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Lord of Sebring

1955 Austin-Healey 100S

"The 100S was a fine car and, while it was not a pure thoroughbred single-seater, it did have disc brakes and the great versatility of being able to be driven between races. I grew quite attached to it by the end of the season with the racing and the travel. Results were fairly spectacular, primarily due to the braking power supplanting track speed." Ross Jensen

WORDS ALLAN WATSON PHOTOS SEAN CRAIG





The barn find. It's every classic car enthusiasts' dream – the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow – to rediscover a rare classic after it has spent years hiding away from the world in some obscure corner. And, while for many this remains simply a dream, for others it has become a reality.

Bill Lillibridge, a classic car enthusiast from Minnesota, took his first drive in an Austin-Healey (his brother's BN2) in the early '60s, and finally acquired his own Austin-Healey in 1988. Bill was restoring his Healey in 1990, when he stumbled over his pot of gold.

after arriving in out-of-the-way towns and Bill expected the attendant's answer to be along the lines of: "What's an Austin-Healey?". So Bill was rather surprised when the pump-jockey replied that, yes, there was a Healey just up the road. With directions in hand, Bill drove around the neighbourhood and finally spotted a truly rough looking Healey sitting in a carport.

The pot of gold

At first sight, Bill thought he was looking at a 100-6 judging from the rounded radiator grille, but as he approached closer, he spotted a large racing petrol filler cap protruding from the car's

The 100S was in dire need of a total restoration and previous owners had wrought considerable damage on the car

At the time he was district manager for a pharmaceuticals company and his job took him all around the US. In 1990, while in Minot, North Dakota (a place Bill says is as remote as Stewart Island), he asked a local gas station attendant if he knew of any Healeys in the area. It's the sort of question many classic car enthusiasts ask

rear shroud. Bill's mouth went dry – could this be a 100S? He had only ever seen one other 100S, but the car he was now looking at was fitted with a 100-4 windscreen, had the steering wheel on the left hand side and was missing its engine. The car's owner came out to greet Bill and confirmed that the Healey was indeed a 100S,

and that he had acquired it in New Jersey 18 years previously while in the US Air Force. The owner's military service had allowed him to travel to the UK where he had acquired a genuine 'S' engine and some additional parts with the intention of restoring the Healey back to its original condition when he retired. Bill gave the owner a list of Healey club contacts and wished him well on his retirement project, although in the back of his mind, Bill determined he would own the 100S.

After that chance meeting there followed many months of protracted discussion and negotiations until finally, in 1991, Bill purchased the car.

Healey in drag

The 100S travelled to Bill's home in Minnesota and he became something of a celebrity within local Austin-Healey circles – with members of the Austin-Healey Club of Minnesota gathering at Bill's house to check out the rare racer. The 100S was in dire need of a total restoration and previous owners had wrought considerable damage to the car. The most serious of these 'modifications' was the Healey's conversion to a dragracer – the Healey's firewall had been cut out to take a Corvette V8 and a LHD conversion. During the process, the car also lost its unique 100S rear disc brakes and rear axle. ▶

THE 100S IN INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION

The 100S was effectively a replica of the factory Special Test cars that achieved third place at the 1954 Sebring 12 hours driven by Stirling Moss with Lance Macklin. Later, the car was run at Bonneville, achieving a 132mph average over 24 hours. The first ten 100S models (which included AHS 3707) were fitted with a dash-mounted brass plaque commemorating this achievement. Remaining 100S cars were fitted with the more familiar black plaque. The 100S was raced by the factory team at Le Mans, Sebring and the Mille Miglia. Other results include, sixth place at Sebring in 1955 (11th overall), first in class at the 1955 Mille Miglia and 11th at Sebring by a privateer in 1956. More controversially, the 100S will always be remembered for the part Lance Macklin's car inadvertently played in the tragic 1955 Le Mans 24 Hour race.





1955 AUSTIN-HEALEY 100S

• Engine	Four in-line
• Capacity	2660cc
• Bore/stroke	87.3mm x 111.1mm
• C/R	8.3:1
• Valves	ohv
• Max Power	132bhp (98kW) @ 4700rpm
• Max Torque	148lb/ft (228Nm) @ 2500rpm
• Fuel System	2 x SU H6
• Transmission	Four-speed manual
• Axle Ratio	2.92 (opt. 3.66/4.125/2.69)
• Body/Chassis	cross-braced box section chassis, all-aluminium body
• Brakes	Dunlop four-wheel disc
• Suspension	Front: Independent by coil springs, double-acting Armstrong RXP hydraulic shock absorbers and anti-roll bar Rear: semi-elliptic \ springs, double-acting Armstrong RXP hydraulic shock absorbers and anti-sway bar
• Steering	Burman cam and peg
• Wheels	15-inch wire
• Tyres	5.50 x 15 Dunlop R
• DIMENSIONS	
Wheelbase	7ft 6ins (2308mm)
Length	12ft 4ins (3795mm)
Width	5ft 0.5ins (1551mm)
Height	3ft 6ins (1077mm)
Kerb weight	1988lbs (901.7kg)
Track F/R	4ft 1 5/8ins/4ft 2 3/4ins (1276/1301mm)
• PERFORMANCE	
0-60mph	7.8 seconds
Max speed	134mph (216kmh)

