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Living the dream

Time, money and availability are the three elements that force Mini owners to compromise their precious rebuilds, but not Will Fleming, who went all out for his dream car.

Words by Paul Richards
Photography by Martin Vincent



Together with skinned knuckles, copious amounts of time and not to mention a fair few quid, it seems that compromise is also a by-product of many a Mini rebuild. All too often that killer 1425cc motor evolves into the reality of a warmed-over 1275cc, while the plans for a full leather retrim seem to give way to second-hand Cooper cloth. It's hardly the end of the world, but it's fair to say that it always leaves the majority of owners somewhat wanting. For Will Fleming though, compromise has proved to be a very good thing.

"I've had Minis since I was 16 and I was determined that this one would have everything that I'd wanted on my previous cars," explains Will, "but at the same time I wanted a quick and good handling Mini that was also luxurious. And he's succeeded too, his superb saloon striking the perfect →



The jack's been painted in the same colour as the car, with a custom Cooper badge stuck on.

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Will got hold of a Momo racing steering wheel for better control of the Mini whilst hurtling round the bends.



BACK TO BASICS

It's hard to believe, but this beauty started out as a sorry-looking 1986 City (p13) that turned into Will's perfect Mini. Finished in a fetching shade of beige and rust, the City was originally bought for Will's fiancée, Robin, for her to learn to drive in.

"It cost us £150 and was at the upper end of the snotters available, being mechanically good but well rotten," laughs Will.

The C-plate saloon helped Robin ditch her L-plates but was laid to rest six months later when the MoT expired, the couple deeming it too far gone to even bother seeing what it would fail on. But while it was as perforated as a teabag, its potential as a donor wasn't lost on Will. In no time it was pillaged for its saveable parts and went out in a blaze of glory, not only being invaluable to Will's project but also to those of his friends'.

"Only the fuel tank, front subframe, top suspension arms, swivel hubs and radius arms have been used in the new car, but part of the gearbox tunnel and bulkhead were welded into friends' cars," says Will. "We cut the rest into five pieces with an air hacksaw and chucked it in the skip."



Full leather Cooper seats were fitted for a more luxurious ride, along with a set of Wilton carpets.

medium between out-and-out road racer and luxury cruiser. But while the build has seen a compromise between styles, Will's made a point of settling for nothing less than the finest components and buying the vast majority of parts brand-new.

"It all started when I bought a 1380 motor off a mate for £250," he remembers. "I took it down to Russell at Downton Motor Engineering and he

absolute nightmare," says Will. "I knew I wanted a blue and was edging towards the Subaru shade, but then Robin suggested MG Trophy Blue. We spent two days seam sealing it before it was painted and then covered it in Waxoyl. It just went everywhere, even in our hair, and there's so much wax in there that it drips!"

Billy basic

Big bodykits aren't Will's thing so the bodyshell was left pretty much standard, the Wood & Pickett arches being the only obvious modification. But while they're easy on the eye, the modest arches are also necessary to cover the 6x10 inch MB Racing rims. "I had 7x13 inch wheels on the Cooper, but this time I wanted 10 inch rims for a bit of a retro look," says Will. "I must have looked at all sorts of styles, but it was the MB Racing ones that really stood out. I was set on split rims from the start and I like these because there's a lot of influence from the rims of the Mini Miglia racers."

Underneath, and the finish is equally flawless, Will and Robin hitting on the idea of painting the majority of components in a patriotic red, white and blue colour scheme. Such was the extent of the colour-coding that nothing less than red battery cable would suffice, while the wow factor is further enhanced with kit like the tasty Mini Sport 7.9 inch vented discs and trick adjustable suspension. And these bits aren't just for show, the brakes and suspension have to earn their keep by taming the overbored 1399cc motor. Kicking out a genuine 100 bhp on Slark's rollers, the potent A-Series caused much debate

"The brakes and suspension work hard to tame the overbored 1399cc motor"

made a top job of rebuilding it, but when he was done he joked that it was too good to put into my rusty old Cooper. He said he'd have to build me a new car to go with it and looking at the Cooper, he was absolutely right. So the next day I went and had a chat with the bank manager."

With the tired Cooper finding a new home with Will's brother, John, and Mr Bank Manager being quite receptive, Will started looking for the ideal base. "I got talking to a friend and he mentioned that Julian at Mega Modz had some really nice Sportpack shells, which were brand-new and still in grey primer. At around £2500 it wasn't cheap, but after having so many rusty Minis the new shell was definitely worth it and I know that there's not a speck of rot anywhere."

