

Why Austin's Smallest Car Hails from the Welsh Valleys

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Some 66 years on, Dave Moss remembers the disabled Welsh miners who produced 30,000 cars...



'Correct' in every detail, and topping the wishlist of so many youngsters in the 1950s/60s, the Austin J40 pedal car was manufactured to very high standards - like the full-size A40 on



which it was based. This one was spotted at Goodwood.

Pengam, on the outskirts of Bargoed in south Wales, is a pretty unlikely place for a car factory - but its product was a pretty unusual car. Deep in the Rhymney Valley, landlocked by hills, eighteen tortuous miles north of Cardiff and almost as far from Ebbw Vale and Merthyr Tydfil, for years the largest colliery waste tip in Europe overshadowed Bargoed and its surroundings. Opened in 1897, the colliery broke the world production record in 1908 when a ten-hour shift produced 3,562 tons of coal - followed up by another new record in 1909 when a similar shift raised 4,020 tons. The tip is now a nature park, the mine closed in 1977, and the car factory is also long gone - but the two remain forever inextricably linked - by one of the most debilitating diseases suffered by miners who toiled long and hard in appalling conditions simply to raise much-needed coal to the surface.

The factory location springs from a time when Welsh coal was pivotal to the second world war effort. Then, increasing numbers of miners were falling victim to the serious lung disease Pneumoconiosis - blockage of lung tissue caused by some form of dust - in this case, coal dust. At least 5,000 Welsh miners were diagnosed by 1945, and post-war the government began introducing subsidised factories in affected areas to encourage the provision of alternative work for miners no longer able to undertake hard manual labour.

Low rents and reduced rates were offered for employment of such workers, attracting the interest of the Austin Motor Company's new Managing Director, Leonard Lord. Austin was then planning a new car range which would later become the "county" series - with miniaturised versions for sale as children's pedal cars also under consideration. Low costs, a new factory, and a readily available labour force for the lighter work involved in making childrens' cars rather than real ones seems likely to have appealed to Lord on both a business and a benevolence level.

A small team was formed at Longbridge tasked with urgently developing a prototype child's car, following the "real car in miniature" principle. Its dimensions were to suit children aged four to nine, with seating for one plus a smaller brother or sister, with working lights,



opening bonnet and boot - and a dummy engine. Body styling features from production Austin models were required, including a proper grille and then-current "alligator" bonnet.

The prototype was completed in time for a surprise reveal at the "Austin Progress" Convention in June 1946, where the millionth Austin to be built would take centre stage. This first version was finished in maroon with contrasting brown bench seat, and at Leonard Lord's suggestion its miniature number plate carried the legend JOY 1, because - legend has it - he said: "this car is going to give joy to many children." A considerably lighter second prototype followed, with treadle rather than bicycle-style pedals: it became JOY 2. After this came an alternative, rather smaller single seater called JOY 3, with attractive looks in the style of the 1930's Austin 7 twin-cam racing cars.

JOY 4 was the final prototype to emerge, combining production readiness with experience gained from engineers and plenty of youthful test drivers - and the grille and cutely rounded front end of the new, soon-to-be-launched Austin A40 Devon.

Prior to production, the JOY3 single seater gained the Pathfinder name - which reappeared later on the full size mid-1950's Riley saloon produced by BMC. JOY 4 was renamed the Junior 40 around this time, then later changed to J40 - creating a family relationship with the A40 designation first used on the Austin Devon saloon.



An appropriate 'piggy back' ride for this J40 was atop an Austin A35, also seen at Goodwood, in the spring of 2013. (Kim Henson comments that although he has owned many A35s and other 1950s Austins, he has never - yet - acquired a J40!).

At just over 24,000sq ft including stores and offices the Bargoed factory was small by motor industry standards, but early in 1949 drawings were progressed, tooling and equipment installed and the facility structured for production as with full size vehicles. Dealers and selected high profile retailers were advised that first Pathfinder deliveries were due in early summer 1949 - following the factory's official opening on the 5th of July. J40 "roadster" production began some months later.

On opening, the factory employed under 100 staff, growing to around 150 by 1953, after which numbers increased more quickly. Modest numbers of management and specialist



personnel were seconded from Longbridge, but local employees generally suffered some disability, mostly forms of Pneumoconiosis. By 1965 around 500 were employed, many of them on presswork: it's reputed that 112 pressings were needed for the production version of the J40 pedal car, with 108 panels pressed on site - just four large panels came from Longbridge. By the mid-1960's work covered far more than the J40 - the site was turning out significant volumes of pressed steel parts for BMC's full-size cars, ranging from original Mini door pockets to engine fans and timing chain and rocker covers.

Perhaps surprisingly, the Austin Junior Car factory remained largely untroubled by the 1960's BMH and BLMC mergers. The last J40 was made in September 1971: just over 32,000 examples left the factory between 1955 and 1971 on their way to entertain boys and girls in Britain and worldwide. Production numbers between 1949 and 1955 aren't known, but estimates indicate perhaps 1500 were made in the period, along with 3000 Pathfinder variants. Today's consensus is that the J40 sold for £20.0s 0d, while the Pathfinder cost £25.4s.0d (£25.20) Both types still occasionally appear for sale, attracting surprising prices at auction.

The factory continued making a range of vital small metal assemblies for British Leyland vehicles long after J40 production ended, surviving successive acrimonious BL shake-outs. Ultimately it became part of Austin Rover, living on through British Aerospace and BMW ownership of Rover Group, closing its doors for the last time in April 1999.

References

<http://www.austinmemories.com/page66/page66.html>

<http://www.j40.co.uk/>

Book

Austin Pedal Cars by David Whyley Pub 01/11/1999

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Austin J40 specification

Treadle operation by pedals. Adjustment available for leg reach. Drive to right-hand rear wheel. Adjustable handbrake. Pressed steel hubs with roller bearings. Pressed steel wheels, Dunlop 12.5in x 2.5in pneumatic tyres. Three spoke sprung steering wheel. Pressed steel bodywork. Padded seating with leathercloth upholstery. Dummy engine with sparking plugs and leads. Opening bonnet and boot. Chrome bumpers to front and rear. Twin 4.5 volt batteries operating horn and twin headlamps and horn.

Length 5ft 3in, Width 2ft 3in, Height 1ft 10in, Weight 95 lbs

(Note: This article first appeared, in a slightly different form, on our original 'Wheels-Alive' website in 2014).