

TEAM MATES

Words and modern photos by Craig Watson.
Historic photos by autopics.com.au unless otherwise stated.

Two cars with the same sponsors and very similar design philosophies, but very different histories.



At first glance there are plenty of similarities with the two cars pictured here. Obviously they both wear similar "war paint". Both are powered by fairly "hot" 1275cc A-series engines and both reside in the suburbs of Brisbane, within only a few blocks of each other.

Both cars were absolute legends in their day, but their histories, while related, are vastly different. They are more like cousins than brothers, but when parked together or competing at historic race meetings attract many admirers.

However, uncovering the full story, particularly on the Midget, has been very difficult. Not the least because the cars were famous nearly 50 years ago and people's memories differ, especially on minor detail points on who did what and when. A lot of people were involved with

building and running the Midget, and this complicates things a bit.

12 Hours at Surfers

September 3, 1967. Surfers Paradise played host to the second running of the Rothmans 12-Hour Sportscar Race – billed at the time as the longest endurance race in Australia.

BMC Australia had entered its lightweight Mini (**NOT** the car pictured here, but more on that later) driven by Bob Holden and Don Holland.

Almost at the eleventh hour, BMC Competitions Manager Alan Kemp decided to enter another car: a lightweight racing MG Midget, mainly to promote the soon for Australia road version.



sorted, and consistent lap times around 1:25 for both drivers augured well for the coming marathon.

That time was good enough for fourth place on the grid, and four places higher than the Mini (at 1:29.7), but because of its late arrival the Midget had not actually set a qualifying time and had to start from the back of the grid.

The race featured a Le Mans type start, and John French got cracking. He was in the lead pack as he crossed the start-finish line level with the eventual winning Ferrari. Just for fun, there was a Dymo label message stuck to the top of the Midget's dashboard, which read: "Please sound horn when passing Ferrari." But there wasn't much likelihood for the horn getting any use, with the Ferrari lapping around ten seconds faster than the Midget.

French soon settled into sixth place, but a broken fuel line early on caused the loss of a lap. Another stop caused by

a broken rocker shaft, saw the Midget slip further down, but French charged back through the field. By 1pm he was in fourth place, three laps ahead of the next competitor.

He got two lucky breaks in succession in the fourth hour, when the leading Porsche Spyder slid off the track, into Armco, and the third-placed Lola T70 had to pit with overheating problems.

The Midget was suddenly in second place outright. *RCN* continued: "Foley took over the MG Midget at 1.35 (PM) after a quick brake check, and the car, despite its hasty preparation, was running splendidly and seemed set for a high placing."

Coming up to 4pm and the half-way point of the race, the Midget suddenly lost oil pressure and headed into the pits. The problem was diagnosed to the failure of the oil scavenger pump in the dry-sump system. The engine was quickly converted to wet-sump and the car sent out again,



A snippet from the BMC Rosette, on the 1967 Surfers Paradise 12-Hour race.

but the damage had been done and Foley brought the car back into the pits, officially retiring at 4.20pm.

Apparently a small roll pin in the scavenger pump drive had sheered. The pump itself hadn't seized, as reported. It was a minor problem that caused a major catastrophe in the engine.

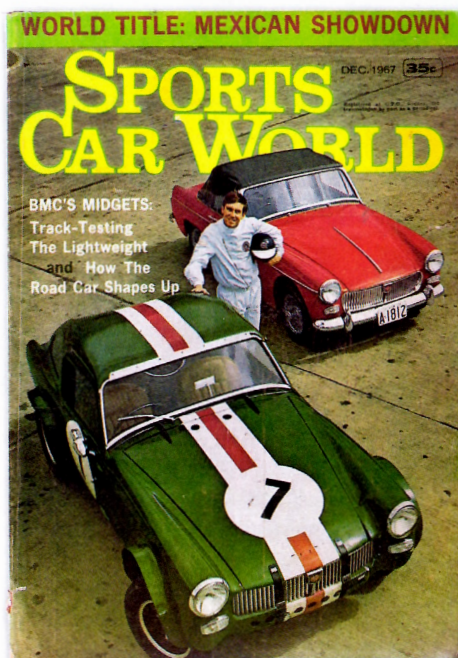
The Mini continued on and finished a very credible fifth outright and second in class.

