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BMC/BL Mini – The Clubman and 1275GT Scenario

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John Cooper and 1275GT history and development.

Dave Moss describes what happened.

In the mid 1960s, specialising began at BMC over how best to update or replace the Mini, which was turning into one of its most successful cars. The decision was ultimately

overtaken by the mergers which first created British Motor Holdings and then the British Leyland Motor Corporation - bringing all the BMC brands and Jaguar together alongside Triumph and Rover. These mergers brought the scale of the looming small car problem into sharper focus - for, despite the newly assembled marques offering a wide model portfolio, no new small car was then at a late stage of development for consideration as a long term Mini replacement.



Easily the nearest was the 9X, the last complete car design from Sir Alec Issigonis, and a concept which, whilst practical, was almost as radical as the Mini before it. Running prototypes existed by 1968, of which an example survives today at the British Motor Museum Heritage Motor Centre at Gaydon. Yet for reasons too complex to go into here, nothing came of Issigonis's last stand. Torn by internal indecisions, the company was obliged to depend on the Mini for many more years – for a small car design was not considered again until the 1974 ADO 74 project, which after much agonising and false starts eventually developed into the ADO 88 and ultimately LC8 projects – before belatedly surfacing as the MiniMetro in 1980.

The end of the 1960s coincided with Alec Issigonis's fall from grace, sidelined away from his position as Technical Director, with the 9X rejected by the new BLMC hierarchy at almost the same time. However he had also been leading work on updates to the existing Mini – the first of note in an 8 year production run – which resulted in the appearance of the mildly facelifted Mark 2 version in October 1967. Issigonis's influence on the further work undertaken when the very limited changes attracted adverse criticism was modest, but much improved Mark 3 models surfaced just two years later. Long overdue amendments were then incorporated, the most obvious of which were internal door hinges, wind-up windows and a more comfortable interior.

There were numerous other revisions, some of them relating to the vehicle structure, incorporated to allow for production of more upmarket derivatives to replace the low-volume Riley Elf and Wolseley Hornet variants. Mark 2 and Mark 3 Minis retained their familiar looks, but forward of the windscreen and scuttle area, the Mark 3 bodyshell now provided for alternative, more boxy front sheet metalwork unique to the new Mini Clubman saloon and estate. A new larger, flatter, full width bonnet closed over a more spacious engine compartment, which extended forward into a squared up frontal area with integrated front lighting. The frontal changes were speedily penned by BLMC's new Director of Styling – the man who styled the Ford Cortina Mark 2 – Roy Haynes. The effect on the car's aerodynamics has – perhaps thankfully – gone unrecorded, but opinions about the result were certainly divided. BLMC boss Lord Stokes reportedly loved it, while Alec Issigonis



hated it; press and public reportedly found the bluff-fronted Clubman oddly proportioned, appearing aesthetically balanced only as an estate-car – which now replaced the earlier Mini Traveller.



The neat side profile of the Mini Clubman estate, produced from 1970.



[They sold overseas too... Here's a left-hand drive Mini Clubman saloon.](#)

The first Mark 3 Minis and new 998cc Clubman variants left the showrooms in 1970 – just as total Mini production reached two million units. The Clubman had a fresh and more appealing interior, sacrificing some interior storage space, but with instruments now immediately ahead of the driver. Meanwhile the Mini 850 and 1000 saloons continued in 'Mark 3' guise, though they reverted to the original rubber cone suspension, leaving the Clubman saloons using the fluid based Hydrolastic system.

The last Mini Coopers were built as a new 1275 GT arrived in November 1969, with similar looks and a slightly sportier trim package than the standard Clubman. A single carburettor 1275cc engine, closely related to that used in the larger Austin 1300GT, gave similar overall



performance to the Cooper. However it fell well short of the Mark 3 Cooper 'S,' which was discontinued in 1971 - about the time that Mini production reached its peak of over 300,000 cars in a year.



From left to right, 1275GT, Mini 1000 and Mini Clubman, 1973.

The following slideshow photo sequence depicts the superb 1275GT owned by Frank Phillips, proprietor of Austin Morris Services based at Freshwater on the Isle of Wight (Tel. 01983 755888). Grateful thanks to Frank for the use of his photographs of his car.

This slideshow requires JavaScript.



Though the Clubman series was the last major derivative of the Mini concept, development didn't completely stagnate after its introduction – despite the deepening troubles afflicting BL as the 1970s unfolded. Innovations which followed the demise of its Hydrolastic suspension in 1971 included a heated rear window, much improved remote control for the gearchange, radial ply tyres, an alternator and inertial reel seat belts. In 1974, the 1275 GT became the first Mini with a 7.5 gallon fuel tank – and gained more effective braking by also being the first (by 10 years...) with 12 inch wheels, releasing space for larger front discs. These allowed the optional fitment – taken by a surprising number of owners – of Dunlop 'Denovo' run-flat tyres.

During 1975 the Clubman gained luxury-feel cropped nylon trim, as well as the flexible 1098cc engine previously fitted in the '1100' range – though automatic versions retained the 998cc unit.

Twelve months later a final round of improvements included a new, rubber mounted front subframe, retuned suspension, moulded carpets, tinted glass and upgraded interior trim. By August 1980 the imminent arrival of the new MiniMetro spelt the end for the Clubman saloon and 1275GT – BL wanted higher prices for the new car, and recognised a performance and equipment overlap between the Clubman and the initially intended Metro range. Saloon production thus ceased before the Metro arrived, though the estate lingered longer. Though it still carried the Clubman front end, rather oddly it reverted to Mini HL badging and a 998cc engine. The very last examples were sold in 1982.