Austin Motor Company

Few names in British motoring history are better known than that of Austin. For many years the company claimed that ‘You buy a car but you invest in an Austin’.

A young Herbert Austin (1866–1941) travelled to Australia in 1884 seeking his fortune. In mid 1886 he began working for Frederick Wolseley’s Sheep Shearing Machine Company in Sydney. Austin returned to England with Wolseley in 1889 to establish a new factory in Birmingham, where he became Works Manager.

Austin built himself a car in 1895/6 followed a few months later by a second for Wolseley, a production model followed in 1899. A new company, backed by Vickers, bought the car making interests of the Wolseley Company in 1901 with Austin taking a leading role. Following a disagreement over engine design in 1905 Austin left, setting up his own Austin Motor Company in a disused printing works at Longbridge in December of that year.

The first Austin was a 4 cylinder 5182cc 25/30hp model which became available in the spring of 1906. This was replaced by the 4396cc 18/24 in 1907. 5838cc 40hp and 6 cylinder 8757cc 60hp models were also produced. The 6 cylinder engine also formed the basis for a 9657cc 100hp engine used in cars for the 1908 Grand Prix. A 7hp single cylinder car was marketed in 1910/11. The company expanded rapidly, output growing from 200 cars in 1910 to 1100 in 1912. By 1914 there was a three model line-up of Ten, Twenty and Thirty.

The Austin Company underwent a massive expansion during World War I with the workforce growing from 2,600 to more than 22,000. Production included
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shells, guns, vehicles and aircraft. Post war, the newly knighted Sir Herbert Austin decided to adopt American principles of mass production and concentrate on one model, the 3620cc Twenty. The car did not sell as well as hoped and by 1922 the company was in financial difficulty. A bid to increase sales led to the introduction in 1922 of the medium sized Twelve and, perhaps most significantly, the 696cc (later 747cc) Seven, the so called Baby Austin.

Figure 1: The 1924 Austin Seven 4 seat tourer offered affordable family motoring.

The Seven turned Austin’s fortunes around and with numerous developments and improvements would remain part of the company’s range until 1939, by which time some 375,000 had been built. The Twelve also remained in production for many years whilst the Twenty was aimed at the luxury market.

The 1930s saw the Austin range expand with numerous medium and larger sized models powered by both 4 and 6 cylinder engines available alongside the ever popular Seven. Austin himself was created Baron Austin of Longbridge in 1936 and although well into his seventies still took an interest in every facet of the company’s operations and worked long hours. Lord Austin died in 1941 and was succeeded as Chairman by Leonard Lord.
During World War II, like the rest of British industry, Austin turned its factories over to the war effort. Wartime production included over 82,000 trucks, thousands of Hurricane, Stirling, Battle and Lancaster aircraft as well as over 100,000 cars and utility vehicles.

Immediate post-war production resumed with pre-war models such as the Eight, Ten and Twelve joined by the Sixteen, fitted with a new 2199cc overhead valve engine (Austin’s first OHV design). The emphasis of British industry was overseas sales and Austin rapidly became the leading exporter of British cars. The late 1940s saw the gradual replacement of the older pre-war models and the introduction of new designs such as the A40 (Devon, Dorset, Somerset), A70 (Hampshire, Hereford) and A90 (Atlantic) all with OHV engines.

Figure 2: 1953 Austin A40 Somerset.

A new small car reached the market in 1952. The A30 with 803cc A Series engine was pitched to compete directly with the Morris Minor. However, in the same year Austin and Morris completed a merger creating the British Motor
Corporation (BMC). Austin would become the dominant partner with the A Series engine replacing the Minor’s side valve unit, both small cars continuing to be marketed alongside each other. The engine in various forms would go on to power the Corporation’s (and its successor’s) smaller cars for much of the next forty years.

1959 saw the introduction of a new Alec Issigonis designed small car. Available as the Austin Seven or Morris Mini Minor, it soon became better known simply as the Mini. Throughout the 1950s and 60s many of the Corporation’s car designs were ‘badge engineered’ producing Austin, Morris, Wolseley, Riley or MG versions of basically the same car.

The Mini’s front transverse engine, front wheel drive configuration lead to a whole family of cars in the 1960s and 70s with this layout, allied to Issigonis’s hydrolastic suspension system. These included the 1100/1300 family dating from 1963 (replaced by the Allegro in 1973), the 1800/2200/Maxi line and the wedge shaped 18/22 and Princess. However these were far from happy times.

BMC amalgamated with Jaguar Cars in 1966 to form British Motor Holdings. 1969 again saw a merger between this group and the Leyland Motor Corporation to form the British Leyland Motor Corporation. The union brought together household names like Austin, Morris, MG, Rover and Triumph with numerous examples of similar models competing for the same market. The Austin name continued as part of British Leyland’s Austin Morris division. Relations with the work force were at an all time low leading to frequent strikes and a poor reputation for quality control. Increasing financial difficulties led to nationalisation in 1975.

The 1980s saw the corporation re-organised and gradually returned to the private sector. The car division became Austin Rover. New models such as the Metro, Maestro and Montego would however be the last to carry the Austin name, with only the MG and Rover brands being kept alive after 1986.
Further Reading:


Last updated: 9 December 2009.