



Re-tracing the 49 steps

Before Austin took over, 19 pre-production 'Healey 100s were built. This is one of the few survivors – now with all 49 differences restored

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IF YOU KNOW YOUR HEALEYS – *really* know your Healeys – the sight of AHX11 on this page may have caused you to take a deep breath.

Sure, it looks basically like any other Healey 100 at first glance, but this is special; this is the sixth one made, the 1953 Turin Show car, one of a batch of 19 that was built at the Healey Motor Company's modest base in Warwick rather than on Austin's Longbridge production line, and a piece of history so significant that it's now valued at over £100,000. Not that you'd know that from the restoration it was subjected to a decade ago, and which took three years to put right.

But let's start from the beginning. When

Donald Healey famously shook hands on a production deal with Austin's Leonard Lord at the 1952 Earl's Court Motor Show, he was taking on a workload that the modest Healey Motor Company team was only just capable of fulfilling – that of developing the prototype into a production-ready car in less than six months, while simultaneously promoting the new model worldwide, on a shoestring budget.

And when it became clear that the planned 20-cars-a-week production rate would be more like 100+ a week, the pace really hotted up. The plan had been for Tickford to build the bodies, but Tickford wasn't geared up for such high

PRE-PRODUCTION 'HEALEY 100

production numbers, and so the contract went to Jensen, already involved with Austin via the deeply underwhelming A40 Sports.

Austin needed time to lay down a new production line, but the Earl's Court appearance had started something that couldn't be stopped, and so the Healey engineers had no choice but to begin the dual tasks of producing cars for publicity tours as well as working with the Austin engineers to move the design from a prototype intended for eventual low-volume production to a car that could be produced in much higher volumes on a major manufacturer's production line.

Healey set out to build 50 pre-production cars but, as it turned out, just 19 were built before Austin was ready to take over production, in March 1953. The significance of the first cars has increased over the years, as experts began to understand just how different they were, and how the differences (all 49 of them) effectively document the development of the Healey 100 from the Earl's Court prototype to the highly successful production model, and provide an insight into the mindset of the Healey engineers – Geoff Healey, experimental department head Roger Menadue, chassis designer Barry Bilbie, stylist Gerry Coker and works manager Harry Brandish to name but a few.

All the Warwick-built Healeys received commission (or build) numbers prefixed with 'AHX' (or 'AHR' for the four Special Test cars), often remaining unregistered to avoid purchase tax on the condition that the cars were scrapped rather than sold off once finished with.

Consequently the survivors are few and far between, though their initial destinations say much of how Healey planned its publicity campaign. The first three were shipped out to the USA, and only one of those is known to survive. AHX4 was built for the Frankfurt show, AHR5 to Geneva; only the latter is still around, having been later rebuilt as a 100S and relocated to the USA.

AHR6 was registered as NOJ 392, to become the famous press car for *The Autocar* and *The Motor*, and it still exists, while AHR7 was registered NOJ 393 and became the 1955 Le Mans entry, as a 100S, also still surviving (and due for sale at Bonhams on 1 December). It's not until the ninth Warwick car built, AHX9, that we find the first right-hand-drive 100, but sadly that's known to have been scrapped in 1955, having been used as a test car at MIRA. AHX10 is a mystery, almost certainly never actually built at all – hence the 19 cars built out of 20 apparent commission numbers.

And so we come to 'our' car, AHX11, which was registered – with its build number, as you can see – on 1 April 1953 so it could be driven out to Italy by Geoff and Margot Healey for the 1953 Turin motor show. It was finished in the same light metallic blue as all the Warwick road cars, a

colour copied from a Jaguar shade admired by Donald Healey, and fitted with an internal boot release rather than an external handle, apparently a request from Geoff to prevent his and Margot's possessions from being stolen at the show.

The three cars that followed AHX11, originally shipped to the USA, have also survived, though the next along, AHX15 is missing without trace. AHX16, still around today, was registered NUE 854 and sold to racing driver Betty Haig, but nothing is known of AHX17 and AHX18, nor of AHX20. Fortunately AHX19 – registered NUE 855 – is not only alive and well in Bournemouth, UK, but is thought to be the most original of all the survivors.

So, just ten left, and AHX11 the oldest known Healey in Europe. The Healey engineers were honing the production processes, tweaking the design a bit at a time, and learning what worked and what didn't. Meanwhile, the bodies were being farmed out to Jensen, who also seemed to be changing the design – without the knowledge of the Healey engineers – finding shortcuts where they could get away with them.

AHX 11 was no different, and it went on to endure a typical lifecycle for a British sports car, living in the USA for much of its life, used hard, suffering the usual corrosion and rough repairs. When it was finally returned to the UK it was in need of serious restoration, but what it received instead was a horrific series of bodesges by a now thankfully defunct specialist. In 2004 it was sold through auction, for a not insignificant £36,000. Even then, the owner was aware of problems with the car but it was only when he delivered AHX11 to Cape International in Coventry that the full horror of the restoration began to emerge.

Cape's Steve Norton knows Healey 100s, including the Warwick cars, inside out and had previously been involved in the restoration of the Earl's Court car. He had already noticed plenty of discrepancies and problems, some as basic as the engine having been painted the incorrect colour (Warwick cars should have duck egg blue engines). But some faults ran much deeper: the doors didn't open and close cleanly, the shape of the rear shroud was incorrect, and the car drove badly. The Cape team began to dig deeper, and it was soon agreed with the owner that another restoration, to much higher standards, was needed.