Although it had retired, the Midget had shown its potential and was ahead of much more favoured cars, including Porsche, Lola, Lotus, MGB, Cobra, TVR and others.

Midget For Australia

Although released in the UK in June 1961, effectively an up-market version of the Mk2 Austin-Healey Sprite (released one month earlier), the MG Midget was not available in Australia before 1968.

Unlike its parent, BMC Australia saw no economic sense in trying to sell two almost identical cars under different brand names. As the original "Bugeye" Sprite had been assembled from kit form at Pressed Metal Corporation in Enfield since 1959, PMC continued to build the Mk2 as soon as it was available.



BMC (or Leyland), which already had a 30% stake, bought Pressed Metal Corp outright in early 1968 and transferred all sports car assembly to Zetland.

As this more or less coincided with the release of the 1275cc-engined Mk4 Sprite and Mk3 Midget, the decision was taken to only produce the MG version, alongside the MGB.

Thus, all Sprites assembled in Australia came from the Enfield factory, while all but the very earliest Aussie Midgets were assembled at Zetland.

The Lightweight Midget

Privateer Sprites had been competing successfully in Australia since they had first arrived in the country, so it was no surprise that the Competition Department at Zetland felt that a factory-prepared car could be at least as successful.

A box of special Competition parts duly arrived from Abingdon. Included were numerous aluminium panels, a dry-sumped competition engine and close-ratio gearbox, adjustable competition shock absorbers and a set of knock-on Minilite magnesium alloy wheels.

It is a common belief that Brian Foley brought the parts back from the UK on BMC's behalf. Foley certainly made numerous trips to the UK and brought back parts for his Minis, but says he has no recollection at all of organizing parts for the Midget. Alan Kemp, Terry Douglas and John Cotter believe the parts came directly from Abingdon, and Kemp believes it was probably Evan Green who organised it.

It is not clear where the chassis came from, but it seems that it was not part of the pack from the UK.



Photo courtesy John Cotter.

A very rare colour photo of the Midget at the Surfers Paradise 12-Hour.

Terry Douglas and John Cotter were the two mechanics responsible for building the car. The chassis was probably a former press test car (which would mean an earlier model Sprite) that had been sitting around for some time – possibly waiting for the UK parts to arrive.

"It was a very basic car", Cotter recalls. "We built it from a bare chassis...minus all the guards...with the rails out the front. It was the firewall, floorpan and boot type of thing. No rear guards on it at all."

Looking at the one photo that exists of the car under construction it is clear that the aluminium panels included at least the front guards, the front panels and the bonnet shut panel. Photos of the car today show the holes in the inner front and rear guards have been pressed, rather than drilled like many other panels on the car, so it is likely these came from Abingdon as well.

The doors were flimsy, single-skin aluminium with a box section frame.

The engine appears to have been built to Group Two specs in the UK, bored out to 1310cc or 1330cc, with, according to *Sports Car World* magazine, "Cooper S type bottom end and head, 12 to 1 compression and the factory rally cam – No 648."

The decision to enter the car in the 12-Hour came only three weeks before the race, meaning a marathon effort just to get the car built. "It was bedlam", Cotter

