Rethinking an Icon of Sixties Britain: The Mini and Its Place in the Post-War Motor Revolution

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Abstract

The Mini was launched in 1959 during Britain's motor revolution. This iconic car has long been analogized with the popular iconography of the Sixties, but I argue here that this association only scratches the surface of its more complex meanings. Rather, the Mini embodied the tension arising from a motor revolution that was transformative yet limited. By looking at how the Mini was marketed, perceived, and used (and by whom), I suggest that it was a conduit through which Englishness and national decline were mediated against the backdrop of mass motorization. It also reflected the motor-car's growing importance as a public and private space. I draw on a number of historical sources to make this argument, including automotive advertising, a source that is currently underutilized by historians. In doing so, I seek to overcome the normative tendency in academic history to overlook the car's cultural significance.

Introduction

Between 1950 and 1970, the number of cars on British roads increased from little more than 2 million to over 11 million.[1] This motor revolution, as it has been termed, transformed patterns of mobility, leisure, and consumption. As the writer Lorna Sage recalled,

> *The car was one of us, it played a part in making us one at all, the 1950s nuclear-family model: two parents and two-point-something children travelling along life's highway, socially*

mobile, their own private enterprise.[2]

Few cars spoke for the democratization of personal motoring like the small, affordable Morris Mini-Minor and Austin Seven, better known as the Mini. Launched by the British Motor Corporation (BMC) in 1959, the Mini came to represent a halcyon age of motoring, subsumed in popular period clichés: 'Kings Road colours, Twiggy fuel bills, "The Italian Job" traffic skills, parking on a sixpence'.[3] These associations persist today, due in part to the retro appeal of BMW's reincarnated MINI.[4]

Cars like the Mini possess great social and cultural significance. As sociologist Mimi Sheller has observed, 'car consumption is … about aesthetic, emotional and sensory responses to driving, as well as patterns of kinship, sociability, habitation and work'.[5] Yet historians, many of whom hold negative views of the motor-car, or perceive its present-day banality to render it undeserving of historical interest, have been reluctant to acknowledge this. Instead, existing automotive literature has focused on the motor industry, perpetuating the car's place in the domain of enthusiasts, or 'petrolheads'. The result is a comprehensive scholarship on how cars have been designed, built, and sold, but not how they have been consumed, experienced, and understood.[6] Even those works that promise a 'social history' of the motor-car, such as L. J. K. Setright's *Drive On!* and David Thoms et al.'s edited volume *The Motor Car and Popular Culture*, have so far failed to redress this balance.[7] The Mini has received little treatment beyond popular histories and enthusiasts guides.[8] This is a significant oversight, for it was best-selling 'people's cars' like the Mini that gave the car 'its significance for ordinary, everyday social life'.[9] As Bernhard Rieger has shown vis-à-vis the Volkswagen Beetle, there is much to be gained from approaching an iconic popular car with historical rigour.[10] Drawing inspiration from both Rieger's work, and the 'automobility' turn in automotive scholarship—which 'considers the automobile in the widest possible terms, as only one element in a hybrid assemblage of commodities, bodies of knowledge, national projects, laws, techniques, institutions, environments, nodes of capital, sensibilities, representations, practices, emotions and modes of perception'—this article seeks to elucidate the Mini's social and cultural significance during Britain's post-war motor revolution.[11] In a broader sense, it builds on Joe Moran's persuasive research into the prosaic, banal, and every day. The car, like queuing and commuting (in which of course it is implicated), is now part of the unconscious landscape of daily life, but that does not make it devoid of historical significance.[12]

All this requires reading the Mini against the grain. The Mini is regarded as an icon of 'swinging' Sixties culture: classless, fashionable, and British.[13] The motor revolution formed part of the same cultural fabric. As R. J. Morris has commented, the parking meter (introduced in London in 1958) is as much a symbol of the Sixties as the contraceptive pill.[14] However, Mark Donnelly has stressed the limits of such period motifs, which he calls 'the media image of the sixties'.[15] Can we ascertain more from the Mini and the motor revolution than popular clichés? I argue here in the affirmative. I begin

by examining how the Mini was marketed, arguing that promotional material betrayed an increasingly ambiguous relationship with mass motorization and Englishness. With this crisis of national identity in mind, I then examine contemporary discourses around the Mini, showing that far from a 'coddled and primped' icon, the Mini was a contested symbol of decline.[16] Lastly, I explore the Mini's intersections with class, gender, and youth. Here the limits of mass motorization are made clear, as is the Mini's significance as a public and private space, which in turn points to the motor-car's wider cultural importance.

