



MINI INFORMATION

THE MINI STORY: The history of the classic Mini

Exciting build-up

- **Prototype commissioned**

By the latter half of the 1950s, Leonard Lord, chairman of the British Motor Corporation (BMC), had become convinced of the need for a new kind of small car.

In 1957, he commissioned engineer Alec Issigonis, the man behind the groundbreaking 1948 Morris Minor, to develop a prototype. The only stipulations were that it had to have four seats, be powered by a BMC engine, and be smaller than the cars BMC were making at the time.

- **Go-ahead for production**

Just seven months after his boss, Leonard Lord, had given the go-ahead, Alec Issigonis had two Mini prototypes up and running. And by July 1958, he was ready to invite Lord for a ride.

“We went round the works, and I drove him at a hell of a speed – I’m sure he was terrified – but then he was so impressed by its road-holding. We stopped outside his office. He got out of the car and he said, “Go and make it.””

- **Launch approaching**

Having given the prototype the thumbs-up, the boss demanded a production version within just twelve months. In 1958, plans were made immediately to start manufacturing at the new production lines in Longbridge and Cowley.

Despite the tight deadline and the need to iron out the odd teething trouble along the way, Mini was ready on schedule. By June 1959, around a hundred cars a week were rolling off the assembly lines in preparation for its August debut.

Compact solution

A new dimension in roominess: a combination of ingenious design and clever engineering ensured that Mini always possessed an uncanny ability to create space on the inside, while saving space on the outside.

- **The ten foot-car**

“More than 15% off mini”: what at first sounds like quite a good deal was in fact a major task facing Mini designer, Alec Issigonis in 1957: how to reduce the length of the Mini from twelve feet to ten feet – without affecting the quality.

To maximise cabin space, Issigonis introduced a practically unheard-of transverse-engined, front-wheel drive layout and sited the gearbox underneath the engine. The result was a car that measured just ten feet in length and devoted a remarkable 80% of its space to the occupants and their luggage.



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- **Have Mini, will travel**

Following the slump in the immediate post-war period, the economy first recovered and then flourished. Between 1951 and 1961, wages rose by 34% and car ownership rocketed by a staggering 250%. With increasing prosperity and mobility, holidaying became an increasingly important part of life.

As an affordable and practical set of wheels, the Mini helped to fuel this mass mobility. What's more, it was a great car to go away with. The boot featured a drop-down lid that acted as a loading platform or seat and the storage space was accommodating, with generous door bins, rear side pockets and a large dashboard shelf.

- **Parking record**

The Mini has always been renowned for its manoeuvrability in the tightest of spaces. Just how tight these spaces can be was demonstrated by Russ Swift on 17 April 1999, the stunt driver from Darlington, England, parked a Mini between two other Minis at Bruntingthorpe Proving Ground in Leicestershire – in a space that was only 33 cm (13 inches) longer than the car.

Stylish design

The revolutionary new design in the 1950s set the ball rolling, and it has blazed a trail ever since. The Mini has been meeting and beating new challenges for decades – and will undoubtedly continue to do so for decades to come in the guise of the new MINI.

- **The first Mini badge**

Ten years after the first Mini came the first Mini badge. In 1969, the twin Austin Mini and Morris Mini-Minor identities were dropped and the car became known simply as “the Mini”.

By this time, its parent company had a change of name too, becoming the British Leyland Motor Corporation.

- **Mini Clubman**

In October 1969, British Leyland revamped the design of the Mini in the form of the Mini Clubman. With its new-look ‘face’ – the radiator grille (with its own Clubman logo) spanned the entire width of the more angled front of the car and was flanked by chrome-surround headlights – the Mini Clubman was designed to project a safer, more ‘grown-up’ look. At 3.17 metres the Mini Clubman was roughly 12 cm longer than its predecessor.

Changes had also occurred on the inside. The dashboard of the Mini Clubman saw the centrally positioned speedometer replaced by two round instruments directly behind the steering wheel – and thus directly in front of the driver.

In addition to the saloon version, the Clubman Estate was also produced, replacing the Morris Mini Traveller and the Austin Mini Countryman.

- **Innovative design features**

It's not every day you update a legend. So once the MINI project team under the leadership of Frank Stephenson had settled on their basic design they presented the prototype at the 1997 Frankfurt Motor Show. Combining classic Mini characteristics with modern design, it showed the motoring public what they might expect from the Mini of tomorrow. The response: “When can we buy one?”



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Racy sensation

Whether on- or off-road, the Mini had always proved to be a veritable bundle of energy. A combination of inimitable go-kart feeling and stamina have helped to secure countless rallying successes – and tons of driving fun.

- **The go-kart is born**

With its compact dimensions, low ground clearance and aura of fun, nothing like the Mini had ever been seen in the automobile world before its launch in 1959. However, the way it handled was reminiscent of an earlier miniature vehicle: the go-kart, the first version of which is said to have been “invented” in 1951.

- **Wanted: Mini Cooper**

Once a racer, always a racer: Firmly set on the idea of producing a Mini for competition purposes, racing car constructor John Cooper made tentative approaches to Issigonis, selling the idea of a high-performance variation of the Mini.

However, Sir Alec Issigonis still harboured a dream that his Mini was a car for everyman: “These cars are not designed for competition use, they are a people’s car.” Such was Cooper’s persistence that, in 1961, he ended up going over Issigonis’s head, straight to George Harriman. Harriman commissioned Cooper to make 1,000 Mini, with a two-pound royalty payment on each one sold - eventually 150,000 Mini Cooper were made.

- **Sporting plans**

The Mini had enjoyed its first taste of rallying success, and the BMC management was keen to exploit the car’s race-winning potential to the full.

