

RECORD BREAKER

For the second year running Barry Knight took the UK's top concours award. He spoke with Jeremy Coulter about his success



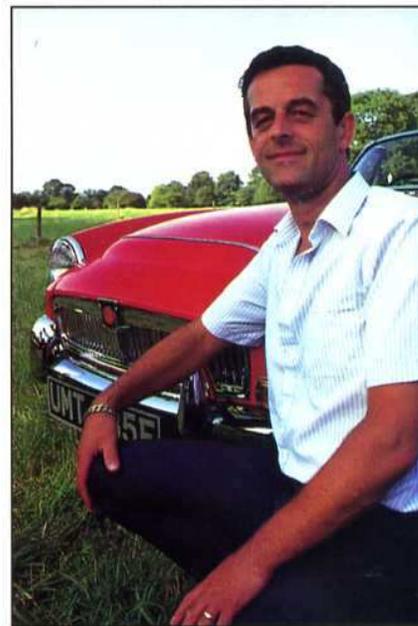
BARRY Knight is not one to rest on his laurels. Barely has his second National Classic Car Concours Champion trophy started gathering dust on the Knight sideboard than he's working on plans for his next car. "I'm really going to go to town on the Mini," he says. The car in question is his 1967 MkII Cooper S. By most people's standards it's already a very fine specimen but as far as Barry is concerned, it's ripe for being torn apart and put together again with that rare brand of perfectionism that marks the concours star from the run-of-the-mill participant. Not content with having already 'done' an Austin-Healey Sprite and an MGC he's set on ending up with a trio of perfect cars.

But the Mini is, as the say, another story, one that will surely appear in a future issue of the magazine. The car that everyone is talking about this year and the one that concerns us here is the second

Above, Barry Knight enjoying the six-cylinder power of his beautiful MGC fresh from its Beaulieu success

member of the Knight stable, the car that took the premier award at the first National Classic Cars Concours to be held at Beaulieu. It's a 1968 MGC roadster in bright red with chrome wire wheels.

"I was convinced there had been some great louse-up at Beaulieu," recalls Barry. "I'd entered the Sprite and the MGC and when the time came for the awards, there seemed to be some confusion about which car they wanted in the presentation ring. Initially they wanted the Sprite and we duly rolled up in it but then someone said it wasn't the Sprite that was wanted but the MGC. Anyway, with Lord Montagu already handing over the awards, I dashed back to the concours field to get the C, leaving my brother-in-law with the Sprite.





Left, superb engine bay condition and above, the steering wheel is yet to be leather covered, as per original. Below, Lord Montagu presents the big prize at the Classic Cars-sponsored Beaulieu concours

Naturally I was delighted when the Sprite was given the Masters class award but running through all the other awards in my mind there didn't seem to be any category left for the MG so I had the vision of being left in the ring all by myself with Lord Montagu standing there with nothing to give me. Of course, what I'd forgotten about was the overall National Champion award. When Wilson McComb announced the result I just couldn't believe it. It seemed incredible that I could win the masters class, plus National Champion at one go."

Even the journey home with the rain and the traffic on the Winchester by-pass couldn't reduce the euphoria that resulted from that amazing double. "Having to spend a couple of hours drying off the car once we got home was a bit of a pain," says Barry, "but that's a risk all concours entrants run. You can't, even once, say I'll dry it off tomorrow or maybe even not bother at all. As soon as you do that the rot will quite literally set in and you might as well not bother. It's the same with preparing a car for a show. I reckon that if you're really serious, you need to spend at least ten hours on preparation before a major show. These days you simply can't expect to restore a car, however well, and then leave it in the garage without touching it from one show to the next and expect to do well. Use the car, by all means, but similarly, don't expect to do well if you cover a lot of miles. The life expectancy of a concours winner is fairly short without constant work and attention to detail.

Barry has covered maybe 1,000 miles in the MG since he finished the restoration at the beginning of the year. By his standards this restoration, was a fairly speedy business, taking a little over two years, during which Barry has also found time to develop and expand his successful building and commercial carpet fitting company, Barry Knight Services.

"I bought the car for £1,400 in 1985 from a chap in North London who was its second owner," recalls Barry. It was complete and running and Barry drove it



home. "Part of the appeal was that it hadn't been messed around with. Also it had spent five years of its 17-year life sitting in a garage so the total mileage was only 50,000 or so."

Why an MGC? "Like the Sprite, it's a case of reliving a happy memory. I did lots of miles in a C when I was quite a bit younger. Now I've got the odd bit of spare cash I thought it would be nice to have another one. I always liked that big six-cylinder motor and the general look and feel of the car. I can understand why some people aren't keen on the C, but I like driving it. I'm not out to break any speed records or outhandle modern hot-hatches so it suits my sort of driving. Besides which, it's affordable, fairly easy to get bits for and not too difficult to restore."

The C sat on Barry's drive for a while before the mood took him one fine day. "One Saturday morning I felt the time was right and started to take the car to bits." Needless to say, Barry's approach to dismantling is not some sort of blind rush to reduce the car to as many anonymous piles of dirty bits as possible, but a very orderly transfer of parts to labelled boxes and bags. A fair proportion of the restoration work was tackled in one of Barry's lock-up garages, a far from ideal arrangement that has led him recently to move to a new house where a quadruple garage is being built for his three strong concours fleet.

