Metro-spective – 40 years since the launch of the Austin miniMetro

Published: October 8, 2020

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Online version: https://www.wheels-alive.co.uk/metro-spective-40-years-since-the-launch-of-the-austin-minimetro/



One of the very first Austin miniMetros – a range-topper 1.3 HLS press demonstrator, as road tested by Kim Henson in October 1980. (Photograph copyright Kim Henson).

40 years on – a Metro-spective.

Dave Moss reflects on the life and times of BL's biggest selling car…

It's 40 years this Autumn since the most important new car to appear during the British Leyland years first broke cover at the press presentation ahead of its official launch on October 8th 1980 (exactly 40 years ago to the day) – a date carefully chosen to avoid being "one of a crowd" at the 1980 British International Motor Show – where it made its public debut a fortnight later.

It was the culmination of a remarkably tortuous story, with a slightly sad prologue towards the end of the 1960s, when newly installed management led by Sir Donald Stokes following the merger of Leyland and British Motor Holdings, flatly rejected Alec Issigonis's last small car design. Known internally as 9X, it was then at running prototype stage, and looking like a smaller version of what later appeared as the Peugeot 104. Before being sidelined out of his Director of Engineering post after the merger, Issigonis fought a protracted and increasingly futile battle to get 9X adopted for production, but a competitor for the all-conquering, volume-selling Ford Cortina was seen as a much greater priority, and the Marina duly went forward…

With Issigonis removed from power, 9X became a forgotten dead-end, contributing little to the next chapter in the story of replacing the then-ageing but still strong-selling Mini. This unfolded as project code ADO74 in the early 1970s, only to be abandoned in a spectacular act of mistiming in 1972 – just as the 1973 oil crisis loomed large, and BL's financial fortunes spiralled downhill. Somehow, though, the idea lived on, metamorphosing into project ADO88, which then, over a period of years, progressed through two prototype phases. For very different reasons, neither of these evolved directly into the small car that eventually became manufacturing reality under yet another project code – LC8.

This painfully slow story of evolution is both remarkable and far too complex to consider here, though hindsight offers three principal causes – bureaucratic indecision, financial constraints resulting from an increasing reliance on periodic cap-in-hand approaches for

government cash – and inconsistent progress because of endless staff and management changes. Such problems were depressingly familiar to 1970s British motor industry observers, who delighted in reporting every upset. Thus, as the final development stages drew near, with the company in public ownership, press scrutiny intensified, with speculation particularly rife over what the new car might be called.

In 1979, approaching the end of its interminable, strife-torn gestation, BL decided company employees could choose the name in a ballot from a shortlist of three – carefully selected from a "long" list reputedly comprising over 8,000 possibilities. The ballot had an indifferent reception, with only half of those eligible bothering to vote. And so BL's most important car ever came to be called the miniMetro by a majority of 267 – amassing 8,599 votes against the second placed miniMaestro, which garnered 8,332.

Sitting continuously in the journalistic spotlight, as the new car neared launch, inevitably secrets leaked out. One of them was the plan for dealer and major fleet purchaser presentations to take place during September 1980 aboard the MS Vistafjord, the last British-built luxury cruise liner, sailing between Liverpool and the Isle of Man. Afterwards, BL rated this exercise highly successful, but with seemingly endless amounts of taxpayers' money already eaten up by the car's development, such apparent extravagance inevitably prompted searching questions about necessity, cost, and value for money.

The press launch began late in August, a series of events based at London's swish Churchill Hotel, on leafy Portman Square. There, despite zealous questioning of senior management by wearied hacks who had followed the twists and turns of BLMC's, and then BL's, cash-strapped, strife-torn machinations for over a decade, a new-found confidence pervaded the evening press conference. The positive atmosphere suggested management genuinely saw the miniMetro as a product to be proud of, and a turning point – despatching into history the delays, political unease, cash shortages and general turmoil which had dogged the company's attempts to compete in the fast-developing Supermini class, against cars like the Ford Fiesta, VW Polo and Renault 5.

It would be stretching a point to say the Press adored the car – at least on the days I was there – but the reception was certainly warm. The outbound motorway run to a coffee stop near Banbury brought a snap verdict solidly reinforced during lunch near Henley-on-Thames: The Austin miniMetro was the most complete new product package to emerge from BL in years. Keen prices started from £3,095, but naturally there were criticisms: I noted a rather dumpy appearance, plasticky trim, limited model choice with just six versions and two power levels (44 and 63 BHP), old technology, modest performance – and handling clearly built and tuned for comfort, not for speed.

Most such issues were addressed later in the model's life – and overall, praise rated far higher than criticism. The 3 door hatchback bodyshell was surprisingly spacious, and high series cars offered the new innovation of a 60/40 split rear seat. Though advanced in safety terms for its day, it was hardly adventurous mechanically, based on major units from the Mini – including newly improved, usefully economical A+ versions of its familiar 998 cc and 1275 cc engines – albeit still with four speed gearboxes. Ride quality benefited from a simplified version of Hydragas suspension, as then fitted to the Austin Allegro.



In October 1980 this then new, state-of-the-art press demonstrator 1.3 HLS miniMetro hatchback, at the time being put through its paces by Kim Henson, leads a line of small Austin models dating back to 1938… The cars behind the Metro in this shot are a 1973 Mini 850, 1958 A35, 1955 A30 and 1938 Big Seven. (Photograph copyright Kim Henson).

