

Modest means

PHOTOS GARRY STUART

Austin's Farina-designed A40 is often neglected by enthusiasts, yet these humble cars set a trend the world followed.

Nick Larkin looks at buying one



They're still being scrapped by the hundred every year, and few people seem bothered. A major specialist admits to having thrown out rare spares due to lack of interest from owners. You'd be lucky to sell a good example for £600.

For reasons unknown, while the mechanically similar Frogeye Sprite and A35 bask happily in the limelight, the neat, practical Farina-styled Austin A40 sits in the dark.

Yet these cleanly-styled, practical and economical cars were trendsetters in their day – the Countryman version was the world's first volume hatchback. Renault, Volkswagen and Fiat all have

the A40 to thank as the inspiration for their money-spinning Eurohatches.

The A40 itself owes a debt to Europe, however, being designed by Pinin Farina of Turin, a stylist later commissioned to shape other mainstream BMC models.

Unveiled to the public at the 1958 Motor Show, the A40 had crisp, clean yet undeniably attractive lines. But it was the car's two-box, estate car-cum-saloon bodyshell which proved the real innovation.

Initially only available in

'saloon' form, with a 'tailgate' opening downwards from waist height, the rear seats could be folded back to give estate car load capacity.

The Countryman variant, introduced the following year, was a true estate, the rear window panel forming

Mk 1 A40 Countryman was the pioneer hatchback which spawned many imitators



SPECIALISTS

Henry Maslin, 43 Archer Way, Swanley, Kent BR8 7XR, tel 0322 668284.

Radford Panel Co Ltd, 1 Block Road, Heathcote Industrial Estate, Warwick CV84 6TA, tel 0926 313801.

CLUB

A40 Farina Club. Membership secretary Keith Hallock, 113 Chastilian Road, Dartford, Kent DA1 3LN.

an upper tailgate for unhindered access to the load area.

Mechanically, the car was almost identical to the A35, incorporating the same 948cc engine, identical front suspension, and, on earlier cars, even the hydro-mechanical brakes, though there were larger front drums to cater for the A40's extra weight.

The speedometer, steering column-mounted light switch, steering wheel and counterbalanced rather than wind-up windows were also features plundered from the A35, which lived on when that car ceased production in 1959.

A Mk 2 A40 followed in 1961, when the car received a facelift and numerous detail improvements. An SU carburettor replaced the downdraught Zenith, giving a welcome boost in power from 34 to 37bhp. The wheelbase was increased by 3½ inches, improving rear legroom.

Fully hydraulic braking was added, and a front anti-roll bar, along with telescopic

rather than lever arm rear dampers to further improve matters.

A full-width grille was the major external modification, and the interior was transformed with a new-style dashboard and different seats.

Only a year later, BMC increased the engine size to 1098cc, and modified the transmission. This increased

maximum speed from 72 to 79mph and reduced the 0-60mph time from the Mk 1's 35 seconds to 23.9 seconds. Coupled with a higher final drive ratio, this made the car much more suitable for cruising on the era's new-fangled motorways.

Deluxe versions of all models offered options such as opening rear side windows, and stainless steel window surrounds.

The A40 was then left to sell in relatively small numbers until 1967. Many of the car's competitors, particularly the Mini and 1100, were also BMC products, but of much more advanced design, and this accounted for a total production run of 342,000 cars, of which almost half were Mk 1 models built from 1959-61.

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Different radiator grilles immediately distinguish Mk 1, left, and Mk 2

SPECIFICATIONS

	Mk 1	Mk 2
Produced	1959-61	1961-67
Engine	4-cyl in-line ohv	4-cyl in-line ohv
Capacity	948cc	1098cc (948cc 1961-2)
Bore/stroke	62 x 76mm	64 x 83mm (62 x 76mm)
Max power	34bhp @ 4750rpm	48bhp @ 5100rpm (37bhp @ 5000rpm)
Suspension	Front: Ind, coil and wishbone Rear: Half-elliptic leaf	Front: Ind, coil and wishbone, anti-roll bar Rear: Half-elliptic leaf
Brakes	Drum, rear hydro-mechanical	Drum
Length	12ft	12ft
Width	4ft 11in	4ft 11in
Max speed	72mph	79mph (75mph)
0-60mph	35.6sec	22.9sec (27.1sec)
Fuel cons	38-45mpg	31-42mpg

the sills, can rot out completely. Again, replacement sections are available.

The rear of the inner fitch panel, between the top of the wing and the bulkhead is another danger spot. Scrutinise the entire front bulkhead, too.

Doors aren't normally too bad, but give the lower areas the once-over. Carefully check the lower edges of the rear wings.

