

PROFESSIONAL CUSTOMISERS

No friends, you can't just dismiss these as a bunch of flashed up Minis—what you are looking at is a collection of coachbuilder's artistry at around two and a half grand a time, with a few incidental bits of metal by Lord Stokes at a throwaway £1100 or so beneath to whizz it around on. Over three and a half G's for a Min? Don't believe it? You'd better read on then . . .

There was a time, early in the life of the motor car, when you could go shopping for a body to suit your tastes and have it built on to your selected chassis. You may think those days are gone, but one or two firms still carry on the old tradition to some degree in this Great land that is Britain, so that you can still lay your money down and have the car of your dreams over the counter within limits. Not a complete body mounted on a separate chassis, of course, but a highly individualised mass-produced model. So many of the leads we followed up while trying to trace such firms ended at the Park Royal, London, doors of Wood and Pickett Ltd that we decided to begin our story there.

Refreshingly, in these days when the Partners in 'Biggot, Brag, Brash, Biggot and Barely-Decent, Solicitors' always seem to be called Smith or Nurk, both Mr Wood and Mr Pickett are very much in evidence at W&P. Bill Wood and his partner worked together at Hoopers, one of the old-established coachbuilders, then set up together in a small way doing subcontract trimming work until they were eventually in a position to start their own small company in Willesden some 25 years ago. Customers included Rolls-Royce, Mulliners, Park Ward (all three of whom are now amalgamated) James Young, Harold Radford, Fiat and Lancia. They eventually moved to Wembley and then, around eight years ago to their present location in Abbey Road, Park Royal NW10 (01-965 7222). In the words of their managing director, Eddie Collins, 'At that particular time we had what seemed to be a very large factory and nothing to fill it. It was a bit shattering at the time but the object of the exercise was to offer to the private motorist a really high quality service, based on the previous Wood and Pickett trim service which was established in the trade.'

In fact one of their first jobs at that time was to trim the road-going versions of the Ford GT40 for John Wyer Automotive. They also did a version of the Mini Moke with white paintwork and candy-striped canopies for a trade promotion, and were approached to build a luxury Mini for Hayley Mills. The job was accepted as 'just another project' but, as time has shown, it was probably the most important one they have ever taken on. This first car was seen by the late Laurence Harvey, who promptly ordered a replica for himself, and the Mini side of their business just took off from there under its own steam.

Personal service is very much the order of the day, and since each job is an individual piece of hand craftsmanship, a customer's every whim can be catered for, provided he can foot the bill. A good reputation quickly spread and a large retail clientele built up, with demand for restoration and luxury upholstery work on a variety of quality cars from Bentleys to Jaguars. The petrol 'crisis' certainly gave the Mini business a boost though, and when we called they accounted for ten of the fourteen cars occupying the trim shop, the others being a gull-wing Mercedes 300SEL and a Silver Dawn, both undergoing full restoration, another Rolls awaiting a new soft-top and an export XJ6 having an electric sliding roof installed. The traditional work is certainly coming back again, but the Minis are presently accounting for about half the W&P business.

Frankly, I found this rather surprising. After all, August marks the fifteenth birthday of the Issigonis design, and by contemporary standards it is getting

distinctly long in the tooth. Rivals have appeared from France, Italy and Japan offering better performance, comfort and versatility, but not one is to be seen

at Park Royal. 'Why?' we asked Eddie Collins. The answer is simply that it's a matter of customer demand. They have considered W&P's suggestions of Imps, Escorts and Alleghros, but they just don't seem to want to spend their money on anything but a genuine BLMC Mini. The Snowdons could never have dreamt what a style they were to set when they did their bit towards establishing the 'classless' image which no other car seems to have enjoyed, either before or since.

Incidentally, the reason you don't see any of those Radford three-door conversions around nowadays, is that there is simply not enough reserve of strength in the saloon shell to withstand such major butchery on the back end without the whole thing going floppy. So there. You can always have the estate body customised though.

Where does £2500 go in one of these 'economy' cars then? Exactly how much, and where, is entirely up to the customer of course, and no two cars are exactly the same, unless you've

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No, they don't signwrite every job, this is just the side of the company van.



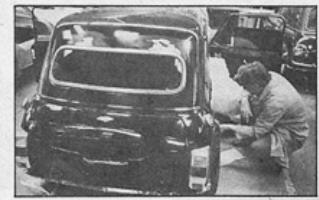
Above: a general view of the trim shop which was scene of much quiet industry and below: a leather-trimmed console takes shape beneath skilled hands.



Above: Jaguar styling was the brief for this interior. Dash design gives depth to build-in the radio in the centre.



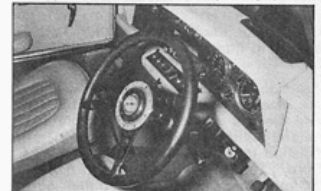
Above: wings are reshaped so well the Merc lamps look original. Below: still the same car, deseamed, bootlid resculpted for square number plate, export tail lamps and how do you like that small back window?



ordered a matched-pair. Wood and Pickett have a price list (available on request) which is broken down into individual jobs, so that you can easily build up to either a specification or a price.

