

GROVE CLOSE,
NAPTON,
OXFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND
RUGBY.
TEL. SOUFRAX 225.

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PROFILE:

1954 AUSTIN-HEALEY

by S. C. H. Davis

THE AUSTIN MOTOR COMPANY LTD
LONGBRIDGE BIRMINGHAM

3000 GROVE



2 THE AUTOCAR, 1 APRIL 1955

A SPORTING CAR FOR THE YOUNG AND FOR THE YOUNG IN HEART

Since its introduction the Austin-Healey has set a standard in sports car styling, with its pure and unflamboyant lines

By
S. C. H. DAVIS

PROFILE :



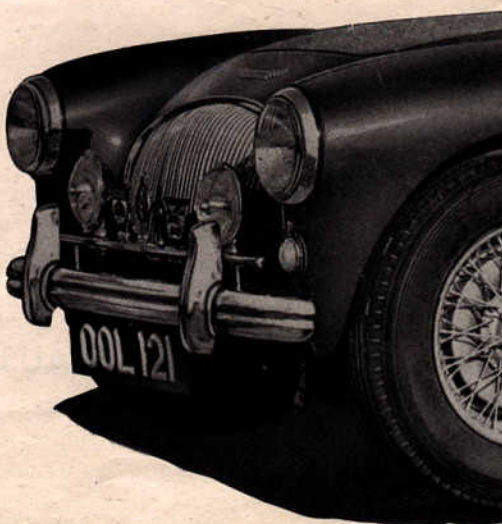
A well-matched pair; "Sammy" Davis, with familiar beret and duffel-coat, in the car

IF you analyse the reasons why a friend buys a car which he has selected you often find that the decision has rested on characteristics that were not only unappealing to you but also anything but obvious.

Now the Austin-Healey appealed to me because I had had a fast run of over 300 miles in one which suggested the possession of two things I particularly value. It was comfortable and it was quiet—or rather it could be driven quietly in spite of its performance. Once in the driving seat I felt comfortably secure; felt that I could place the car just where I wanted it to go; decided that the machine would jump to it when I wanted to overtake a string of merchant vehicles. The run proved that it could put fifty in the hour and I liked the quality of the cruising at 60-70 m.p.h. Little things interested once the premier requirements were established.

Now all of us who have had years of experience testing every kind and type of car retain the fear that the impression left after a test may not be fully confirmed if you subsequently buy the car. Not even a week of testing will disclose whether the machine will or will not develop those irritating defects whose elimination can cost a mint of money. Still, it seemed to me that any firm as big as the British Motor Corporation was unlikely to sponsor a car which was unreliable, while I knew that their spares and service system was good (which, as far as I am concerned, is a decisive factor in selection). Finally the cost was of vital importance, for although one might like a Bentley Continental or a Mercedes 300SL, one can have only what one can afford, particularly when the hell-hounds of Inland Revenue help themselves to so much of one's hard-earned money. Summing everything up, I liked a host of things. Some I was doubtful about: the electrically-operated change into overdrive on second and top, for example, and the odd position of the gear lever.

A few I did not like: for instance, the fuel filler within





Unobstructed vision, clear road ahead and a well laid-out instrument panel—the ingredients of amusing motoring

