



Custom Creation

Like the fingerprints of their owners, each and every Speedwell Sprite GT was a unique sports car

BY MARK J. McCOURT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID LaCHANCE

In its standard form, the Austin-Healey Sprite was a cheap and cheerful sports car, a roadster that used common off-the-shelf components to deliver big fun for a small price. As re-imagined by Speedwell Performance Conversions Ltd., the Speedwell Sprite GT was a streamlined, race-ready coupe that was built to order for a handsome price.

That individuality made it perfect for its discriminating owners, and ensured that it would be cherished for decades to come.

Although few Americans are familiar with the Speedwell company, it earned a strong reputation for performance tuning from day one. Formed in 1957 by racers Les Adams, George Hulbert and John Sprinzel, it was a firm that modified 948cc Austin A35 (and shortly, Austin-Healey Sprite and Mini) cylinder heads for racing. Racer Graham Hill soon joined the firm, and Frank Costin (stylist of the Lotus

Elite, of future Marcos fame) contributed aerodynamic body component designs. Speedwell's BMC A-series engine-tuning skills were famously applied to a Sprite-based land speed record car, the "Speedwell Streamliner" that set a 1,000cc Class C world record speed of 132.2 MPH at Belgium's Jabbeke in 1960.

While the standard Sprite's appearance had its own charm, it wasn't made for speed. Frank Costin created a new, sleek one-piece nose for the car, which

was crafted in glass-reinforced plastic, as well as a fixed aluminum fastback roof that incorporated a curved windshield in place of the standard flat unit. When the "Monza" nose and hand-formed "GT" roof were fitted to a steel-bodied 1958-1961 Mark I Sprite, the fetching result was called a Speedwell Sprite GT.

The sight of an unusual red sports car for sale at a farm across the highway from





A sporty wood-rimmed steering wheel and full instrumentation were some of the accessories that were fitted to this car from new.



The shape and location of the aluminum GT roof's air extractors varied from car to car.



Tight door openings and snug leather-trimmed buckets make ingress and egress challenging.



The luggage compartment, more exposed in Speedwells than regular Sprites, is commodious.

one day, we were looking at what they were doing to a Sprite, and I said, 'I'd quite like one of them.'

"So I actually commissioned them to make this car from scratch; it was built to what I wanted. It sounds incredibly grand, but it wasn't that expensive to do because we weren't talking about trying to make something to a Rolls-Royce standard—the workmanship was pretty rough. For all intents and purposes, apart from the chassis underneath, they rebuilt the whole thing. I think they enjoyed doing it because they were all fun guys, and it was their idea of heaven, doing something like that."

When David took delivery of his pale metallic blue Speedwell Sprite GT, it featured a smooth bonnet with a small central air intake, wire wheels and exterior door handles and locks to protect his photography equipment. "The body was completely redesigned, and didn't look like a Sprite at all," he recalls. "The shape of the roof was unique because I had to get a certain amount of equipment in it; the top was molded so that I could get cases, which I had made, into what could laughingly be called the back seat."

This sports car would be a work-in-progress much of the time that David owned it, and after a short period, he spoke with the men at Speedwell. "For somebody who wants a flashy sort of car, it's a bit underpowered," he explained. "That's when one of them, probably George, said, 'Well, a very good engine to put in it is the Fiat engine, because it's got a lot of torque.' I had more money in my pocket than sense, and I flippantly said, 'Oh, that sounds great.'"

Although adding quarter windows to the GT roof and converting the front drums to discs were simple enough, fitting this new engine posed rather more problems: "One issue with it was that the engine wouldn't go under the bonnet; the bulges in the bonnet had to be made for clearance. Once the engine was in, it had so much power that it wouldn't stay fixed to the transmission—the torque kept twisting it! They had real problems trying to get the power from the engine to the rear wheels without it distorting the whole car."

"It was great fun to drive; there was no weight in it whatsoever, and it had a very powerful engine, so it went like a bat out of hell. And it was an extremely pretty car. At that time, there was no speed limit on British roads, so I used to belt this little car down to the film studios at some frightening kind of speed, and all the time it was under enormous strain. I didn't have it much more than two years, though—I gave it up comparatively quickly, because they'd never managed to sort out this

problem with the torque of the engine and make it reliable; by that time I'd gotten rather grand and had bought a DB3 Aston Martin. I look back on the Speedwell with fond memories."

The Sprite went through a number of hands, including those of famous British race driver Gerry Marshall, before it made the trip overseas. While in England, "6943MM" went from blue to BRG to red, and its Monza bonnet gained five prominent ventilation ports in an attempt to regulate engine temperatures at speed, which is an issue that still dogs the car in the hands of its 33-year owner, Richard, although it doesn't hamper his comfort.