Russell W. Belk and Richard W. Pollay have remarked that 'whether advertising imagery reflects the present or the future, it supports an image of society, and that is enough to warrant our attention'.[17] Even so, car advertising is a vastly underexplored source for historians of twentieth-century Britain, works by Michael Frostick and Heon Stevenson notwithstanding.[18] This article represents an almost unique foray into the extensive catalogue of Mini promotional material, Jenny Rice and Carol Saunders' contribution to Thoms et al.'s volume being the only other instance.[19] I also draw on a diverse range of other sources, including newspapers and parliamentary debates, reflecting the Mini's ubiquitous, but often unconscious, place in everyday life. I locate my enquiry between 1959, when the Mini was launched, and the mid-1970s, by which time the post-war 'golden-age' was over and UK sales of the Mini were in permanent decline. This broadly follows the line of the 'long Sixties' taken by other historians.[20]

Mass Motorization and Its Limits

First, however, it is worth outlining the post-war motor revolution more fully. As Simon Gunn has shown, politicians of all sides shared a near-consensus by the late-1950s that Britain's future was a motorized one.[21] Personal motoring, previously reserved for the middle-classes, became a near universal aspiration.[22] More families owned multiple vehicles, most drove more frequently, and older forms of transport, like trams and railways, declined rapidly.[23] Urban planners engendered these changes by building motorways, ring-roads, and multi-story car parks, fundamentally remapping Britain in the car's favour.[24] The time, money, and faith demanded by these projects signalled wider confidence in the vision of a motorized future. Birmingham's inner ring road, for example, took 14 years to complete.[25] Paved in every new mile of tarmac was the conviction that the age of mass motorization was not to pass quickly.

As the cheapest new car on the market in 1959, the Mini offered many people the chance to join the motor revolution by purchasing their first car.[26] It quickly became commonplace on the second-hand market, where it could be bought for as little as £100.[27] More than a handful of the 'slightly battered cars [that] began to appear on council estates and in the streets of older working-class districts' were

thus Minis.[28] In fact, BMC manufactured almost 200,000 Minis in 1964 alone, and 2 million cars had been built by 1969, many for the domestic market.[29] If children were buying miniature versions of the vehicles they were most frequently seeing, then it is indicative that after the Batmobile and James Bond's Aston Martin, the Mini was Corgi Toys' joint best-selling model car until 1969.[30] Seemingly, only 007 could outsell the Austin Seven.

The growth of personal motoring was linked to the greater spending power of the affluent society.[31] Broadcaster Ray Gosling observed as much in Leicester's new 'Auto-magic' multi-story car park: 'there's money to spend, steady, regular red money in thick wage packets … this car park isn't full yet, but it soon will be. And so will the new one they're building over there'.[32] Likewise, in 1962 a Luton resident told John Goldthorpe et al.'s *Affluent Worker* study that the town's planned new roads signified that it was a 'boom town'.[33] It was no coincidence that one of the workplaces studied by Goldthorpe et al. was the Vauxhall car plant, one of the largest employers in the town and noted for paying high wages. Even in traditional industrial regions, people found that affluence came on four wheels. Leeds-born Shelia Rowbotham remembered her parents' Morris car as a symbol of their 'new-found stability'.[34] Up and down Britain, the car reflected that people had 'never had it so good'.[35] This was especially true of the Mini, an icon of both the motor revolution and the popular youth culture that spawned from Britain's new affluence.

The apogee of this petrol-powered optimism was Geoffrey Jellicoe's planned 'Motopia', a city where traffic would be 'piped like drainage and water' along the rooftop of every provincial building.[36] Yet 'Motopia' never came to fruition, symptomatic of a motor revolution which ultimately had its limits. Surveys revealed that driving remained a predominantly male habit, and car ownership in rural areas lagged far behind urban ones.[37] Most significantly, in 1970 the cost of running a car was still prohibitively high, at an average of around 10 pounds a week.[38] Consequently, nearly half of all households still did not have a car in 1971.[39]

For urban planners too reality did not always match aspirations. In Woolwich, Leicester's 'Auto-magic' had a futuristic companion in the 'Auto-stacker', which parked cars automatically with a system of lifts and conveyors.[40] But it malfunctioned during its inaugural run and was demolished without ever opening to the public.[41] Meanwhile, traffic and road safety became prominent political issues.[42] Colin Buchanan's best-selling governmental reports, *Mixed Blessing* (1958) and *Traffic in Towns* (1963), presaged an emotive rhetoric.[43] Buchanan recommended building 'a new china shop specially designed for bulls', while MPs warned that Britain was fast-becoming the car's 'slave'.[44] Even the affluent society's greatest champion, Harold Macmillan, pondered privately what could be done to assuage the car's meteoric rise.[45] All this was not confined to the political classes. As Krista Cowman has shown, working-class women rallied against the car by campaigning for 'play-streets' for

their children.[46] Thus, as Gunn suggests, the installation of the car system 'did not occur at a single historical period or in the once-and-for-all manner'.[47] This ambiguity found parallel in the Mini's own contrary meanings.

