

Morris Motors: How Oxford became a Motor City



The Morris Oxford and BMW Mini parked at the Oxford Mini Plant
Source: www.bmwblog.com/2016/06/20/visiting-mini-plant-oxford/

Oxford's history is one of industry. One of Britain's largest cities in the medieval and early modern period at a crucial crossing of the River Thames, the city remained a transport hub through the First Industrial Revolution. As the meeting point of the West Midlands' canal network and the major river, Oxford facilitated water transport between the industrial heartlands and the capital. With the advent of the railways, Oxford's position as a crossroads solidified. Later, Oxfordshire's inland position and relatively flat geography would make it an ideal location for airbases in wartime. Road traffic, first horse-drawn and later horseless, also passed through Oxford as major roads led to and from the city.

But Oxford is a home to vehicle manufacture not just a transport hub. Oxford is the UK's motor city. These days the majority of Formula 1 teams have their headquarters in Oxfordshire, while BMW's Mini plant is situated in the Cowley area of Oxford on the site of the old Morris Motors factory.

William Morris founded Morris Motors in Oxford in 1912. Attempting to create a British equivalent to the Ford Model T, Morris designed an intentionally Oxford branded car. The success of the vehicle relied upon the reputation of the city; in return, his motor company would transform Oxford's industrial landscape.

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Automobiles and Bicycles

Although historians dispute who invented the first automobile, German and French engineers developed various horseless carriages in the late 1880s. The European car industry began in the 1890s, structured around the foundational assumption that automobiles were the playthings of the rich. It was in the United States that the automobile was transformed into a product for the masses, famously thanks to the vision of Henry Ford.

According to historian Thomas McCraw, Ford “became practically a living emblem of the core features of the Second Industrial Revolution: machine mass production, economies of scale, the combination of mass production with mass marketing, and the rise of purchasing power for consumers.”¹ Ford’s idea was to transform automobiles from bespoke, luxury items, into a mass market. To achieve this goal, Ford simplified production and introduced practices of mass producing the same car again and again, dramatically reducing costs. Ford’s car, the Model T, revolutionized the automobile industry, created a mass market for cars, and has epitomized the power of mass production ever since.²

Ford launched the Model T in 1908 to be the “ultimate standardized machine.”³ Simple, durable, incredibly easy to repair, and possible to create on Ford’s innovative moving assembly lines at his plant in Detroit. All of the company’s resources went into this one product and, over the next few years, Ford managed to manufacture the Model T at higher volumes, to a higher standard, and at a lower cost.⁴

As the market for automobiles matured, other business models appeared, most notably at General Motors under the leadership of Alfred P. Sloan Jr. If Ford had mastered the creation of a mass market around a single product, Sloan segmented the market into different models at different prices for different parts of the new mass market.⁵ With the two giants in competition in the 1920s, the question was whether Ford or General Motors were going to win the battle for supremacy in the American automobile industry. Around the world, various companies wondered how they could adopt Fordist techniques in their spheres. And as for the automobile, it would become the “signature product of the twentieth century.”⁶ By the 1970s, one in every six US businesses was involved in the manufacture, distribution or operation of automotive products.⁷

But for the first few decades of the automobile’s existence, it was by no means clear whether cars would ever become a popular mode of transport. From a late Victorian perspective, there was no obvious need for cars to exist, especially not in Oxford. British industry and agriculture appeared to operate quite effectively without motorcars; the British railway network was highly developed as a means of transporting both goods and people; and roads were adequate for horse-drawn transport but hardly worth upgrading for the few who could afford such a luxury as a motorcar. Moreover, frequent breakdowns, difficulty in obtaining suitable fuel, and problems adapting to hot or cold temperatures also plagued early motorcars.

The bicycle, in contrast, was a sensible and useful choice for an urban dweller. The invention of the “safety bicycle” in 1885 saw a dramatic rise in urban cyclists and bicycles transformed cities around the world in the 1890s. While bicycle use decline in the US in from 1900, cycling continued to grow in popularity in Europe where bicycles were used for commuting, recreations, and simply to get around. According to historian Evan Friss, bicycles particularly changed urban geographies for women, allowing them safe and respectable mobility around cities.⁸

Oxford was particularly suited to cycling culture. A relatively large (in terms of walking distances), flat, and wealthy city, Oxford was also home to students and workers in a wide range of trades and professions. William Morris had been born in Oxford and grew up in the East Oxford town of Cowley. He was a racing cyclist with a local following and skills as a mechanic. As a young man, Morris had been apprenticed at a local bicycle manufacturer. He left the apprenticeship aged just fifteen, in a dispute over his pay. On leaving the company, Morris set up a rival business in his family home on James Street, off the Cowley Road in East Oxford.

