The front bumper and overriders are extras on the economically priced Sprite. A jacking point is provided at the foot of the scuttle on each side

The days-old advent of the Austin-Healey Sprite is the more welcome because, during recent years, there has been no quantity-produced, true sports model of approximately 1-litre capacity. The advantages of the Sprite's conception are several; for while acceleration and speed at first glance seem modest, the character, behaviour, economy of operation and, not least, the low initial cost combine to make a very rewarding total.

As used in the Sprite, the A series B.M.C. engine has twin S.U. carburettors and extra strong valve springs, and a number of modifications have been made to valves and bearings to ensure that the unit will stand the 50 b.h.p. gross output claimed. With a lower weight (at just over 13 cwt ready for the road) and smaller frontal area than any other B.M.C. model using the A series engine, and with a smooth under-floor surface, the Sprite proves to be a nippy performer for its engine size. The standing quarter-mile figure of 21.7 sec, for example, is less than that of many 1½-litre family cars and, indeed, bettered by only 0.5 sec even by the M.G. Magnette stabledmate. Similarly the mean maximum speed of 80 m.p.h. will hold off the challenges of very many larger-engined saloons. The performance alone of the Sprite shows that the model is much more than a runabout.

As the car is specifically intended to provide enjoyable, sporting motoring at low cost, the financial aspects of the model are particularly important. The basic price of £455, making a home market total with purchase tax of £668 17s, is a good start. To complement this is a minimum m.p.g. figure of 33, with more than 40 m.p.g. readily obtainable when the car is driven in more leisurely fashion. In addition to the choice of engine, wide use has been made of B.M.C. components with resultant economy not only in initial cost but in the price of service and repairs.

The Sprite is at its most satisfying on winding roads, on which its exceptionally good roadholding can be appreciated to the full. With but 2½ turns of the wheel from lock to lock, the Morris Minor type of rack and pinion steering is very precise; at first it feels almost over-sensitive, any trace of heavy-handedness resulting sometimes in the car weaving slightly. But the driver needs to be no more than reasonably sensitive himself to acquire the right touch; this accomplished, the way in which the Sprite goes round corners is a delight—a small movement of the wheel gives sufficient, instant response, and a precise line is held right through the bend. Unexpected bumps do not catch car or driver by surprise, always provided that he does not tighten his grip on the wheel. On wet roads the car remains predictable and safe. The structure as a whole is extremely rigid; even on rough surfaces there is, for example, no trace of scuttle shake.

A clear indication of the superiority of the Sprite in this respect over most family cars—and several sports cars, too—is provided when the little car is on the tail of one of them on a twisty road. During the test this occurred several times, and even while the car ahead was being driven near the limit of its adhesion, the Sprite remained as unruffled as a sphinx. The ride is firm to the point of being a little harsh, in feel not unlike that of sports cars of the classic era. This does not adversely affect road-holding, and the level ride enables long journeys to be completed with a

Luggage accommodation is within the one-piece rear section. Winking indicators are mounted beneath the tail-stop-lamp assemblies.
minimum of fatigue. The bucket seats are well shaped, except that some extra support for the lower part of the back would effect an improvement, as also would greater rigidity in the backrests.

The 948 c.c. engine revs easily up to its 6,000 r.p.m. maximum; attainment of this high engine speed is owed in part to the extra strong valve springs used in this tuned version. However, it is not well served by the gear ratios. First is the natural choice for starting from rest, and while second can be used for the same purpose, this ratio would be better if changed to give higher gearing. The maximum speeds on the three indirects are 23, 37 and 63 m.p.h. The gap between the second and third gear maxima is therefore 26, while between first and second it is only 14. A slightly higher first and adoption of an appreciably higher second would be welcome, although it is realised that the present choice, which results from the use of standard B.M.C. parts, helps to keep down the price. Third and top gears serve their purpose well, and the extra power has not resulted in lack of flexibility.

A well-placed, stubby central lever permits very fast shifts of ratio to be made. The synchronmesh on the upper three ratios copes amply with the potential speed of the change, and the performance of the box as a whole adds to the fun of driving this little car. A stronger safety spring against reverse would make a small improvement. On the car tested the change across the narrow gate from second to third could be affected by catching the opening to the reverse slot; and when changing from third to top as quickly as possible it was necessary to avoid using much pressure to hold the lever to the right, for fear of touching reverse itself. These criticisms appear more serious on paper than they proved to be in practice; they did not slow accurately executed changes. Clutch take-up is just right; the unit will transmit power promptly for fast getaways from rest, while being amply smooth to meet the needs of town driving. To obtain lively performance the gear box needs to be used freely, and the revs kept high. For fast long-distance cruising the Sprite's engine naturally is noticeably busy.

