

# The Sprite Stuff

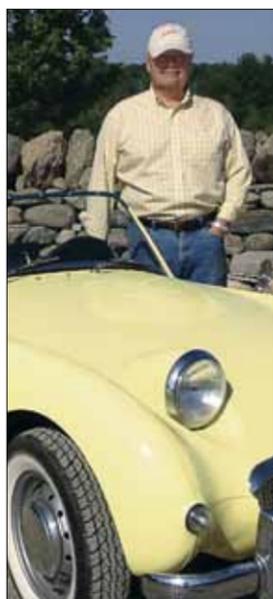
There's more than one way to modify a Bugeye, as this delightful trio proves

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID LaCHANCE

There's nothing new about modifying a Bugeye Sprite. Donald Healey had a keen sense of what the sports car buyer was looking for, and when he gave the world the Austin-Healey Sprite, he made sure that it was both affordable and fun to drive. Its low price tag dictated that it would be a no-frills machine, but the factory and aftermarket suppliers made sure that buyers could add their personal touches to the cheerful little roadster.

In the decades since, the tinkering has continued, as owners continue their love affair with Donald Healey's creation. Although the Bugeye has become collectible, with nicely restored examples selling for up to \$20,000, there's still a great deal of interest in modifying these cars for better performance, one-of-a-kind aesthetics, or both. Naturally enough, there's more than one way to modify a Bugeye, and more than one stream of thought in the broad Bugeye community. The cars featured here represent three segments of the market, ranging from those owners who want a car that's pretty much just as it was when new, to those who are comfortable with engine swaps and altered bodywork.





**Richard Self**  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

**FRED**

When I was a kid at university, I had a 1975 Midget, which I just loved and I should still have—unfortunately, I don't. And Bugeyes were sort of the classic that started it all. This car happens to have been made in 1958, which is the year I was born, so it seemed to match up and it's one of the first 5,000 made, so it just seemed to be serendipity. Our youngest daughter, Jacqueline, is 15, and she has always wanted to get a Midget when she was old enough to drive. And so I said to her, 'What about a Bugeye?' She looked it up on the internet, and she said, 'Boy, Dad, that's not a very nice looking car.' About a month later, she sent me a collage of Bugeye images that she had done, and she said, 'You know, this might be quite a cool car.' That's how we ended up with a Bugeye. For a 1958 car that has its own unique look to appeal to a 15-year-old in today's society, I think it says a lot about how appealing these cars are.

**This is how they looked new, with stamped steel wheels and simple, Vynide-covered dashboards. Donald Healey was determined to build a sports car that was not just fun to drive, but affordable.**

Let's look at the three representative cars we have gathered here. First up is a car to make the purist's heart beat faster: an unmodified 1958 Bugeye, one of the first 1,000 cars assembled. A 948cc A-series four makes it go, and four drum brakes make it stop. Its concessions to modernity are minimal, reversible changes like LED taillamps and a spin-on oil filter adapter. Our second example is more radical, a 1960 Bugeye that's had five inches added to its wheelbase to enable its owner to get behind the wheel; it's a modification that looks exactly right, and might go unnoticed by anyone who's not an aficionado. This car has a 1,275cc A-series four from a later Sprite, a popular upgrade. Finally, we have the mildly customized 1960 Sprite that packs a warmed-up 1,275 four and front disc brakes under its subtly modified bodywork, chrome roll bar and look-at-me racing stripe.

All three of these cars have come through the Branford, Connecticut, shop of David Silberkleit, the C.F.O. (that's Chief Frogeye Officer) of [bugeyeguy.com](http://bugeyeguy.com), who's been infatuated with the Mk I Sprite since his high school days (see sidebar). It's a chilly, breezy April day when we arrive at his shop to sample the three cars, which belong to customers in Rhode Island, Louisiana and Ontario, Canada. "It's just mind-blowing for me to see how this little smiling car can be adapted to meet the needs of such a wide range of customers. Every Bugeye that has passed through our shop has been slightly different, which has been a lot of



**Lifting the heavy steel bonnet reveals an original-spec 948cc inline-four, rated at just 43hp.**

fun, and keeps our work very interesting," David says.

