



BIRTH OF A LEGEND.

The Cooper Mini was a happy marriage of the utilitarian brilliance of Issigonis' original Mini, and the racecar-building genius of John Cooper.

When the Mini was launched in August 1959, it was immediately recognised for its motorsport potential. Early prototypes that used the 948cc engine were considered too fast for the Mini's intended "everyman" market, and production cars got the 848cc.

However, the handling and stability of the diminutive car was fundamentally suited to motorsport, and hotted-up versions were very soon available.

One of the first tuners to recognise the Mini's potential was Daniel Richmond from Downton Engineering, who modified and raced a very early 1959 Austin Se7en.

John Cooper was another early enthusiast, who arguably had the greatest impact on the Mini beside Issigonis.

Cooper and Issigonis had been friends, or at least known each other, since early post-war years, when Issigonis was running the Lightweight Special and Cooper his Formula 500 cars in hillclimbs.

According to Laurence Pomeroy in his 1964 book *The Mini Story*. "Although John Cooper had at Surbiton a concern no larger than many of the tuning establishments, he was not interested in this class of work, nor in providing speed kits, as he concentrated wholly on the production of Grand Prix cars to Formulae 1 and 2 with results which rang around the world" (Formula 1 World Champs in 1959 and 1960 - Ed).

"This combination of small resources buoyed up by an outstanding blend of pragmatism

and empiricism made a strong appeal to Alec Issigonis, so that the two men became close friends - a relationship that was cemented by John Cooper's use of the Mini for his personal transport."

Cooper also built many customer cars in a variety of Formulae, and around the time of the Mini's launch was using modified A-series engines of 997cc capacity in his Formula Junior racers. Due to his success in the world arena, Cooper had some influence with the likes of Lockheed, who he persuaded to manufacture some tiny, seven-inch diameter, disc brakes to suit the Mini.

Cooper set about modifying a handful of Minis, using many of the lessons learned with his Formula Junior engines. Folklore has it that after driving an 850, Cooper said, "OK, now let's build one for the boys."

He suggested to Issigonis that BMC could gain a fair amount of prestige by allying itself to his small, but well reputed, business. He proposed a Cooper Mini, with 997cc Formula Junior-type engine, remote gear change, disc brakes and improvements in interior trim.

Issigonis, despite his love of motorsport, rejected the idea, as it didn't fit with his vision of what the Mini was all about.

Not to be deterred, Cooper demonstrated a Cooper-Mini to BMC Chairman George

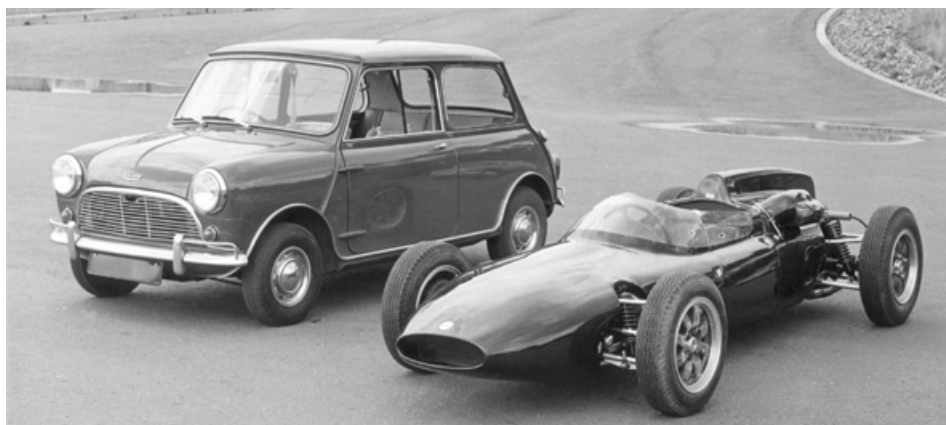
Harriman, who loved the idea and authorised the production of 1,000 cars - the minimum required for motorsport homologation - although he was apparently sceptical that so many could be sold. John Cooper was to be paid a token £2 royalty per car.

According to Graham Robson, in *Mini - A Celebration of Britain's Best Loved Small Car*, "once overruled by George Harriman, the BMC design team took the Mini-Cooper project to their hearts. The first ten hand-built cars were tried by the motoring press in July 1961 and the cars met their public in September", Robson reported.

Typical of BMC's badge engineering policy, the Cooper was available in Austin and Morris versions, although both were built together at the Longbridge plant - none coming from Cowley, according to *Original Mini Cooper* author John Parnell.

Although commonly referred to as Mini-Coopers, even in some brochures, the cars were only ever badged as Morris Cooper or Austin Cooper (a Mini Cooper badge wasn't used until the Mk3 1275cc Cooper S).

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Early Austin Cooper with A-series powered Cooper Formula Junior racer.