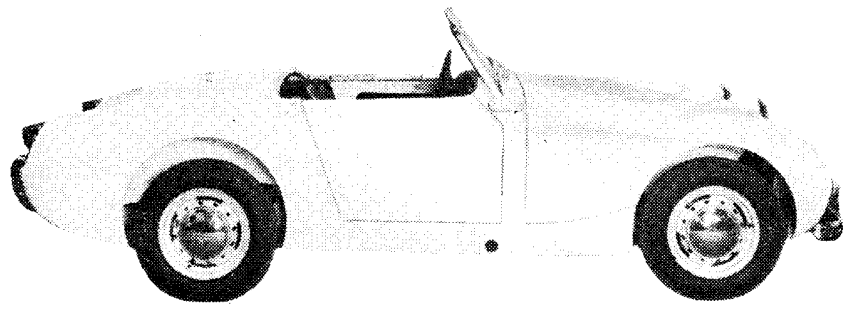
'Motor' tells you what to look for under the skin of that second-hand car



SPOT CHECK

SPRITE I & II

NOT the world's most beautiful car in its Mk. I form, the Austin-Healey Sprite was introduced in May, 1958, and was quickly accepted because it represented the cheapest way of going fast and, anyhow, people soon got used to its cheeky face.

The B.M.C. A series engine, with suitable modifications, powered it in 948 c.c. form. In May, 1961 the very much prettier Mk. II appeared and, in October of the following year, the engine capacity was upped to 1,098 c.c. —these models were mechanically similar to the Mk. I.

The run continued until March, 1964, when the current Mk. III took over.

A look around

Check the Mk. I for rust in the body welds between the wings and bonnet top and at the sides of the radiator grille. On early models, the tank/boot joint may be broken and cars used in competition can become bent under the nose. Examine proprietary plastic bonnets for accuracy of fit.

Early hoods were fixed by press-studs and the later hook-on strip arrangement is much better. A damaged rear window means a new hood: check also the stay tension. The doors are simple and give no trouble but improved catches were introduced during 1959.

Check the rubber grease retainers on the steering linkage for splits and examine the handbrake cable for stretch. It is wise to look over "extra" wiring as these cars are happy hunting grounds for the mod men.

On disc wheels, look for cracks between the studs.

Engine running

The engine should start easily but if a Mk. I or II has been standing around for some time the mechanical petrol pump will almost certainly need priming. An electric one can be fitted if desired, as on the Mk. III.

The valve gear should be reasonably quiet but look for a blown manifold/exhaust joint. A loud rattle when starting can come from a fractured carburetter heat-shield. Over-enthusiastic tightening can break the rear lug on the manifold—check. Examine the engine-mounting rubbers for weakness.

If the timing chain rattles this can be cured by replacing the tensioner rings and/or chain and/or sprocket—it's a matter of stripping down to have a look.

Oil leaks from the rocker cover and side cover gaskets are of little account: an improved type of seal will take care of weeping at the front main bearing; but a leak from the oil filter can be serious as this may mean that the distance-piece has vibrated loose. The fixing bolts are very difficult to get at and the best scheme is to "glue" them in place with a locking cement.

On the road

The rack-and-pinion steering is very light and the steering wheel should not be held firmly—even then it takes a while to get used to this lightness and the car should really be handled like a solo motorcycle.

If the handling seems odd, or the tyres show uneven wear, check the forward mountings of the rear springs. These locate the back axle and if they are out of line, control will suffer very badly. Also check the front upper shock-absorber mountings for tightness. There should be no steering play.

The clutch travel should be light and short—check early examples for slip. The brake pedal should have normal travel and if the brakes seem inadequate, A40 units (8 in. instead of 7 in.) can be fitted to make a considerable improvement.

Many modified cars have disc brakes with wire wheels and this increases the track with a beneficial effect on handling.

Brief Specification

Engine: four-cylinder o.h.v., 948 or 1,098 c.c.
Gearbox: Four-speed with synchromesh on three upper ratios.
LENGTH: 11 ft. 5 in.
WIDTH: 4 ft. 6 in.
WEIGHT: 12¾ cwt. Mk. I; 13½ cwt. Mk. II.

New Performance

TOP SPEED: 82 m.p.h. Mk. I; 85 m.p.h. Mk. II (948 c.c.); 87 m.p.h. Mk. II (1,098 c.c.).
AVERAGE FUEL CONSUMPTION: 43 m.p.g. (948 c.c.): 37 m.p.g. (1,098 c.c.).
ACCELERATION: 0-50 through gears 14 sec. (948 c.c.); 11 sec. (1,098 c.c.). 20-40 in top 12·5 sec. (948 c.c.); 11 sec. (1,098 c.c.).
BRAKING FROM 30 M.P.H.: 30 to 31 ft.

Identity Parade

Introduced May 1958.

Screen and hood fitting modified October 1958.

Door locks improved January 1959.

Sliding side windows standard on open models March 1960.

Mk. I discontinued May 1961 at chassis no. 50116.

Mk. II introduced at chassis no. 101.

Larger engine, disc brakes, baulk-ring synchromesh introduced October 1962.

Discontinued at chassis 38828 and Mk. III introduced.