Healey - the Men & the Machines

By John Nikas with Gerry Coker

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Three walls of my study are covered with purposefully made timber shelves and there are books everywhere. Can a bloke ever have too many books? Well no! I don’t believe you can.

A couple of shelves are dedicated to publications on Healeys and Austin-Healeys and while most books are standing up I have had to lay some on top of the others such is the need for more room.

The first of my special books is a copy of *Healeys and Austin-Healeys* by Peter Browning and Les Needham I was given when I turned 21, not long after I bought my 100. That it’s signed by both Donald Healey and Roger Menadue makes it all the more special. While published in 1970, it was predated ten years by the Donald Healey and Tommy Wisdom title *The Austin-Healey*. Roger signed my copy.

For books it was quiet for a time until the late 1970s saw a number, including the first of Geoff Healey’s books. A decade later the plethora of Healey books matched the growth of the classic car scene and since then it has kept abreast with the popularity of the marque(s).

I have previously made comment that I have 46 publications on Healeys and with this new treatise by American writer John Nikas I now have 47. As I said, a bloke can never have too many books.

At 328 large format pages, this is a serious publication and certainly not one to breeze through in an afternoon. It’s clear that the author has gathered together historical information not only from the many books on Healeys, club publications, but also through access to the documents of the Donald Healey Motor Company, many of which have not been made public beforehand. The author has also contacted those who were directly involved in the DHMC from its very early days and in particular has worked alongside the gentleman who penned the original design of the 100 and Sprite, Gerry Coker. Some of Coker’s comments about his time with the DHMC are quite eye-opening.

In essence there are chapters dealing with Donald Healey’s flying days; the establishment of the automotive business at Perranporth and his early competitive motoring experiences; Donald’s experiences of working with Triumph; the setting up of the Donald Healey Motor Company including the manufacturing of Healey cars; the design and release of the 100; the six-cylinder Austin-Healeys; the Austin-Healey Sprite; the Jensen-Healey; Healeys in competition; speed records; and Donald’s activities in later life, including that of Healey Automobile Consultants.

The publication is generously adorned throughout with B&W photos, including some this reviewer has not seen before.

On reading each chapter there are reference numbers to notes at the chapter’s end and being in smaller font they are easy to miss, so you need to stay alert or you will miss something. For instance in the chapter on competition there are 187 notes over nearly eight pages at the end. All of which meant constant page turning to fully absorb the passage of Healey history. As mentioned it’s a serious read that deserves serious concentration.

At the end, the appendices are generous with lists of DMH’s competition records, vehicle competition records, speed/distance records, production records, vehicle specifications, and interestingly the text of Donald Healey’s performance specifications originally published in *Autocar* in November 1945. Also included is the *Motor Sport* magazine article of July 1954 where DMH announced the withdrawal from European races. There is also an extensive bibliography, but sadly no index.

I wanted to like this book, and I do, but there are quite a few errors that I really don’t understand. In a lot of ways it’s a disappointment as errors printed one day, become gospel the following. As with other publications I ask the question of who is this book written for. Someone new to the world of Healeys and Austin-Healeys or someone who has been deeply involved with the marques for close to 50 years.

Frankly I don’t follow why there is a foreword by Alain de Cadenet. Sure he is an authority on classic Alfa Romeos and is a British television Motorsport presenter, but as far as I know he has had next to nil involvement with Healeys. This is borne out by stating that Healey at Bonneville in his 100-Six Streamliner in 1954 clocked up almost 193mph, when it was the four-cylinder 100S engined car.

Of course Le Mans appropriately features heavily throughout, as after Ferrari and Porsche, the name of Healey features the most times at the circuit from 1949 to 1970. However Donald and Roger were not backwards at pulling a shifty when in 1953 NOJ 391 was damaged in a road accident after practice. While the official records may have stated that it was repaired, all the recognisable parts were removed and fitted to the spare car, NOJ 393. One of the reasons why NOJ 393 brought the big sum when it was auctioned a few years back.

As you would imagine the Austin-Healey 100S does gain prominence within a number of places in the book, and throughout the cross flow cylinder head gets a mention. Well whoops! The cylinder head fitted to the 100S is not cross flow, but all eight ports (four inlet and four exhaust) are on the driver’s side in this RHD car. Plus when was the 100S fitted with ‘four-piston brake callipers’?

What happened at Sebring in 1965? The author repeated the error that’s in the latest Graham Robson book on competition Healeys in stating that the 1964 entry 767 KNX was a BJ8. No 767 KNX was and is a BJ7 and is still running in European Historic Motorsport. The only BJ8 prepared at Warwick was DAC 953C and it ran at Sebring in 1965 and has been in Australia since the mid-1970s. On the subject of competition Big Healeys, the all alloy six-cylinder engine fitted to PWB 57 was a C-series four main bearing engine and not designed for the MGC Sebring cars that were fitted with seven main bearing engines.

Back to Le Mans, but some years into the future. Sorry the Healey SR that ran in 1968 and ’69 was the same car with the same wheelbase. In preparation for the 1970 event the wheelbase was stretched five inches for the Repco Brabham V8 to form the XR37. By the way the Repco V8 was derived from the Oldsmobile Jetfire engine and not the Buick engine that evolved into the Rover V8.

I could go further, but a review is a review and shouldn’t resemble another book, but please don’t let these put you off this publication. I am pleased that it’s part of my collection of 47 publications on Healeys and Austin-Healeys.

Reviewed by Patrick Quinn

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