

Popular history would have it that the first Morris Minors to enter police service were 1965 models liveried as panda cars - but a photograph in the archives of Cheshire Constabulary dating from 1952 soon disproves that theory. In the early 1950s, a 4-door Series MM saloon finished in the familiar black livery was the ideal divisional car, despite a top speed of 62 mph, and it seems to have marked over two decades of the Morris Minor in the service of Britain's police forces. Meanwhile, in Portsmouth visitors to the car park of Cosham Police Station would have noticed two regular occupants - a black Ford Popular (the CID car) and the Superintendent's Morris Minor.

When Lord Nuffield, the chairman of Morris Motors, was first shown a model of what was to be the first major new car of the post-war era back in 1947 he disliked its appearance so much that he referred to it as 'a poached egg'. The origins of the Minor can be traced back to 1942, with the first prototype appearing in the experimental workshops at Cowley early in 1943 (by which time it could be determined that the war would eventually be won) as an eventual replacement for the Morris Eight Series E. The designer of the new Morris was a young man by the name of Alec Issigonis.

The plans of Issigonis for the new car were utterly startling by 1940s standards - gone were separate running boards and wings, replaced by a highly modern unitary bodyshell which dispensed with a chassis frame and which displayed advanced Transatlantic styling features (inspired by the 1941 Packard) which had never been seen on virtually any British car. Not content with that Issigonis had also specified uniquely small wheels for the new car and that the engine would be mounted right over the front wheels instead of well behind them - the weight of the engine in this position dramatically improves the stability and controllability of a car. The front were given an advanced torsion-bar independent suspension which, when combined with the rigidity of the unitary construction body, gave an incredible standard of ride comfort.

Given all of these developments, Lord Nuffield's comments do seem to be slightly unfair but fortunately, motorists across the globe (domestic sales were very limited until 1952 as the emphasis was on 'Export or Die') soon realised that the Morris Minor was designed by the great Alec Issigonis as a family car which combined the handling & cornering of a sports car and rack-and-pinion steering with practical and stylish coachwork and robust engineering - all at a price within reach of a working man. Today, far too many of us are so over-familiar with the Minor - which is quite untreatable after nearly six decades - that we tend to overlook the radical impact of what was soon to be known as one of the world's finest small cars and the first British car to sell more than a million units.

The Minor was first launched as either a 2 door saloon or a very stylish convertible on the 20th September 1948 and was initially powered by a 918cc side valved engine. To keep the price affordable, the official extras list even included a passenger windscreen wiper! Raised headlamps and a 4-door option were new additions for 1950 (as was the very welcome addition of a heater to the options list) and, after the merger of Austin and Morris in 1952 (to form the British Motor Corporation), the Minor Series II of that year was fitted with the 803cc Austin A series engine. The Traveller debuted in 1953 together with the van and the pick-up and the split Vee-Windshield was replaced by a single piece screen in late 1954. However, the major change in the Minors's history was the new 948cc engine for the Morris Minor 1000 for 1956. Thereafter the range continued with progressive detail changes; the semaphore trafficators were finally dispensed with as late as

1961 (they were prone to falling off), the same 1098cc engine used by the Morris 1100 in 1963 and key starting (as opposed to a separate starter button) in 1965.

As a general purpose divisional car, the Minor had its following - Stockport Constabulary was using 2-door Minor saloons finished in a rather striking Chevron livery between 1962 and 1964 - but it was the arrival of the Unit Beat Panda Car in 1965 that established the Minor's iconic image as one of Britain's definitive Panda cars. The thinking being the panda car was that the "bobby on the beat" could more effectively patrol larger suburban or rural areas as opposed to foot patrols - and would be readily accessible via the panda car's two-way radio. In the period between 1965 and 1969, various cars from the Mini, the Austin A40 'Farina', the Morris 1100 and the Triumph Herald to the Anglia 105E, the Hillman Imp and the Vauxhall Viva (not to mention the Ford Zephyr 4 Mk. III) was used for Unit Beat work but it was the Minor that became the Panda Car of choice for forces across the UK. The reasons for this were many and various, for the Minor was used for a variety of police purposes:

a) Simplicity. Right until the end of production in 1972, the Minor was still fitted with a starting handle bracket and its robust engineering meant that it was far more reliable than the likes of the Hillman Imp, less rust-prone than the Ford 105E Anglia or the Vauxhall Viva HA and, unlike its stablemate, the BMC 1100, it did not suffer from leaking Hydrolastic suspension. Police mechanics soon learned that the Minor's engine compartment was so large that even with the power unit in place there was enough space for a compact engineer to stand there.

The fact that the Minor was so over-engineered was a key element in its very high survival rate, not least because the thickness or gauge of the metal on the body is a lot thicker than on modern cars, where it is thin and designed to crumple in an accident. The Minor's durability was fortunate, given the amount of abuse suffered by certain police versions, as the following story illustrates:

"Back in 1970 or so we (Northants Police) had a police Morris 1000 (1100) 'Panda' car and this had a bad judder when starting off. (I) duly reported it to the traffic sergeant who told me that I shouldn't be in first gear long enough to notice it. A while later the front suspension, or something in that area, collapsed. I don't know whether it caused an accident. People think that police cars must be OK as they are well maintained!! They weren't then!"

b) The sheer variety of body styles available on the Minor. The Van was an utterly adaptable dog van - the City of Cardiff and the City of Glasgow Police, Cornwall Police, the BTP, the Metropolitan Police and Buckinghamshire, Guernsey and Hampshire Constabularies were just some of the many forces to use the Minor for this purpose and Wiltshire Police favoured an especially striking 'mustard' livery. But then there were also the timber framed Travellers favoured by Edinburgh City Police, West Midlands and Leicestershire or the standard 2 and 4-door saloons as used by the Metropolitan Police, Northhants Constabulary and City of Dundee Police amongst many others. Exeter City used a fleet of 20 Minor panda cars and such loyalty to the model was far from unusual.

c) Versatility. Of course the Minor was never famed for its speed - even with the 1098cc engine the top speed was a less-than-blistering 75 mph - or a decadently luxurious interior but its excellent ground clearance meant that it was as adaptable for rural beats as it was for urban policing.

As far as liveries and equipment were concerned, each force used different colour details and different accessories; some favoured a simple roof box whereas some Minors were fitted with a blue flashing light. A few Minors were equipped with klaxon horns but some were fitted with surplus Winkworth bells, which were deemed to be quite sufficient for the Minor's gentle accelerative powers!

Production of the Minor gradually ceased from 1969 onwards; the Convertible in 1969, the 2 and 4 door saloons in 1970, the Traveller in 1971 and the Van and Pick Up in 1972 after over 1,300,000 Minors in 24 years. The British Leyland Motor Corporation claimed that the Morris Marina was the replacement for the Minor and the Oxford Farina but fans of both cars merely shook their heads and looked in envy to New Zealand where the Minor was produced until as late as 1974. However, this was far from the end of the Minor in police service, for as late as 1995 the Falklands Islands police were proudly using their 4-door 1000 saloon. A panda car that can survive an armed invasion - as good a summary of the Minor's enduring appeal as you are likely to find anywhere.