

NUMBER 24 1959-60 Mini

Words **Martin Vincent** Photography **John Colley**

The original Mini was pushed through production so quickly it didn't get tested properly, leading to various problems. Most cars were fixed, but some still slipped through the net.

If you regard the classic Mini as an icon then the very first series of the Minis launched on August 26, 1959, must surely count as the most iconic of all. Yet at the time, the new Mini was not immediately hailed as the best thing since sliced bread, at least not by the buying public who were naturally suspicious of such an unfamiliar and radical design. It's easy to understand their wariness of

this new model. Imagine the reaction of those familiar with traditional 1950s family cars; not only did this new-fangled Mini have tiny proportions, but it also had those ridiculous roller-skate wheels, it had the engine the wrong way round and driving the wrong end of the car, it had cheap-looking external door hinges and exposed protruding seams to join the bodywork together, and it even had rubber cones instead

of springs for its suspension. No wonder it didn't catch on straightaway with Britain's notoriously conservative car buyers. As a result, surprisingly few cars were actually sold in its first year of production despite a frenzy of marketing from BMC and tumultuous acclaim from the press.

Those very early ADO 15 cars from the first months of production were significant in that they could almost be

considered as running prototypes. Indeed, many detail aspects of the car were changed as a result of issues or defects with the first production models and so these 1959 and some 1960 Minis are really quite unique. Remarkably, it was less than two years earlier when the very first Mini prototypes ran for the first time in November 1957. The following July (1958), BMC's Chairman Leonard Lord drove one of the prototypes and



OWNER'S TALE

To say Trevor Ripley has a passion for Minis is an extreme understatement, with this 1959 Austin being part of a collection of superb, and very rare, Mk1 cars — some of which featured as our cover story for the autumn issue of Mini Magazine

(MMI37). The car here was rotten but complete when he bought it in 2000, before treating it to a painstaking restoration. "It's the purity of the original that I really appreciate," he told Minimag when we first saw his garage.





Own an original Mini?

Tell us! Simply e-mail mark.robinson@futurenet.co.uk if you'd like to have it photographed for a buying guide

Under-seat wicker picnic baskets were available as additional extras.



told the production team to have it in production within 12 months.

Fast-tracked

This was a ridiculously short period in which to develop, refine and produce a motor car. Durability testing was necessarily restricted and, that being the case, a good deal of the Mini's durability testing was effectively carried out by the first people who bought the car! Furthermore, management had insisted on cost-cutting in the production of the car and so shortcuts had to be made which harmed the overall quality and durability of the car.

It wasn't long before faults, both minor and major, began to appear. Water leaked into the cars through the bodywork seams and past the door window channels, filling the doorbins and the footwells; oil seals failed in the engine, leaking oil onto the clutch, which then slipped; the gearbox synchromesh failed prematurely and even the wheels began to crack and to break apart. BMC worked fast to fix any affected cars under warranty and to redesign parts that showed failings, although interestingly some cars slipped through the net and survive without all of these changes. Also, many of the steel pressings and component parts originally rushed into production before being fully developed were refined and changed within the first months of production. The result is that the very early cars possess a certain 'rough around the edges' cachet that many early Mini enthusiasts value highly. Any early Mini is very collectible, but these 1959 cars earn even higher respect.

For this guide, we are concentrating on those Minis built up to the Mini MkI 'facelift' of October 1960. This cut-off point is significant because the bodyshells (and other components) were changed in several different ways. One obvious change at this time was the introduction of recessed front and rear screens. Also, these later bodies were made of thicker steel and the car gained about 50 kg in weight. This

made the earlier cars popular for racing and grass-tracking because of the lighter shells.

These early Minis today have very much a vintage feel, despite the fact that the design was so much ahead of its time in 1959. But that was the best part of 50 years ago. Let's not forget that the Mini was the replacement for the Austin A35, a car that was the embodiment of traditional small car design. In comparison, the Mini was a miracle of packaging and its handling and performance were in a completely different league by the standards of the day. Even with its little 850cc engine it could still achieve around 75 mph due to its small frontal area, while the ability to seat four people in such a tiny car was a remarkable achievement. The transverse engine driving the front wheels via an integral transaxle was certainly novel, while the ultra-compact dimensions of the car were only rivalled by the so-called 'bubblecars' and Italy's Fiat 500/600.