"Basically," says Barry, "it was a

straight car that had never been crunched too badly. There was a nasty ding in the bonnet where the front had gone under a lorry tail but other than that it was OK." By OK, he means that it had rotted in most of the places that MGCs, and MGBs for that matter, always seem to rot. The wing and door bottoms were gone, plus the rear wheel arches and the castle sections of the chassis. "Rather than patch the wings, I decided to go for a complete new set from the Sprite & Midget Centre and I also opted for a new pair of door skins." As with the Sprite, the removal of rotted metal and the fitting of new sections, plus the wings, was partly entrusted to Barry's friend Tim Rosner of Rosner Autos, South London.

"Tim got on with cutting and welding while I prepared a list of all bits and pieces I thought I wanted to complete the whole job. While restoring the Sprite I seemed to spend more time fetching bits than I spent working on the car. I thought that if this time I put the money up front and got everything in one go, then I could concentrate on actually doing the job." The bill for this big pile of bits came to a cool £1,800 which is a lot of money to front but there is always the consideration that during the course of a two-year restoration, parts are only going to get more expensive as time wears on.

"I warned the Sprite and Midget Centre that I was coming. They know me pretty well now and knew what to expect. In the

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end I spent pretty much the whole day there with this great big list and came away with almost everything I wanted."

All chrome parts went to Murrivans in Croydon for stripping and replating. Even the grille was reduced to its constituent parts and remade. The seats were sent away for full refurbishment. "I recovered the Sprite's seats myself and didn't fancy going through all that again so I decided to have them done professionally this time and the finished results show that it was worth it."

Meanwhile the car had been reduced to a rolling chassis. The engine and gearbox had been craned out and Barry busied himself cleaning up the engine bay and inner sections. "Lifting the engine and box is a real struggle. It's a huge assembly and you really wonder how it all fits into this relatively small car. It's like a great long tooth being extracted; you don't know when it's going to end. It's easy to understand why the front suspension had to be redesigned and switched to torsion bars to cope with all that extra weight."

As the body started to come together, the bonnet and boot were entrusted to a local shot blaster for stripping. "I swore after the Sprite's original bonnet was destroyed by blasting that I'd never have it done again. But this time I felt there was no way the chap could get it wrong. I told him exactly what I wanted and what sort of grit to use." Barry should have been less trusting. "When I went to collect the bonnet I just couldn't believe it. He'd managed to stretch the metal by holding the grit stream against the underside of the bonnet to remove traces of sound-deadening felt. It was completely useless."

There was no alternative to finding a replacement bonnet. This was no mean task because these aluminium items with their distinctive power bulge are much in demand. In the end Barry found one in Norfolk and in a sense this was a blessing in disguise because the vendor also had for sale an overdrive gearbox which Barry needed, having decided to equip his car with this useful optional extra.

Needless to say, this second bonnet was stripped by hand and then the car went for painting. Tim Rosner taking charge of the spray gun and the five litres or so of red cellulose that it took to get the desired finish. The painting process was, however, not without incident as a subsequent attack of micro-blistering while the car was under cover meant that the whole of one side had to be stripped and re-done."

On the mechanical side, Barry was delighted to find that the engine was completely sound. The head was lifted and the bearings checked but everything was fine, as indeed it should have been with so few miles on the clock and such an unstressed strong engine. The block and head were stripped off with Nitromors and painted in the original BMC engine green.

Barry cites the painting of the engine as an example of his approach to restoration. "When you take something apart, what you must do is look at it closely and judge the standard of finish that the part had



Above, Barry's MGC is well cared for but also driven hard. Work doesn't stop when the restoration is complete; ten hours routine preparation before the show and four hours once there are what it takes to win, says Barry

when it left the factory. That's the sort of finish I aim to replicate. I don't try to get the best possible finish just for the sake of it. That's why I'll be the first to admit that on the concours circuit there are better-condition cars than the MGC, or the Sprite for that matter. Quite a few well-known cars are far, far better than they ever would have been when new and as far as I'm concerned, that's not what it's all about. But I'll accept that in some events that is what the judges are looking for and that's one of the reasons I'm keen to get on with the Mini Cooper. By the time I'm through with that the finish will be so good that the judges will be able to see their reflections on the underside of the floorpan..."

The finish on the underside of the MGC may not be quite to that standard but it's excellent nonetheless. With painting complete and the engine and gearbox fettled the axle and braking components came in for the full treatment. Rewiring

caused a few headaches as the spec was an interim one with half plastic covering and half cotton. Nevertheless a new loom was made up to this pattern and fitted. The wheels are off-the-shelf items from Motor Wheel Services, being the 15in MGC standard rims, not the 14in of the MGB, partly accounting for the difference in ride height between the two models. The fitting of chrome wires and for that matter, a chrome boot rack is one of Barry's few concessions to concours 'flash'. Both items were listed extras for the model he is quick to point out.

The C ran for the first time in early 1987 and the following few weeks were spent sorting out the trim, detailing the engine bay and fettling the weather equipment. Most of the instruments and cockpit fittings were fine for reuse although the dash needed refinishing with crackle paint, the application of which Barry perfected when restoring the Sprite.

The first major event for the reborn car was the National Concours at Beaulieu and the result of that is already in the Classic car record books. Many more awards will surely follow this premier trophy.

Finally, what motivates Barry to spend hundreds of hours working on a car when he could be sitting with his feet up enjoying the fruits of a successful life? "I suppose it's simply the satisfaction I get from taking a pile of rusty metal and turning it into something beautiful that people stop and stare at. Seeing and hearing the pleasure that they get from seeing a car looking like new is the icing on the cake."

Barry certainly has brought pleasure to thousands of show visitors during the last few seasons and with the Mini about to get the full Knight treatment he looks likely to continue winning for many years yet. 

