

PART 2 – THE BIG HEALEY Forty Years of Austin Healeys

by John Seaman - Wisconsin Chapter AHCA (written January 2010)

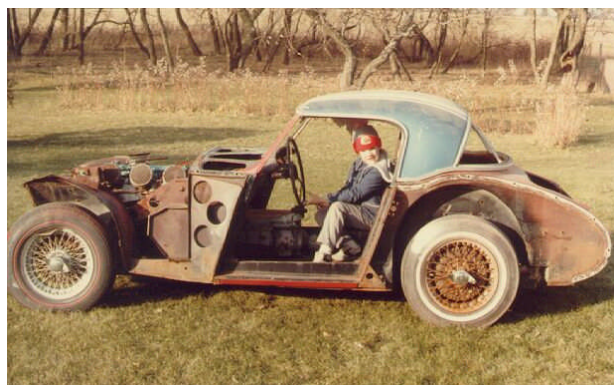
History of a 1962 Austin Healey BT7 Mk II Restoration



I have always been impressed with Austin Healeys. My cousin had a green 1967 3000 MK III when I graduated from high school. In college I bought a new 1969 MK IV Sprite, and kept it running for 155,000 miles, retiring it in 1989. I always wanted a “tri-carb” Austin Healey 3000 BT7. The Austin Healey / British Motor Corporation built 5,095 model BT7 four-seaters, and 355 BN7 two-seaters in 1961 and 1962. The 3 liter inline 6 cylinder puts out 132 bhp at 4,750 rpm. Only these models had three carburetors, since completion

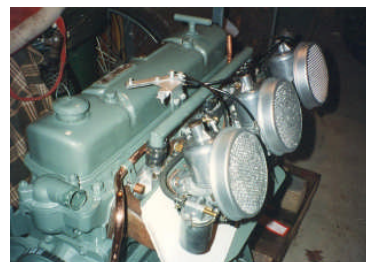
regulations allowed a change in the size, but not the number fitted to production. This allowed the Austin Healey factory race cars to run three Weber carburetors. Donald Healey was the genius behind these special cars, and is well-known in automotive circles. With his son Geoffrey, their competition success was the result of rigorous preparation, and a dedicated team that set speed records in the mid-1950’s and competed in Alpine Rallies, the Mille Miglia, Le Mans 24- Hour and Sebring races in the 1960’s.

I found this car advertised in the North Texas Austin Healey Club newsletter, in November 1983. I was President of the Wisconsin Chapter of the Austin Healey Club of America, and the different chapters had a newsletter exchange. It was offered as a basket case, being sold to help pay for the owner’s purchase of a rare 1955 Austin Healey 100S special.



After evaluating photos of the car and all the parts, car was purchased in May 1984, for \$2,300 delivered from Texas. A rare factory hardtop was also included.

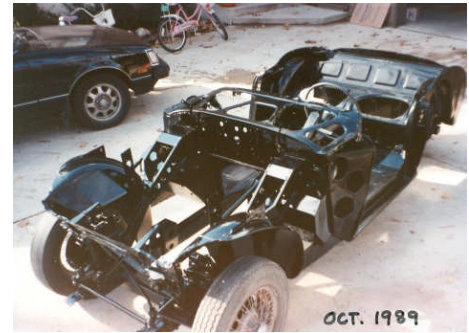
The engine was disassembled in February 1985, and found to be a good “boat-anchor”. After reviewing several options, I decided to purchase a spare engine and have the head re-done, leaving the lower end as is. After the machine work was completed by *Fourintune*, the engine was painted and assembled in April 1986.