True classic

Owning a 1959 or early 1960 Mini today is a shrewd move for any Mini enthusiast as here is a car that is not only historically significant, but it is also one which will grow in value. Restoring such a car will always be a challenge, not least because so many of the parts are unique compared with other MkI Minis, but early cars are so scarce that it will be a very worthwhile thing to do — but restoration is not for the faint-hearted or for those who lack the necessary skills. Many people have fallen into the trap of buying an old Mini that is apparently in decent nick only to discover that it is a pastiche of filler, newspaper and glassfibre. That said, there are also some very nicely restored cars around, but again these are incredibly rare and command top money. Originality is crucial to the value of the car though, as is its date of production — the very earliest cars command a premium — so read this guide carefully to make sure that the car you buy really is an early model. →

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

GENERAL

Some of the components and body pressings for the earliest Minis from 1959-1960 are unique and were changed in a gradual process over the first year or so of production. It is hard to define all the special characteristics an early car should have because the date of change is rarely known accurately and changes took place over a period of months. That said, there are still plenty of major identifying features that will positively identify a Mini from the first few months of production.

Of course, the usual rules of assessing condition are the same as for any Mini and these have been covered extensively in earlier buying guides in this series, so we will concentrate here on the features that make a 1959-60 Mini unique. Originality is the main consideration although any early history or service history of the car is also well worth having as this supports the car's provenance, as does the original registration document.

One other important point is the precise date of manufacture. Cars built before or during July 1959 are extremely rare because production was still scaling up. These very early cars are more desirable to collectors and this obviously affects values. The chassis serial numbers began at 101 for both the Austin and Morris Minis.

WHEELS

The first wheels were made of pressed steel and were in two parts (the rim and the centre) which were joined using eight steel rivets.

When Minis began to be used for competition, it soon became clear that the new 10 inch wheels were not strong enough. The rivets began to pull apart and the wheels literally fell to pieces. Also, cracks began to appear in the steel pressings. The first Minis were fitted with these riveted wheels but, once the weaknesses became known, a new design of wheel in heavier gauge steel and with a welded joint was fitted to production Minis. It was not until 1961 that these stronger wheels were specified so all 1959-60 Minis would have been fitted with the riveted wheels. All early Minis were equipped with crossply tyres and these are still available in the 10 inch size.

UNDER THE BONNET

The Mini was launched with just one engine option — the OHV A-Series four cylinder displacing 848cc. It was fitted transversely and the gearbox was beneath the engine and coupled to it via transfer gears. It had a single SU carburettor and produced 34 bhp. It was considered capable of quite adequate performance for 1959 and gave the Mini a top speed of 74 mph. The engine was painted the traditional BMC green.

Early teething problems included oil leaks from the end of the crankshaft, which leaked onto the clutch, causing it to slip. This was eventually cured by a new design of seal, although this was not until 1960. The gearbox with its Austin A35 internals was never man enough with its weak constant load synchromesh and this was eventually uprated to a baulk ring synchro design in October 1961. The exhaust system was prone to breakage too.

Very early cars can be distinguished by a number of unique details beneath the bonnet:

■ Radiator. This had a flat top for 1959

cars. This was changed to a more rounded profile for later cars. Early ones, however, may well have been changed for the later version by owners.

■ Oil cap. The oil filler cap was pressed steel, not plastic as used on later engines.

■ Carburettor. The SU carb dashpot cover had a brass screw-in cap — later ones were plastic.

■ Air cleaner housing. The very earliest cars built before August 1959 had the air cleaner intake pipe pointing towards the radiator. Thereafter it was angled downwards towards the clutch. Most were replaced with the later style, under warranty, due to icing-up issues so the early style is extremely rare.

