

Austin A40 Farina

The clean-cut car that threw away Austin's dumpy image is practical and fun, reckons **Malcolm McKay**

A forgotten classic that surely deserves better recognition than it currently enjoys, the Austin A40 Farina marked a sea change in Austin styling and pointed the way towards the two-box hatchbacks that now rule the small car market. The taciturn and domineering Leonard Lord had little interest in continental styling – “We don’t want any more damn foreigners, we’ve enough of them already,” was his retort when seeking Pinin Farina’s advice was suggested. He changed his tune when the Duke of Edinburgh, visiting Longbridge in 1955, commented: “I’m not sure these are up to the foreign competition.” In no time, Pinin Farina had taken the A35 running gear and produced a bigger car that bore no resemblance to its origins.

It took some acclimatisation – Austin workers referred to it as a ‘bloody matchbox’ and were allegedly threatened with the sack if heard to refer to it as a van – but the A40 Farina offered vastly more interior space than the A35, yet was only 90lb heavier, and 170lb lighter than the Morris Minor. It was much more aerodynamic than it looked, helping it to offer an easy 50mpg in gentle driving, a figure rarely beaten even 45 years later. In Italy the car was built by Innocenti and its version of the MkII Countryman (the Combina) took the logical step BMC never managed,

fitting a one-piece top-hinged tailgate. Austin sold the car as a saloon with conventional bootlid but fold-down rear seat back, or as a Countryman with split tailgate that still limited its practicality.

Sharing much of its running gear with the Austin-Healey Sprite, the A40 handled better than the A35 and soon achieved success in rallying, chiefly driven by Pat Moss. It was hampered by Austin’s penny-pinching, which saddled it with heavy Cam Gears steering and a poor turning circle when it could have had the Sprite’s rack. The telescopic rear dampers and front anti-roll bar that came with the 1098cc MkII improved the ride and handling, but by then the BMC 1100, infinitely more modern under the skin, was entering production and the A40 was only made to satisfy the most conservative of buyers.

The car’s simplicity, practicality and appearance ensured its popularity on the second-hand market, but also led to most being driven into the ground. Once rot takes hold it can become rampant and, with low values for decades, few rusty A40s have been fully restored. Values are still rock bottom, making a decent A40 a remarkably cheap foothold in classic motoring. Though complete body panels are hard to find, patch repair panels are available: it’s vital to keep on top of rust and eradicate any small areas before they spread.



From top: brochure emphasised classless appeal; Pat Moss/Ann Wisdom on '59 Alpine; BMC works team en route to Newcastle, for Stockholm start on '61 Mott



Timeline

1958 Oct: A40 saloon launched at Paris Show. By year end: two boot straps, Austin badge added to rear, bonnet flying A deleted
1959 Improved soundproofing, hinged boot floor covering spare wheel, time switch on indicators for self-cancelling, interior light
1959 Sept: Countryman, with top-hinged rear window, metal straps on bootlid plus wing mirrors; 70lb heavier than saloon
1960 Innocenti A40 launched
1961 Sept: MkII replaces MkI after 141,897 saloons and 27,715 Countrymans – 37-in longer wheelbase, full-width grille, wind-up windows, hydraulic brakes, SU carb, full-folding rear seats, two-tone trim
1962 Feb: Innocenti MkII, after 10,213 Berlins and 6444 Combinas. Sept: 1098cc, plus higher final drive, stronger ‘box, larger clutch, improved kingpins
1964 Oct: simulated wood-grain replaces crackle-black fascia, moulded-rib seat covers
1967 November last A40 built; 172,568 MkIs sold

The facts

Produced/no built 1958-67/342,180
Engine watercooled 948/1098cc pushrod ‘four’ with single Zenith/SU carburettor
Transmission four-speed manual with synchromesh on top three
Max power 34bhp @ 4750rpm to 48bhp @ 5100rpm
Max torque 50lb ft @ 2000rpm to 60lb ft @ 2500rpm
Chassis/body steel monocoque
Suspension: front double wishbones, coil springs, lever-arm dampers; MkII anti-roll bar
rear live axle, semi-elliptic springs; MkI lever-arm dampers; MkII telescopics
Brakes drums all round
Steering Cam and peg
Length 12ft 1in
Width 4ft 11in
Height 4ft 8 1/2 in
Weight 2044-2184lb
0-60mph 35.4-27.1 secs
Top speed 70-77mph
Mpg 35.4-37.1
Price new £599 (De Luxe saloon, 1963)

Insurance

Premium from £140 for comp cover for 21-year old with clean licence on a '63 A40 as a second car, agreed value £1250, garaged overnight, 6000 limited mileage. As only car, 10,000 miles, not garaged, three years' NCB, £147: Lancaster (01480 484848).



