

The Wall-flower of Triumph Sports Cars - Triumph Spitfire in South Africa

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Attending any motor show in South Africa and there will invariably be several breathtakingly-restored Triumph sports cars on show. From a somewhat outsider's view the TR series seemed to have established itself as the "darling" for South African Triumph collectors and restorers, an elevated status still firmly entrenched many years after production ceased in February 1963. The Triumph TR sports cars were all assembled by Motor Assemblies in Durban with an [interrupted] production span of 8 years. The TR 2 was in production from October 1955 to December 1956 and 354 units were produced. The Triumph TR 3 took over in January 1957 and production ceased in October 1958 with 624 units produced. The drought in TR production in South Africa was broken after 27 months when the Triumph TR 3A came into production in February 1961 and production ceased two years later in February 1963. Only 72 Triumph TR 3A units were produced which surely contribute to even higher collectability. Motor Assemblies therefore assembled a total of 1050 of these desirable collectables.

The Triumph Spitfire took over from the TR 3A in mid 1963. By comparison the Triumph Spitfire models seem to be in lesser numbers at these shows and apparently enjoy less popularity. Labeling the Spitfire as the Wall Flower at the Triumph party is perhaps a bit unfair. It really has a charm of its own and deserves to be asked for more than one dance.

Some Background on the Triumph Spitfire

The Triumph Spitfire in 4 cylinder configurations was manufactured in Coventry in the UK from 1962 to 1980 as the Mk.1 [Sports 4], Mk.2, Mk.3, Mk.4¹ and the 1500. There was also a Triumph GT6 with 6 cylinder engine and Spitfire body but like in the case of the Spitfire Mk.4 and 1500 it was never assembled and sold in South Africa. A total of 314152 Triumph Spitfires with 4 cylinder engines were manufactured in the UK.

The Spitfire was first introduced at the 1962 Earls Court motor show featuring "handsome and curvaceous styling" from the Italian stylist Giovanni Michelotti. He already produced a design for a new two-seater sports car as early as 1957 for the Standard-Triumph company [the original project code name was "Bomb"]. The company experienced serious financial problems at the time and it was only with acquisition of Standard-Triumph by Leyland Motor Corporation in 1960 that funds became available to proceed.

Design Features

The Spitfire and the Triumph Herald shared to a large extent the same chassis platform. The two cars share a steel-girder chassis. In the Spitfire's case the outer rails and rear outriggers were removed resulting in a shorter chassis. To compensate the Spitfire body

¹ In the UK motoring press the designations Mk. I, Mk. II etc. and Mk.1, Mk.2 etc. were used interchangeably although the boot badge on the Spitfire Mk.3 UK model clearly displayed the Mk.3 insignia. In South Africa both the Mk.2 and Mk.3 Spitfires had these insignia on the boot and the South African motoring press also used these designations in their reports. Having said that, when Leykor took over assembly of the Mk.3 Spitfire, their one advertisement referred to it as the Mk.3 and the other as Mk. III.

featured structural outer sills to stiffen its body shell. Wheelbase on the Spitfire is also shorter than the Herald by 21,6cm [Spitfire 211 cm and Herald 232 cm].

The Spitfire also shares most of its suspension features with the Triumph Herald. At front are independent, wishbone, coil spring and anti-roll bar suspension. At the rear the Spitfire features a swing axle with transverse leaf springs and radius rods. The rear suspension and its influence on the violent oversteer of the Spitfire when pushed hard is well recorded and only addressed and improved in the Spitfire Mk. 4 version overseas. The Triumph Spitfire featured disc brakes at front and drums at the rear. The Spitfire also shares the Herald engine but in various stages of tuning and capacity. All models assembled in South Africa were fitted with twin 1¼ inch SU carburetors. All also used a four-speed gearbox with synchromesh on upper three.

Another much-praised feature of the Spitfire design is that the complete bonnet and front wing assembly tipped forward giving unimpeded access to engine and front suspension. This is another shared design feature between the Spitfire and the Triumph Herald. Both cars are also highly rated for their tight turning circle of 7,3 meter [compared to 9,5 meter for a late-sixties Mini].

