

So you want to buy a Midget?



Introduction

Presumably if you're reading this you are already the owner of an MG, or at least a member of the MGCC, so are familiar with the cars from Abingdon, if not necessarily the Midget. Should that be the case and you've ever wondered what they are like, then this is for you. Look out too for a report by Katie Wharf in next month's *Safety Fast!* giving you a first hand view of what it is like to be a new owner of a Midget.

It has been said, and justifiably, that the Sprite and Midget as produced by the MG Car Company from 1958 until 1979, provided motoring enthusiasts with by far the most amount of enjoyment, for by far the least amount of money. One of the most versatile sports cars ever, owners were within days of its announcement, competing successfully with them in all branches of motor sport, and have continued doing so ever since. Equally at home whether being used for racing, rallying, hillclimbing, sprinting, trialling, or auto-testing, these diminutive machines were, and are, truly competitive, and in talented hands always capable of some giant slaying results. A joy to drive, easy and inexpensive to buy and repair, these little machines represent the ultimate enthusiast's all rounder. A true "sports car" in every sense of the word.

History

The name "Midget" was first used by MG in 1929 ascribed to the M Type, this being MG's first baby sports car based on the then newly-released Morris Minor. Rapid development of the overhead cam sports and racing cars through the early 1930s led to subsequent C, D, J, P, Q, and R type Midgets, this being MG's most exciting period. Then came the first of the T Type Midgets the TA in late 1936, culminating with the TF model of 1954. When the TF's successor, the MGA, was being planned, it was considered the car had by now grown too large to be referred to as a Midget any longer, and so the name was dropped, not being revised until the new semi-monocoque car being reviewed here was launched in 1961.

The first 'modern' Midget was essentially a re-badged Austin Healey Sprite MkII which itself was a development from the original 1958 MkI Sprite, more frequently known as the 'Frogeye'. The MkI Midget, as announced in June 1961 and fitted with a 46.5bhp 948cc BMC "A" series engine was quite basic, with a very simple interior, sidescreens and stowaway hood. However it did just what its creators intended, and offered sporting motoring for minimum cost. It differed from the Sprite by having a traditional MG style of grille and extra trim, a

black instead of white steering wheel, and other small detail differences, the uncomplicated but attractive car bringing under one litre motoring back to MG enthusiasts for the first time since 1936. This didn't last long though for in 1962 a more powerful version was introduced fitted with a 1098cc 56bhp version of the same engine, and in 1963 further improvements arrived in the form of front disc brakes and better interior trim. At this point also the engine received some further refinement by the fitting of larger 2" main bearings, this was in answer to the criticism of the engine being somewhat rough at higher revolutions. In all other respects the car remained as before, but big changes were to be revealed with the announcement of the MkII model in 1964. This version incorporated a completely new and far more comfortable cockpit, with wind up windows and swivelling quarter-lights, better instrumentation, lockable doors and the option of wire wheels. The biggest change however was to the rear suspension, the quarter elliptic springs being replaced by softer half elliptic's, resulting in a smoother ride. With the 1098cc engine now producing 59bhp due to a new three branch manifold, larger inlet valves and improved porting, the Midget was becoming sophisticated.

In 1966 yet more power was available by the fitting of the 1275cc 64bhp version of the "A" series engine, unfortunately though not the full 75bhp Cooper 'S' version. This model, the MkIII, also benefited from a superb new design of folding hood, and a larger fuel tank. It was at this point however that all further mechanical development of the model sadly came to a halt, it remaining largely unaltered mechanically until 1974, although from the Leyland take-over in 1968 there were minor annual styling updates, mostly irrelevant, starting with the application of much matt black paint, a change in bumper design and rear light clusters, "mag" style Rostyle wheels fitted as standard, and a new pattern of seat material in late 1969. In 1970 the Austin Healey Sprite model became just an Austin Sprite, which the following year after just 1022 had been made was dropped altogether. By this time however the two models had become identical in all but badge. Come 1972 and a slightly more notable alteration was



Above: David Housley arriving at Charlecote Park on the 2004 September Road Run, in his 1971 MkIII.

Far right: A beautiful Damask 1973 concours MkIII round arch model seen at the MGCC Beaulieu meeting in 1979.

Far right: Mineral Blue 1969 MkIII by Saltash Bridge in 1973 heading for Cornwall.