On the road

Being lighter than a Morris Minor and quite low geared, even the early A40 should feel quite lively around town and on twisty roads, though it will soon run out of breath on open modern roads. The MkII is much better, being higher geared, and diff ratios can be swapped. Quite a few cars have had modifications over the years, some done well and some not. With A-series running gear, more power is readily available and it's natural that the more plentiful 1098cc engine is often dropped into a MkI when the now-rare 948 gives up, and the temptation to bolt on a pair of SUs from a Midget (with or without a 1275cc engine) is understandable.

Midget front disc brakes can be adapted to fit – particularly easily on MkIIs that share the same stronger kingpins. It's important to uprate the brakes to match the power and to fit the stronger MkII kingpins to MkIs that are going to be driven hard. A complete front suspension rebuild can get costly so regular maintenance pays off. Look for a car that has been sympathetically maintained, with evidence of frequent greasing and clean oil. Smoky, rattly or oily engines are likely to need a rebuild, though they may well smoke on for years. If it's just rattly, it may only need a timing chain and tappet adjustment. A-series engines, particularly with low gearing, are prone to valve seat erosion on unleaded petrol, so start saving for the (inexpensive) unleaded head conversion if you drive hard.

The MkII benefited from a number of improvements, not least a longer wheelbase with the rear axle moved back on longer springs, plus telescopic rear dampers and a front anti-roll bar. Its gearbox was also stronger and many early cars now have the ribbed-case 1098 gearbox. Jumping out of second and noisy layshaft bearings are signs of a tired gearbox.

Early cars are happiest on twisty roads. Look for signs of regular maintenance



Alternatives



HILLMAN HUSKY
Top speed 73mph
0-60mph 30.8 secs **Mpg** 25
Produced/no built 1955-66/c70,000
Price new £575 (1963)
Price now £950
Rather frumpy Minx-derived workhorse was solid and dependable. A great load carrier but totally unsporting, the last few had an all-synchromesh gearbox and anti-roll bar. Few are left now, so it has novelty appeal and can easily be made faster with contemporary parts-bin swaps.



TRIUMPH HERALD
Top speed 77.5mph
0-60mph 21.3 secs **Mpg** 30
Produced/no built 1959-71/548,291
Price new £580 (1200, 1963)
Price now £900
Italian styling and lively colours hid rattly separate-chassis construction, but spacious estate option and lively performance plus tiny turning circle scored over Austin and it lived longer with bigger engine. Keen following and excellent spares availability make it a practical choice now.



Rot spots

- 1 Front wing around headlight
- 2 Heater plenum chamber/scuttle
- 3 Rear of front wing and A-post/bulkhead
- 4 Outer and inner sills
- 5 Floors
- 6 Doors
- 7 Rear spring hangers
- 8 Rear wing valances
- 9 Boot floor
- 10 Base of bootlid

Rather weak straps (just one on the earliest cars) support the A40 bootlid: check for distortion to the bootlid and its support panel resulting from past breakages



Gearbox wear manifests itself by the lever jumping out of second or by excessive noise in intermediate gears. Like the Minor, the gearbox that came with the 1098cc engine was stronger



It's rare to find any new brightwork for A40s, though generally secondhand parts can be found: among the most difficult are the easily damaged stainless steel side strips



Check how car sits at the rear to see if the rear springs have sagged. Also look for a wobbly wheel that may denote a bent halfshaft. Both halfshafts and Mk1 and MkII springs are unique to A40s



Cam Gears steering box and idler need to be well lubricated and adjusted to avoid wander and excessively heavy steering; new parts are not available but secondhand or reconditioned are



Owners' views

Keith Bennett bought his early red A40 saloon in 1966: "I'd learnt to drive in an A40 and no one in my family had a car, so I asked my driving instructor what to buy. He said 'Get an A40, keep it greased and it'll last for ever,' so I did. It had already done 100,000 miles but had been serviced."

"It's now done more than 300,000 miles but is lucky to be here, because it had a big rebuild in the 1980s that went wrong when the restorer went bust: it took a long time and a lot of money to recover from that. Bob the welder spent every Saturday with us for almost four years, gradually piecing it back together."

"I still enjoy driving it in town and on country roads," Bennett explains, "where it can nip through narrow gaps, but I try to avoid motorways."



Graham and David Jones from Ebbw Vale acquired their 1960 Mk1 A40 saloon locally after it had been stored for many years. Seventeen-year-old David did most of the work needed to make the car presentable and prepare it for a respray

"There's nothing else like it round here, I love it to bits," David says. "I was going to have it as my everyday car but the insurance was crazy. I'm planning to go to medical school and hope that in future I can use it more: there's just not enough of them around. We get all the bits we need through the club - it's easier to find bits for the Austin than for my Astra!"