As a young businessman, Morris knew he had to leverage his two potential strategic advantages: his local fame as a competitive cyclist and his knowledge of the local market of wealthy Oxford University students as a source of both customers and potential business partners. By the 1910s, Morris, still only in his mid-thirties, had two decades of experience as a manufacturer of road transport. He had also begun dabbling in the automobile trade – selling or hiring out other manufacturers’ cars from his Oxford garages.

William Morris, unlike many of his contemporaries, was certain that cars would take off in Great Britain,

just as they had in the States. Morris could see the road improvements demanded by cyclists which could literally pave the way for wider automobile use and he had also been keeping an eye on the fledgling British motorcar industry. In Morris's words, "[what] had happened with bicycles I felt sure would happen with cars."⁹

The crunch time came in 1911. That year that Ford announced the establishment of a British subsidiary in Manchester, the first Ford manufacturing plant outside of the United States. Morris felt he could take some of Ford's techniques and use them to produce a car in Oxford tailored to the demands of the local market, just as the Model T was tailored to American buyers. The British market was quite different after all. Compared to the United States, Britain's population was dense, urban, and industrial. If the Model T suited farmers and rural workers or anyone who needed to travel long distances on rough ground, a British car in general, and an Oxford car in particular, needed to suit an urban population who required ease, low coast, and quick maintenance. If the name of Oxford, with its connotations of prestige and taste could be connected to such a car, then so much the better.



Morris Oxford (1913) Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=46701213>

In 1912, Morris formally established a car company with a loan of £4,000 from the Earl of Macclesfield, a former customer. Morris Motors began designing and then producing its first car, bearing both Morris and his city's name: the original Morris Oxford.

The Morris Oxford

The Morris Oxford may have been designed and assembled in Oxford, but it contained very little that was new in terms of parts. Having observed both Ford's model of creating the car parts onsite and Sloan's decision to contract with outsiders to manufacture of parts, Morris believed that the key to producing an affordable car, especially when starting up, was to buy in engines and running gear: both extremely expensive to design and build from scratch. The Oxford was thus designed in collaboration with an existing Coventry engine manufacturer and nearly all of its drivetrain consisted of components made externally. Far from being a weakness, in Morris's view, this collaboration guaranteed that the finished design was entirely the work of specialists: "the work is better and more cheaply done, while the cost and worry... is avoided".¹⁰

Although Morris and his team saved time and expense by employing external specialists, the design process still overran. In 1913, Morris' design was coherent enough to begin production and he established a factory in Cowley to assemble the Oxford. The first Morris Oxford went on sale in March 1913. Like the Model T, the Oxford was a humble car. On the other hand, its two seats and output of less than ten horsepower were no more than the average working customer was likely to need. More importantly, it cost an extremely competitive £165 at a time when the average Oxford home cost £235 and an adult might expect to earn £67 annually. Automobiles, even if cheaper, remained an expensive product.

Morris also began building his reputation within Oxford. William Morris attached himself to the cause of improving transport in the city. Already well-known and well-regarded as a local businessman from his work with bicycles, Morris introduced the first motorised buses to Oxford as a private operator. His buses proved far more reliable than the horse-drawn services in use at the time. Morris clearly had an eye for using controversy to create good publicity. When the bureaucratic city council refused him an operator's licence, he bypassed the need for one by accepting tokens as payment instead of cash; the council made the mistake of threatening him with arrest but caved in after protests from his supporters. Morris acquired much in a single stroke: proof of public goodwill, profit from the sale of the bus company, and a reliable

means of mass transit for his workforce. By the outbreak of World War I, he had won one of the first and hardest battles for a new manufacturer: he could claim that his name, at least, was now established locally. Fame for his company, on a national level, could follow in time.

In contrast to the bus controversy, William Morris ran Morris Motors conservatively and pragmatically, always conscious of his relations upon outside suppliers. Securing contracts for engines and running gear was by far the most important priority. By 1914, Morris' annual revenues amounted to over £150,000, and the company was outselling its key rivals Vauxhall and Austin. However, 85% of its profits up to that point were reinvested in order to fund further growth, both in the form of improvements to the Cowley manufacturing plant and negotiation of new contracts for parts.^{11 12}

The dawn of the First World War, however, had the potential to destroy Morris's plans. The Great War led to the conscription and death of much of Britain's young male workforce and forced consumer goods production to be curtailed in favour of war material production. As a side effect, it would also normalise motor transport, creating a generation familiar with using it and requiring countries to build an industrial base capable of mass-producing it. The return to peacetime would bring its own challenges.