'THE FIRST MODERN MIDGET WAS ESSENTIALLY A REBADGED AUSTIN-HEALEY SPRITE MKII, ITSELF A DEVELOPMENT OF THE ORIGINAL 1958 MKI SPRITE'

made, when rounded rear wheelarches were introduced, a design cue not seen since the original Mark I Frogeye Sprite. Also at this time Rostyle wheels, similar to those fitted to MGs were fitted as standard with wires still being offered as an option, and the interior switches altered to the rocker type in the aid of safety. In late 1974 however the car underwent its final and most significant change, for to keep the model in line with the ever increasing safety and emission rules being introduced in the US, heavy energy absorbing bumpers were fitted along with a 1498cc 65bhp engine from the Triumph Spitfire.

The engine was chosen as it had previously passed all US emission specification requirements, and it was unlikely the "A" series would do so without serious development. The Triumph engine was mated to a fully synchromesh gearbox taken from the Morris Marina range. Marginally more powerful, this final version could in standard form just reach 100mph, something none of the previous standard cars could achieve, although it took a while to get there. Its appearance due to the bumpers was considerably altered, the Midget 1500 also featuring a return to the square design of rear wheel arch. In 1976 wire wheels were dropped from the option list. The car then continued in this guise with just slight annual cosmetic revisions until 1979 when production finally ceased on December 7th.

Usability

Probably the initial and greatest appeal of all Sprites and Midgets is their affordability and very low running costs, but pretty quickly new owners are captivated by the cars pin sharp handling and throttle response. They may not have power to spare but are willing, and at least as far as the "A" series cars are concerned, possess great tune-ability. Indeed these cars can be transformed into seriously quick machines, there being no shortage of tuning shops able to perform wonders. The engines, even when tuned, remain relatively simple and strong, something which can be said of the car in general, although like all late fifties designs, they do suffer from corrosion. This, in common with so many cars of the time, being by far the most expensive problem to overcome. Depending upon how bad the car has suffered, new shells are readily available and very good value, being a cost effective alternative to many hours of costly professional welding. Once the corrosion has been eradicated and thorough modern rust prevention has been carried out and maintained, the problem largely becomes history.

In use all the A series engined cars have a similarity in feel, compact with light and precise steering allowing easy controllable oversteer; a noisy first gear with no synchromesh, they simply cry out to be "driven". Enormous fun and an absolute joy, if creature comforts are

not high on your list of requirements, this is the car for any red blooded enthusiast. The earlier MkI models with their quarter elliptic rear suspension are perhaps a tad sharper, but can catch the unwary out as there is less warning when things start getting near the edge. Some enthusiasts consider these the best handling of all the standard cars, even if the ride is a little firmer. The later 1500 models by contrast are much softer and do lose out on the Midgets strongest virtue, its handling, this mostly due to the large heavy bumpers combined with an increase in ride height. This of course can easily be overcome by lowering the suspension, and by what many owners have done, complete removal of those heavy bumpers.

Owning a Midget should cost very little, (my kind of car), any car manufactured before 1st of January 1973 being classed as an historic vehicle and therefore exempt from road tax, even later models made after this date only being charged the lowest rate of £110. Insurance likewise is relatively inexpensive, and with parts costing nothing in comparison to those of modern cars, these diminutive machines continue to give levels of enjoyment out of all proportion to their costs. When set up correctly they will start first time, warm up quickly and transport you anywhere enjoyably, returning at least 35mpg when driven in normal traffic. Bear in mind though they are between 28 to 45 years old,



Clockwise from left: Ken McGowan's BRG 1967 MkII; Blaze 1972 MkIII round arch model; Dennis Wharf's BRG 1966 MkII.

so won't be quite as reliable as your modern car. They will, and do misbehave, with something often requiring attention at an inconvenient moment. Your 'modern' will undoubtedly be more reliable, but nothing like as much fun!

MODIFYING

With its easily tuneable BMC "A" series engine many tuning shops have offered all manner of performance enhancing modifications since the car was announced. Taurus, Speedwell and Abingdon Special Tuning all offered various levels of tuning from day one. Conversions of the engine swap variety were less common and only two were commercially available during the car's production period. The first in 1963 from Jack Brabham Conversions, who were better known at the time for their conversion work on Saab's and Vauxhall's, deployed a 1216cc Coventry Climax engine in the Midget, but this was very expensive with few being made, then in 1971 Car Preparations of Oakley in Bedfordshire produced the 106 mph Atlantis 1600 Midget, using a Ford 1600cc GT Kent engine which although less expensive, still sold in relatively small numbers. Now we have companies like Frontline Costello offering all manner of things like five speed gearboxes, modern front end steering and suspension units with multi link rear ends, and engine swaps utilising the fuel injected "K" series engine. Modifications of this calibre move the car into a completely different category and is a subject in its own right. However it can't be stressed

to strongly that a properly put together Sprite or Midget with a few period tweaks and a well prepared, balanced engine, is a pure joy to drive. Smooth and responsive the car becomes far more than just another form of transport. Great stuff!

