
Opening Extract from...

Mini

The True and Secret History of the Making of a Motorcar

Written by Simon Garfield

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To everyone who made the car

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Preface

On Monday 3 November 2008, a man arrived at MINI Plant Oxford to make a car. It was 6.15 a.m., still dark, and from all over the surrounding area other men and women began arriving too – on bicycles, in old Vauxhalls and Fords, some in Minis, some in MINIs, most alone, a few in pairs. Ahead of them lay a ten-hour shift. Some of them carried their lunch in small rucksacks on their backs.

That man on his own – that was me. I was there to learn how to build a MINI, a day's training with two other men. The other two would do their best not to show me up, but they were people who thought with their hands. They knew what a subframe was, and DC tooling, and all about newton metres, and in time they could probably build a whole engine, and then a body shell, and eventually a car.

For my part, I could turn on a digital tape recorder.

Making a car was not the task it once was. I had heard stories about Dante's *Inferno*, of oil slicks beneath men's feet, of industrial fatalities. The place I was visiting, at Cowley on the outskirts of Oxford, was the place where British cars had been built for almost a hundred years, and amidst the grease and infernal clatter it concealed the most romantic story. This is where the great motor-car builder William Morris set up shop, where the cars of our parents and grandparents were made. It was where hundreds of thousands of people spent a lifetime

welding metal together. And it was where the Mini reinvented itself as the MINI.

Born out of an economic and political crisis, it celebrates its fiftieth birthday during another one; once more it may be the best car for its time. When the first Mini was sold in 1959, no one – not even its egomaniacal designer – guessed what a thing it would become: more than a car. People would talk of it not only as a means of transport but as a lifestyle and an attitude. People would think of the car and smile. How could this be? Why would marketing people claim that more drivers gave their Mini a name than any other car? How would a thin box of metal and wires become a welcome part of a human family?

The Mini of old is not the MINI of today – thank God. Its single greatest achievement – popularising the idea that smallness and not bulk is desirable – has held fast through half a century of great turbulence in the British car industry, and it may be the only constant. The car has improved beyond measure. It has a new style, a new size, a new price, but it maintains strong links with the past not just through its factory but through its ethos. It is no longer British, but this is not uppermost in the minds of the hundreds of Poles and Turks and Greeks and Ukrainians and Irish who turn up each day to build it.

This book is the story of the making of a car by the people who made it in 1959 and who make it in 2009, some of whom have grand titles and some of whom do not. It is not an account of the Mini's rallying success or of the fans who customise the cars or the cars' celebrity owners. It is not even an account of blowing the bloody doors off. There are already some fine books about these things, but this is an attempt to relate a more

intimate story. When I turned up to build the car at the end of 2008 it became clear that alongside the engineering and technological feats of the cars lay a tale of immense human endeavour, and I hoped that perhaps an oral narrative assembly line could reveal new truths. The people I spoke to tell the story as best as they can remember it, and because the story of the Mini old and new means so much to them, they tend to remember it vividly and with great affection. I do wonder whether any other car has ever been so intensely fought for, or so wildly loved.

Cast of characters

(in order of appearance)