The Morris Cowley

William Morris continued to manufacture cars, although in smaller numbers, during the war, and even launched a new model. Named for his childhood home and the home of his factory, the Morris Cowley was almost as Oxonian as the Morris Oxford.

Within the company, Morris's leadership style was meticulous, autocratic, and hands-on. His bookkeeping was fastidious with regard to both the company's finances and improvements to its products. An engineer by inclination, as well as a businessman, he personally suggested and then supervised a series of changes to the Cowley and Oxford models in order to improve their quality. By understanding his own products as thoroughly as possible – to the point of familiarising himself with the design and cost of each of their component parts – he was able to carefully document the cost at each stage of the manufacturing process and identify any items that could be sourced externally more cheaply. This would have been impossible for a motor manufacturer in any subsequent era: only the earliest cars were simple enough for an individual executive to understand them so entirely. Morris documented the cost of each of the 1915 Cowley's component parts; in part because there were only sixty-two.

Morris also managed to turn many of the restrictions of the wartime economy into positive opportunities. He used the repurposing of part of the Cowley plant for weapons production as a opportunity to cultivate positive relations with government officials and generate good publicity when, for instance, Morris volunteered the site for the manufacture of copies of a recovered German mine sinker. The lower sales volume brought about by the conflict also gave Morris time to fine-tune his designs and ensure their effectiveness. With a suddenly slack market for passenger cars, there was downtime to make incremental changes and improvements to the design of the Oxford and Cowley models, and also to prepare for the needs of the postwar market. The company had not been caught off guard by the outbreak of the war and would not be by its end.

Britain's economy suffered far more as a consequence of the war than that of the United States, and the 1920s would be a difficult decade for British industry, with severe inflation not helped by flawed monetary policy. The transition back to a peacetime economy might help a manufacturer of consumer goods in the short term, but the war's impact on overall levels of demand had the potential to cause problems in the long term. As a first step, William Morris, who had planned his approach to the postwar period well in advance, rationalised his company. He renamed it as "Morris Motors Ltd" (it had remained as "W. R. M. Motors" until 1919) and devised a formal, two-tier model line-up, with the Cowley as a cheaper entry-level model and the Oxford as its more upmarket stablemate. In response to the increasingly protectionist global tariff policies of the interwar era, Morris also engaged in a form of vertical integration: having always been quick to identify the best-value component suppliers and negotiate new contracts where possible, Morris sidestepped the need to pay import duties by purchasing design blueprints from one supplier while persuading another to move its factory site closer to Oxford.

The final, radical act that established Morris Motors as a mainstream manufacturer was forced by external circumstances. The immediate postwar years proved a critical transition. In order to survive, Morris Motors needed to become the volume manufacturer that William Morris had always hoped that it to

become. Demand was slowly growing, but inflation was growing even faster. The price of the Cowley had increased by £170 – more than 50% – between 1919 and 1920, and sales of the model were unsustainably low.¹³ The company faced the imminent prospect of failure.

Morris intervened. He personally ordered that most of the Cowley's price increase be reversed in October 1920. In effect, he decided that, as of now, a mainstream car would be a cheaper product because, if a mass market for cheap cars did not finally emerge, volume sales would be impossible to maintain. Having patiently built his company, he was ready to make his prediction that a mass market would exist for cars in Britain into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The effect of the price change, which took place in February 1921, was dramatic. Between 1921 and 1924, Morris' production increased more than tenfold; between 1921 and 1927, almost twentyfold.¹⁴ By 1927, Morris cars were sold in 1,750 franchises nationwide. Rival manufacturers were taken completely by surprise. Morris Motors' market share rose from approximately 10% in 1921 – an already healthy figure but not one that was sustainable in an economy lacking demand for cars – to over 40% by 1925.¹⁵ It would be no exaggeration to claim that Morris single-handedly created the mainstream automobile market in Britain.

With manufacturing now in the tens of thousands, Morris was able to buy out and integrate several of his key suppliers, including the engine manufacturer Hotchkiss. For the first time, Morris's company was large enough to be manufacturing components Morris himself did not understand in detail and could not personally inspect. Morris increasingly had to entrust improvements to specialists from within a new managerial framework, such as the engineer Frank Woollard who became the manager of Morris Motor's new integrated engine plant. Expanding production by means of space-saving technology and quality checks, Woollard ensured the engine production quadruples in less than two years, easily absorbing the vast increase in demand.