Dennis Wharf, MGCC Midget Register

MAINTENANCE BODYWORK

Apart from the MkI Austin Healey Sprite, the body shape on the rest of the Midgets and Sprites looks the same. That's as far as it goes as there are quite a few changes as production and models move through the years. However, there are many publications that go into great detail on all the minute changes, so I will just touch on a few, more important ones. When looking at a Midget or Sprite attention should be paid to two main areas, corrosion and body damage / repairs. Staring at the front of the car we have quite a few things to look at. The bonnet is often an area that has had some attention at times. Due to its design and the way it is held open, the whole assembly flexes, this causes stress in the front of the bonnet and where you have stress, you get corrosion, this with the fact that the reinforcements of the panel at the front are a water trap means that this is a serious corrosion area. Likewise, the lower front panel is vulnerable to corrosion plus the lower parts of the front wings. On a detail note here, it is worth researching the model year of your car as in 1968 / 69 there was a change in

sidelight position, the later cars were fitted with the light unit slightly lower in the wing below the headlight, it is amazing how many cars are fitted with either the wrong wings or even odd wings! Look also to the front of the wheel arch, if it is out of shape or appears to be pushed out slightly, this could indicate accident damage. Moving back, the rear of the front wings is also a mud trap where it meets the top of the sill, this area will rot away and also the footwell panel and sill with it, in extreme cases, the inner sill and front floor can be effected too. The 'A' posts (door hinge panels) are very susceptible to rust, again a stressed area and a water trap. Pay particular attention here, as unprofessional repairs in the past have been common. The doors are often an area to aware of rusting; pay particular attention along the bottoms and the front lower corners. Because of the nature of these little cars, they are a convertible and as such have often been used in wet conditions; ingress of water through open top motoring or just leaks can often lead to constantly wet carpets and thus over time, rusting floors and sills. Because the roof is NOT a supporting panel, the main strength of the shell is in the inner and outer sills and the gearbox tunnel. It is very rare that the gearbox tunnel will be found to have any corrosion due to engine and gearbox oil leaks over the years protecting it, the sills on the other hand are a key area of corrosion. Badly fitted sills or a damaged car can quite often be noticed when opening and closing the doors. The gaps should be neat and



The 1978 Carmine 1500 model which 'T' type exponent Barry Willgrass owned for many years.

equal and the door should open and close with ease and should certainly not nip.

The next areas of concern are the rear spring mountings. The early cars with the quarter elliptic are more vulnerable to corrosion as all the stress of the mounting is taken up in one area at each side of the car. Look for collapsed spring box mountings or an uneven ride height as an indication of trouble. I have come across some frightening so-called 'professional' repairs in this area, most of which totally unsafe. The later cars with the semi elliptical springs are still a cause for concern but less so. Rear wings and inner arches are quite often rusted away, pay particular attention to the area behind the back of the rear wing where it is a double skin and comes up to meet the boot floor. Finally the boot floor itself. Areas of corrosion are common along the back of the boot floor where it meets the rear panel. Check for poor repairs here also.

ENGINE

In the most cases, Midgets and Sprites had the trusty BMC 'A' series engine. It came in various sizes ranging from the early cars with 948cc and then 1098cc to the later models with the larger 1275cc unit. From there a major change was made and in 1975 the 'A' series engine was replaced with Triumph's 1500cc unit.

In general the 'A' series engine was a trustworthy lump but as in all cases, neglect and over-enthusiasm often brought them to their knees earlier than desired. Look for low

oil pressure particularly when the engine is fully warmed up, a worn engine will breath and you can smell burnt oil and fumes from under the bonnet as well as the exhaust. One engine that perhaps should be mentioned to take particular attention to is the early 1098cc version fitted to the Mk2 Midget and Mk3 Sprite. These engines shared the same crankshaft as the Austin A40 and Morris Minor 1000 and whilst seemingly OK in these models was not a strong unit in a Spridget. A more substantial crankshaft was fitted to the later 1098cc engines (with engine number prefix 10CC) and this shared the larger journal sizes of the Mini Cooper S range. The 1275cc engine was and still is a tuners delight, it is one of those engines that can be bored and stroked to nearly 1600cc and develop very healthy power. I will not go down the route of tuning here except to say, beware of tuned and tired engines. None of these engines have the life of today's engines and one would expect to be rebuilding an engine at about 70 / 80,000 miles of normal use.

The later 1500 engine when in good fettle is a good unit and develops good power and torque, however it has a weakness. Its crankshaft journals are small and therefore their life is not long. I have heard of modifications to the lubrication system that drastically improves matters, but this is not an everyday modification.