The lid of the lower tailgate is another notorious rust spot, though a replacement panel can be bought. You'd probably be able to pick up a secondhand lid without too much trouble.

Now – if you dare – inspect the floor, all of which can

rust. Make sure the area around the rear spring hangers and all the shock absorber mounting points are not about to bid goodbye. Check the condition of the petrol tank of the Mk 2 which can rust around the centre seam.

Enthusiasts reckon that generally the Mk 2 models were more rust-prone than the Mk 1 – the metal was thicker and rustproofing better on the earlier cars.

The good news is that repair sections for almost all the problem areas are available from specialists, but they're often made in small batches when there's sufficient demand, which is not that often.

BODYWORK

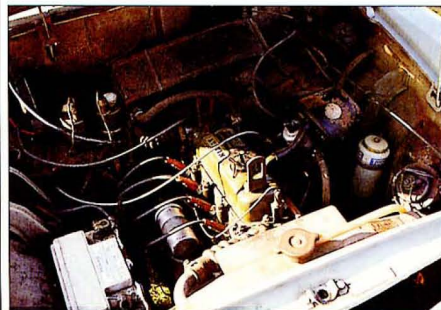
A40s rust, all over. Given current low purchase prices, it's necessary to search for evidence of get-it-through-the-MoT welding and sheer bodgery as well as good, honest corrosion.

The importance of checking the entire car cannot be over-emphasised, even if your prospective purchase

appears fairly sound.

Starting from the front, the area round the headlamps is likely to display rust or filler, though replacement sections, or complete wings, are available if required.

Front wings are extremely vulnerable, so make an especial check of the lower area between the wheelarch and door. This entire section, including a continuation of



All models had BMC A-series engine in 948 or 1098cc form



Spartan but neat interior of Mk 1 includes A35 speedometer



Better trimmed and more comfortable cockpit of Mk 2



Front wings are particularly prone to rot on all models



Rotten lower wing hides rusted-out sill, but can be repaired



Mk 2 cars are much better for higher speed cruising

MECHANICALS

IT'S a much happier story on the mechanical front, thanks to the cars containing almost identical mechanics to their more popular brethren.

The ubiquitous BMC A-series engine is a byword for sturdiness, and replacements are available off the shelf.

Check the condition of kingpins, though complete replacement stub axle assemblies can be bought to solve any problems – the

unit is the same as the 'Frogeye' Sprite. New shock absorbers are available cheaply.

Synchromesh can be weak on early gearboxes, and halfshafts may also be worn.

As with all BMC cars of the time, the A40 needs regular and careful greasing. There are six grease nipples on the stub axle assembly alone, which, according to the manufacturer's schedule, need treatment every 3000 miles.

That apart, the A40 should prove a reliable and easy to run workhorse.

PRICES

A HUNDRED crisp fivers should get you on the road in a safe, usable and clean A40, but expect to pay around £1000 for a top-class car. Although you do see cars advertised at £1500, enthusiasts generally reckon it's extremely unlikely that these figures are ever realised.

The result is that there are a lot of tatty A40s around, staggering from MoT with the bare minimum of expenditure. Specialists say that a lot of owners just aren't prepared to pay for cosmetic items – why spend £300-plus on a pair of hand-made front wings when you can buy a reasonable car for little more than that?

Henry Maslin (0322 668284), one of the country's best-known suppliers of spares for the A35 and A40,



Lower tailgate area will have rusted on most cars by now

reckons the A40 side of his business loses him money. 'I love the cars, but if it wasn't for the fact that they have so much in common mechanically with other models I don't think I could afford to cater for them,' he says.

He added: 'In the past I've ended up having to dump certain parts, such as some bumper sections, simply because no-one would pay anything for them, and I couldn't go on storing them because of space problems.'

Maslin has, over the years, bought a lot of ex-BMC spares for the cars. He supplies halfshafts at £25, outer sills at £20, doors at £75 and rear wings at £75.

Kingpins, common to other cars, are £15 each, and kingpin and stub axle assemblies are £23, all plus VAT.

Radford Panels of Coventry (0926 313801) supply a wide range of repair sections, including rear wing lower halves at £50, rear skirt crossmembers, outer sills at £15, inner sills at £18, front skirt panels at £30, front wing nose sections at £65 and bootlid skins at £35. Front floorpans are £18 each, and front wings can be made. VAT is extra.

CONCLUSION

IT'S obviously not really worth buying a scruffy A40, unless you want to restore it for enjoyment's sake, or are after a basic hack.

But any thoughts of economical motoring could go straight out of the window if you don't give the car the most thorough inspection for rust before buying it.

