



Bob Skelton was the most successful driver in the Midget, taking many class wins. Here he is driving at Oran Park in 1968. Photo by Autopics.com.au

Aussie Pocket Rocket

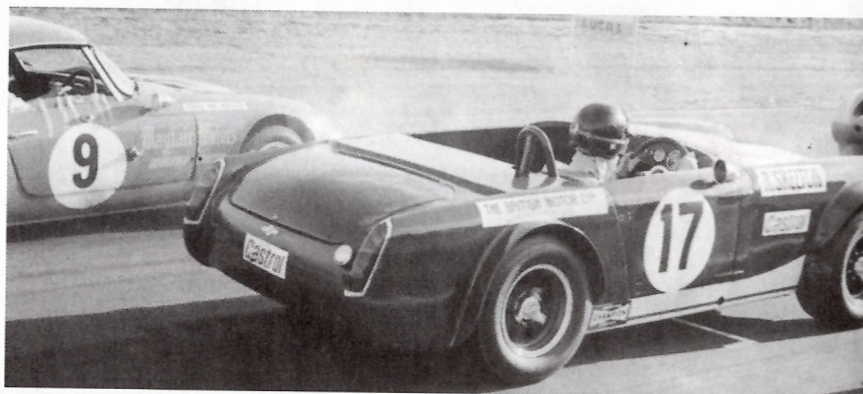
This racing MG Midget was built in only three weeks and surprised many people out of the box, but was sidelined when a tiny part failed. Now it storms the tracks again, is winning new admirers and rekindling past memories wherever it races. In the first of a two-part story, Craig Watson fills in the background and details its first two years of life.

PHOTOS USED WITH PERMISSION, AS CREDITED.

On 3rd September 1967, Surfers Paradise was to play host to the second running of the Rothmans 12-Hour Sportscar Race, billed at the time as the longest endurance race in Australia. BMC Australia had already entered its lightweight Mini, driven by Bob Holden and Don Holland. Almost at the eleventh hour, BMC Competitions Manager Alan Kemp decided to enter another car: a lightweight racing MG Midget, mainly to promote the soon-for-Australia road version.

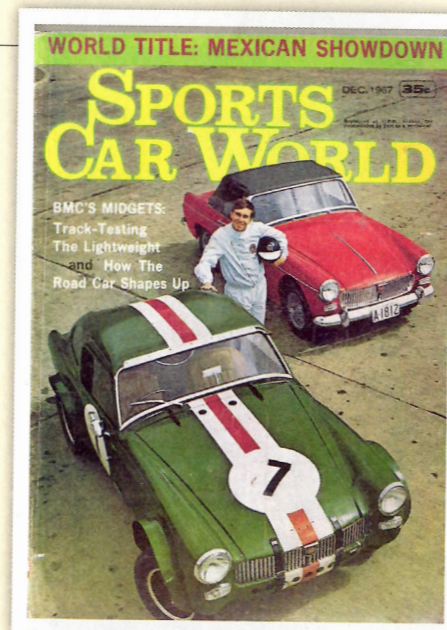
Privateer Sprites had been competing successfully in Australia since they had first arrived in the country, so it was no surprise that the Competition Department at Waterloo felt that a factory-prepared car could be at least as successful. The chosen drivers were Brian Foley and John French, a logical pairing because they had driven the lightweight Mini in the previous year's event, finishing sixth overall.

A box of special competition parts duly arrived from Abingdon. Included



ABOVE: Without roof or windscreen, the car remained competitive for the rest of the 1968 season. Here it is at Warwick Farm. Photo by Autopics.com.au

RIGHT: A photo from the pages of *The BMC Rosette* [the company's in-house newspaper] of drivers John French (left) and Brian Foley during the 1966 Surfers Paradise 12-hour, when they finished sixth outright in the Works lightweight Mini [facing page].



ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT: Brian Foley featured with the Midget on the cover of *Sports Car World* in December 1967. The only known colour photo of the car during the Surfers Paradise 12-hour – then billed as Australia's longest endurance race – here seen in the paddock before the race (Photo courtesy John Cotter). Programme cover for the Surfers Paradise Speed Week, which culminated in the 12-Hour.

were numerous aluminium panels, a dry-sumped competition engine and close-ratio gearbox, adjustable competition shock absorbers and a set of knock-on Minilite magnesium alloy wheels. It is a common belief that Brian Foley brought the parts back from the UK on BMC's behalf. Foley certainly made numerous trips to the UK and regularly brought back parts for his Minis, but says he has no recollection at all of organizing parts for the Midget. Alan Kemp, Terry Douglas and John Cotter believe the parts came directly from Abingdon, and Kemp believes it was probably BMCA's publicity chief and rally supremo Evan Green who organised them.