We'll start with the 1958 Sprite, nicknamed "Fred," which David located through a friend of a friend. "That one I was lucky, because it was maybe 15 miles from here, and when I found it, it was in a kind of a barn on someone's property. It had been partially restored, but the potential of that car was that it was a true '58 car, a thin-windshield-pillar car." As was

often the case, the windshield frame had been broken—that's why it was redesigned after about 5,000 cars had been built. David repaired the damage, buffed the Primrose Yellow paint, and made a series of reversible upgrades that buyer Richard Self wanted—things like LED taillamps and a spin-on oil filter—to make the car more usable. (All of the original parts went into a "time capsule" that will stay with the car.)

I reach inside the door and pull up the metal rod that operates the catch—the Sprite lacks such luxuries as door locks and external door handles. There's not a

**Dave Fite**  
Shreveport, Louisiana

**BOLT**

I had a Bugeye when I was 16. It was the first car I ever bought. I have never been in a better handling car than an Austin-Healey Bugeye Sprite. I could go around a standard street corner at 45 or 50 without any qualms at all. Just hit it and go, right on through, and never miss a beat. I've never been in any other kind of car that could do that.

You know why I named it Bolt? Well, that stands for "Big Ole Long Thang." In the Bugeye world, that's a Big Ole Long Thang! I wasn't the first person that made the complaint that it was a lot tighter getting into it than when they were 15 or 20 or whatever age they were when they had one! It drives just as good—matter of fact, it might drive better with the additional five inches, because it seems a little heavier to me.

I've got a 20-year-old daughter who really likes it. As a matter of fact, I've got a passel of kids, and it wouldn't surprise me if they wanted to drive it a good bit, too.





**Craftsmanship and attention to detail hide the five-inch stretch added to this Bugeye's wheelbase. As with all Mk I Sprites, the only access to the trunk and spare tire is from the interior.**

tremendous amount of room between the front of the seat and the front of the door opening—testers back in the day complained about this, too—and I can see why someone would be tempted to hang onto that fragile windshield frame while lowering himself into the seat. This car has the original large, black plastic steering wheel, which has become something of a rare sight on Sprites.

The instrument panel, a flat expanse of Vynide-covered steel, could hardly be more rudimentary. There's a 100-MPH speedometer with a silver-on-black face, and a matching tachometer that was actually optional equipment, though you're not likely to ever see a Sprite without one. To the left of the speedometer is the gas gauge; it's balanced by a combination oil pressure and coolant temperature gauge to the right of the tachometer. In the middle of the dash are the key-operated ignition switch, surrounded by the headlamp knob, and knobs for the choke, the windshield wipers, the starter and the blower of the optional heater. A three-position horizontal toggle switch above the ignition works the turn signals.

"It's a classic looking British sports car, but probably more importantly, it's just a simple car—it is what it is," says Richard. "There are no fancy computers, there's only one speed for the wipers, it's just a simple car and it's great fun to drive. It's a fabulous car."

Small it may be, but your 5-foot-11 editor has no trouble getting comfortable behind the wheel. The seat cushions are comfy, the door cutouts provide lots of elbow room,

and there's even enough space for my size 10½s in the footwell—more than in some larger cars. I tug on the starter knob, and the long-stroke 948 starts right up, producing a sporty exhaust note that belies its scant 43 horsepower.

Time to head out onto the street. Acceleration surely isn't brisk, but it feels sprightly enough (sorry), with an agreeable clutch and satisfyingly direct gearchange to play with. There's just 52-lbs.ft. of torque on hand, but the peak comes at a comfortable 3,300 RPM. That, and the car's sub-1,500-pound curb weight, makes for drama-free driving among more modern machinery. Second is fairly low, but third gear is a great cruising gear that makes good use of the engine's torque at lower speeds, and its willingness to rev at higher speeds.