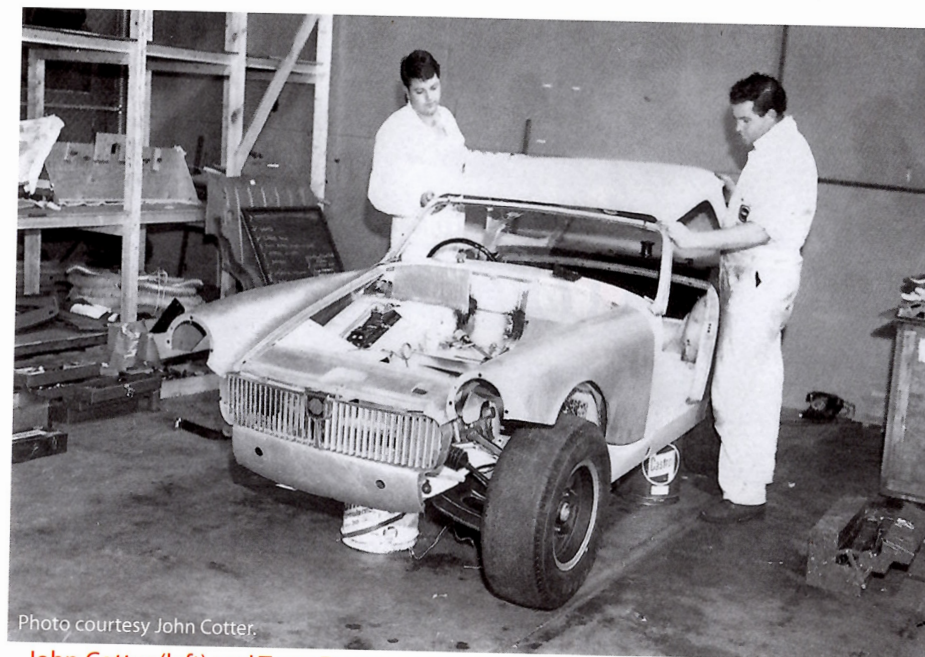


Photo courtesy John Cotter.

John Cotter (left) and Terry Douglas trial-fitting all the lightweight panels and roof.

remembers. "One night I slept in the store-room of the Competition Department, on a pile of rags, because we finished at 4 o'clock in the morning."

Despite the short time frame, there were areas on the car that came in for some serious modification. MGB disc brakes at the front, with Austin Lancer rear drums and front sway bars, for starters.

The front coil springs were replaced with torsion bar suspension. Alan Kemp remembers this as being Terry Douglas' idea, as Douglas explains. "I don't know what I was thinking, I just got this notion in my head that said forget coil springs, we're going to go torsion bar. Alan just said, if you want to do it, go and do it."

The fibreglass hardtop was made by J&S Industries – who worked with BMC on many projects and had a range of hardtops available for MG and Austin-Healey.

With the Works lightweight Mini on its way up to Surfers Paradise, it was touch and go as to whether the Midget would be ready for the big race.

It was finished, or at least put together, by early Friday morning, and the team packed up and drove straight to Surfers,



Skello being chased by Lakis Manticas - Oran Park, 1968...



...and getting two wheels off the ground in the process.



Midge Whiteman following Christine Cole: Oran Park, 1968

1968 Season

Some time in late 1967 or early '68 a test day was held at Oran Park, with a number of drivers given the chance to drive the Midget.

Don Holland, who had started racing in a Healey but was best known at the time for his success in Minis, said the Midget was a complete handful. "I had a drive of it, but I couldn't. Everybody who had a drive kept spinning it, and I spun it once. Skello [Bob Skelton] and Laurie Stewart were the only ones who could drive it. Then Graham Jackson, who was helping me at the time, went out with them on another test day, and he swapped some wheels around... and that seemed to fix it. I never drove it after that was done, but I think that made a better car out of it."

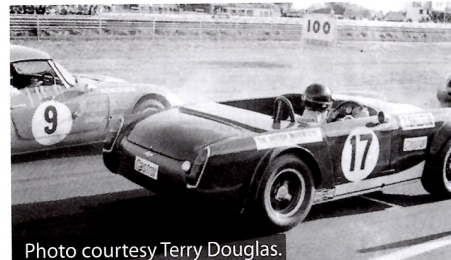
Bob Skelton admits the car was a handful in the beginning, but it was quickly sorted out and he was selected to campaign the car for BMC in the 1968 season. The car certainly seemed to suit his driving style, described by *Racing Car News* as "aggressive". "If ever a driver was underestimated by the Australian public, it was Bob Skelton", the magazine mused in 1986. "The man had the ability...to drive to its limit almost any car he put his bum into."

Skelton certainly had many successes in the Midget, mostly in its class – but there were numerous outright results as well.

