



MG Midget (and Austin Healey Sprite), 1961 to 1979

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Uncluttered, attractive lines – the neat styling of Sprites and Midgets has stood the test of time. This is an early Midget version.

Affordable, fun to drive and easy-to-own classic sports cars, the Midget and Sprite still live up to their original design brief. Kim Henson tells all...

Adorned by the famous MG badge, Midgets (together with equivalent Austin Healey Sprite models) are budget-priced classic sports cars offering much more hood-down fun per mile than their size and performance potential might suggest.

Even today Sprites/Midgets are still relatively cheap to buy, and fuel costs are about as low



as they can get for a sports car.

The original 948cc Austin Healey 'Frogeye' Sprite (the basis for all later Sprites and equivalent Midgets, which essentially differ only in badging and trim) was cleverly designed, developed and produced around Austin A35 components, and appeared in May 1958. It was deliberately intended to be inexpensive to buy and to run. With factory-fitted twin carburettors and other 'mild' upgrades to the engine, it produced good performance for its time. It handled well too, and the precise rack and pinion steering system received much praise.

In the summer of 1961, the body style was changed and the revised, more powerful models became known as the Mark II Sprite and Mark I Midget (effectively, from this time the Midget 'Mark' reference numbers were always one behind those of the Sprite). This feature concentrates on this and later versions, not least because the bodywork construction on the earlier 'Frogeye' Sprite, and this model's values, are very different from those relating to the cars from 1961 onwards.



The model from which all later Sprites and Midgets evolved was the Austin Healey 'Frogeye' Sprite, introduced in 1958. The wide-opening bonnet was unusual at the time.

As the years passed Sprites and Midgets were fitted with increasingly large versions of the A Series engine, first expanding to 1098cc in October 1962. From March 1964 the power unit was uprated and the cars were improved in many other ways too, becoming known as Mark III Sprites/Mark II Midgets.



BMC's 1275cc 'A' Series engines were employed from the autumn of 1966 (Mark IV Sprite/Mark III Midget), to give even more power and better performance.

From January 1971, the Healey name was dropped from the Sprites, which were now known simply as 'Austin Sprites', and the model was discontinued a few months later.

The Midget soldiered on, gaining 'round' rear arches in place of the previous 'squared off' type.

The final Midgets (from October 1974 to November 1979) were powered by 1.5 litre Triumph engines (as also used in the Spitfire); these cars were identified by their black 'rubber' bumpers.

All Sprites and Midgets are easily looked after at home, and spares are widely available from specialists, at highly competitive prices.

Asking prices for most Sprites and Midgets are still (usually) reasonable.

Organisations catering for the cars include:

- Austin Healey Owners' Club. www.austin-healey-club.com
- Midget and Sprite Club. www.midgetandspriteclub.co.uk
- MG Owners' Club. www.mgownersclub.co.uk
- MG Car Club. www.mgcc.co.uk





From the rear the cars look as attractive as from the front. The rear bodywork incorporates a luggage boot – shallow but reasonably spacious.



BMC's 'A' Series engines were used until 1974 and ensured dependability, longevity and frugal fuel consumption.



The cockpits provide ample room for two, although for tall people, getting in and out when the hood is raised is something of an art!



Rust ('everywhere') is the main enemy of all Sprites and Midgets. The vital sill assemblies require close attention; replacement is a major operation.

RESTORATION

Even basket case examples can be restored – and brand new, complete 'Heritage' body shells can be bought if your much-loved example is very seriously rusty. (Note: A new shell can be a quicker, easier and more cost-effective way to get a car on the road, as an alternative to restoring the original shell, but some enthusiasts prefer to retain as much of the original vehicle as possible).

When buying, and especially if the asking price is high, make sure that the example you are looking at really is as solid as it first appears ('bodges' are commonly encountered...).

Ensure especially that there is no serious and/or disguised rust in the sill assemblies, the door pillars, the floor pans (particularly vulnerable if the hood leaks), the rear suspension mountings (check very carefully) and the extremities of the front wings.

Rot can also take its toll along the leading edge of the bonnet, in the door bottoms, in the vicinity of the front and rear valance panels, in the lower sections of the rear wings, and along the trailing edge of the boot lid.

Always look closely around the floor of the boot too; you may find crumbling metal and holes



here.

ENGINES AND MAINTENANCE

The 'A' Series engines are renowned for their reliability and longevity, but all versions need to be checked to ensure that they don't emit huge quantities of blue 'oil' smoke (indicating piston ring/cylinder bore wear), and that they do not rattle from the bottom end (bearing problems).

The Triumph 1500 engine used in the last Midgets needs to be checked carefully for the same symptoms; these units tend to be less long-lasting than the 'A' Series motors.

Ensure that the gearbox is not excessively noisy, that synchromesh on second, third and top gears works well (second gear is usually the first to suffer) and that the gearchange is precise in operation.

It is essential that the front suspension receives regular lubrication; ideally re-greasing should be carried out at least every 1,000 miles, or the king pins and their bushes, also the lower threaded trunnions, will wear rapidly (eventually resulting in MoT test failure). When viewing any of these models, visually check the suspension for signs of recent attention with a grease gun.

The power units are easy to work on, although access to the lower reaches of the engine bay is restricted.

PRICES

948/1098/1275cc: Rough, £1,200. Good, £2,500. Top Notch, £5,000+

1500cc: Rough, £1,000. Good, £2,000+. Top Notch, £4,000+



FACTS AND FIGURES

Built:

948cc: 1961-62

1098cc: 1962-66

1275cc: 1966-74

Midget 1500: 1974-79

Bodywork:

Two-door open sports car

Engine:

All are overhead valve, in-line four-cylinder units; BMC 'A' Series:

948cc (Midget Mark I/Sprite Mark II): 47 bhp

1098cc: Midget Mark I/Sprite Mark II, 56 bhp; Midget Mark II/Sprite Mark III, 59 bhp

1275cc (Midget Mark III, Sprite Mark IV): 65 bhp

Triumph-derived: 1493cc (Midget 1500): 65 bhp

0-60 mph:

12-20+ sec

Top speed:

85-100+ mph

Typical fuel consumption:

30-45 mpg