

PRACTICAL CLASSIC'S SALON FEATURE

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The Austin A40 represents the archtypal family saloon of the sixties, yet humble though it was, it possessed a certain flair and ingenuity in its design which both excused its rather ordinary mechanical make-up and provided an object-lesson for other small/medium-size car designers — indeed, it could be argued that evidence of the influence the A40 had on the European automotive industry has lasted right up until today, in the form of popular cars like the VW Golf.

The launching ceremony for the A40 took place at Longbridge on 18th September 1958, conducted by BMC's go-getting chairman Sir Leonard Lord, while the public had a chance to see the car at the London and Paris motor shows held a few weeks later. Keen interest was generated all round not by any technical novelties but by the car's eye-catching and unique styling, which especially for a BMC model was quite startlingly different.

The attractive new body shape — described at the time by 'Design' magazine as the best-looking product of the British Motor Corporation — was due to the innovative move, most unusual in the case of a British mass-production small car, of calling in an outside specialist. For BMC had engaged Pinin Farina of Milan to carry out the new car's body design, one of the world's most outstanding designers and known largely through expensive projects on limited-production thoroughbreds — though already some Italian, French and even American manufacturers had Pinin Farina designs in series production for the mass market.

Why did BMC commission Farina? Quite apart from his obvious skills, it has been suggested that bringing in a neutral 'outsider' to clothe the first-born of the Austin/Morris merger was a diplomatic move to quell the rivalries which still existed — and which had even intensified — between the Cowley and Longbridge drawing offices. Though on the other hand, would Len Lord really have bothered with such niceties? Particularly as his avowed aim, after previously quarrelling with Lord Nuffield and going over to 'the other side', was to dismantle Cowley 'brick by brick'... But certainly the call to the continent was somebody's good idea; almost certainly BMC's chief engineer S.V. Smith.

The Farina style gave a truly unified appearance with simple flowing lines, the minimum of adornment and a reserved elegance. Famed for his work on elitist models, something of the essence of the style used in these was expressed in the lines of the modest A40 Farina, complemented by some enterprising and quite engaging body-colour combination.

The real innovation however, was the idea of a saloon/estate car cross — an early step in



The first of the 'hatchbacks', the A40 was certainly a trend-setter. But it was never quite the success BMC hoped. Here for the first time, the in-depth story.



Interior of the Mk 2 A40, showing the crackle-black facia (replaced in October 1964 by a wood-grain finish); this Speedwell car has a non-standard rev. counter and (to right of steering column) oil pressure gauge.



Aluminium rocker-cover and twin carbs are non-standard on this Speedwell-modified 948cc Mk I, as are the twin horns. In September 1962 this engine was replaced by the 1098cc unit.



'Our' A40, the ex-Pat Moss Mk I of November 1958 vintage, XOE 778 (hence 'Zoey'). Photographed here at an early stage in the rebuild, Zoey will shortly be painted as the bodyshell has been finished.

Main picture: The A40 Farina — still practical today and with remarkably undated lines. This is an early Mk 2 with full-width grille incorporated side/flasher lights.

The A40 'Farina'

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although the A40's handling qualities were rather dismissed as being "undistinguished and perfectly predictable".

Besides a better performance, the Mk 2 A40 gave the rear seat occupants more room; this was achieved by moving the rear axle back 3½ inches, the longer wheelbase allowing the rear seat to be moved back too — headroom was not too badly affected thanks to the lines of the roof, which did not slope to the rear very much. The visual changes included a new, wider straight-bar grille of almost Morris appearance which replaced the typical Austin wavy-line type of the 'Mk I', the headlamps lost their cast surrounds, and of course the rear wheelarches were set noticeably further back in the rear wing. The interior trim was completely revised as well.

The final edition of the A40 arrived in 1962 with the coming of the 1098cc engine, though the extra power was largely negated by a rise in final drive ratio — albeit a useful change in itself, as it made the car far less fussy in an increasingly motorway-orientated age. Top speed was found by *The Motor* in March 1963 to be slightly up, at 76.5mph, but the acceleration was much the same and top-gear performance actually down a little.

Time was catching up on the design however, and the magazine noted that the "included boot" of the A40 was less of an asset than it had been due to increase in luggage capacity of more recent small cars. Similarly, the body was adjudged to be "rather high and narrow by current standards", though it was acknowledged that the wide doors made rear access easier than on some other two-door cars.

Two main failings were singled out though — the A40 "never had very good steering or very comfortable seats" and surprise was expressed that "no-one has even yet put matters right". Apart from this, however, *The Motor* found the A40 "difficult to fault".