Terry Douglas and John Cotter were the two mechanics responsible



ABOVE: In an effort to keep the car competitive, Skelton ran it in late 1968 without roof or windscreen. Photo by Autopics.com.au



ABOVE: The Works lightweight Mini during its construction in mid-1966. This is the car that French and Foley drove in the 1966 Surfers Paradise 12-hour. Photo by Autopics.com.au

for building the car. The chassis was probably a former press test car (which would mean an earlier model Sprite) that had been sitting around for some time in the Experimental Department. As the race was late in 1967 and the decision had already been taken to discontinue the Sprite in favour of the Midget, it was decided to make the car the MG version. 'It was a very basic car,' Cotter recalls. 'We built it from a bare chassis, minus all the wings, with the rails out the front. It was the firewall, floorpan and boot type of thing. No rear wings on it at all.'

Looking at the one photo that exists of the car under construction it is clear

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« that the aluminium panels included at least the front wings, the front panels and the bonnet shut panel. Photos of the car today show holes in the inner front and rear wings have been pressed rather than drilled like many others on the car, so it is likely these came from Abingdon as well. The doors were flimsy, single-skin aluminium with a box section frame. The engine appears to have been built to Group Two specs in the UK, bored out to 1310cc or 1330cc with, according to *Sports Car Word* magazine: 'Cooper S type bottom end and head, 12:1 compression and the factory rally cam - No 648.'

Since the decision to enter the car in the 12-Hour had come only three weeks before the race, a marathon effort was required just to get the car built. 'It was bedlam,' Cotter remembers. 'One night I slept in the storeroom of the Competition Department, on a pile of rags, because we finished at 4 o'clock in the morning.'

Despite the short time frame, there were areas on the car that came in for some serious modification - MGB disc brakes at the front, with Austin Lancer (Wolseley 1500) rear drums and front anti-roll bar for starters. The front coil springs were replaced with torsion bar suspension. Alan Kemp remembers this as being Terry Douglas' idea, as Douglas also recalls. 'I don't know what I was thinking, I just got this notion in my head that said forget coil springs,



ABOVE: BMC also loaned the car to journalist and racer Midge Whiteman for a number of events in the Ladies' Championship at Oran Park in 1968. Here she follows Christine Cole in a lightweight Mini. Photographer unknown.

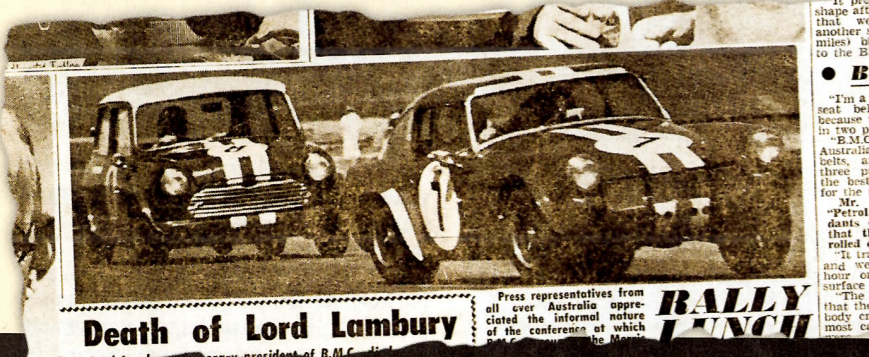
we're going to go torsion bar. Alan just said if you want to do it, go and do it.'

The fibreglass hardtop was made by J&S Industries, who worked with BMC on many projects and had a range of hardtops available for MG and Austin-Healey. With the Works lightweight Mini already on its way up to Surfers Paradise, it was touch and go as to whether the Midget would be ready for the big race. The MG was finished (or at least put together) by early Friday

morning, and the team packed up and drove straight to Surfers, arriving Friday evening. 'It was a great relief to see the hastily prepared MG Midget arrive late on Friday,' RCN reported.

