

SPITFIRE

A look back over nearly 20 years to the beginnings of the Triumph Spitfire: and its steady development into 1980

by RICHARD M. LANGWORTH

(Dick Langworth, the auto historian, is author of "Triumph Cars: The Complete 75-Year History"; \$25.95 from Dragonwyck Publishing Ltd., Box 385-T, Contoocock, N.H. 03229.)

Eighteen years, and over 250,000 units, is a pretty good run for any sports car. So, by way of tribute, let us salute the Spitfire with a look back.

The Triumph Spitfire is descended from that waifish little swing axle affair the Herald. Named after Standard-Triumph managing director Alick Dick's yacht, the unit body Herald was a fair success in Europe, less so in the U.S. It immediately got S-T technical head Harry Webster thinking about a sports car built around its components. Standard-Triumph was readying an up-market replacement for the TR3, but as yet had no answer to BMC's popular Austin-Healey Sprite. Webster initiated the Herald sports car project under code-name 'Bomb' in mid-1959. Then he asked his friend and Triumph's consultant designer, Giovanni Michelotti, to style it.

Michelotti took a new Herald to his Torino studios, where he shortened its wheelbase to 83 inches. Ignoring the rest of the chassis (a sports car would need a separate chassis in any event), Michelotti created his own original shape. Versus the bug-eye Sprite it was a work of art, more comparable in its smooth lines to the pretty MGA, a one-time Triumph rival.

For a fellow who had just rendered up a 'brutal and masculine' sports car in the 'Zest' prototype (later to evolve into TR4), Giovanni certainly changed his pace. The new shape was beautifully curved, hunkered down well on the road yet it retained such practical features as the Herald's



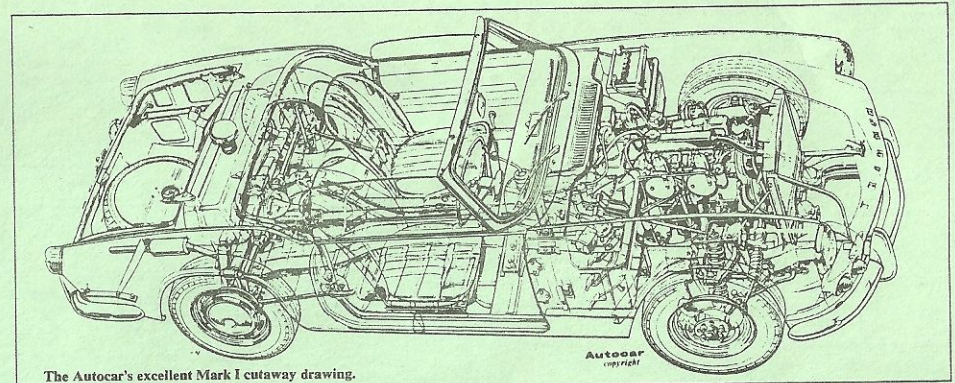
"Want to ride in my Spitfire?" BBC-TV show hostess Sue Cuff with 1500 in 1977.

front-hinged bonnet/fenders, which exposed the whole engine and front suspension for easy service. The car had a rakishly low, dipped beltline and a rounded nose. Its instruments were grouped under a hood behind the steering wheel, not unlike that of the 1957 Ford Thunderbird.

Harry Webster loved the prototype, but was unable to do anything about it. By 1960 Standard-Triumph had entered another of its periodic eras of decline, and there was no money available. Numerous good ideas were lost in this period; fortunately the Spitfire wasn't. Alick Dick sold Standard-Triumph to Leyland Motors in late 1960, and with its BMC competitor in mind, Leyland decided to go ahead with a lower priced Triumph sports car.