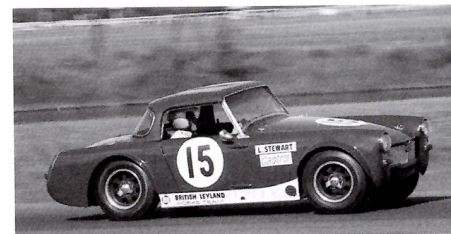
Sprite racing and tuning legend Bob Rowntree, who raced against Skelton at the 1968 Bathurst Easter meeting, vividly remembers Skelton driving the car. "He was competing against some very well



Leonard Teale: Castlereagh, 1968.



Bob Skelton: Warwick Farm, 1968.



Laurie Stewart: Warwick Farm, 1969. Note the different roof again.



Photo courtesy Neville Mansfield

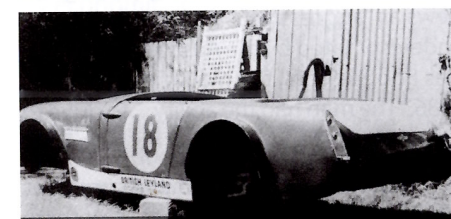


Photo courtesy Neville Mansfield

The Midget as bought by R Stokes: c1975.



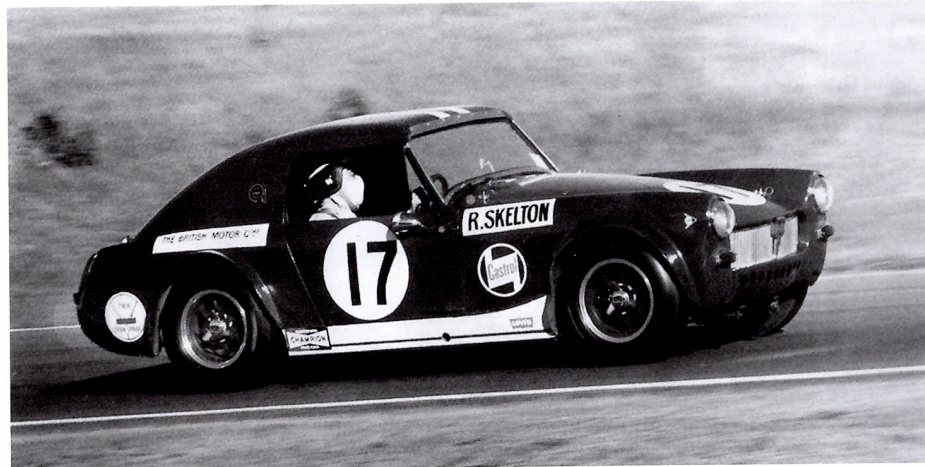
Photo courtesy Neville Mansfield

As bought by Frank van der Worm: 1983.



Photo courtesy Neville Mansfield

Ready to tow to Queensland.



Bob Skelton: Oran Park, 1968. Note the different roof.

prepared and well driven Lotus 23s and he was level pegging with them all the time, they couldn't get away from him. It was absolutely fantastic that car, and he was a real eye-opener. The car always went fantastic with Skelton driving it."

But Skelton wasn't the only person behind the wheel of the Midget in 1968, with a number of people being given one-off drives. These included James Smith in Victoria and John French in Queensland.

Timo Makinen was also listed to drive the car at a night meeting at Oran Park in October 1968, but is not listed in the results. Midge Whiteman did drive the car, though, and continued in it from time to time in the Ladies' Championship at Oran Park.

Even the actor Leonard Teale had a drive of the Midget, organised by BMC publicity maestro Evan Green. "I think he raced a production car himself, and he showed some interest and we thought the publicity he would generate warranted it", Kemp remembers. "That was at Castlereagh drag strip", adds Cotter. "We just took it up there and the drags were on, but it was a one-off."

It would appear that a different hard-top was used in some events, judging by the photos, and later in the year the car was raced with no top and no windscreen.

An Uneventful Year

Leyland took over BMC in 1968 and in early 1969 they closed down the Competition Department at Zetland. Alan Kemp moved into the Public Relations

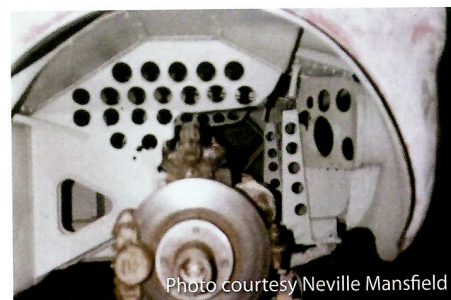


Photo courtesy Neville Mansfield

Light panels during restoration.

and Advertising Department, while Cotter went to work for John Lindsay in Quality Control.