Douglas recalls Foley driving the car for the first time. 'He was amazed. He said he got down the straight to the first braking marker, put the brakes on then accelerated again [before the corner]. Then the next lap he went down to the second braking marker, still stopping well before the corner. He said: "The brakes on this thing are unbelievable." It proved itself time and time again. What you lost down the straight on the top end, you made up for in braking. We had the big wheels on it, of course, and with big fat rubber it didn't lock brakes

LEFT: A photo from *The BMC Rosette* showing the Midget and the Works lightweight Mini during the 1967 Surfers Paradise 12-Hour.



ABOVE: Bob Skelton leads the Buckle LMS lightweight Mini of Lakis Manticas in a Sports Car race at Oran Park in 1968 - the site of many of the Midget's class victories in that year. Photo by Autopics.com.au



ABOVE: BMC loaned the car to TV actor Leonard Teale for an event at Castlereagh drag strip in 1968, and gleaned plenty of publicity for the Midget. Photo by Autopics.com.au

or anything.' The major problem found with the car was a tendency to lift a back wheel, which caused axle tramp. This was reportedly cured by setting the rear shocks to their maximum hard setting, but the car remained difficult to handle and often then lifted a front wheel on cornering.

Despite having been built virtually from scratch in three weeks and arriving untested at Surfers Paradise late on Friday, a few practice laps on Saturday saw some tweaks, but otherwise the car was looking very promising. According to *Racing Car News*: 'Alan Kemp appeared quite pleased with his little special... The car was quickly sorted, and consistent lap times around 1:25 for both drivers augured well for the coming marathon.'

That time was good enough for fourth place on the grid, four places higher than the Mini (at 1:29.7), but because of its late arrival the Midget had not actually set a qualifying time and had to start from the back of the grid. The race featured a Le Mans type start, and John French got cracking. He was in the lead pack as he crossed the start-finish line level with the eventual winning Ferrari. Just for fun, there was a Dymo label message stuck to the top of the Midget's dashboard, which read: 'Please sound horn when passing Ferrari.' Unfortunately there wasn't much likelihood of the horn getting any use, with the Ferrari lapping around ten seconds faster than the Midget.

French soon settled into sixth place, but a broken fuel line early on caused the loss of a lap. Another stop caused by a broken rocker shaft saw the Midget slip further down, but French charged back through the field. By 1pm he was in fourth place, three laps ahead of the next competitor.

He got two lucky breaks in quick succession in the fourth hour, when the leading Porsche Spyder slid off the track into Armco and the third-placed

Lola T70 had to pit with overheating problems. The Midget was suddenly in second place outright! RCN continued: 'Foley took over the MG Midget at 1.35 (PM) after a quick brake check, and the car, despite its hasty preparation, was running splendidly and seemed set for a high placing.' Then disaster struck. Coming up to 4pm and the halfway point of the race, the Midget suddenly lost oil pressure and headed into the pits. The problem was diagnosed as failure of the oil scavenger pump in the dry-sump system.

The engine was quickly converted to wet-sump and the car sent out again, but the damage had been done and Foley brought the car back into the pits, officially retiring at 4.20pm. Works mechanic John Cotter explains what happened. 'A scavenger pump was fitted onto the back of the block, where a mechanical fuel pump would

