

The full story of my Frog

Austin Healey Sprite 2953KZ

Well it's sitting in the garage now while I wonder what to do about the ignition warning light shining brightly when I rev the engine. One of those moments when you fall out with an inanimate object as though it was a human being. To stop sulking I think, "well it's running, it's got its MOT and it's legal".

Oh and George has just dropped off a battery charger so life's fine.

Of course the frog and I have had many fallings out and reading our magazine I realise this is what we all seem to do with our cars although I am truly an accidental Spridget buff (anorak).

I'd been running round in a re-sprayed British Racing Green Minivan with yellow wheels when I

thought, "I've got to have one of those mini coopers", they really did go like stink. My brother-in Law

had a red one with a white roof, just what any newly 21 year old must have. Well that's what I thought,

of course the man from the Prudential thought otherwise. He was a regular at our house and had

insured my early ventures into motoring and he was not about to increase his risk of a big claim by

quoting cover for me.

In his defence he offered another way I could go up market and still get cover. Why not take a look at

one of those MG midgets he said. Now there was an idea.

A friend of mine was driving an MGTC midget but quite frankly it was both thrilling and depressing at

the same time. He had just found dry rot in the frame and taken the poor thing to peaces and with it

looking like a pile of matchwood I decided I'd have to look at a better model.

Good lord there's no way I can afford one of these MG midgets.

All the ones I see advertised are over a grand. No maybe I'd have to reconcile myself to the minivan. Not quite the babe magnet I'd planned. Then there it was in the good old Echo one Friday night (I get all my best cars from this rag) an Austin Healey Sprite. Of course I've no earthly idea what to expect for £250.00 but it's worth a look.

Over to Birkenhead with my dad driving, now he'd had some classic stuff but that's another story. A red MK1 although I didn't really care. It had a bonnet like an e-type so I was sold. When I got it home I was chuffed, it had a turn of speed better than the old van, a cockpit like a fighter plane and, whoa, that view across the bonnet.

It wasn't long before I discovered the handling was very different. If I went into a corner like I did in the mini I would lose it, and so my relationship with the car began.

When I raised the fibre-glass bonnet (one of the 'Ashley Specials' so the man who sold me the car said, what would I know?). What did I see? No XK aluminium covers, no triple SU's, it was an Austin A35! And I didn't need to read the history of the mark to know. I'd had one before the minivan and knew quite well that the mini was better than an A35. Of course the single brass topped SU was a dead giveaway and I've been robbed.

So I'm driving a sheep in wolf's clothing. Time for serious alterations and I've got no time to waste on incidentals. How about a pair of Strombergs on an Alexander manifold suggested one pal, why not.

Well for one thing the inboard dashpot started to hammer a crazed hole in the bonnet. Apart from me not being able to balance them – ever! Have you actually tried to use one of those balance kits with the little bouncing ball in the tube. Never mind that the

engine is so far out that there's nowhere to hang the thing or keep it steady. I'm starting to understand the logic of the single carb. Balance three? Give me a break!

The last straw for the Strombers came when cruising along I blipped the throttle and it jammed open.

It can't half shift when you don't want it to, flying past a Moggi Minor of all things I'm rationalising how to end this small drama. Of course, turn the ignition off. I pull up in front of the moggi. Never could work out just what the driver was trying to shout.

So I've got to up the power a better way. Thinking clearly now I do some research, well just far enough to fix on one of those stage one heads. There's another Guy over in Birkenhead that can do me one for £25.00. I do so like a bargain, well at 10% of the car's value it's bound to be a good investment, oh yeh.

It looks the part, all shiny and new and I was more than happy to bin that old A35 head (well it looked like an A35 head to me). Crikey that's better, I can spin the wheels in 1st and yes in 2nd. Handling is now becoming a little embarrassing though and those A35 wheels must be the culprits. (and I know these are A35 wheels coz there's no holes in them!)

