

Logbook

MiniWorld staff and writers reporting on their month in, under and around Minis...

Simon Benton



A long-term love

I'm a newbie to *MiniWorld* but I've been tinkering with Minis for decades. I'm looking forward to telling you all about my Mini history and my Mk1 Mini project.

OBie

Model: 1967 Mk1 Austin Mini

History: Bought by my dad as a present for my mum in 1977 and used as a daily drive until 1991

Mileage before restoration: 93,063 miles



They say 'a dog is for life, not just for Christmas' and, in my case, you can say the same thing about a Mini. I'm an industrial designer with a passion for Minis which started when I was just 11. I've been kicking about around Minis now for over 40 years, on and off, and I'm lucky enough to still own the first Mini that got me hooked.

Rewind all the way back to Christmas morning in 1977 and we were all gathered in the front room downstairs. We knew dad had some sort of a surprise waiting for mum as he got her to open

the curtains. As they parted a grey and dreary day was revealed and then there was a squeal of excitement. There in the drive was this little blue Mini. She was wrapped in a soggy crepe paper bow with 'Happy Christmas' written in red lipstick on the windscreen. Needless to say mum loved it.

The little car sitting there in the rain looked like a bedraggled pet waiting to be played with. My sister and I were so excited that we couldn't wait to have breakfast, as we just wanted to go out for a ride in the Mini, but first we were told we had to give her a name and get



Test running the rebuilt 1275cc engine.



The GT with the 1380 engine on a rolling road.



The 1380 engine was dyno tuned by Peter Baldwin.

"...hidden under boxes and blankets and sheets of wood, for nearly 30 years until I rediscovered her."

the lipstick off the windscreen. Various ideas for a name were floated, most of them bad, very bad. Mum started reading the number plate aloud and as she said "Oh - Be" we blurted out in unison "Wan - Kenobi" as Star Wars had just come out that summer. As for removing the lipstick, what a nightmare that was! I think it would have been quicker to replace the windscreen.

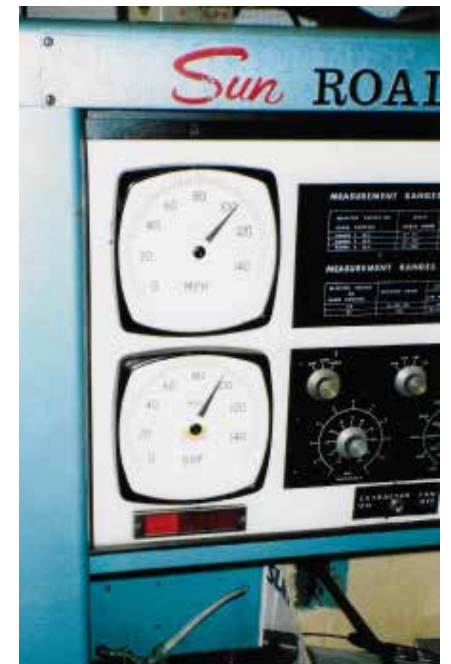
The name settled at OBie and that's really where the Mini thing all started for me, from being taxied around in her as a boy, getting my hands dirty helping to service and repair her, to learning to drive in her. OBie, and Minis generally, plus the odd bit of sci-fi, were to become a significant part of my life.

Fast forward a few years and, once I passed my driving test, the 34bhp from the little 850 just wasn't doing it for me. I craved more power and speed. My uncle had owned Coopers and Ss and I dreamt of getting one but, even back in the 80s, they were just too expensive. I'd had a Saturday job for a while and managed to scrape together enough cash to buy a wrecked 1275 GT. It was more of basket case than I'd planned for but, over the

summer holidays, and with help from dad, I managed to repair and re-spray the rotten shell and rebuild and tune the engine. I had got the Mini bug.

I saved up some more and found another wrecked GT for sale in the local paper. This needed more work than the first one but I'd learnt loads on the first rebuild and this one took about half the time to complete. I restored and de-seamed the shell this time, then stripped, rebuilt and mildly tuned the engine. Whilst working on the second car the first one broke a crankshaft so I then had both off the road and was using OBie whilst I rebuilt the wrecked engine, this time fitting an EN30B nitrided crankshaft. I bored it to 1380cc and then ground and gas-flowed the head to Stage 5, following David Vizard's hallowed instructions. I couldn't afford a Weber so fitted an HS6 and then got it dyno tuned by Peter Baldwin in Cambridge and got over 100bhp but that's another story...

All this time OBie was being used as a daily drive. When she was about 15 years old I remember her developing some engine and gearbox problems. Rather than stripping her original engine



and box down for repair, dad part-exchanged them for a reconditioned unit, probably to save time and money. She carried on right up until the early 1990s when the winter salty roads and 93,000 miles eventually took their toll on her transmission and bodywork.

She developed gearbox problems again, jumping out of second gear all the time, and failed her MOT. The car had become part of the family and there was no way »

we could sell or scrap her but we all knew she would need quite a bit of work as the front end and sills were now starting to rot. I got her into the garage and started stripping her down, getting the front panel and wings off and removing the engine, etc. We had also looked at the rear and replaced the rotten rear subframe but that's where it all came grinding to a halt.


University, life, girlfriends, families and children were to take over and OBie became more and more buried and forgotten at the back of the garage. Fast forward a long way, this time to 2018, and the time had come at last to do something with OBie. She had been lying at the back of the family garage,

hidden under boxes and blankets and sheets of wood, for nearly 30 years until I rediscovered her. With two of my three daughters now able to drive, I told them the story of OBie and they thought it would be great if we could restore her so that they could drive her too.

So, the challenge was set to get OBie restored. Now a lack of enough garage workspace and a shortage of my time, due to work commitments, meant I would need help with the project. I went over to see Ted Sparrow in Ipswich to get the car stripped and get the shell restoration underway. This would give us time to work out how we were going to restore OBie and what we were going

to do with the engine and gearbox.

The excitement of the project was growing and by now I was just itching to get my hands dirty. I knew I was going to have to build a new garage at home, as my workshops weren't suitable for the space required for full bodywork repairs and eventual storage of another car, but this would have to wait.

What I could do was start work on restoring all the smaller parts and sub-assemblies ready for the build-up. It would be far easier for me to grab a bit of time here and there in the workshop on these smaller projects and still be around the house to do the washing up and take my turn at cooking the family dinner. 



OBie with my 1275 GTs in 1988.



OBie, in the background, in 1990.



OBie in 2018, minus her boot lid and doors, on a trailer ready to go to Ted Sparrow's workshop.