



MORRIS MINOR

For years – in fact, for as long as most of us can remember – Morris Minors have provided cheap and reliable transport. Back in the 'Sixties, early 'Fifties examples were handpainted in all kinds of lurid colours and had their power upped by installation of bigger 948 and 1098cc engines in place of the original sidevalve and 803cc engines. This popular appeal continued throughout the 'Seventies, though in the second half of that decade the cars began to interest the emerging classic car hobby. Thanks in no small part to a well-known former property tycoon in Bath, Minors started being restored properly rather than patched for an MoT, and the values/desirability of good ones started to rise.

Today of course, good restored Minor Travellers regularly sell for five-figure sums. Vans, once the least desirable Minors of all, are also now highly sought-after, and convertibles always have a ready market.

But in spite of all that, a Minor can also still perform exactly the same function as it did in the 'Sixties/early-'Seventies – that of providing simple, reliable, low-



Peter Simpson
Editor in chief

Our new occasional "CCB Recommends" series starts with a look at the car that is arguably Britain's most popular small classic of all....

cost and totally non-depreciating transport. At a recent classic auction I saw two white Minor 1000 saloons (one 1961, the other 1968), sell for just over £1000. They weren't perfect of course, but both were presentable enough to be used without attracting adverse comment, both came with almost a full year's MoT and both looked solid enough underneath in all the usual places; they'd both been welded of course but it all looked competent and workmanlike.

I have absolutely no doubt that either of those cars could have been driven daily as urban runabouts in place of a modern hatchback: 40mpg is entirely possible on a run, and unleaded cylinder heads are available ex-stock for around £300. Throw in free road tax and the case becomes even more compelling.

Finally, and contrary to the cars rather fuddy-duddy 'little old lady' image, Minors are actually great fun and exceedingly rewarding to drive thanks to a well-sorted chassis, torsion bar front suspension, and rack and pinion steering.

So really, there's a Minor for all budgets, and for all types of driver/owner.

WHAT'S AVAILABLE?

As we've seen, prices for running/useable Minors seem to run from around £1000 for a slightly scruffy round the edges but still viable saloon, right up to £12,000-plus for a just restored to as good as new Traveller, possibly with a few performance, brake and suspension upgrades. Between those two, there's all manner of Minors around. Unusually, it's the later 'Minor 1000' cars that are generally more

valuable/sought-after because of the greater usability of the 948cc and (especially) 1098cc cars. The early lowlight models now have a particular kudos due to their rarity, originality and presence of quirky features like the strange metal strip in the centre the bumpers due to Alec Issignois' last-minute decision to make the car wider. Other than that though the sidevalve and 'split screen' models are generally cars for enthusiasts/Minor collectors (and a lot of Minor fans own several) rather than those seeking a car for daily/regular use.

Many people still fancy a Minor convertible, and they are of course every bit as useable as the standard saloon, and while the hood arrangement is fairly basic it is reasonably watertight if the hood and frame are in good condition. Many cars that are now convertibles started life as saloons; a genuine post 1958 convertible will have a chassis number starting MAT, and on 1952-58 cars the second letter in the three-letter code will be C. Pre-1952 convertibles cannot, unfortunately be identified from their chassis number, but there are other clues; for example the triangular strengthening plates under the dash

will be spot-welded on a genuine convertible but are usually MiG or gas-welded on conversions. The most important strengthening is within the sills: This can't be easily seen from outside, though fitting it involves fairly extensive sill renovation work, which should be fairly obvious. Finally, most genuine convertibles did not have a courtesy light switch in the driver's door shut, though a small number were built with them by mistake.

A properly converted convertible is okay, and can be used/enjoyed in exactly the same way as a factory-built one. It should though not be sold as a genuine car, and should be roughly 10-15 per cent cheaper. That, on the other hand, makes it a better buy for someone who isn't bothered about originality.

Minor Travellers are always sought after of course; partly for their extra utility/usability but mainly, I'd diplomatically suggest, for their looks. The half-timbered rear end is just so British – as much so as half-timbered houses in fact – and totally distinctive. Luggage carrying capacity is okay rather than outstanding – Minors aren't big cars – but for two people going camping or on holiday it's more than adequate.



◀ 1948-52 Minors were powered by Morris's ancient sidevalve engine, due to Lord Nuffield's reluctance to sanction the new flat-four engine Alec Issigonis wanted. This is a 1950-52 example; earlier ones had lower headlights in line with the grille.

▶ From 1952, and following Austin and Morris's merger into BMC, the sidevalve engine was replaced by the ex-Austin 803cc OHV unit. Grille design changed to the later type seen here in 1954 but the split windscreen remained until 1956.



◀ Last of the line; a 1967/68 Minor 1000 saloon in gorgeous Spruce Green. You won't buy one this clean for £1200-1500, but useable examples are around for this sort of money.

▶ Minor Traveller in an extremely appropriate location. The writer suspects strongly that the appeal of this model must owe something to the wood-framed rear end's similarity to timber-framed houses.