GEARBOX

The early cars were fitted with what is known as a 'smoothcase' gearbox, easily distinguishable

by its smooth appearance. These gearboxes are weak and spare parts are almost impossible to obtain now. However, those with early cars, do have less powerful engines and tend not to suffer too much trouble. The later gearbox is the 'ribcase' and again it can be easily identified by its appearance. A lot stronger gearbox and one that can be rebuilt. You may find some cars that have had various five speed boxes fitted, beware of this if you are after a 'pure' car; that is all I am going to say about five speed conversions.

Going back to the standard gearboxes, the problems to be aware of are noisy first and reverse gears. These gearboxes have a straight cut first and reverse and do have a 'wine' of their own, but this should not be mistaken for worn gears and bearings which is much more pronounced. Another thing to be aware of is worn synchromesh and gearbox internals. These gearboxes both 'smoothcase' and 'ribcase' are pleasant and easy to use, they have NO synchromesh on first gear so it is not advised to try to change down to first whilst on the move. The later gearbox fitted to the 1500cc models are a lot stronger but carry a weight penalty, they certainly are not a cause for major concern.

AXLE, STEERING and SUSPENSION

I have grouped this together as I feel it is one area of the car that can be covered as a whole. The front suspension and steering is often the MOT testers favourite area on these cars and particular attention must be taken to inspect

Right: Mk1 course car at 1961 British Empire Trophy meeting. Below: James Hall auto-testing his well campaigned Teal Blue MkIII round arch model.



'AS WITH ANY CAR, SERVICING AND ROUTINE MAINTENANCE IS COMPULSORY AND CERTAINLY AIDS RELIABILITY AND ENJOYMENT'



these items carefully. Wear and corrosion cause problems here and this is usually down to poor and irregular maintenance. There are between three and four greasing points on each front suspension and steering unit, these need lubrication very regularly and NOT with grease but with thick oil or a waterproof grease. The most common cause of MOT failure here is what is known as 'Kingpin' wear. In most cases that I have had to deal with over the years show little or no wear at all but excessive corrosion to the bottom of the 'Kingpin'. Likewise the 'Fulcrum' Pin suffers in the same way. Other problems to be aware of may be track rod ends and play in the rack ends, but neither of these are major areas of concern. The front springs give little trouble but the rears start to sag after time and may require re-setting or replacement. The rear axle usually gives little or no trouble but listen for a noisy differential. Occasionally the rear hubs may leak oil into the rear brakes but this is usually due to lack of inspection and servicing and is easily sorted.

BRAKES

The brakes on these little cars are very reliable when in good condition. Drum brakes all round on the early cars, and disc / drum combination on all models from the 1098cc engine onwards. Bad maintenance and worn parts can lead one into thinking that the brakes need up rating. The fronts require inspection now and again and the

rears require regular adjustment to keep them performing well.

EXTERIOR TRIM

The trim on the outside of the car is an aesthetic thing only. Sprites were fitted with no fancy strips on the bonnet or waistline, whereas the Midget was until 1969 when the trim vanished in stages of production. Later cars were fitted with a sill finisher and sill lettering. Careful inspection may reveal corrosion around the fittings for these trims.

INTERIOR TRIM

The trim changed slightly almost from model to model, so if you are looking for an accurately detailed car, your research should be thorough. Many cars over the years have been messed around with and items swapped from model to model.

MAINTENANCE

As with any car, servicing and routine maintenance is compulsory and certainly aids the reliability and enjoyment you will get from your trusty steed. The engine requires oil and filter to be renewed every 6000 miles or 12 months (whichever occurs first), plus air filters, plugs, points and condenser should also be renewed at the same time. Gear oil is usually fitted for life, but regular changing can't do any harm at all, likewise the rear axle oil. Brakes as

mentioned above require looking at frequently even if only to dust them out and adjust them, however more importantly, remove the front brake pads and push back the calliper pistons every now and then, just to be sure that everything is free and working.

Looking after the bodywork is easy, regular washing under the car and cleaning out trapped mud and deposits will help prevent corrosion and touching up stone chips will do likewise. Remember cellulose paint and chrome are both porous so regular waxing will also help these areas. Finally an under body wax such as Waxoyl or Dinatrol is also a good deterrent for corrosion.

Points of reference taken from "Original Sprite & Midget" by Terry Horler
Mark T Boldry, MGCC Midget Register.