Marketing the Mini

Development of the Mini began in 1955, in response to BMC's brief for a small affordable car. The brief imposed a number of constraints on lead designer Alec Issigonis, chief among which was that the car must utilize an existing engine. The Suez crisis of 1956 gave the project a renewed impetus.[48] With national fuel rationing in place, the car was rushed into production on the basis of its fuel economy, even though several of the prototypes' design flaws were not yet rectified.[49] Although the finished product, with its transverse engine and an unrivalled size to cabin space ratio, was mechanically revolutionary, its sparse specification (no heaters or seatbelts as standard) attested to a car that was frugal by design and nature. It was officially launched in August 1959 with a fittingly modest promotional budget.

The Mini was advertised in the press with printed posters and photographs. The fledgling medium of television advertising was used only rarely during the first few years of production. Brand loyalty was to be key, but was hard to achieve with a new car. Hence, despite the name 'Mini' gaining colloquial currency immediately, the car was sold under the established marques of Morris and Austin, borrowing the tried and tested names of Mini-Minor and Seven.[50] Each brand essentially neglected the other's existence. Even the car's launch was accompanied by two separate promotional films, for which every shot was faithfully (and expensively) recreated with both Morris and Austin vehicles.[51] This betrayed BMC's apprehension at the radical nature of the car; 'Wizardry on Wheels' could only be palatable when couched in the familiarity of the Morris and Austin names.[52] The buying public was also apprehensive, with sales being disappointing during the first year of production.[53]

While BMC obviously stood to benefit from a new generation of buyers emancipated by the motor revolution, its emphasis on brand loyalty targeted the car squarely at existing middle-class motorists, for whom the pre-war privilege of motoring was something to be preserved rather than overcome. The corporation's marketing reflected these customers' ambiguous attitudes towards the growth of personal motoring. The problem of traffic was a recurring theme. By 1963, the Mini—by now commonplace enough to bear literal and figurative responsibility for urban traffic issues—was positioned as a solution to them:

> *Incredibly compact. Marvellously agile. Willing and able to out-manoeuvre any car around. To slip into ridiculous curbside gaps*

> *like a coin in a slot. Just right for today's roads. Just right for today's traffic.*[54]

As well as cultivating the Mini's impish personality, advertisements like this provided a commentary on motorized society. The importance of compactness and agility highlighted that the autonomy of personal motoring did not translate into unrestricted mobility. This was felt keenly by existing car owners, who had enjoyed an era of motoring unburdened by the participation of the masses. With traffic-choked roads ascribed specifically to 'today', this era was demarcated as a precious bygone age, to which the motor revolution necessitated escape:

> *You can't put the clock back. So have a Mini instead. Minis are realists in the too-little-space age. They're compact yet roomy. Fantastically lively and manoeuvrable. Easy as pie to park. Cheap to buy and run. Minis belong to the new generation of BMC cars brilliantly engineered to preserve the pleasure of motoring in today's conditions … Wouldn't you feel happier – more contemporary – in a car like this?* [55]

By paradoxically defining contemporaneity by the ability to escape modern motoring, BMC set the tone of subsequent advertisements, which placed the Mini in pastoral settings to contrast it with 'road congestion', 'city parking problems', and 'costs of motoring'.[56] These environs invoked notions of pre-war motoring, which as David Jeremiah has shown, was uniquely identified with the English countryside.[57] Reactionary nostalgia like this was perhaps inevitable at a time when the car was having such a transformative effect. It had long been a predictable dictum of marketing that 'obligations, obstacles and restrictions'—in this case the drudgery of modern motoring—should be shown being overcome.[58] Writing in 1970, Frostick recognized the persistence of this 'salesmanship', dismissing it as 'an old idea getting steadily worse'.[59] As Raphael Costambeys-Kempczynski has shown in his analysis of The Kinks' 1968 album, *The Kinks are the Village Green Preservation Society*, there existed in the 1960s a 'pathological nostalgia' for an idealized bucolic past.[60] BMC's advertising factored into this, the thatched cottages, tranquil rivers, and country houses that formed the backdrop of the Mini's promotional images representing an English idyll just like The Kinks' village green (Fig. 1).[61]

The place of the car in this idyllic picture, and indeed its implications for notions of Englishness, was increasingly contested. On one hand, personal motoring still facilitated discovery of the countryside, and its essential Englishness, as it had done in the inter-war period. The car's place in idealized visions

of pastoral England was confirmed by a growing interest in veteran (i.e. pre-First World War) cars, which wistfully historicized personal motoring (Kenneth Grahame's Edwardian motorist, Mr Toad, being emblematic in this respect).[62] Moreover, the sizeable domestic car industry meant that the motor revolution was, for now, economically beneficial to the nation. On the other hand, conservation movements highlighted mass motorization's negative impact on the heritage environment, the tangible evidence of old England.[63] Polemics against the car duly suffused the pages of publications like *Country Life*.[64] As we have seen, advertisements for the Mini captured this tension, framing motoring in a series of contrasts: something both urban and rural; modern and antiquated; good and bad.

