

If 2021 was the old road from the 'Bridge back to Adelaide, we must just about be passing the Eagle on the Hill and about to round Devil's Elbow for the straight shot into 2022. So, as the Year That Was wends its way to its inextricable conclusion and think positive thoughts about what 2022 will bring, we still need to glance into the rear-vision mirror or take a last fleeting look over the shoulder and think about what the passing of the year that was and what we might have missed. It is, after all, a no stopping zone and we can't pull over and have a picnic as the world keeps revolving towards next year!

So, what was 2021? Well, if you owned a MGF/TF you might argue it's the COVID Silver Anniversary for that model – that's 25yrs + 1 for lockdowns. The cheeky little mid-engine car that reminded the world that Rover/MG still knew how to mass produce a great two seat sports car, even if it took the Germans to kickstart it and the Chinese to re-fire it, but it is undoubtedly one of the great affordable modern sports cars. A spiritual replacement to MGs of past? Maybe. Sure, it might have been beset with issues with the K-Series engine early in life and the suspension isn't exactly bullet proof, but would it be an MG if it didn't come with some quirks and areas for enthusiasts to improve on? I nearly bought one of the first ones to arrive in Melbourne (1996 or 97 maybe?). Took it for spin around the Melbourne back streets. The ones they had received had a A/C unit that took up half the space of the passengers footwell which wasn't ideal and the trim in the brand-new car clearly had fit and quality issues so I stuck to owning my Mk3A Sprite (which itself fell victim to the arrival of my first daughter a year or so later, not an unfamiliar story to many). Besides, like the Sprite, it was going to sit in the shed whilst I was at sea and consume registration and insurance at a horrendous rate ... or so I convince myself now, 26 years later, wishing I'd bought one. For the record, about 118k F/TFs were made so it was no flash in the pan in terms of production numbers and if recent car sales are anything go to by, the values are starting to swing upwards which is a sign of a car in demand. Like Midgets really....

2022 will have MGB enthusiasts around the world will be all a-lather as they froth at their collective mouths over the 60 years of the MGB. And rightly so – over half a million cars and even a rebirth 15 years later with another 2000 RV8. One can only image what might have been if Aston Martin had been able to buy the brand in 1980. Next year also marks 60 years of one of the most important British cars behind the mini, Austin 7 and the ubiquitous Morry Minor; the Austin/Morris 1100/1300 series. With over 3million cars built, it's a significant car in automotive history. Like any BMC car of the times, it suffered badge engineering with the MG 1100/1300 being the most popular of the 'badge engineered' versions (including Wolseley and Riley amongst others). Just about everyone knows someone in their family who owned an Morris 1100 at some stage of their lives and, yes, I'd love one. They built well over 100k here in Australia. Even a station wagon version!!

For the history buffs, 2021 also marks 60 year since Yuri Gagarin the Alan Shepard made the first tentative steps into Space, Brabham drove the first mid-engine car at the Indy 500 (finishing 9th) and a Studebaker won the Armstrong 500. And, of course, Hawthorn, the greatest AFL club, won its first of 13 VFL/AFL and 9 night/pre season premierships. But it's another 60th anniversary that is rapidly disappearing in the rear vision mirror of 2021.

This year is 60 years since the MG brought the Midget name back and launched one of the most underrated yet quintessentially British sports cars in history. And numbers don't lie. Nearly 230k Midgets were built including about 1200 here in Australia built alongside the MGB. If you add in the Austin/Austin Healey Sprite numbers its around 355k cars. Sadly 2021 also marks 50 years since Australian Midget production ceased (indeed 2022 is 50 years since the close of all MG production in Australia).

Oh, I can hear the usual grumbles of the M and T-Series types ... "it's not a Midget" ... but I'd argue that the Midget/Spridget is the embodiment of everything that the T Types were. Simple, small, some might say cramped, yet 100% fun to drive. I had a MGB for a short period and it was a beautiful car to drive. A true, affordable, grand touring machine. I'd drive one anywhere. Yet, give me the choice, and I'll choose my Midget. Incredibly rewarding cars to really drive and not unlike Dr Who's TARDIS ... bigger on the inside! Oh-so-very-low, quick handling, fast through corners, and importantly, it feels far faster than it really. As the MG moto says - Safety Fast! I honestly don't think there are many equivalent (affordable) classics that will keep with a well driven one on winding road. Until maybe the road straightens out that is! I often tell people that you don't so much sit in it, you slide into it and strap it on around you, like a giant roller skate, and off you go. Just don't use the term strapping on and Midget in the same sentence ... it can get strange looks. Some car names are destined never to be re-used (talking about putting a supercharger a Midget draws equally worried looks!).

