



Bruce Phillips, 64, stands in the Carroll Avenue garage where he has repaired Austin-Healeys for nearly 30 years. Below: The front logo plate of his 1956 H

# In Takoma Park, the 'wizard' of Austin-Healey

Bruce Phillips, with wife, works magic on decades-old sports cars at specialty shop

BY LINDSAY A. POWERS  
*The Gazette*

Bruce Phillips is a surgeon of sorts. His "operating room" is a garage between the Takoma Park Volunteer Fire Department and an auto service store on Carroll Avenue, and it currently holds two

of his "patients."

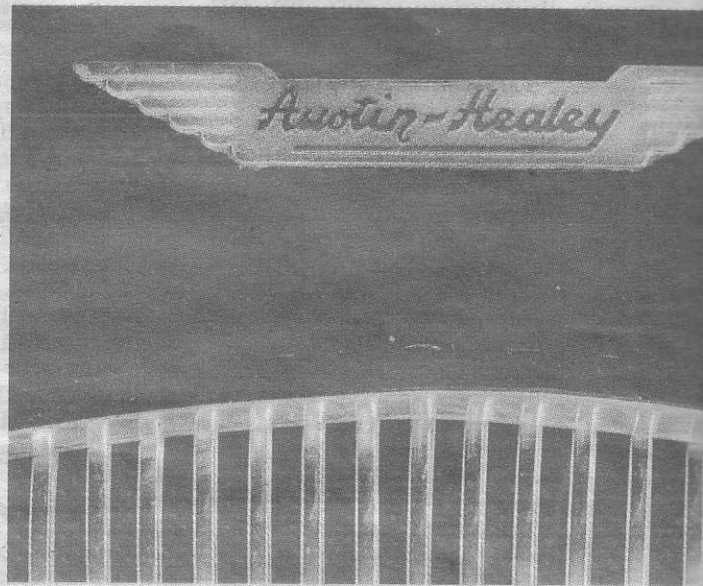
For Bruce, owner of Healey Surgeons with his wife, Inan, his work is performed on Austin-Healeys, a British sports car produced from 1953 to 1967.

For nearly 30 years in their Takoma Park shop, Bruce, 64, has worked for customers around the area and the country, mostly on the cars (and their parts) with the design that he says "draws people" to them.

"It really was, I think, one of the best-looking cars of its day, and to this day it still holds its own," he said.

Sharing the shop's open garage space, Inan Phillips, 63, orders and sells the new and used parts from around the world that make these cars tick, almost all of which are first tested in the shop.

"Bruce is my guinea pig," said Inan, who



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has worked with her husband during those decades. She called it a "niche business" that she did not think would work at first.

On a recent January morning, Bruce hosed the soap off one of his two Healeys, a 1956 black Austin-Healey 100, which he repaired and restored. He first saw it as a bare frame with no engine or transmission and plenty else that needed work.

"I don't drive it enough, I'm kind of ashamed," he said. "Part of the problem is I have a dog, and I've tried putting her in the car, and she hates it."

Bruce has worked on every model of the "Big Healeys," ranging from the 100 to the 3000 Mark III.

The Austin Motor Company and the Donald Healey Motor Company produced about 72,000 of the cars, Inan said. The Austin-Healey Sprites, she said, were produced until 1972 but are "a totally different animal" and considered more similar to the MG family of sports cars.

Healeys "were very common to begin with — a lot of college kids drove them," Bruce said. "And that's why a lot of the older people today, the older professionals, want to go back and recapture youth, so to speak, and are buying these cars and are interested in getting them."

Bruce said he was in his early 20s when he bought his first Healey, which was "tired and beat up with a bad transmission."

Since then, "we've owned some interesting cars," he said.

For the era, the cars were relatively fast, reaching speeds from about 100 mph to 120 mph depending on the model, he said. One rare version of the 100 model could go about 160 mph.

The sports car also performed well in long-distance rallies in Europe, he said, such as those "from Paris to Rome to Paris."

