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LOW RIDER

The man who invented the body-chopped Mini is back in business — and this is the result.

Words **Martyn Morgan Jones** Photography **Gary Hawkins**

Neville Trickett's highly original approach, artistic flair and practical ability have led to the creation of some rather interesting and successful vehicles. His Siva range of kit-based cars included a proliferation of vintage-looking runabouts. One was even used by Jon Pertwee, who played *Dr Who* in the BBC TV series back in the '70s. Then there was the gull-winged Siva 160, the Mini Moke-inspired Llama and Mule, and the Mini-based 'Minibuggy'.

Since moving to France in 1989, Neville has been busy restoring a chateau, inventing and producing replica Elgin Marble panels. Now, however, he's gone back to his roots, resurrecting his iconic — and original — Mini Sprint conversion.

A Mini history

"I was keen on motorsport and the Mini," remembers Neville, fondly. "When I moved back to the UK in 1962, I decided to build and race a Mini 850. My first race was at Silverstone, which I won. In 1964 I decided to get serious and I set about lightening the bodyshell. At just 8.5cwt, it was the lightest Mini racing at the time."

It was quick, too. The 850 had been replaced with a full-race 1071 S (sleeved down to under one litre), which powered Neville to seven wins and six lap records. 1964 had proved to be successful and

Neville hoped that 1965 would go the same way. Sadly, it didn't.

"I replaced the 1071 S with an overbored 970 S. This engine was rather special. I modified the distributor to run at one-quarter speed and fitted two sets of points. The engine would rev to 10,200rpm before the points bounced! It also used a roller-bearing camshaft that I designed. I provided Leonard Reece Camshafts with the drawings and graphs I'd plotted, and they did a terrific job. To get the best possible performance, I ran the cam with PTFE-coated bearings, lightened cast-iron followers and titanium top hats. That engine was super quick!"

Although the engine was fast and reliable, the gearbox (a Colotti-Francis five-speeder) tended to strip a gear — usually while Neville was leading. It was after one such occasion, when a disconsolate Neville was pondering what to do next, that he was approached by fellow racer Geoff Thomas. Geoff made Neville a business proposition, as he recalls. "Geoff, who knew I had a mechanical aptitude and a background in creative arts, said 'Why don't we section a Mini and make it into a low-line?' Geoff reckoned the lower frontal area would cut down drag. He also explained →



"Mark had a mildly tuned 1071 S in mind"





Mark has fitted his preferred dials.



Along with the chop, the Mini has been vertically deseamed.



"It was largely thanks to the cut-down screens that it was such a looker"

that sectioning was what hot rod builders in the USA did. I had no idea that I could actually do this, but said I could!"

Thus were sown the seeds of the Mini Sprint. Geoff sold his pharmacy business to finance the project, while Neville left Sigma Engineering and set himself up in a small corner of Peter Barnes's Westminster garage in Parkstone. The project operated under the name 'GT Equipment Company' (GT standing for Geoff Thomas and Grand Turismo).

Neville came up with the idea of cutting the bodyshell at the windscreen pillars and floorline, thereby reducing the overall height by about three inches. The bodyshell was reflanged and welded internally, and the doors were reshaped to fit. In theory, the conversion appears relatively straightforward. In practice, however, it proved to be rather challenging. Nevertheless, Neville persevered and soon, VPR 470 — a second-hand Mini 850 — had been chopped and de-seamed. Satisfied that the project had potential, Geoff and Neville set themselves up in a workshop in Wallisdown, Dorset.

The only problematic part of the conversion was installing the specially manufactured laminated windscreens. If fitted incorrectly they would break — something Geoff Thomas remembers happening all too often. "I assumed responsibility for fitting the windscreens and I seem to remember having a 75 per cent success rate! The other 25 per cent either cracked or split during fitting. They cost an

arm and a leg. At least having paid for them, I couldn't blame anyone else!"

In fact, it was largely thanks to the cut-down screens that the Mini Sprint was such a looker, as Neville tells us. "I certainly didn't expect it to be the aesthetic success it turned out to be. The cut-down windows and lowered roofline, together with removing the vertical seams, combined to make a very attractive-looking car."

So attractive, the orders rolled in. Demand for the low-line Mini far exceeded the pair's expectations. The press certainly took the car to their hearts, and road tests were full of praise. Stirling Moss, who tested one of the first, was so impressed that he bought one. Rob Walker Garages ordered 50! "This took us completely by surprise. It was far too many to cope with, really," admits Neville. "In the end we converted new and used cars, and only to order. 'Haggis', a car enthusiast/engineer who hailed from Scotland, and my good friend Nick Jenke were employed as part of the team."