Although Morris was becoming less autocratic, he remained the principal shareholder and deliberately rejected the concept of a board of directors in order to retain the freedom to make executive decisions. Throughout the period he retained a veto power over decisions made by those in charge of subsidiary divisions even as he increasingly relied on placing experts in managerial positions.

William Morris also deliberately avoided being acquired. He rejected a buyout by Austin in 1924, and by General Motors in 1926 (an intriguing decision by GM given that they had purchased the rival firm Vauxhall a year earlier). In contrast, Morris Motors purchased Wolseley in 1926, thus bringing an upmarket marque into the family in the mould of a contemporary Audi or Lexus. Expansion also came from the spin-off brand MG, launched in 1923 by a subsidiary manager as what would today be known as a "tuning company" – a company that takes a stock automobile and creates a sporty version – in the style of AMG's relationship with Mercedes. The new brand enjoyed a mild premium, slightly sporty image, of a kind that is very valuable today.

Yet, despite this expansion and attempts at niche products – a six-cylinder model, a takeover of a French manufacturer, a car aimed at the Australian market – the company's success still rested on the core Oxford and Cowley models. Many of the other products, often created in short time frames, made sense on paper but failed in practice. Understandably for a firm that had enjoyed massive, market-changing success as a consequence of the Oxford and the Cowley, they were largely sticking to what they knew. The gradual development of a simple model range, over the course of a decade, had paid dividends and as the 1920s drew to a close, the reliable Oxford and Cowley remained Morris Motor mainstays.

The global Great Depression beginning in the late 1920s and lasting for much of the 1930s provided further challenges for Morris. And with sales of the Oxford and the Cowley stagnating and the firm's market share dwindling, a new model appeared precisely what the company needed.

The Morris 8

Although the Great Depression was far less catastrophic for the United Kingdom than for many international economies, Britain was not immune from the global economic challenges of the 1930s. As unemployment rose and wages fell, domestic demand for cars declined. Morris' output in 1933 was approximately four-fifths of what they had produced in 1925. Worse still, he was losing his grip on the British market. American rivals like General Motors and Ford were gaining ground and had better experience diversifying their produce models. Morris Motors had remained stubbornly mid-market on the

insistence of its founder, who had resisted a move towards smaller-engined cars – against his engineers’ advice – several years earlier. Now the company would witness the drawbacks of that narrow strategy. Morris’s share of the UK market fell to only a fifth in 1933 from nearly one third in 1930.¹⁶ The automotive manufacture now employed 10,000 staff at Cowley (12 percent of the Oxfordshire), and in order to safeguard both their jobs and the manufacturer’s image locally, things needed to change.¹⁷ William Morris replaced several senior managers among them Woollard, who left acrimoniously.

The main beneficiary of the shake-up – so it seemed at first – was Leonard Lord, who had overseen the upmarket Wolseley unit, who was promoted to the central Morris division in 1934. Lord immediately oversaw a major investment in the Cowley plant, such that its capacity reached 100,000 vehicles a year. Following this – a move that, incidentally, rendered Oxford’s automotive manufacturing capacity greater than the entirety of what was now Nazi Germany – Lord’s main focus was standardisation. He continued the company’s integration, both horizontally and vertically, and brought the Morris, MG, and Wolseley ranges much closer together. This three-pronged “standard, sports, and luxury” structure was not dissimilar to that found at other manufacturers: comparable to the Ford/ Mercury/ Lincoln triumvirate or combinations of the five key brands produced by General Motors. It also involved considerable sharing of mechanical components between models, in an early equivalent of Volkswagen’s platform-sharing system. Beneath their different bodywork and interior designs, vehicles across Morris’s three-marque range would share drivetrains and engines, which themselves would be standardised and manufactured in individual factories.

New models soon followed, along similar lines to modern European product cycles. The previous American-style approach of annually updating models with incremental changes was replaced with a system of creating entirely new models intended to last a few years. The Morris 8, the small entry-level car that the firm desperately needed, was introduced in 1935 and proved an instant success. By the outbreak of World War II, Morris had sold more than 200,000 8 models, and over a million cars in its still relatively brief history.



Morris 8, 1936. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Morris_8_1936.jpg

The Morris 8 was the first of a new range of numbered models that came to include the upmarket Morris 10 and Morris 12. The numerical naming system was perhaps a sign that Morris had outgrown its need to market his vehicles based on local pride or Oxford’s civic reputation, or, perhaps, a symptom of William Morris’ increased detachment from his company.

