

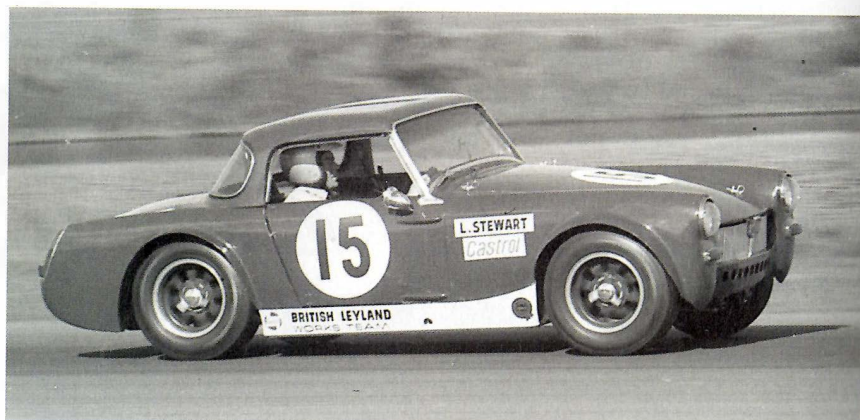


# Back from the dead

Craig Watson brings us up to date with the life and times of this well-known racing Midget. It's fair to say the car has enjoyed ups as well as downs!

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Last issue, we explained how this Midget was built by BMC Australia in just three weeks to race at Surfers Paradise in September 1967. It surprised everyone by being competitive straight out of the box, and then led an active life on track through 1968. However, Leyland took over BMC in 1968 and in early 1969 they closed down the Competition Department at Waterloo, New South Wales. Comps Manager Alan Kemp moved into the Public Relations and Advertising Department, while John Cotter (one of the two mechanics who had built this Midget) went to work for John Lindsay in Quality Control. Terry Douglas, the other mechanic



**ABOVE:** Sydney driver Laurie Stewart had a brief flirtation with the Midget at Warwick Farm in 1969. Stewart said the car needed a lot of development, as it had been sitting idle for some time. Photo by Autotpics.com.au



**LEFT:** The car as bought by John Read in Adelaide. Photo courtesy Frank van der Worm.

**BELOW:** Freshly arrived in Brisbane, Queensland, with its replacement J&S fibreglass fastback roof. Photo courtesy Frank van der Worm.



**LEFT:** The car languished in the backyard of Les Carne for about five years. Photo courtesy Les Carne.

responsible for building the Midget, says it still had a lot of potential for 1969, but admits the Competition Department closure was inevitable. 'The car itself still needed a lot more development work, but we were running out of money. We were actually robbing from PR and Advertising just to keep the Comps Department going,' he said.

Cotter agrees money was a big issue, but says Leyland just wasn't interested in motorsport. 'Things were tight. We did most of the stuff in-house except

balancing and some of the machining. The apprentice school did a lot of it for us, so everything was done on the cheap, or as cheap as we could possibly do it, which was a pity because we had to cut a lot of corners. Castrol was prepared for us to build three cars, one to run in Victoria, one in NSW and one in Queensland, and they had the budget ready for it, but Leyland said no.'

After the Comps Dept closure, the car languished for a while before being taken over by Brian Foley Motors for Laurie Stewart to drive. 'It had been sitting idle,' Stewart recalls. 'It seemed like a hell of a waste. Somebody said something to someone and it was suggested that we, as Brian Foley Motors, take the vehicle, prepare it for