To pull the "that's not a Midget" thread a bit further, the origins of the original Midget was, according to the MG Car Club (UK) Midget Register, a *'baby sports car based on the then newly released Morris Minor'*. Leap forward about 30 years and the Sprite, then Sprite/Midget and you have a baby sports car, albeit initially developed by Healey for Austin, using the parts and underpinnings from the Austin A30, A35 and ... Morris Minor. Some of the most endearing handling features of the Midget are because need to adapt suspension and drivetrain components from more humble cars.

I find the story of how the Midget came about interesting as it's more than BMC deciding to put an MG badge onto a Sprite. By 1960 was recognition within BMC that the replacement for the venerable T Type (the MGA) was an altogether more advanced ... and expensive ... car than the TC/D/F that it had replaced and it had moved up in the market to a wealthier consumer, meaning there was a gap they were no longer filling – they needed a 'budget/baby' sports car. The distinctive looks of the Bugeye (ok, Frogeye for those about to pound the keyboard and tell me it's a Frogeye in the UK) was falling out of favour with the market and, in response, BMC directed Healey to re-design the front end to a more 'conventional' look was needed. Those familiar with a Bugeye will know there is no boot lid – the boot is accessed from behind the seats (some might say this is an endearing feature!). Without telling Healey what they were doing, BMC also directed MG to re-design the rear of the car to incorporate a conventional boot. It was only good luck (and not good management) that both companies became aware of each other's design brief and the result was a combined effort. The similarities between the resultant Mk2 Sprite/Mk1 Midget and the yet-to-be-released MGB can't be overlooked. And that's not a bad thing either! In the Home and US markets, the Midget Mk1, launched a month or so after the Sprite 2, was an 'up market' version, with the Sprite for evermore being the lower priced 'basic' version (except in Australia) and with the Midget receiving the higher trim etc. Other than that, they are, for all intents and purposes, identical. Here in Australia for CKD production, it was a little different, with only one model being produced, the Sprite between 1960 and 1966, then the Midget from 1967 through to 1971 and all Australian cars here benefited from the higher trim levels, irrespective of the model.

Even Bowie appreciated the Midget (or at least his cameraman did) using one on his Ziggy Stardust album dust cover.

I did a bit of research about Australian production. Australia built around 9000 MGBs between 1963 and 1972 (and about 2000 MGA before that). Between 1960 and 1971 we built some 4780 Spridgets. To be exact, 1184 were Midgets, all of them the 1275cc Mk3 variant and all built between 1967 and 1971, mine being the second youngest known survivor. The switch from Sprite to Midget came about because by 1966 the Austin Healey brand was deemed less desirable than MG. The switch to

the 1275cc powered Mk3 Midget was the re-branding point, with production officially commencing in 1967, although the first sales were most likely in early 1968. It wasn't a simple switch in the CKD deliveries either. The 1275cc engine overcame many issues of the previous 1098 but it came with its own challenges, most of all cooling in hot climates. BMC invested a lot of time and money testing 1275 powered Midgets and Minis here before introducing them and as a result, all Midgets (and Cooper S Minis) came with an oil cooler as standard to help the engine survive an average hot summers day. Other components fitted as factory standard here rather than an optional extra in the UK sale catalogue, included the likes of standard wire wheels and a front sway bar, but it's the inclusion of a standard oil cooler (and that BMC/Leyland Australia 'rotodipped' the bodies for added corrosion protection, unlike their UK counterparts) that demonstrate (to me anyway) that BMC Australia/Leyland Australia were smarter than maybe the Ford/Holden/Chrysler fans give them credit for (or indeed did the UK company HQ).

It doesn't take long reading the social media forums to realise many international enthusiasts have no idea that Midgets (or MGs period) were even built here, let alone the differences, as a UK based MG magazine recently demonstrated in their article about Australian built Midgets. Several mentions of the different paint codes and colour pallet used here in Australia, but not a word about the fundamental differences between the production runs. Maybe I'm the only person to whom this might be interesting!!

