Austin Cambridge A55 Mark II/A60, Morris Oxford Series V/VI (‘Family’ Farina Models)

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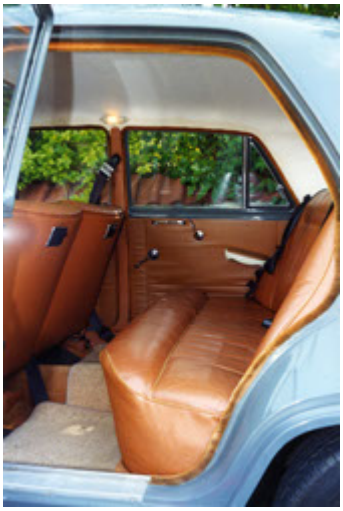
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Smart yet not over-ostentatious, the attractive A60 Cambridge and equivalent Oxford Series VI have stood the test of time as useful and enjoyable classics for families.

As British in character as a Sunday roast, but with a hint of Italian styling flair, the Cambridge models from Austin, and equivalent Oxfords from Morris, were respected in their time, and make effective ‘family’ classics today. Kim Henson investigates...

As the 1960s beckoned, angular styling and pointed rear fins were all the rage. Echoing this trend, the popular ‘mainstream’ Austin and Morris versions of BMC’s family cars, featuring body design by Farina, were part of the ‘new look’ revolution.



The rear seats are particularly accommodating, and offer excellent head and leg room. Ride comfort is good too.

In fact the Austin A55 Mark II Cambridge and the Morris Oxford Series V, both introduced in 1959, were ‘badge-engineered’ versions of the same car, differing only in grille design and trim details. Although this feature concentrates on these, the most affordable mid-range ‘Farina’ versions in BMC’s line-up, more upmarket variations on the same theme were also produced, wearing MG, Riley and Wolseley badges. These were mechanically similar to the Austin amd Morris models (with twin carburettors and more power from the MG and Riley variants), but featured their own unique styling touches (including the front grilles and interiors).



Leather-trimmed seats came as standard – impressive for a mass-produced family car.

By comparison with the Cambridge and Oxford models they replaced, the new family cars from Austin and Morris were very boldly styled and much more angular in appearance, with sharply pointed rear fins and vast amounts of bright trim. Much attention had been paid to ensuring that the cars were practical for everyday family use, so spacious five/six seater, four door bodywork came as standard, as did a huge, easily loaded luggage boot which opened from bumper level.

Underpinning the concept in both cases were the mechanical units proven in the previous Austin Cambridge models. BMC’s conventional and very tough overhead valve (pushrod) 1.5 litre ‘B’

Series engine drove the rear wheels through a four speed gearbox.

New A60 Cambridge and Oxford VI models arrived in 1961, featuring revised styling (incorporating generally ‘softer’ lines and slightly more ‘rounded’ rear fin profiles), and even more interior space. Notably too, the new cars were endowed with more powerful, 1622cc engines.

The cars found appreciative buyers throughout the 1960s. The A60 was built until 1969, and the Oxford soldiered on until 1971. By this time the new, rear wheel drive Morris Marina was ready to be launched, and effectively took over from the Farina Cambridges and Oxfords.



The early Farina-styled models, like this superb 1961 A55 Mark II, featured ‘pointed’ rear fins; the Oxford V has generally similar bodywork.



From 1961 the appearance was ‘softened’ with more rounded body corners, especially at the rear. This is a 1964 A60; again, the Oxford VI looks very similar.



Dashboard design is simple but incorporates comprehensive instrumentation (including a temperature gauge and an oil pressure gauge).



Plenty of room! The boots on the saloons can swallow a vast amount of luggage, and open from bumper height. The estates are even more practical.



The engines are tough and long-lasting, capable of covering 150,000 miles or more between overhauls, provided they are properly serviced.

WHAT ARE THEY REALLY LIKE TO LIVE WITH TODAY

These vehicles were never intended to be sports cars, but are still capable of cruising at motorway speeds for hour after hour, and make ideal family classics. They are still effective and economical to run over long distances, with between 34 and 35 mpg being achievable in real world high speed cruising conditions.

In all versions, passenger and luggage accommodation is generous. The excellent ride quality (in a well-maintained example), coupled with a high standard of interior trim (featuring large, comfortable, leather-upholstered seats and good quality carpets, for example), means that these Austin/Morris models are pleasant cars in which to travel over long distances. In addition, the large glass area helps to provide a light and airy interior.