With this in mind, were BMC's calls to bucolic Englishness purely reactionary nostalgia? No doubt they also made a knowing allusion to suburban modernity. The idealized English countryside they depicted stood in contrast to the suburban sprawls engendered by automobility. In this sense, BMC entered the critical discourse aimed at suburbia in the 1960s. Take The Kinks' song 'Shangri-La', for instance, in which the ubiquitous car is held as a symbol of suburbia's stifling uniformity.[65] Here, we can deduce that if motorized suburbia is in the imagined place 'Shangri-La', it is not in England. That said, neither BMC's nor The Kinks' depictions of suburbia were wholly cynical. Peter Mandler suggests that suburban England's 'timely' and 'up-to-the-minute' lifestyle appealed more persuasively to English identity than the pastoral sensibilities it ostensibly displaced.[66] By promoting the Mini as agile and manoeuvrable, BMC conferred that 'timely' character upon it, and thus situated the Mini in the heart of twentieth-century suburbia. Indeed, BMC's advertisements depicted settings that were as much 1930s 'Tudorbethan' as authentically old.[67] If we suppose, as Stephen Daniels does, that these 'suburban pastoral' environments successfully united city and country, then they functioned here to reconcile the car's contradictory place in Sixties society.[68] Given the middle-class character of twentieth-century suburbia, they also alluded again to the classed dimensions of post-war motoring. Incidentally, The Kinks 'Shangri-La' was itself an expression of sympathy for middle-class suburbia, wrapped up in outward critique.[69]

The tone of Mini advertisements shifted in the 1970s, coincident with BMC's absorption into a new car manufacturing conglomerate, the British Leyland Motor Corporation (BLMC). By this time, a cult of celebrity ownership had established the Mini's place in contemporary culture. BLMC referenced this explicitly to conceptualize a new notion of Englishness grounded in visual icons and popular personalities. Eric Sykes, James Bolam, and Twiggy all offered a 'welcome back to a better Mini' (Fig. 2).[70] Where earlier marketing had looked wistfully to the pre-war era, here the Mini was analogized with teenage romance ('I thought you could never recapture the thrill of your first Mini'; 'my favourite car of all time will always be my first Mini') to invoke nostalgia for a past which had barely passed. In other words, the Mini was no longer removed from the Sixties, but consciously placed there. BLMC was not alone in perpetuating this; nor was the phenomenon new to the 1970s. One of the Mini's first reviews in 1959 had christened it a 'design for the Sixties', consciously

historicizing the decade before it began, and from the mid-1960s BMC's advertisements mythicized the Mini as perpetually fashionable.[71] In 1966, artist Geoffrey Dickinson designated it a symbol of swinging London by including it on his iconic *Time* magazine cover.[72] Not only did all this reflect, by the 1970s, another search for Englishness in an age of rapid industrial decline, but it determined the Mini's enduring popular image at the expense of its more ambiguous meanings.

Driving Decline

It is clear from the Mini's appeals to Englishness that mass motorization was equated with a sense that something was being lost. The car industry itself was symptomatic, plagued as it was by terminal problems. A sign of things to come was the disappointing merger of Morris Motors and the Austin Motor Company in 1952. Far from creating a centralized, world-beating conglomerate, it caused duality and increased costs.[73] Then, from the late-1950s, European car companies bounced back unexpectedly from the Second World War.[74] British brands held 95 per cent of the home market in 1965, but only 65 per cent in 1975.[75] This was exacerbated by underinvestment, bad labour relations, and a change-averse management culture across the whole of the British car industry.[76] All this fed into a narrative of economic decline. This arose in part from politicians of the New Right, who in the 1970s and 1980s seized the example of the car industry to discredit the post-war settlement. But as Hugh Pemberton points out, 'declinism' was as much a contemporary mindset as a retrospective political construct.[77] The Mini was a case in point.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, British motor industry managers were offered Volkswagen's Wolfsburg factory and Beetle car, but hastily rejected them.[78] Had they accepted those spoils, Britain could have had a small, best-selling people's car 10 years before development of the Mini began. As it was, West Germany was already selling several successful small cars by 1959, and had overtaken Britain as Europe's largest car manufacturer.[79] Put simply, the so-called advanced Mini was actually very late to the game.[80] So was the motor revolution itself. Two-thirds of American families owned a car by 1956, but even after the Mini's launch the same proportion of British families still did not.[81] By that time, the USA's first superhighways and Germany's *Autobahns* were already 20 years old, covering thousands of miles and expanding yet further.[82] Britain's first 8 miles of motorway were not opened until 1958.[83]