"For the body size, it is tight," he explains. "I'm 6-foot-2, and I've got about two inches' clearance under the roof. I've definitely got to bend myself to get in, and with those true bucket seats that lock you in, everyone has their own style of getting in and out. It can be a challenge, but the seats are very comfortable."

"I had to replace the rear suspension because both of the quarter elliptic springs were broken, so it's riding a little higher than normal, but it takes bumps easier now, and the ride has improved. As far as performance, the differential and transmission gearing means that it is slow at the



Combining a 1,500cc Fiat engine with the Sprite's factory four-speed gearbox and radiator has meant a lifetime of blistering speed, touched by inadequate cooling and fragile shifting.

lower ends of the gears, but once you're in the upper rev range, you can take off because there is a lot of gas pedal to work with. It idles around 900 RPM, and once it's above about 2,200, it finds its sweet spot. I don't leave it in the lower gears long because of the roar from the glass pack exhaust that Speedwell installed with the Fiat engine."

Despite its zip, Richard doesn't drive the car at superhighway speeds; "People today are all doing 70-80 MPH, and I feel like

I'm standing still in that small car at 60-65 MPH—I could be creamed," he laughs.

Being the owner of one of two genuine Speedwell Sprite GTs in America, and one of the estimated nine remaining worldwide, has made Richard very knowledgeable on the subject. He wrote numerous inquiry letters and traveled to England four times in attempts to dig up more information; he learned about 2,000 Monza noses were made and sold to anyone who wanted to add one to their Sprite, and that a division

Speedwell fitted this special car with an electronic tachometer of its own design; despite its compact dimensions and advancing age, Richard has been able to have it rebuilt as needed.



of Speedwell made dashboard instruments before folding in the mid-1980s. It was through a Speedwell engineer that Richard learned of David Hurn being his car's first owner, and he was able to meet David and talk about the car's history in 1997.

Richard has treated the car to sympathetic maintenance and repairs. "It needed some bodywork because there were some parts that were starting to get weak," he explains. "When the domes were added to the hood, they cut into a crossbeam support that braces the whole nose, and I could see little lines cracking under the paint. I wanted to keep the weight down, but it needed extra strength, so we put in a liner like you usually see in the back of a truck. Cracks were also developing in the filler between the GT top and the rear deck, so I had the entire body blasted and that area repaired to the proper contour with space-age filler."

He also treated the engine to a full rebuild after an X-ray showed a crack in the block. And that famous gearbox trouble? "We finally figured out what the problem was after I blew through two or three transmissions. I had an engineer look at the connecting link, and he found a different shaft that would go into the Fiat engine and be more continuous. The original one was



This snapshot, taken in the paddock at Brands Hatch, shows the car as-delivered in 1961.

nothing more than a little flexible ball, and since the transmission was locked tightly to the engine block, why would we want it to flex? We pulled that out and shaved a larger unit to the exact measurements so that the ball snugs into the transmission plate properly instead of extending beyond it, and I've never had a problem since," he chuckles.

"Any time I have an issue with this car, I will go to a racer first because they understand the engineering aspect of what is really needed. This car is so unique, so many parts are very odd in combinations, I will go to a racing crew who has a better concept of what it really needs—they won't tell me to replace something with a Sprite part. Sometimes you have to go through engineering to develop something new. The windows screw on, and two of the threads were gone. I went to a racer who is an engineer, and he literally made me four new threads—those were English threads, not any standard thread, modern thread or metric thread. That's the magic blend—you have to be a racer and an engineer, and that's what many of these people were." 🌐

'61 Speedwell Sprite GT Owner's Story



"Most people would think that it's a kit car that someone slapped together from a Sprite. It's never won awards, and it never got recognition in the first 25 years I owned it. Purists are the people who would dismiss it—they wouldn't care to hear about the car, or even look at it—some have walked by and literally put their noses up, as if someone made a little jalopy out of it. Nobody here in the U.S. would know about this car because Speedwell was, for the most part, totally English."

—Richard Rooks



What to Pay

1958–1961 Speedwell Sprite GT
\$60,000*

*Examples with famous racing provenance can command more

Club Scene

Sprite-Midget Club USA

1001 First Avenue
Dodge City, Kansas 67801
www.sprite-midgetclub.org
Dues: None; Membership: 200

Austin-Healey Sprite Registry

1421 East Chocolate Avenue
Hershey, Pennsylvania 17033
www.austinhealeysprite.org

Pros & Cons

Pros

- One of only two in North America
- Instant celebrity in the greater Austin-Healey world
- More speed and style than any stock Bugeye

Cons

- Tiny size and right-hand drive mean constant vigilance is required
- Historic information about Speedwell is hard to come by
- These cars rarely change hands