

1936 Riley Sprite

A tantalizing delight of a car, once glimpsed, never forgotten

By Roger Barlow

Usually I write only about cars I have owned or at least driven. Not so with the greatly admired subject of this page that was met and known only through the pages of *Autocar* in 1937 when the wife and son of the managing editor took one (with 10,000 miles on its odometer) on a trip to Italy and wrote a well-illustrated article about it. Those photographs of the Riley are still clear in my mind ... like a lovely woman's portrait, once seen in a gallery, then haunting one through the years.

The nearest I ever came to this car of fond memory was 40 years later when, while being driven in the area of the National Theater beside the Thames, I spied a Riley Sprite traveling on a parallel road to which there seemed no access. It was as beautiful and desirable in 1977 as in *Autocar* of 1937. Even more so. No longer now in black and white, this pristine beauty was vibrantly alive in brilliant scarlet. As new and as young as if it had just departed a London showroom floor that afternoon. It even lived up to its name, for it moved with true sprightly grace among the mostly drab and clumsy sedans cluttering up its pathway. Then, suddenly, it was gone ... like a dream ... like the sprite it was. Swallowed up in seconds by the first wisps of evening fog drifting up from the river. Though, for another moment or two, the crackle of its exhaust came back above the hum of traffic like a friendly but sad farewell.

Ah, me. Infatuation is never an easy state! Automotively speaking or otherwise.

As I said, I never drove a Riley Sprite. But, oddly enough, I drove Rileys that were on either side of the Sprite in time.

One day in 1946, as Van Dyke and I were talking in the entrance to our shop area, we were startled by the improbable sight and sound of an honest-to-God Brooklands Riley Nine two-seater turning in from the street and coming to a halt near where we stood. My partner, assuming from the looks and sound of the battered and scruffy little machine that repairs of some kind were urgently needed, stepped forward to ask if we could help. The young man untangled him-

self from his fragile transport without dislodging anything. Then, with a grin and an agreeable accent, announced that he was a mechanic and had just arrived from England ... to work for us! Van Dyke and I exchanged a quick understanding glance before he voiced both our thoughts: "If you



In 1936 the Riley Sprite represented quite a break in sports car styling

drove that car across the country, there's no doubt about your ability. You're hired!"

When Phil Payne reported for work the next day he invited us to drive his well-traveled rickety Riley. I treated it gingerly, as befitted its age and condition, but it was plain to see how this model gained its reputation for liveliness. It was light and its not-very-quiet, 1100cc, four-cylinder engine (with a two-bearing crankshaft) thought it was supposed to get the rev counter needle up near the red line with just a touch of the throttle.

This was the first of the famous Riley engines having inclined valves in hemispherical combustion chambers. The valves not operated by twin overhead camshafts but by a pair of cams in the block. One on each side, mounted high so as to keep the pushrods as short and light as possible. The rockers, too, were light and compact. An excellent design concept for a high-revving, performance engine that really made Riley's reputation and was continued in one larger form or another (with more main bearings) right up to the demise of the company in the late '50s.

On the other side of the Sprite in time was the post-WWII, 2.5-liter Riley. This big four, with the same valve arrangement as the Brooklands Nine, was still a lively and sporty engine. Robust and durable, it had many characteristics endearing enough to Donald Healey that he built a couple of

his first post-WWII sports cars around it. I met him and sampled his first prototype Silverstone when he showed it at Geneva in 1948. Later we imported the more curvaceous 2.4 Healey along with the fairly entertaining normal Riley sedans and the truly ugly and ungainly Roadster, which were, unfortunately, flawed by generally poor quality control and some less-than-commandable design features such as a clutch pedal that invited cold water to squirt up the driver's left leg on a rainy day!

Never having driven the car that was so often in my memory, that memorable Riley Sprite, I'm not honor-bound to report on leaks, rattles or whatever mundane faults it may have had. Few, though, were com-

mented upon by testers at the time. The chassis was praised as being remarkably stiff, which was not true of most 1930s sports cars. Its suspension, like that of the SS 100, MGs, Squire and many others of the time, was stiffish semi-elliptics all round. Beam axles fore and aft. So the Riley Sprite could not have been at its best on cobblestone streets or washboarded roads. Nevertheless, there were important

virtues inherent in its old-fashioned suspension: precise steering, flat cornering, predictable handling at the extreme edge.

The Sprite's engine, though only a 1500cc four, endowed this two-seater with a very creditable top speed just on the exciting side of 90 mph. A top speed more than adequate for the time, as it was about the same as the 2.5-liter Jaguar SS 100 (properly the SS 90).

The appearance of the cars we dream about (or never forget), like the ladies we dream about (or never forget), is fortunately a matter of individual taste and so is subject to considerable variation. (For which, God be praised, else we might all be in each other's dreams.) The Riley Sprite, despite its traditional British cutaway doors, was in 1936 something of a break with contemporary English sports car styling with its sweeping, full-length (rather than cycle-type) fenders and, especially, its neatly (charmingly?) rounded backside in place of the usual slab-type gas tank with the spare mounted upon it.

A remarkably pleasing amalgam of two styling approaches that, less deftly executed, might have been less than pleasing.

Oh, yes. The lovely red Sprite that momentarily materialized before melting into the evening mists (and memory) was driven, most appropriately, by an equally lovely lady with a gaily flowing green scarf. ■