

# Simple and tough — Austin's post-war baby

*Mechanically simple, the A40 in all its guises transported thousands of families for 20 years. B J Tritton traces the car's history.*

The first post-war designed Austin was the A40 family saloon, introduced in 1947. The A40 designation was destined to last 20 years, encompassing 12 different models and remaining one of the most popular family saloons throughout that time.

The Devon and Dorset started it all off, four-door and two-door saloons respectively, with a "Utility" or estate version and the 10-cwt van and pickup following in 1948.

Austin's first small OHV of 1200cc (the 16hp, 2199cc) of 1945 had been the marque's first OHV in a private car, was housed in a rounded body which — almost inevitably for the time — harked back to a pre-war US design, in this case the '41 Chevrolet.

Other modern features were hydromechanical brakes where previous Austin's were rod-operated, coil-spring independent front suspension and pastel colours.

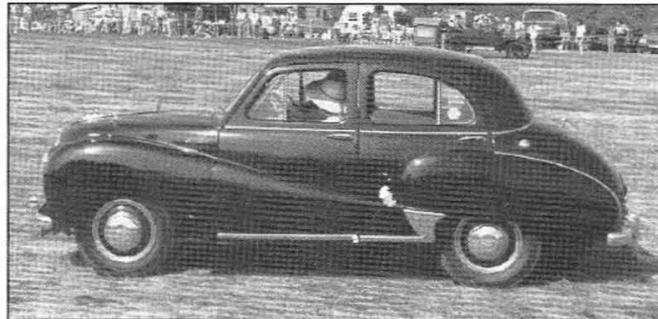
One pre-war feature the A40 did retain at this stage was a massive U-section cross braced chassis. This, coupled with bolt-on heavy-gauge panels (the whole front assembly, including

both wings, was in one section), meant that the Devon and Dorset were set for long lives in the chassis/body department.

And so they were mechanically. The 1200cc OHV unit was tough, if a little underpowered for a heavy car, and all running parts and transmission were well up to the job. The four-speed gearbox had synchro on second, third and fourth. Later models adopted the popular column change.

The hydromechanical brakes tended to be a little under par, and handling could not be regarded as outstanding. Soft front suspension encouraged wallowing on corners. However, with the 1200cc engine's only average performance, perhaps the soft ride was more important than handling.

A sliding sun-roof was available on both models and it was to prove popular on all the A40s for which it was available.



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Many examples of this first A40 still exist, a tribute both to their longevity and to the dedication of their owners/restorers. The Dorset was discontinued in early 1949, and is consequently rarer now than the Devon.

In 1951 came the A40 Sports, a four-seater convertible with the Devon/Dorset chassis and mechanicals and a very attractive low-line body designed by Jensen. Overall height of the car was six inches less than the saloons. Twin SUs and 46bhp (six more than the saloons) meant better performance and a top speed of around 80mph. But performance brought the handling problems into more serious perspective.

The Sports never proved over-popular, only 3,800 were produced before it was discontinued in 1953. Accordingly it is now rare and commands a much higher price than the saloons.

In 1952 the A40 Somerset replaced the Devon. Basically the new car had the same chassis, engine and running gear although the brakes were now fully hydraulic and subsequently improved. Its style was based

on the six-cylinder Hereford of 1951, being more rounded and bulbous with more room inside. You could now replace the bolt-on front wings independently!

A few more horses were squeezed out of the engine, but the handling remained the same. Column shift was standard, although it had independently adjustable front seats rather than the "bench" which was becoming popular. The usefulness of the full instrumentation on the central fascia panel was marred because most of the instruments were usually hidden by wheel or hands.

The Somerset was considered quite luxurious with deep upholstery and nice detail touches like child-proof locks on the rear doors and "Arm rests which also act as door handles are fitted to the rear doors, adding greatly to the passenger's comfort", said a contemporary hand-book.

Another nice touch was the "Stevenson" telescopic jack. It fitted through a hole in the floor and engaged with the central cross member of the chassis, lifting both wheels on that side off the ground in the modern

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fashion. "In such cases, therefore, there is no need to insert a jack under either axle, whilst the effort required to raise the car with this type of jacking system, is relatively small." The disadvantage of having to remove the seat squab to perform this operation were probably offset by being able to keep out of the rain by jacking the car up from inside.

It is possible that such soft options would not be considered by motorists of the time who were obviously a different breed. The hand-book recommends "when starting from cold, particularly during frosty weather, it is helpful to turn the starting handle a few times before switching on."

This, of course, is after having lifted the bonnet, checked oil and water, and primed the fuel lift pump manually — just in case. Motoring had not yet reached the stage where the well-being of the driver was considered more important than that of the car.

There was also a Somerset convertible — not to be confused with the Sports — while the van, pickup and utility continued with the old "Devon" body shape, the commer-

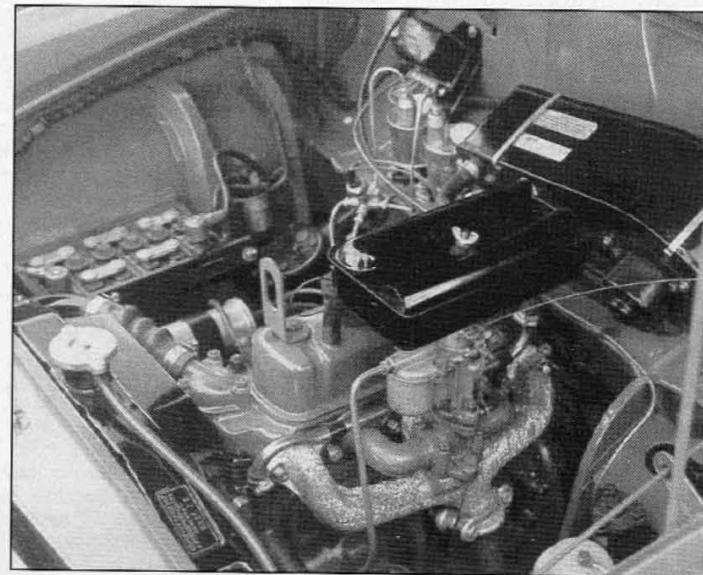
cials lasting until they were replaced with the A55 commercials in 1957.