'The dilemma was that each Warwick car was different,' says Steve, 'so it was difficult to find a reference point. Was I looking at someone's hack job in the 1970s, the restoration work from 1999 or some last-minute factory revision? You've just got to hold stuff and say "Bloody hell, this feels quite honest".'

In fact, Steve went well beyond the 'honesty' test, and commissioned Coventry Prototype Panels to analyse the welding techniques and the age of the welds to ensure that none of the original Warwick work was destroyed.

What a shame that the previous restorers hadn't been so conscientious. As Steve points out, Healeys are difficult to get badly wrong, because the chassis mounts act as datum points. And yet AHX11's sills had been fitted at the wrong height, and to overcome this the bottoms of the aluminium wings had been cut, overlapped with the sills, riveted (yes, riveted!) into place and filled over.

The rear end was wrong, having suffered



'It was in need of serious restoration but what it received instead was a horrific series of bodesges'



1953 AUSTIN-HEALEY 100

ENGINE 2660cc four-cylinder, OHV, twin SU H4 carburetors **POWER** 90bhp @ 4000rpm
TRANSMISSION Three-speed manual with overdrive, rear-wheel drive **STEERING** Burman steering box
SUSPENSION Front: coil springs, wishbones, anti-roll bar, lever arm dampers. Rear: live axle, leaf springs, Panhard rod, lever arm dampers **BRAKES** drums
WEIGHT 914kg **PERFORMANCE**
Top speed 107mph



timing cover, and curved cooling fan blades.

Now clearly this is for the true Healey anorak, but isn't it satisfying to know that those little differences are still in place? And it goes on, to greater significance, particularly in the bodywork.

The production cars used machine-pressed panels, with (after a short changeover period) steel wings, doors, bonnet and boot, with aluminium alloy front and rear shrouds. The Warwick panels were all hand-formed aluminium, and the difference can be seen in

the crispness and depth of the swage lines.

With some skilful repair work AHX11's original front and rear shrouds were retained; the front wings had to be replaced, but the swage line was re-made to match the Warwick shape. As for the missing boot lid, remarkably it was tracked down to Chicago, and reunited with the car.

And then there were the touches designed purely for show – literally. The wire wheels were originally chromed rather than painted, as were the brake drums, the cockpit trims and even the wiring loom P-clips.

Every aspect of AHX11's rebuild required detective work, and Steve was assisted in this by other Warwick car owners. The result is a stunning restoration, with as much original metalwork retained as possible, and all 49 of those special Warwick features either kept or replicated.

Intriguingly, NOJ 393, one of the 19 cars built alongside AHX11 at Warwick, is thought to have the potential to become the first million pound 'Healey due to its race history. But where does that leave AHX11 and the other Warwick cars?

Thanks to Steve Norton at Cape International, +44 (0)1676 542292, www.cape-international.com.

accident damage at some point and then fitted with a new rear end that was (incorrectly) attached with odd little fillets of metal.

The rusty chassis outriggers, just £25 each to replace entirely, had instead been roughly plated, the chassis brackets were wrong, the engine mount brackets were fitted so badly out of line that the rubber mounts had torn, the uniquely shaped inner wheelarches badly patched, the original boot lid missing, the body was full of spray filler... it's a long and saddening list, topped off with the most badly worn wire wheel splines that Steve had ever seen on a Healey.

But it wasn't all bad news. The majority of the most important original features had survived intact, including the seam-welded (rather than spot-welded) butt-edged chassis, the hand-folded steel front sub-structure, the floor panels, with their different size (from the production cars') strengthening circles, the smaller footwells and the signature Warwick three-piece sill complete with internal wooden formers.

The engine was original, and retained its distinguishing Warwick features such as castellated nuts on the main and big-end bearing caps, different flywheel, clutch mechanism and

RESTORING AHX11

How crucial historical features were retained and replicated



Stripped to the bare structure

The outer panels were removed and the chassis structure cleaned off to bare metal (and then lightly primed for protection, as shown). The rear tubs, seen here in front of the car, were junk, the rear end having been replaced at some point in the car's life. The front tubs are original, each one formed in one-piece, a distinguishing Warwick feature.



New rear panels

Warwick-built boot floor, rear bulkhead and rear tubs were different from the Longbridge cars' panels, having been hand-folded and formed by the Healey engineers rather than pressed. Unfortunately, although the chassis was original, AHX11's rear end panels were Longbridge-spec, so they were replaced with replicas of the Warwick panels. Note the remains of the bodged sill ends still visible here.



Original shrouds, new wings

The original front and rear shrouds were battered and filled, but the craftsmen at Coventry Prototype Panels were able to repair them. All four wings had to be replaced but they were first reworked to replicate the deeper swage lines of the Warwick cars. The metalwork of the front substructure was retained intact – a crucial point because it's quite different from those of the Longbridge cars.



Practice assembly

Before AHX11 could go for paint, the body went through a complete mock build. All mechanical parts were stripped and rebuilt, revealing many more unique-to-Warwick touches, including a 32% overdrive (production cars were 22 or 28%), redundant starting handle hole in the radiator, adjustable joints on the steering outer links, and more.