Never mind the powertrain, though—it's

the handling that's this car's claim to fame. The steering, a rack-and-pinion unit borrowed from the Morris Minor, is sharp as a scalpel, light and blissfully free of play, and even though there's just 2¼ turns from lock-to-lock, there's no need to seesaw the big black wheel to stay on course—just point the car, and it goes. The ride is a delight, too, firm and nicely snubbed, with stiff quarter-elliptic springs in back, and softer coils up front. Not every Bugeye that David acquires rides like this; it's this good only because he takes great pains to make sure that everything—bushings, shocks, tires, king pins and more—is up to snuff. It's evident that this car's bits have been fully sorted. It's also apparent that even the seat cushions function as part of the suspension system. The body has no cowl shake—something that can't be said for many more



**Like many Bugeyes, Dave Fite's car features a later 1,275cc inline-four. Visually similar to the 948, it makes nearly 50 percent more power.**



**Scott DeBisschop**  
Westerly, Rhode Island  
**SHELBY**

Shelby is the second Bugeye I've bought from David. The first car is called Cosmos; it's a green 1960 Bugeye Sprite. [Editor's note: Cosmos, which has been upgraded with a 1,275cc engine, disc brakes and other components from later Sprites, was featured in our March 2008 issue.] Then I saw David's Shelby, and it looks like a small Shelby. I guess I always thought it looked cool, and I bought it on a whim when I was there. It's just a very modified, cool little Bugeye. It's quite different from Cosmos in the fact that Cosmos looks pretty original, but this car is just a cool little car.

I'm comfortable with both. If I had to sell one, I don't know which one I'd sell. I think the green one is probably more valuable, because it's been signed by Brian Healey, and it's all just so well done. But the exhaust in Shelby kind of resonates a little bit more, and it's a completely different car. And I can appreciate both. From the purist aspect of it, to modifying the heck out of them—it's just fun. Most Bugeyes that you see now have been modified in some manner—I mean, these cars are 50-something years old.

modern designs—and there's not so much as a single rattle or clunk in this example.

The brakes, on the other hand, are unremarkable. The drums stop the car with no problem, and I don't use them heavily enough to encounter fade. But there's not a tremendous amount of feel through the brake pedal, and it goes without saying that there's no assist.

After spending some time in Richard's car, it's a shock to climb into David Fite's long-wheelbase Sprite. The car looks well proportioned from the outside, but when I climb into the non-adjustable passenger seat (another way Healey kept the cost down), the dashboard seems absurdly far away. In fact, my toes can't even reach

**Smoothed fender seams give Scott DeBisschop's racy Sprite a custom look. The navy, black and white color scheme carries through to the interior; gauge faces were custom made in the U.K.**

the firewall. It's a different story from the driver's seat, of course, where once again I settle in and scan the now familiar array of instruments. The seats on this car have been broken in, and the lower cushion makes a noticeable change in driving position.

The inspiration for the car came from Dave Fite, who had bought a stock Bugeye from David Silberkleit, intending to recapture the fun he had had in a similar car when he was in his teens. The problem was, he couldn't get into or out of it easily. "I'm still 6'-5". I drove it with the top on and I drove it in bad weather and I drove it all over the place, and I never remember it being much of an issue getting in or out of it," he laughs. "One day, and I said, 'Dave, what's the chance of adding five inches to this thing?' He said, 'Oh, we can make a limo out of it if you want to.' I didn't know him very well at the time, and thought he was just being facetious—you know, he





A Weber carburetor, a header and a performance cam give this 1,275cc four an estimated 75hp. A dual-pipe muffler lends it an aggressive rasp.



was a purist and that would be sacrilege to do anything like that to a Bugeye."

Not so. Back in Connecticut, David got to work, playing around with a stretched Bugeye in Photoshop. "We looked at it, and we said, you know, it looks pretty good. And this guy is not going to be able to use the Bugeye, and he's got very strong memories and he really wants this car...so, why not?" He already had a badly rusted parts car to use as a basis for the project.

The work that David and ace metal-worker Bob Matcheski carried out is utterly convincing; if you didn't know better, you'd think this was the standard car. The extra

length was added in the middle of the doors; Bob lengthened the polished alloy moldings pieces for a factory appearance, and crafted new door pockets that mimic the originals.

David is pleased with how the project turned out, and under the right circumstances would do it again. "If it was that somebody just wanted a four-door, for instance, because they thought it was kind of quirky, I'm not as interested in that. But to make it so that somebody can use it? Every time, I'm interested in that."

