



Mini Happy Returns – 60 Years since BMC’s baby was introduced – No. 2 in a special series

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Late example with Sports pack and electric sun roof.

Mini Happy Returns – Sixty years on...

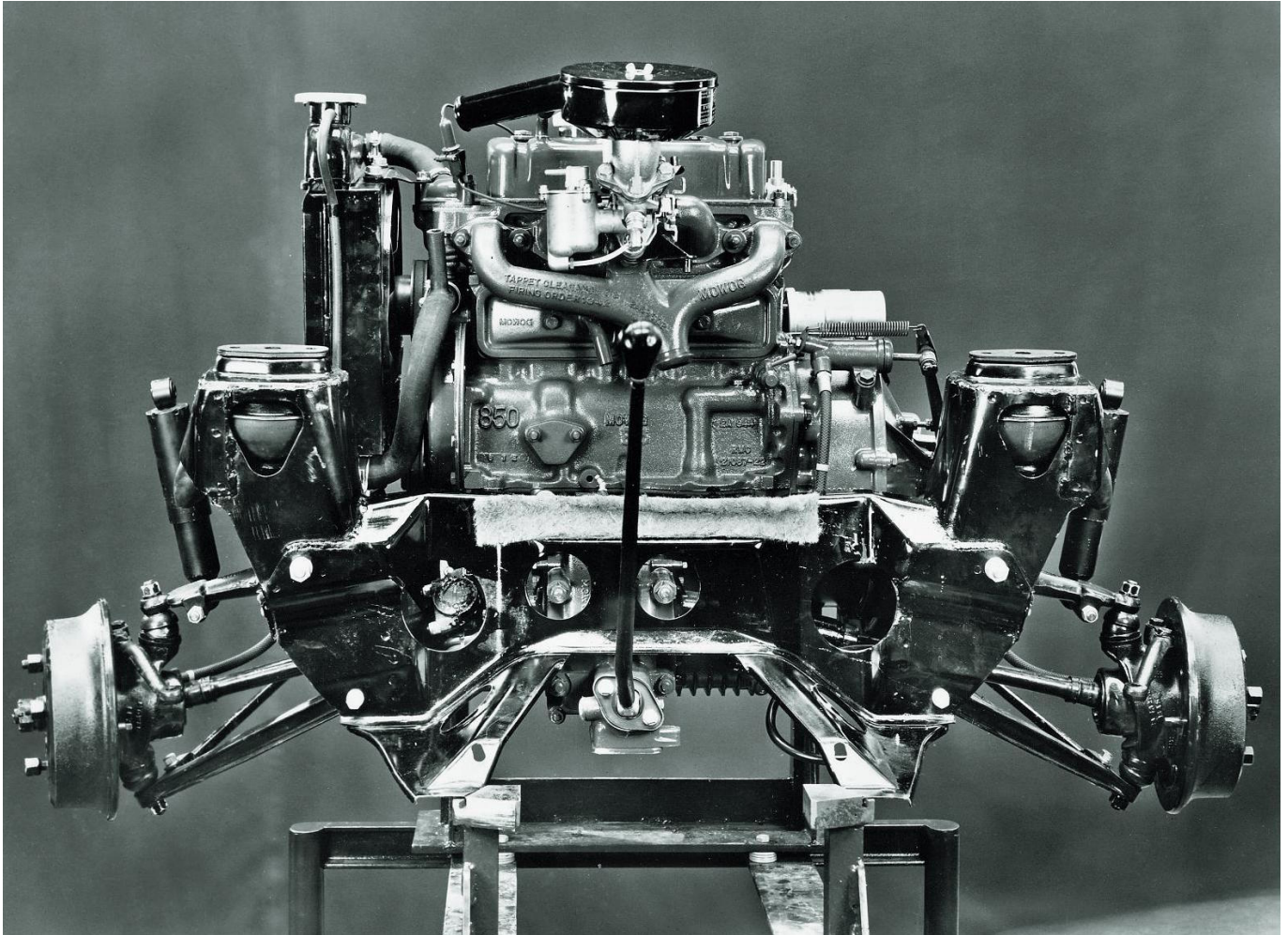
...Feature 2 in our special celebratory series by Dave Moss.



“My, how you’ve changed!”

Major development changes in the classic Mini’s lifetime were few and far between. Most of the reasons for that were wrapped up in the downhill slide into a complex financial nightmare that began after BLMC was formed in 1968 - delivering plenty of lost opportunities along the way. Yet the Mini moved a long way forward in 41 years of production, even if much of that progress rather surprisingly came during its last five years on sale.

This last, and arguably most far-reaching update was announced on October 1st 1996, resulting largely from new legislation impacting hard on a car designed in a very different age. In 1959 it had to meet little more than basic construction and use rules, which mostly avoided safety, noise and emissions issues - all major 1990’s concerns.



Early (1959) engine, transmission and driveshaft set-up.

