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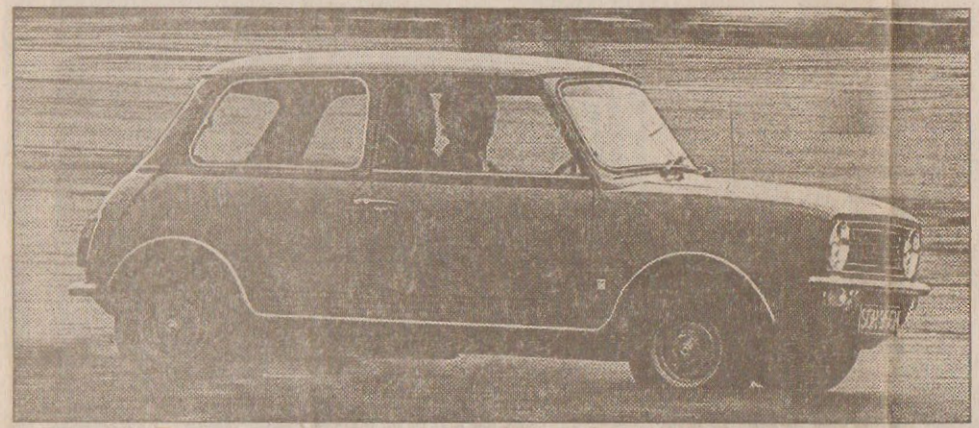
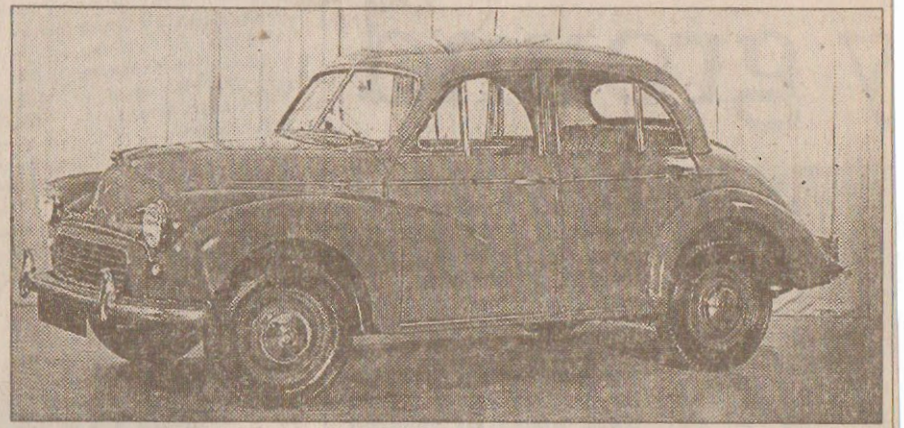
Old favourites in foreign parts





Going strong and going overseas: the Mini (left), as it was in 1969. Right: the Morris Minor, first seen in the Forties, could now go into production in the Third World

Minis are to be assembled in Venezuela and a Sri Lanka factory is to make Minor parts. **Kevin Eason** looks at two popular models

Old Minis and Morris Minors never die. They just seem to find more enthusiastic customers with every new generation. Both come from an age when cars were round and robust, less concerned with style than transporting their drivers on time and cheaply.

The years have, however, polished the image of the little runabouts, turning them from family workhorses into chic classics, so much so that both models are finding new buyers — and new demands for production.

In a small coup for British persistence, the Mini and Minor are being maintained in a form of production by foreign factories. The Morris Minor, last produced in 1971 by British Leyland, will live on, thanks to a new venture to make components in Sri Lanka.

Charles Ware, who runs a Morris Minor restoration centre in Bath, Avon, has joined forces with the aptly named Durable Car Company, of Sri Lanka. The venture, he says, could pave the way for producing new Minors eventually.

At least 25,000 Minors are still being used in Sri Lanka, many of them as taxis, and in Britain, 80,000 motorists are registered as Minor owners.

Mr Ware says: "There is still a lot of demand for Morris Minor parts in Britain, and a lot of the cars are still being used in Sri Lanka and India. Preparing to build the car again out there would take some time, perhaps four years, but it could come about."

At the same time, Rover executives have signed an agreement with Facorca, a manufacturing company in Caracas, Venezuela, to allow production of 3,000 Minis a year for the South American market. The deal overcomes strict import laws that would have prohibited the sale of the Mini direct from Rover's Longbridge plant in Birmingham. Instead, Longbridge will supply mechanical parts and Facorca will fit glass fibre bodies to the chassis at its own plant.

This will be the first time since 1970 that Rover, or British Leyland as it then was, has sold cars in South America, and the British company has ambitions to turn the Mini into the sort of cult vehicle that has kept output at Longbridge at 1,000 a week, after more than 31 years in production.

The Mini, introduced in 1959, set an engineering style that was followed by many other manufacturers. Even stringent new emission regulations have not killed off the little car. The Mini has become Japan's best-selling import. Rover plans improvements to the engine and exhaust system so that the car can keep running through the Nineties.

Mr Ware thinks he knows why the charm of the Minor and Mini lives on: the genius of the late Sir Alec Issigonis, the designer of both cars. Mr Ware says: "Cars such as the Mini and the Minor are real 'people cars'. They could not be designed today; now teams of designers work on a car, one of the reasons all cars look alike."

Issigonis was born in Smyrna and had barely seen a car until his family left Turkey after the first world war. He did not go to school but was passionate about all things mechnical. His passion found its niche at Morris Motors in the Thirties.

Issigonis designed the Mini and Minor with only a small, handpicked team and at a cost that seems unimaginable today, when a new car costs at least £1 billion to develop. Motoring legend has it that he drew the shape of the Mini on the back of a cigarette packet, a design that must have been inspired because more than five million were sold.

The Minor was similarly dreamt up, but the Issigonis eye for design was a match for today's computer-aided designer. Mr Ware points out that the Minor has a drag coefficient similar to that of the Metro, which came a decade after Minor production stopped.

Issigonis started work on the Minor during the war, but the funny, squat shape drew the fury of Lord Nuffield, the then Morris chairman, who sniffily called it "a poached egg". Morris went on to sell more than 1.5 million Minors.