

MORRIS 850

March 2006 marks the 45th anniversary of the launch (or more accurately the birth) of the Australian Morris 850.

While there is an almost inexhaustible supply of books and magazine articles on the design, launch and history of the Mini from an English perspective, there is very little available on the subject from an Australian point of view. That's where this magazine is making every effort to find the information, and sort the facts from the urban myths.

Many Australians had already seen magazine and newspaper articles on the "revolutionary" new Mini, long before the car was available here. With advertising slogans and editorial headlines like Wizardry on Wheels, Marvelous Mini and BMC's Brilliant New Baby, expectations were high for the car on its release in Australia.

However, according to former Road Proving Supervisor at BMC Australia's Zetland plant, Roger Foy, there was a bit of uncertainty from the management about whether the car would be a success here. "It was just a feeling we had. By the time the car was ready for release, we were quite enthusiastic about it, but we had to convince some people."

Despite the glowing reports in the press, the first UK Minis (badged Morris Mini Minor and Austin Seven) were slow sellers. Part of



The humble Morris 850 is becoming a desirable model today.

this was due to the already well-publicised water leaks, while part was also due to the fact that the fuel crisis, which had spawned the Mini in 1956, was already over by the time of the car's release.

As Laurence Pomeroy put it in his book, *The Mini Story*, "The middle and lower-middle classes quite definitely thought the car was more admirable than buyable. That is to say they respected its obvious technical merit, but they did not themselves wish to be seen by their neighbours leaving their front gates in a car which, by being sub-size, was by inference sub-standard."

"Alec Issigonis", Pomeroy continues, "held that it was nonsense to interpret the motor car, or at any rate the mass production motor car, in terms of a status symbol. It is one

of the great paradoxes of automobile history that in pursuing this line he unwittingly evolved one of the greatest status symbols ever marketed."

By the end of 1960, just 16 months after the UK release, sales had turned around, with almost 150,000 Minis produced, and the car was well on its way to becoming the cult classic we all know and love.

Originally there were two versions of the Mini in England, in both Austin and Morris guises, standard and De Luxe. According to Chris Rees' book, *The Complete Mini*, "the basic model had a very stark specification in the interests of keeping the price down to just £497. It had fixed rear quarter-windows, a fixed passenger seat, a bare painted mill-board dash, loose rubber floor mats and cloth upholstery which was described by BMC as 'rubberised hair with polyester seat cushions'. There was only one sun visor, no screen washers and a bare painted filler cap."

Rees continues: "The more upmarket De Luxe – at a premium of some £40 – had far superior trim: two-tone vinyl upholstery covering foam rubber seat cushions, flecked cockpit trim, a vinyl-covered dashboard, a chrome kick-plate on the front door pockets, carpeted front wheelarches, headlining for the rear three-quarter panels and – the luxury of it! – pile carpeting. It gained on the equipment side, too: there were standard twin screen washers, passenger seat adjustment, a passenger's sun visor, hinged rear



Windscreen washers were standard.

quarter-lights, extra ashtrays and lamps in the rear side bins and a recirculatory heater/demister."

There were also a number of chrome-plated items, including filler cap, rear number plate surround and the fascia switch panel surround. The De Luxe also came with real door handles on the inside, instead of the infamous cord-pull.

With the basic Mini built to a very low price, perhaps too low, most buyers opted for the De Luxe versions, according to Rees.

Still, the English Mini was a very low-profit (many suggesting it was even a loss-making) car throughout its life, and BMC Australia was adamant that if the car was sold here it had to be sustainable. Management was concerned about how the Australian public,



Locally-made trim from the start.

with its seemingly insatiable desire for big cars, would take to this 'baby car'.

Three early Minis were imported from the UK in mid 1960, with two going to the Experimental Department for evaluation prior to production. We had a complete rundown on the third one in our first issue, but suffice to say here, they were well received by all who got to see them and drive them.

However, it was felt by the Experimental Department that some changes were needed for Australian conditions, and to reduce production costs. Although the first Minis assembled in Australia were from Complete Knock Down (CKD) kits – where the major components were supplied from the factory in the UK, for assembly at BMC's Zetland plant in Sydney – there was some



Sliding windows as per UK models.

room for local input right from the start, as Roger Foy pointed out. There would also only be one specification to begin with.

Basically the Australian Mini, released as the Morris 850 (more on that soon), was fitted out somewhere between the UK's standard Mini and the De Luxe.

The seats and other interior trim were locally made, though of a similar pattern to the UK version. The seat frames were of a more basic design, without height adjustment of the rear legs, but with sliding adjustment on both seats.

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