They decided to develop an even sportier version of the Mini Cooper. It was to get more power, uprated brakes and wider wheels.

Once the specifications of this Mini Cooper ‘S’ had been determined, a corresponding letter was sent to the production team, containing the polite request to build six of these cars initially. The catch: to comply with homologation regulations (which show that a vehicle or component of a vehicle has been approved and satisfies requirements set by statutory regulatory bodies), they needed them to be ready within less than four weeks.

Despite the tightness of the schedule, the homologation deadline was duly met, and the Mini Cooper S was ready to take the rallying world by storm.

- **Mini wins the Monte**

Regarded as the toughest event on the rallying circuit, the Monte Carlo rally has held a special place in the motorsport lovers’ hearts since its inception in 1911.

The year 1964 went down in the history books as a particularly memorable year. Starting at Minsk – one of the nine different starting points in the rally that year – Paddy Hopkirk and his co-driver Henry Liddon powered to victory in a Mini Cooper S, to the astonishment of the rest of the field and the racing fraternity.

This initial Mini victory was repeated in the following year and in 1967, but it’s the first victory that sticks in the mind.



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- **Mini wins the Monte – again and again**

The best way for the Mini to prove that the initial Monte victory was no flash in the pan was ... to win it again the following year.

The 1965 Monte Carlo Rally saw six Mini Cooper S on the starting line. Despite arduous conditions that put paid to many of their competitors, Timo Makinen and Paul Easter took the outright title, with Paddy Hopkirk and Henry Liddon in 26th and Don and Erle Morley in 27th position.

The success story continued even further in the 1967 rally, Rauno Aaltonen and Liddon made it a hat trick of victories for the Mini team. But for some dubious decisions the previous year, it would have been even four out of four. In 1966, the Mini team took first, second and third, only for all cars to be disqualified for apparent breaches of headlamp regulations.

Celebrity qualities

The strikingness of the Mini has seen it at the centre of some pretty high-profile attention over the years. Top designers, advertisers, media personalities, press photographers, even The Beatles have all sought out the Mini as a companion on a number of occasions.

- **Test-drive for the press**

In mid-August 1959, a week before the official launch of the Mini, a group of motoring journalists were invited to a sneak preview of the car. At a private circuit at the Fighting Vehicles Research and Development Establishment in Surrey, southern England, they put the Mini through its paces.

Although the test cars were spared the rough-and-tumble of the tank trails, they had to negotiate a banked track, a steep road snaking up and down a hill as well as a skid pan. The gentlemen of the press were clearly impressed: the word “sensational” featured prominently in the ensuing reports.

- **Mini at the London Palladium**

After their victory in Monte Carlo in January 1964, Paddy Hopkirk and Henry Liddon were bombarded with silverware and plaudits in the Monegasque sunshine. The tributes continued to pour in after the victorious team and their Mini Cooper S had returned home.

The climax was undoubtedly the appearance on “Sunday Night At The Palladium”, then one of Britain’s most popular television shows. Star of the proceedings was, of course, the Mini, parked proudly on a revolving stage and cheered by a television audience of some 20 million.

- **TV adverts around the world**

Despite – or maybe because of – its intrinsic Britishness, the Mini was a hit all over the world, even conquering the Japanese market in 1990. Its agility made it the ideal and fun-packed alternative to big-city traffic problems, and its glue-like roadholding allowed it to keep its nose in front on winding rural roads.

- **Car of the century**

It popularised front-wheel drive and transverse engines, rewrote the rules of packaging design, and became part of a social revolution. Small wonder the Mini was voted Car of the Century by readers of Autocar, the UK motoring magazine, in 1995.

Four years later, it was also named European Car of the Century at an awards ceremony in Las Vegas. Not a bad way to celebrate your 40th birthday!



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Individual touch

Despite its outstanding road-holding, the Mini has never been afraid to veer from the straight and narrow. Versatile enough to adapt readily, it's always retained a mind of its own, breaking ground wherever there's new ground to be broken.

- **Versatile Mini**

The Mini chic belied a versatility that was to prove a hit in many areas of working Britain. The Minivan was particularly popular with the Royal Mail (its low loading level offering a clear advantage for deliverymen) as well as with roadside repair teams in 1968, who had previously been sent out in a motorcycle and sidecar. Even the police force, primarily in Liverpool, put the Mini Cooper S to work, thanks to its manoeuvrability in traffic and the second petrol tank (introduced in 1963), which doubled the car's range to almost 500 km.

- **Spirit of enthusiasm**

"Irreverence" was the buzzword of the 1960s. Women's skirts had grown shorter, men's hair had grown longer. Society grew more relaxed by the year, culminating in flower power and hippiedom in 1967.

What car could better suit this spirit of adventure than a Mini? The Mini was recognised not just as a fashion statement, but as a whole new way of life. A life founded on new freedoms of expressions, movement, freedoms from discipline, regimentation and classification.

- **Limited editions**

Even after the four millionth model had rolled off the production line in 1976, there were new variants, with the first "limited edition 1000" appearing on the market.

Following sports, London districts, even a crime movie were subsequent inspiration for specially designed, specially decorated or specially tuned Mini. There were simply not enough ways to make a unique car even more unique.

- **Designers' favourite**

Hands-on design also featured prominently during the 40th birthday celebrations of the Mini. An exhibition was opened which featured Mini with a celebrity touch. The artist Paul Smith had already created a multi-coloured art car in 1997, model Kate Moss came up with a cobweb design and actor Michael Caine opted for a gold-bullion decoration as a tribute to the 1969 heist 'The Italian Job', in which he and the Mini played a leading role.