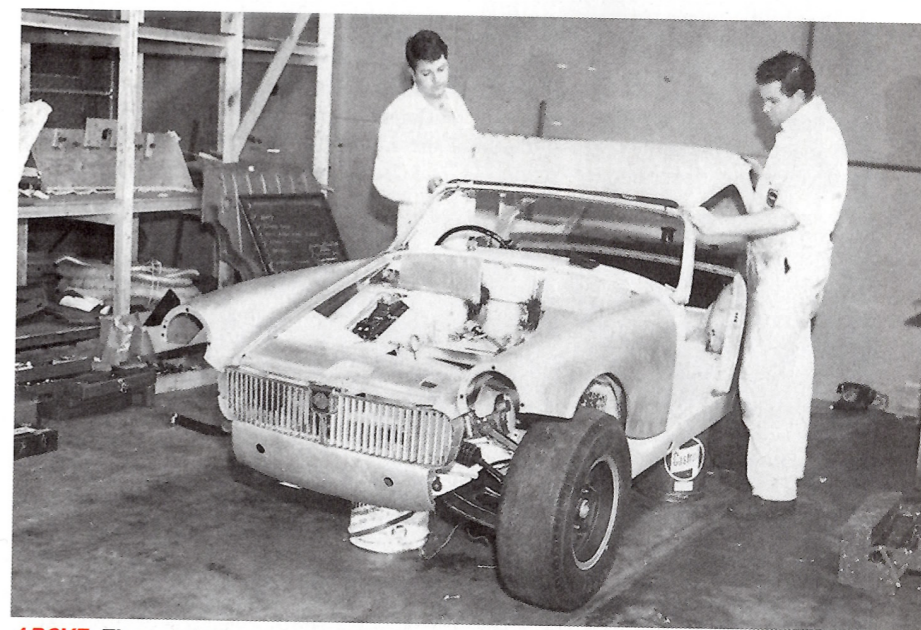


ABOVE: In 1966 BMC Australia entered a special lightweight Mini, which finished sixth overall driven by Brian Foley and John French.

Photo from The BMC Rosette.

normally bolt on. It had a little gear on the shaft of the pump that ran off another little gear on the camshaft. There was a little roll pin that went through the gear and that roll pin sheered off. We don't know why. The pump never seized up or anything as was reported, it was just a minor thing. Getting it back out was just a matter of changing the hoses as it still had the other oil pump in the back of the camshaft, so it was only a matter of plumbing to convert it straight over.'

Meanwhile, the Mini continued on reliably and finished a very credible fifth outright and second in class. Although it had retired, the Midget had shown its potential and had been ahead of much more favoured cars - including Porsche, Lola, Lotus, MGB, Cobra, TVR and others - before its failure. Having been prepared in such a short time, it speaks volumes for the work



ABOVE: The only known photo of assembly of the Midget at BMC Australia's Competition Department, showing the roof and some of the aluminium panels being trial-fitted. The team mechanics were John Cotter (left) and Terry Douglas. Photo courtesy John Cotter.

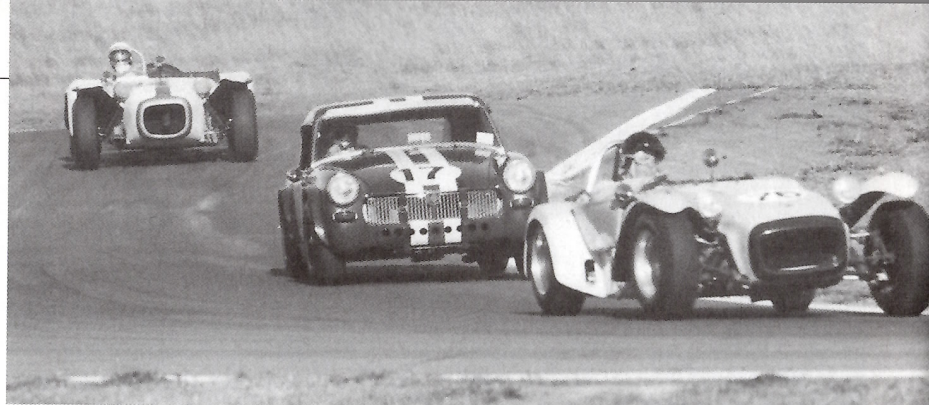
Racing Midget

« by the BMC Australia mechanics and the drivers, that the Midget did so well, particularly as it was a part from the UK-sourced engine that had let the car down rather than anything done locally.

After the race, the Midget was returned to Waterloo, but delays in more parts from the UK meant it was some weeks before repairs could be made or the handling issues sorted, as explained by *Sports Car World*, who had tried in vain to organise a full test of the car. 'The parts for the Midget, together with the engines the overseas drivers had ordered for the Total Rally, were off-loaded at Bombay because of a bomb scare,' they reported. 'The result was a completely immobilized Midget and little chance of a test before our magazine deadlines finally expired.'

Some time in late 1967 or early '68 a test day was held at Oran Park, with a number of BMC-supported drivers given the chance to drive the Midget. Don Holland, who had started racing in a Healey but was best known at the time for his success in Minis, said the Midget was a complete handful. 'I had a drive of it, but I couldn't. Everybody who had a drive kept spinning it, and I spun it once. Skello [Bob Skelton] and Laurie Stewart were the only ones who could drive it. Then Graham Jackson, who was helping me at the time, went out with them on another test day. He swapped some wheels around and that seemed to fix it. I never drove it after that was done, but I think that made a better car out of it.'

