

Spitfires at Le Mans

by David Blumlein

1959 was a significant year for Britain's motor industry. Aston Martin not only won at Le Mans but also became the first British manufacturer to win the World Sports Car Championship. For private car owners three important models were launched during the year: the Austin Seven / Morris Mini-minor, which quickly came to be known collectively as the Mini, was something of a revolution from a British factory; Ford, much more staid, revealed the Anglia 105E with its 'reversed' rear window but more importantly its superb over-square OHV engine which stormed the Formula Junior ranks when breathed on by Cosworth, and the Triumph Herald which was to spawn the very successful Spitfire 2-seater three years later.

The Herald was unusual at a time when most manufacturers were embracing the idea of unit-construction bodyshells – it used a separate chassis to which were bolted, not welded, the different sections of bodywork. There was a simple reason for this: there was no company available to build unit-construction bodyshells for Standard-Triumph, their earlier supplier Fisher and Ludlow having been snapped up Leonard Lord's BMC organisation and, as he said, he was not going to spend his company's money gearing up to supply the Standard Motor Company!

So Standard-Triumph (S-T) had to fend for themselves by buying up smaller companies where and when they could and in the meantime rethinking their design policy. In fact, the idea of a separate chassis increasingly appealed to their engineers because it offered a comparatively cheap way of offering a variety of body styles. The Herald, on its announcement, proudly displayed its facility for quick replacement of its basic body parts!

By this time Triumph had, of course, been producing the very successful and appealing range of TR sports cars which were notching up plenty of victories in racing and especially rallying and when Austin-Healey introduced their smaller sports car, the A-series-engined Sprite in 1958, this encouraged S-T to think upon similar lines with a Herald-based car that would be relatively simple and cheap to produce. Thus was born what was known in-house as the 'Bomb' project. Early in 1960 work got underway on a chassis that was 8.5 inches shorter in the wheelbase

than the Herald but 3 inches longer than the Sprite; in fact, the frame was made much more rigid and differed entirely in detail from its forebears.

Then came crisis for S-T! Basically the company was too small to compete with its rivals and was facing bankruptcy but salvation came in the nick of time with a takeover by Leyland and the newly appointed managing director, Stanley Markland, gave the go-ahead for the 'Bomb' to be developed. Sankeys produced the chassis and Forward Radiator (now part of S-T) in Bordesley Green, Birmingham were to make the bodyshells. The prototype had the 948cc engine of the initial Herald but an 1147cc 63bhp unit was soon being tried out in a short-wheelbase Herald convertible. It all came together for the 1962 Earls Court Motor Show by which time the 'Bomb' had become the 'Spitfire'. There were significant British car launches at that show as well, the Morris 1100, Ford Cortina, Lotus Elan and MGB also making their public debut. But the Spitfire held its own with its welded bodywork, twin SU carburettors, front disc brakes and winding-up windows. It was to prove a sales success and within a year or so was outselling its deadly rival, the Sprite / Midget range, the rivalry soon extending to the world of competition.

A works prototype car, registered 412VC, was used for some toe-in-the-water research and entered in some rallies, obtaining a second place in the 1964 Welsh Rally but S-T had reformed its Competition Department in earnest for the 1964 season and cars were constructed both for racing and rallying, the former turned out in "British Racing Green" the latter in the powder blue that the works TR4 had used in rallies in 1962/63.

The racing cars were aimed at Le Mans and fell into the 1.3 litre category of Group 3 (Grand Touring) where they could expect opposition from not only the Sprite / Midgets but the French Alpine / Renaults, Bonnets and Italian Fiat-Abarths. It was estimated that 100bhp would be required to be competitive based on an analysis of what rivals had achieved in 1963. Stretching the OHV four, which was derived from the 803cc motor of the 1953 Standard Eight, brought plenty of blown engines in early testing and reliability was obviously going to be of paramount importance.

The Le Mans cars had all-aluminium shells to which glass-fibre



Spark 'die-cast' SPK1410
Triumph Spitfire - Le Mans 1964
Hobbs/Slotemaker

fast-back tops were grafted. No, they did not set the style in this respect for the forthcoming GT6 – they copied the prototype GT6! TR4 gearboxes were used, stiff suspension helped to make them handle and the engines were given cast-iron cylinder heads, the whole unit being heavily reworked to squeeze out 98bhp from 1.1 litres with the help of twin-choke Weber carburetors.

The first car was taken to Oulton Park where Fred Nicklin, Triumph's chief tester, was joined by David Hobbs and Peter Bolton; they had to abandon the test after 65 laps with a total loss of oil pressure. Shortly afterwards two cars, still without the faired-headlamp bonnets which were not ready, appeared at the Le Mans Test Day where they performed very encouragingly and by the June four cars (one a spare) were transported to the Sarthe circuit. They were entered as prototypes which enabled the engineers to have more scope in their detailed preparation.

In the race, the white-nose car of Rothschild and Tullius (car no. 49, reg ADU1B) retired early on when the former lost control and crashed at the Dunlop bridge; the red-nose Hobbs / Slotemaker car (no. 50, reg ADU2B) came home in 21st position overall and 3rd in class, beaten by two Alpine-Renaults but perhaps more interestingly 124 miles ahead of the Austin-Healey Sprite! The third car of French drivers Jean-Louis Marnat and Jean-Francois Piot (car no. 65, reg ADU3B) with a yellow nose suffered an unusual retirement: some altercation had taken place at Tertre Rouge which damaged the rear panel giving access to the spare wheel. This in turn had fallen off letting exhaust fumes unknowingly into the car. Marnat, thus poisoned, came slowly weaving past the pits, hit the pit counter and careered into the Dunlop bridge on the outer side of the track.

The two French drivers made up for their disappointment later that year when one of the rally cars (ADU5B, car no.51) was entrusted to them for the Paris 1000km race at Monthéry where they came

home the first GT in the 1150cc category.

For 1965 it was to be first a visit to the Sebring 12-hour race where GT6 gearboxes were fitted. Peter Bolton rolled ADU1B but the other two cars of Barker / Feurhelm and Tullius / Gates scored 2nd and 3rd in class behind... the special Midget of Hedges / Mac, the only time in international races where the Midget / Sprites beat the Spitfires! Then onto Le Mans for the last official works appearance of the race cars.

The cars were 110lbs lighter with thinner gauge chassis frames, the smaller GT6 all-synchromesh gearboxes, smaller rear brakes but armed with 109bhp. Four cars were entered and they raced as homologated GT cars. The Bradley / Bolton car (ADU2B, car no.53) retired early on when the front oil cooler split, letting all the oil leak away, and the Hobbs / Slotemaker car (ADU1B car no.52) came off the road while too generously letting a faster car through at the tricky White House bends. However, the other two entries both finished, taking the first two places in their class: Jean-Jacques Thuner and newly-signed Finn Simo Lampinen (ADU4B, car no.60) were 13th and Claude Dubois and J-F. Piot steered ADU3B (no. 54) into 14th, beating all the Alpine-Renaults this time.

And that talented Finn, Lampinen then jumped into his specially-built Spitfire with left-hand drive (reg AVC654B) to tackle strong opposition in the Alpine Rally and managed to win outright the prototype category!

The Spitfire was finally destined to have the final say over its BMC rival: when the admirable A-series engine just could not be stretched above its 1275cc capacity to produce more power to overcome the increasingly strangling emission demands, the decision was taken (for both marques were British Leyland-owned by then) to fit the 1500cc version that had been developed for the Spitfire into the Midget – now wasn't that a triumph!