What to pay

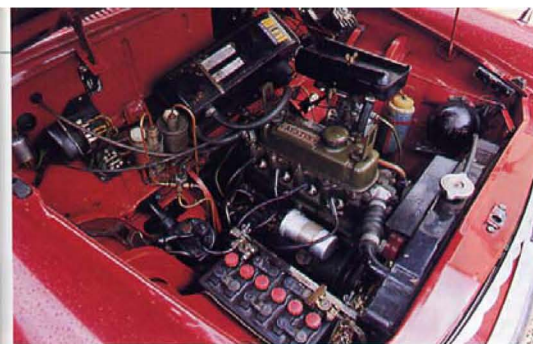
Show/rebuild	£2250
Average	£750
Restoration	free

Parts prices

Front wing	£275
Rear wing bottom repair	£28.50
Floorpan (either side)	£34.50
Full sill	£40
Unleaded cylinder head	£125
Brake master cylinder	£59
Brake shoes (axle set)	£12
Fuel pump (MkII)	£55
Clutch kit	£145

On the web

www.omniautos.force9.co.uk/sprite/a40.htm, www.bolus.com/cars/a40.html, www.elc.canterbury.ac.nz/news&events/Electric%20Car%202001.htm



A-series engine rattles on for ever: look for signs of excessive breathing or oil leaks that show it's tired. Later A40s had more power with SU carb; Zenith is most economical



Radiator sits on a crossmember that traps moisture and can rot merrily away out of sight: check it and all surrounding panels for rust and filler

Kingpin front suspension gives good handling but needs greasing every 1000 miles on MkIs. Stronger MkII kingpins are better able to cope with extra strain from radial tyres or disc brakes



Specialist view

Henry Maslin has been supplying parts for Austin A40s, as well as A30 and A35 models, for 25 years: "It was a good market back then, but now there can only be about 800 A40s left and they're still worth nothing: most are in deplorable condition. I used to do body panels but when you've paid £200 for a car, you balk at £500 for a pair of wings."

"If you run one now you'll be very reliant on the club for secondhand spares. I still have a lot of parts and they're not expensive - £3 a side for steering side rods - but a lot of the unique A40 parts like the steering boxes and idlers, the Mk1 braking system, the rear lights and the halfshafts, are unobtainable now. The cars are worth so little and there are not enough left to justify remanufacture."

Henry Maslin (01474 854005)
Radford Panel Co (01926 313801)
Autofurbish (0161 427 5292, www.autofurbish.net)
Ex-Pressed Steel Panels (01535 632721, www.steelpanels.co.uk)

Club/events

A40 Farina Club
 Christine Hepherd, membership secretary
 75 Tennyson Road, Harborne, Birmingham
 B32 2JB (e-mail: info@a40farinaclub.org)
www.a40farinaclub.org

Books

Post-War Baby Austins A30-A35-A40
 Barney Sharratt, Osprey
Austin A40 Mk1 & II Factory Workshop
 Manual Brooklands Books
Austin A40
 Restoration Brooklands Books

One to buy £1200

Year of manufacture 1959 **Recorded mileage** 17,000 (117,000 in total) **Vendor** Jack Jones, Llanbydder, tel: 01570 480213 **For condition** **Against** just needs cosmetic tidying

This A40 has spent its life in West Wales, first as a pool car for the Welsh Plant Breeding Station. The vendor is only selling the car to free up garage space and has kept its registration number. The paint has many swirl marks, particularly on the bonnet, that should T-Cut out. The brightwork has no dents but is pitted, while the side trims carry a few light knocks.

Before being stored from 1982 to 2002, the car was fitted with a GoldSeal recon engine. The underbonnet area is tidy but needs a clean, while the boot is smart and shows no signs of repair. Inside, it's as good as still has the supplying dealer's sticker on the glovebox lid. There are no rips in the seats or door panels (the driver's panel needs refitting), but the headlining is coming away along the driver's side.

This early Mk1 isn't quick, but the engine responds well and has a healthy note. The brakes work well but pull slightly to the left. What instruments there are work correctly.

The car will come with a fresh MoT, plus spares including trim, wheels and an exhaust centre box.



The verdict

It's a buyer's market, with scruffy A40s almost impossible to give away. But, with numbers dwindling and the cost of restoration rising, only the best cars are worth buying unless you're going to contribute to the decline.

A good solid A40 is fun to drive and one of the cheapest and most practical classics to own, with rallying pedigree and lots of tuning potential, too.

MARKS OUT OF 10

Driving	6
Everyday?	6
Looks	6
Parts availability	5
Ease of maintenance	7
Rust resistance	5
Club support	7
Running costs	9
Value for money	9
Insurance	8

TOP SCORERS

6	Mini	74
6	MG Midget	71
6	Morris Minor 1000	71
5	VW Beetle	71
7	Austin A35	70
5	Fiat 500	70
7	Reliant Scimitar	70
9	Triumph Vitesse	70
9	Austin Seven	69
8	Citroën 2CV	69

Final score 68/100