Amid all this, the way that BMC promoted the Mini effused an acute sensitivity towards Britain's world position. When launched, the car was sold only in red, white, and blue, so that its small but plucky personality spoke also for the nation's.[84] Newsreels of the Mini's press launch betrayed an anxious preoccupation with international, particularly German, performance, by alluding to the Second World War:

> *The models have two aims: to keep out foreign cars in the small field, and to carry the sales war in the foreign countries … they look like showing the Volkswagen and similar invaders just where they get off!*[85]

Days after that launch, strikes at Austin's Longbridge manufacturing plant provided a humiliating anti-climax, signalling what was to become a recurrent embarrassment in the next two decades.[86] Further embarrassment came when early cars were found to suffer terrible leaks, a problem which necessitated expensive investigations and engineering tweaks.[87] Ultimately, the Mini was so over-engineered and under-priced that each one incurred a net loss.[88] The outward success that was to come was therefore shallow, and the Mini represented, in Martin Adeney's words, the 'canker of decline concealed among the fruits of progress'.[89] Bearing in mind that many cars (as with most consumer goods) were bought on the shallow financial foundations of hire purchase, this analogy speaks also for the growing gap between outward affluence and actual economic performance throughout Britain.[90] The economic crises of the 1970s spurred a resurgence of jingoistic advertising: posters invoked Winston Churchill, and warned against 'foreign cars… from foreign parts'.[91] The Mini was thus marketed from a defensive position which contrasted sharply with the bullish export-focused tone of immediate post-war advertising.[92]

All this is not to recount the British motor industry's decline, nor echo New Right commentators, but to see the Mini in more complex terms. Of course, generalizations like Peter Sinclair's 'years of bitter disappointment' must be avoided.[93] To many people, the national economic picture was no doubt irrelevant. It is clear from the Mini's falling sales in the 1970s that few people took issue with switching to European (or Japanese) cars. Nonetheless, as Barry Supple points out, the 'idea' of decline, if not the actual economic record, is important.[94] At any rate, declinism was not reserved to economic performance. If the Suez crisis marked Britain's fall from international greatness 'in comic style', as Hugh Thomas suggested in 1966, then the car that was developed in response to it was representative.[95] Here national identity was again at stake. The Mini was mocked by *The Economist* as a plum pudding, and an American reviewer laughed that it resembled a roller-skate.[96] Columnist Mollie Panter-Downes thought simply that it was 'no beauty to look at'.[97] Over the years, *Punch* magazine depicted it as comically tiny, being mistaken for a dustcart, and driving off the cliffs of Dover.[98] This ironically subverted the Mini's role as representative of the nation, and cemented its reputation as the butt of an international joke.

Other contemporaries were less amused than flatly unimpressed. Macmillan was photographed looking distinctly nonplussed as he tested one at the 1959 Earls Court Motor Show, validating Andrew Marr's

assertion that the Prime Minister, like many of the families the Mini was aimed at, would never buy anything so 'small and vulgar'.[99] The Mini's notoriously poor build quality and austere specification garnered particularly negative attention. While famous victories for the Mini at the Tulip Rally (at the hands of female driver Pat Moss) and successive Monte Carlo Rallies yielded some positive attention, the Mini still undoubtedly contributed to an increasingly pessimistic perception of British cars generally.[100]

Declinism also encompassed a moral decline, which was perceived to stem from the motor revolution. In 1964, a British Pathé film showed how the 'nicest, politest of people' became 'selfish and stupid drivers', echoing MP Patrick Gordon Walker, who 4 years earlier had denounced the 'dominance, competition, [and] mastery' demanded by motorists.[101] John Betjeman too lamented that 'driving a car makes a mildest man competitive and turns him into a fiend'.[102] Richard Hoggart, meanwhile, observed that working-class community spirit was eroded by social climbers who now drove cars to football matches.[103] If the car was the 'ultimate realization of individual affirmation', then according to these discourses, individualism was corruptive.[104] Commentators also pointed to a decline of the family unit. Marking the transition 'from a cohesive to a mobile society', this trend was emblemized by car ownership.[105] A 1966 poem of Betjeman's alluded to this, with the Mini inevitably part of the picture:

A man on his own in a car

Is revenging himself on his wife;

He opens the throttle and bubbles with dottle

And puffs at his pitiful life.