I happened upon a local motor factor who can provide wider wheels, fine but I can only afford two. I can really only afford one but even I know the Police would notice this alteration. They notice me quite a lot really. I'm still embarrassed to tell that emerging from the Mersey Tunnel on that Birkenhead side I was pulled over by the Tunnel Police. The Officer asked me if I had once owned a motorbike? Well yes I said, "a France Barnett". To that he said "well the next time we catch you coming into the tunnel on two wheels we'll arrest you"! And I got a speeding ticket 300 yards down the road 2 minutes later.

The car really looked good with two 5½J's on the back, well from the back anyway. From the front it looked a bit stupid.

So why, just when I'm on top of things do I lose power? And I mean loose power. I'm drawn inexorably to that head. Why do you always think you've done it wrong? Taking the head off all seems fine but, low, what's that ring doing there just under one of the middle exhaust valves. I'm getting good at naming car parts now you may note. Yes I know you have all been there. Stepping up to the counter of your local, friendly, parts specialist. Only to be ridiculed by a snotty git in a brown overall who revels in your total lack of intimate knowledge of widget springs. So you go home and study – just to see if you can catch him out. I know you have. Well I have. Oh that ring, yes it's a valve insert, or more accurately pop-out. Now where did I put that A35 head?

So for every bad thing that happens, I gather good things happen to balance the cosmos and my good thing was meeting Linda. Linda met the specification for any red blooded sports car type: a long tall blonde with a lot of patience. Although long blond hair and wind buffeting the back of one's head as the sprite rolls along is not a good mix. My idea that Lin should wear a scarf was not taken too well.

Lin came into this saga just in time, she gamely financed an increasing number of defective items falling off the Sprite, a gear box, front suspension bits (I do know all the words) and a new hood for my birthday.

We actually set off and visited Consett in County Durham in the Sprite, Linda was born there and has family who actually seemed impressed with the car. They probably were truly amazed it got there from Liverpool and of course anyone brave enough to attempt to travel back across the moors in such

a contraption must be a truly hardy fellow. Or a nut.
I should perhaps set out some of the problems that came with the car, those I sort of overlooked or more accurately did not appreciate. As you all know (clever people) the Mk1 Sprite has a mechanical rev counter. Mine never worked. In hindsight that's easily understood as the dynamo was an A35 special, not one of those fancy screw thread-endy ones. I'm still looking for one by the way.
For some reason the horn button assembly was absent and a Heath-Robinson button on the dash sufficed. The back cover and the bezel are, as you all know, rather rare. But I've found these Ha! Just need that pencil thingy that connects the two bits to the wires.
For some modern reason my ignition key works the starter motor, so I don't need one of those old fashioned starter pull switches. Well why would I, there's no hole to fit one. And the light switch is a switch in a proper hole in the dash. Now that's odd.
In fact the dash is odd, it seems to be in fact a later model dash so no MGA light switch/ignition set-up now why would that be I think? Oh its got to be one of those late models, runs using up bits in the factory to finish off the 47,999 built – maybe mine's the 48000th. You know I'm wrong.
Those A35 engines go for ever though don't they. Well no not really and I've been using this Sprite assemblage as everyday transport for three years when I learn a truth; once said by some sage that a machine is working at its optimum in that moment just before it breaks. A Jason Button moment.
The morning after, trying to start an engine renowned for its ease of starting, I persevered. You can start anything if you have that mechanical gift... a can of easy start. It ran too although it had the most amazing lack of oomph, was seriously out of balance and

letting the clutch in or out made alarming sounds and little in the way of motive progress.

A black day, we laid the car to rest in the garden. I know, they rot there, please don't wince now it gets worse further on. Well Linda had had enough we had to buy an ordinary car. A what? Now you can cry. But, I pleaded, we'll not get any money for the Sprite. Not even 50 quid and I can't drive it to a dealer. No, we will have to cut our losses and find a cash deposit.

So we went out there and then and bought a mini.

That was over 30 years ago and many things have happened since and in between. The little green light of the battery charger is telling me that current is flowing into and charging the battery.