Terry Douglass says the Midget still had a lot of potential for 1969, but admits the Competition Department closure was inevitable. "The car itself still needed a lot more development work in it, but we were running out of money. We were actually robbing from PR and Advertising, just to keep Comps Department going."

Cotter agrees money was a big issue, but says Leyland just wasn't interested in motorsport. "It was whatever we could pinch off Evan, his rally budget. Things were tight. We did most of the stuff in-house except balancing and some of the machining. A lot of it, the apprentice school did for us. So, everything was done on the cheap, or as cheap as we could possibly do it, which was a pity because we had to cut a lot of corners...Castrol was prepared for us to build three cars, one to run in Victoria, one in NSW and one in Queensland, and they had the budget ready to give us for it, but Leyland said no."

The car languished for a while, before being taken over by Brian Foley Motors for Laurie Stewart to drive. "It had been sitting idle", Stewart recalls. "It seemed like a hell of a waste. Someone said something to someone...and it was suggested that we, as Brian Foley Motors, take the vehicle and race prepare it and run it."

"I drove it. I wasn't all that comfortable in the car and I only raced it in a couple of events. I seem to recall it needed a fair bit of development because development had passed it by, technology was moving at a pretty quick rate and it just wasn't as competitive as we would have liked it to have been. I think we put the matter to BMC, that we needed some development dollars for this but they weren't forthcoming. We said, 'well hang on, do we really want to spend that sort of money?' We didn't. They didn't. So we packed the car up and sent it back to them, and I think that was the end of it."



Photo by Darin Mandy - Digital Realism.

John Robertson (inset) has been the sole driver of the car since 2002.

For that short interlude the car raced under the banner of the British Leyland Works Midget Team (the only time it did). Interestingly, the hard-top roof on the car by this time was a conventional Midget item, rather than the elegant and, arguably, more aerodynamic J&S fastback version. It appears that Stewart raced the car once with the hard-top at Warwick Farm and once without it at Catalina Park.

Abandonment and Rescue.

The Midget was virtually abandoned at the Zetland factory. Evan Green, meanwhile, managed to siphon enough money from his PR budget, topped up with sponsorship from Castrol, to keep a rally programme going and to provide limited support to the "official" racing team.

The Works Midget was earmarked to be destroyed, but apparently ended up at Les Carne's place. Carne was racing another Midget, and while not officially sponsored by Leyland knew the right people there, and in 1971 would join the Leyland Young Lions Team. That has led many people to believe that the Works lightweight and the Young Lions Midgets are the same car, which wasn't the case. Douglas continues; "We built Les's car to the same specs, except there were no aluminium panels on it. That was the car that became the Young Lions Midget." Parts from the lightweight that did end up on Carne's Midget included the MGB disc brakes and uprights, the close-ratio gearbox and LSD, and possibly the engine.

The wheels may also have been on Carne's car, but they reputedly ended up on Ian Corness' MGB "Superbee".

What remained of the Works lightweight, basically a bare shell, ended up in South Australia, owned by R. Stokes from Blackwood. He put it back together, removed the factory sponsorship and raced it in Group D in 1976 and 1977, but the car was deemed ineligible and had to

then race in Group A.

It was then bought by John Read, from Adelaide, who raced it until 1983, when he sold it to Frank van der Worm from Perth, as van der Worm continues. "The car was running as a Group A Sports Car, with no roof and no windscreen. It was running wide composite wheels with slicks and the flares had been opened up, and it was running a hot 1098 motor, with a Sprite gearbox. It would have been hopelessly outclassed running in Group A, against big-bangers and anything else that came along that wasn't a production car."

Van der Worm worked for Budget Rent-A-Car and moved to Brisbane as State Manager in the mid-1980s. "I picked the midget up from Adelaide on my way through and trailered it up to Brisbane. I then restored it under my house. The aluminium bonnet, the bootlid, all the floor panels behind the seats were pressed aluminium, including all the gusseting, and they were all original BMC pressings. It didn't have the J&S fastback on it anymore, so I bought one of those, second-hand, and put it on - I actually bought that when the car was still in Adelaide."