The doors, bootlid and bonnet were sourced from Heritage and Will was then faced with the difficult decision of what paint to lay onto the virginal metal. "Deciding on the colour was an



for Will, including the use of the whopping twin 1.75 inch SUs.

“It took ages to research the final spec, but I think it’s about as far as I can go without losing driveability, although it’s still a bit awkward in traffic with the 286 cam,” he says. “It’s pretty quick, but something like a Honda VTEC would make it faster still, I’m a bit of a purist though and the A-Series makes all the right noises. Switching to a Weber might release a bit more top end power, but I’ve always liked the look of twin SUs and besides, fitting a Weber would have meant chopping the bulkhead and there was no way I wanted to cut the shell.

“They’re probably a bit big, but the HS6s fuel just fine and at £60 they were a bit of a bargain too, although they’ve been fully rebuilt since I found them at Mini In The Park.”

With all the running gear in place another trip to Mega saw Will return with full Cooper leather and an ultra-rare Cooper 500 dash, and the Mini was shaping up. Unfortunately though, not as fast as Will would have liked and the angst of mid-project blues was rearing its head.

“It was such a frustrating time, especially as it looked nearly complete,

and I just started to lose interest,” says Will. “We could only spend a few hours at a time at Russell and Karen’s fitting it up and a couple of jobs were just a nightmare, plus it was quite hard sourcing some of the little, but essential items, from Rover.

“The wiring was the absolute worst job, though. The loom’s a one-off with bits of Metro and Sportpack Mini thrown in and it took an absolute age to work, especially as I wanted features

like the central dash switches for the electric windows and the intermittent wash wipe. My mate

Barry started it and then me and Robin had a go, but in the end it was Russell who finished it. There was just a big bird’s nest of wiring behind the dash and in the end he took eight feet out”

Russell completed the job in style, converting the Mini to a blade-type fusebox along the way, and the project was back on track. It wasn’t long before the finishing touches like the chrome and stereo were added, the latter providing one of those ‘doh’ moments that seem obligatory to any build.

“I roped my brother into building the bass box out of MDF and it took him a whole weekend to finish. It looked great, but because we built it up to fit the boot of his 1991 Cooper, →

“The ICE’s not as loud as in my first Mini, that used to bounce coins off the roof”



The dials and stereo head unit tie-in well with the silver dash and are easy to see and access.



A Cooper 500 dashboard and gearknob give the interior a professional and polished look.

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The overbored 1399cc engine has been fitted with a Stage 3 kit and three-core radiator to cool the engine.



WHEELY TRICK

Will hunted high and low for the perfect wheels before turning up the trick MB Racing rims for his Mini, but what actually makes them so special? First off, there's the pedigree. They're designed and produced by Mike Barnby Engineering, the guys behind the original Spectrum rim, and the distinctive centres have survived the rigours of season after season of Mini Miglia racing.

And on the subject of the centres, these are machined from a solid billet of 6082 heat-treated aluminium and electro-chemically anodised before being attached to the highly polished inner and outer rims via silicone sealer and flush fitting DIN 12.9 socket cap screws.

Of course, the three-piece split rim design is ultra-trick too, but it's not only for looks. The meticulous construction and materials involved mean that balancing weights are usually only required inside the wheel (Will's only have weights on the outside to counterbalance the valves) and that the rims are both lighter and stronger than cast alloy items. This all means improved steering response and better handling, making the Mini even more nimble. Which, of course, is what it's all about.



The front four-pot callipers have also received the spraycan colour-coding treatment...



...while the rear Superfin drums are supported by coloured AVO adjustable dampers.

we forgot that the new shell would have the additional alarm switch bracket. When we tried it in the boot of my car we couldn't actually shut the boot," laughs Will. "We ended up shaving a bit off the sides but it was well worth the grief as I can't have a car without a decent stereo. It's not as loud as the set-up in my first Mini though, that used to bounce coins off the roof!"

Steady as a rock

After four years in the making the Mini made its debut at last year's Stoneleigh show, instantly catching our attention and everyone else's too. But has it impressed Will as much as us? "It's come out pretty much as I wanted, but if anything I reckon it's probably biased more towards a racer than a luxury cruiser," reflects Will. "The leather and electric windows are nice, but it all goes out of the window when the SUs are barking and you're being bounced around everywhere because of the solid-mounted subframes.