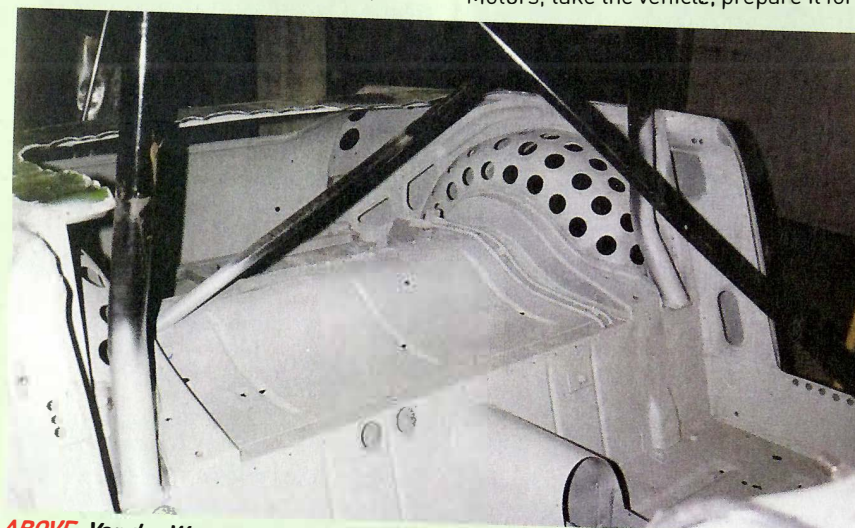
racing it and run it. I drove it. I wasn't all that comfortable in the car and I only raced it in a couple of events. I seem to recall it needed a fair bit of development because technology was moving at a pretty quick rate and it just wasn't as competitive as we would have liked. I think we put the matter to Leyland, that we needed some development dollars for this, but they weren't forthcoming. We said: "Well hang on, do we really want to spend that sort of money?" We didn't. They didn't. So we packed the car up and sent it back to them, and I think that was the end of it.'

For that short interlude the car raced under the banner of the British Leyland Works Team (the only time it did). Interestingly, the hardtop roof on the car by this time was a conventional Midget item, rather than the elegant and arguably more aerodynamic J&S fastback version. It appears that Stewart raced the car once with the hardtop at Warwick Farm, and once without it at Catalina Park.

## Abandonment and Rescue

The Midget was virtually abandoned at the Waterloo factory. Evan Green, meanwhile, managed to syphon enough money from his PR budget, topped up with sponsorship from Castrol, to keep a rally programme going and to provide limited support to the 'official' racing team of privateer drivers.

The Works Midget was earmarked to be destroyed, but apparently ended up at Les Carne's place. Carne was racing another Midget, and while not officially sponsored by Leyland he knew the right people there, and in 1971 would join the Leyland Young Lions Racing Team. That has led many people to believe that the Works lightweight and the Young Lions



**ABOVE:** Van der Worm wanted to restore the car as accurately as possible to its Surfers Paradise specification, which meant keeping all the holes pressed or cut out and not replacing the rear firewall. Photo courtesy Frank van der Worm



« Midget are the same car, which wasn't the case, as Terry Douglas explains, saying: 'We built Les's car to the same specs, except there were no aluminium panels on it. That was the car which became the Young Lions Midget.'

Parts from the lightweight that did end up on Carne's Midget included the MGB disc brakes and uprights, the close-ratio gearbox and LSD, and possibly the engine. The wheels may also have been on Carne's car, but they reputedly ended up on Ian Corness' MGB Superbee, also in the Young Lions, which was regarded as the world's fastest MGB at the time.

What remained of the Works Midget, basically a bare shell, languished in Carne's back yard until about 1976 when it was bought by R. Stokes from Blackwood in South Australia. He put it back together, removed the factory sponsorship and raced it in Group D Series Production Sports Cars in 1976



**ABOVE:** Today the car is raced by John Robertson in Queensland for owner Neville Mansfield, and gets a lot of support from locals. Photo by Darin Mandy, Digital Realism.

and 1977, but the car was deemed ineligible and had to then race in Group A Sports (Racing) Cars, although it was very uncompetitive by this time.