Morris was becoming gradually less involved in the operation of his company, and displaying more of an interest in developing a personal legacy than a business legacy. He had been knighted in 1929, ennobled in 1934, and by 1938 had become Viscount Nuffield, named in honour of the Oxfordshire village where he now lived. He had established a company in his name and not only led it to become a market leader but also built the market for it to lead, almost single-handedly. While it would be a stretch to say William Morris had put the already-famous city of Oxford on the map, he had made it Britain’s car-making capital, perhaps alongside Coventry, whose rising status was also thanks to his work. By popularising driving in Britain, he had set in motion historic changes to the national infrastructure. By expanding British carmaking, he had made just as much impact on national culture, creating a touchstone industry that had become a source of pride. He had now been officially recognised for it.

Becoming Lord Nuffield did not change Morris’s relationship to the company in a consistent manner from the 1930s onwards. At times, his behaviour was that of a man who felt that, having created a business

empire from humble beginnings, he needed nobody else's advice or aid in making decisions as to how it should be run now. At other times, it appeared that Morris had lost interest and now wished to dedicate his career to philanthropy instead.

Officially, Morris had stepped back from the day-to-day management of Morris Motors. He floated new shares in 1936, not just to expand the company but to reduce his stake within it. As early as the late 1920s, he had started to become an absentee owner, largely due to his charitable work, the official reason for his ennoblement. This frequently involved collaboration with, and donations to, the University of Oxford. The self-made local industrialist and the elite academic institution, the most recognised symbols of modern and historic Oxford respectively, were now in a position to work together.

Nuffield College, established in 1937, is a dedicated social science college, but its namesake never intended it to be so. Morris had envisaged Oxford's first college of engineering and technology, an institution that could develop talent able to meet the practical concerns of industry. In essence, the first business school at Oxford. His involvement with the university was of relatively long standing by this point – he had funded a professorship since 1926 – and in many respects he was now not only a motor engineer but a general-purpose investor in new technology, invention, and philanthropy. Famously, after witnessing victims of the polio epidemic in London in the 1930s, Nuffield established the production of affordable iron lung machines alongside the Morris Motors production lines in Cowley, among many other contributions to funding development in medical technology, and was also active in politics, advising on economic and military development, and donating to those causes.

With these military and political links, it is possible that Nuffield foresaw the outbreak of war in 1939 to some extent; he had attempted to establish an aircraft engine company in 1938, though the plans were shelved when he failed to find a business partner. He was certainly quick enough in transferring production in Cowley from civilian vehicles to military equipment. In consequence, the war years were relatively quiet for Morris and his business ventures. His recognition for engineering ability was valuable enough to see him quickly promoted to a senior military position, as the RAF's Director-General of Maintenance, and in a military economy – something he had already demonstrated the ability to understand – he drew little attention. It helped that Oxford was relatively safe from German attacks, allegedly because Hitler had hoped to make Oxford the British capital in the case of a successful invasion. The factory itself was recognised as a potential target by the Luftwaffe but was absurdly safe by comparison to Morris's plant in Coventry, one of the most heavily bombed cities in Britain.

The success of Morris's second transition back to peacetime manufacturing was harder to measure than the first. It was to herald the introduction of the company's most iconic product, one that brought success of a different but comparable kind to its early breakthrough.

The Morris Mosquito

As had been the case towards the end of the First World War, Morris's engineers had begun planning for the launch of a new civilian car well before the Allied victory was declared. This time, plans did not include Nuffield, whose concentration was by now very much on other things. They also did not include William Lord. Lord had been disgusted at Nuffield for offering him control of Morris but no share of its profits and so he had defected to the firm's most direct rival, Austin, in 1938, where he allegedly swore to "screw Nuffield into the ground".¹⁸

By now, Morris's most important employee was the supremely talented designer Alec Issigonis. He drew up a prototype for a new base-model Morris to replace the 8. Given the codename "Mosquito", it was to be better known as the Morris Minor. It became an all-time classic of British engineering design and sold in excess of 1.2 million, shattering the previous sales record for any British car. The Morris Minor remained in production until the 1970s. Lord Nuffield hated it.¹⁹

The Minor had a very long gestation period, seemingly because of the complete lack of support offered from above. It is said that, upon first seeing the prototype, Nuffield derisively referred to it as a "poached egg". In 1947, two years after it was first unveiled, Nuffield broke his new policy of non-involvement with the day-to-day running of the company in order to veto all plans to put the car into production. Such behaviour lost him yet another senior manager: Sir Miles Thomas, Lord's replacement, who resigned in exasperation at what he saw at Nuffield's unwillingness to do anything to update his range. Astonishingly, in that one calendar year, Nuffield rejected proposals to build not one but two iconic, record-selling

“people’s cars”: he also ruled out the idea of purchasing the rights to the Volkswagen plant in Wolfsburg at the same time.²⁰



Morris Minor. Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=42458351>

It is hard to speculate about what exactly Morris, especially Morris with Issigonis on board, would have achieved had they produced the car that became known as the Beetle. In Nuffield’s defence, he was by no means the only carmaker to reject the idea since Ford also turned down the design, and Rootes, the group behind such brands as Hillman and Humber, were absolutely scathing about it, memorably claiming that the car could never be successful in the long term.

