

CONTENTS

FOREWORD BY SIMON TAYLOR	5
PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	6
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	8
1. YOUTHFUL INSPIRATION	9
2. EXPLORING THE CURVES	17
3. THE GROUNDHOG YEARS	29
4. WATERSHED	43
5. LE MANS – ET COMPLICATIONS AMOUREUSE	56
6. NEVER MARRY A MAN WHO DRINKS, OR RUNS A GARAGE	68
7. FUN RUNS IN THE MOUNTAINS	80
8. IT’S CARNAGE OUT THERE	96
9. A LOVE AFFAIR REKINDLED	111
10. “YOU HAVEN’T DONE MANY LONG RALLIES, HAVE YOU?”	123
11. THE NEXT GENERATION	137
APPENDIX I. DD 300: A BRIEF HISTORY	150
APPENDIX II. JOHN DAVID CHATHAM: 40 YEARS OF HIGHS AND LOWS	152
INDEX	158

DEDICATION

To Vicky,
for being a charming hostess to me and a wonderful wife to John.



John with SAL 75, his first Healey, and fellow Healey owner Derek Park. The two were born only three weeks apart and this photo was taken when they were both 21. With his 21st birthday money Derek bought what became DP 1769, a yellow 3000 Mkl with a Ruddspeed conversion and lots of other mods.

No one realized it at the time, but that gathering at a pub on the road to Weston-super-Mare was a seminal event. Many of the people in the room would go on to become lifelong friends and remain involved with Healeys for decades. Just two or three SW Centre meetings down the road, John's local network of Healey aficionados would be firmly in place, with names like Tony Sampson, Alan Harvey, Tony Fowles and John Bristow in his address book, and his social life would have a Healey-dominated focus, which it has never lost. "Eighteen of us from that inaugural meeting still get together every year," John adds with obvious pleasure, "including Alan Zafer, who I still see regularly."

But the driving force behind the SW Centre would not be John. That honour went to Frank Walker, "a bombastic fellow, a great character."

John continues: "He ran it like a regimental sergeant major and what he said, went. He ruled the roost – he had

a big whip. If he said, 'you've got to be outside my house at seven o'clock on Sunday morning, we're going to a sprint at Blackbushe,' or whatever, we'd all go along with it. We were just glad that things were happening. Even if it was a distance away, we were up for it; we didn't worry so much about drinking and driving in those days, we and the sergeant major did quite a lot of that on the way back. Fortunately, we all survived that era.

"Frank's way of doing things was rather good for the club at the start, but eventually the members couldn't put up with him any more. People got tired of being instructed to go and spend a whole day chasing round in a circle at some windy bloody airfield in the middle of the country. We still did those things of course, but we wanted a say about when and where."

The car which underpinned all this, SAL 75, "was bog standard when I got it," recalls John, but inevitably it didn't stay that way. "In those days it was easy to develop a car:



Silverstone late 1970; shakedown prior to Targa Florio.

John drove hotfoot up to Abingdon and after a day's haggling ended up acquiring the four remaining shells – three complete and one in bits – plus two alloy blocks (one of the batch of three had been scrapped in production) and all the spares. The cost of the whole lot was £1500, a bargain even at 1969 prices. Reading between the lines, Abingdon wanted the bits to go to a good home. The two Sebring cars stayed in the United States and were sold there.

Part of the deal was that John would take over the BMC entry in the Targa Florio, something he was more than keen to do, though time was now tight. What had looked like a practical development schedule for the factory looked very onerous for a privateer working largely on his own in his spare time. The pressure was on.

The first casualty was the alloy engine. There is much more to building an alloy engine than simply substituting a different material in the foundry, and the lightweight unit needed development which there was simply no time to do. So John fitted the hottest iron-block unit he could

muster, moved all the weight he could into the boot to minimize the nose-heavy characteristics and worked flat out to create the first UK-registered MGC GT Sebring, which emerged from Egerton Road with a Bristol plate (VHY 5H) early in 1970, ready for its fateful maiden trip across the Severn Bridge.

Logistics followed. "I got Natalie Goodwin of Goodwin Racing Services, an old friend, to handle my entry and I then went to BMC and asked them what hotel they'd planned to use. 'Hotel Zagarella,' they said, so I booked that. Four rooms for four people: me, co-driver Alan Harvey [a Sprite racer from Bristol] and two mechanics – Tim Jewell and my old 'spannerman' John Horne.