The A40 Farina had a U.K. production of 342,000 over its nine years, 169,000 in the three years of the Mark I from 1958 to 1961, with a peak year of 67,000 in 1960, and 173,000 in the six years of the Mark 2 from 1961 to 1967, with a peak year of 50,000 in 1962. In addition there was assembly abroad from exported U.K. bodies and parts together with some locally produced components, notably by Innocenti of Milan and by BMC Australia. Innocenti models carried their own insignia and some of their modifications, including in one version of their "Combinator" (Countryman) a one-piece hatchback.

Both Mark I and Mark 2 were made in basic and de luxe versions, some later Mark 2s being called super de luxe. Saloon and Countryman models were made of each and also, for export only, a van model, which used the Countryman body with metal panels instead of rearward side windows. All were



Rear aspect of Mk 2 A40 saloon shows its push-button bootlid handle and the new no. plate light (also seen on late Mk 1s) which replaced the 'button' (Mini-type) used earlier.

two-door models and all had bodysells with the same shape and overall measurements, although of course the Mark 2s had the longer wheelbase already mentioned.

Undoubtedly intended to be a high selling popular car, it did not make the figures expected. The UK production figures previously mentioned show that the Mk II period was less successful than the Mk I. In the small car class it was overlapped and sandwiched, even within BMC, on the one hand by the older Morris Minor and A35, still with a good sales (and higher average annual and peak year figures) and on the other hand by the Mini — out in the first full year of A40 Mk I production — and the 1100, out in the first full year of Mk II production, with all the badge-engineering rationalisation and high sales; whilst outside competition in the popular small car market accelerated in something of a design boom.

The A40 had traditional engine lay-out and rear-wheel drive, coil and wishbone front suspension and rear leaf springing. The BMC 1100 was in one evolutionary step, given the benefit of the pioneer work of the Issigonis-

designed Mini. The 1100 body was again Farina designed, but with some compromise in styling dictated by the pursuit of internal space benefits from the mechanical condensations of transverse engine and front-wheel drive. The 1100 was overall only 1¼ inches longer and less than one inch wider than the A40 but with its shorter engine compartment, longer wheelbase (6½ inches larger than the A40) which took the internal wheel-arch protrusions away from the rear seat sides, and a little squaring of the body lines, it was markedly roomier. This and the improved ride from the Hydrolastic suspension and longer wheelbase were attractive features which allowed it to score against the older car.

Today, the A40 Farina is steadily gathering its devoted preservationists. It can be a rewarding car with its distinct identity, good looks, economy (owners variously claim 40 to 45 m.p.g. overall), adaptability, and its accessible and comprehensive mechanics. Bodywise its problems and generally average of its kind with perhaps marginally more in the sills and adjoining wing cavities, but there are still a few around needing much less than the surgery of the *Practical Classics* Zoey restoration.

So ends the story of the A40 Farina to date; highly innovative in its time, yet having to



Facia of the Mk 2 cars was considerably modernised with new instrument cluster and crackle-black (later wood-grain) finish. Speedwell car sports rev. counter and extra instruments. Handy gear-change remained unchanged.

persevere with very orthodox BMC engineering under its enterprising skin which, while reliable, perhaps never allowed the car to fulfil its initial promise. It may be sheer conjecture, but possibly with more power, higher gearing and more responsive steering the A40 could have been a true 'world car' during the early sixties. However, it was considerably better than a lot of small cars produced during that period, and that it still remains such a usable, cheap-to-run car today, over twenty-five years after its introduction, surely says a good deal about the correctness of its original conception. Definitely, the A40 can be counted as being among the most competent BMC designs of its era.

Paul Skilleter tries a Speedwell A40

The subject of our 'Salon' colour this month is a rare survivor in the form of a Speedwell-modified Mk 2 saloon dating from mid-1962. It turned up in the locality of Ted Walker, a friend of mine who lives in Dursley, Glos., and he kindly drove it over so that I could see

it. A40s in this sort of condition are unusual, but to make it even more interesting, there was a little Speedwell badge on the bootlid and a tuned engine under the bonnet.

The story goes that this particular car was owned from new by a gentleman who, at the age of 80, died, leaving this immaculate little car behind, complete with its period Speedwell bits. Speedwell operated from London at the time and were well known in the sixties for their work on the 'A' series engines; apparently the 948cc engine was modified by them when the car was nearly new, with a twin-carb. conversion, branch exhaust manifold and gas-flowed cylinder head. More recently the engine had been overhauled and later carburetors (1¼ ins.) installed, but otherwise the car appeared in near-mint early sixties trim.