At Morris, Sir Miles Thomas’ replacement, Reginald Hanks, a long-standing Morris employee who had clashed with Nuffield in the past, was able to ensure that the Minor went into production. Morris Motors needed a “global car” in order to break through in the international market in a similar manner to its steady emergence as British market leader. This was not a task that the now elderly Nuffield could realistically oversee, but he could help lay the groundwork and ensure some right to claim it as his legacy. An immediate sales success, the Minor had the potential to be the first step towards such a move, especially since it was joined in the range by a larger stablemate that restored a favourite old name: the new Morris Oxford. Nuffield’s final major business decision was far more of a gamble.

After overseeing further rationalisation of the company, and a second attempt to establish an Australian arm, Nuffield and Hanks set in motion a merger with Austin. The result would be the British Motor Corporation, or BMC. In many ways, the merger seemed a logical move. Significant consolidation of this kind had already taken place in the continental European and American industries. With Vauxhall owned by General Motors, and Ford a subsidiary of an American firm in the first place, the Austin-Morris merger would result in two clearly distinguished British-owned mass market carmakers: the newly-created BMC and the Rootes group. BMC had the more rational range, and it had the talents of Issigonis. If these firms, in partnership, could replicate Morris’ 1920s breakthrough on a global scale, British car manufacturing could become to the rest of the world what Oxford car manufacturing had become to Britain.

Hanks downsized the Morris board, Nuffield overruled the remaining board and the two forced through the merger. By 1952, they had established BMC. Nuffield remained chairman of the new corporation for one year only, before his retirement at the age of seventy-five to be replaced by Leonard Lord. By this point, the Minor had reached sales of a quarter of a million. To augment it in the range, plans were drawn up for a downsized version. Released in 1959, Issigonis’ new design was launched as the Morris Mini-Minor. Along with its badge-engineered sibling, the Austin Mini-Seven, it became better known as simply the Mini.

The Morris Mini

The original Issigonis Mini remained in production for forty-two years and became a cultural icon, yet it somehow achieved this without ever being profitable. A common anecdote tells of industrial spies at Ford buying, dismantling, and forensically analysing a Mini in order to work out how such a car could be making money for BMC, before finally concluding that it was not. Initial sales were slow, but the company was able to capitalise on the increasing popularity of motorsport, a much more accessible form of entertainment than it had been in the interwar years. The famous John Cooper works editions of the Mini, so successful in rallying, helped provide the template for a truly sporty model in an everyday line-up, very much in the spirit of the original MG models.

Nuffield did not witness these developments. He died in August 1963, at the age of eighty-four. Leonard Lord, who had once sworn to destroy Nuffield, died in 1967, still in situ as chairman of BMC, and partway through a decision-making process that would see the group replaced the following year. Sixteen years after that, Morris Motors would cease to exist as well.

In the years leading up to his death, Leonard Lord oversaw a series of complex mergers. When completed in 1968, BMC had effectively assumed control of Jaguar, Triumph, and Rover along with Austin, Morris, MG, and Wolseley. The resulting conglomerate, British Leyland, became one of the most infamous names in business history.

Of the ten different brands that made up British Leyland, only four – Mini, Jaguar, Land Rover, and (in a greatly reduced state) MG – still survive today. No aspect of British car manufacturing emerged from the experience in good condition. Yet the fate that befell the Morris brand seems especially cruel. The Cowley plant, the one reliable constant throughout British car making's rise and fall, immediately ceased production of the Mini. What could have been a global mainstay for the Morris range was spun off into something between an Austin (it was built exclusively at the Longbridge plant in Birmingham) and a brand in its own right.



Morris Marina. Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=70561365>

When the Minor and the Oxford ceased production in 1971, after twenty-three years, their replacement on the Cowley production line was the abysmal Marina. A car deliberately designed on the cheap, it has become shorthand in modern popular culture for everything that was wrong with British manufacturing in the 1970s. It was wilfully designed to look boring, in an attempt to make Morris the “sensible and conservative” marque of the British Leyland range that showed none of William Morris’ 1920s judgment in positioning his company that way. It was terrible to drive and unreliable by design, with underpinnings based on pre-existing, already dated mechanicals; the suspension, already a weak element on the Minor, was particularly poor. An attempt at a sporty coupe version was hardly convincing.

