

## “Hootie” The Bugeye – by Jim Borkman

### The Purchase

One day a few years ago I was cruising E-bay looking at British cars for sale. To my delight I happened upon an Austin Healey “Bugeye” Sprite for sale in Herkimer, NY. The Bugeye, known as Frogeye in the UK, so named because its headlights are prominently mounted on top of the bonnet. The Bugeye is also known for its appearance of a smiling face with its distinctive grill coupled with the protruding headlights. At the time I was not seriously looking to purchase another fine British automobile as I was in the process of restoring an MGA. But given that this car was within driving distance and had a reasonable starting price I thought to myself, “Why not!” I will help this owner get the pricing going. How could I go wrong, with several days still for others to bid, and no reserve, I thought this car would surely sell to someone else.

As the days progressed, I kept watching the auction and no other bids were coming in. Not overly concerned I patiently waited until the last day and now wondered; could it be possible that I would be the only one who is going to bid on this car? It was a bit disheveled, but heck, it is a classic. I thought, how bad can it be? A little paint and tune up, it should be fine.

When the auction ended, I was both excited and a bit concerned. I had to reveal the truth to my wife Gail. Oh, and to pay for the car and make arrangements to pick it up.

Fortunately, Gail loved Bugeyes. A friend of hers, while she was in high school, had a Bugeye and would occasionally drive her to and from school. I was in luck, not only did I win the auction, but I had my wife’s blessing as well.

### Off to Herkimer

It was a nice day as I picked up a U-Haul car dolly, hoping the wheel span would be narrow enough to fit the wheel span of the Sprite. It was about a 3-hour drive to the Herkimer, NY where the car resided. Once exiting the Thruway, I traveled down a country road with excitement and anticipation in seeing my new purchase. It doesn’t get any better than this I thought. It’s all in the chase.



## “Hootie” The Bugeye cont’d

As I pulled in there was the car. Not bright and shiny but a dull red finish with tired tires. A bearded gentleman who was selling the car met me and we glanced up to take a look. He had enjoyed the Bugeye but it needed repair and attention he could no longer provide. Thankfully the engine did run, and the car started right up with a nice plume of oily smoke. He said the brakes were quite worn and suggested I just take it up and down the driveway. So back and forth I went, test driving my new purchase. We signed the deal and shortly there-after loaded the Bugeye onto the car dolly. To my delight it just fit and I was able to transport the Bugeye safely home.

### Restoration Begins

My initial desire was to get the car inspected and road worthy. So I decided to have the import car shop near my work take a quick look at the car. After new tires, brakes and a little carburetor tuning it was ready to go. I picked the car up after work and was off to a British car class at Burgard high school that I was attending. I couldn't believe how the car shook and how noisy it was. A stream of exhaust smoke was gently trailing my ride. It really felt like a jalopy and I was more than concerned that it would fall apart before I got to British car class..

Soon after getting the car on the lift we discovered the problem.

A little background is helpful here. The Bugeye was one of the first cars designed with unitary construction however testing showed deformation of the rear. So the designers reverted to the original plan with the rear half more of a unibody construction and the front being provided with two front chassis supports. When the car was designed there was thought of installing a boot lid but due to concerns of strength it was opted to eliminate the boot lid and just make that area accessible through behind the fold down seats. The problem at hand with my car was that the lower rear half of the boot (or floor of the trunk was barely hanging on due to rust). Fortunately, a trunk floor was readily available and became the first major piece of body repair.





## “Hootie” The Bugeye cont’d

Additional repairs included replacement of the A pillar and rocker panels along with floor structural repairs. The bonnet was also converted to a front-end hinge making the engine much more assessable. The grill and rear bumperettes were re-chromed and the car was painted a bring Chili Red, the same as current Mini Coopers.

While the body repairs were underway we were working to rebuild the original 948cc engine, 43 bhp motor. This being my second engine rebuild I was pretty confident that it would go well. The pistons ended up 30 thousands over for the bore, a slightly stepped up cam was installed and an electronic distributor have resulted in a peppy engine. The car sported two 1 ¼” SU’s carbs and I installed a new aluminum radiator to keep this baby cool. One of the most challenging tasks was replacing one of the cracked quarter-elliptic leaf springs.

## Why “Hootie”

The results exceeded my expectations resulting in one of the most fun British, eye catching, cars to drive. OK, so why the name “Hootie”? You have to drive the car to understand the name, but you can imagine that this car is an absolute Hoot to drive! It just makes sense and I love to drive it. It’s certainly not a muscle car but a fun sporty British roadster that brings smiles to the faces of those who see it!

