

PRESSED STEEL COMPANY 60TH ANNIVERSARY

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You know how anniversaries are. Sooner or later someone pulls out an old photograph album and folks get to see some shots they've never seen before. Well, the Pressed Steel Company in Swindon, England, just celebrated its 60th anniversary and these photos (graciously provided by The Swindon Society) of Bugeye Sprite body production have risen to the top.

The Bugeye was the first mass-produced sports car with monocoque construction, meaning it did not have a separate frame. Although it was less expensive to manufacture than a body-on-frame design and totally in keeping with the low-price objective of the Sprite, production had to be decentralized to accommodate the available manufacturing facilities scattered across the British countryside.

So the chassis began at John Thompson Motor Pressings at Wolverhampton where the underbody with "H" frame, floorpan, suspension mountings, transmission tunnel, bulkhead, battery tray, inner sills, footwells, front inner wheel arches and rear crossmember were fabricated and assembled. The process involved 2,066 spot welds backed up by arc welding where additional strengthening was required. The assemblies were then loaded onto a lorry and trucked 75 miles over the road to Pressed Steel in Swindon where the welded-on panels were installed.

Pressed Steel employed 6,600 workers, and all but 92 were men. They pressed and assembled all the Sprite's exterior panels, including the iconic lift-up bonnet as can be seen in the



assembly line picture. At the end of the process, a complete body-in-white had been produced and was ready for transport to the Morris plant in Cowley.

In addition to providing employment for many local workers, Pressed Steel also supported a number of related providers, like British Road Services that operated a large depot close to the Pressed Steel works. Their lorry, loaded up with 12 Sprites as shown in the photo, then travelled another 30 miles to Cowley. The Morris paint shop was reputed to have the highest quality in Europe and produced a finish at a higher level than one would expect on the budget-driven Sprite.

After painting, the little Sprite's journey was not quite done. Loaded up on lorries once again, the painted body assembly rode the last seven miles to the MG factory at Abingdon where it was trimmed, married up with the driveline and transformed into the car we've all grown to know and love. And the next time someone says they have an original mileage Sprite, ask

them if they've added the 112 miles the car did on the road before the speedometer was installed.

Although Sprites are no longer in production, the plant that made their panels has continued to prosper. In May of 2000, Pressed Steel became a wholly owned subsidiary of BMW and today produces 90 percent of



the body panels for the Mini. Known now as BMW Plant Swindon, the plant employs 800 workers and 140 robots. And just like in the old days, the completed panels are trucked to Oxford where the Mini is assembled. But to show how times have changed, Oxford operates on a "just in time" inventory system and Swindon must produce a pressing and deliver it to Oxford within four hours from the time the call for parts is made. That's not exactly how it worked in 1960! **HM**

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