Not all of the Marina’s problems were specific to that car: the general issues that plagued British manufacturing in the 1970s also applied to the Cowley motorworks. While not as strongly associated with industrial action as some of BL’s other plants, such as Longbridge and Speke, the plant became notorious for the poor quality of both its parts and finished products. As for business sustainability, it seemed that in this era, the idea that a British car might be profitable was treated as almost incidental. British Leyland was nationalised in 1975, and a new chairman, Michael Edwardes, was tasked with rationalising the range two years later. By then, the explosion in popularity of reliable Japanese rivals had thoroughly ended any illusion that British cars in general – whether made by Leyland, Ford, or Vauxhall – were selling adequately or sustainably in their current state. British Leyland, in particular, had become a mess of brands

competing with one another needlessly. Some would have to go, and Morris, with its reputation fatally wounded by perhaps the group's worst product, was the most obvious candidate.

Under Edwardes, plans were set in place for a new mainstream line-up of three models: first the small Metro, introduced in 1980, and later the Maestro and Montego. These latter two models would replace the Marina, both in the overall model range and on the Cowley production line, but they would wear the Austin badge, though sports models would be designated MG. Their lengthy development process caused the Marina to limp on for a surprisingly long time, aided only a little by an unconvincing redesign by the Italian styling house Giugiaro. The rebadged Morris Ital, which somehow looked worse than the car it replaced, was finally discontinued in 1984. The Morris name was shelved with it, along with Triumph. While the latter was resurrected as a motorcycle manufacturer, there has been no realistic interest in bringing Morris back. The rights to the name are now owned by the Chinese government, which has had little enough success in its attempts to re-establish MG as a brand.

Yet the Cowley plant survived. Used as the base for production of several different British Leyland vehicles, not just those badged Morris, it was chosen for the manufacture of the larger, more prestigious models in what was now the Austin Rover range. Build quality, while much improved on the 1970s nadir, was still not especially good, but BMW – the group's owners in the late 1990s – clearly saw more potential in Cowley than in the now tarnished Longbridge plant. Production of the Rover 75, briefly seen as a pivotal and hopeful product for British car manufacturing, began in 1999. But an abrupt change of strategy at BMW saw the German firm lose interest altogether in the Rover brand, which was promptly sold the following year. They made sure, however, that they retained the rights to the Mini name – and to the Oxford factory. The site was completely redeveloped into a new, state-of-the-art plant, with only the former Pressed Steel section remaining of the old site.

The new Mini was launched in 2001 to rave reviews from journalists.^{21 22} An instant sales success, unlike its predecessor, it now constitutes a globally famous brand with a varied model line-up, an excellent example of a blue-chip small car maker – a “premium mainstream” marque – that has achieved what several European and American rivals have repeatedly tried and failed to do. Most of the range, including the simple small hatchback that provides its mainstay, is manufactured at Cowley, which has become a minor tourist attraction able to capitalise on Oxford's global fame and popularity. Of late, concern has been expressed that the plant's future could be jeopardised by Britain's exit from the European Union. Yet it has been central to BMW's strategy in a way that Longbridge never was, and that Britain's Nissan, Honda, and Toyota plants are not to their parent companies. Of the British volume manufacturers, Jaguar and Land Rover have increasingly become global brands under Indian ownership, with a deliberate strategy of placing less importance upon their heritage, but the Mini is marketed as fundamentally British – and for as long as that is the case, it is likely to be fundamentally Oxonian too.