PART ONE

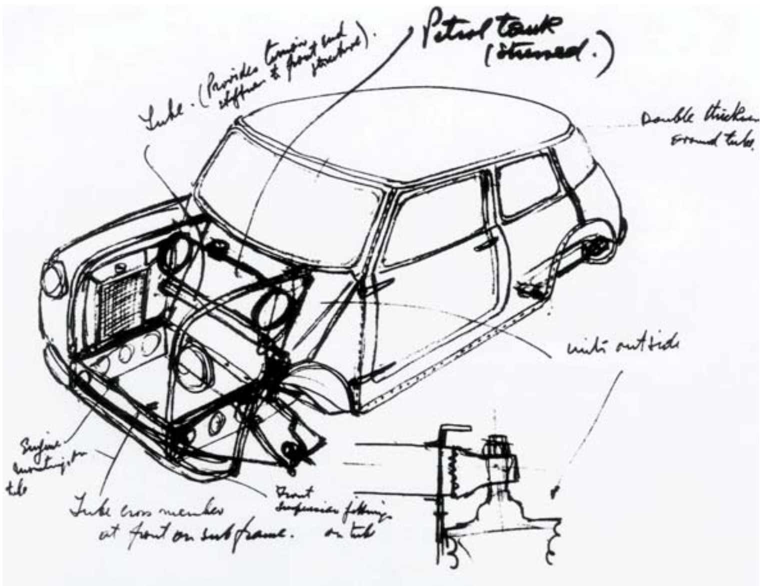
Peter Tothill, a production engineer
Roy Davies, a vehicle proving engineer
Alec Issigonis, a car designer
Alex Moulton, a rubber suspension specialist
Donald Stokes, a manager of British Leyland
William Morris, a manufacturing pioneer
Laurence Pomeroy, a motoring expert
Tony Ball, a publicity man
John Cooper, a speed engineer
Ronald 'Steady' Barker, a motoring correspondent
Lord Snowdon, an enthusiast
Eddie Cummings, a safety engineer
Jean Cummings, a trim machinist

PART TWO

Paul Chantry, a former deputy director
Ian Cummings, a process improvement manager
Chris Bond, a deputy union man
Frank Stephenson, a cool designer
Pat Nolan, an engineering manager

Gert Hildebrand, a chief designer
Peter Ustinov, a renaissance man
Elaine Butler, a personal assistant
Donna Green, a quality specialist
Peter Crook, a paint director
Cedric Scroggs, an old-school marketing director
Bernard Moss, a plant convenor
Emma Lowndes, a modern marketing director
Frau Dr Larissa Huisgen, a Munich-based promotional expert
Dr Herbert Diess, a former Oxford plant director
Jeremy Clarkson, a voice of motoring
Mike Colley, an assembly line trainer
Andy Lambert, an assembly line director
Richard Clay, an assembly line trainer
Jim McDowell, an American vice president
Frau Dr Stefanie Ludorf-Ring, an events and corporate meetings expert
Giles Smith, a motor car columnist
Dr Oliver Zipse, an outgoing plant director
Dr Jürgen Hedrich, an incoming plant director
Gabrielle Hummelbrunner, an advertising and promotional film coordinator

PART ONE


Petrol tank (stressed.)
Tube cross member at front on sub frame.

1 'This car is going to leak,' said Jim Percival

Peter Tothill (production engineer)
Towards the end of 1957, Leslie Ford, the chief planning engineer, called me into his office and said, 'There is a new highly secret model coming, and I want you to deal with it from scratch. I will take you over to E Block paintshop and show you where we will build it.'

We entered the south-east corner of the building and there was a vast area of pristine concrete floor.

So where the hell do I start?

Roy Davies (vehicle proving engineer)
Early in 1958, a prototype Mini appeared in the chassis experimental department next door to the drawing office where I worked. It was quickly locked away in a cabin, and access was only allowed to authorised persons. The cabin was guarded by a works policeman.

Peter Tothill
The next task was to get some idea of the car. It was coded ADO15 (Austin Drawing Office, project 15) but already nicknamed Sputnik. I had already seen this strange little vehicle with wheels the size of shirt buttons. It was Prototype No. 1, and was being endurance-tested round and round Chalgrove aerodrome, south-east of Oxford.

Roy Davies
The Mini was called Sputnik because at the time they started doing the testing round Chalgrove, the Russians had just put the Sputnik in the air, an orange thing going round the sky. At night, the Mini going round Chalgrove was an orange thing going round on the ground. The road-proving engineers christened it Sputnik much to Issigonis's disgust. In later years he had a change of memory and said that he christened it, but he didn't.