Bob Skelton admits the car was a handful in the beginning, but it was quickly sorted out and he was selected to campaign the car for BMC in the 1968 season. It certainly seemed to suit his driving style, described by *Racing*

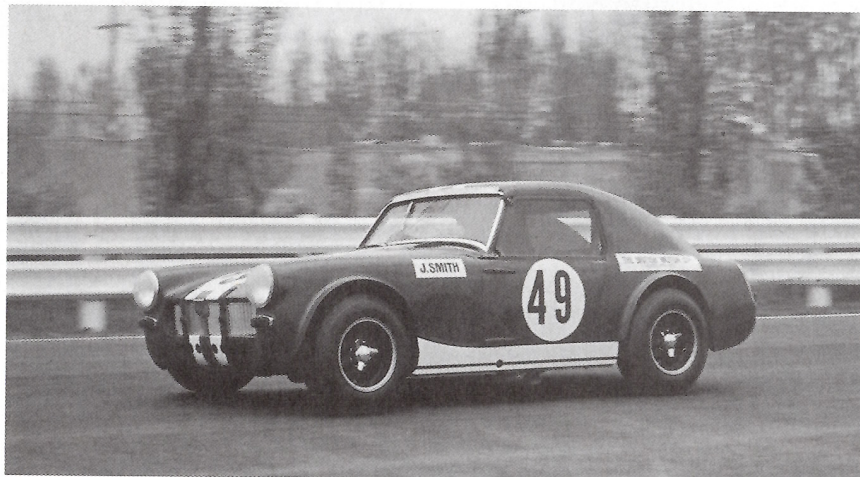


ABOVE: Bob Skelton and the Midget tackle a race for Sports Racing Cars at Oran Park in 1968. Photo by Autopics.com.au

Car News as 'aggressive.' 'If ever a driver was underestimated by the Australian public, it was Bob Skelton,' the magazine mused in 1986. 'The man had the ability... to drive to its limit almost any car he put his bum into.'

Skelton certainly had many successes in the Midget, mostly in its class, but there were numerous outright results as well. Sprite racing and tuning legend Bob Rowntree, who raced against Skelton at the 1968 Bathurst Easter meeting, vividly remembers Skelton driving the car, saying: 'He was competing against some very well prepared and well driven Lotus 23s and he was level pegging with them all the time, they couldn't get away from him. It was absolutely fantastic that car, and he was a real eye-opener. The car always went fantastic with Skelton driving it.'

But Skelton wasn't the only person behind the wheel of the Midget in 1968, with a number of people being given one-off drives. These included Leyland Works Mini drivers James Smith in Victoria and John French in Queensland. Timo Makinen was also listed to drive the car at a night meeting at Oran Park in October 1968, but is



ABOVE: Victorian Works driver James Smith giving the Midget a run at Sandown Park in 1968. Note the different roof. Photo by Autopics.com.au

Midgets in Australia

Although released in the UK in June 1961, effectively an up-market version of the Mk2 Austin-Healey Sprite (released one month earlier), the MG Midget was not available in Australia before 1968 – BMC Australia saw no sense in trying to sell two almost identical cars under different brand names. As the original Frogeye Sprite had been assembled from kit form at Pressed Metal Corporation in Enfield since 1959, PMC continued to build the Mk2 Sprite there as soon as this became available.

BMC Australia, which already had a 30% stake, bought PMC outright in early 1968 and transferred all sports car assembly to its main factory at Waterloo. As this more or less coincided with the release of the 1275cc-engined Mk4 Sprite and Mk3 Midget, the decision was taken to only produce the MG version alongside the MGB. Thus, all Sprites assembled in Australia came from the Enfield factory, while virtually all Aussie Midgets, except the first three months' production from November 1967, were assembled at Waterloo, and the Midget was only ever available in its 1275cc Mk3 guise.

not listed in the results. Journalist and racing driver Midge Whiteman did drive the car, though, and continued in it from time to time in the Ladies' Championship at Oran Park.

Even the Aussie actor Leonard Teale had a drive of the Midget, organised by BMC publicity maestro Evan Green. 'I think he raced a production car himself, and he showed some interest and we thought the publicity he would generate warranted it,' Kemp remembers. 'That was at Castlereagh drag strip,' adds Cotter. 'We just took it up there and the drags were on, but it was a one-off.'

Next issue we'll pick up the story after the Leyland takeover, and bring you bang up to date with this Midget.