THE MINI

The Mini is a great British icon. It is known around the World and I would suggest it is very much symbolic of the United Kingdom. The introduction of small cars in the UK was nothing new, of course. Before the Second World War, Austin had produced the Seven. This was a small car that had given both the ability and the opportunity to travel around the country to many individuals and families who had hitherto not been able to do so.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Morris based in Cowley, Oxford had produced the Morris 1000. This was another very successful small family car. Both these cars from an engineering point of view were conventional in that they had longitudinal engines and rear wheel drive.

The Mini, however, came to be produced due the different historical circumstances. Oil had become a very important commodity in the twentieth century and continues to be so. This has made the Middle East very important strategically today, as it was back in the 1950's. President Nasser of Egypt nationalised the Suez Canal on 26th. July 1956. He wanted to use the revenues from the Canal to help finance the Aswan High Dam that was vital for irrigation and the alleviation of poverty in Egypt. There is far more to these developments than I can write about in this type of article, however, the key thing is that the French, Israelis and British decided to invade and take back control of the Canal The campaign initially went well in terms of achieving the objectives that the invaders had set themselves. Then, however, President Eisenhower of the U.S.A. was furious that his permission had not been sought. U.S. officials threatened to stop all financial aid to Britain if the invasion was not stopped. The invading troops were withdrawn. Britain and France had no real option other than to comply with what the Americans wanted.

This was a great humiliation for both Britain and France; many Arabs were delighted that two former imperial powers had been humiliated; the immediate effect of the invasion was that Nasser had blocked the Suez Canal and this had severely interrupted trade to Britain and Europe through the Canal. It made oil very expensive. The British Prime Minister Anthony Eden who had wanted to be Prime Minister for so long had no option but to resign! Petrol rationing was introduced for a very short time in Western Europe.

In this context Bubble Cars from Germany became a proposed solution. They were small and very economical. I would suggest that many younger readers will never have seen one of these vehicles. Most were, as just stated, manufactured in Germany by companies that used to manufacture mainly aeroplanes e.g. Messerschmitt and Heinkel. Probably the most famous was the maker of motorbikes and cars namely BMW, this company manufactured the Italian Iso Rivolta Isetta under licence, they used one of their own motorbike engines to power it. The UK had licensed built right hand drive versions of the lsetta. There were variations of these vehicles and they satisfied a need for cheap vehicles, they could, it seems, because they only had three wheels in the U.K., be driven by a driver with a motorbike licence. Some on the Continent were built with four wheels. Leonard Lord of the British Motor Corporation detested Bubble cars and wanted, it seems, to rid the British roads of them!

The original Mini was designed by Alec Issigonis. It was intended to be a “proper” car capable of carrying four people. Alec Issigonis sketched out the idea for the Mini on the back of a cigarette packet. It would have four wheels but it dimensions would be very compact. The engine would be transverse rather than the convectional longitudinal. It would also have front wheel drive, there had been front wheel drive cars before notably the Citroen Traction Avant but at this time in the 1950’s the vast majority of cars had rear wheel drive. The first Minis were introduced in 1959. The Austin version was called the Austin Mini Seven and the Morris version was called the Morris Mini Minor. Both names were a throwback to an earlier time.

The Mini very soon became popular, Princess Margaret and Lord Snowden (Anthony Armstrong Jones) had one and that helped to give the marque a boost and social cachet. It became a car with a classless appeal but also a car that was seen to be fashionable. John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr and other celebrities like Peter Sellers were seen driving them; specialist firms like Radford took basic Minis and turned them into luxurious vehicles. Harold Radford and Company was based at Merton Court in South Kensington, London. They were long established dealers of Rolls –Royce and Bentley cars. Under G.H. Radford they had developed a bespoke coach building business in the late 1940’s this was to be named Harold Radford (Coachbuilders) Limited. This business began making bodies for new Bentleys that were altered to suit the lifestyle of wealthy landowners in the countryside; the Bentley Countryman was produced by this firm. This was described as a luxurious town car, shooting brake and continental tourer in one vehicle. I would suggest that this is the territory now occupied by the Range Rover.

Further publicity was given by wins for the Mini in the Monte Carlo Rallies in 1964, 1965 and 1967. In this context another huge boost was given in 1969 by the film, the Italian Job. This film starred Sir Michael Caine; it had a cast of excellent supporting actors and actresses including Sir Noel Coward. The opening sequence featured the song “On Days Like These”, with lyrics by Don Black and music by Quincy Jones, it was sung by Matt Monroe. This set the scene for an excellent film. However, it might be argued that the true stars were the Mini Coopers that featured so strongly!

The Mini range expanded with the introduction of the Riley Elf and the Wolseley Hornet. These were designed to be more upmarket versions of the Mini. They had boots and grilles, they clearly did not sell in the number that the standard Minis did, nonetheless they sold in enough numbers, in my view, to show that there was a market for these types of cars. The Mini Cooper and Cooper S, as alluded to earlier gained much publicity.

The following is a summary of the stages in its production of the Mini, the Mark 1 was produced from 1959 -1967, the Mark II 1967-1970, the Mark III 1969-1976, the Min cooper and Copper s from 19612-1971. The Mini Clubman and 1275 GT from 1969-1980 when they were replaced by the Austin Metro, this was a new hatchback. The Mark IV was produced from 1976-2000. The Mini Moke, a utility vehicle, was produced in various locations from 1964-1993. There were also a large number of special editions of the Mini produced. The total number of Minis sold in the United Kingdom was 1,581, 887.

I had always wondered if there was an M.G. Mini prototype produced, to this end I rang the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust. I was informed that one had not been produced but there was an M.G. type sports car produced, that did not go into mass production, it had Mini components but it did not have a Mini style body.

