



The final range of Classic Minis. L to R: Cooper, Se7en, Cooper Sport and Knightsbridge.

Wednesday 4th October 2000

– all quiet at Longbridge.

The Mini production line at Longbridge fell silent, as the last-ever Classic Mini was driven off the line by another 1960s pop icon, and former Mini owner, Lulu. 5,378,776 Minis (does this include those built in Australia, South Africa, Italy, Spain, etc?) were built in 41 years' production.

While it had been planned for months in advance, and was no surprise to anyone, the end of Mini production was still an emotional time for many people. The recent carve-up of the Rover Group had been a bitter pill to swallow and, despite the hype and optimism of the imminent start-up of Rover 75 production, Longbridge would never be the same without the Mini, and most people knew it.

BMC/Leyland/Rover missed a few opportunities to replace the Mini with something as timely and equally audacious as Issigonis' original 1959 concept, and let the Mini slide almost into oblivion. When Issigonis penned the 9X, his proposed replacement for the Mini, in 1967, Mini sales were reaching close to 250,000 per annum. Despite his claims that 9X would reduce production costs by around 5%, and that the Mini always made little or no profit (depending on who you listen to), BMC considered the cost of tooling up for the replacement would have been excessive.



Lulu with the last Mini & Rover employees.

The 9X gearless Mini, from a few years later, looked more like the original but, with few parts or body panels, if any, being in common with the Mini, costs of tooling again stopped the idea cold.

Management would have felt justified in their decision not to replace the Mini, as sales reached a peak of around 318,000 in 1971. However, sales began to decline into the 1970s, as competition from various "super-minis" emerged and the Mini became stagnant in design and engineering.

By the mid-1970s, with sales back down around 200,000 per year, Leyland began looking seriously at a replacement for the Mini. When it arrived, as the Metro in 1980, it had none of the cheeky character or charm of the original and, although replacing the Mini as the cheap, small English car for daily use, it failed to kill-off the Mini completely.

In 1979 Mini sales were 176,000 and in 1980, with the Metro launched late in the year, 150,000 Minis were sold. In 1981 Metro sales were up to 165,700, but there were still around 70,000 Mini sales.

Mini's popularity continued to decline over the 1980s, with a slight peak in 1989/90 (the nostalgia of the Mini's 30th birthday and the re-launch of the Cooper helping things along), and by 1993 sales had dropped to around 20,000 – of which only 6,326 were sold in the UK.

The following year, Rover Group was bought by BMW for £800 Million, and a replacement for, or evolution of, the Mini again became a priority. (See Issue 1 for details of the development of the new MINI).

By 1999, sales were down to only 11,738 for the year, but the design of the new MINI had been finalised and dates for the start of production at the Longbridge factory were being set.

Then, in May 2000 came the turmoil of the Rover Group carve-up and sale – Land Rover and Gaydon were sold to Ford, MG/Rover being taken by Phoenix, and BMW keeping MINI.

Deals were done and MG/Rover, keeping Longbridge – the MINI production line being moved to Oxford – was permitted to continue building the Classic Mini until October that year.

The end date for the Classic Mini had already been planned well in advance, and in March Rover had announced three limited editions of the Mini, for the final production run of 2,500 cars for the UK market.

On that fateful October morning in 2000, Rover CEO Kevin Howe said, "We're paying tribute to a motoring legend, and it's not without a tear in our eye."

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Photo by Pete Howarth

Some of the last Minis outside Dutton's



Last Mini on display at Gaydon, 2007.