As well, the Healey's rear wheel-arches had been cut in order to accommodate larger rear tyres. Although the V8 had long been removed (probably in 1973), a decal on the Healey's windscreen proclaimed it a winner at the Dover drag strip. Bill's 1956 BN2 was approaching the final stages of restoration and, looking at the ravaged 100S, he knew the only way he could finance another rebuild was to sell his BN2.

100S #AHS 3507

Before the restoration project began, Bill researched the car's history, digging deep into Austin-Healey lore. During this phase, Bill was in contact with fellow enthusiasts from all over the world as he began collecting parts and information. His search even led him to New Zealand, where he struck up friendships with several Kiwis, including Frank Karl, Andrew Fox, Ralph Roden, the Sale family and Mike Salter. From the Healey factory's original records, Bill was able to learn the early history of his car. Austin-Healey 100S, chassis number AHS 3507 (original engine no 222708), had been built

on the February 6, 1955 in the Cape works at Warwick, the seventh 100S and one of the original batch to be built by Healey. On February 9, the completed car was sent from Austin of England to New York for use at the 1955 Sebring 12 Hour race. As such, the Healey was prepared to complete Sebring spec, including first gear modifications, Dunlop racing tyres (5.50x15), a quick-lift racing jack, tool kit and spare Champion racing plugs.

Vincent Sardi

The car's owner, Vincent Sardi, was the proprietor of the famous Sardi's restaurant in New York. Sardi's still exists today, and is renowned for the extensive collection of celebrity caricatures and paintings that line the restaurant's walls. At that time, Sardi was a member of the Manhattan Chowder Racing Club, a club that meets regularly even now. Sardi first began racing in 1952 with a Jaguar XK120M and then switched to an Alfa Romeo. However, the Alfa proved fragile – at one time, while leading a race at the Virginia International

Austin-Healey 100S, chassis number AHS 3507 (original engine no 222708), had been built on the February 6, 1955 in the Cape works at Warwick



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1. Vincent Sardi in AHS3707
 2. Austin-Healey Club of Minnesota members gather around 'as found' AHS 3707 – Bill Lillibridge at the front of car in dark shirt
 3. As found, with rear wheel-arches cut to accommodate larger tyres
 4. Vincent Sardi (in white overalls) discusses race day tactics



:: 1955 Austin-Healey 100S



Raceway, the Alfa's driveshaft broke. Sardi switched to a Healey but, shortly afterwards decided to retire from racing. Retirement didn't last long, and soon Sardi was back on the track with another Jaguar but, when he heard that the Austin-Healey 100S was coming out, he ordered one for himself. "I enjoyed that car," said Sardi in a later interview, "It was fun to drive. I did very well

with it. I always placed either second or third. Occasionally I would win." When Bill finally finished his restoration of the ex-Sardi 100S, he and his wife Karen drove the Healey to New York with the intention of uniting Vincent Sardi with his old car at a meeting of the Chowder Racing Club. However, the date set for the meeting was September 11, 2001 and even as Bill and Karen drove into



New York, commercial aircraft were flying into the Twin Towers – an event that, as you would expect, put an end to the planned meeting.

until that day in 1991 when Bill trailed the car back home to Minnesota. For Bill, that day also marked the beginning of a restoration challenge that would take the best part of a decade and earn him friends around the world.

Car Services in Wellington. Despite the car's relatively fresh stateside restoration, trouble was brewing in the Healey's innards. On its arrival at the Healey Factory, NZCC arranged for a test-drive, but this early attempt at driving the 100S was crushed when machining swarf was discovered in the Healey's engine sump. It resulted in the engine undergoing yet another rebuild. More trouble was to come and, despite a smooth drive to the South Island to



DEVELOPING THE 100S

The 100S owes its existence to the Austin-Healey 100 – a car progressively developed by Healey via the 1953 to 1954 competition cars. This led to a revised frame for the 100S, which included numerous strengthening gussets and stronger mounting brackets for steering and suspension assemblies – all of which had originally been tried first on the Special Test cars.

A new body for the 100S was styled by Donald Healey and Gerry Coker, with some assistance from Donald's son Brian.

With slightly softer lines than the 100, the new car's body was manufactured from aluminium by Jensen Motors, who also painted and trimmed the cars as well as manufacturing and fitting the Perspex wind-screens.

