Mini – Collectors' Gold

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Early BMC Minis, including unrestored examples, commercial versions, Coopers and special editions are all of particular interest to enthusiasts in the 21st Century says Dave Moss.



This early Austin version is identifiable by its original 'wavy' grille. (By the way, the 'Flying A' attached to the bonnet of this car is not in fact a Mini feature, but was originally fitted to an Austin A30).

Despite a high profile career spanning over 40 years, it's perhaps rather surprising that almost all of today's most valuable and collectable Minis were sold in the 1960s. Though

the next three decades produced what might be described as cosmetic collectables, the desirability of that elusive, low mileage, original condition 1960s 1275S Mini Cooper has become so legendary, today it invariably sells at prices matching the high profile of the legend. The 1275S, nonetheless, is not the rarest of this breed: that honour goes to good, original examples with 1071cc and – especially – 970cc engines. Meanwhile the 'ordinary,' less powerful (and certainly less temperamental) Mini Cooper with early 997 and – mostly – later 998cc engines were once far more numerous than any S type, but both – and the later Mini Clubman 1275GT – now seem at least as rare.

At this point a wallet health warning is probably appropriate: If you really, really, want to buy any Mini Cooper variant, be it a long dead barn find or the finest example, take every precaution to ensure that what you are buying is both original and genuine. True Mini experts will know precisely where to look, and what to look for, to identify genuine cars – and it really is worth paying for expert help to avoid being taken for a ride by Mini mutton dressed as lamb. Non-genuine Coopers have been turning up for years.

Another expensive rarity is the original, BMC built, 1960s fun vehicle, the Mini-Moke, with prices nowadays almost matching those of the Cooper S. Yet more restricted budgets don't preclude rare cars: ordinary Minis with Hydrolastic suspension, for instance, have all but disappeared, and automatic versions are equally thin on the ground. Mini Clubman derivatives and more luxurious Wolseley Hornets and Riley Elves with an extended boot are all seriously endangered species, and about half a million commercial vans and pick-ups have also vanished, practically without trace. There were wood-trimmed and all-steel Austin and Morris Mini estate cars too, though you'd hardly guess it today. From the early years, complete and often quite original Austin Se7ens and Morris Mini-Minor saloons from 1959, 1960 and 1961 occasionally turn up for sale. Production line remedies for early water leak problems created this small group of survivors, often regarded as having better structural rust resistance than the bodyshells of modified design introduced after 1962.

At the more recent end of the scale, a whole run of Special Edition Minis began in 1976 with the Mini 1000 LE Special. Three years later came the more plushly trimmed 1098cc 1100

Special, celebrating 20 years of Mini production, after which ‘Anniversary’ cars began appearing at 5 year intervals. 5,000 examples of the Silver Jubilee Mini 25 were built in 1984, and 3,000 units of the Mini Thirty in 1989. Five years later just 1,000 units of the Mini 35 followed, rounded off by a mere 250 examples of the 1999 Mini 40 LE.

This era actually got into its stride with the 1983 Mini Sprite, after which the introduction of the mainstream ‘Mayfair’ badge spawned a string of London-themed special editions. Between 1984 and 1987 came the Mini Ritz, the Chelsea, the Piccadilly and the Park Lane. The Mini Advantage appeared ahead of Wimbledon 1987, quickly followed by Minis Red Hot and Jet Black, and in 1988 the Mini Designer, said to have been ‘created’ by Mary Quant. In 1989 BL tried for a nostalgic 60s feel with two-tone pastel colours for Minis ‘Flame’ and ‘Racing,’ while the 1990 Mini Checkmate came in black and white, and was followed by the ‘Studio 2’, end result of a Rover young people’s design project. Production numbers rarely exceeded 5,000 units, and dwindled through the 1990s: only 1,000 examples of the Mini ‘Sidewalk’ and ‘British Open Classic’ were built, there were 1,500 examples of the Mini Neon, 700 of the Mini Rio, 500 of the Tahiti, 200 of the ‘Monte Carlo,’ and just 100 of the 1998 Mini Cooper LE.

These are just some of the ‘Specials,’ of which a percentage would have been exported, and inevitably, time, rust and wear and tear has by now exacted its final revenge on many of the rest. Today, any running Special Edition Mini is a rare specimen indeed, though when they surface, prices usually remain within reach. Yet other tantalising rarities remain out there: for instance, from 1980, Europe saw several unique export-only special edition Minis, which were never sold or seen in Britain!