A 'basic' job might comprise tinted glass throughout, including a Sundym laminated front screen, at £55, a Weathershields sunshine roof at £44 and a simple polished wood fascia panel with glove box on the passenger side at £18. Add a set of five-inch-wide alloy wheels at £61, and if you keep the standard tyres you'll just get some change out of £200 and have a neat little motor to show for it. Very good value in fact. So how does one spend the extra £2300 or so? Where would you like to start, on a comfortable interior or an eye-catching exterior?

Well, Mini seats are better now than they used to be, but they'll still stand improvement. And if you change the front pair you'll naturally want the rear bench done to match, and why not have leather and include the side panels too? Okay, that's £350 you've just spent. Shows the tatty BLMC carpet up a bit though doesn't it? Felt-backed carpet £38, wool or nylon £75. Shame about that wood dash you fitted earlier. It's nice, but only standard Mini-nice. Really needs something better now. Leather to match the seats perhaps, with



Above: wearing well. Customers often return cars for updating or refurbishing. This one is ten years old.



Above: neat adaptation. Sectioned Victor grille fits perfectly. Below: an accessory not easily come by, nudge bars are essential wear for expensively-finished town Minis. W&P are sole importers for one range.



a full set of matt black Jaguar-style instrumentation. £325. Still sounds like a standard Mini too, so better add the underseal at £19.25 and sound proofing at £24. With VAT added you've now just about paid the same to W&P as you paid for your Mini 1000 in the first place. And you've hardly started yet.

Look, you can't leave all that painted metal exposed inside, so say cheerio to another ton and hello to a retrim from roof to waist level in best wool cloth, and a fully carpeted boot. And to get full value from all this expenditure why not have the folding rear seat conversion, including a cutaway rear bulkhead to give access from the boot? Ooh, £5 change from £250.

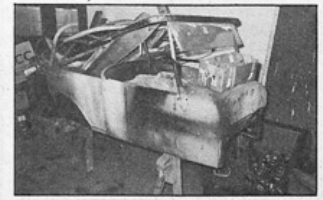
Please don't get the idea that we decay the cost of this work, because the workmanship is just simply superb. The most expensive fascia panels for example comprise a basic structure of glass fibre mouldings and fabricated sheet aluminium, which is then covered with a resilient material before the tailored leather skin and wood veneered or leather instrument board are added. As well as the full set of instruments you'll find a large ashtray with cigarette lighter, an electric clock and cold-air face level ventilation, and the result is one of the best looking and best finished fascias we have ever seen in a Mini. Sure it's expensive, but for the hours



Above: destined for a collection, the gullwing will sadly never be showing off its W&P paint and trim in public.



Above: custom cab? Seems some City gents wanted a change from their 'clapped out' Phantom V Limo. Below: could their motto be 'We tackle anything'? This is one Model T that won't be sporting a small-block V8.



of hand craftsmanship involved it is very good value. But that's not to say it won't give you a few ideas to adapt or incorporate in your own car.

It is very easy to get carried away with customising when you find somewhere as good as W&P, as one of their customers is proving right now. Starting with a basic smarten-up job on a Mini 1000 for his wife he has gained enthusiasm and returned the car several times for further work until it now sports a highly-tuned motor (W&P employ several ex-Downton Engineering mechanics) electric windows (£195), special wheels and spats, crash bars for which W&P are sole importers (£25 chrome or £35 in stainless steel), deseamed and repainted shell, a new dash, upholstery and so on. Have you guessed? It's not his wife's car any longer.

Paintwork is most popular in very dark shades at present, with black and brown very much in evidence. Air-drying cellulose paints are used, and metallic finishes, where called for, are applied 'straight' without the lacquering which is almost 'customary' to us. Why? The dreaded yellowing still rears its ugly head you see, and as most of their Minis are used in town (though just as likely Paris, Brussels or Teheran as London) and therefore liable to the odd crunch more than most, ease of refinishing is important. You just try matching-up to paint with a yellow film over the top! A complete respray inside and out in any colour of your choice is £225.

When you've picked yourself up, just consider that invariably a lot of body mods are carried out at the same time, such as deseaming, welding on steel spats, reshaping wings for special lamps and so on, and not one single sign of distortion or, heaven forbid, filling is to be seen, even where that all-revealing colour, black, is used for the final finish. This truly is Rolls-Royce quality work.

We've already mentioned the crash bars which W&P import for Minis, and they have one other speciality—a range of special seats by Recaro of Germany. These are, as befits Wood and Pickett, just simply superb. Where else can you find an aftermarket seat which is not only fully reclining with adjustable lumbar support, but has a height adjustment of from a quarter to one and a half inches, a full nine inches fore and aft travel, and even an adjustable-length cushion? These would be a special order mind, but even so several designs are available ex-stock in black PVC with black corduroy facings. These include a Rally Seat at £39.50 and a Super Safety recliner at £75, and all have provision for excellent head restraints at £5.25 each. You can also see these seats at Checkpoint in both Manchester and Wembley, Syters in Nottingham, AVJ Development Ltd at Pershore, Mach One in Birmingham and Ian Lines of Weston-Super-Mare.

And that's where we conclude our visit to Wood and Pickett, with special thanks to Eddie Collins for tolerating us as we dribbled and drooled over their work. If you don't hear any more of me for a while it's cos I'm busy planning to rob a bank . . .