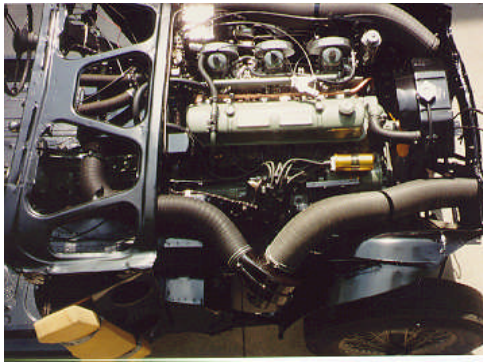


In the summer of 1989 the chassis was disassembled, and the frame sandblasted in September. Being from Texas, there was very little rust. The floor boards, trunk floor, and a spot under the battery were repaired, and then everything was epoxy primed. By October 1989 the frame was finished in black

enamel. All original fasteners were wire-brushed and painted or clear-coated, depending on original finish. Where possible, stainless steel fasteners were substituted.



In 1991, I started purchasing *lots* of parts for the restoration. Suppliers of choice were **Healey Surgeons, Inc.** and **Victoria British Ltd.** Used parts came from **British Sports Car Center.** The master cylinder seals, wheel cylinders, engine mounts, and many bushings were replaced. In



June 1993, a new clutch, sports coil, oil line, carb kit and new floats were purchased. Also, a new gas tank, front brake lines, speedo cable, tach cable, battery cables and hose sets, plus many miscellaneous nuts, bolts, and fasteners were needed. In November 1993 I cleaned and rebuilt the heater with new water and fresh air hoses. I installed a new wiring harness, and checked out all the electrical connections. I rebuilt the four front seat sliders, replacing the ball bearings. Rebuilt front shock absorbers were installed. The engine and transmission were installed. The driveshaft was cleaned and painted.

The engine was started for the first time in November 1993. A Falcon stainless steel exhaust system was painted black with high-temperature paint and installed.

In 1994, I bought a restored emergency brake handle, used rear seat pans, a cut-out switch, and parcel tray. I purchased the parts to restore the front seats; new seat bottoms, and new foam for the seats and backs. In August 1994 I had all the bonnet, doors, rear deck lid, front fenders, rear fenders, and seat bottoms chemically stripped and de-rusted for \$300.00.

Body work began in October 1994. As you can imagine, this part of the project took three times as long, and cost three times as much as originally planned. I have had three different people working on the body panels. There are many hundreds of hours in the final result. One of the rear fenders had twenty ¼" diameter holes drilled in it, (used to hold bondo in place), that had to be welded up. The driver's door had to have a replacement plate welded in. The aluminum shrouds required the most work, however, to remove all the dents and dings, and make the surface smooth again.





The majority of the “panel beating” was done locally by **BENZINI**. The high spots were hammered out, the surface was filed smooth, and epoxy primed. Then a “sandy-primer” was applied and the surface sanded again. This was done to all the body panels, during 1995 and into 1996. The inner fenders were sprayed with a

“chipguard” material, and then all the parts were sprayed with black basecoat and block sanded again and again. There are over 400 hours in the basic body preparation and finishing.



After the body panels were to this point, I took the car to **PERRONNE'S AUTO BODY** for final fit and finish. I had mounted all the panels to the car, after the black basecoat painting. To do it over again (Ha, Ha), I would have spent the additional time to assemble everything in the primer stage. I was having a problem getting the doors to fit.



When I had an equal gap all around them, then they wouldn't close. I also had inflicted a few scratches and stress cracks in the fenders and hood during their installation. The car was in his shop from August 1997 until May 1998. After final fit and finish, (lots of block sanding and polishing), it was sprayed with clear-coat. When the car was back home again, I spent some of the most frustrating hours of the project assembling and installing the windshield, as the gasket was too stiff.

NEUMEYER UPHOLSTERY, was selected to do the interior, with their experience in foreign car restorations. The old interior panels and original seats were used as patterns. The car was trailered to their shop in July 1998. Red leather was selected for the seating surfaces, as original, and red vinyl for the seat backs, door panels and dashboard. We worked together on the interior, several evenings a week and some

Saturday mornings. It was a 30 + mile trip each way to his shop. It is obvious to see how experience and the “tricks-of-the-trade” result in a professional job. A purchased carpet set was used, however, the seams around the transmission tunnel had to be redone to get a correct fit. The upholstery was finally completed in September 1998.