Prototype to Production in 1963

Leyland's decision was undeniably a sound one. There was no competition except the Sprite, which by 1962 had gained a more acceptable looking body (and an MG clone) but still had side curtains and a fairly spartan interior. Michelotti's prototype offered the advantage of roll-up windows (in production the beltline was raised to cover them). It would handily accept the twin-carb Herald four, which had 63 bhp and could propel a light two-seater to 90 mph. Leyland engineers created the new sports car's underpinnings. For the extra strength required by a sepa-



The Autocar's excellent Mark I cutaway drawing.

rate body and chassis, they designed a backbone chassis, strongly reinforced, carrying a stiffer version of the Herald suspension: coils and wishbones up front, swing axles at the rear. Since the new chassis lacked cross members, the rear suspension radius arms pivoted from the body shell.

To achieve production economies, Michelotti's hooded dash was replaced by a central instrument panel flanked by package shelves. This permitted either left- or right-hand drive without serious modifications. The attention to costs paid off: the Spitfire sold for only \$2199 on introduction in the U.S.

The car's name came from Britain's classic wartime fighter plane. Aircraft enthusiasts looked askance at its application to what they called 'that thing' and British safety fanatics protested that it would inspire dangerous driving. Neither of these groups deterred the company. Indeed Leyland even found an ex-RAF pilot, to testify to the merits of Spitfires past and present.

On introduction the car was called 'Spitfire Four', which led to speculation that a 'Spitfire Six' would follow, using the smooth two-liter engine of the Triumph 2000. This didn't happen, though other six-cylinder variations did appear: the Herald-based Vitesse or Sports Six, and the Spitfire-based GT6. Had a big Spitfire actually been produced, it would have been the monocoque Fury, a 1965

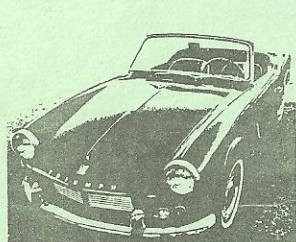
Michelotti prototype with hidden headlamps and curvaceous lines. (The one-off Fury was sold publicly and survives in the collection of England's John Ward, who also owns both 1950 TRX prototypes.)

The Mark II Spitfire, announced for 1965, had four more hp, a diaphragm-spring clutch, redesigned bucket seats and a padded dash. It can be recognized by its larger diameter front turn signals, which replaced the small glass Lucas units of the Mark I. Then in 1967 came the Mark III, with combined side/turn lamps and raised bumper to meet U.S. minimum bumper height requirements.

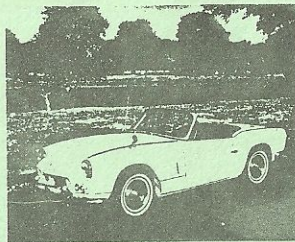
On paper the Mark III should have been a faster Spitfire, because its engine was bored out to 1300 cc. Indeed, European versions were much improved, with 75 hp and 100 mph top speed. But the U.S. model was detuned to meet pollution standards and developed only 1 hp more than the Mark II, though it was more torquey. The Spitfire Mark III stayed in production through 1970, by which time total Spitfire output had reached nearly 150,000.

Big Changes for 1971

For 1971, British Leyland released the fourth generation Spitfire, with major design improvements. The body shell was reworked front and rear. There was a new, smoothly integrated bumper up front, and a squared off deck cast in



The 1963 Mark I introduced amber turn signal lamps.



Mark II of 1965 had larger turn signals, more horsepower.



Optional hardtop and solid paint job transformed the car.



Triumph cleaned up hardtop, grille on completely restyled Mark IVs.



Spitfire 1500 was continuation of Mark IV; both used squared-off deck.



It could have been a 'big Spitfire': Michelotti's monocoque Fury prototype, 1965, still

When there's
a chill
in the
air...

GLUCH

(1 Pint/20 Fl.Oz.)

1 bottle of red wine
4 oz. sugar
1 pint beer
raisins
almonds
bag of spices (cloves, cinnamon
stick, cardamon)
3/4 bottle of port wine

Put sugar in pan. Add beer, warm until the sugar is dissolved. Pour in red and port wines. Add spice bag, raisins and almonds.