The styling designer of the Austin-Healey 100 was Gerry Coker, a "young kid in his early 20s," Bruce said, adding, "I actually offered him a car once."

The Phillippses have also been in touch with the Healey family, including Donald Healey.

Bruce used to service cars in his Takoma Park driveway, he said, but he got so busy, he quit his job with offset printing presses and opened a shop in Hyattsville.

"I've always kind of been tinkering on cars ever since high school, but I never imagined doing this full time," he said. "It's something I kind of just fell into."

Since 1984, when his shop

moved to Takoma Park, Bruce said, he has worked primarily on Healeys, including those that come in with mice climbing out of the trunk.

"I'm at the point now where it seems I either work on really horrible, nasty cars or really nicely restored cars," he said. "And I guess I'm spoiled by the nice cars."

There are other shops that work on Healeys and even specialize in them, but Healey Surgeons is the region's only shop focusing only on the sports cars, Bruce said.

Dave Doyle of Silver Spring said he has known the Phillippses "long before the shop," when they were all involved in a group of about 15 to 20 Healey owners who went to national car shows together.

Although some people had doubts about how a business specializing in Healeys would fare, Doyle said, "they proved ev-

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**Bruce Phillipps**, owner of Healey Surgeons

everyone quite wrong."

His 1967 Austin-Healey 3000 was in the shop about a week ago, said Doyle, who was the first president of the Capital Area Austin-Healey Club.

"Bruce is a bit of a wizard at it," he said. "Bruce is the only other person on the planet who touches my car."

Inan, he said, is the brilliant business mind.

Bruce prefers fixing gearboxes and engines, but he can work on a Healey from headlights to rear bumper.

"There's nothing I haven't done or really can't do," he said.

Bruce said his customers bring or send broken components for him to fix as well as the whole cars, whether they are driven or pushed in.

The Takoma Park shop holds a wide range of used parts he has accumulated, from carburetors to gearbox synchronizing rings.

"I try and give 'em the best I can scrape up," he said.

During busy periods, Bruce will work on one car a week and is usually backed up with requests for service — although lately, he said, it has been slower.

Business has declined gradually in part because the cars require only routine maintenance

after they are restored and looked after, he said.

"It's nice to hear from people," Bruce said. "I've actually had people say, 'You did my car 10 years ago. I haven't done anything to it since except change the oil — and drive it.'"

Another factor, Bruce said, is that people outside the United States are buying the cars, and Healeys are being re-exported.

Healeys have not quite grabbed the hearts of younger generations as they did for older ones, Inan said. Young people have sought out faster and less expensive cars.

Although the prices can rise depending on the quality of restoration, the average Austin-Healey runs from about \$30,000 to \$60,000, Bruce said.

As the shop's three employees left over the years, Bruce did not replace them.

"It got to the point where it's just down to me now," he said. "If I need an extra pair of hands, I call on my wife to help clean brakes or something."

Yet when the repair-service side is slow, "the parts kind of carry the day," he said.

Most of Inan's sales are to high-end restoration shops across the country and around the world, including England, Australia and Japan.

The Phillippses are also involved in the reproduction of Healey parts, she said, which includes sending original parts to companies in the United States and abroad so they can be accurately copied.

Bill Connellee worked at Healey Surgeons for 10 years after selling his Volkswagen shop to the Phillippses. He said he enjoyed working on the specialized long-term projects rather than "anything you had to do to eat," as was the case before.

"It's a lot nicer," Connellee said. "You get very good at what you do."

He is close to completing the restoration of his 1961 Austin-Healey 3000.

Connellee, of Woodbine, now the owner of Prospect Motors in Mount Airy, said he and Phillipps continue to do work for each other on various cars.

Steve Garrett, the president of the CAAHC, said that even though he does not know Bruce personally, he is well-acquainted with his strong reputation as a Healey mechanic.

Garrett said Austin-Healeys continue to attract people for a variety of reasons, including their handling and classic style.

"It's kind of like driving a little bit of history," Garrett said.

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