep cost down. The rear view is actually the best angle of the car. Not even a deck lid breaks the trim, taut feeling. There is a sound engineering reason for this. The Sprite has a solid, rattle-free, unitized body—always a difficult design problem in a topless car. In order to obtain the needed stiffness at the rear, the tail and rear fenders form a rigid shell which has been stiffened by panels welded between the inner wheel arches, door pillars and top panel. Other points of rigidity come from five-inch-deep boxed-in sills and a driveshaft tunnel which is fully enclosed so that it forms

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE: 4-cyl. in-line ohv. Bore 2.48 in. Stroke 3.00 in. Stroke/bore ratio 1.21:1. Compression ratio 8.3:1. Displacement 57.8 cu. in. (948cc). Develops 48 bhp @ 5000 rpm. Torque 52 lbs.-ft. @ 3300 rpm.

TRANSMISSION: Dry single-plate clutch 6 1/4-in. dia. 4 forward speeds, top 3 synchronized. Overall ratios 15.3:1, 10.0:1, 5.96:1, 4.22:1.

CHASSIS: Unitized body. Front suspension—dependent with coil springs and wishbones. Rear—double trailing link via quarter-elliptic springs below and link rods above. Armstrong hydraulic lever-arm shocks all around. 5.20 x 13 Dunlop tubeless tires. 7-in.-dia. Lockheed hydraulic brakes, 2 leading shoe in front. Rack and pinion steering with 31-in. turning circle, 2.3 turns lock-to-lock.

DIMENSIONS: Wheelbase 80 in., overall length 137, overall height 49.8, overall width 53, front tread 45.8, rear 44.8, test car weight 1390 lbs (53% front, 47% rear).

PRICE (port of entry): \$1795

ACCESSORIES: Tachometer \$13.75, heater \$55.75, windshield washer \$6.25, tonneau cover \$19.95.

a center backbone along the floorpan.

Front suspension is conventional (Austin A-35) with coil springs, lower A-arms below and single links above which form levers for the Armstrong hydraulic shocks. Upper and lower arms are of unequal length to minimize track variations. At the rear, a rather unusual double trailing link system with quarter-elliptic springs below and link rods above concentrates stresses in the center of the body shell, making a lighter tail structure possible and keeping unsprung weight relatively low.

There is more luggage room than in many comparable sportscars, including the MG-A, but it requires an acrobat's agility to get at. Always offer a silent prayer that you may never have a flat tire and have to dig out the spare while it is buried beneath the suitcase, overnight bag and plastic clothes bag which can be accommodated. Copious door pockets offer additional storage.

The top and curtains stow neatly in the luggage compartment atop the spare. I was able to put up the top and install the curtains in two minutes flat the first time out. This included moving the bows from their resting sockets into position and snapping the top into place. Weather protection in any roadster leaves something to be desired and the Sprite is as good or as bad as the rest.

Detail finish throughout is simple and good. Leather-covered dash and upholstery all appear able to withstand hard use. Body panels on the test car had a few gaps but nothing serious. As indicated in the photos, the entire front of the Sprite raises for engine access. It is not a light unit but it does provide good working room and the supports are such that it will safely stay up.

Although comparatively few persons actually race their sportscars we have a strong hunch that the Sprite is going to induce an amazing number to make like Fangio. The car feels safe and is at its best at high speeds. Most important, it is ready to race at a fraction of the cost of any other sportscar. Seat belt, roll bar, harder brake linings, stronger clutch and an engine balance should be enough to put a novice in a position to gain some valuable experience. And don't forget the expert on a limited budget. If the engine should break (remember that this is the same basic unit which broke nine International Class G records at Bonneville in 1957), the cost of repairs will be nominal.

As it stands, the Sprite is one of the two best dollar bargains on today's sportscar market. Its amazing docility makes it perfect for city shopping. It is a great little touring machine for the open road and a natural for the "little man" to go racing. We like it. We think that the American public is going to like as many as can be delivered. /MT