By small British sports car standards the Spitfire was described as “surprisingly sophisticated and well-equipped” with luxuries such as wind-up windows which the counterpart MG and Austin Healey Sprite were lacking. The Spitfire featured full instrumentation which included a tachometer.

South African History of the Triumph Spitfire

Triumph Spitfire Mk.1 [also called 4 Sport]

The Triumph Spitfire 4 Sport was introduced in South Africa in August 1963. The “4” referred to four cylinders and later references were made to this model as the Mk.1 model although it was never officially badged or promoted as the Spitfire Mk.1. Production started at Motor Assemblies in Durban in July 1963 and it appeared for the first time in leading South African motoring magazines’ price lists in August 1963. Launching price was a moderate R1530 in a market where a Dart 1500 Sports Coupe was priced at R 1970, Auto Union 1000 S Coupe at 1675, an Alfa Romeo TI at R 1996, a Fiat 1500 saloon at R 1770 and a GSM Flamingo GT Coupe at R 3000. The last price for a Triumph TR 3A soft top earlier in that year was R 1850 and with wire wheels priced at R 1910.

Production of the Triumph Spitfire Mk.1 continued at Motor Assemblies up to December 1965. Unfortunately Motor Assemblies production records only show combined production figures for the Mk.1 and Mk.2 Spitfires. Fortunately CAR magazine’s New Car Price Lists last price on Spitfires was published in December 1965. After a four months break in the price lists where no Spitfire price was reported the Spitfire resurfaced in May 1966 with a launching price similar to that published in the New Model announcement on the Spitfire Mk.2 in July 1966. In applying the cutoff date for the Spitfire Mk. 1 as end of 1965 to the NAAMSA sales figures roughly 626 Spitfire Mk.1 units were assembled and sold [172 in 1963, 375 in 1964 and 79 in 1965].

In this period the Spitfire Mk.1's price increased twice to bring it to a total of R 1560 representing an R 30 price hike over almost 2½ years. Just to reiterate how good the "good old days" were the annual licensing fees amounted to R 16 per year!

There were not many road tests done on the South African Spitfire Mk.1. In general the write-ups were quite positive. In January 1965 CAR magazine said "The Spitfire 4 is a little beauty, solid and driveable and with many attractive features. It has moderate performance by sports car standards, but makes up for this by its reasonable cost, safety and enjoyable handling, and outstanding fuel economy." And further "This is a sleek and nimble little car with many sensible features, including a diminutive turning circle, accurate steering and firm suspension." In summary it said "The Spitfire is deservedly popular in South Africa, and it is a pity that its production volume is limited here. It is our only imported sports car at this stage, and it's a good one." I suppose the reference to it's "production volume is limited here" refers to constraints imposed by the South African Local Content Programme. This programme specified tariff protection for car parts made in South Africa, progressive rebates of excise duty on cars according to their South African content and bonus import permits at a time of strict import control for CKD [completely knocked down] kits. This possibly also explains why the South African Standard Triumph Motor Company never saw a need for placing a single advertisement in any leading South African motoring magazine trying to increase Spitfire sales.

The Spitfire Mk.1 with its mildly-tweaked 1147cc engine had a top speed of about 90 mph/145 km/h [depending on which road test you prefer to believe!]. Other performance figures are summarized in the box comparing the various Spitfire models' performance and mechanical detail. Bringing the performance more in line with sport car standards must have been uppermost in the minds when introducing the Spitfire Mk.2.

Triumph Spitfire Mk.2

A New Model announcement on the Triumph Spitfire **Mk. 2** was made in the motoring press in July 1966 while the Mk. 2 Spitfire already appeared in the motoring press price lists in May 1966. It was still moderately priced at R 1650 in a market where an Austin Cooper 'S' cost R 1765, a Renault Caravelle Coupe cost R 2300, a GSM Flamingo 1500 GT cost R 2596 and a Sunbeam Alpine 260 cost R 3350. The Spitfire Mk. 2's price increased in 18 months by R64 [from R 1650 to R 1714] representing an 3,9% increase.