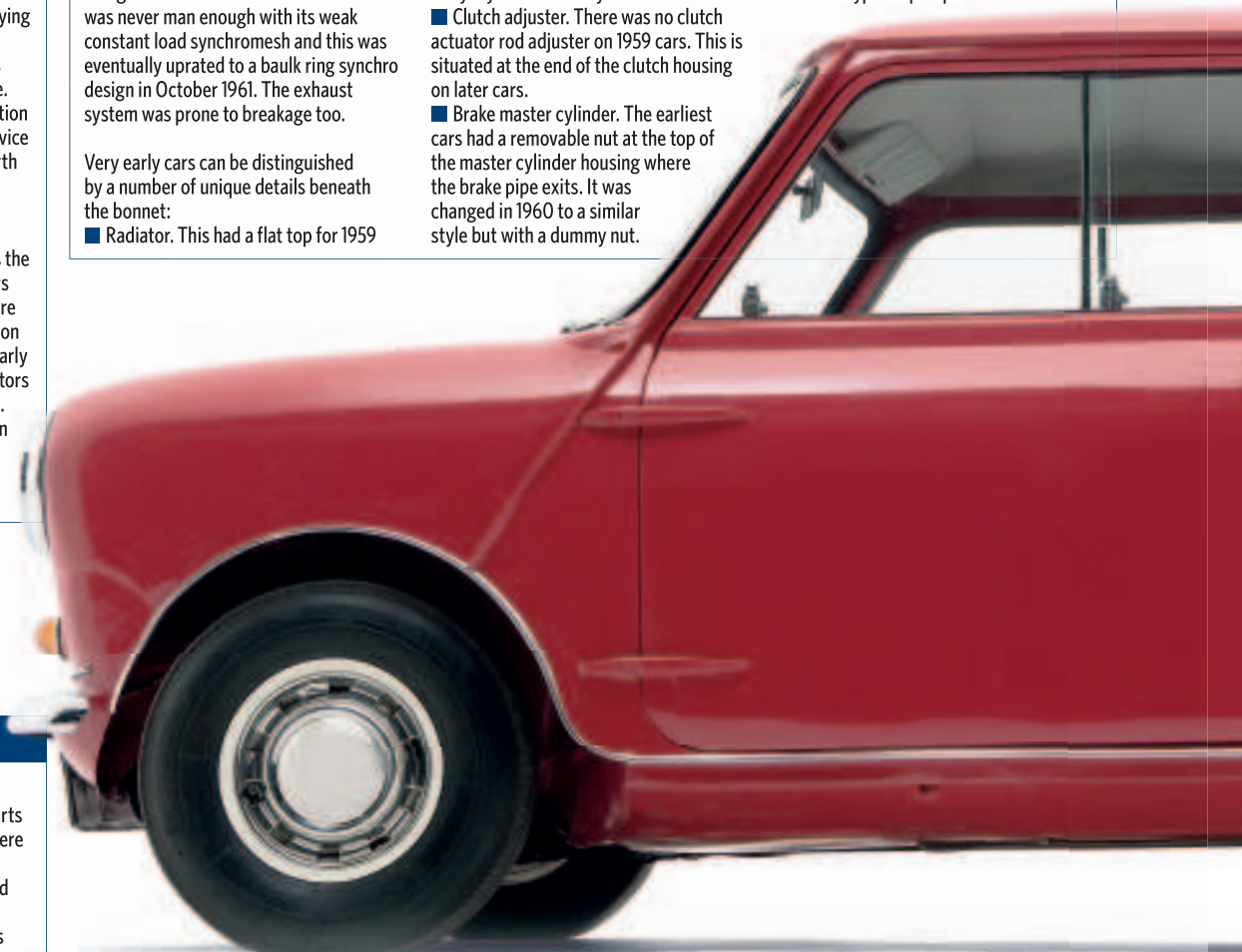
■ Clutch adjuster. There was no clutch actuator rod adjuster on 1959 cars. This is situated at the end of the clutch housing on later cars.

■ Brake master cylinder. The earliest cars had a removable nut at the top of the master cylinder housing where the brake pipe exits. It was changed in 1960 to a similar style but with a dummy nut.

Both these types had a metal cap for fluid top-up. Later cars had a cap made from plastic and no dummy nut at the pipe outlet.

■ Washer bottle. This was a glass jar for the 1959 cars. It should be marked UGB 16 on the base and it had a 16 fl.oz capacity. These are almost impossible to find — a pickle jar of a similar size makes a convincing alternative. Later cars used a plastic washer bottle. Note that the screen washers were an optional extra for the basic model.

■ Fuel pump. Early cars were equipped with the SU PD type fuel pump. This has a dumbbell shape that is quite different to the later-type SU pumps.