"Next we took the C to a Modsports race at Silverstone as a shakedown. It wasn't as quick as my racing Healey but it was solid and strong, a good choice for a tough six-hour event like the Targa. It didn't handle as well as a Healey though.

"Alan had just bought a 3.3-litre Ventora estate and I'd just bought a new four-wheel trailer, so we were well set up.



A Healey was bound to make an appearance at the wedding at some point.

some time that I was in a house which was never of my choosing."

Nevertheless, she made the best of it and threw herself enthusiastically into the unique mix of commerce and friendship that has always characterized John's business affairs. "The kitchen was an extension to the office," she continues, "so anyone who visited the garage – and we regularly had foreign visitors from all over Europe and America – would soon find themselves in the kitchen having coffee and would probably end up staying for dinner too. The house was part home, part office, part B&B, part hotel." In the driveway would be anything up to 12 cars at a time, mostly Big Healeys in various states of disrepair, while at the bottom of the garden was, in Simcock's words, "an unbelievable Pandora's box, although John always knew exactly what he'd got and where it was."

A good idea of how the business operated, and how much it has always relied on John's elephant-like memory for Healey minutiae, can be gleaned from the history of Simcock's 3000 MkIII. He'd acquired it in the early 1970s and John had looked after it practically ever



John and Vicky on honeymoon in Mexico.

IT'S CARNAGE OUT THERE



In 1986 the ASAVE, the French equivalent of the HSCC (Historic Sports Car Club), agreed with Club Austin-Healey France to make Austin-Healey the featured marque at the following year's Grand Prix de l'Age d'Or, in celebration of the club's tenth anniversary. Club president Henri Maisonneuve and his wife Béatrice asked their British counterparts to help and as a result Joe Cox became involved.

Joe, who was John's garage manager for several years and by this time was also heavily involved with the Austin-Healey Club, suggested running a Big Healey race, something which hadn't happened since the 1960s. He took the organization of the grid under his wing and John Chatham volunteered to get in touch with American Healey racers. To everyone's surprise Phil Coombs and Dan Pendergraft agreed to ship their cars to Europe to compete. International classic Healey racing was born.

The sight of an entire grid of 22 Big Healeys lined up to do battle at the banked circuit of Montlhéry in June 1987 was inspirational and the race was a huge success. John Chatham won, but Phil Coombs finished second and this planted a seed in the Americans' minds. Before long an idea had firmly taken root and they were saying to themselves, "we must do something like this in the US and challenge these guys on our home soil!" And with the help of Dick Lunney of the Austin-Healey Club of America, and a huge number of other companies and individuals too numerous to mention here, that's exactly what they did.

Every year Healey enthusiasts from all over the US gather for an annual conclave, and the plan was to have a race series centred on this event. They called it the



DD on its way to victory at Montlhéry in 1987. (© Joe Cox)



John with the other winners of the 1987 Healey race at Montlhéry: Phil Coombs (centre) was second and Mark Schmidt (right) third. (© Joe Cox)



Father and son at Castle Combe in 1991, 00 for John and OYY for Joe.

was no time or money to build a second 'diesel,' so John slotted the hottest four-cylinder engine he could into OYY – a bored and stroked unit opened up to three litres – and mated it to a high-ratio overdrive to try to keep the revs down and the block in one piece. Trevor Seckel, who'd raced Healeys for many years, was recruited to co-drive, while Joe was despatched to Mexico to get the lie of the land.

Before the start, Joe phoned home to warn John that they would need substantial sumpshields, as the roads were much rougher than anticipated. So when John arrived they sought out a local garage – basically a yard with a bench and a vice, plus a piece of corrugated iron for shelter. While the 'mechanico' was sorting out a suitable piece of steel, a police car drove in and the mechanic broke off John's job to remove its instruments. John soon realized that the mechanic was clocking the police car's odometer.

John speaks no Spanish, but a grin and a finger rotated anti-clockwise told the mechanic that John had worked out what he was up to. To John's surprise, the mechanic



Route of the Carrera Panamericana, a rerun of the famous 1950s road race. (© Norman Burr)