Then it was finally time to add all the remaining trim, spend more frustrating hours installing the grille, surround, and eyebrow so the gaps were minimized. The new wood-rim steering wheel from **Westport Vintage** looks **great**, as do the Dayton 15x6 72 spoke chrome/stainless steel wire wheels from **British Wire Wheel**, with Yokohama A321 185X70R15 radial tires. Now it

was finally looking like a car, and a magnificent one at that! I added a small radio/tape player, (negative ground), to the positive ground car, by insulating the radio mounted under the heater box, disconnecting the antenna ground sheath in the cable, and adding a fuse. The speakers are hidden above the foot wells. The Wisconsin collector plates were added, and I finally got to



drive it in October 1998. What a thrill! Even the overdrive worked the first time without making any adjustments. In 1999, I put 500 miles on the car, taking several “seconds and thirds” at local car shows.



At this point, I must give credit to my understanding wife, as she has supported my decisions and put up with the many hours I have spent in the garage. Without her encouragement, and help budgeting the expenses, I am afraid the car would still be in pieces, or sold for parts.



Starting the New Millennium, my Y2K projects were to be restoring the hardtop, (which was a challenging project of its own), and putting on re-chromed bumpers and over-riders. By 2001 the bumpers were on, and the car was detailed to my satisfaction. Since my intention was to have the hardtop restored in a year or so, I never had a suitable soft top for the car. The hardtop restoration did not come easy. I could not find anyone willing to restore it for me, so between 2001 and 2007 my Healey ran around “topless”. We had to plan our club event



attendance around the weather, and in some cases attempted to prove out the theory “if you drive fast enough in the rain, you won’t get wet”, but alas – you have to slow down sometime... I even borrowed a soft top from another club member for our “Door County weekend. It came in useful though, as it rained hard Saturday night. It became apparent that if the hardtop was ever to be finished, I would have to do it myself.

I started with disassembly and stripping in 1998, but became frustrated with the fit between the hardtop and the body, and spent many evenings



bending and refitting the support rails in 2002. I gave up for a few years, and then in May 2006 I bought another hardtop from Bill Dredge, (formally Sportscar Services). The top front seal never aligned with the windshield either, and with Bill’s help we changed the rake of the windshield to finally get a better fit



with the second hardtop. I also bought a replacement plexiglass rear

window from Bill, however, since every top is different, it was sized ½” larger than the opening. Using new seals from Bill Bolton, (**BOLT-ON HEALEYS**), it took me a week to carefully sand the new window to fit. I used a belt sander mounted to a vice on my workbench, and sketched on tape around the edge to mark the opening. I had to sand a little away, try the fit, and then sand the other side and test the fit. This took me a week of evenings. You don’t want to make a mistake and get it too small. After fitting the window to the top, and the top to the car, I started disassembly in October 2006, anticipating re-anodizing the rails. I had an awful time separating the rails from the fiberglass. After pricing out re-anodizing, I decided to reuse the best parts from both tops and clean up the original rails and the latches. New headliner material of similar pattern, (the original pattern is not available), was purchased from Bill Bolton, and I went to **NEUMEYER UPHOLSTERY** again to have all the pieces sewn together. After re-caulking and refitting the metal rails, the top was ready for painting. John Perronne, (now **ROCK LEDGE COLLISION SERVICE**) in Sheboygan Falls), tackled the job. He had it back to me by the first of the year, and after installing the new headliner and all the new seals, the top was finally back together and painted black by March 2007, and installed on the car in April. It then took more work to get the sliding window frames to fit the top seals.



This flurry of activity was in preparation for Conclave 2007 in Burlington VT. And yes, we did make the trip in the Healey, 2,175 miles, 4 days at Burlington, and 6 days vacation in Upstate NY. It was a great road trip, the Healey performed well, and took third place in class at the Popular Car Show. In 2008 and 2009 we participated in several car shows and enjoyed taking short trips. We are planning on attending Conclave 2010 in Galena, IL.



All-in-all, I am proud of my accomplishment, and know how much hard work goes into a detailed restoration.

