



Things...British

by Tom O'Neill, Director — Tiburon Classic Car Show

With the Mini Cooper as the featured marquee this year, it is of interest to note that over the years British cars have been the object of much critical comment, boisterous anecdotes, and witty sarcasm. They have also been the brunt of a lot of humor aimed at certain uniquenesses that can be quite quaint and equally not so quaint. To illustrate the latter, one has only to recall the often used title, "The Prince of Darkness," bestowed upon the Lucas electrical systems and lights used on most British cars. Much maligned for their irregularity of performance, Lucas electronics have been the grist for British car humor for more than the five decades of the Mini.

Owning a British sports car is a life-changing experience. The first challenge is simply acquiring the nomenclature. Almost nothing is as it seems, or at least as it is understood, relating to cars produced in most other countries. The thing covering the engine, which is not an engine but a motor, is not a hood, but a bonnet. The thing that covers you and keeps the rain off your head is not the top but, rather, the errant hood. The space in the back where you put your suitcase—which most people call a trunk—isn't a trunk at all, but a boot where you put your valise rather than your suitcase. On inclement days, you not only put up your hood to keep out the weather, but also attach plastic side curtains instead of just rolling up windows. Mind you, the hood attaches to the windscreen rather than the windshield which, as everyone knows, is attached to the scuttle. Exhaust runs through a silencer box rather than a muffler. And, when it comes time to replenish the fuel, which isn't gasoline but petrol, you often times find the filler pipe hidden inside the boot. Also in the boot, where normal people carry their valise, it is necessary to carry enough tools to qualify you as a mobile mechanic. And, these aren't just your average run-of-the-mill tools. That would be too simple. They are Whitworth tools!



Above: First Place Winner British Car Show, Stowe, VT, 2008

Clever, the British! Who else could come up with a dimensional system that was neither metric nor standard? "I say," said some English noblemen, "Whitworth would be a ducky name for a measuring system! Confound the Krauts you know." The theory was that the German's tools wouldn't fit the Spitfires that plopped down on their soil after being shot out of the sky during WWII. It's possible that the Crescent Wrench was invented as a solution to needing the right tool to turn a Whitworth system nut or bolt. Say what you want about the Italians, but nobody beats the Brits for making the simple complex and the complex unthinkable. So we have cars with nuts and bolts that require special tools—Whitworth tools. And, as any owner of an old British car knows, there is ample opportunity to become well acquainted with one's Whitworth tools.

So, the Tiburon Classic Car Show solutes all British cars. Frustrating to some, British cars bring joy and delight to many whose fond memories of breaking parts, greasy hands, skinned knuckles, non-working lights, cold wet rides or just plain wondering whether the thing will start, are the stuff of folklore and legend.



Right: British Classic Mini's British Car Show 2008