



Impressive reception would do any showroom proud, but AH Spares only specialises in new and used parts



Jonathan Hill and Rebecca Kemsley carry on the work started by Great Uncle Fred Draper



KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

Nearly half a century on, Fred Draper's AH Spares ethos remains unchanged

If you own an Austin-Healey Sprite, 100 or 3000, the chances are that it's wearing some parts from AH Spares, even if you've never dealt with them directly. The Warwickshire-based company is at the heart of the Austin-Healey scene, as it effectively grew out of the demise of the original brand in the late 1960s.

Fred Draper was the parts manager for the Healey Motor Company. In 1969, with the big Healey out of production, Fred negotiated for the opportunity to buy any 100/6 and 3000 spares still in stock at the Healey Motor Company. With this stock of spares and working with a BMC main dealer to source faster-moving items, Fred set up AH Spares in February 1970, to keep these cars on the road.

Initially Fred ran the business from home, and even in those early days he focused on commissioning

companies to produce parts that were already obsolete. By 1972 AH Spares had moved into dedicated premises and with the business already expanding, Fred asked his nephew Bob Hill to join him. Under Fred and Bob's guidance AH Spares continued to thrive, and by 1981 it had become a limited company. Fred died in 1986 and in 2013 Bob handed over the reins to his son Jonathan, who is now the MD, while

Bob's daughter Rebecca is in charge of marketing.

Says Rebecca: "The ethos today is the same as it was when the company started 48 years ago – to keep these cars on the road by sourcing and producing the highest-quality parts that we can. By keeping as much in-house as possible we can maintain standards; AH Spares now employs 28 people. We have an

in-house trim shop, along with AH Panels which was set up in 2003. This focuses on producing high-quality replacement panels for big Healeys of any flavour, especially front and rear wings in either steel or aluminium".

Unable to source front or rear wings of a high enough standard for the demanding restorations that these cars deserve, AH Spares embarked on a project two years

ago to make its own panels. Only now are they available – that's how long it takes to do a thorough job – but the positive feedback so far received shows that it was worth all the effort.

AH Spares only provides parts. Says Jonathan: "Being based near Coventry we're surrounded by expertise, so we sell our parts to businesses that restore, maintain and race-prepare Healeys. Of course, we also sell direct to owners, wherever they are. While most of what we sell is sourced from the UK, we sell all over the world. France is a big market for us but we also have

customers in Australia, the US, South Africa – even Cambodia.

"The majority of our business is around the 100 and 3000, but the Sprite is still extremely important to us – and becoming ever more so. The Sprite parts market is very buoyant thanks to sharp rises in the value of the cars.

"Our focus is the Frogeye because the later models are the same as the Midget and there are so many other companies able to provide parts as a result. We're seeing a lot of younger customers now, who have inherited their car from a relative and they want to recommission or restore it".

Those increases in value for all Healeys have made a big difference to both Jonathan and Rebecca, who have spent many years balancing the cost of remanufactured parts with decent quality. Now that owners are prepared to spend more on maintaining and restoring their cars, AH Spares can justify spending ever larger sums on tooling up for new parts. The introduction of steering boxes last year has gone down very well but it's not always the big, relatively costly components that are well received. Items such as glovebox locks, door catches and numerous

small trim and brightwork parts have filled gaps in the catalogue.

So what of the future? Having focused on new parts for almost half a century, AH Spares is ramping up the used parts business that it launched a few years ago – but the big news for this year is the introduction of new cylinder heads for the 100/4. Gas-flowed and CNC ported, there's no need for any hand finishing as the heads are made to such a high standard.

Available in aluminium or cast iron, they are the result of a two-year development process – they're so new that when we called in at the start of February the first batch were yet to be received by Rebecca and Jonathan. By the time you read this they should have started to arrive for sale, although the first units probably won't be despatched until into April.

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