

It's funny really. I am not usually known for being early. I don't normally allow enough breathing time. On the other hand, some people work best under pressure, don't they. Strangely, though, I am different about one thing – my own Healey.

My wife can't understand why I am so early leaving the house, if I am going out "motoring" - as my neighbour calls it - to drive the Sprite. I didn't realise, at first, but, of course, I have my rituals to follow – and I think of them as a part of my car. And it takes a little time. I am sure we are all the same.

I lift the light blue, soft fabric, indoor car cover from the rear, initially folding, then rolling it up the rear shroud, as far as the back of the seats. I usually then stand, for a moment and admire the form of the rear; it is a pretty car from the back – nice haunches, I always think.

I like the look of it, framed by the door aperture. I then walk round to the front of the car, then performing the same cover ritual, pausing again, to admire the bonnet, although from a slightly higher vantage point, since I am now at the far end of the garage, with less space behind me. The "frog" eyes look up at me, and wink, through their stone guards. My car cover is a little too long, for the small dimensions of the MK1 Sprite, so is folded back on itself, in a line across the car, onto the top of the windscreen. This, being the high point, allows the cover to smoothly drop, to front, back and sides, from that point - its own weight holding it nicely in place. I lean across, always from the driver's side, to the middle of the screen and flick the roll off the top of the screen and onto the roll behind the seats. The sides, draping almost down to the ground, are lifted and folded double, on top and the cover, which can then be safely stowed at the far end of the garage, on the bench.

I turn and take a moment to look over the car and through the door, to regard the weather outside, just to confirm my earlier clothing decisions.

Next, I get onto the car. I don't need to be comfortably settled, at this stage, as I will have to get out again, once the car is reversed out, to close the garage door.

I am sure that we are all the same with the next part. The Engine starting procedure always presents me with a mixture of both wonder and worry, in equal measure. The electrical isolator key is inserted into its secret and carefully concealed slot, under the dash and rotated a quarter turn, to give life to the car. The ignition key is slipped in and turned to the right, my eye noting the ignition light's red glow.

A couple of waggles of the gear lever, are necessary, to assure me that we are in neutral – the car is facing a block wall, after all – and we are ready to start.

To start from cold, it always needs maximum choke – more than the performance of my (registration number monogrammed) peg can provide, on its own. I slip the peg down onto the choke button shaft, as I pull it out, then hold the choke fully out, while I pull and hold the starter with my right-hand - poking through the steering wheel.

I am keen to keep the parts of the car, as original as I can – including the mechanical fuel pump. It takes a while for the fuel to wake up in the tank, be sucked along the pipe and be squirted up, from the pump on the side of the engine block; the pump's diaphragm pulled and pushed, by a cam, on the side of the engine. This is a very clever

device, but does mean that the battery, turning the engine over, is initially just a 948cc fuel pump; sucking then squirting the fuel up, through the in-line filter, on its journey to the float chambers and twin carburettors. I hold my breath, as fuel is sprayed as a mist, mixing with its life-giving air, into the engine's intake and, after a few false starts - keep the choke fully open and don't let the starter go – she springs in to life. This is the tense part, because for the first few seconds, the engine seems as if it will falter – a stiff splutter, followed

by a slight reluctance to fully wake, requires just the right amount of coaxing, with the right foot. Too much and it will splutter to a stop, but very satisfying, when I get it just right, the engine settling into a smooth and confidence inspiring rhythm.

At that point, the choke needs to be pushed in a little, but not too much. In my case, I have found that by angling the peg, so that the end rests on the rim of the gauge next to it, provides the perfect angle. I can then relax, for a moment and wonder at this 60-year-old technology. Well, almost all is 60 years old technology. I am a covert to the advantages of the hidden electronic distributor conversion. I've convinced myself that "I could always convert it back to points", but of course, I never will. I carry a spare electronic module, as well as a set of points in my "emergency" box, tucked behind the seat, though, just in case.

Once I am happy that the engine is running smoothly, I tend to do a couple of test dipping's, of the clutch, anxiously listening to the changing note of the engine, as I do so. (The clutch, although quite light of foot, is positive and progressive in its action. In use, I make sure that it is smoothly and cleanly depressed, all the way to the floor, ensuring that the gear change, to follow, is also smooth in action.) I will then push the choke in, to standard peg position.

With clutch firmly to floor, I tap the gear lever to the right and slot the stubby lever, positively, into reverse and slowly begin to lift the clutch pedal. I am usually surprised that the car begins to move, almost straight away. It rolls slowly backwards and I crane my neck, round the side of the garage door, to make sure no one is coming around the corner. I am careful to stop, with the back wheels resting in a shallow depression in front of the garage opposite, so that the car is sitting flat and I can get out, without having to put the handbrake on. We all know about that little sticking, rotating widget, at the back of the car, which operates the bars, which operate the brakes on the rear drums. No point in tempting fate.

Once the garage door is closed, I climb back into the driver's seat, by leaning in, resting my hand on the transmission tunnel, swinging my left leg into the car, at 45 degrees and under the Les Leston, before dropping myself into the seat. I then make a point of lifting my weight, still with one hand on the tunnel and the other on the sill, so that I can position myself firmly and comfortably, back into the curve of the horsehair padded seatback. Although over six feet tall, there is plenty of room for me, in the Sprite cockpit.

I reach over to my right and grab the seat belt. These were not original on my car, but I have bowed to pressure - although I fitted an original 1960s Britax static set. I pull the belt tight, with my left hand and tuck the excess belt between the seat and tunnel. Now I am ready to set off – with a little smile on my face.

## RITUALS

We all have them