1954 AUSTIN-HEALEY

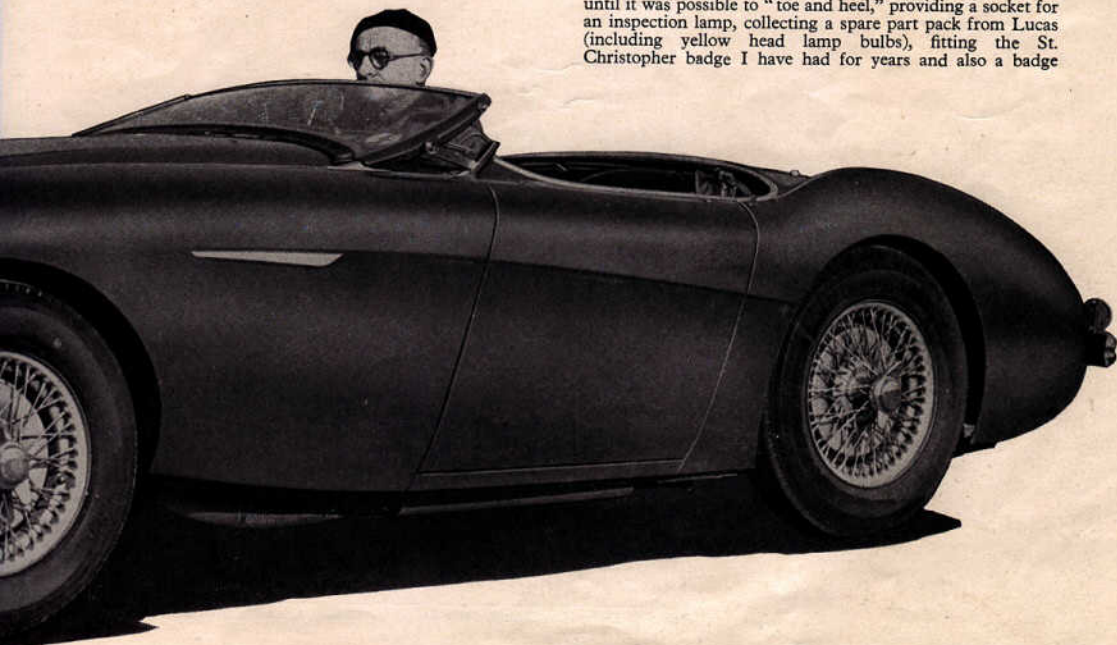
the luggage locker, the absence of starting handle, ammeter and clock—and the darned old-fashioned hydraulic jack.

So there we were, and when the opportunity arose to acquire that very car then came also the chance to see how right or wrong the original opinion had been.

First there were two matters of importance: inspection of the doubtless-well-substantiated cost of certain spares for my youngster's Healey led to a panic enquiry as to Austin-

Healey costs and, secondly, inspection of the beautiful little low-built green car when delivered disclosed only one fault. Now I have had a great deal to do with inspection, therefore am probably pernickety; but in the first of my post-war cars there were eight faults and in the second five. Moreover, the fault this time was only that the spare wheel tyre was not inflated, so this was encouraging.

Next came fitting out: this consisted of mounting a clock and ammeter on the fascia board, adjusting the throttle pedal until it was possible to "toe and heel," providing a socket for an inspection lamp, collecting a spare part pack from Lucas (including yellow head lamp bulbs), fitting the St. Christopher badge I have had for years and also a badge





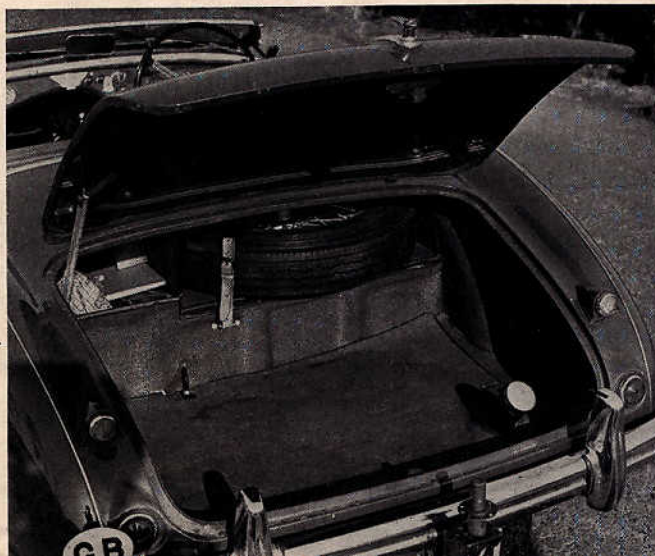
With the hood up and the rigid sidescreens in position, the car is proof against the winter and does not lose any of its good looks

bar. On this bar were arranged a Lucas "flame thrower" lamp of the smaller size, companioned, at that firm's suggestion, by a flat-topped beam fog lamp. As to badges, the car will normally wear two, but for full-dress can take six, varying according to the job in hand or the country. Covering the tail pipe was a chromium plate addition, rusty pipes being unsightly. A GB plate and an attachment for towing "Beelzebub" were added. ("Beelzebub" is the author's 1897 Léon Bollée tricycle.—Ed.) Tool kit, a fire extinguisher, and so forth were then put aboard and the task was finished. Well, there we were, and I must say the car is a little peach for my work, which is mostly solo, usually entails 100 miles to a run—often 200 and sometimes 400—as a rule in a certain hurry. At the end of 400 miles there is no sense of fatigue, which is the best testimonial to a car I know. We can express *joie de vivre* on curves safely, no screech coming from the tyres, and it seems difficult *not* to put over 40 miles

into an hour. The brakes are fine—even the hand brake—the steering light but certain; you and the car are one. With the aid of the high ridges above the front wheels the width is easy to judge in the awkward entrance to my garage and I now like the gear lever position and movement. There is plenty of room in the cockpit, which is unusual for a sports car on racing lines, and though it is awkward for passengers to get in or out, that troubles me not at all! I know how it should be done.