The 100S was full of innovation and, at the time, was quite probably the most developed sports car of all. Its mechanical specifications included four-wheel disc brakes, while the three slots carved into the seat backs were forerunners of the seat ventilation system utilised by the Ford GT40.

Healey turned to Austin for the car's power plant with engines for the 100S built by Morris.

A major redesign of the Austin A90 engine, the 100S engine featured a nitride-hardened crankshaft and solid skirted, flat-top pistons. A new cylinder head, cast in aluminium was also specified, which ditched the A90's slanted inlet ports and numbers two and three exhaust ports in favour of separate porting. With twin SU carburettors, Morris Engines tested every 100S unit after assembly with all engines achieving 132bhp and 4700rpm. Furthermore, every completed 100S was road-tested up to 120mph (193kmh) by Healey.

The gearbox fitted to the 100S was also a BMC unit, a close-ratio version of the C-series four-speeder. An overdrive was not used, but was listed by Healey as



an optional extra. Initially, Donald Healey wanted to call the new car the 'Sebring' but problems with Fraser-Nash (who held the rights to that name) meant the Sebring name was never used officially. Of the 55 100S models built by Healey, 47 were delivered in the same colour – white over lobelia blue – and one car was converted to a coupé for Donald Healey's personal use.

All 100S cars, including test specials, were constructed between February and July 1955.

Development of the factory racing cars continued past the end of official production with most effort pushed into lightening the 100S. A new exhaust manifold and replacement of some steel parts with alloy reduced the car's weight to around 1790lb (812kgs). Higher lift camshafts raised power to 140bhp (104kW) still on twin SUs, while the later addition of twin Weber carburettors increased this to 145bhp (108kW). As AHS 3707 is also fitted with Weber carburettors, its engine is probably developing around 145bhp (108kW) – a very respectable output for a car fast approaching its 50th birthday.

Of the 55 100S models built, 10 remain unaccounted for – the last 'discovery' being in France in 1994.

Lost in time

Although the 100S was intended for the Sebring 12 Hour race, Sardi never raced there – although he did compete at Watkins Glen, Lime Rock, Bridgehampton and several other East Coast racetracks.

Keen-eyed Healey enthusiasts will spot that our featured 100S has extra cooling slots cut into the front valance below the standard radiator intake. This modification was carried out during Sardi's time with the car by Walt Hansgen. According to Sardi, "Walt thought that since we were running on short courses without very long stretches – Lime Rock, Thompson etc – we should get more air into the oil cooler. It was not for appearance." As well, Sardi used to drive the 100S regularly on the road and reckoned that more cooling was required when driving in traffic.

After Sardi's short time with the car, the 100S faded into obscurity and all its history was lost

Trial and error

Having previously visited New Zealand, Bill was determined to come back with his 100S when its restoration was completed, and in 2003 the fully

restored Healey arrived on our shores, while Bill remained in the US.

Until Bill also arrived, the 100S was left in the keeping of Frank Karl, The Healey Factory in Tauranga, or with Andrew Fox who owns Classic

take part in the 2003 Austin-Healey Nationals, on its return to the North Island the 100S ignominiously broke its gearbox while at Classic Car Services.

Prior to this mishap, NZCC had planned to drive

"I enjoyed that car," said Sardi, "It was fun to drive. I did very well with it. I always placed either second or third. Occasionally I would win."



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1. The 100S as discovered with LHD conversion
2. Weber carburettors donated by works 100S
3. Geoffrey Healey checks out AHS 3707's ongoing restoration during a trip to the US



the 100S back to Tauranga alongside Andrew Fox, but the car seemed to be doing its best to avoid our attentions.

Eventually, in late January 2004, we caught up with both the car and Bill Lillibridge at Weber Specialties in Glenfield, where renowned Weber guru Murray Johnson was working his magic on the car's Weber carburetors, which Bill said had never worked properly.

The Weber's fitted to this 100S are actually very rare sand-cast DCO3s (as used on C and D-type Jaguars) and came off one of the two 1956 'works' 100S Sebring cars. Geoffrey Healey reckoned that these two cars were the most highly developed Healeys ever to be raced. Interestingly, the ex-Ross Jensen 100S was also fitted with DCO3 Webers.

A few days later, Murray had finally sorted out the car's carburetors and with the 100S now in rude health, Bill drove it to the NZCC Intermarque Concours, where the Healey took pride of place on the NZCC stand. A few days afterwards, Bill and Karen drove the 100S from Auckland to Wellington and left New Zealand – bound for home via Australia, Switzerland and Great Britain – while the Healey was left in the care of Andrew Fox, once again, to later arrange for the car's next journey abroad.