BUYING GUIDE

Like everything else, Minors can rot. Additionally, the integral underbody/underframe is quite complex, meaning that once rot starts it can spread quite quickly, and what looks like a fairly simple repair to a single part often involves renewing a lot of the surrounding metalwork as well. Take the main centre crossmember for example; this carries the jacking points but also, most importantly, the front suspension torsion bar anchorage points. It often rots, and when it goes, it's usual for the floorpan it mounts on to need work as well. You can assess this easily enough by just looking underneath – it's generally the outer edges that go first.

Patch-type crossmember repairs are common. While not a restoration in the true sense of the word, these can be solid enough to make the car last for several years, and provided you accept that the repair is not permanent, they are satisfactory.

Sills can rot too; here again it's a case of looking underneath, and again you may find patches over the top of rust. This is a temporary fix, and, as usual, a lot of the structurally-important parts of the sill are inside, invisible, and will have been severely compromised by the time rot appears on the outside.

As is well-known, the woodwork on the Traveller isn't just cosmetic; it's basically what holds the entire rear-end together. Wholesale

“ MINORS ARE ACTUALLY GREAT FUN AND EXCEEDINGLY REWARDING TO DRIVE THANKS TO A WELL-SORTED CHASSIS, TORSION BAR FRONT SUSPENSION, AND RACK AND PINION STEERING. ”

renewal, though not that difficult technically, is a time-consuming job – something to do over winter rather than over a weekend or two. Usual initial signs are blackness in the main longitudinal members and at the joints where moisture has got in, along with any sign of wood filler.

Having said all this though, it's not that uncommon to find Minors on which some or all of the underbody restoration has been done properly, but which still looks a bit scruffy/average on top. Everything needed to sort a Minor's structure properly is available, the techniques to do it are well-known, and there are numerous extremely good Minor restoration specialists. For many years Charles Ware's famous Morris Minor Centre (formerly in Bath, now in Bristol) has been advocating planned and staged restoration of a Minor as a non-depreciating alternative to paying for a new or nearly-new car on finance. This involves sorting the structure first, and avoiding short-term/temporary cosmetic work. Look for bills from a recognised specialist, and don't be too concerned if the work was carried out a decade or so ago. You should check it of course, but provided it

was done properly and has been properly wax-protected since, it should still be sound.

Other common problem spots include the main front 'chassis' legs either side of the engine (though these are often protected by leaking engine oil), the rear spring mounts and the whole of the floorpan.

The mechanical side is straightforward and long-lived; A Series engines generally run and run, though sometimes fitting an unleaded cylinder head can cause cylinder blowback that previously escaped through the head to leak past the pistons, leading to a bit of blue smoke. Having said that, a full rebuild isn't difficult or expensive. Transmissions last well too; Minors never had synchromesh on first, and most owners live with weak/worn syncho on second. Rear axles usually whine a bit, but provided the oil level is kept up they'll run like it for ages. And, of course, all Minors have that wonderful and unique exhaust rasp on the overrun.

COLLAPSING FRONT SUSPENSION

When Minors were popular as banger transport, it was common for the front suspension to collapse due to the bottom joint/trunnion

coming away from the upright. The join between them is provided by a screw thread, which requires regular greasing – every 3000 miles was (and still is) recommended. If that isn't done, the threads wear, and eventually come apart. Fortunately, this usually happened at low speed, when rolling resistance on steering – and thus strain on the joint – were at their greatest.

As well as lack of lubrication, this problem was often exacerbated by a poor previous repair. Clearly, the correct cure for a worn thread is to renew both parts of it. However, it was cheaper and easier to simply renew the trunnion part, and doing this would often remove play sufficiently for MoT purposes. However, it's still weak and will fail again in time.

Nowadays though, people recognise that both need renewing, and a trunnion and upright will typically cost about £100. These are stronger threads-wise than the original, but regular greasing is still important.

LOOKING AFTER IT

Minors really are dead-easy cars to look after; even if you aren't the sort of person who normally likes to get your hands dirty, you'll be

able to cater for a Minor's basic needs if you want to. As already noted, steering and suspension requires greasing-up every 3000 miles, in addition plugs and points should be cleaned every 6000 miles, and the oil and air filters every 12,000 miles. Brakes also need adjusting every 6000 miles – basic adjustment is done with the wheels and drums in place, but you should remove and refit the drums first to clean out dust and check for fluid leaks/oil contamination. Buy a workshop manual, talk to someone who's owned a Minor in the past – and let's face it, an awful lot of people have – and you'll probably surprise yourself by just how much you can do.

But what if DIY maintenance really isn't your thing? No problem – the cars are so simple that any garage can look after them, though it may be necessary for an 'old hand' to do the work, or explain to the youngsters how to set manual valve clearances and points gaps.