Five speeds are amusing, though I am still experimenting to see how to make the overdrive change absolutely smooth. The fore and aft visibility is first class, so that no "hostile" vehicle can take station on the quarter unnoticed (though several have tried in 30 limits). Opened, and with the screen down in its racing position, I can get all the fresh air I want; closed it is snug by reason of a most efficient heater. The view astern is magnificent as the rear window is very wide indeed. Of all the cars I have ever owned this is the easiest to wash, including, funnily enough, the wire wheels of which I was doubtful.

There is room for plenty of luggage, again an unusual point for this type of car; the hood and side curtains are quickly stowed or erected, and though it hasn't happened yet I know that the locker will be flooded with fuel one day as a result of overflow from the internal filler. Except for the propeller-shaft joint nipples it is easy enough to service the car and carry out regular maintenance and that goes for the engine auxiliaries as well. There is more room for maps, guide books, and the paraphernalia I carry than on any other car of the kind I have had, but—though this is an advantage—less



Room for plenty of luggage, though the locker could be flooded by an overflow from the filler

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AUSTIN-HEALEY . . . continued

room for the dog. I still want a starting handle, having been almost caught when the battery was a bit down after three weeks' rest while I was away, and I still dislike having to grovel if the jack has to be used.

Petrol consumption at the speed at which I drive is a gallon to 24 miles, less when pottering about. For an ash tray which can be used for a pipe (rare accessory) I am duly grateful.

Now, you may notice that some things so often considered to be of vital importance have not been mentioned. Maximum speed for example, and time taken to reach



Guardian of a succession of fast cars through the years; the author's St. Christopher badge

60 m.p.h. from a standstill. Well, maximum speed interests me very little, though I know this car can attain 110. What I want is miles in an hour, not miles per hour for a moment, and as to acceleration from a standstill the bare idea seems horrific and expensive, let alone the fact that we are always left at the post in getting away from traffic lights, having a preference for starting only on the green (not that we are tail-end Charlie a few seconds afterwards).

Efforts by drivers of other, often smaller, sports cars to take the Mickey out of the Austin-Healey cause amusement, because at the end of 100 miles they may or may not be there, and mostly aren't ahead. After all, many years of



Towing attachment for Beelzebub, the author's 1897 Léon Bollée tricycle; and a shiny tail pipe

racing make one disinclined to "dice" on unclear roads.

Tyre pressures are important; you can bring the tail round with the throttle nicely, and inexperience might find that the curve ahead was being taken at 70 m.p.h. instead of the estimated 40, wherein lies danger. On ice and snow you can have a lot of fun and the long straights in France are just the job for this type of car; also the head lamps are good enough for the speed, which is something.

Finally—though this is just naughty pride—the car attracts attention wherever it goes, which means that you have to drive more carefully and keep thoroughly awake, for any error, however slight, will result in, "look at that lunatic with a racing car; oughtn't to be allowed," and so on. I don't say there are not more exciting cars if you have £3,000 or more to spend, but I do say that this car suits me for the particular kind of drives I prefer, and certainly it is an enjoyable car to drive for the sake of driving which, after all, is the purpose for which it was built. And it is amusing to note that the opinions formed during the original test are, in the main, confirmed, even if experience has proved that some things thought to be difficult to handle turned out to be much easier on longer acquaintance.

And, by way of epilogue, it is good to recall that this car would never have been born, or might have had a different name, had it not been for the perfervid enthusiasm of a youngster with a garage at Perranporth, in Cornwall, who became involved in high adventure with those fantastic two-cylinder, air-cooled, A.B.C. cars; who subsequently won the Monte Carlo Rally with the kind of car no normal person would dream of going to the Riviera in, then ran into foreign trains and generally learned the hard way to make a car for himself. Or for the violent obstinacy of a delightful engineer who spent much time trying to design an egg-poaching machine but lived to gain a knighthood, ruling the huge works known by his name.

Donald Healey and Sir Herbert Austin.

And if it hadn't been for the fairy godfather quality of one Sir Leonard Lord, the car might not be in my garage at this moment.

The familiar pipe indicates attention to detail—an ashtray on the shaft tunnel