Mechanical changes on the 1147 cc Spitfire Mk.2 engine included revised camshaft design and a fabricated 4-branch exhaust manifold. The output of the Mk.2 was improved by 3kW to 50 kW and top speed increased by 10 km/h to 155 km/h. A water-heated inlet manifold ensured quicker warming up and a no-loss cooling system was introduced. A diaphragm-type clutch was introduced which required less pedal effort.

The Mk.2 Spitfire was also treated to a new-look front grille and Mk.2 insignia on the boot lid. Several interior improvements were introduced such as extra trim where there was previously bare metal – the fascia [except for the central instrument panel], passenger's grab handle, parcel rail, fascia support and windscreen surround were trimmed in black vynide. Completely newly-designed seats provided more comfort. Molded carpets were added and there were carpeted panels at the base of the doors for kick protection.

Very few readers would probably remember the Mildex Motor Book – Used Car and Truck Identification Guide. This was the second hand car dealers' "Bible" used in the sixties and seventies to identify all South African models when they have to quote prices for a trade in. Under the Triumph Spitfire Mk.2 section mention was made that all Spitfires with serial numbers 4FC 68812 DI on were Spitfire Mk.2 models.

Production of the Triumph Spitfire Mk.2 continued at Motor Assemblies up to September 1967. Their records show that 257 Spitfire Mk.2 units were assembled. According to NAAMSA [National Association of Automobile Manufacturers of South Africa] records 223 Spitfire Mk.2 units were sold in South Africa in 1966 and another 42 units in 1967 for a total of 265 units. This shows a discrepancy of 8 units more sold than assembled at Motor Assemblies which can probably be attributed to direct imports.

Triumph Spitfire Mk.3

From October 1967 to September 1968 there was no Triumph Spitfire production in South Africa. In a New Model Release in September 1968 Leykor Distributors announced that assembly of the Triumph Spitfire Mk.3 in South Africa has commenced. NAAMSA sales figures confirm that 89 Spitfires were sold in 1968. NAAMSA for the first time recorded these sales under the newly-formed Leyland Motor Corporation of S.A. Limited banner.

The question is however at which plant was the Triumph Spitfire Mk.3 assembled? Some people speculate that initial production was at the old Rover assembly plant in Port Elizabeth. There is merit in this assumption since the other newcomer in the Triumph range, the Triumph 1500 was initially assembled at this plant [CAR May 1968]. In October 1968 the S.A. Garage and Motor Engineer reported that "the first trial runs of Triumph cars will be undertaken at Blackheath during November. Triumphs are expected to be in full production at the BMC plant by early 1969." This was confirmed in the Motoring Mirror of April 1970 reporting that Leykor Manufacturing's car assembly was finally centralised at the Blackheath plant near Cape Town. During February 1969 assembly of the Triumph 2000 was transferred from Motor Assemblies in Durban to Blackheath as well as the production of Land Rover and the Triumph 1500 previously assembled in Port Elizabeth.

In all of this, no mention was specifically made to where the Triumph Spitfire Mk.3 was initially assembled. It is possible that it was first assembled from September 1968 to February 1969 at the Rover plant in Port Elizabeth. The numbers were much smaller than the production of the Triumph 1500 [608 units sold in 6 months of 1968] or perhaps Spitfire production went straight to a Blackheath assembly line. No written proof of either of these theories could be found.

The Triumph Spitfire Mk.3 was launched at R 1795. It was still moderately priced in a market where an Alfa Romeo Giulia Sprint GT 1300 cost R 2595, a Mini Cooper 'S' cost R 1907, a Fiat 124 Sports Coupe R 2980, a Lancia Fulvia Rallye Coupe 1.3 R 2790, a MG 1100 'S' saloon R 1934 and a Renault 8 Gordini at R 2230. After three price increases the last price quoted for the Triumph Spitfire Mk.3 was R 2115 in January 1972. This represents a R 320 price increase over 38 months or an average increase of 5,9% per year.