Stand 185, the biggest in Hall 3 at the British International Motor show, was besieged, as the public flocked to see the new miniMetro – and appeared very much in favour. BL had put 600 launch cars into UK dealer showrooms – and the public flocked there too. Though Ford's stylish Fiesta had been available since 1976, during 1981 185,700 Metros were built, and it became Britain's best selling small car. However 1983 was its best year, with over 130,000 examples taking to British roads alone – propelling it to 3rd place in the SMMT annual best sellers list, outsold only by Ford's new front-drive Escort, also launched in 1980, and the 1982 Sierra.

During 1982, when the mass-market section of BL cars became Austin-Rover Group, the car

was officially renamed the Austin Metro, allowing the new MG version to drop neatly into place from May as a sporty 72 bhp range topper, with lively performance, temperament-free driveability, and Mini-like handling. It featured a delightfully well crafted interior, and a keen £4,799 list price A luxury variant, the Metro Vanden plas, was launched at the same time.

However, with the supermini revolution accelerating, despite the arrival of 5 door variants, 1984 proved a vintage year for the Metro's competitors. Sales drifted away to the new Peugeot 205, Fiat Uno and Vauxhall Nova – and the newly facelifted Ford Fiesta, which outsold them all. Astute Metro marketing using the memorable advertising strapline "A British car to beat the world," couldn't halt the slide, and the car never reclaimed its top selling status, maturing into a strong but steady seller, and making regular SMMT top ten appearances.

1986 saw the arrival of an improved and facelifted range – the first really significant upgrade since launch. The Austin name was retired around a year later, though it remained on commercial vehicles for some time afterwards, including, quite briefly, a basically equipped Metro van. Following Rover group's purchase by British Aerospace, in spring 1990 the now ageing Metro underwent further stylistic, interior and engineering changes – officially becoming the 'new' Rover Metro with "K" series engines. Late in 1994 came a final, more plush, heavily facelifted upgrade, which Rover's launch information claimed provided "more value with greater prestige." Rover 100 badging was then added to UK cars – in line with European export versions.



16 valve ‘K Series’ powered Metro GTA, 1991.

No other BL/Rover car launched after 1980 was manufactured in volumes approaching that of the Metro, so, in its various guises and incarnations, it holds the record as easily the best selling car ever built by BL. Despite the best disruptive efforts of Derek “Red Robbo” Robinson, it also came to follow the infamous BMC/BL tradition of staying in production far longer than its designers expected – or intended. Manufacture remained unbroken throughout the British Aerospace ownership period, and continued under BMW. Annual sales remained above 100,000 units until 1991, and over 54,000 units as late as 1996.

Sadly though, the miniMetro story lacks a fairytale ending. Hailed in 1980 as being at the forefront of automotive safety development, with innovative features in a bodyshell of noteworthy torsional rigidity, then unmatched by any competitor, BMW had little choice other than to cease Rover 100 production in 1997, when the car returned disastrous 1-star

results under EuroNCAP testing to then-current safety standards. 2,078,219 examples were completed – enough to guarantee a spot alongside the Mini and Morris Minor as one of the best selling British cars of all time.



The Euro Ncap test that ended the Metro production story…

British Motor Museum hosts ‘Metro at Forty’ online exhibition.



British Motor Museum's "Metro at Forty" online exhibition gives a fascinating insight into the model's history. This is a 1980 Austin Mini Metro 1.3 HLS, in sectioned form.

As previously mentioned on Wheels-Alive, The British Motor Museum is hosting a comprehensive online exhibition to celebrate the Metro, and – entitled "Metro at Forty". It is free to view and gives everyone the chance to celebrate this iconic car's special birthday. The direct link to the exhibition is: https://metro.britishmotormuseum.co.uk/

References:

Launch Press kit, various personal notes and recordings made during the London press launch, September 1980… and 1986, 1990 and 1994 model update interviews and press information.

Selected SMMT sales figures for the years 1980-1997

The euroNCAP report that ended the car's career:

https://www.euroncap.com/en/ratings-rewards/latest-safety-ratings/en/results/rover/100/15472

The Wikipedia entry:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austin_Metro

Books:

Back from the brink, Sir Michael Edwardes. Collins, 1983. ISBN 0-00217-074-4.

Metro – The book of the Car, Graham Robson, Patrick Stephens Ltd, Cambridge, 1982. ISBN 0-85059-593-2

STOP PRESS: As this feature goes live, on 8th October 2020, a new book entitled 'Austin and Rover Metro: The Full Story' has just been published. Author (and Austin Rover enthusiast) Craig Cheetham says, "The Metro is a car that touched millions of lives.

Whether you bought one new, your mum had one or you learned to drive in one, it was part of the fabric of British society and remained on sale for almost two decades.

Today, it's a rapidly appreciating classic that's especially popular with younger enthusiasts. And as it turns 40, it's definitely time to celebrate the achievements of the British Car to Beat the World."

Austin and Rover Metro: The Full Story is available now from Amberley Publishing, priced at £14.99. You can order a copy at www.amberley-books.com, via bookshops or through Amazon.

Material on the MS Vistafjord:

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On death row – 12 Apr 2017

Goodbye Vistafjord | Linerlovers's Blog
www.linerlovers.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/goodbye-vistafjord