In 1955 the A40 went unitary with the Cambridge, which was also designated A50 when fitted with the 1.5 litre BMC "B" series engine. A totally new four-door body design went with the unitary construction, much squarer than the Somerset with slab sides, smaller frontal area and horizontal radiator grille. Smaller 15-inch wheels helped improve steering and handling, though suspension remained softish at the front end.

Column change and the feeling of luxury together with the now traditional A40 sliding sun roof option were all refined. But so was the 1200cc engine, and the A50 with its extra capacity proved more popular. The Saloon and Countryman versions of the A40 were discontinued in 1956, the A50 in this guise grew into the A55 and continued until 1959. Its van and pickup derivatives lived into the early seventies.

The Somerset lays claim to be the last Austin with a chassis, the A40/A50 Cambridge the last large saloon with an

Simple A-series engine 998cc (right) powered A40 MkI (left) and MkII.



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identifiable Austin body style, for this was the time of the BMC Farina revolution — and it struck the A40 designation with all the force expected of revolutions.

The A40 Farina MkI, introduced as a two-door saloon in 1958, was revolutionary in every sense. It not only changed completely the A40 designation itself by becoming a replacement for the much smaller A35, but the Farina body introduced a whole new concept to small cars — although the Mini took the small car concept another giant leap forward the following year.

A rather basic interior (sliding windows, simple trim, basic instrumentation) initially did not detract from the roominess provided by Farina's very ample four-seater body, with the Countryman of 1959 offering lifting tail gate and prodigious carrying capacity. Called a utility or estate at the time, it has to be regarded as the original hatchback.

The lively 948cc engine was carried over from the A35, as were the 13-inch wheels, with the Farina's wider track giving better handling.

Lockheed hydromechanical brakes on the MkI gave way to a fully hydraulic system on the MkII in October 1961. The MkI also gained a few inches in length and other upgradings such as window winding mechanism. Visually the easiest way to differentiate between the MkI and the MkII is the latter's full width radiator grille.

In 1962 the 1048cc "A" series engine was installed and the definitive A40 Farina was complete, to last right up to 1968 with little but cosmetic changes.

The A40 Farina was a tough, reliable, practical, and for unitary construction a surprisingly long-lasting little car. It was reliable, economical and a very adequate family hack.

It did not however have the charisma of the Mini or the handling quality of the front-wheel-drive 1100/1300 range, and it died in 1968 ending 20 years of the A40s.

Nothing too inspiring perhaps but beavering away quietly in the background, reliable and economically serving family and commerce.

## History

**Devon: 1947–52.** Four-door saloon. In-line OHV 4, 1200cc (65.48mm×89mm). Compression ratio 7.2, 40bhp at 4,300rpm. Brakes Girling/Lockheed hydromechanical, nine inch drums. Clutch Borg & Beck mechanical, 7¼ inch. Four-speed gearbox, synchro on upper three ratios, column change on later models. Wheels 16 inch. 12-volt positive earth electrical system.

**Dorset: 1947–48.** Two-door saloon. Specification as Devon.

**Countryman: 1948–52.** Utility. Specification as Devon, except wheels 17 inch.

**Van and Pickup: 1948–52.** 10-cwt commercials. Specification as Countryman.

**Sports: 1950–53.** Four-seater convertible. Specification as for Devon, except twin SU carburetors, 46bhp at 5,000rpm. Brakes Girling hydraulic 10 inch drums.

**Somerset: 1952–54.** Four-door saloon and drop-head coupe. In-line OHV 4, 1200cc (65.48mm×89mm). Compression ratio 7.2, 42bhp at 4,500rpm. Brakes Girling hydraulic, 9 inch drums. Borg & Beck mechanical, 7¼ inch. Four-speed gearbox, synchro on upper three ratios, column change. Wheels 16 inch. 12-volt positive earth electrical system.

**Countryman/Van & Pickup: 1952–56.** Utility/10-cwt commercial Devon body style. Specification as Somerset, except wheels 17 inch.

**Cambridge: 1954–56.** Four-door saloon. In-line OHV 4, 1200cc (65.48mm×89mm). Compression ratio 7.2, 42bhp at 4,500rpm. Brakes Girling hydraulic, 9 inch drums. Clutch Borg & Beck hydraulic, 7¼ inch. Four-speed gearbox, synchro on upper three ratios, column change. Wheels 15 inch. 12-volt positive earth electrical system.

**Countryman: 1954–56.** Utility. Specification as Cambridge.

**Farina MkI, Saloon/Countryman: 1958–61.** Two-door saloon/hatchback estate. In-line OHV 4, 948cc (62.9mm×76.2mm). Compression ratio 8.3 or 7.2, 34bhp at 4,750rpm. Brakes Lockheed hydromechanical, drums 8 inch front, 7 inch rear. Clutch Borg & Beck hydraulic, 6¼ inch. Four-speed gearbox, floor change. Wheels 13 inch. 12-volt positive earth electrical system.

**Farina MkII & III, Saloon/Countryman: 1961–68.** Two-door saloon/hatchback estate. Specification as MkI, except full hydraulic brake operation, 1048cc BMC "A" series engine from 1962.