The Spitfire Mk.3 featured several significant improvements. Engine capacity was increased to 1296cc and engine performance improved significantly. Both output [56 kW] and torque [102 Nm.] increased by 12%. This is claimed to give the magical “ton” of 100 mph/161 km/h maximum with improved top gear flexibility but most road tests overseas cautiously claimed a lower top speed. Acceleration 0 to 100 km/h also improved by 1,5 seconds to 12,9 seconds. A stronger clutch was installed to handle the extra torque. Brakes were also improved by changing brake lining material all round with larger front calipers that gave greater pad area. A larger brake master cylinder was also fitted.

The Spitfire Mk.3 body also featured several stylish and significant changes. Most obviously was the changed frontal appearance by raising the bumper to cut across the centre of a new single-piece air intake. In one road test it was referred to as the “bone-in-the-teeth” bumper. This change was necessitated by American safety legislation. Single front indicator and parking lamps units were fitted under the front bumper. New over-riders with rubber inserts on the front bumper were also introduced. The rear bumpers have also been raised and rear over-riders were discarded while two reverse lamps above the rear bumpers were introduced. A most significant change was the introduction of a permanently attached soft top which could be erected single-handed in seconds. The top was folded away behind the seats while a vynide cover snapped over it. The instrument panel was now also veneered.

Total Triumph Spitfire Production/sales in South Africa

No official Leykor production figures for Spitfire Mk.3 are available. According to NAAMSA records the sales of Spitfire Mk.3 units under the Leykor banner until discontinued at the end of 1971 totaled 632 units. In 1968 89 Mk.3 Spitfire units were sold. Sales increased significantly in 1969 to 201 units, followed by another 237 units in 1970. Then sales tapered off to 93 units in 1971 and finally a mere 12 units were sold in the early part of 1972.

Motor Assemblies’ production records show that 883 Mk.1 and Mk.2 units were produced at their Durban factory. This figure is 8 less than what the NAAMSA sales records show. It is possible that these 8 Spitfires were direct imports. According to NAAMSA figures total sales of Triumph Spitfire Mk.1 and Mk.2 models amounted to 891 units.

The total of all Triumph Spitfire sales for the period July 1963 to early 1972 [slightly more than 8 years] came to 1523 units.

A Last Thought

Before the acquisition of BMC and Jaguar by Leyland South Africa in 1968 the company had strong views [also regularly expressed in the press] to build a plant to produce fibreglass bodies for the cars in their stable. The July 1968 edition of Motorgids reported that Leyland budgeted R3,5 million for the erection of a plant to produce fibreglass bodies for Triumph and later Rover cars as well as cabs for Leyland commercial vehicles. At the time it was not yet decided whether a new plant would be build in Rosslyn or whether the Rover plant in Port Elizabeth would be expanded.

Already as far back as December 1966 the S.A. Garage and Motor Engineer wrote in a News Flash “Leyland have announced that Triumph will have three ‘manufactured’ models by late 1967 – the 2000, a 1500c.c. saloon and a sports car. To achieve ‘manufactured’ status² the cars will have fibreglass bodies – said to be cheaper than metal on short runs. While fibreglass bodies have found little favour overseas, South Africa has produced the two fibreglass sports cars – the Dart and the Flamingo. With no manufacturing competition in the sports car field, the Triumph sports car at least is likely to prove a proposition.”

One wonders if these plans materialized 50 years ago whether it would have contributed to moving the Triumph Spitfire away from ‘wall flower’ closer to ‘Belle of the ball’ status among South African collectors and restorers.

² When a certain percentage of locally-manufactured components [based on vehicle weight] were achieved “manufactured” status and privileges was achieved; if not the model was classified as “assembled” with less privileges within the Local Content Programme.