Mini Happy Returns – 60 Years since BMC's baby was introduced

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One of the very earliest 1959 Minis, in this case an Austin version.

Small Wonder…

Britain's favourite small car of the 1960s and 70s, celebrated by

Dave Moss.

It was exactly 60 years ago this week, on 26th August 1959, that the Mini was introduced to the world. In this first instalment of a series about the BMC/British Leyland/Rover Minis, Dave describes the background to, and development of, this small but revolutionary car, dubbed ‘Wizardry on Wheels’ in contemporary advertising. Further fascinating aspects of the Mini will be soon covered on Wheels-alive; please watch this space!

Hindsight tells us that small car design entered a whole new era on August 26th 1959 with the public arrival of the Austin Se7en and Morris Mini-minor… yet in practical terms the real wonder is that they made it to launch on that day at all…

Today the genesis of such an innovative mainstream vehicle, entering a marketplace loaded with competitors styled and engineered in earlier times, would be seen as a major sales opportunity. Amongst other things it would require extensive research into market positioning, customer desires, expectations and impressions, and demand a launch marketing campaign as advanced as the car itself. The Mini benefited from none of this, for in the 1950s commissioning new car designs was mostly art, not science. Usually the boss, in this case Sir Leonard Lord, decided, largely on instinct honed through experience – perhaps taking account of similar “expertise” from senior colleagues – that a particular new car was needed. He would then brief the company’s designers and engineers to create something suitable within a handful of key parameters – with a go-ahead depending on the sampling of a prototype in due course.



Thus the story goes that Alec Issigonis (pictured above) was implored by Sir Leonard to come up with a new small car to “drive these bubble cars off the road.” So, in under two years from 1957, based on the A Series engine derived from the power unit of the 1951 A30, a small team worked flat out at Longbridge on drawing boards and in experimental workshops to turn Issigonis’s sketches – and some unconventional ideas – into driveable prototypes, and ultimately production-ready motor cars – at a time when computers weren’t around to help in any way. Though indisputably a product development feat of Herculean proportions in its day, this “seat of the pants” engineering approach under endless time pressure might just be the birthplace of BMC’s notorious 1960s reputation for leaving final development of its cars to its customers.

It was certainly true of early Minis. Service intervals of 1000 miles must have irritated owners even when annual mileages were much lower than today, though they provided a

useful opportunity for dealers to rectify the issues charted by customer experiences and the regular stream of post-launch service bulletins. Water leaks became a public legend, but many lower profile problems escaped wide publicity. Four different unit part numbers inside 12 months hints at problems with the innovative sump-mounted gearbox, premature crankshaft oil seal failure soon led on to clutch failures; awkward to operate, wand-like gearlevers were cranked to allow easier gearchanging, drive shaft universal joints and then the driveshafts themselves were modified inside a year… and more seriously, the new 10 inch wheels developed a habit of reverting to their rim and hub component parts while in active service…

Austin and Morris versions were near – but not quite – identical, and sold through dealers handling one or other marque – never both. Bubble cars were already disappearing when the Mini appeared, but, though frugal on fuel and easy to park, the Mini's engineering was unquestionably unconventional, and in the early stages, potential customers were wary. Around 80,000 examples left Longbridge and Cowley in the first year, many of them destined for export. Sales really began blossoming in the 1960s, helped by van, pick-up and estate derivatives, and a first motorsport appearance, just three months after launch, on the RAC Rally. Gradually, the Mini's adoption by London's swinging sixties set as the car-to-be-seen-in around town ensured its simple charm, endearing character and classless outlook permeated into all levels of society. Suddenly, from VIPs to show-biz personalities, pop musicians to politicians – and for anyone simply wanting modern, fun, economical transport – the car to have was a Mini.



The Riley Elf (first generation 1961 example shown) was an upmarket sporting version of the Mini. The Elf featured restyled frontal bodywork, a plush interior and a larger boot.



The utility Moke was based on Mini mechanical components. This one dates from 1964.

Ride quality was always a bugbear: Though tamed somewhat by the short lived, liquid based, Hydrolastic suspension, the ride was eternally firm, though potholes were definitely smaller back then. Many drivers, indeed, tended to forgive the ride because of the car's tidy cornering and general agility. These characteristics made a natural starting point for high-profile motor sport: The Mini took its first major international win at the Tulip Rally in Holland in 1962, driven by Pat Moss.

This attracted interest from names like Ralph Broad, Downton Engineering and John Cooper – and their performance-developed versions were soon appearing on race circuits. Special stage rallies were more challenging with only six inches ground clearance, but once John Cooper's name found its way onto more powerful production Minis, racing and rallying history was made. Between 1965 and 1967 the Mini was victorious on 22 top level European

rallies, and as its top flight career ended in the late 1960s it had triumphed on most of Europe's toughest events, amongst them the RAC, the Alpine, the Thousand Lakes – and, not without controversy, the Monte Carlo rally on three occasions.

The late 1960s and 1970s were the Mini's golden age: The one millionth example was built during February 1965, two million followed in June 1969, the millionth export Mini sailed away in April 1970, and in October 1972 it became the first British car to pass the 3 million production mark. At that point 2,860,382 examples had been built in Britain, achieving 1,527,506 home market sales – with 1,332,876 exported. Seventeen overseas plants had assembled a further 780,000 examples from exported kits of parts – with another 139,618 made overseas incorporating over 50% local parts. Production remained consistently above 200,000 units annually from 1962 to 1977, hitting an all time peak of 318,000 units in 1971, and passing the four million milestone in 1976.

Twenty years from original launch, Austin-Morris, previewing the imminent arrival of the 1100 Special – first in a series of 5-yearly anniversary editions of the car – reported its 1979 first quarter Mini sales figures. In March, sales totalled 9,438 cars, which in March 2019 would have placed it seventh in the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) best sellers list – somewhat spookily the place occupied by the current MINI range, which sold 8,896 examples… despite itself being almost 18 years on from launch.

The year-to-date figures are also revealing. In the first three months of 1979, when Britain's annual car sales were well short of 1.5 million units, the Mini sold 24,617 examples. 30 years on, the SMMT 2019 first quarter figures – charting a market now delivering over 2 million vehicles annually – reveal that total would have comfortably made the classic Mini Britain's top selling car in the first quarter of 2019 – outselling the current Ford Fiesta by 1,143 units, and a remarkable 6,970 units ahead of the second placed Vauxhall Corsa.

Its worth remembering these figures were achieved as the Mini's mainstream career ended, and the new mini-Metro headed towards launch. There were rumours that the Mini would be discontinued after that car's arrival in 1980, but with the Metro growing bigger during

its lengthy and fraught gestation period, the Mini was reprieved. Production passed the 5 million mark in 1986, Mini Cooper branding – which had ended when the last original Cooper S was built in 1971 – was reintroduced in 1990, and the pinnacle of fame came in 1999, when the Mini was voted Autocar magazine's Car of the Century – and European Car of the Century. Ultimately though, all good things come to an end: the final curtain came in October 2000, when Mini number 5,387,862 rolled off the Longbridge production line and into automotive history with a well deserved place at The British Motor Museum.



The first 30 years of the BMC Mini were celebrated in 1989…