"Having said that though, I did use it everyday for a bit and the handling is great. The first time I took it out I thought I was going too quick into a corner but it just carried on sticking with no squeal or anything. Russell did a great job of setting it up."

And there's more than a fair chance that Russell will be seeing Will in the future too. Like any petrol-head, Will's already sizing up the next project and, naturally, it's going to be Mini-shaped. We say 'shaped' because with what Will's got planned that's about where the similarity with a normal Mini ends!

"My first car was an old Mini Advantage and it's just been sat there rusting on the drive," says Will. "I want to put a Hayabusa motor in it so it'll be more like a kit car when I'm done, but it's going to be a proper sleeper — steel wheels, original grey bumpers, the lot."

Sounds like our kind of Mini and with Will looking to create a full-on Cossie-killer, we reckon this is one build where he certainly won't be looking for a compromise.

TECH SPEC



BODY: Late Cooper Sportpack shell, Wood & Pickett arches, Cooper door mirrors and badging, clear lenses front and rear, Aston flip filler cap, chrome bootlid hinges, wipers, grille and bumpers, Angel Eye headlights, painted in MG Trophy Blue with Old English White roof.

ENGINE: 1399cc, Powermax pistons, Stage 3 cylinder head by Classic & Modern Engine Services, 286 Kent cam, twin H56 SU carburettors, ITG Keith Calver airfilter, MG Metro rocker cover, three-core radiator, Manifold inlet manifold and full Manifold two inch LCB exhaust system, Facet solid state fuel pump, fuel pressure regulator, Aldon Yellow distributor, Lucas Sport coil, Lumenition HT leads, MG Racing spark plugs.

TRANSMISSION: Standard, rebuilt Goldseal four-speed gearbox, AP 'Orange' clutch, 3.1 differential.

SUSPENSION: Front: Hi-Los, adjustable AVO dampers, rose-jointed bottom arms, adjustable tie-rods, painted components throughout. Rear: adjustable AVO dampers, adjustable rear camber brackets, painted components throughout.

BRAKES: Front: Mini Sport 7.9 inch ventilated discs, Mini Sport aluminium four-pot callipers, Goodridge braided lines. Rear: Mini Sport Superfin rear drums, Goodridge braided lines.

WHEELS AND TYRES: MB Racing 6x10 inch split rims, Yokohama A032R tyres.

INTERIOR: Leather late-model Cooper trim, Cooper 500 dashboard and gearknob, Momo Race steering wheel, Trent Developments doorcards, alloy door furniture, central locking, electric windows, bespoke blade fusebox, Wilton carpets and leather dash rails by Russells Trim Supplies, Sportpack steering column cowl and heater, Thatcham Cat 1 full closure alarm.

ICE: Alpine CDM 7807 RB head unit, JBL 180x2 watt amplifier powering JBL GTO 3.5 inch component speakers hidden behind heater vents, JBL 601.1 amplifier powering twin JBL GTO 10 inch sub woofers in bespoke enclosure.



The Aston chrome flip filler cap matches the chrome hinges, wipers, grille and bumpers.



BEHIND THE WHEEL: WILL FLEMING

How many Minis have you owned?

Between me and Robin we've had about seven, including a Park Lane, Cooper and an auto.

Worst moment of the project?

Managing to put a tiny scratch on the door when I was fitting the chrome window strip.

How much have you spent in total on the Mini?

About £18,000, but it has been spread over four years.

Favourite Mini event?

Southern Mini Days.

How many miles per year do you cover in the Mini?

Roughly, I'd say it was under 2000.

Favourite thing about driving a Mini?

It would have to be the handling on back roads.

How much would you sell it for?

It's definitely not for sale!

What's your dream Mini?

This one. Although I wouldn't mind adding a supercharger or KAD twin-cam head.

Best mod on the Mini?

So difficult to say, but I suppose it would have to be the wheels.

Favourite job of the restoration?

Building up the subframes with all-new parts. It was great seeing it come together.

In the doorbins and glovebox?

This Mini doesn't have any doorbins, but in the glovebox there's a pair of sunglasses and, bizarrely, a chrome radiator cap.

What's on the stereo?

Got to be the Prodigy.



The 1986 Mini City was in a sorry state but still brought life to other Minis as a donor.



Will had to decide what colour to paint his brand-new shell and chose red, white and blue.

