

Works Minis In Australia



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Works Minis: Two words that invoke thoughts of glamour, power, respect and even awe.

In the mid-1960s BMC in the UK was the undisputed rally king. By 1967 the Mk1 Cooper S alone had snared more than two dozen major rally victories, including four Monte Carlo Rallies in a row (okay, the 1966 team, which took 1-2-3, was disqualified for a technicality) as well as an almost endless list of class victories.

While the Works team tackled rallying, the privateers, with varying degrees of support from the factory, were left to forge an equally envious reputation on the racetrack.

The BMC Works mechanics, based at the home of the MG Car Company at Abingdon, had such a reputation, that just turning up in a Works-prepared Mini often gave a driver a psychological advantage, if not a physical one.

But it didn't always go the Minis' way. Naturally, there were numerous retirements, but enough Minis did well enough to ensure the marque immortality. BMC, mainly with the Cooper S, but also with Austin Healey and Austin 1800, became the most successful rally team of the 1960s

Like in England, the situation in Australia saw an emphasis on rallying. Unlike today, rallying was the key publicity vehicle for car companies in the mid-1960s.

Following the success of, and public interest in, the Redex Trials of the 1950s, rallying was big news in Australia. Cars that could compete successfully in the tough local conditions earned enviable reputations.

There were also fewer restrictions on sponsorship signage on vehicles, and teams were able to offset costs more readily with companies who got more exposure for their sponsorship dollar, than on the circuit.

With racing, the situation was very different. Prior to 1968 advertising of sponsors' names was strictly forbidden. Virtually all Australian racing drivers were amateurs, mostly otherwise involved in the motoring industry as a means of supporting their racing. Bob Jane and the Geoghegan brothers were car dealers, as was Peter Manton with

Monaro Motors. Brian Foley was a car salesman at P&R Williams, while Don Holland had a mechanical workshop. The list goes on.

Support for most drivers was limited, as explained by both Don Holland and Gus Staunton, this was usually limited to practical support in terms of parts, oils, fuel, etc. Sponsors often paid for cars to be painted in their colours and for drivers to wear recognised apparel.

However, because labelling was outlawed, sponsors had to be content with the public knowing, for example, that the BMC cars were painted Castrol Green, and what that meant.

All that considered, there were a number of high profile drivers who came under the umbrella of the BMC Competitions Department, headed by PR Manager Evan Green. These included Don Holland, Bob Holden, Brian Foley, Laurie Stewart and, later as the Young Lions, Lakis Manticas and John Leffler.

Many drivers in Europe, on the other hand, were full-time professionals, often competing in sports cars, saloon cars and open wheelers, all in one weekend.

Three of these, Roy Salvadori, Bruce McLaren and our own Jack Brabham, were instrumental in the development of the Mini Cooper, while with the Cooper Car Company in 1960.

In touring car circles they were later joined by the four Johns - Rhodes, Love, Whitmore and Fitzpatrick.

The European rally drivers became household names in their own countries and anywhere else where a Mini was parked in the garage. The original Flying Finns Timo Makinen and Rauno Aaltonen, Irishman Paddy Hopkirk, and Brits Tony Fall, Pat Moss (sister of F1 and sportscar racing star Stirling), Andrew Cowan, and others became celebrities through rallying. All of these were also accomplished drivers on the race track.

Rallying may have been king, but the publicity benefits of certain high-profile circuit races wasn't lost on BMC's Evan Green. In November 1964, he organised for four of BMC's top drivers, Hopkirk, Makinen, Aaltonen and Fitzpatrick to come to Melbourne for the Sandown International Six-Hour.

In the international spirit of the event, the BMC team was divided by nationality, with the two Brits sharing number 60, the Finns in 61 and the Aussies, Foley and Manton, in 62. The Aussie Mini was second outright, with the whole team performing well all weekend, and gaining much publicity.

However, the race was run to Series Production rules, meaning the cars were virtually standard (modification for quick-lift jacks about the only obvious concession to racing).

Similarly, the cars used at Bathurst up to 1971 were standard production cars and, although prepared by BMC mechanics at Zetland, wouldn't classify as Works cars.



Bob Holden raced the Works lightweight for the 1967 season.

Generally, the closest we have to Australian-built Works race Minis are those mentioned previously, which sported Castrol Green paint schemes, usually with one red and two white stripes over the centre, and the later Leyland Young Lions blue and white Minis. As mentioned before, the most famous of these were the cars of Holden, Holland, Foley, Manticas and Leffler.

However, Bob Holden drove, among other Minis, the original Works lightweight in Sports Racing Closed competition. Built at the factory, it is probably the only true BMC Australia Works racing car.

Bob explains how he came to drive it. "That was built by BMC here in Sydney for Brian Foley to race, but he said it was un-drivable. I don't think he ever raced it. Alan Kemp was the head of the apprentices at BMC and they built the car."

"Alan asked me to test it at Warwick Farm. I did a few laps and it was twitchy but it wasn't too bad. After I did about five laps I was going faster in it than Foley ever had."

Bob had a terrific battle for the series with Don Holland in his private lightweight, culminating in the round at Oran Park, as Bob continues. "I'd been in front of Donny Holland most of the season and we came to Oran Park. We were having a great battle and he got past me. I was following him down through the Dog Leg, where it sort of drops away, and both his back wheels were about

a foot off the ground. He was practically driving it on two wheels, just the front two. After the race I said to him, do you know what your car is doing going through the dog leg?, and he said, probably the same as your car has been doing all year."

While Evan Green was not a circuit racer, he was a highly accomplished rally driver. Much of the impetuous in getting good rally Minis was Evan's success in the sport and his high position within BMC.

Gus Staunton gives an insight. "The PR/Media department, which Evan headed up, had their own vehicle centre where they prepared the press cars, for press releases and so on. There was a group of mechanics in there, and I suppose it was easy then for Evan to get a car prepared to go and rally, to get it done there, rather than open up a whole new competition department as such, (although) they were called the competition department."

"There were people like Terry Douglass, Allan Cotter, Warwick Long and others who were very good. They were preparing competition cars for events that Evan went in and that kind of thing." (There was also a handful of rally Minis prepared for BMC by Bob Holden, who was third in one in the '67 Southern Cross.)

"It was referred to as the competition department, but I think Evan was the one who wanted to go in the competitions. Looking back, I don't think the rest of the factory really got behind



Lakis Manticas
Leyland Young Lions, 1971

the thing the way they should have."

But, BMC Australia had neither the resources or capital to build full-blown rally cars, as was being done in the UK. The easiest and cheapest alternative was to bring some in, ready to go. The first two of these were registered in the UK as LRX 828E and LRX 829E, and arrived in Australia in time for the 1967 Rothmans Southern Cross Rally.

Quite a few Mini enthusiasts would be familiar with two other Minis built at Abingdon at the same time, LRX 827E and 830E, which won outright the 1967 Alpine Rally and Acropolis Rally respectively, as well as numerous class victories.

LRX 829E was driven by Rauno Aaltonen/Henry Liddon in the '67 Tulip Rally (Holland) and finished third outright. It then finished first outright in the '67 Geneva Rally (Switzerland/France) with Julian Vernaev/Henry Liddon.

LRX 828E (see main story) was less successful in Europe, but no less capable, as it was built to exactly the same specification.

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Laurie Stewart in the Foley Broadspeed



LRX 828E &
LRX 829E at
start of the
'67 Southern
Cross Rally