SPITFIRE HISTORY (Continued)

TRIUMPH SPITFIRE SPECIFICATIONS & PRODUCTION								
Years	Model	cc	Bore x Stroke, mm	hp/rpm	Torque/rpm	Wt. (lbs.)	Production	
1963-64	Mark I	1147	69.3 76.0	63/5750	67/3500	1600	45,753	
1965-66	Mark II	1147	69.3 76.0	67/6000	67/3750	1600	37,409	
1967-70	Mark III	1296	73.7 76.0	75/6000	75/4000	1600	65,320	}
1967-70	Mark III (U.S.A.)	1296	73.7 76.0	68/5500	73/3000	1650		
1971-73	Mark IV	1296	73.7 76.0	63/6000*	69/3500	1720		
1971	Mark IV (U.S.A.)	1296	73.7 76.0	58/5200*	72/3000	1620		
1972	Mark IV (U.S.A.)	1296	73.7 76.0	48/5500*	61/2900	1620	70,021	}
1973-74	Mark IV (U.S.A.)	1493	73.7 87.5	57/5000*	74/3000	1710		
1975-80	1500	1493	73.7 87.5	71/5500*	82/3000	1750	60,589†	}
1975-80	1500 (U.S.A.)	1493	73.7 87.5	57/5000*	74/3000	1814		
*DIN †as of May, 1978								

the image of the Stag and Dolomite. The optional hardtop was redesigned to provide better visibility, with quarter lights and a larger backlight. A new dash closed off the driver's side package shelf, making room to group the two major instruments squarely in front of the driver.

More significant than the pleasant new styling were the Mark IV's suspension changes. Despite its proven success in competition, the original swing axle had earned criticism in stock applications. The degree of softness necessary implied an equal degree of tire tuck-under on hard corners, accompanied by oversteer. In the Mark IV, Triumph pivoted a transverse leaf spring from the top of the differential, eliminating rear roll stiffness and preventing excessive rear wheel camber changes. This did wonders for overall handling, though keener drivers missed the tail-out handling characteristics of the earlier models. The Mark IV

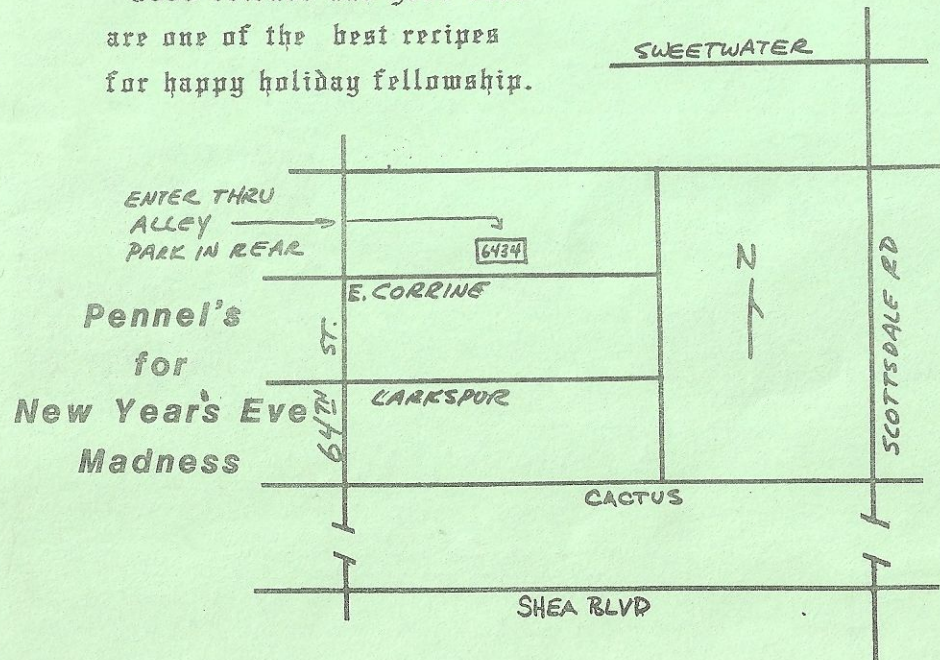
also received a new gearbox: the all-synchro four-speed from the Triumph Toledo. Yet at \$2699 base price, the Spitfire had only gained about \$500 since it had appeared eight years before.