"They ran it with the roof on it at Surfers, and in that photo on the cover of SCW it's got the roof on it, and that's how I presented the car to CAMS. All the Sprites in Marque Sports race with an aero screen, and this car ran with a windscreen and the fastback, and that's the way I wanted to run it, because it set the car apart. It was more indicative of the way the public remembered the car."

The two areas that van der Worm intentionally changed were the seats, for safety and comfort, and the dashboard - fitting a modified Midget dash in to "make it look more like a Midget when you look inside the car".

Van der Worm wanted to race it in historic Group O, which is for period race





Don Holland in 1st lightweight (left) & Bob Holden in Works car - W. Farm, 1967.

cars, but had difficulty getting it CAMS certified. "The only issue with that was they didn't think it was a special and originally thought it was a production Midget that had been modified", he explains. After digging up what information he could on the car, he was able to show it was built by the factory Works team as a racing special and got the car log-booked for Group O.

"I got it finished and prepared to race at Amaroo Park and Surfers Paradise, and then they closed the Surfers track. It had its first race at the very last race meeting at Surfers." That was in 1987.

Van der Worm raced the Midget at historic meetings over the next few years, mostly in Queensland and NSW, before taking it back to Perth, where he found the car was virtually unknown.

"I just couldn't bring myself to get enthusiastic about it here [in Perth], and the Midget just sat around, and nobody over here really knew what it was...so, I thought it was time for the car to go. I had it fourteen years. I did everything I wanted to do in it. I had a lot of fun with it. I really appreciated having a car that had genuine history attached to it. The intrinsic value of that car was never lost on me, even though it never raced in Western Australia."

"When I would take it to Sydney, to Amaroo or Oran Park, a lot of people would come up to me because they knew the car and they would talk to me in the pits. In Brisbane a few people knew it, because it ran at Surfers, but a lot more people in Sydney knew the car."



Fred Sayers in the second ex-Don Holland lightweight Mini - in 1968 spec.



A New Life

In 1998 Queenslander Neville Mansfield heard the Midget was for sale. He'd seen it in 1987 at Lakeside and knew a little about it, so organised to buy it through Tony Bennetto, from the Bugeye Barn in Melbourne.

Mansfield has run the car since then, but with other people driving it for him.

Today it is driven almost exclusively by John Robertson, from Lionel Otto Instruments, who continues. "I did five or six years of Formula Vee racing. Neville came and watched me a fair bit and then he approached me and asked would I like to drive his car. I leapt at it. I thought, brilliant!"

Robertson says the car is still a handful, but after 11 years of racing it he is pretty used to it. "It's got its challenges", he laughs. "Engine-wise it's a beautiful engine, it's really strong, built by Freddy Sayers, but chassis-wise and body-wise, because it's an aluminium car of the period, it has a huge amount of body flex. It's quite tricky sometimes, getting it to straighten up through corners and prevent oversteer/understeer. The suspension still has its challenges, mostly because of limitations in what you're allowed to modify, because you're not allowed to put any big internal roll cages in that might help its structure."

"I guess I drive it 9½ tenths and probably pull back a bit when there's other drivers around me that I don't know too well. But if I know the driver well, I'll drive wheel to wheel. You've got to be able to trust the person beside you."

"One of the really good things I like about driving it is...people remember the car...you just get so many people come up to you in the pits and talk about it, which is really nice."

"I think it's quite an honour to drive a car with that sort of significance. People know this car. It's something special."

To prove he is competitive in the car, and not just there to display it, John continues to win class trophies at almost every outing.

Lightweight Mini

Early on I made the point that the pictured Mini is not the Works lightweight that raced with the lightweight Midget at the Surfers 12-Hour. It does, however, have some relationship with that car.

The Works lightweight Mini was built specifically for the 1966 Surfers Paradise 12-Hour, and was then driven by Bob Holden for the 1967 season in Sports Racing Closed.

