MORRIS MINOR SCUTTLE TANK TWO-SEATERS – A MARKETING DEBACLE?

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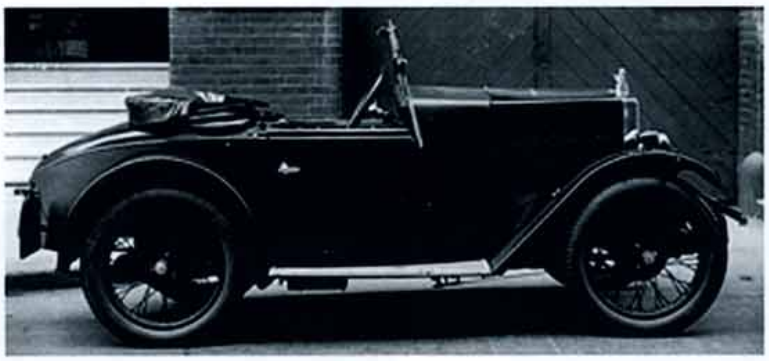
When Morris Motors launched their small (two model) range of Minors in September 1928 little was said in the motoring press and elsewhere about the lack of a two seat model. Austin meanwhile, their main rivals in this market sector, had launched such a model in 1924 and models similarly configured successfully continued in production through to the end.

Morris concentrated their initial marketing efforts behind the four seat Fabric Saloon, their 'open' Tourer model simply being given a mention in the Saloon's media ads at that time. The following year Morris launched the Coachbuilt Saloon and made great play of its pressed steel body panels and folding head sunshine roof, once again almost ignoring the Tourer model. Despite this neglect Tourer sales were sufficient to ensure it remained in production, indeed it was the only model to constantly remain so throughout the Minor's six year existence.



Just four months separate the launch of these cars – why?

During the course of 1930 a number of coachbuilding companies began to body, the by now commercially available, Minor rolling chassis (£105). Notable among these organisations were the Gordon England concern based in Wembley (N.W. London) and A.P. Compton, initially based in Merton (S.W. London) prior to a move to Hanwell (W. London) in the late spring of 1930. Both concerns produced two seater bodies for the Minor chassis, although G.E. also produced a smart and comparatively luxurious Fabric Saloon. Early in 1930 Coventry Motor Sundries (CMS) launched a two model sporting Minor two seater range. By the end of that year many more coachbuilding firms had jumped onto the Minor Special bandwagon and were marketing their products in the Light Car & Cyclecar magazine and elsewhere. With one or two notable exceptions these Minor specials were predominantly two-seaters.

Whether these cars were successful in the market place is a matter of debate and conjecture within today's pre-war Morris Minor community. However contemporary small ads evidence in the motoring magazines of the time indicate that many more were sold than latter day experts considered possible, particularly now that it is clear that the previously accepted total of just 137 OHC chassis frames reaching the home market, is subject to some doubt and warrants much more research.

Morris Motors did make a decision during 1930 to launch a Minor two-seater model. This decision may have been influenced by the sales success of the small coachbuilding concerns, which had been able to fill a market demand, free from the encumbrance and marketing clout of a competing model from the parent manufacturer. On the other hand the two-seater model launch timing could have been planned from the outset, although this seems highly unlikely. Ironically, it was to one of these coachbuilding firms that Morris Motors turned to for help with their own two-seat Minor project.

At Morris Motor's request Gordon England designed a handsome fabric covered two-seater body for the Minor chassis which was based upon their own 1929 G.E. car. The Morris Minor Semi-Sports was conceived and born into a deep world economic recession and at its launch in August 1930 was initially priced at £135, an identical price tag to that of the Minor Fabric Saloon. However within a matter of weeks the price had been reduced to £125. It appeared with this new price tag in the 1931 Morris range brochure (which was published on September 1st 1930) with a tell-tale comment appearing at the foot of the page. The comment read "For Morris Minor S.V. model see separate list". This was the first clear indication from the company that they were about to introduce a side valve engine for the Minor. That it was planned to only appear in a two-seater model was further reinforced by the lack of similar references adjacent to the remaining Minor model descriptions in the same brochure.

The Semi-Sports model sold reasonably well in its only season of production, accounting for approximately 9% of all OHC Minor sales, well ahead of the Fabric Saloon. There is little doubt that it would have fared even better had it not

been for the introduction of the headline grabbing £100 S.V. Minor two-seater in February 1931. With the benefit of hindsight, the decision to launch the Fabric bodied Semi-Sports at a time when fabric bodied cars were rapidly going out of fashion seems a strange one and would hardly have helped the Morris dealership sales staff. That the car sold at all, when further burdened by a £25 price disadvantage to the similarly equipped £100 Minor, says much for the kudos provided by the car's OHC engine and its pretty Gordon England boat tailed design, rather than for any special marketing effort on the company's behalf.

