



# Real estate

Gerry Taylor bought his Countryman to carry bricks and cement, but he soon discovered he had something very special on his hands...

Words and photography **Gerard Hughes**

**T**here have been plenty of adjectives applied to Mini estates lately. Like their commercial brothers, the Minivan and Pick-up, they've been labelled rare, desirable and collectable. The first of these cars appeared in 1960, less than six months after the saloon's debut. Now, as the earliest estates celebrate their 50th anniversary, the descriptions are becoming ever more fanciful. But there's one word that used to be applied to these cars that's been forgotten of late, and it's one that should never be ignored. Estates always were (and for those who own them, always will be) that most important of things — useful.

"At the time, I just wanted a car rather desperately, and this was advertised locally for £130. I didn't think it was anything special — I

just wanted an estate car," explains Gerry Taylor, the owner of XAM 8. As you can see, it's a Mini that's worthy of every adjective of the 'rare and collectable' genre that you care to throw at it.

The time was 1977 and Gerry is a surveyor by trade, so the estate car was very important to him. "I threw anything and everything into it. Bags of cement, bricks, blocks, timber, all my surveying equipment. Park it anywhere, back it into trees..." he chuckles. "By rights, it should have been run into the ground and scrapped." Estate cars were just another tool of Gerry's trade, and when one wore out he simply replaced it.

"But someone up there was looking out for this car," he says, "and it's sheer luck that that it survived." The signs were there from the start. It might have been 1977, but Gerry picked the estate



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Brass door hinges hint at the car's heritage.



## "Someone up there was looking out for this car. It's sheer luck it's survived"

up for a bargain price because the clutch had gone. "Those were the days when things like clutches just wore out. I thought nothing of it, got the guy who was selling it to give me a push to get going and drove it home." It cost £60 for a new clutch and the car was pressed into daily service. "The first day I drove it to the office, a bloke in the street offered me £260 for it. I didn't understand, but I considered the offer. Doubling my money in a few days? Of course, he was after the numberplate, but somehow I turned him down."

The Mini's real luck came in the shape of the garage to which Gerry entrusted all

of his servicing work. "It was a small local business run by Tony Fiddes and his son, Matthew," Gerry explains. It was a general garage, but as Gerry was to find out, both Tony and Matthew were dyed-in-the-wool Mini fanatics. Everyday use had started to take its toll on what was already quite an elderly car, so Gerry made several visits to the garage for servicing and repairs. "One day in 1979, Tony turned round to me and said, 'I'm not doing any more work on this car.' I was a bit puzzled," says Gerry. "Tony explained that he believed that this was a very early car, and before he removed, replaced or repaired any more

parts, he wanted me to find out its pedigree." Tony pointed out that the car had brass door hinges, copper radiator reservoirs, copper heater pipes and a ton of other details unique to early estates.

### History lesson

"I wrote to British Leyland Heritage (as it was then), and got a lovely letter from the archivist, Anders Clausager. He confirmed that it was either the 297th or 298th car off the line, within the first 300 cars built." Gerry felt there was only one thing to do — he took the Mini off the road and started to renovate it. He spent £2000 on



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The radio was an early addition of Gerry's.



The interior was retrimmed by Newton Commercial, working to the original spec.



the bodywork, replacing typical areas like the A-panels and rear subframe. Then the whole thing was stripped back to bare metal and resprayed in the original colour.

Then the Mini's luck temporarily ran out. "The recession came along, I lost my job and the Mini was put up on blocks in the garage." It would be a long time before Gerry found the money to revive the car, but he did protect it. "In 1980, Sotheby's put a value on it of £5k as it stood, so it was always insured for fire and theft. I was consoled by the fact that the numberplate was going up in value faster than what I was spending on insurance."

It was 2008 before Gerry was in a position to get the Mini back on the road. "After 30 years, it was in a bad state," he recalls. "Even though it had been stored in the garage, the floors had gone." Gerry had been impressed by the work of West Country Triumph and entrusted them to revive the Countryman. "They took it back to bare metal and, where possible, let new metal into the original panels."