The Mk 1, with its pure Farina lines, is perhaps the prettiest of the cars, but a 1098cc Mk 2 is the more practical day-to-day vehicle, with a useful improvement in performance and handling.

Few cars can be cheaper to run; you can expect at least 40mpg from your A40, probably more on a gentle run.

Mechanical spares are also cheap to buy and relatively easy to find.

The A40 is rarer than you tend to think – some reports suggest there may only be a couple of thousand sur-

1967 Mk 2

Anna Vickerman

NO-ONE could have paid less for their A40 than Anna Vickerman: 'It had been advertised free of charge in the A40 club newsletter to a caring home, after being in an accident,' she recalls.

A trailer was hired and the car brought back home to the Worcester area. One new wing and some welding later the low-mileage car was back on the road again.

'Apart from their character, A40s are easy to drive and cheap to run,' says Anna, a dog breeder.



1960 Mk 1 Countryman

Nick Bayliss

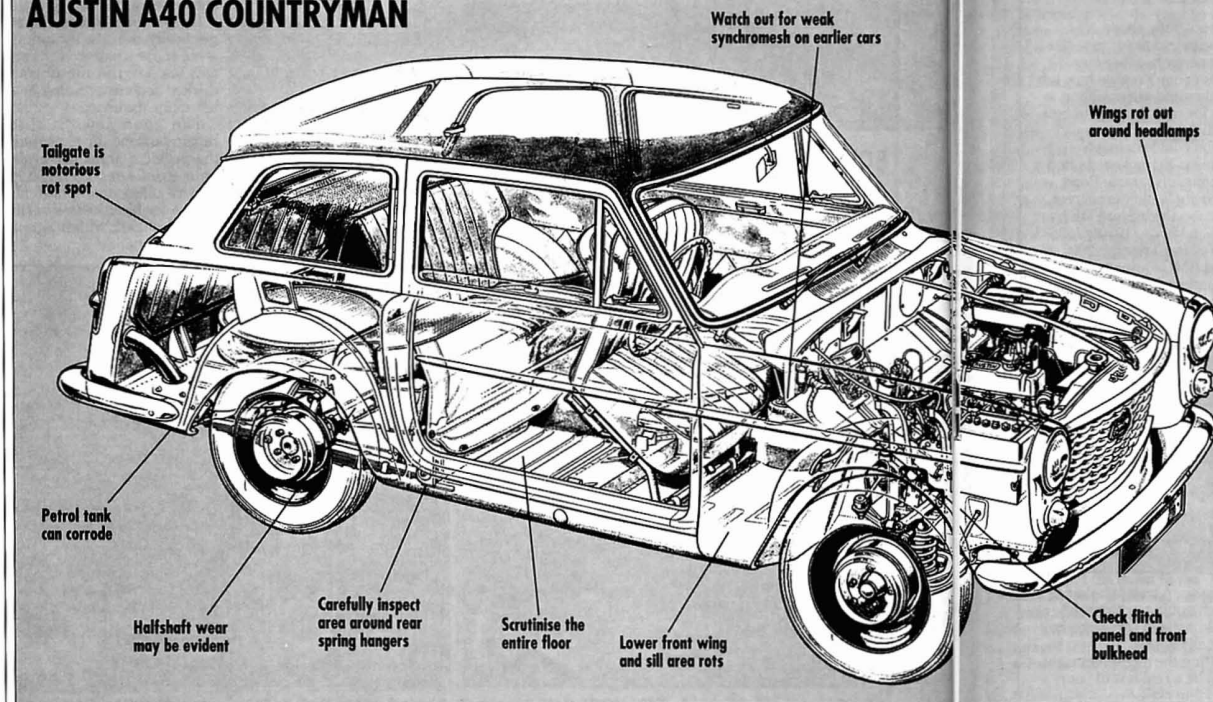
BIRMINGHAM technical consultant Nick Bayliss, who runs the West Midlands branch of the A40 Farina Owners Club, bought his car unseen when it was offered to him over the phone. Eighteen months later, he had completely rebuilt it.

The car's registration number, 3131 NK, seemed appropriate to Nick, who says: 'The A40 has a great deal of character, and is a very practical classic.'

'It's also very rare in Countryman form,' he adds.



AUSTIN A40 COUNTRYMAN



Watch out for weak synchromesh on earlier cars

Wings rot out around headlamps

Tailgate is notorious rot spot

Petrol tank can corrode

Halfshaft wear may be evident

Carefully inspect area around rear spring hangers

Scrutinise the entire floor

Lower front wing and sill area rots

Check flitch panel and front bulkhead



Countryman, left, had upper and lower opening tailgates, saloon had fixed window panel