The Semi-Sports did receive some initial 'headline' promotion at the time of its launch during the months of August and September 1930 after which it became a small print after-thought on the majority of both S.V. and the few OHC advertisements that were placed during the remainder of the 1931 season. By way of a comparison the £100 two-seater was heavily promoted from late January onwards with advertisements appearing in all three main motoring journals as well as other publications, including insertions in the prestigious Punch, or London Chivari magazine.

Apart from the lack of chrome embellishments and a side valve engine of very similar performance, the two models shared many more common features and few significant differences. The £100 Minor was tested by the Motor magazine, the results appearing in the 6th January 1931 edition giving its top speed as being 52 mph. The Autocar had earlier (31st Oct. 1930) tested the Semi-Sports and recorded a top speed of 55.21 mph. This small difference in top speed could be attributed to any number of factors, not least of which could be the prevailing road and weather conditions; or with an engine of such diminutive size, the weight of the driver!

One significant difference between the two cars was in the layout and design of the dashboard. On the Semi-Sports, style definitely took precedence over practicality. The dash was fabric covered in red Karhyde to match the remainder of the interior trim and two neat cubby holes were present on either side. Sadly the instrument panel was recessed some six inches further back beneath the scuttle, ensuring the instruments were impossible to see by any driver over five feet in height! Having recently re-read the original Light Car launch article for the Gordon England Minor two-seater special, it was noted that G.E. had raked the steering column on this model and as a result had almost certainly provided a lower seating position for the driver. The Semi-Sports was not provided with this modification and if the original G.E. dash layout was carried over to the Morris model, then it is hardly surprising that Semi-Sports drivers could not see their instruments. Sanity had returned by the time the £100 Minor was launched and a traditional wooden dashboard with its instrument panel clearly visible was installed, to ensure clear visibility of the instruments by dwarves and giants alike!

The cars are unsurprisingly very similar to drive, with the same light and precise feel to the steering that is common to most Minor variants. The view forward only differs by the higher positioning of the headlights and lack of side lights on the £100 car. The side valve engine provides a muted engine note when compared to its OHC relative, it being more of a burbler than a barker, even when subject to a heavy right foot. Although the author's Semi-Sports has been retro-fitted with hydraulic brakes, the cable brakes fitted to both models will provide plenty of stopping power even for today's roads. Hood down visibility is excellent with the extremities of the car easy to judge, making parking a simple affair. The same can't be said with the hood raised. The unfamiliar position of the central accelerator pedal is a soon forgotten quirk and both cars are a delight to drive on anything except the major roads. Anyone thinking of purchasing a pre-war Minor should carefully consider these early scuttle tank two-seaters. It is doubtful you could get more driving fun per £ spent with any other pre-war car.

Both of these models were born of muddled thinking on the part of Morris Motors. Late into the market place to launch a two-seater and having been nudged into recognising a market opportunity by the sales success achieved by their coachbuilding firm customers, they then proceeded to launch two very similar models upon a confused market place, within four months of each other. That the launches were the result of forward planning (reference the 1931 sales brochure comment above) would make a 1930 Morris Motors strategic planning document a very interesting item to read. Their marketing team also misjudged the mood of the buying public by de-glamorising the £100 Minor in a search for sales. This can be seen by the sales figures achieved by the side valve models in 1931; just 5434 units of all four models. The 'run out' OHC cars achieved 7601 units with just a fraction of the advertising and marketing support that was provided for the Side Valve range.

The Semi-Sports launch four months previously had initially been aimed at a more glamorous 'upwardly mobile' market niche and the car was originally priced accordingly (£135), but pricing pressures instigated by market forces necessitated a response from Morris resulting in the £10 price reduction mentioned earlier. The net effect of this was that when the grey, utilitarian £100 S.V. Minor was launched there were already Semi-Sports models sitting in showrooms resplendent in their glistening chrome work and black cellulose, making the choice of car for customers a difficult one. Looking through Autocar and Motor magazines from February and March 1931, there are examples of new Semi-Sports models being offered for as little as £115, ensuring that the two Minor models were competing for the same customers. Put another way; two lots of vehicle development costs competing for one sale, not a sensible way to run a business.

This marketing fiasco came about because Sir William Morris wanted his company to be the first to launch a £100 car in the United Kingdom and this became a holy grail within the organisation. That he achieved his goal is now indelibly written in automotive history. That the car's introduction was a poorly conceived and badly managed affair has already been lost in the mists of time.

Editor's Note: Over the three years that Chris has run the Pre-War Minor Network website he has written and published (on the site) a number of articles on Minors. He writes "While I am certainly no Harry Edwards the history of the Minor fascinates me and my research into the model is on-going and continues to uncover items and facts that seem to have got lost in the mists of time." We welcome him as a member and look forward to a close relationship with the PWMN.
See more at www.prewarminor.com