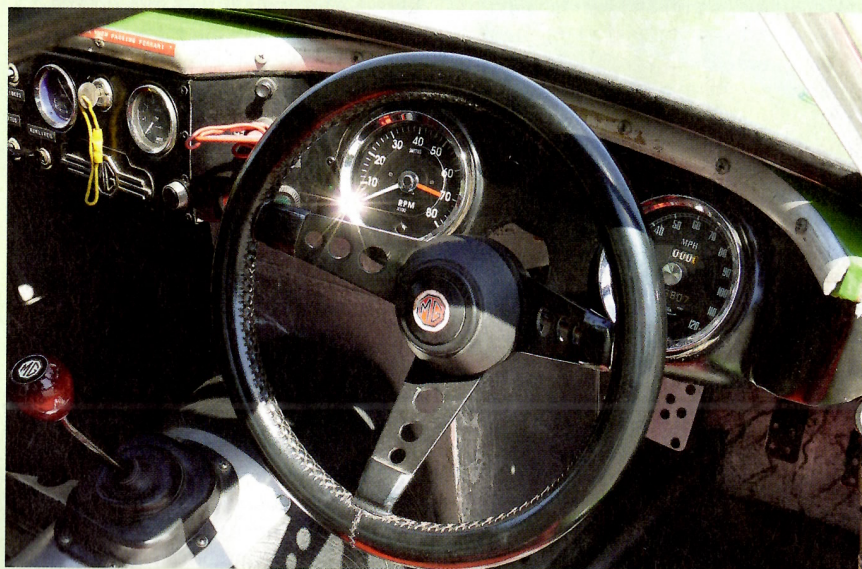
It was then bought by John Read from Adelaide, who raced it until 1983, when he sold it to Frank van der Worm from Perth. 'The car was running as a Group A Sports Car,' relates van der Worm,



**ABOVE AND LEFT:** Frank van der Worm fitted a modified Midget dash to make the car look more like a Midget inside. Note the Dymo label on the top dash rail, which is copied from the original used in the 1967 Surfers 12-Hour race and says: Please sound horn when passing Ferrari.

'with no roof and no windscreen. It was running wide composite wheels with slicks and the flares had been opened up, and it was running a hot 1098 motor with a Sprite gearbox. It would have been hopelessly outclassed running in Group A against big-bangers and anything else that came along which wasn't a production car.'

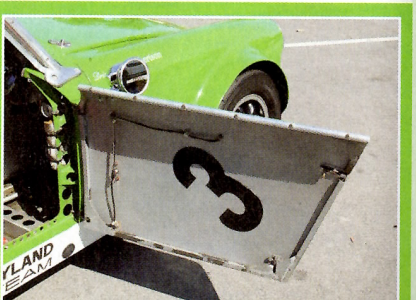
Van der Worm worked for Budget Rent-A-Car and moved to Brisbane as State Manager in the mid-1980s.



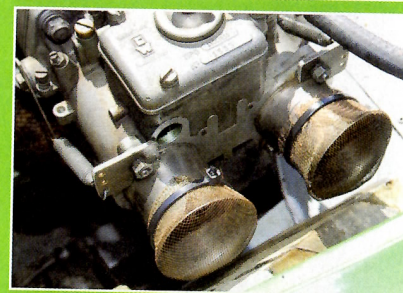
**ABOVE:** Although the car was originally built as a Sprite, BMC Australia raced it as a Midget because the Midget replaced the Sprite on the local market in 1968.



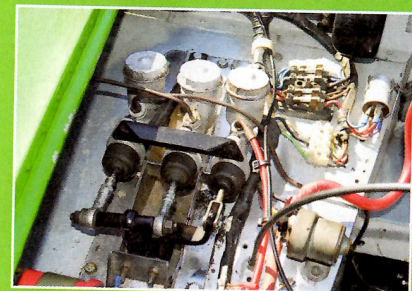
**ABOVE:** British Leyland took over BMC Australia in late 1968, but the Leyland signage only appeared on the car when race by Laurie Stewart in 1969.



**ABOVE:** Like so much of this car that was built for a purpose, the doors are flimsy aluminium and offer the bare minimum of comfort or protection.