Besides low fuel costs, Minors are cheap in other ways. As already noted, they all qualify for free historic vehicle road tax. Parts are generally inexpensive too; a complete engine service kit comprising oil and air filters, plugs, points, condenser and rotor arm costs around £20, a set of brake shoes £15-25 depending on make/quality, and shock absorbers are £20-30 apiece. Availability is excellent too; with the exception of some trim and other specific items for very early cars, there's nothing



Pre-1954 Minors had this style of dash with a speedometer in front of the driver rather than centrally mounted. Note the matching decoration on the nearside, allowing the same basic dash shell to be used for LHD and RHD versions.



Four-door Minor was introduced in 1950. While popular in the 'Fifties it largely fell out of favour from the 'Sixties, though it remained available until all saloons were discontinued at the end of 1970. As you can see, the rear doors improve rear seat access massively.



Engine bay was designed to take a flat-four, and the Minor had an extra four-inch width added at the last minute. All of which means there's lots of room round the bay for routine servicing – and, if it appeals, fitting a twin-cam Fiat engine or similar.



This is typical of the sort of thing you can do with Minors. You don't have to renew shock absorbers; provided the leak isn't too bad you can usually restore action by simply topping up – use hydraulic jack oil if you can't get shock absorber fluid.

“ THERE'S ONE OVERRIDING REASON WHY THE MORRIS MINOR REMAINS SO WELL-LOVED AND SO POPULAR 40 YEARS AFTER THE LAST ONE WAS MADE. THEY WERE, AND ARE, EXTREMELY GOOD CARS; THE BEST SMALL CAR OF ITS ERA IN FACT. ”



Distributor servicing is also straightforward due to excellent access. As always, it's sensible to renew the condenser and rotor arm at the same time as you change the points. There's even a starting handle to help you get the centre spindle positioned correctly.

that can't be obtained. The specialists are extremely efficient too – so much so that Minor spares will often arrive quicker than parts for a modern car that are no longer generally stocked by dealers and have to be delivered by the manufacturer.

Pre-1960 Minors are now MoT exempt. I would, though, very strongly recommend anyone new to classic ownership, or who is insufficiently skilled/experienced to check a car's roadworthiness properly themselves, has the car safety-checked professionally. You can do this either by submitting the car for a voluntary test, or by having it done by a classic/model specialist – the latter may actually be a better bet.

LIVING WITH A MINOR

Let's start with the bad news; though I stress that I'm writing this mainly for someone who is thinking of replacing a younger car with a Minor. The standard seats aren't particularly comfortable, and standard interior noise levels are also likely to be a little higher than you are used to. Both these issues can, though, be addressed.

Right; that's the bad news out of the way; now let's look at the many positives. First off, you'll be impressed by the light, positive and precise steering, and even if you're not the sort of motorist who wants to test handling to the limits, you'll appreciate the generally very tight and predictable

front end. You'll also love the slick gearchange on 948cc and 1098cc cars with the 'remote' gear lever.

That's all very well for newcomers to classic motoring, but what about established enthusiasts who already know how easy classics are to maintain, and who are looking for a new or additional hobby car rather than a substitute urban runaround? Well unless you are planning to do a lot of miles, or for some other reason want a

car with maximum parts back-up but which will also be the same as many others, I'd go for one of the earlier cars – either a 1952-56 803cc Series II split screen or even a pre-1952 sidevalve. All of these are now actually surprisingly rare – especially in original/unmolested condition. You are also, arguably, buying a 'purer' Minor. Just so long as you aren't looking for lots of speed. Plus, until 1956 leather trim was standard.

CONCLUSIONS

It's a bit hard for us to fathom now, but when the Morris Minor was introduced in 1948, it was a truly ground-breaking car; a small car that steered and handled far better than many that cost far more, and had superb interior space for its external dimensions. Its looks were also slap-bang up to the minute and clearly heavily influenced by contemporary American styling. In short, it was

a true icon, and unsurprisingly, it sold well.

The more traditional 'olde worlde' image came later and arose basically from BMC carrying on making the things for far longer than would have normally been the case. By 1962 the basic car was 14-years old and would ordinarily have been replaced. And in one sense the Minor had been, because that year the front-wheel drive Morris 1100 arrived, and the 1100 range quickly became BMC's main contender in the 1100cc class. However, BMC carried on making the Minor because there was still sufficient demand to make doing so worthwhile, and with the tooling and other set-up costs long-since covered, making Minors was profitable, provided no significant investment was required. By this time, though, its appeal was largely to older people and some specialist fleets who were concerned that FWD might be unnecessarily complex and thus unreliable – hence its use by some police forces, the NHS and, in Traveller form, HM Forces.

At the end of the day though, there's one overriding reason why the Morris Minor remains so well-loved and so popular 40 years after the last one was made. They were, and are, extremely good cars; the best small car of its era in fact.

And that's why we've chosen it to be the first of our 'CCB Recommends' classics. **CCB**



Minor convertible – or tourer to use the technically correct term. See main text for how to distinguish a 'genuine' factory-built one from a conversion, though the latter are okay if done correctly and priced accordingly.