In addition to his windscreen-fitting duties, Geoff Thomas handled sales. "It's hard to pinpoint exactly how many conversions we did, but it was probably around 85," he recalls. "In May 1966 we relocated to Corsley Garage, near Warminster, which belonged to Rob Walker, of F1 fame. I took a controlling interest in the garage. Things improved and the quality of the cars got better and better. Several went abroad, including one that went to Copenhagen. We even converted a Mini



Traveller."

With Geoff and Neville sharing a common interest in motor racing, it was inevitable that their thoughts turned towards a racing Mini Sprint. The low-slung racer certainly looked good, and went well, although due to the body modifications it had to compete in the GT class, as Neville is keen to explain. "There was nothing wrong with the car, it was just that the GT class was ultra-competitive, even back then, and we were up against some exceptional purpose-built cars. Our racer was just another quick Mini, but with a lowered roofline!"

In 1967, with Geoff concentrating on building and developing the Rob Walker business and Neville setting up NTD (Neville Trickett Design), the Mini Sprint project was sold to Stewart & Arden, a BMC dealership

based in London.

There's no doubting the fact that the Neville Trickett Mini Sprints were great cars, which had engineering integrity as well as aesthetic appeal. However, the arrival of a succession of not-so-well-crafted 'chopped' Minis, made by various wannabe Mini Sprint companies, was not good news. "A minor disappointment was that a plethora of lowered-roof, rock-bottom suspension 'uglies' started to appear, and often called themselves Mini Sprints. How could they?"

Despite having waved goodbye to the Mini Sprint over four decades ago, Neville has recently become re-united with the project. "I was being contacted by enthusiasts who were keen to build a Mini Sprint, so I've started offering a bespoke conversion

service. Customers bring their standard Mini shell to me and a few weeks later they return to collect a genuine, Neville Trickett, 'Signature'

Mini Sprint shell."

One of the first customers to avail himself of this service was Mark Forster — a name that may well be familiar to regular readers of *Mini Magazine*. A life-long Mini enthusiast, with an incredible knowledge of early cars, Mark is also the man behind the superb www.mk1-performance-conversions.co.uk website, which is a veritable treasure trove of early Mini information.

Sprint start - Sprint finish

Mark passed his test in a Mini, and has been a passionate and proactive enthusiast ever since. "I've had a 28-year association with Minis," he discloses. "My first was a MkIII 1000 and since then I've owned various models. I currently own a number of Minis including a Speedwell 1152, a supercharged 850 Traveller, a Mini Moke with a seven-port head, a 1961 850 and my 1071 S historic racer."

One variant that Mark coveted but couldn't track down was a genuine Mini Sprint. He'd almost given up hope when he heard some good news. "I found out that Neville Trickett had started converting



Mark wanted to use Rosepetal wheels for a proper period look.



Recovered bucket seats work with a period 14-inch Springalex steering wheel and custom drop bracket.



The car has been authenticated with a plaque.



Mark has rebuilt a 1071 block with a mix of period and modern parts.



shells," explains Mark. "I'd always wanted a Mini Sprint and having one built by the original designer really appealed, so I contacted Neville and he agreed to do a conversion for me."

A donor car was needed to get the conversion underway, so Mark bought an early 850 Mini. To say that it was past its prime is an understatement. Mark explains why he purchased the 'perforated' 850: "It was ripe and I could have found a much better one, but a lot of the metalwork was going to be cut away and/or reshaped, so it kind of made sense. However, what really sold the car to me was its registration number: 4852 MF — 'MF' being my initials."

Nevertheless, before he could even consider letting Neville loose on 4852 MF, the basic shell had to be structurally sound. Mark drew up a plan of action and enlisted the help of his good mate, Paul Fish. "Paul did the bulk

of the early work," Mark explains. "I basically locked him in the garage and didn't let him out for a fortnight! This was May 2008, and when the work had been completed, we slung the shell in the back of a Transit and set off for Neville's place in Normandy."

Neville is a perfectionist. He's also brilliant at keeping clients informed and a quick worker, as Mark discovered. "Almost every day I'd receive an email telling me what he'd done, and he'd attach photos too. Then, six weeks after he'd started, he rang to say that the shell was ready!"