The transmission was quiet, with little sound from the gear box on any ratio, and a silent axle. The sports engine is naturally the major factor in noise build-up, but the volume of sound was considerably less than that of many other sports cars. The Sprite can be driven very quietly in built-up areas, and at speed on the open road the rather pleasant exhaust note is not excessively loud. During the test the exhaust down pipe sheared just below the point at which it is clipped to the manifold. The break was in such a position that a replacement was needed, made up of the complete pipe and silencer assembly. Examination suggested that the silencer and pipe mountings could be modified to reduce the strain at the manifold union. High maximum r.p.m., regularly used, are frequently synonymous with heavy oil consumption. Not so the Sprite tested; at the end of its period with The Autocar the dipstick reading showed that the level was down to the extent of less than half a pint.

With the hood up there is an appreciable amount of wind roar at relatively high speeds; when the hood is down there is less noise, but a fair amount of buffetting by the back draught which results from the size and shape of the generously proportioned screen. The hood and sidescreens fit quite well in their almost new condition, and they proved more effective than their appearance might suggest. In very heavy rain, amounting on occasion to a torrential downpour, very little moisture got past the hood and screen joints,
Ease of entry and exit, even with the hood in place, is good for a small sports car. The dials for rev counter and speedometer are directly in front of the driver. There is a grab handle for the passenger, and a deep pocket in each door.

**Austin-Healey Sprite . . .**

and none at the top of the screen, on which the hood fits snugly.

High quality p.v.c. is used for the hood, which incorporates a large area of clear plastic at the rear, divided into three sections. Erection and dismantling are unusually quick and easy for this type of superstructure, and the design of the hood irons, and their positive location when in use or stowed away, are most ingenious. With the hood up, the strip of p.v.c. under the main section of the rear window interferes with visibility through the mirror, sharply cutting down the range.

The brakes stood up well to fast driving; maximum retardation, checked from 30 m.p.h., proved to be 0.86g, and only the exceptional severity of repeated test applications from high speed caused any appreciable loss of efficiency. The brakes stopped the car four-square, and the pull-up hand brake lever, conveniently placed between the seats, was absolutely positive.

In the design of the cockpit the needs of driver and passenger have been well met. The pedals, gear lever and steering wheel are satisfactorily placed in relation to the driving seat, although some drivers would prefer to be a little farther from the wheel. Through the wheel can be seen the rev counter and speedometer, the latter having a trip as well as total mileage recorder. Between these dials is the tell-tale light for the non-cancelling turn indicators. There are gauges for oil pressure, water temperature and fuel level. With the exception of the limit placed on rearward vision by the hood, all-round visibility is good when the car is closed or open. The Sprite is easy to place on the road, but a slightly higher seating position would improve the driver's vision of the far front wing. The wipers cover an adequate area of the screen, and work efficiently.

Luggage accommodation is unusually arranged, the compartment being reached from within after the backrests of the seats have been folded down. Its shortcomings are accounted for by the competitive price, and the extra rigidity provided by the one-piece, non-opening rear end. Stowage and removal of luggage and the spare wheel are not ideally simple, and oddments, once let loose in the cavity, are difficult to retrieve. However, with the use of soft bags the total volume of luggage which can be carried is greater than one would expect in a sports car of this size.

The luggage space is reached by folding down the backrests of the seats. The mounting of the hood irons is ingenious: the higher slots take the stems when the hood is to be erected

There is a space between the seats and the luggage compartment proper which can take casual accoutrements, and even a young child for short journeys (owing not so much to the shape as to the childish liking for wriggling into unpromising crannies).

Entry and exit are at least up to average sports car standards, although when the hood is up the technique calls for sitting down first, then swinging in the legs. Opening the doors from the outside when the sidescreens are in place is not easy, particularly if the entrant has only one hand free. This is partly because the door handles, which are mounted internally, are rather low and have to be pushed down. The passenger has a grab handle on the facia. Sufficient head room is provided when the hood is up, and elbow room is ample. The upper edges of the doors are horizontal and high in relation to the seating position; this makes hand signalling a little more clumsy than in most sports cars.

Mounting of the head lamps above the bonnet line, dictated partly by the minimum height regulations in the U.S.A., detracts from the symmetry of the coachwork, but the extra height is welcome at night. The range is adequate on main beam and satisfactory on dip. The horn does no more than fulfil legal obligations.