She's losing her looks very fast,

She loses her temper all day;

That lorry won't let me get past,

This Mini is blocking my way.[106]

Here it is the very act of driving that facilitates the narrator's marital breakdown, allowing his departure and encouraging his aggressive remarks. There is also a classed element, for the Mini can be

seen to represent the new motorists impinging upon the privilege of motoring currently enjoyed by the middle-class narrator. Indeed, the speaker goes on to comment that he will 'only give way to a Jag'.[107] We also observe in his 'pitiful life' more than a hint of The Kinks' commentary on modern suburbia. Symbolically, the poem ends with the narrator's death—the road, personified as a sentient evil, 'accepting its kill'.[108]

Those early critics of the Mini, who perhaps feared that their consumption-based middle-class status might be undermined by the affordable Mini, critiqued mass motorization from a similar standpoint to Betjeman. Fears of economic decline were linked to a loss of global and imperial power which did not necessarily affect the working classes. That said, working-class critique of the car was not uncommon. Several people surveyed by Michael Young and Peter Wilmott in 1957 reported that car ownership made family members snobbish, as did a labourer's wife cited in Jon Lawrence's recent study of post-war community values.[109] The belief that the car was entwined with some moral and cultural loss transcended class identities.

Class, Gender, and Youth

The Mini too was believed to transcend class, or at least facilitate class mixing. It appeared to be the ultimate egalitarian car, driven by celebrities and charwomen alike. As such it reflected the abandonment of 'post-war, class-bound rigidities' in Sixties Britain.[110] Yet in reality, one size Mini hardly fitted all. The basic Mini Minor and Austin Seven models were conspicuously sparse, satisfying aspirations of affluence in the most restrained way possible. These were the cars intended for the developing market of working-class first-time car owners. By contrast, the pricier Wolseley Hornet and Riley Elf variants, with their grandiose grills and tailfins, were aimed at middle-class buyers who thought the basic car too minimalist.[111] In total, there were more than ten different Mini variants, including van and pickup models, symbolizing not just the expansion of personal motoring, but its classed complexion. The majority of those who did opt for the ordinary Mini upgraded to the 'De Luxe' trim specification, demonstrating the importance of appearing affluent and hence the 'resilience of class distinctions' identified by Hoggart and Dick Hebdige.[112] As such, the Mini range did not release customers from a rigid class structure as much as contain them within it, albeit with some potential to move up.

That is exactly what advertisements encouraged them to do. Drivers were portrayed as boaters, horse riders, archers, glider pilots, and continental holidaymakers.[113] The middle-class two-car family ideal was explicitly referenced.[114] Even the workhorse Mini van was depicted patronizing luxury shops like Burberry; and the utilitarian Moke, although marketed as an agricultural vehicle, was shown at the hands of an affluent farm manager.[115] While these kinds of images were not unique to BMC's advertising and did not necessarily depict the target market, the potency of the middle-class ideal

spoke for the way that car ownership was conceived. The middle-class habit of driving had not, through the expansion of personal motoring, become a working-class one; rather, working-class people had entered a sphere that was still imaged as middle-class.

The Mini's reputation as a melting pot of different classes was cultivated by a cult of celebrity ownership. Lord Snowdon, husband of Princess Margaret and friend of designer Issigonis, set the trend and single-handedly boosted the Mini's sales figures.[116] His position in both royal and popular celebrity circles reflected the changing definition of celebrity in Sixties culture. Class alone no longer determined wealth and fame; nor did it necessarily determine what car one drove. The sight of wealthy singers, actors, and comedians—many from working-class backgrounds—at the wheel of a Mini suggested that BMC's small car transcended class boundaries.[117] Yet, above all else, Snowdon's impact on the Mini's success underscored the enduring importance of nepotistic connections and elite influence. Furthermore, celebrities' Minis were rarely the same as those driven by the general public. Instead they were embellished with expensive and ostentatious upgrades. Peter Sellers, for instance, converted his to a hatchback and painted it with an intricate wickerwork pattern.[118] If the Mini was for 'rich and poor' as Setright suggests, it was in a manner that distinguished, not united, the two.[119]

Minis like Sellers's were ridiculed in the popular press. Here, embourgeoisement—if that is what these cars represented—was conflated with crass self-indulgence. Cartoonist Ken Mahood sketched a ridiculous modified Mini to lampoon Sellers's car (Fig. 3). John Lennon, a terrible and only occasional driver, attracted mockery for his yellow Rolls-Royce, a companion to his coach built Mini.[120] The *Daily Mail* passed the same judgement on a second modified Mini bought by Sellers ('the price is £560 more than the basic Mini Cooper'), and revelled in teasing delight when Monkee Mike Nesmith's gold and pink Mini broke down within hours of collection.[121] These send-ups represented not just a rejection of flamboyant celebrity culture but an enduring class consciousness. It was the firm belief of many middle-class people that working-class celebrities like the Beatles had betrayed their 'natural' social standing.[122] That Prince Philip's purchase of a basic Mini in October 1959 drew amusement from the press shows that this applied to those going below, as well as above, their perceived station in life.[123] Brian Laban has suggested that the unashamed affluence of celebrity Minis appealed to an aspirational mindset; that it was precisely cars like The Beatles' and Sellers's that made the Mini classless and in turn captured the egalitarian spirit of the Sixties.[124] But clearly it was more complicated than that.