BODYWORK AND EXTERIOR TRIM

Virtually all early Minis will have undergone a certain level of repair or restoration and due to the fact that some of the early-style replacement panels were never available, later-style panelwork may have been fitted and modified to suit (for the floors, for example). This makes it harder to positively identify a Mini as being a 1959/60 model. However, the lack of a front and rear window recess will be the key factor in establishing if a car is a genuine early Mk1 version. Today, most panels are once again available from M-Machine.

There are a number of unique features that distinguish the very early Minis from other Mk1s. Here are the most well known:

■ Non-recessed glass apertures. The most obvious hallmark of a first-series production Mini is the non-recessed glass apertures for the front and rear screens. In later cars the steel pressing had a recess to take the window seal but the very early cars did not have this until autumn 1960.

Instead, the rubber window seal sits proud of the surface of the metal surround.

■ Drip rail. The Mk1 Mini normally has a

drip rail fitted flush with the gutter on each side. This is not present on the very early-production Mk1 Minis.

■ Roof gutter drain holes. The earliest Minis did not have any drain holes in the roof guttering. They first appeared some time during 1960.

■ Floorpan pressing. The floor pressing has a much larger depression on each of the footwells on cars built before October 1959.

■ Toe board/floor join. The toeboard to floor seam was spot-welded and sealed but, the floor panel was originally positioned

INTERIOR

Listed below are the unique features for the interior of 1959 cars:

- **Rear quarterlight catch.** The DeLuxe model had opening rear quarterlights. On 1959 models the opening catch was a slimmer design to that used on later cars.
- **Door pulls.** All Mk1 Minis (except the Super and Cooper) used a cord door catch with a ribbed hand grip in a fixed position on the cord. Some very early 1959 Minis had a grip with no ridges and this wasn't fixed but could slide on the cord.
- **Door locks.** The 1959 model interior door lock used a rounded chrome-plated button. This was changed in mid-1960 to a flat type button.

- **Front window opener.** All 1959 Minis utilised a window opening catch attached to the glass with a single bolt fitting. This could rotate on its single fixing (the glass is often scored in circular marks) so this was changed for a modified version with a separate locating dowel. This of course required window glass with two holes rather than one. This took place in November 1959 for the Morris but Austin's were not changed until early 1960.

- **Seat frames.** The 1959 Mini used all tubular steel seat frames with the front section bolted to a mounting that was welded to the floor crossmember. This was changed (probably in mid to late 1960) to a design using a steel pressing for the front hinge and this was

bolted directly to the front of the box-section crossmember.

- **Gearstick.** This was straight for all 1959 and some 1960 cars. From October 1960 a revised pattern that was cranked upwards close to the gearknob was employed. This provided a more convenient hand position.

- **Switch panel.** This was a flat panel for very early cars. It was later revised and had recesses for the switch mountings.

- **Heater unit.** Early cars had demister vents but there was no provision for shutting off airflow to the car in order to make them work efficiently. In late 1960 a flap attachment was added to the heater unit which could shut off air to the footwells thereby directing all the output to the demister vents. Some very early cars were fitted with another variation which had flaps to shut off air to the demisters. All heater units were the recirculatory type on 1959-60 cars, although fresh-air ventilation became an option some time in 1960.

SEAT TRIM

There were several different types of seat trim on 1959 cars and the design changed in September of that year. Austin and Morris each had individual designs for the DeLuxe Mini. The base model seats were covered in a grey/white patterned fabric that was not very hard-wearing. It is very unlikely that you will come across an early basic Mini with its original seat fabric intact. The material is now unobtainable. Most early Minis were specified in DeLuxe spec. The first Austin seats were in a fluted grey fleck fabric with 12 stitched flutes, plus a larger panel at the front of the base in either red or blue. The back of the seats were also in red or blue. Sometime soon after production began (about mid-July) the fluted panels were no longer stitched but were instead welded.

For the Morris, the seats were in a grey fleck but with a black front panel instead of the Austin's red or blue, and with the back in grey fleck fabric. The panel design was entirely different to the Austin and featured a wide central panel and twin flutes at each side. They were stitched, not welded. From September 1959, the Morris seats changed to a style similar to that of the Austin, but with wider fluted panels. Also, the colour changed from black/fleck to red or blue with fleck. For all early Minis, the rear seat backs were shaped at each end to cover the wheelarch. Most restorers will try and retain original upholstery wherever possible, but where the trim is not original it is fortunate that repro interior trim and new seat covers are now available from Newton for the more popular DeLuxe model.