Don Holland built another lightweight Mini, with considerable help from Terry Douglas, as Don explains. "He brought a lot of things from BMC. We built the car with some of the ideas from the works car but we made them better. Terry came up with a lot of ideas. Some were used on the BMC lightweight, some were his ideas and ideas that he wanted to try but that didn't get done on the original lightweight."

In its first outing, at Warwick Farm, it beat the factory car. Holland spent the rest of the 1967 season dicing with Holden, usually behind him but occasionally beating him. In 1968, Minis generally were no longer competitive in most classes, so Holden began racing a variety of other cars - eventually settling with Ford for a few years.

Holland's car became the official



Holland's first lightweight - 1968.

factory-supported race Mini in the Sports Racing Closed category, being painted in Castrol Green and white. It regularly competed against the likes of the Buckle LMS of Lakis Mantikas (Issue 7 of *TME*) with a lot of success. Holland scored a second in class and fifth outright in the Surfers Paradise 6-Hour in September.

New rules came in for 1969 stipulating that the silhouette of the car could not be changed - wiping four Minis in an instant - and limiting the weight reductions in structural areas.

For Holland, this meant that the rear firewall, between the boot space and the passenger compartment, had to be welded back in. "We could have got away with a few things, but the rear firewall was a major change, so we got a new body from BMC and built a new car. Everything that was in the first one went into the second Mini, so it was virtually the same car in a new body shell.

Running now under the British Leyland banner, the Mini was very quick and broke many lap records - reaching 131mph on Conrod Straight at Bathurst.

This is the car featured on these pages.

Weight saving in this car followed along the same lines as before and with the Works cars, with many panels drilled out, removed or replaced with lightweight material. The doors were single-skinned, with the frames drilled out, as was the bootlid and any other panel that they could get away with. All glass, except the windscreen, was replaced with Perspex.

Don took the Mini to New Zealand in November 1968, competing in the Saloon Cars category, with support from Castrol.

Lynx Engineering was involved with engine development and, with offset bores (of 73.5mm) and a long-stroke (84mm) crank, got the capacity out to 1426cc - advertised as the biggest-capacity Mini anywhere in the world at the time. With a compression ratio of 12.7:1 the engine produced maximum power of 126bhp at the wheels and revved up to 8,000rpm.

In this form the Mini had six class wins and three outright, from six starts, between December 1968 and March 1969.

One modification of particular interest was the fitting of two cast blocks on the front and back of the block, with long bolts passing through the block and the centre-



His second lightweight - 1969.

main bearing cap holding it all together.

Holland said that although the engine had "bags of torque" it wouldn't rev freely, so he sleeved it back to 1310cc.

Holland prepared another Mini for 1970 (*TME* Issue 28) and the lightweight was sold to Glenn Amos from Lismore in northern NSW. At a meeting at Surfers not long afterwards, Amos got sandwiched between two other cars, damaging the Mini badly.

It was repaired, remarkably well by all accounts, and sold to Gary McGrath from Casino. McGrath raced it for a couple of years, then sold it to Geoff Russell, who went on to win the Queensland Mini Series twice.

Russell put a fibreglass Clubman-style flip-front on it, and later sold it to Ron Williams, who drag raced it for a while, before selling it back to McGrath.

McGrath set about restoring the Mini to its 1969 configuration, but with 1330cc. The restoration, completed in the mid-1990s, was described by Holland at the time as being exactly as the car ran when he had it: except he never had a full-width aluminium dashboard in it - and of course the engine size.

McGrath also located the original block and put it in the car, before selling it in 2005 to long-time sports-sedan Mini racer Fred Sayers from Brisbane. Fred races it as often as he can in Group O Sports Cars and has made some changes for his own personal taste. Fittingly, the Mini often competes against the lightweight Midget.

Unfortunately, Sayers inverted the car a couple of years ago, which required a new roof to be fitted and a complete repaint of the car - Castrol Green is arguably the most contentious colour ever used.

Neighbours

Because both these cars now reside in Brisbane they are often seen together at shows and race meetings. Either one attracts a lot of attention, but together they multiply that interest exponentially.

Both cars are historically significant in their own right, but when seen together they show the best of BMC in its heyday on the Australian race tracks. A good way to educate anyone who thinks the history of Australian motorsport revolves around Holden and Ford.