Boot space is excellent, and the spare wheel is easily accessed when required by winding down a cradle beneath the boot floor, so there’s no need to remove all the luggage in order to change a wheel.

The now rare estate versions are even more practical than the saloons, incorporating a long, flat load floor, and a horizontally divided tailgate. The values of the estates (Austin A55/A60 Cambridge Countryman, Morris Oxford Series V/VI Traveller) are increasing more rapidly than those of the saloons.

All versions are easy to drive (although the steering is heavy at low speeds, especially if radial ply tyres are fitted), and all-round visibility is good.

Over the years these models have justifiably earned a reputaion for being extremely reliable and generally inexpensive to buy. Do-it-yourself maintenance is very straightforward too, although changing the original type replaceable element oil filter is a challenge, due to its inaccessible location beween the battery and the under-engine cross-member!

The 1600cc versions (from 1962) were always a popular choce for caravanners in the 1960s/70s, and if you fancy a classic caravan, these Austin and Morris models are still excellent tow cars (not least because of their strong torque delivery at low engine speeds).

Problems? Rust can be very extensive throughout the body shell, and if you are considering buying a Cambridge or Oxford, it's wise to opt for the best example you can find, in terms of structural integrity. Mechanical condition is less important, but still needs to be taken into account.

Carefully examine the body shell in all areas, but especially in the vicinity of the sill assemblies, jacking points, floor pans, front cross-member assembly (beneath the radiator support panel), 'chassis' outrigger assemblies (especially those just behind the front wheels), pillars, bulkheads, front inner wings and rear spring supports.

In addition, assess the condition of the front and rear outer wings (the fronts can be particularly expensive to repair or replace), the lower edges of the doors, the bottoms of the rear wings and the base of the boot lid. Check the condition of the boot floor too.

If in good condition, the interiors are inviting and comfortable, but worn leather is costly to have renovated… check very closely.

The mechanical components are long-lasting, but the engines eventually show signs of wear in terms of smoking due to worn piston rings and cylinder walls. Check for a smokesecreen in the rear view mirror when accelerating away from the bottom of a long descent.

Check too for very low oil pressure. With the engine fully warmed up, the oil pressure gauge (a standard fitting) should indicate around 50 p.s.i. at normal road speeds. Listen for rumbling from the bottom end of the engine too (indicating worn crankshaft/bearings), and ensure that the oil pressure builds up rapidly from a cold start.



Assess manual transmissions for weak synchromesh and noisy gearbox bearings. On versions equipped with the optional Borg Warner automatic transmission (1622cc cars only), check for smooth ratio changes and ensure that the transmission fluid is clean and at the correct level.

These models need to have the front suspension re-greased regularly (ideally very 1,000 miles or so), or the king pins and bushes, and the lower fulcrum pins, can wear badly, eventually resulting in MoT test failure. Rectification is a time-consuming job, and can be costly.

Weak front shock absorbers (dampers) result in a ride quality that's terrible, with much bouncing (especially from the front end of the car) over rough surfaces, and abysmal roadholding.

VERDICT

Fun to own and to use, dependable, user-friendly and still practical family classics.

(To read about a happy excursion to the Isle of Wight in the Austin A60 featured photographically in this article, please click HERE).

Organisations catering for the cars include:

British Made Car Club; http://bmcc.99k.org
Cambridge-Oxford Owners' Club; www.co-oc.org

Austin Cambridge Westminster Car Club; www.acwcc.org

PRICES

Saloons: Rough, £300. Good, £1,500-£2,000+. Top notch, £4,000+.

Estates: Rough, £400. Good, £1,600-£2,500+. Top notch, £4,500+.

FACTS AND FIGURES

Built:
A55 Mark II/Oxford V: 1959-61
A60: 1961-69
Oxford VI: 1961-71

Bodywork:
Four door saloon, five door estate.

Engines:
Overhead valve, in-line four cylinder.
A55 Cambridge/Oxford V: 1489cc, 53 bhp
A60 Cambridge/Oxford VI: 1622cc, 61 bhp

0-60 mph:
1489cc: 24 sec
1622cc: 21 sec

Top speed:
1489cc: 80 mph
1622cc: 82 mph

Typical fuel consumption:
27-35+ mpg