In many ways, the same was true of gender roles. To consider women first: there can be no doubt that the legalization of abortion, introduction of the pill, and expansion of the female workforce all attested to greater personal freedom.[125] The car appeared emblematic: for young urban women in particular it was a literal and figurative vehicle through which to express that freedom. The Mini was implicated because it was affordable, fashionable, and perceived as feminine in character. Nonetheless, women

accounted for only 30 per cent of driving test passers in the early 1960s.[126] Moreover, for many of those women who could drive, the car simply accommodated traditional domestic duties. Few working or even middle-class women could identify with the likes of Twiggy and Pat Moss, for whom the Mini was a demonstration of wealth, personality, and liberty.

BMC's promotional material elucidated the place of both women and men in modern motorized society. Men were often depicted in the driving seat while their wife and children sat passively beside them.[127] This mirrored the changing definition of masculinity. Owing to increased affluence and thus fewer working hours, fathers increasingly took part in family leisure activities such as motoring trips.[128] By taking charge of the vehicle, they upheld their authority within this increasingly coherent family unit. This signifier was important in the context of mass motorization, for the democratization of personal motoring inevitably challenged what had until then been an almost entirely male domain.

Women were also depicted at the wheel, but often as they shopped for household goods—a theme underscored by numerous 'win a Mini' promotions launched with Heinz, *Woman's Own* magazine, and other domestic brands.[129] Maternal parlance was frequently employed: the Mini was referred to as BMC's 'baby', and the Morris and Austin 'twin sisters'.[130] Where removed from domestic scenarios, women were depicted as young and unmarried, enjoying leisurely activities like walking, swimming, and picnicking, and often in sororal pairs as if to negate the implication of sordid independence.[131] In these scenes independent driving was presented as a temporary prelude to married life:

> *While you're single and working, the Mini will make the most of every penny you earn … When you marry, your Mini will do the shopping with you and park right outside the shop, visit your friends and whisk you up to town … The Mini will help you with your growing family … will look after you all on the twistiest and most slippery of roads. In fact it's hard to see how a girl, or woman, or mother, can get on in the world today without her Mini.*[132]

While it is significant that women were acknowledged as motorists, the chauvinistic condescension here suggests that traditional conceptions of gender behaviour persisted. Women were clearly conceived as passive agents even when driving, their cars contrastingly afforded a paternalistic protective role. Colin Pooley has suggested that the car had a liberating impact on women, but the Mini indicates that this was not always true.[133] As Andrew August points out, the 'unprecedented

opportunities' for women in Sixties Britain rarely translated into a full break with 'domesticity and motherhood'.[134]

If women did not always benefit from the emancipatory potential of the car, young males undoubtedly did. The Mini's cheap availability on the second-hand market made it a popular first car for young drivers. Before long, a wide range of modifications were marketed at youths so they could customize their cars.[135] In 1968, this gave the Earl of Cork and Orrery cause to lament that

> *The 18-year-old who passes his test … is immediately able to hoist his skull and crossbones upon an Aston Martin or, indeed, on a Mini-Cooper S [the sports version of the Mini], a mechanical product which I am afraid I consider to be a piece of misplaced ingenuity on the part of designers and engineers.*[136]

Here, the image of the young first driver had become one more in a long line of motifs invoked to castigate the independence of working-class youths. Like D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the subject of an obscenity trial upon its mass publication in Britain in 1960, the car was apparently acceptable in the hands of a privileged and trustworthy few, but dangerous when opened up to the (young) masses.[137] Even so, the Earl's misgivings about the Mini were not entirely unfounded. The Mini's excellent road holding gave an enticing margin of error that was all too often used up, especially by adventurous young drivers.[138] Racing driver Stirling Moss crashed one Mini, and was prosecuted for dangerous driving in another, all within 1 month of the car's launch in 1959.[139] As Peter Merriman has suggested, the characteristics of drivers were commonly conflated with those of their cars, and vice versa.[140] The perceived reckless youthfulness of Mini drivers and the revolutionary newness of the car itself thus formed a self-destructive cycle where the car's popular image was concerned.