### Restore, replace, respray

The list of work is impressive, and not only includes the full body restoration, replacement wood framing and a respray

in Farina Grey, but also new seat covers and carpets, and all consumable parts, such as new tyres. Gerry has tried to be a stickler for using original (or as near as) parts wherever possible. "The Austin badge had gone missing from the bootlid, but the bodyshop eventually tracked a suitably antique replacement from an Austin A40."

Even though the Countryman looks new again, Gerry has been careful to retain the signs of its long life — the little things that prove that this car hasn't always been so cosseted. Soon after buying the estate, Gerry made a few improvements: a very '70s radio hangs under the parcel shelf, →



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# The resto

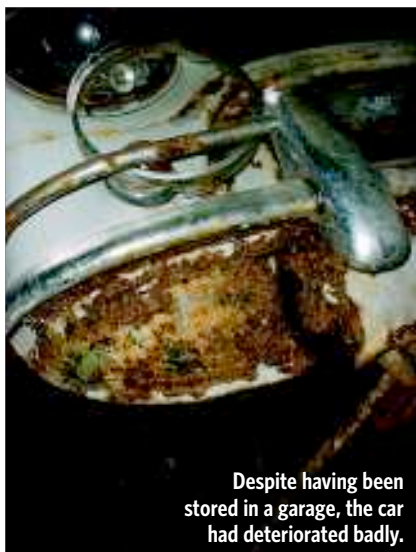
Gerry decided to restore the Countryman after discovering that it was one of the first 300 off the production line. The body was fully restored, with new metal let into the old panels, and original parts were used wherever possible. Gerry was adamant that it had to be the same car once the work was finished.



The first stage was to strip the car back and inspect the damage.



Years of hard use meant the upholstery looked rather the worse for wear.



Despite having been stored in a garage, the car had deteriorated badly.



Once the body was finished, it was time for a fresh coat of Farina Grey.



## TECH SPEC

**BODY** 1960 Austin Seven Countryman estate in Farina Grey.

**ENGINE** Standard 848cc A-series

**TRANSMISSION** Standard four-speed with magic wand gear change.

**SUSPENSION** Standard rubber cone.

**BRAKES** Front: single leading shoe drums, rear: standard drums.

**WHEELS** Standard 10-inch steel wheels, Falken 145/10 tyres, chrome embellishers.

**INTERIOR** Newton Commercial trim set to original spec, red carpet set, new fuel tank cover in matching vinyl.





West Country Triumph have done a remarkable job of the restoration,



next to a fresh air heater. “The original recirculating type was useless and I used it every day, so I needed a decent heater.”

And with the Mini back on the road, Gerry has completed his research of the Mini’s history. With the help of friends and contacts, he’s managed to piece together a fascinating story. The Countryman was built alongside the saloons on the track, but demand was expected to be lower, so only every 500th car was a Countryman. Gerry’s car rolled out of the factory on August 12 1960, and was delivered to Wadham Stringers in Trowbridge.

The car was registered on October 10 1960 — and yes, that’s the original registration number. “I’ve been told that

back then, the low numbers were always used by garages as trade plates on their demonstrators. They probably ran this as a demo for a couple of months and then sold it with the plate. I suspect it should never gone to its first owner with that number.”

The numberplate is worth a fortune, but Gerry has no intention of ever separating it from the estate — or selling the car, for that matter. “As far as I’m concerned, it’s got to go to Heritage,” he says. They may well take Gerry up on that, because this is a very significant car. He has discovered that there are only 24 early MkI Countrymans still in existence, with just 12 left in the UK. And of all of those cars, XAM 8’s body number and build date prove that it’s the earliest.

Gerry describes the Countryman as 95 per cent restored. “There’s what I call the niggly list,” he explains. “The bits that need to be added. There are currently no vertical A-post seam trims on the car, the door window seal strips are missing and I need to find a window catch for the rear.”

The running gear is original for the most part, with the 848cc engine still going strong. The head gasket was replaced in the late ’70s, and a check of the pistons and bores at the time showed them to be in excellent condition. The odometer hasn’t yet turned 40k, so there are no plans for a rebuild. “It’s just been serviced, and Classic Autos in Swindon now look after it. They’ve been told to keep it running!”

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