**ABOVE:** The 'filters' on the Weber 45DCOE carburettor are only there to keep out sticks and stones.



**ABOVE:** Three master cylinders because two could be used with a bias bar for front-to-rear brake adjustment.

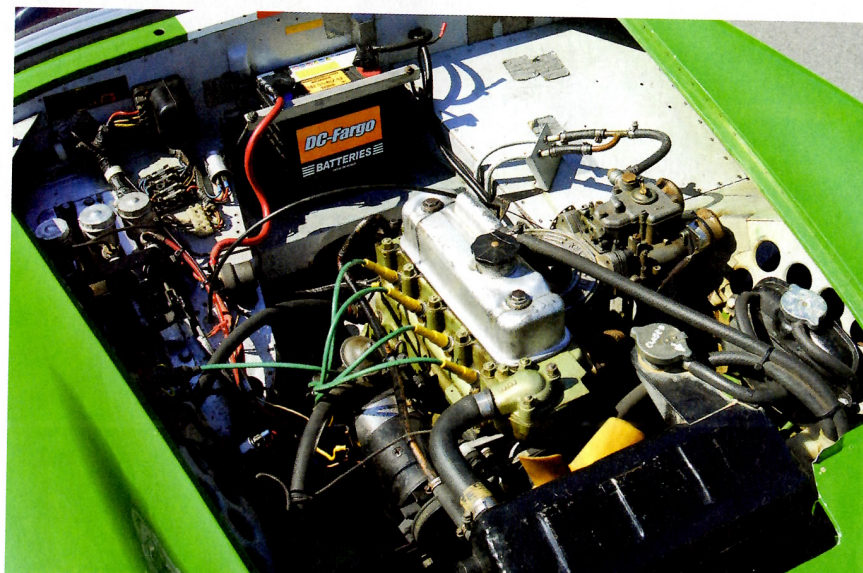


**ABOVE:** Holes were cut into every possible place to reduce weight.



**ABOVE:** Driver's-side footwell, showing how the floor was lowered. Note the front suspension torsion bar.

'I picked the Midget up from Adelaide on my way through and trailered it up to Brisbane,' he says, 'and I then restored it under my house. The aluminium bonnet, the bootlid, all the floor panels behind the seats were pressed aluminium, including all the gusseting, and they were all original BMC pressings. It didn't have the J&S fastback on it anymore, so I bought one of those secondhand and put it on - I



**RIGHT:** Neville Mansfield shows off the lightweight aluminium bonnet - one of a number of alloy panels shipped from the UK especially for the car.



actually bought that when the car was still in Adelaide.

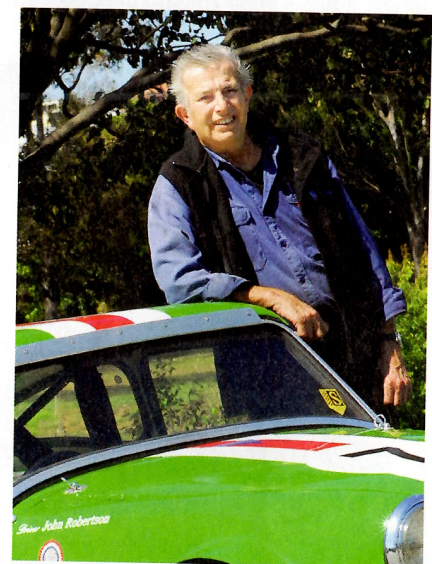
'They ran it with the roof on at Surfers, and in that photo on the cover of SCW it's got the roof on it, and that's how I presented the car to CAMS (Confederation of Australian Motorsport). All the Sprites in Marque Sports race with an aero screen, but this car ran with a windscreen and the fastback, and that's the way I wanted to run it because it set the car apart. It was more indicative of the way the public remembered the car.'

The two areas that van der Worm intentionally changed were the seats for safety and comfort, and the dashboard - fitting a modified Midget dash in order to 'make it look more like a Midget when you look inside the car.'