BENEATH THE CAR

Underneath, the earliest cars differed only in detail from later ones, mainly in the design of the handbrake operation.

- **Handbrake cable.** The early cars had no pivoting quadrant attached to the rear radius arms for the handbrake operation. Instead, there was a 90 degree bend formed from steel tubing. The quadrant was fitted from October 1959.

- **Radius arms.** The rear radius arms for early cars lack any provision for attaching the handbrake quadrant.

- **Rear brake backplate.** The mounting plate for the rear brake shoe adjuster is riveted to the brake backplate on very early cars with one rivet each end. It was later incorporated into the backplate.

- **Suspension 'trumpet'.** This was a steel fabrication on earlier cars; this was changed to aluminium in 1961.

beneath the toe board panel, leaving the seam vulnerable to water penetration. The panel join was changed so that the join was higher up on the toe board and the floor panel edge then went inside rather than outside the toe board panel.

- **Outer sills integral with floor.** Minis built prior to October 1959 had the outer sills as part of the floorpan pressing and there was a separate inner sill spot-welded to this main pressing. The design was changed because water could leak past the panel seams and enter the car.

- **Starter button housing.** The starter button for the very earliest cars was mounted on a separate small steel pressing spot-welded to the main floor.

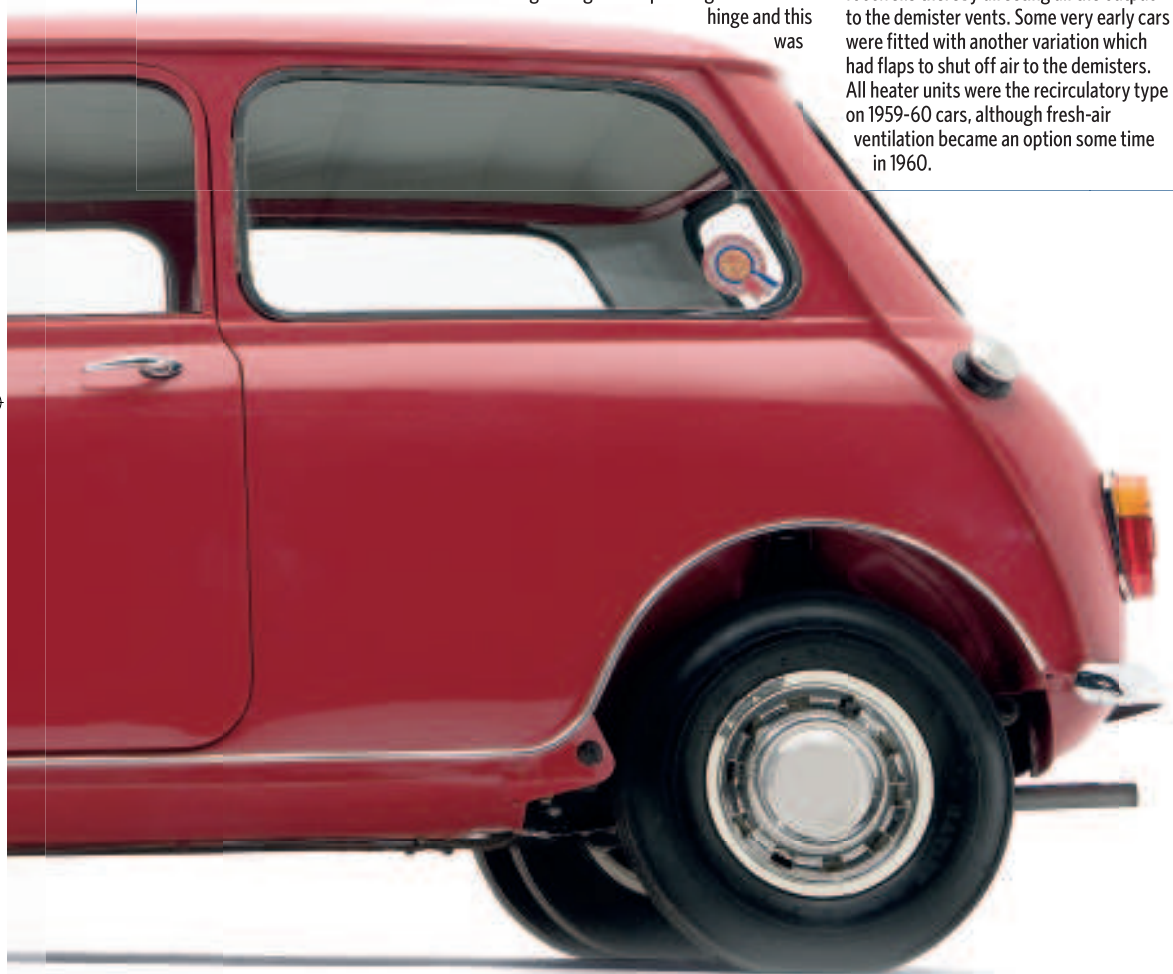
- **Door pressings.** Early Mini doors had holes for water to exit at each end. This did not work properly and later cars were equipped with a more effective system. All 1959 cars have the two drain holes at each end of the door. The later system was implemented mid-1960.

