

# The Collectors

## Westward Bound

Words and photos by Craig Watson



Understandably, the owner of these Minis values his privacy, but he did agree to share his remarkable collection with us, for an exclusive photo shoot.

This may not be the biggest collection of Minis around, but what it lacks in numbers, it more than makes up for in quality.

Michael's introduction to Minis came in England in 1967, as he recalls "My aunt gave me an original December 1959-built Mini. It had a heater in it and an old valve radio, especially put in before I got it. I had that for years and years. I wish I'd kept it, it would have been worth a fortune by now. It was one that had the floor the wrong way around, and used to let the water in, but she had the floor redone. I was given it when I was about fifteen and it only had 15,000 miles (24,000 km) on it."

Michael moved to Australia a few years later and worked at Leyland in Sydney. "I used to be in vehicle distribution. I've got a mechanical background and I worked at Leyland for a couple of years. I was one of the people who helped create, or make, or have my lunch in, P76s. And I drove a lot of them."

There were also a couple of trips in Minis across the Nullarbor Plain, as he recounts. "The first time I had a cat, a portable TV and a tool kit. It took me about five days, the whole journey from Sydney to Perth. That was an imported Austin Mk 2 Cooper S, it didn't overheat or anything. On the second trip the oil hose went between Kalgoorlie and Southern Cross. I got towed into Southern Cross, and got a lift to Perth, where there was a big Leyland place. I got the hoses and took them back to Southern Cross and changed them."

Although without a Mini for about ten years, Michael got back into the fold in 1998. "I was

thinking I'd love to get another Cooper S, and my son found one in Perth and told me. It was a Mk 2 and it had been warmed up and was sweating, and I thought you've got to be joking. They wanted about \$20,000 but it was a wreck. I was so disappointed."

"I rang Paul Skinner in Sydney and he said he knew a guy who was selling a Mk 1. The guy phoned me about two hours later. This was on Thursday. I flew over to Sydney on the Saturday, went to see him on the Sunday... and I had it in Perth within the week. It's got less than 16,000 miles (25,700 km) on it, and it was built in 1968."

Michael has a lot of respect for Paul, from Mini Car Clinic (now Mini Spares Centre Australia), and has become a devoted customer. When Paul decided to sell his Mk 2 project, famously known as ReCooperation, Michael



Blue Mk 2 features rare parts and accessories, like rear wiper, Hopkirk seats, picnic basket and Les Leston steering wheel

was happy to secure it. "That would have to be one of the best in the country and it was built according to the book, not according to what someone thinks is right. I don't use it, maybe once around the block a couple of times a year. That's got less than 100 miles (160 km) on it, since it was restored."

With a couple of magnificent Minis in the garage, Michael decided to get one for day-to-day use. He met Wilf Chambers, who has worked on and raced Minis since doing his apprenticeship at BMC and Jaguar in the UK in the late '60s, and now specialises in Minis and Jaguars in his busy "semi-retirement". Michael bought the blue Mk 2 Cooper S from Wilf and the pair became good friends. Wilf is the only person in Perth allowed to work on or drive Michael's Minis.

In early 2001, Michael was talking to Paul again and was told that there were a couple of rare Woodies for sale. Paul sourced one of these, the white Countryman pictured, and restored it with a police-spec 1310cc motor, as Michael enthused. "Paul had the requirements from the NSW police and built it to those specifications. It's good for 111mph (179 km/h) and can cruise all day on about 80 or 90. The car hasn't had any panels replaced, only the wood. Paul took it to the Minishow in Melbourne, on his way over to Perth, and it won some trophies."

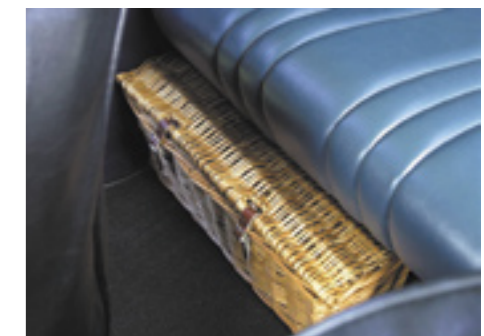
Michael doesn't show his cars, partly because of the privacy factor, and partly because he's too wary of anything happening to the cars. "All you need is a kid with an ice-cream, or something, or someone

to lean against the car with keys on them. None of my cars has ever got a dent, touch wood. All of my cars are guaranteed not to have the one thing that all English Minis have - rust."

Before the Woody, Michael was looking through the English Mini magazines and saw an advertisement for Downton's exclusive Mini Sport 40. "I couldn't resist. I rang Stuart Mickelburgh, who's the owner and he said they were only doing five, and I could have the last one, because four were already sold, if I gave him a deposit by credit card straight away. That was in 1999 and they got the car in January 2000 and completely stripped it and rebuilt it, with all the modern bits, but to a 1963 Mk 1 Cooper S style. It's got the same type of seats, wheels, flares, the little things on the grease nipples, which they stopped doing for twenty years to save money. It's got a Mk 1 boot, but none of this plastic crap. No radios or anything like that."

"It looks like a '63 model, but the engine is one of the twin point injected ones, bored out to 1310cc, and is really powerful and really smooth. There's not even an airbag in it. It's got a genuine Les Leston steering wheel, that was a period accessory, but they are as rare as hen's teeth. The only thing that, not spoils it but is part of it, is the switches, which are a modern type. It's also got an oil cooler on it."

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Perth collection contains some rare and exceptional Minis. Inset: Owner Michael with two of his stable.