For access to the engine the whole bonnet assembly, complete with lamps, swings up on to two positive supports which are engaged automatically; a third support can be engaged manually for additional safety. The lock and safety catch are not easy to reach, and lifting the heavy assembly would be made less difficult if some sort of hand hold were
Austin-Healey Sprite . . .

provided. Under the bonnet is further panelling to protect the engine from road dirt; the sections running over the road wheels make useful platforms for tools and small parts. Accessibility for routine checks and adjustments is affected by the limited bonnet opening.

A fully exposed fuel tank filler on the rear decking, near one of the tail lamps, takes the full flow of fuel from a garage pump without blowing back. The 6-gallon capacity gives a cruising range comfortably in excess of 200 miles, with a minimum total range of little less when the car is driven really hard.

There is an unusually long list of optionally extra items, some of which were fitted to the car tested. They include such components as front bumper and overriders, rev counter, screenwashers, locking petrol filler cap, and tonneau cover.

The little Austin-Healey Sprite has the sort of charm that grows with acquaintance. It exhibits so many pleasant characteristics on the road, does much more—and does it better—than the specification suggests, and shows every indication of providing many miles of lively motoring at very low operating cost.

### AUSTIN-HEALEY SPRITE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHEELBASE</th>
<th>6' 6&quot;</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FRONT TRACK</td>
<td>3' 94&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>REAR TRACK</td>
<td>3' 60&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>OVERALL LENGTH</td>
<td>11' 56&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>OVERALL WIDTH</td>
<td>4' 57&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>OVERALL HEIGHT</td>
<td>4' 1&quot;</td>
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**PERFORMANCE**

**ACCELERATION:**
- Speed Range, Gear Ratios and Time in sec.
  - 4.32 to 1, 5.65, 11.01, 15.31

**BRAKES (at 30 m.p.h. in neutral):**
- Pedal load Retardation Equivalent stopping in lb distance in ft
  - 50 0.71g 42.5
  - 75 0.86g 39.1

**FUEL CONSUMPTION:**
- M.P.H. at steady speeds
  - Top 50, 54.0
  - 50, 54.0
  - 70, 35.5
  - 70, 30.0

**TEST CONDITIONS:**
- Weather: dry, stiff breeze, at temperature 60 deg. F.
- Road type: tarmacadam. Fuel, premium grade.

**ENGINE:**
- Capacity: 948 c.c. (57.8 cu in).
- Number of cylinders: 4.
- Bore and stroke: 62.9 x 76.2 mm (2.5 x 3.0 in).
- Valve gear: o.h.v., pushrods.
- Compression ratio: 8.3 to 1.
- B.H.P. 45 (nett), 50 (gross) at 5000 r.p.m.
- Torque: 62 lb ft at 3000 r.p.m.
- M.P.H. per 1000 r.p.m. on top gear, 15.4
- WEIGHT: (with 5 gals fuel), 13 cwt (1463 lb)
- Weight distribution (per cent): F: 54, R: 46.
- Laden as tested: 16 cwt (1799 lb).
- Lb per c.c. (laden): 1.9

**BRACKES:**
- Type: Lockheed.
- Method of operation: hydraulic.
- Drum dimensions: F, 7 in diameter; 1 in wide.
- R, 5 in diameter; 11/16 in wide.
- Lining area: F, 20.7 sq in; R, 30.7 sq in (76.6 sq in per ton laden).

**TYRES:**
- 5.20 x 13 in.
- Pressures (lb sq in): F, 18; R, 20 (normal).

**TANK CAPACITY:**
- 16 Imperial gallons.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>PRICE (basic) with two-seater body, £445</th>
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<td>British purchase tax, £223 17s.</td>
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<td>Total (in Great Britain), £668 17s.</td>
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<th>DATA</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ACCELERATION</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>M.P.H. to 1</td>
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<td>sec.</td>
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<td><strong>TRACTIVE EFFORT:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SPEEDOMETER CORRECTION:</strong> M.P.H.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Car speedometer:</td>
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<tr>
<td>True speed:</td>
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**Width:** 5ft 9in.
**Height:** 4ft 11in.
**Ground clearance:** 5in.
**Frontal area:** 13.3 sq ft (approximately).

**ELECTRICAL SYSTEM:** 12-volt; 43 amp-hour battery.

**SUSPENSION:**
- Front, independent, coil springs and wishbones. Rear, quarter elliptic, anti-roll bar.

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Scale 1in to 1ft. Driving seat in central position. Cushions uncomprised.