

History of the BMC

An Innovative and Heroic Character

by Joe Thomer, General Manager BMW San Francisco

This may sound familiar: when Middle Easterner Gamal Abd el-Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal 1956, there was widespread fear the flow of oil from the region would be interrupted. So the chief of the British Motor Corporation told engineer Alec Issigonis the company desperately needed a tiny, fuel-efficient vehicle. The result was the Mini, a car that changed the face of the industry.



Issigonis gave his team a terrifyingly simple brief: create package with room for four adults in a vehicle that would be only slightly longer than ten feet and no wider than five. The solution was to mount the engine transversely, kick the wheels right out to the corners of the body, and put the gearbox in the only space not in use—under the engine.

In 1959, the Mini was launched in a way that was just as innovative as the car itself. Tony Ball, a young man in the company's sales department, remembers getting the call. "I was summoned into the design studio by the directors and people like Alec Issigonis. They pulled back the curtain, and there was the Mini. I was amazed. I'd never seen a car with front-wheel drive and a transverse engine before—or a car designed to be small but so big inside. The word *magical* came to mind. 'It's wizardry on wheels,' I said. They said, 'How would you like to launch it?'"



Ball had a plan, for which he requested a \$1,000 budget. Incredibly, given the size of modern launch budgets, the company balked initially but eventually relented. Ball's plan revolved around a magician's enormous top hat, from which the Mini emerged. Then the real theater began, "Inside the car, rather like a magician pulling endless rabbits out of a hat, I had put three of the biggest men I could find, two ladies, one of whom was my wife, a baby who was my three-month-old son, two rather large poodles, and all the luggage we could possibly cram into door wells and under the seats, including golf clubs—almost everything you could imagine. As I waved a wand these men and women and babies and golf clubs came out of this little car and

made such an impact that people just stood and cheered."

Ball continued, "After having put the car on the market for less than \$1,000, we wanted to make sure it would not be regarded as a novelty or a gimmick. We wanted to show it was a car with genuine, ingenious, practical design. We felt it also needed to be regarded as something people would love to be seen in, a charismatic vehicle rather than a gimmicky one. So we made sure all the leading social figures those days were seen to own one or drive one—Peter Sellers, for example, and people like him, who moved in great social circles. All the leading fashion models, we made sure, were seen in the car."



Ball went on to have a successful career in the industry. The Mini went on to become a symbol of the 1960s as well as world-beating racing car with victory at, among others, the Monte Carlo Rally. Pretty good for a car that Issigonis once described as having been designed "for the district nurse."

In 1994, BMW group took control and ownership of the Rover Group including the Mini brand. In April 2001, BMW started production of the all-new Mini Cooper and in 2002 the first Mini Coopers went on sale in the United States.

During the 1960's, BMW enthusiast Dieter Schmitt pioneered the first BMW dealership in Northern California. His success in the business led him to relocate and open bigger locations until settling its latest location, a dairy plant in the SOMA district of San Francisco. In 1993, the dealership moved into what was known as Dell-Marin Dairy on 1675 Howard Street. By then, Dieter had passed the torch to his son Henry who had transformed the facility into a state-of-the-art auto dealership. The Schmitt family made sure the structural beauty of the historical landmark was kept in tact. In 2002, BMW of San Francisco embraced a new member into the family, the Mini. With its compact size and its outsized character, it's the perfect car for San Francisco and has had huge success since its 2002 launch. Mini of San Francisco has sold over 2,800 Mini Cooper models since 2002 quickly becoming the number one Mini dealer in sales volume in northern California. Mini of San Francisco is proud to sponsor the 2009 Tiburon Classic Car Show during this the 50th year anniversary of the Mini!