If the safety debate epitomized the car's intrusion into public space, the Mini possessed yet greater significance as a private space. The introduction of the pill in 1962 facilitated a new era of sexual promiscuity, and euphemistic jokes about 'Minnie Cooper' highlighted that the Mini was complicit in it.[141] With many teenagers living with their parents for longer, affordable cars like the Mini provided the autonomy, freedom, and privacy necessary for sexual activity. Of course, sex in cars was not new, as veterans of 1930s roadhouses would attest.[142] But with so many Minis and other cars now at the hands of teenage drivers (as opposed to the middle-class suburbanites of the inter-war period), this private act became ever more public. The revelation that Christine Keeler and John Profumo's illicit affairs had taken place in their Minis was emblematic.[143] As such, the Mini embodied a new form of privacy as identified by Deborah Cohen: one that emphasized independence and the ability to do as

one pleased, rather than the preservation of personal affairs from other people.[144]

Inevitably, all this engendered more commentary about the car's corruptive influence. According to Ruth Penfold-Mounce, personalities like Keeler and Profumo achieved notoriety because traditional societal values had relinquished to the 'aesthetic and consumable'.[145] The relevance of these descriptors to the Mini requires no explanation. Moreover, Keeler and Profumo were not the only Mini owners to court scandal. When Marianne Faithful appeared at her boyfriend Mick Jagger's drugs trial in 1967, her Mini took centre stage in press reports.[146] And, when Great Train Robber Bruce Reynolds was tracked down in 1968, his brand new Mini Cooper was held as the ultimate symbol of his ill-gotten wealth.[147] These young celebrities validated fears about youth culture which, as Jon Garland et al. rightly contend, were linked intrinsically to economic problems, class consciousness, and gender identities—things that, as we have seen, were mediated through the Mini. The Mini therefore existed at a sensitive intersection of contemporary issues, exposing, like youth culture, 'critical fault-lines in the very conception of a post-war consensus'.[148]

Concluding Remarks

In the film *The Italian Job* (1969), three Minis (red, white, and blue) take part in a daring gold bullion raid in Italy. As Richard Weight argues, these cars are analogous with the nation: small yet gutsy; but also the doyen of an industry that was slowly dying. The film's conclusion—the Minis unceremoniously destroyed; a coach load of thieves and gold teetering perilously over a cliff—thus represents Sixties Britain (or given the cockney cast, England), 'in limbo, suspended between an imperial identity and a European one, both of which they have rejected'.[149] As I have shown, this was not the only instance in which the Mini was implicated in a search for contemporary Englishness. The car's intrusion into modern life was ambivalent at best, and even those marketing one of Britain's most popular cars could not ignore the dislocating effect that mass motorization had in terms of national identity. If pre-war, middle-class rural motoring was something singularly English, then post-war, egalitarian urban motoring was not. BMC's advertising for the Mini sought to reconcile this conflict, especially as the Mini itself became a symptom of economic and moral decline.

We can observe parallels to the Mini across Europe. As Rieger shows, the Volkswagen Beetle propelled German mass motorization and invited people to consider what it meant to be German.[150] It also enjoyed global success, and while it is beyond the scope of this article to situate the Mini in an international context, it is worth pointing out that the Mini was licenced for production by various BMC subsidiaries around the world. Perhaps it, like the Beetle, 'evolved into an icon with multiple nationalities'?[151] This might add even greater significance to the Mini's appeals to Englishness. Kristin Ross has also highlighted the significance of the car in post-war France. France had no vehicles quite as iconic as the Mini and Beetle (although the Citroen 2CV was close), but automobility was no less

significant for those trying to navigate modern society. Ross demonstrates persuasively that the car's capacity for mobility, speed, and displacement was a metaphor for the intertwined processes of modernization and decolonization.[152] Collectively, these examples underscore the rich meanings that we can glean from studying the car.

Returning to Britain's own post-war modernization, we see from our figurative position at the wheel of the Mini a motor revolution contained within boundaries of class and gender. There is no doubt that access to personal motoring broadened in the 1950s and 1960s. More people than ever drove; but motorists were still likely to be middle-class and male, and their lives were unlikely to be fundamentally transformed by this new age of automobility. Moreover, those who had already enjoyed the privilege of personal motoring tacitly challenged its extension to a new generation of drivers, through a variety of discourses in which the Mini was routinely invoked. Put simply, mass motorization did not develop evenly, and it did not go uncontested. Symptomatically, the Mini was not classless. If any element of its mythology holds true, it is its association with youth. But its significance here was not as the public emblem it came to be, but as a private and intimate space. This reminds us that cars were (and are) important sites of human experiences and emotions. Therein lies the true historical significance of a people's car.

Figure 1 Promotional material for the Morris Mini Minor and Austin Seven, 1959. British Motor Industry. *Source*: Heritage Trust Photograph Archive.

Figure 2 'As a matter of fact, this isn't my favourite car of all time', British Leyland, 1977. *Source*: History of Advertising Trust.

Figure 3 'The Gadget Fan', Punch, 21 October 1964.*Source*: Punch Online Archive.

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