Prices really started to gallop in 1973 (\$2995), and by 1978 (\$5150) they were well over double the initial 1963 figure, mainly due to inflation, government mandates and a strengthening pound sterling. Regulations proved a particularly heavy burden: by 1972 the 1296 cc engine was down to only 48 hp (DIN) in its U.S. form. To help regain lost torque and horsepower, BL stroked the engine to 1493 cc in 1973, which increased horsepower to its present 57 DIN.

In 1975 the Spitfire was designated 1500, although it was really the Mark V—the fifth generation, a mark few cars ever meet. Some of the beneficial latterday changes include a wider track, a fire-retardant interior, a smaller steering wheel, reclining seats and a wood-veneer instrument panel. The Spitfire 1500 is really a well finished sports car these days. Its styling has worn well, and by the standards of 1980, it's a good buy—one of the lowest priced open cars in America.



Good friends and good food
are one of the best recipes
for happy holiday fellowship.



Triumph Newsletter



TSOA TRIUMPH SPORTS OWNERS ASSOCIATION



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1980 Triumph Spitfire Sports Car Announced

Over a Quarter of a Million of the Popular Spitfire Models Have Been Built

In this issue we have some special features about Spitfire. The famous 83in. wheelbase sports car (with production well past the quarter million mark) has been marketed in the U.S. for 17 years. In that time it has undergone extensive development both mechanically and visually. This aspect is covered in an authoritative article by a noted American auto historian (p. 40). Note also the brief letter from an American serviceman, who has left his Spitfire waiting for him while he completes his overseas duty. It's from a real Triumph enthusiast (p. 45).

Leonia, N.J., Feb. 8: The 1980 Triumph Spitfire has been announced by Jaguar Rover Triumph Inc. The British-built, Italian-styled, two-seat sport car was first seen in this country in 1963. Since then 269,000 have been produced with 90 per cent sold in the U.S.

Among the key Spitfire features are its distinctive styling with the rear fenders curving gracefully up and then down from the door's trailing edge to the rear light assemblies; one piece hood and front fender assembly which hinges forward for easy access to the engine, front suspension and steering; and exceptionally short turning circle, only 24-feet or about one and a half times the car's overall length.

The Spitfire was styled by Giovanni Michelotti who designed a number of other Triumph model bodies.

Another Spitfire feature has been its ability to win on road racing tracks throughout the country. Spitfires have won a total of 17 Sports Car Club of America National Championships in two classes. A Spitfire 1500 is the current National Championship car in the SCCA's class 1 Production.

The first two Spitfire models, Mk I and Mk II, had 1,147cc engines and their convertible tops, frame and all stored in the trunk when not in use. The Mk III and IV had conventional and much more convenient tops and were equipped with 1,296cc power plants. The current model the Spitfire 1500, has a 1,500cc engine and its top has zipper-opening rear window.

Other Spitfire 1500 features include fully independent suspension, rack and pinion steering, front disc brakes, reclining bucket seats and full instrumentation including tachometer. Options include fuel-saving overdrive which gives the equivalent of six forward speeds, and removable steel hard top.

EPA fuel economy figures are 32 mpg highway and 2 city and 35 and 22 respectively with overdrive.

The manufacturer's suggested list price for the 1981 Triumph Spitfire 1500 is \$7,365 (POE). The 1980 model is not available in California.



The smart 1980 Spitfire 1500 convertible available in its ultimate development with all black, wrap-around regulation bumpers and front air spoiler. There is a choice of seven bright color styles, matched with Beige or Black 'houndstooth' pattern upholstery.