- **Wheel trims (DeLuxe model only).** The basic Minis were equipped with stainless

steel hub caps that covered the wheel centres. On the 1959-60 cars, the DeLuxe wheel trims featured 10 rectangular apertures around the periphery. On later cars the holes were semi-circular.

- **One-hole door window glass.** The window fastening catch was attached to the glass by a single bolt. A second locating lug was fitted from 1960 and this required glass with two holes.

- **Bumpers.** The very first 1959 chrome front and rear bumpers were slightly longer than those fitted to 1960-on Minis.



SPEC 1959 Morris Mini-Minor and Austin Se7en

Cost £497, DeLuxe £537

Top speed 74 mph
0-60 mph 17 sec(official) 26.5 sec (The Autocar)

ENGINE

OHV four cylinder A-Series

Capacity 848cc

Bore/stroke 62.9 x 68.2mm

Compression ratio 8.3:1

Max power 34 bhp @ 5500 rpm

Max torque 44 lb.ft @ 2900 rpm

PERFORMANCE

Max speed 74 mph

0-60 mph 18.3 sec

Fuel consumption 40 mpg

TRANSMISSION

Four-speed manual gearbox with 3.765 final drive

SUSPENSION

Rubber cone

BRAKES

Drum/drum unservoed

WHEELS

Steel 3.5x10 inch with 5.20x10 Dunlop C41 crossply tyres

DIMENSIONS AND WEIGHTS

Weight 571 kg (basic)
 584 kg (DeLuxe)

Luggage capacity 5.5 cu.ft

Tank capacity 5.5 gal

Length 120 inch/3054 mm

Width 55 inch/1397 mm

Height 53 inch/1346 mm

Wheelbase 80.2 inch/2037 mm

HOW MUCH TO PAY

How much have you got? An early Mini can be picked up as a complete restoration project for perhaps £500-£2000 — but you could be searching for many months to find one and may resemble a colander more than a Mini.

Decent examples are both rare and sought-after and have price tags to match. Restoration costs are not cheap, so expect a top-quality concours standard car with some history and provenance to be worth anything up to £12,000, possibly more — and prices are not likely to get any less.

In-between the two extremes, it is certainly possible to find a decent early Mini for £4000-£6000, although the value is highly dependent on condition, originality, provenance and date of manufacture. Cars built before August 1959 command a premium so if you find a car with a really low chassis number, buy it. Numbers started at 101. The earliest known Mini in existence was built in May 1959.



The airfilter originally pointed to the radiator, but was changed on later models due to problems with freezing.



INSURANCE QUOTE

Male, 21, Orpington, Kent, 0 yrs NCB
 £619.82/5000 miles; main car
 £605.99/5000 miles; second car

Female, 32, Fort William, Scot, 3 yrs NCB
 £95.55/5000 miles; main car
 £63.00/5000 miles; second car

Male, 46, Great Barr, B'ham, 6 yrs NCB
 £70.35/5000 miles; main car
 £63.00/5000 miles; second car

Mini Magazine Insurance Services
Call 0800 027 6147
www.insureyourmini.com





Identifying features

Early Mini — Identifying features at a glance

- No recess in bodywork for front and rear screens
- No drip rail or front drain holes in roof gutters
- One-hole door window glass (for opening catch)
- Rectangular holes in wheel trims (DeLuxe only)
- Riveted steel wheels
- Metal filler caps for master cylinders and for rocker cover oil filler
- Brass cap at top of dashpot on SU carb
- Glass washer bottle
- Straight gearstick
- No seatbelt anchorages
- Flat-type outer sills integral with floor