Even with these aids to the engine the car was hardly a lightning performer — but it had to be borne in mind that the power unit was the smallest used in the A40 at 948cc. What

was impressive was the willing manner in which it revved, up to and beyond 6,500rpm on the rev. counter perched on the dash beside the speedo, with no signs of stress.

Top speed was possibly around 80mph (at least 5 or 8mph better than standard) but the car was really in its element on country byroads, where it was ideally suited to dashing round bends of the 30-50mph variety. I don't know what if anything had been done to the suspension but for an early-sixties family saloon it really handled well and could be thrown about with impunity; that plus a nicely-placed gear-stick with what seemed to be quite close ratios, and the free-revving little power plant, made the car highly entertaining. It certainly makes me look forward to the day when our own A40 is on the road again!

Our thanks to Charles Vallender of the A40 Farina Club for supplying much of the data used in this feature.

The Club

The A40 Farina Club is small but growing fast. It has one of the best spares/advice services around and we at *Practical Classics* can vouch for the friendliness of officials and fellow-members alike. Every A40 owner should belong, and send a SAE to Alan Barton, 5 Othello Close, Colchester, Sussex CO4 3LB, is the first step to take.



Where the A40 led, others followed... and still do today. Mk 2 saloon next to Volvo 343 hatchback.

Working, Racing and Rallying A40s by P.G. Stapleton

The A40 found some popularity as a fleet car, particularly when equipped with the more economical low-compression engine option, and a large fleet of the basic Mk II version was delivered to the Birmingham Police Force in late 1966-early 1967 for use as Panda Cars. Some Mk I Countrymans were converted into vans for commercial use in this country.

The A40 was a popular subject for engine and suspension modifications and tuning to increase speed, roadholding and performance and such firms as Alexander Engineering, Downton Engineering, Palace Gate Garage and Speedwell Performance Conversions produced modified A40s to customer order. Further modifications, including reduction of body weight, produced highly successful racing A40s in the hands of Geoff Williamson, 'Doc' Shepherd and J.R. Normanton. The latter modified a 948cc Mk I saloon so that it was able to reach 103mph rather than the standard top speed of 72mph, and in 1961 won ten of the 14 meetings attended, taking class lap records at Oulton, Mallory Park and Snetterton.

An Austin A40 actually held a circuit record for

a while — in September 1959 a standard example covered 1,417.33 miles in 24 hours to break Snetterton Circuit's 24 hour endurance record for production saloons and win the Commander's Cup. Prepared by Mann Egerton Ltd of Norwich and standard except for Dunlop Duraband tyres, the car completed 523 laps at an average speed of 59.55mph despite early-morning fog (an improvised flare path was made using burning diesel oil in drums to mark out the more difficult corners!). Fastest lap was covered at an average

of 64.6mph, and the car beat the previous record (set by a Singer Gazelle) by 24.39 miles to become the smallest car ever to have attempted the trial. Some 6½ pints of oil and four tyres were consumed, but petrol consumption was an exemplary 27mpg.

From 1955 BMC Competitions Department at Abingdon entered cars in international rallies. Some success was achieved with the Austin A30 and Wolseley 6/90 in the Tulip Rally of 1956 but success in the Monte Carlo came only with the

advent of the A40 Farina. In 1959 Pat Moss and Anne Wisdom drove a modified saloon to a brilliant 10th in general classification, thus winning the Trophy in Dames and also the RAC Challenge Trophy. This car is currently being restored by *Practical Classics*. They also won the ladies' section in the Lyons-Charbonnières Rally that year in the same vehicle whilst on the home front A40s took first and second place in the best performance category of the 466 mile Yorkshire Rally. In 1960 Moss and Wisdom, in another



modified A40 Mk I saloon, again took the Coupe des Dames in the Monte Carlo and this second success resulted in BMC entering this car and two other A40s the following year, accompanied by three Minis. The Moss-Wisdom car had been further modified to compete in Group 3 and as such was heavily handicapped by the rally formulae used, so despite achieving second in their class they did not win any awards. Their car reappeared in the 1962 Monte Carlo as a private entry where Meredith-Evans and Bradley took it to sixth place overall in the Grand Touring up to 1000cc class. The A40 made its final appearance in the event in Mk II form in 1963 but no success was achieved. The car was now out-classed by the Mini-Cooper but had helped to establish BMC's place in international rallying.

Its manoeuvrability and the reliable nature of the A-series engine made the A40 quite popular as a rally car, both in international events like this Alpine Rally, and, with amateur drivers and entrants, in club rallies. While some privately-modified A40s were quite capable of beating the 3.4 Jaguars on the tighter motor racing circuits!