YOUR MIDGET IN COMPETITION

Midgets have been used in competition from the first day of their production. There was already a tremendous sporting heritage carved out by the Austin Healey Sprite Mk1 thanks to the likes of John Sprinzel and Pat Moss before the Midget was introduced, although one can only wonder what competing in a snowy Monte Carlo Rally must have been like in an early Sprite! During the late fifties and throughout the sixties Sprites and Midgets had been competing for the better part of twenty years nationally and internationally in production sports car racing,

Right: William Smallbridge working on his 1380 modified car in 2004; the engine compartment of Robert Dean's 1380 modified car; Peter Bernard's 1380cc modified car in April 2005.



and likewise in road rallying, and as already mentioned had establishing a considerable competition record.

By the 1970s however their competitiveness was being severely compromised without considerable modifications, and it was in 1975 that MGCC member and Midget driver Larry Quinn proposed a racing series exclusively for these cars. His ideas were absolutely correct for the time, with the whole thing really taking off very quickly, resulting in both national modified sports car and standard production sports car race championships. Chris Meeke, now the owner of Mallory Park race circuit was very successful in a standard 1500cc car winning several championships.

The mod-sports cars became more and more extreme as the years went by, and gradually less and less original parts were used in their make up. This trend reached its conclusion when a "Midget" was raced in the Donnington Park GT Championship that consisted of a replica Midget body mounted over a front-engined Mallock clubmans space framed racing car. Since those days the specification of Midget racing cars has been reigned in so that the cars on the tracks today do have some relationship with road cars. The most modified cars are only seen in the national Midget racing championship. These cars have spaceframed rear ends, highly modified engines mated to racing gear box internals, and use wide racing wheels and tyres.

Less modified cars known as road going modified, are found in the Cockshoot Cup, Phoenix Championship and the middle class of the Midget Championship. These cars have to keep the basic steel shell, but are allowed fibreglass panels. They run on six inch wide racing tyres and some major engine, gearbox and suspension modifications are permitted. The least modified racing Midgets, road going, run in the standard classes of the various championships. These cars are nearly all steel apart from the front panels, have to run their engines with original SU carbs and use road derived tyres and keep their original brakes only with racing pads and linings. All racing Midgets utilise the same safety modifications including a full roll cage, racing seat and belts, and a plumbed in fire extinguisher. Sadly the days when you could drive your Midget to the circuit and then race it have long gone.

Competition cars complying to the various race championship specifications can also be



used in speed events where drivers compete against the clock, either uphill (a hillclimb), or on a race circuit (a sprint). The MG Car Club runs the very popular Luffield Speed Championship where these cars compete. However you can run your everyday road car in a speed event, with only a minor amount of preparation. This form of competition is ideal for those who would like to start competing but are unsure about mixing it with others out on the track. It is inexpensive, your runs are taken individually so there is no chance of tangling with another car, and there is a wonderful camaraderie in the paddock between those taking part. A really useful and informative insight of how to go about competing can be found on the club's web site under the Motorsport heading entitled "Sprint - a beginners guide".

Or if you would prefer just to talk to someone first about the possibilities of competing, give Paul Goodman a call on 01625 876300, who is always happy to help and will answer any questions you may have. For further details of the racing championships please contact: The Competitions Secretary, MG Car Club, Kimber House, PO Box 251 Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 1FF. 01235 555552 or email mgcc@mgcc.co.uk
Paul Goodman, MGCC Cockshoot Cup

NEW: STAR CAR AWARD

In an effort to get members about in their Midgets, the MG Midget Register has created the STAR CAR AWARD, to be presented annually to the owner of the Midget or Sprite

which has been used the most in MGCC events throughout the year; the presentation being made at Silverstone during the annual MGCC International Weekend meeting.

Open to all owners of Sprites, Midgets and derivatives, cars must be registered with the MG Midget Register, and can be either standard or modified (provided the shell conforms to the original design or modified in line with MGCC competition regulations). A valid road fund licence must be displayed and a current MOT should be available if requested, except for race modified cars. Points are awarded as cars are entered in any club event or if used to attend when marshalling, organising or helping to run an event.

The Award Secretary will administer the trophy, however it is you, the cars owner, who is responsible for ensuring your points are claimed, and to do that owners should send details of all events entered and started to the Star Car Award secretary, Graham Springthorpe, 9 Greenways, Saffron Walden CB11 3EZ. All MGCC organised events count for points ie: Race Meetings, High Speed Trails, Auto-Cross, Concours, Driving Tests, Trails, Rallies, Road Runs, Social Events, Sprints and Hill Climbs. Furthermore, at any single race meeting a number of Races or High Speed Trials can be entered with each counting for points, provided the car has started them. Similarly at any single social meeting, the concours, gymkhana and treasure hunt would all count. So enter as much as you can!