Mini Happy Returns – 60+ years on – Mini Coopers Galore

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The Cooper influence – by Dave Moss

John Newton Cooper was born in Kingston upon Thames on July 17th 1923, and left school at fifteen to work in the machine shop which was part of the Surbiton based garage run by his father, Charles Cooper. Growing up with Brooklands racing circuit just down the road, John must have soaked up the atmosphere and influences of motor racing – for amongst other things his father's work involved maintaining racing cars for then famous driver Kaye Don.

Later John moved on to a company making marine equipment, changing direction again as war broke out to work as an instrument maker, later serving in the RAF in a similar

capacity. After the war, the motor sporting bug took hold: He teamed up with a friend to build the first single-seat Cooper 500 racing car, mostly from scrap or second hand parts, and assembled with considerable ingenuity. Very unusually its simple ladder frame chassis had its pre Second World War JAP 500cc motorcycle engine installed behind rather than in front of the driver.

This car proved successful from its first competitive run at Prescott Hill Climb in 1946, and soon fate played a hand. During the 1930s one Alec Issigonis had also employed considerable ingenuity to develop his own home-constructed lightweight racing special. The story goes that soon after the War he was awaiting a start in the Brighton Speed Trials, alongside a Cooper 500… driven by the man himself, who duly won the race. This chance meeting, it seems, started a firm and enduring friendship.

During 1947, John Cooper somehow found time to marry his fiancée Pauline – while helping to further improve the car for the coming racing season. Further success brought growing demand for replica examples, so John and his father founded the Cooper Car Company, after which John successfully piloted a steadily developing works car for several years. Well over 300 examples were eventually built, turning the Cooper Car Company into the world's first – and biggest – manufacturer of 'privateer' racing cars.

Cooper himself went on to become racing manager, and following agreement with Coventry Climax for engine supply, the team moved upward through Formula 3 and 2 into Formula 1. Stirling Moss winning the 1958 Argentine Grand Prix in a Cooper Climax for a different team prompted a bid for top flight success, the reward coming when Australian Jack Brabham and the Cooper team, with the rear-engined Cooper Climax T51, won both the drivers' and constructors' Formula One World Championships in 1959 and 1960.



Cooper Climax Type 51.

Somehow, amid the frenzied activity involved in scaling these heights, Issigonis persuaded a reportedly sceptical John Cooper to try out an early Mini. It's said he found its abilities very much to his liking, which is probably where the idea for a Mini Cooper first emerged, for in the early 1960s Cooper racing activities extended into the new Formula Junior category.

The Formula Junior cars were powered by a developed version of the Austin A35/Morris Minor 1000 engine – basically the same unit as in the new Mini – and it wasn't long before this carefully developed engine was being evaluated by the Cooper Car Co in BMC's new baby. An approach to build the 1,000 cars necessary for racing homologation of the Cooper powered Mini quickly followed, and though reputedly unconvinced about commercial viability, BMC were probably swayed by the powerful marketing attraction of association with the world famous Cooper name. The 997 cc Mini-Cooper was launched in July 1961,

and its arrival, alongside more powerful derivatives urged upon BMC by John Cooper as the early car's competition successes grew, marked the opening of the Mini's big-league competition history. Both the Cooper Company, which completed much competition background work, and Downton engineering – responsible for early engine development and tuning – benefited from these successes, with both continuing their development work in the 1960s.

Despite introducing what became the accepted rear engine layout for future Grand Prix cars, the Cooper company never really capitalised on its high profile championship wins. It took a bitter blow in 1963, when John Cooper was badly injured in a crash in a development prototype twin-engined Mini, from which his recovery was quite protracted, and during which time his father died, at the age of 70, in October 1964.

Though the glory days were gone, Cooper remained in top level motorsport until 1965, when the team and company were sold to the Chipstead Motor Group. John Cooper went on to set up his own successful retail garage at Ferring in Sussex, and continued as team co-director alongside Roy Salvadori into 1968. The Cooper racing operation closed for good early in 1969.

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In 1970, with Lord Stokes battling to reduce burgeoning costs at what had become BLMC, its highly successful Competitions department was closed down. Soon after, the Cooper link was ended – with around 150,000 Minis bearing the Cooper nameplate then sold. The last of them left Longbridge in 1971 – ironically the year in which Mini production reached its all-time peak, with 318,475 examples sold worldwide.

The agile and fast-for-their-time Mini Coopers were enjoyed by many thousands of motorists on the road, and in their heyday were all-conquering in motorsport too, particularly in international rallying, where their giant-beating achievements are legendary.

The Cooper name reconnected with the Mini in 1985, when an engine performance

conversion kit was introduced – and attracted considerable interest. A limited edition 1275cc Mini Cooper was re-introduced in 1990, quickly becoming a mainstream product, and offered with an optional "S" conversion kit which further increased its performance. The car survived BMW's acquisition of Rover, with John Cooper having a hand in the new MINI's mid-1990s development. After BMW sold the company to MG Rover, the original Mini remained available, alongside two Cooper-badged variants, until production finally ended in October 2000.



John Cooper with Mini Cooper Grand Prix Limited Edition, 1994 (celebrating 35 years since winning the 1959 World Championship).

John Cooper was honoured with a CBE for services to British motor racing in 1999. He had been suffering from cancer for some time, and died on December 24th 2000, knowing that

the new MINI, launched just months earlier, would carry the Cooper nameplate proudly into the 21st century.