This car is powered by a 1,275cc A-series four; it's a fairly common swap for Mk I

owners who are hungry for the additional 16 horsepower and 10-lbs.ft. of torque it belts out. The extra grunt certainly makes itself felt, even if the car is still no rocket—no wonder this is one of the most popular performance upgrades for the car. (David estimates the weight of the extra sheetmetal and such at about 50 pounds, not enough to be a big factor in acceleration times.)

What's surprising is how well this all works. There doesn't seem to be any drawback at all to the additional length; in fact, I find myself wondering if maybe this car doesn't have just a little bit more straight-line stability than the stock car, and

## Specifications

	"FRED" 1958 AUSTIN-HEALEY SPRITE MK 1	"BOLT" 1960 AUSTIN-HEALEY SPRITE MK 1	"SHELBY" 1960 AUSTIN-HEALEY SPRITE MK 1
<b>ENGINE</b>			
Type:	Inline four, cast-iron block and head	Inline four, cast-iron block and head	Inline four, cast-iron block and head
Displacement:	948cc (57.9-cu.in.)	1,275cc (77.8-cu.in.)	1,275cc (77.8-cu.in.)
Bore x stroke	62.9 x 76.2mm	70.6 x 81.3mm	70.6 x 81.3mm
Compression ratio	8.3:1	8.8:1	8.8:1
Horsepower @ RPM	43 @ 5,000	65 @ 6,000	75 @ 6,000 (est.)
Torque @ RPM	52-lbs.ft. @ 3,300	72-lbs.ft. @ 3,000	83-lbs.ft. @ 3,000 (est.)
Fuel system	Two SU H1 carburetors	Two SU H52 carburetors	Weber 32/36 DGV 2bbl. carburetor
<b>TRANSMISSION</b>			
Type	Four-speed, synchromesh on 2nd, 3rd and 4th	Four-speed, synchromesh on 2nd, 3rd and 4th	Four-speed, synchromesh on 2nd, 3rd and 4th
<b>STEERING</b>			
Type	Rack and pinion	Rack and pinion	Rack and pinion
<b>BRAKES</b>			
Type	Four-wheel hydraulic	Four-wheel hydraulic	Four-wheel hydraulic
Front	7-inch drum	7-inch drum	8¼-inch disc
Rear	7-inch drum	7-inch drum	7-inch drum
<b>WEIGHTS AND MEASURES</b>			
Wheelbase	80 inches	85 inches	80 inches
Overall length	137 inches	142 inches	137 inches
Overall width	54 inches	54 inches	54 inches
Overall height	48 inches	48 inches	48 inches
Curb weight	1,460 pounds	1,510 pounds (est.)	1,460 pounds

## Building a Better Bugeye

David Silberkleit got seriously into the world of the Austin-Healey Sprite Mk I in 2008, when he moved his fledgling business to larger quarters in Branford, Connecticut. Since that time, he's made a full-time business of finding and repairing tired Bugeyes, and putting them together with new owners who will appreciate their unique character.

"I counted it up yesterday—we've sold 95 Bugeyes in the past five and a half years," David says. "I'm really happy with that. I think that that's indicative of the demand." The car's appeal, he says, is no mystery. "Right now, in my own little collection, I have all these other great cars—I've got an Austin-Healey BJ8, I have a 100-4, I've got an MGA Mark II. They're all beautiful cars, they're spectacular cars. And yet, I can't talk about them in the way that I talk about a Bugeye.

"There is nothing condescending about a Bugeye, and there never will be," he continues. "Even the finest ones in the world are not condescending or pretentious. I think that's important because this is a hobby. These are cars that are not essential. This is all about fun, and it's all about passion and collectibility and about a vacation, perhaps, a break from everybody's busy lives. Our third car is always something that's about fun, to make the mundane fun again. To my mind, a Bugeye does that better than any other collectible car that I've had."