Van der Worm wanted to race it in historic Group O, which is for period race cars, but had difficulty getting it CAMS certified. 'The only issue with that was they didn't think it was a special and originally thought it was a production Midget that had been modified,' he explains. After digging up what information he could on the car, he was able to show it was built by the factory Works team as a racing special and got the car log-booked for Group O. 'I got it finished and prepared to race at Amaroo Park and Surfers Paradise, and then they closed the Surfers track. It had its first race at the very last race meeting at Surfers, in 1987.'

Van der Worm then raced the Midget at historic meetings over the next few

years, mostly in Queensland and NSW, before taking it back to Perth where he found the car was virtually unknown. 'I just couldn't bring myself to get enthusiastic about it here in Perth,' he says, 'and the Midget just sat around. Nobody over here really knew what it was, so I thought it was time for the car' »



**ABOVE:** The Midget's current owner is Neville Mansfield, who is proud to own a car with such a special history.



## Racing Midget

« to go. I had it 14 years, did everything I wanted to do in it and had a lot of fun.

I really appreciated having a car that had genuine history attached to it. The intrinsic value of that car was never lost on me, even though it never raced in Western Australia. When I took it to Sydney, to Amaroo or Oran Park, a lot of people would come up to me because they knew the car and they would talk to me in the pits. In Brisbane a few people knew it because it ran at Surfers, but a lot more people in Sydney knew the car.

### A New Life

In 1998 Queensland Neville Mansfield heard the Midget was for sale. He'd seen it in 1987 at Lakeside (Brisbane) and knew a little about it, so organised to buy it through Tony Bennetto, from the Bugeye Barn in Melbourne. Mansfield has run the car since then, but with other people driving it for him, though at the time of writing it had been off the track for a couple of months for some much-needed engine work. These days it is driven almost exclusively by John Robertson, who owns Lionel Otto Instruments in Brisbane. 'I did five or six years of Formula Vee racing,' he says. 'Neville came and watched me a fair bit, and then he asked if I would like to drive his car. I thought, brilliant!'

Robertson says the car is still a handful, but after more than 15 years of racing it he is pretty used to it. 'It's got its challenges,' he laughs. 'Engine-wise it's a beautiful engine, it's really strong, built by Freddy Sayers, but because it's an aluminium car of the period, it has a huge amount of body flex. It's quite tricky sometimes, getting

**ABOVE:** Previous owner Frank van der Worm tracked down a rare J&S fastback roof that matched the original one which had been used in 1967 but later lost.

it to straighten up through corners and prevent oversteer/understeer. The suspension still has its challenges, mostly because of limitations in what you're allowed to modify, because you're not allowed to put any big internal roll cages in that might help its structure.

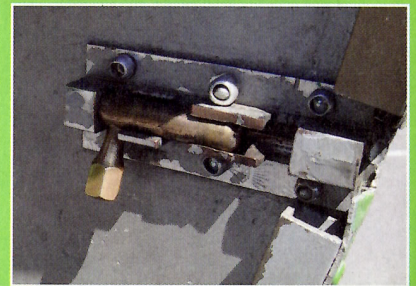
'I guess I drive it 9½ tenths and probably pull back a bit when there's other drivers around me that I don't know too well. But if I know the driver well, I'll drive wheel to wheel. You've got to be able to trust the person beside you,' he says.

'One of the really good things I like about driving this car is people remember the car,' continues Robertson. 'You just get so many people come up to you in the pits and talk about it, which is really nice. I think it's quite an honour to drive a car with that sort of significance. It's something special.'

Yes indeed. This Midget is historically



**ABOVE:** Another weight-saving feature was the removal of the rear firewall.



**ABOVE:** The doors are held shut with two cabinet bolts; crude but effective.



**ABOVE:** Early-style grille, no bumper and holes cut into front apron all helped to keep the weight down.



**ABOVE:** John Robertson has had the privilege of driving the Midget for the past 15 years or so, and considers it an honour to drive such a significant car.

significant in Australia and a fine example of what was being done by the small but enthusiastic Competition Department at BMC/Leyland in Sydney. It is very popular whenever seen at events today, and is a good way to educate anyone who thinks the history of Australian motorsport revolves solely around Holden and Ford.