Australian Midget production wound up in December 1971, followed shortly after by MGB production in 1972 and with it, the close to the history of Australian built MGs. Why was the production halted so rapidly? One factor was sales of the Midget. It took so long to introduce the Australian Midget (late 1967) after the Sprite production line was closed (mid 1966) the market moved so the Midget was possibly not the sales success it could have been. People bought the B or looked elsewhere. Local content rules changed in 1972 with higher tariffs where local content was below 85% (Midgets and MGB apparently hovered around 50%). I've also read claims that MG lines were closed to free up production capacity for the P76, another car that could have been great but was interfered by a head office half a world way and ultimately failed. The truth is probably in the records that Leyland Australia destroyed as they wound up the P76 program as quickly as they introduced it.

In the UK, the Healey name disappeared from the Sprite and eventually the Sprite model altogether in 1972 but the Midget soldiered on until 1979. It finally gained an all-synchromesh gearbox in late 1974 (the Midget may well have been the last production sports car in the world to be made without full synchro!) but that also came at the expense of the A Series engine when it was replaced by the Triumph 1500 engine to meet US emission regulations. In 1978 came a 3.7 differential and the revs at highway speed finally dropped. With over 73000 of the 1500cc version built, mainly for the US market, it was something of a renaissance sales success. Some will argue that the 1500 engined car is the easiest to live with but it also rides higher than the original (to pass US crash requirements apparently) and the change to the 'rubber' bumper which never worked as well on the diminutive Midget as it does on the 'B. Why they didn't put an overdrive gearbox in with the change to the 1500 is beyond me. Perhaps it was a final act by BL to ensure that the Midget stayed one notch below the Spitfire in the market. Have you ever wondered why both the MGB and the Midget copped the massive black bumpers from 1974 onwards, whilst the Triumph Spitfire managed to retain it a variation on its delicate chrome bumpers in the home market and that the US cars only copped the black monstrosities from 1978? Triumph lead BL management nepotism to the last maybe?? Why they competed BMC v Triumph derived models against each other in the UK market throughout the 1970s is beyond me and is surely the subject for marketing degrees everywhere but it's all just another chapter in the mysteries of British Leyland I guess and, ultimately, part of its downfall.

But, then again, keeping the Midget slightly below the Spitfire in terms of performance is probably no different to the decision not to put the full Cooper S spec 1275 into the Mk3 Midget as, at that time, it would have outperformed the MGB, and I'm sure BMC couldn't have that..... 😊

The Australian involvement with the Midget doesn't stop there though. Many Sprites and Midgets around the world have been converted to five speed gear boxes, one of the most popular (and earliest) being the addition of a Toyota T50 from a Corolla. The use of Toyota boxes in Spridgets started here in Australia. The popular UK based Frontline Engineering conversion, possibly the most popular used today, is a direct development of the work started here; they now use a Ford derived gearbox as the venerable T50 is now a bit like Rock Horse excreta and very hard to find ... and highly sought after by many car builders (like pesky clubman owners who are hoarding 2 or 3 as racing spares...). Mine has what appears to be a very early T50 conversion, possibly done by Dr Bob up in Sydney. Funny story ... mine was sold to me as a 'highly original Midget' and I drove it back down the highway after I bought it mindful that highway speeds was up around 4000 rpm in a Midget. It came with documentation back for at least two previous owners back to about 1996 and at every stage it was sold as a 'highly original' Midget and advertised as a '4-Speed' car, so I do wonder how many of the previous owners knew it had an overdrive.

In terms of value, like all cars recently, the prices have shot up over the last two years. Not all that long ago a Spridget was hugely affordable. You'd get a project car for a couple of thousand (or less) and a fully restored car would go for \$10-\$12k (or a bit more if it was a Bugeye Sprite). Now, a project is going to set you back \$8-10k, a solid runner \$15-20k and a restored car, as with a 'B', the sky is the limit. Top cars have gone for between \$30-\$50k recently. Crazy prices maybe, but they are few and far between these days (good ones at least) but I think they are still good value as a project or just as a car to own and enjoy. Like the B, there are plenty of parts available and companies around the world still making parts for them. And for those like me who like to continually 'improve' on the model, the sky is the limit.

It's 60 years since it was launched and 50 years since the last one was built here. Two significant milestones for 2021 that we shouldn't let pass by unacknowledged! I often tell people at MGCCSA meetings - you get the opportunity, have a look at a Midget or a Sprite. If you can manoeuvre yourself into it, take one for a spin. And I encourage them to look at our calendar and come out for a run and stop and talk. Mind you, of all the members there, there are only 3 or 4 Midget owners + a few MG1100s. At the end of the day, it's being able to talk to like-minded car owners and enjoy each other's company ... and the cars!