To provide the kind of performance and trouble-free enjoyment that a Bugeye is capable of, it has to be in good mechanical condition—and many of the cars David sees do not meet that standard. "Probably 80 percent of the Bugeyes that are out there are not optimized, and unless you have driven a lot of them, you would have no way of knowing what is possible, and how nicely you can make them drive," he says. "The car does have limitations, and when they're not set up well, those limitations become much more glaring. When you start to really sort out these cars...it's an amazing transformation of the car, and the driving experience is dramatically improved."

David speaks from long experience, having driven a Bugeye in his high school years. In fact, he still has the car. "I think the reason I've kept that car and gotten rid of so many others since then, is that it's so much tighter and more nimble than most of the other old cars that I've played with.... I think the Bugeye is the most fun to drive, plus has the most personality that's perhaps in keeping with my outlook on life."

As you might imagine, David wholeheartedly endorses the Sprite as an ideal first collector car. "The reason why a Bugeye is a great first car is that it really doesn't have any bad habits except that it's small. That's its only vice," he says. "As a first car, Bugeyes are attractive because you can't get into a lot of trouble with them. Bugeyes certainly can be rusty, but they're not that complicated, so there isn't much that can go awry with a Bugeye. The engines are simple, anyone can work on them—it couldn't be more basic stuff. And the parts are cheap—the parts are still really cheap.

"There are many, many cars that go faster; I mean, I just smile when people ask me how much horsepower these cars have, because even at 43 horsepower you can have plenty of fun in the stock guise. I think everyone who's driven one would agree."



TRICIA BOHANN PHOTO

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a slightly better ride. (Gerry Coker, who worked on the design of the original Sprite, tells me that Donald Healey never considered a longer wheelbase for the car, and I can only assume that it was to keep the car more distinct from the Healey 100/4 in the marketplace.)

All too soon, we're down to one last Bugeye to enjoy: Scott DeBisschop's modified roadster, which wears the nickname "Shelby" for obvious reasons. The car has a thoroughly cohesive and thought-through appearance, thanks to collaboration between David and Scott, who found themselves on the same wavelength.

The Sprite was already wearing beautiful, custom paintwork when David found and bought it. "I thought it had a lot of potential that was unrealized," he says. The prior owner had smoothed the body, shaving off the beading along the tops of the fenders, erasing the parking lamps and rear turn signals, and filling in the U.K. registration plate-shaped recess in back. He had also drilled holes in the rear deck for a Factory Five roll bar, a practice David usually discourages for its hard-to-reverse nature.

David got to work, adding Minilites for a racier appearance. That's when Scott saw the car, and bought it on the spot.

He and David decided to redo the tatty interior, choosing navy blue leather with white piping (rather than the Vynide used by the factory) to complement the exterior, and had the wheels powdercoated in white. They talked about replacing the gauges with modern units, but David had another thought. "We talked about using VDO gauges or some other aftermarket gauge, and I personally think that that's a place where I start getting uncomfortable. Where do you stop using non-British stuff? The dashboard is so integral to the soul of the car, so changing gauges is a bit of a hard line for me." Fortunately, he was able to turn to a gauge builder in England, who was able and willing to refinish correct Smiths gauges in a reverse, black-on-white pattern. It's a subtle detail, and one that took six months to achieve, but it reflects beautifully what this car is all about.

Shelby provides the classic Bugeye experience, only turned up to 11. The black, leather-rim steering wheel is smaller than

the stock wheel, and provides a magnified response to inputs. The engine, again a 1,275, has a performance cam and Weber carburetor, and snarls through a header and a twin-tip muffler. Poke the engine from its lumpy idle, and it makes noises like it wants to be on a race track. The tires, 165s, are slightly wider than the other cars', and provide even more sticking power, and there are disc brakes on the front wheels for better stopping. Is it much quicker? I don't really know. It certainly sounds quicker, and that's enough.

There isn't a car among the three that can't be used and enjoyed, or that won't put a smile on the face of the driver, every fellow motorist and every single pedestrian. Each one honors in its own way the spirit of Donald Healey, who, as Gerry Coker says, "wanted to make a small, simple sports car that a chap could race." And yet, each stands apart as the clear expression of its owner's vision. To those who ask if it's possible to love originality and correctness, and at the same time cherish the idea of an intelligently modified car, these Bugeyes ask: Is it possible not to? 🌐