The finished result was superb and Mark was euphoric, but that euphoria soon subsided. It wasn't that there was a problem with the shell — far from it. It was Mark who had the problem, as he confesses: "I love doing mechanical work but bodywork just isn't my thing. Although the shell had been expertly converted, there was still a lot of

TECH SPEC

BODY Smoke Grey/Old English White bodywork converted to 1960s Mini Sprint specification.

ENGINE Four-cylinder, 1071cc S, Alexander cylinder head and rocker cover, Swifttune ST5 cam, twin 1-1/4-inch SU with alloy ramp pipes, LCB, RC40 exhaust.

TRANSMISSION Four-speed, all-synchromesh, remote gearchange, Cooper 'S' driveshafts, ST close-ratio helical gears, Mini Spares twin-pin kit and H/D clutch, 3.44 final drive.

SUSPENSION All-independent, Hi-Los, adjustable lower arms and tie-rods, Gaz dampers.

BRAKES Hydraulic, with Cooper S discs and callipers, H/D pads, and standard rear drums.

WHEELS AND TYRES 43/4x10 Mini Spares 'Rosepetal' with 165/70/10 Yokohama A008 radials.

INTERIOR 14-inch Springalex steering wheel, original carpeting, twin Cobra bucket seats, extra instrumentation, Mkl Performance drop bracket.

filling, sanding and so on to do and I just couldn't get myself psyched up to start it."

Six months passed and, although Mark had been busy assembling all the mechanical components in readiness for the refit, the shell was still untouched. Something had to be done — especially because Mark had promised Neville that the car would be on the road in time for the 50th anniversary event. "I realised that I wasn't going to get the bodywork completed, so I found someone who was willing to do it and paid him."

Soon the bodyshell was finished and looking resplendent in its Smoke Grey/Old English White two-pack. This was the moment Mark had been waiting for — the moment he could tackle what he does the best: the mechanicals.

What Mark had in mind for 4852 MF was a rebuild as a mildly-tuned 1071 S, with a blend of carefully chosen period and modern parts. Mark already had the engine, which he rebuilt and fitted with an Alexander cylinder head, Swiftune SW5 camshaft, LCB, RC40 exhaust, and twin 1 1/4-inch SU carburettors. The carburettors were a compromise. "I wanted twin 1 1/2 SUs, but they wouldn't clear the bonnet," he says.

Mark also rebuilt the gearbox and slotted in a ST close-ratio, helical gear cluster. He was going to take things a stage further, but then he changed his mind. "I did think about fitting a Quaife LSD," he says, "but in the end I

decided not to — although I did fit a Mini Spares twin-pin diff to help with reliability. I obtained most of the parts from Mini Spares North — Rich Hawcroft has been amazingly helpful."

Every mechanical component was renewed and/or upgraded, including 'S' discs and callipers, rear drums, hubs, bearings, steering rack, dry S suspension etc. The front end features adjustable bottom arms and

"I wanted something classic, so I fitted Rosepetals"

adjustable tie-rods, and there are Hi-Los and Gaz adjustables all round. It's a nicely-specced set-up, but the 'pièce de résistance' has to be the wheels. Produced by Mini Spares, they are a modern reproduction of the Cooper Car Company's 'Rosepetal' wheel. "I wanted something classic, so I decided to fit Rosepetals," says Mark. "They have a little more offset than normal and are actually 4 3/4 inches wide. These were the first batch that Mini Spares sold. I think they look superb."

They certainly do. The interior looks rather nice too — a very tatty rear seat was restored to near new condition, complete with new cover, and Cobra recovered the

front buckets to match. Mark wanted the interior to look authentic and have a period patination, so he looked through his extensive stock of parts and unearthed an original carpet and a set of doorcards. The Springalex wheel is also period, as is the tasty Lucas 608 mirror, although the steering column drop bracket isn't. "I've never been a fan of the add-on drop bracket, so I decided to have some one-piece brackets made," Mark reveals. "They're available via my website!"

These detailed touches certainly add to the car's appeal, but to get a full emotional involvement with this car, you have to look at the bigger picture — or should that be the smaller picture? Unless 4852 MF is parked alongside a standard Mini, it's almost impossible to tell that anything has been done. There's the nagging suspicion that something is different, but it's really difficult to identify the changes. This is mainly due to the quality of Neville's work, and the rake of the front and rear screens — 4852 MF is the first conversion to feature cut-down screens since the 1960s. All the other conversions that Neville has recently undertaken have used the standard windscreen, which needs to be raked back.

Neville and Mark should both be congratulated. Not only did Mark have the vision and determination, he's been hands-on and he's also project-managed this stunning build throughout. This car is a little gem! 