Total Recall

I'm thinking I've got to buy a new voltage regulator as the charging light is still bright green and the ignition light remains alarmingly red. Well we've been through worse than this I think.

Taking the Sprite off the road hit me harder than I thought. I'd used it every day for three years and by then it would be usual to trade in for another motor. If mine had been running maybe that's what would have happened. Why I kept it is something that I will try and explain, if only for my family who sometimes think I need a little more medication.

You may recall I bought the Sprite not really knowing anything about the car, As far as I knew Sprites were badge engineered MG's – so I got that wrong from the start. It's surprising looking back just how powerful an influence MG had and I for one had always thought the Sprite was a copy of the Midget.

When I finally realised I had the little Austin Healey Sprite that all the rest were based on I started to think I had a gem. Rough cut I'll admit.

Diving the car back in 1970 was very different from today. For

one thing at 22 I knew no fear and for another the cars of the day were a little tamer than today. 70's driving, well yes. I can remember one day heading out on the Northwich Road attempting to pass a big Ford and dropping into 3rd gear alongside the driver, why I ended up racing him is beyond me now but at the time I thought I could do it. I couldn't of course and he shot off down the road. The roads around Cheshire are a joy for Spridget Drivers and I would recommend them just as much today. There was a draw-back however driving an Ashley bonneted Frog, for on-coming traffic never quite knew what it was. This was frustrating if I passed another Sprite/Midget for Spritely custom was to wave. I gave up. Today anyone in an old classic waves. Back then there was a pecking order. Of course in our memory the summers were longer than they are today, even with Global Warming, I can recall a run to take my 'pal of the Strombergs' over to Winsford where lay a holy grail of a scrap yard. He was so taken with the fact that we were travelling with the top down that he stood up! Holding the screen rail he hollered for all his worth. It's nice to witness conversion. How many times have you taken someone for a run and the grin on their face tells all. You just know they want an open top sports car. There are some fine driving roads in Lancashire too, although my mind always goes back to one evening on the Wigan Road, without a cap or whippet, I ran out of petrol. Linda was not happy. My trusty bamboo cane dipstick had somehow failed me. Oh I forgot to note the car never had a working fuel gauge, I gather this is not uncommon. The prospect of removing the fuel tank -v- dipping the level always fell in favour of the latter. Two lads on bikes came up asking what kind of car it was, I

had to ask in turn where the next garage was. Too far but they took my petrol-can and a fiver and came back with petrol and change. So

Wigan's okay with me.

On another day I was overtaken by a familiar back wheel, I sort of sank to a halt and was quite impressed with myself for not only having a jack and wheel wrench but had the presence of mind to keep the hubcaps on so all four nuts were still there. I can attest to the fact that the Sprite handles remarkably well on three wheels. Although I haven't tried without a front one yet.

All in all every day was an adventure in the Sprite and I was not about to throw it all away as I

believed then that there were many more fun days to be had.

The Sprite was not going to be fixed while it was parked up in the garden though so I had to hatch a

plan. A very long plan as it turned out that started with the building of Garage Number one.

Planning on this scale also drew upon a lot of daydreaming about how to get the car back on the

road. I had met a chap who reeled on about how much better his Frog was after he had put an 1100

engine into it, only needed to swap the back plate or something he said. Seemed a good idea to me.

I'd always thought the cars out on the track at Oulton Park looked good wearing their wide wheels and

planned to get the two missing front ones when I could. Of course that stupid Ashley Bonnet had to

go. I would get a frog one so that it could be given the happy face it so needed.

This story could get dangerously close to "How I rebuilt my Healey" and as it stretches over 25years

even the hardest of you would be forgiven for quietly closing the pages and going off to the pub. I will

try and be brief.

In the intervening period Elaine and then Heather joined the

family, now both in their twenties, they still remember playing in the Frog as it sat in the garage. I'd say it was a sleeper but the word is saved for cars that have all the right bits. I had plenty of time to list all the parts the car didn't have but the shorter list is of what it had.