Endnotes

- ¹ Thomas McCraw, *Creating Modern Capitalism: How Entrepreneurs, Companies, and Countries Triumphed in Three Industrial Revolutions* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), p. 264. For more on Ford and mass production see Thomas Hughes, *American Genesis: A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm, 1870-1970* (New York, 1989); David A. Hounshell, *From the American System To Mass Production, 1890-1932* (Baltimore, 1985); David Blanke, *Hell on Wheels: The Promise and Peril of America's Car Culture, 1900 -1940* (Lawrence, Kansas, 2007).
- ² McCraw, *Creating Modern Capitalism*, Introduction to Chapter 8.
- ³ Thomas K McCraw and Richard S Tedlow, 'Henry Ford, Alfred Sloan and the Three Phases of Marketing,' in McCraw, *Creating Modern Capitalism*, p. 273.
- ⁴ McCraw and Tedlow, 'Henry Ford, Alfred Sloan and the Three Phases of Marketing,' pp. 266-302.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 266-302.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 266-302.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 267.
- ⁸ Evan Friss, *The Cycling City: Bicycles and Urban America in the 1890s*, (Chicago, 2015).
- ⁹ William Morris, "Policies That Have Built The Morris Business", *The Journal of Industrial Economics*, 2:3 (1954); p. 195.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Jonathan Wood, *The Bullnose Morris* (London, 2001); p. 9.
- ¹² Richard Overy, *William Morris: Viscount Nuffield* (London, 1976); p. 11.
- ¹³ Personal papers of Lord Nuffield (held at Nuffield College, Oxford), MSS 15/4/14. As quoted on the BBC *Home Service* in 1956, Nuffield recalled: "I therefore sent for my manager, and suggested to him that the price should be dropped by a hundred pounds per model, and he said "How can you do that with the profit you're making today?" And I said, "Well, you are making no profit at all because you're selling no cars.""
- ¹⁴ Overy, *William Morris: Viscount Nuffield*, p. 128.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- ¹⁶ Overy, *William Morris: Viscount Nuffield*, p. 132.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- ¹⁸ Roy Church, "Deconstructing Nuffield: The Evolution of Managerial Culture in the British Motor Industry", *The Economic History Review*, 49:3 (August 1996); p. 577.
- ¹⁹ Andrew Marr, *A History of Modern Britain* (London, 2007); p. 169. Allegedly, Nuffield referred to the Minor and Issigonis collectively as "that damned poached egg designed by that damned foreigner".
- ²⁰ Church, "Deconstructing Nuffield", p. 577.
- ²¹ *Top Gear*'s contemporary review (accessible at <https://www.topgear.com/car-reviews/mini/cooper-s/16-one-3dr/road-test>) is a readily available example online.
- ²² C. D. Simms and P. Trott, "The perceptions of the BMW Mini brand: the importance of historical associations and the development of a model", *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, 15:4 (2006), pp. 228-36, uses research from "opinion formers" – including motoring journalists – to outline the image that the classic Mini model had enjoyed in the market, and BMW's success in carrying over elements of this to the new model.
- ²³ Patricia Kane, 'Prostituted at 12 by my mother ... to Morris Minor icon Lord Nuffield,' *Mail Online* (21 November 2015), <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3328430/Prostituted-12-mother-Morris-Minor-icon-Lord-Nuffield-titan-British-philanthropy-founded-Oxford-college-victim-lifetime-silence-reveals-shattering-police-testimony.html> (accessed February 2020)

Prostituted at 12 by my mother... to Morris Minor icon Lord Nuffield: He was a titan of British philanthropy who founded an Oxford college. Now his victim – after a lifetime of silence – reveals her shattering police testimony

- Ann Vaughan said she was sexually abused by Lord Nuffield for a decade
- 79-year-old believes her mother was cowed by his wealth and influence
- Revealed she met Lord Nuffield while waiting in hospital for hip surgery
- He touched her genitals and called her his 'devil' and a 'tease', she said

By [PATRICIA KANE FOR THE MAIL ON SUNDAY](#)

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Appendix 1

Ann Vaughan was 79 when she first spoke publicly about the decade of abuse she told the police she faced starting at the age of twelve at the hands of William Morris, Viscount Nuffield.

Vaughan was twelve years old and in hospital recovering from surgery on her hip when she first met Morris in 1948. She recalls a nurse wheeling her into the sixty-year-old Morris's room after he heard her singing. Morris, in hospital for toe surgery, reportedly called Vaughan a 'tease' and a 'little devil' as he molested her.

Morris paid her medical fees and made arrangements to be home along with her after her discharge from hospital. He gave her gifts including a copy of the 1912 Jean Webster novel *Daddy-Long-Legs*, inside which he wrote 'To the little Devil, from Me, Nuffield.'

Vaughan reported to the police that Morris abused her over the course of more than ten years, from 1948 to 1959. In that time, Nuffield made large monetary gifts to Vaughan, who then wrote cheques to her mother and became the families main breadwinner. The abuse continued when Ann became a student at Oxford University in 1956. She would regularly catch the bus out to Cowley where Nuffield assaulted her in a room above his office. The abuse only ended in 1959 when Ann told Morris she was getting married.

Vaughan finally filed a complaint with the police in 2015. Her motivation was watching a BBC documentary of Nuffield which portrayed Morris as an altruistic philanthropist. Vaughan told the Daily Mail "I had to tell someone about this diabolical creature who had tormented me... I am sure I was not the only little girl that Nuffield abused... The injustice of this despicable man, admittedly to be admired for his inventions and business acumen, being a closet predatory paedophile has rankled with me all these years."²³