Very early production cars may also feature

- Flat-top radiator
- No hinged flap on heater unit
- Rear handbrake cable with no quadrant on radius arm
- Drain holes at each end of door
- Stitched seat trim
- Larger depression in footwell pressing

Note: changes came into effect gradually so not all 1959 Minis would necessarily have all these unique features



BASE AND DELUXE TRIMS

The base trim level was indeed extremely basic. The cloth seat trim on basic models was of poor quality, there were rubber mats on the floor in place of carpeting and there wasn't even a heater or screen washers. Almost all Mini customers paid the extra for the DeLuxe model and this brought a much higher level of trim with more comfortable seats and pile carpeting. The DeLuxe also boasted opening rear quarterlights with a stainless steel surround, a heater, a screen washer, passenger sunvisor,

lamps in the rear side bins, ashtrays, passenger seat adjustment, and a rubber mat for the boot floor.

Externally, the DeLuxe version was distinguished by one-piece chrome wheel embellishers instead of the chrome hubcaps of the base model, while it also featured chrome bumper over-riders and chrome numberplate surrounds, a chrome-effect trim strip for the window rubbers, stainless steel sill-finisher strips and a chrome-plated filler cap.

AUSTIN AND MORRIS

From launch, the ADO 15 Mini was available in both Austin Seven and Morris Mini-Minor versions and in basic or DeLuxe trim. Most larger towns would have had both Morris and Austin dealerships and they were considered quite distinct, despite the badge engineered cars being very similar. The Super did not appear until 1961.

As was the custom at the time, the two marques came in different colours; Farina Grey, Tartan Red or Speedwell Blue for the Austin, with Clipper Blue, Cherry Red or Old English White for the Morris version. The Austin was built at Longbridge and the Morris at Cowley

(with some exceptions), although all engines were supplied from Longbridge. The pricing was identical for both marques at £497 for the base model and £537 in DeLuxe trim.

There was little to choose between the Austin or Morris version. Apart from the badging, the choice of colours and the interior trim design, the only real difference was the design of the front grille; the Austin grille was in chrome and this had eight horizontal wavy bars while the Morris grille was painted white and had eleven horizontal bars and seven vertical. Later Morris Mini-Minors in DeLuxe trim had a chrome grille.



PRODUCTION HISTORY

First chassis numbers: AA2S7 101 (Austin) and MA2S4 101 (Morris)

May 1959

The first Morris Mini-Minor was assembled at Cowley (621 AOK, now at Gaydon). Some 42 Austin Se7ens were assembled in May at Longbridge. Morris Mini production is not known.

June 1959

Production at Longbridge was about 10 cars a day on average. Morris production was probably similar.

July 1959

Production at Longbridge rose to approx 35 cars a day during July.

Aug 1959

Austin and Morris versions of the Mini

launched August 26.

Sept 1959

Austin Se7en interior trim upgraded.

Late 1959

Steering castor increased, pivoting quadrant for handbrake and split radiator cowl introduced.

Oct 1959

Floorpan/sill design changed to fix water leaks and to improve strength.

Jan 1960

Window catches improved (two pin type).

Feb 1960

Improved interior trim for Morris Mini-Minor with padded door panels, parcel shelf and fascia.

April 1960

Driveshaft spline design changed (from square section to involute).

Oct 1960

Austin model interior upgrades similar to Morris.

Oct 1960

All models: gearchange lever now cranked, seatbelt anchorages fitted, drain plug for fuel tank, clutch adjuster fitted, improved dampers and revised mounts, larger front wheel bearings. The recessed front and rear screens and heavier-gauge bodysheils almost certainly came in at about this time. Note that this change may be different for Austin and Morris versions.

JOIN A CLUB

1959 Mini Register

www.1959miniregister.com

The 1959 Mini Register was set up by Trevor Ripley and Bill Bell to help existing and prospective owners of these rare early Minis. The website offers plenty of good solid information and the members themselves provide an invaluable source of knowledge. Trevor Ripley is the owner of the car pictured here.

THANKS TO

Many thanks to the 1959 Mini Register for their invaluable help in compiling this article on early Minis.



Enough luggage space for a family holiday?
Maybe if you use the special suitcases...



Bumpers on the 1959 Mini were slightly longer than on other models.