Alec Issigonis (designer)
At that time, Leonard Lord [chairman of the British Motor Corporation] got me to design a car to beat these bubble cars.

Alex Moulton (suspension engineer)
He'd been called Arrogonis.

Alec Issigonis
Oh yes, I'm Arrogonis!

Leonard Lord gave me completely carte blanche to do what I wanted to do, except one thing. He said, 'Alec, you can do whatever you like, but it's got to have an existing engine that is now in production.'

Lord Stokes (chairman, British Leyland)
Alec Issigonis, as you know, a very great man, a very charming man, one of the most charming men you could possibly meet, but he was also – and this is why he succeeded I suppose – a very *dominant* engineer.

Alec Issigonis
Lord got in the [prototype] with me and I took him round the

block at Longbridge as fast as I could – they've got a big circuit at the works – and I almost frightened him I think. We stopped outside his office, and he said, 'Alec, I want it made in a year's time. Get going.'

Alec Issigonis at Longbridge

Peter Tothill

So the next thing that happened was we were loaned Prototype No. 3 to strip and rebuild and we had a little compartment built, the cabin, in the experimental department, out of plywood sheets so that we could do it in some secrecy. We were a bit vulnerable from the press because the way the bypass was built, you could see right into the factory from the ramp. Our cabin was built over a pit area so we could get underneath.

There was a small team of us, and we had a week to strip and rebuild this car, so we did that and I made endless notes, problems or potential problems.
Issigonis – I may appear very critical of Issigonis, which I am in a lot of ways – but one of the things he decided, and he convinced the board, was that you didn't need a vast engineering organisation. Now Issigonis was a brilliant innovator, absolutely first-class innovator, but he had no time for the nitty-gritty detail. He just used to say, 'Solve it, don't come to me, just solve it.'

Alec Issigonis
I design cars without any prompting from my employers to suit what they want for sale. I thought I knew better than the market-research people what the public wanted. As is shown in the results.

Roy Davies
The thing that rolled through the Mini was the water leak fiasco.

Issigonis for a long time would not admit that there was a water leak, despite the fact that his Mini had a pair of Wellingtons constantly in the boot for him to wear. The basic problem was, if Issi had designed a house, he would have put the tiles on upside down. When he designed the Mini floor, he insisted on having it so that the water went up. Instead of having the floor like that [hands curved upwards] he insisted on it being that way [facing down], so the water just went into the car. The boys at Nuffield Metal Products who make the bodies and the people at the Fisher division who make the bodies all

said, 'It's not sealable.' It took Issigonis about eight or nine months to acknowledge that it wasn't sealable.

Peter Tothill

Before we'd even started building I went up to a meeting in Birmingham at Nuffield Metal Products who built the bodies for Morris. My understanding was that the only purpose of the meeting was to establish in detail how they were going to ship the body to Cowley, what would be fitted, what wouldn't be fitted. After the meeting ended, a guy called Jim Percival, who was the engineering director, said, 'Right, I want to talk to you.' I thought, what have I done wrong? He said, 'I want you to talk to your boss Leslie Ford when you get back. I've already told him, but I want you to reinforce it: this car is going to leak.' So I thought, well, why don't you bloody well change it? He said, 'I've had three acrimonious meetings with Issigonis and he will not change the design of the body. He's done it according to him; he's done it for ease of assembly. I've argued with him that it doesn't make it any easier to assemble, but it does guarantee it will leak.' Issigonis insisted on it being like that, so that any water coming off the front wheels went straight [up into the floor], and the pressure of it coming off – it was like coming out of a fire-hose jet. 'When it comes off the wheel it will wash any sealant out and it'll leak. And there's another place in the front wheel arch,' he said, 'where once it's got past the sub-assembly stage you can't get at it to seal it.' He said, 'I want you to impress this on Leslie Ford.' Fine. I did that and Leslie Ford reported it up through the process but didn't get anywhere with Issi.