Original designer Alec Issigonis and his 8-man team would surely still have recognised the faithful “A series” engine, but quickly spotted a few underbonnet changes in that last update. From 1996, the Mini’s cylinder block lacked a distributor drive, the oil filter was relocated and related pipework removed, and internal oil galleries modified. These, and some front subframe revisions, were big changes so late in the car’s life, but vital to gain space - to move the radiator from its familiar side mounting to the front of the car, and install an electric fan. These changes, along with various hidden sound deadening measures, were necessary to meet the step change of much tougher pass-by noise rules under EC Directive 92/97/EEC, demanding an effective halving of noise levels compared with earlier cars.



Those 1950s engineers might have been slightly perplexed by the final Mini's distributor-less four-coil ignition system, avoiding the need to switch sparks between cylinders - by simply triggering each spark plug on both compression and exhaust strokes. SU carburettors were already long gone, replaced by single point fuel injection when Cooper badging was reintroduced after a 20 year gap in 1990/91. From 1996 single point was upgraded to sophisticated multi-point injection, using Rover's very own engine management system. This closely controlled fuelling and ignition functions, and, helped by an improved catalytic converter and exhaust system, delivered optimum emissions performance. Thus the last "A series" unit became the lowest emitting in the engine's history, while power matched the outgoing car at 63 PS, and torque output was improved with a wider and flatter curve.

These changes allowed fitment of a higher final drive, raising overall gearing by 16% over the preceding Mini Cooper - another key element in noise reduction. Anyone familiar with earlier 1990's Minis might have noticed a performance reduction resulting from these changes - and some very different driving characteristics. Rover claimed 0 to 60 mph now took 12.2 seconds, against 11.5 seconds for earlier cars, with top speed down from 92 to an optimistic-sounding 90 mph - achieved in 3rd gear. Fourth now became an overdrive, cutting engine speed at 70mph to 3,333 rpm. Though the outgoing car wasn't tested to the same standards, given the modern engine management system and the various other changes its perhaps surprising that quoted fuel consumption was unchanged, Rover claiming 43.0 mpg combined...

Post-1996 cars gained plenty of safety-related changes, topped by a major steering column redesign allowing the first standard-fitment driver's airbag. Other safety firsts included seat belt pre-tensioners, and side impact protection. Interior improvements ran to new front seat designs giving better rear compartment access through a "fold- forward" reclining backrest arrangement, the design of which was hauntingly reminiscent of the very first Mini reclining seats, extra cost options on some 1960s Cooper models. There was a certain irony in the announcement that the Mini would finally be available with the unashamed luxury of a two-speed heater blower... ironic because, 46 years earlier, if a heater was fitted - on de-luxe models only at first - the standard rheostat control allowed the fan to run at any speed



occupants chose...

For the 1997 model year, the Rover Group's masters decided that the Mini and Mini Cooper, then both costing £8995 on the road, were ripe for extra cost specification upgrades, and personal customisation. The factory option Sport pack "Creates a dramatic appearance and enhances handling and grip," said Rover - while more coyly confessing it also reduced top speed to 84 mph - cost £795. It brought 13 inch 6J alloy wheels with 175/50 R13 tyres, faired-in, body coloured wheelarch spats, Koni shock absorbers, four front driving lamps, a chrome tailpipe finisher, and oil temperature and battery condition gauges.



Upmarket interior treatment of Mini LE, with 1960s racer in the background.



Sadly the 40th birthday of the original Mini was to be the last 'round number' celebration for the model, which was discontinued in 2000...

Lesser options included wood veneer door cappings, electric glass or canvas sunroofs, various leather trim alternatives, and some familiar paint colours from the past - Almond Green, Surf Blue and the always rare Yukon Grey. The accessories list encompassed 37 items, ranging through extra lighting to chrome, wood, and alloy packs, roof, bonnet and side stripe decals, five wheel and tyre choices - even a sumpguard. It didn't last: by March 2000 just three factory options were listed: a single CD player, sunroof and metallic or pearlescent paint, though accessories remained available via dealers.

As BMW prepared to disassociate itself from the remnants of Rover, on April 7th 2000 it was announced that under 4,000 examples would be built before production ceased in July 2000. Despite this, the two Cooper models were joined by the Mini Seven, a modern take on Minis from an earlier age. Prices rose, ranging from £9,495 for the new arrival, to £10,895 for the

Cooper Sport.

It wasn't long before the now independent MG Rover Group announced a 10% price cut, neatly placing the topmost Mini Cooper Sport model at a competitive £9,995. By August sales were 25% up on August 1999, and production plans reportedly extended into mid-September. The end actually came on October 4th 2000, when the last car, a red Mini Cooper Sport, came off the line at Longbridge, where the Mini had been in continuous production for over 40 years.



Turn of the Century icons... A Mini 1.3i and the Millennium Dome.

If you would like to read the first feature in Dave's special series on the original Minis,



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