

OWNER Simon Drew

Age: 36.

How many Minis have you owned?

Too many.

Best bargain on your Cooper: Fresh air heater for free.

Most expensive item on your Cooper: Wheels.

Would you do it all again? Yes I would.

Favourite car film: *Good Bye Pork Pie!*



The Underdog

Simon Drew relishes a challenge – how about restoring one of the earliest Mini Coopers from an abandoned rebuild tossed into several boxes?

Words and photos: Rob Hawkins



With the exception of the carpets, all of this 997 Cooper's interior is original



A Cooper wouldn't look classic without a bus-sized two-spoke steering wheel



100mph Smiths speedo was only fitted to the Cooper



Holes in the window sliders help to lock the catches

"Parts for the 997 engine are very scarce these days"

At a time when the all-drum-brake Mini was powered by a 34bhp 848cc A-series via a magic wand-controlled gearbox, the introduction of a modified model with over 60 per cent more power output, front discs and revolutionary remote shift gear change must have felt like stepping out of a tractor and getting into a Ferrari.

During the early Sixties the then F1 and race car builder, John Cooper, approached BMC with the proposal of building a Mini Cooper that offered greater performance. The 997 Cooper was the litmus test, with a

Fast facts: 997 Cooper

Launched in 1961, the 997 Cooper used a modified version of the standard 848cc A-series, but was equipped with twin SU carbs, a close-ratio gearbox with remote gear change (instead of magic wand) and 7-inch disc brakes up front with two-pot callipers. Austin and Morris both produced models of the 997 Cooper with differences in badges and front grilles (11 slats for the Austin and seven for the Morris). Roof colours were always different to the body colour.

With a price tag of £679, the Mk1 997 Cooper lasted until 1964 when its engine size was increased to 998cc. Production totalled 64,000 encompassing dry and wet suspension set-ups.

production run of 1,000 saloons starting in 1961 to meet the homologation rules for Group 2 rallying.

While the later and more powerful Cooper S range is, in most people's opinion the Cooper to own, the 997 was nonetheless the first of the breed of performance Minis. It was a hit.

Sixties Mini purist Simon Drew couldn't resist an abandoned and part dismantled project in 2006 when his friend and fellow Works-replica owner, Grahame Allan, contacted him with the sale.

"The car still had a lot of its original parts and shell but was in cardboard boxes and in need of a total restoration," recalls Simon. "It was previously owned by an elderly man who had started to do some work on it and stripped it down. He eventually realised he would never get it done and sold it to Grahame."

Simon spent most of 2006 restoring his 1962 997 Cooper, which involved a lot of work as the floors were rotten along with the rear subframe mount panel. "Other panels included a full front end, boot floor repairs, inner and outer sills – the usual suspects," says Simon.

The Cooper's original 997 engine and gearbox were missing when Simon bought

the project. "Parts for the 997 engine are very scarce these days," he says. "Good cranks, blocks and proper pistons are near impossible to find, but persistence paid off and the correct block, gearbox, head, crank and pistons were eventually sourced."

He found that the cylinder head he'd bought had been modified to take larger 1275 inlet valves. "The seats had been cut to take these valves," he says. "It was a bit extreme but nicely done. I thought it might have been an experimental head because I have never seen valves that big in one of these heads before. The valves only just clear the block."

While he had to source an engine and gearbox for his Cooper, he was luckier with the interior. "Most of the interior trim had survived," he recalls. "It needed a lot of TLC and cleaning. I'm very proud to say all the trim is original except for the carpets." He has kept the interior looking standard except for an additional 8000rpm Smiths tachometer, which needed repairing with a soldering iron. "Hours of re-soldering inside it eventually did the trick," he says.

Other headaches included fitting a fresh air heater. Most heaters of this era lacked

WRITER'S OPINION ROB HAWKINS

I've always favoured the underdog and I think the 997 Cooper falls into this category in the light of the later and more powerful Cooper S models. Such a car has so much character, especially with Surf Blue paintwork, a white roof and a matching Powder Blue interior.

Simon Drew has yet again resurrected a true classic and he thankfully drives it with sufficient enthusiasm to be able to release the torquey 997's potential. I also had the opportunity to drive the car and was stunned by how smooth and refined it was in comparison to a standard Mk1. What a car. I want one.



the front," he explains. "I thought it would settle, but it never did. So instead of washers I went for the Hi-Los."

He has his reasons for choosing Cooper wheels over standard skinny 3.5in steels. "I didn't fancy the old granny-look stainless steel wheel trims and skinny wheels. This was the only

mistake they made for me in the styling of the car – a Cooper deserves a sportier wheel."

A full respray in Surf Blue with a white roof finished off the rebuild and eventually saw the Cooper returned to the road and ready for 2007. In action, the Cooper's 997 motor is relatively torquey as standard with some 53-54lb/ft at 3500-3600rpm (depending on low- or high-compression engines). Simon's 997 seems to pull like a train, which he thinks is down to the cylinder head modifications.

"I am amazed at the torque and power such a small engine can produce," he says with his foot confidently pushed hard on the throttle pedal. "I really like this Cooper as it's the first and the purest of the Coopers. It's most definitely the underdog of the pack, yet for me, shines through with great driveability and oozes the simple charm of the early Minis."

We think he might be right. ■



997cc A-series left the then standard 848cc for dust when it was launched. 998 was much better but all were eclipsed by Cooper S

1962 Austin Cooper

Engine: 997cc engine . +.040in pistons . tufttrided, reground crankshaft . 12A948 camshaft . original 12A185 cylinder head fully flowed . re-machined 1275 inlet valves, enlarged exhaust valves . twin HS2 1½in SU carburettors . alloy inlet manifold . standard paper element pancake air filters . electric fuel pump . single in-line fuel filter . two-core radiator . 16-blade mechanical cooling fan . Lucas HA12 coil . silicone HT leads . NGK BP6ES spark plugs

Gearbox: Four-speed 22G68A manual . helical gears . centre oil pick-up pipe . standard clutch . lightened, balanced cast iron flywheel . 3.6:1 final drive ratio

Brakes: Non-servo assisted dual circuit system . Dot 4 fluid . front 7.5in Cooper S solid discs . two pot callipers . rear Cooper drums, shoes

Suspension: Hi-Los . Koni dampers all round . solid-mounted front subframe . rubber-mounted rear subframe . standard front top, bottom arms, tie-rods . standard rear radius arms

Wheels/Tyres: Cooper Car Company 4.5x10 alloys . Yokohama A032S 165/70x10 tyres

Exterior: Mk1 Cooper 'shell, two-pack Surf Blue with white roof . stainless steel sill strips . chrome front and rear bumpers with overrides . Mk1 front and rear lights . Austin Cooper badges . Austin 11-slat front grille . sliding door glass

Interior: Powder Blue/gold brocade trim . Powder Blue carpets . Smiths 100mph speedo, oil pressure, coolant temperature gauges . Smiths positive earth 8000rpm tachometer . Kangol adjustable seat belts, magnetic buckles . two-spoke steering wheel

Those Cooper Car Co alloys looking much more convincing than the original standard Mini 3.5x10 steels fitted to this Cooper