The last original type Mini that was registered, sold in 2004 four years after the actual end of production. The original Mini was also to spawn the 1100 and 1300 range of cars. They were marketed as Austin, Morris, M.G., Riley, Wolseley and Vanden Plas. The latter four being upmarket versions of the car. Vanden Plas was originally a Belgian coach building firm. They also made limousine type cars that were popular for official functions in the 1950's and 1960's. 1100's and1300's had hydrolastic suspension that had first been pioneered in the Mini. They were in the 1960's the most popular family car in the United Kingdom. I have particular affection for the Morris 1100 as it was one of these cars in which I passed my Driving Test in January 1970. The hydrolastic suspension made them easy for hill-starts, very useful in a town like Shrewsbury! The Morris variant of this car had a roundel at the end of the bonnet which contained the Cowley Bull. My Instructor told me to watch the little bull whilst letting the clutch out gently, then, he said, as the bonnet rises and the little bull seems to be level with you and in your line of sight, let the hand brake down and you will make a perfect hill start. He gave good advice and I was able to pass my test. Using a modern term they were, for learners, very user friendly. The 1800 was also produced; this followed a similar format and was sold in Austin, Morris and Wolsely variants. 1969 saw the introduction of the Austin Maxi, this was the first popular mainstream car to be manufactured with a five speed gear box, something that is now taken for granted.

The Mini had been produced from 1959 to 1968 at the Cowley Plant in Oxford and at the Longbridge Plant in Birmingham from 1959 to 2000. It had also been produced in other parts of the world. In 1969 Alec Issigonis was knighted for this contribution to the British Motor Industry! The technology employed in the Mini clearly had a far-reaching influence. In 1974 Volkswagen introduced the Golf. In 1976 Ford introduced its first front wheel drive car the Fiesta. In 1979 Vauxhall introduced its first front wheel drive car, the Astra. The first front wheel drive Ford Escort was introduced in 1980.The vast majority or cars nowadays have similar technology that was deployed in the Mini.

This section of my article is based on information given to me by Mr. Steve Wrelton, Media Relations Manager, MINI, Plant Oxford. I am naturally very grateful to Steve because it completes the on-going story of the MINI; the BMW Group acquired the plant at Oxford in 1994, at this time the BMW Group was ran by Dr. Bernd PIschetsrieder, a brilliant engineer and businessman. He was the first cousin once removed of Sir Alec Issigonis, the designer of the original Mini. This is a relatively short time ago yet much has been achieved in this time. They launched the MINI brand with the first cars in 2001. Since that time more than 2.5 million MINIS have been produced thus far. In 2001 the MINI was declared to be the Car of the Year" by Auto Express, the biggest selling weekly car magazine in the U.K. Sales have been very good. In the first year of its production 40,000 MINIS were sold worldwide; by 2015 this

figure had risen to nearly 340,000. In the United Kingdom 63,000 were sold and this marked the highest figure since the marque was launched.

There is a clear determination to keep the MINI in Oxford as this plant is very much part of British Motoring history. It dates back to 1913 where William Morris produced the fist car, the so-called “Bullnose” Morris. This was produced near the current production site of the MINI

The site at Cowley, Oxford employs more than 4,500 people. This site manufactures around 1,000 cars a day to individual order. It produces both the three and four door MINIS, the MINI Clubman and a four wheel drive and the high performance MINI John Cooper Works. Hams Hall near Birmingham makes engines. Body pressings and sub-assemblies for the Mini are made in Swindon. The investment by parent company BMW has been huge. Between 2012 and 2015 the BMW Group invested £750 million at these Plants; this took investment in U.K. production to £1.75 billion since 2000. In the first year of production at Oxford nearly 40,000 MINIS were sold worldwide. By 2015 this figure had risen to neatly 340,000. 63,000 MINIS were sold to customers in the United Kingdom in 2015. 80% of the cars produced here are exported to 110 countries around the World, clearly a very important contribution to the wider British economy. All aspects of car production have clearly been covered. At Oxford there is a state of the art paintshop, a high technology body building facility, a final assembly area, a new logistics centre and a Quality and Engineering Centre. There is also the MINIcademy where the Plant’s apprentices are trained.

MINI now produce a range of cars, as stated, the three and five door hatches, the Convertible, the Clubman, the Countryman and the Paceman. MINI is clearly a very wide-ranging marque. An interesting version was the Goodwood MINI. This was a MINI made in Oxford and then taken to Rolls-Royce in Goodwood, Surrey. Here it had Rolls-Royce luxury finish given to it. The first deliveries to customers were in March 2012. I went to see one at Rybrook MINI, Shrewsbury in September 2012. It was mounted on a revolving plinth. The young salesman stopped the rotation of the plinth so that I could have a closer look at it. This car was finished to an extraordinarily high standard in a marque that is already renowned for its build quality. I spoke to the young salesman in question and he was aware of the Radford Mini and the impact of such cars in the 1960’s. He was very knowledgeable about the product he was selling and its wider position in the overall history of the marque. This car was a limited edition and it cost £41,000.

The story of MINI is clearly fascinating. Launched, as stated, in its original form in 1959, it had many years of production, sales success and rallying success. The current MINI has again been a huge success, not only in terms of products and product development but in terms of providing employment and its subsequent beneficial results for individuals and families. Equally the retail aspect of the business is excellent. a visit to Rybrook MINI in Shrewsbury is proof of this. This showroom is outstanding, as is Rybrook BMW in Shrewsbury. MINI is a marque that has built on a long and fascinating history yet is also very innovative. A marque with a great past and a great future!

John Hodson