After over a year of trying, I eventually got my bum into this historic racer – and only just in time. A few weeks after we drove the Healey, it was globe-trotting again – this time to Zürich and a new owner, Urs Ernst, a Swiss Austin-Healey enthusiast who paid a small fortune

for the privilege of owning this example of the rarest Healey production car of all.

A turn at the wheel

After flying down to Wellington, we drove our hire car out to Classic Car Services in Petone where we met with Andrew Fox and the elusive 100S. After such a lengthy period of time waiting to drive Bill's 100S, I was afraid the actual experience would be anti-climactic. Fortunately, I was not disappointed and the Healey provided a day's worth of truly memorable motoring.

For touring use, Bill had kitted out a set of wire wheels with modern Hankook tyres, but as we were planning to photograph the car as part of the road test, we got Andrew to fit the older Dunlop racing tyres to the car. Not quite the

correct size of the originally specified wheel and tyres, nonetheless the Dunlops gave the 100S a more period look.

Enough prevarication; ignition on, a quick press of the starter button and with the Healey's engine roaring away merrily, we drove off to Belmont Regional Park, an area Andrew told us would provide some deserted roads.

Raucous beast

As you would expect of a car developed purely for racing, the 100S is a raucous little beast. The flimsy aluminium body and hard suspension faithfully transmits every lump and hole in the road to your rear-end and, through the wood-rim steering wheel to the tips of your fingers. Having said that, the 100S turned out to be

surprisingly civilised for a racing car, managing to achieve an admirable ride/handling compromise – even on the Dunlop R tyres.

Once I had mastered the Healey's gearbox, freshly rebuilt and without synchro on first, I was zipping along and quickly discovering the car's main handling traits – tail-out in a four-wheel drift.

What a lovely sensation, and so controllable it felt as if the car was doing all the work.

It took a large chunk of courage to brake deeply into corners as, apart from the car's considerable dollar value, it's disc brakes are early examples of the breed (the 100S was the first production sports car to feature disc brakes all-round), and although they worked admirably well, lots of thigh muscle flexing was required to activate the unservo'd

RACING THE 100S IN NEW ZEALAND

Two Austin-Healey 100S models were campaigned in New Zealand during the late '50s. The first of these, AHS 3601, was purchased by Vickery Motors and raced by Barney Giller and Max Richards. This car was written-off in 1962 and its engine ended up in Australia where, in 1992, a replica 100S was built around it.

The most famous 100S, for Kivis at least, was AHS 3908 – the car campaigned by the late Ross Jensen and originally brought into New Zealand by John Seabrook of Seabrook Fowlds. Ross raced AHS 3908 extensively in 1956 – competing in major races such as the NZIGP at Ardmore (from which he retired), the 1956 Lady Wigram Trophy (9th), Dunedin NZ Championship Road Race (8th), C W F Hamilton Trophy, Dunedin (result n/k), Southland Road Race, Ryal Bush (7th) and the Ohakea Trophy (5th).

At the end of the 1956 season, Jensen bought the 100S from Seabrook Fowlds and set about modifying it with twin-choke Webers and competed in Auckland hillclimbs and Levin races.

The next owner of the car, Graham Pierce, raced the 100S at the 1958 and 1959 NZIGP at Ardmore, and the Lady Wigram Trophy races in the same years. Other owners of AHS 3908 include, Peter Sullivan, Glen Hunt, Dexter Dunlop and Rick Baird.

AHS 3908 now resides in Dunedin and we can only hope that, one day, it will make a return to the racetrack where everyone can marvel at this amazing piece of Kiwi motor racing history.



AHS 3908, the ex Ross Jensen 100S photographed recently in Dunedin (Photo by Bill Lillibridge)



Ross Jensen and in his newly acquired 100S, with John Seabrook in the passenger's seat (McLaren Trust Collection)



Ross Jensen racing his 100S at Ardmore (Ross Jensen Collection)

set-up. However, the biggest surprise came from the Healey's engine. It may only be a development of the humble A90 four-banger, but it has a surprising amount of power and

to race the car at ten-tenths for the duration of a '50s Grand Prix race, but sampling this historic car at least allowed me to understand some of the reasons why Ross Jensen liked the 100S so much.

As you would expect of a car developed purely for racing, the 100S is a raucous little beast

torque. Pulling cleanly from low revs, thanks to Murray Johnson's carburettor fettling, once the engine climbs onto the cam, it flies – giving more than a few bumbling modern motorists a bit of a hurry-up.

Even after our relatively short drive, I was beginning to get accustomed to the 100S and found myself liking it a great deal more than I ever thought I would. I'm not sure if I'd be game

So, a truly impressive car and a very special experience – definitely one for my long-term memory banks. ■

[Thanks to Bill Lillibridge, Urs Ernst and Andrew Fox for their assistance in preparing this story, the help and information they provided was invaluable – however, any mistakes belong purely to the author]