Of course I should have expected all this from a car that had its first V5 log book filled with names before I took the last box. I went and moved house too so had to surrender the book for a replacement. All that history gone and so many people to blame for nicking bits of the car. Vital Frog bits too.

The benefit of hindsight is a wonderful thing for I must add my name to this list of vandals. At the time I came to strip the engine the reason for the out of balance characteristics became very clear. The crank shaft had cleaved itself in two just inside of the flywheel. An amazing thing if you have never had the experience and I had actually had the engine running like that! I still have the short end of the crank. No not a memento – it's a handy little anvil for hitting things on.

But I went and threw the block away. Why oh why I know your asking, me too all too often now. It was another expert who said it was knackered, a term we technical people use a lot, especially when making feeble excuses.

I gather those Ashley bonnets are a bit of a collectors item these days, well truth to tell I had little room for the thing in the Garage and sent it to the local tip. Oops. Well I would never have put it back on the car anyway and today I have enough trouble explaining to people: "no it's not a kit car", I'm grateful not to have to explain away any continuing association with Ashley.

To close the gap in time between then and now it's sufficient

to say I spent a lot of idle time reading about Spridgets. And, before you say anything, I'll bet you have too.

A time came when I had told so many people about the car and made so many claims that I was going to rebuild it that I could not avoid the task any longer. It was without doubt an eventful decision given that I had no earthly idea just where to start but start I did and I will not bore you with the sordid detail nor the excruciating length of time it has taken. Well I rather think of mine as a continuing project, I don't in fact expect to ever really complete the car. There will always be something else to fix. I have a list.

What does remain are those people you meet in the course of your adventure. I went to "welding for beginners" at a local comp. That was fun. The very best night was the time I took the old petrol tank in to patch. You know what's coming. The tutor had kittens, he wanted me to fill it with water! No way. I assured him there was nothing in there, it'd had 20 years to evaporate. He still took to the back of the class when I lit the torch. Tank's back on the Sprite though and I moved up to a restoration class.

I can recommend these classes not so much for the learning process but more for the assemblage of like minded car enthusiasts (nuts) who populate the evenings. All manner of machines are fixed and, I'll use the word lightly, skills attend. The most valuable activity was a sort of "haven't you fixed that thing yet" banter. This process kept a level of pressure upon me so that I had to give reports and bring more bits in for debate and derision. But good company to be in when you need encouragement and did I need encouragement.

The very best opportunity came through the college when an offer to donate an MG midget was

made. If you saw the place you can understand that they didn't need another banger in there. I was asked if I wanted to take a look. A particularly good chap had, like myself, kept his car in hopes of fixing it one day. His health failing he knew he had to let it go.

Me, I'm looking at the 4 wide wheels and oh no, it's the 1098 with the big crank, see how all that reading paid off. The body was very very sad. A sum less than the part exchange value of the engine sealed the transaction and I was in business.

Of course you have to wait 20years for these little events to coincide with your plans.

In the next 20year I expect my plans to coincide with a steel bonnet, Healey hardtop, supercharger etc., planning I find is far more positive than just daydreaming.

The result, well the midget very nearly ticked all the items on my missing list. Well all the big important ones. A small amount of blood, sweat and tears would follow before the terror of the open road.

It's one thing recalling bravery of the past but quite another facing the prospect of driving a collection of bits and pieces you've bolted together yourself today in that traffic. I'm having some nervous moments, 30mph god I never realised I could frighten myself and stay inside the speed limit. It's like learning to drive all over again.

In a final twist George's mate Ian brings over some frog parts he didn't need (no it's a long story) including a tonneau cover. Now I never had one so I try it for size and it fits fine but wait a minute, why is the centre "lift the dot" on the dash on the wrong side of the mirror? Well would you believe it, 35years and now I find I have a left hooker. The first owner was in the RAF and must have bought the car overseas, on its return it had that later Mk II dash

fitted and was registered in 1961? (More was to be uncovered)

As promised, there in the morning post, a voltage regulator from those nice lads at Welsh MG (sponsorship maybe?) and the red light has gone out. Me too for a quick blast before the pub.