

AUTO CAR



Road test:
MGB V8 CONVERSION

**Dolomite on
the Continent**



**ECONOMY
CARS
ON TEST**

A little going the longest way

When £650 is the remarkably high least you must pay for a new car today, what is available? *Autocar* tests the Citroën Dyane, Fiat 500, Hillman Imp and Honda N600 under comparative conditions



NO cars today are cheap to buy, unless you start to think in terms of an old £100 banger secondhand. On the new car market, all cars are expensive — some are more expensive than others. For the buyer with an absolute minimum of capital available, new cars in the UK start with the basic Fiat 500 at £531 including tax. Something as grand as a Ford Escort or Vauxhall Viva now costs about £300 more than that (£802 for the Viva, £824 for the Escort), but in between there is a surprising amount of choice, mostly of little foreign cars with air-cooled engines.

Drawing an arbitrary line at £750, you could buy a Wartburg Knight (three-cylinder two-stroke and front-wheel drive), a Skoda S100L (water-cooled four in the rear), a Renault 4 (watercooled four with front-drive and estate car back), NSU Prinz 4 (in-line air-cooled twin in the rear), Moskvich 412 (conventional car mechanically), Datsun Cherry (transverse water-cooled four with front-drive), Daf 33 (flat air-cooled twin with unique automatic transmission), Citroën Dyane and Ami 8 (flat air-cooled twin with front-drive), Honda N600 (vertical air-cooled twin with front-drive) or either of the only two British contenders, the Mini (850 or 1000) and the Hillman Imp. From this dozen, we selected the cheapest four by the simple expedient of drawing the line £100 lower at £650.

This gave us the Hillman Imp, Honda N600, Citroën Dyane and Fiat 500. When it came to procuring test cars for comparative assessment, we ran into obstacles. Manufacturers seldom put the most basic models in their demonstration fleets, so we had to accept an Imp de luxe (£699 instead of £642 for the basic version) and a Citroën Dyane 6 (£690 instead of £637 for the smaller-engined Dyane 4). We did not mind the Fiat 500L (£579 instead of £531 for the basic 500) as it was still very much cheaper than all the rest. The Honda at £637 qualified perfectly.

When we planned this operation the basic Mini 850 cost £643 and right up to the 11th hour an example was in preparation for us at Longbridge. At the very last moment it failed to be passed out as fit for test, so we tried to find a substitute. A couple of the big car rental firms in London were approached, but they did not list this version of the Mini. The saving grace was British Leyland's sudden price increase which put the Mini 850 up to £663, outside our ceiling.

In many ways our group was therefore grossly incomplete. No review of economy cars *ought* to exclude the Mini as it has brought economy motoring to so many motorists. In this case, though, the circumstances were beyond our control and as it is now over nine years since we tested a manual Mini 850, we cannot even comment on it in retrospect.

Test Method

There is no better way to judge a group of cars than to drive them in convoy over a varied route, drivers changing cars every hour or so. Our fleet of four therefore set off with brimmed fuel tanks from Dorset House, through the thick of London traffic westwards to the M4 motorway and a lunch stop at Henley-on-Thames. On the way we carried out brief performance checks of each car in turn.

From Henley we turned south, connecting with the A3 trunk road at Esher and following the Kingston Bypass to Putney and returning to the office via Wandsworth and Battersea. The total distance for this trip was 104 miles and at the end we rebrimmed all the fuel tanks and worked out the consumptions. As the octane requirement affects running costs to a significant degree, we also worked out the miles per £1 spent on fuel, the Imp requiring 3-star Mixture and the rest only 2-star Regular grade.

People who buy unusual cars (and in this group at least three of the four were distinctly individual in character and specification) tend to be biased about the virtues of the car they have chosen. To capture some of this spirit in our reports, we therefore allowed each of the testers to write about the car of his choice; where there was a clash (as in the case of the Citroën Dyane, which proved extremely popular with all members of the staff), the rest backed down in favour of their second choice.

Because the Reliant Rebel is generally reckoned to be a cheap and economical car to run, this followed the convoy as a photographic car so that we could also log its consumption in the same conditions. A brief test of this model, which costs an incredible £798 without a heater, follows the others.

Honda N600 Touring

PERFORMANCE CHECK

Maximum speeds

| Gear | mph | rpm |
|------|-----|-------|
| Top | 76 | 5,900 |
| 3rd | 63 | 7,000 |
| 2nd | 41 | 7,000 |
| 1st | 25 | 7,000 |

| | | |
|-----------------------|----------|--------|
| Standing quarter-mile | 21.0 sec | 65 mph |
| Standing kilometre | 40.3 sec | 74 mph |

Acceleration

| Time in seconds | 5.7 | 8.2 | 11.9 | 16.8 | 28.1 |
|-----------------|-----|-----|------|------|------|
|-----------------|-----|-----|------|------|------|

| | | | | | |
|----------------|----|----|----|----|----|
| True speed mph | 30 | 40 | 50 | 60 | 70 |
|----------------|----|----|----|----|----|

| | | | | | |
|---------------------|----|----|----|----|----|
| Indicated speed mph | 31 | 42 | 53 | 63 | 74 |
|---------------------|----|----|----|----|----|

Fuel Consumption

| | |
|--|------|
| Overall mpg for 100-mile varied test route | 40.5 |
|--|------|

| | |
|--------------|-----|
| Miles per £1 | 123 |
|--------------|-----|

TO European eyes, the Honda N600 is the Japanese Mini. It is fair to say that the Honda bears more than a passing resemblance to the "real" Mini, but this was probably a result of logic rather than straightforward copying.

The latest version of the N600 has a slightly detuned version of the original model, with the little twin-cylinder 599 c.c. air-cooled engine producing 38 instead of 42 bhp gross. The peak power revs have also dropped slightly, from 6,500 to 6,000 rpm.

There is no tachometer on the Touring version, so one gets the impression that the wrong speedometer has been fitted. In fact, Honda are playing very much for safety, and the speed bands on the speedometer end at 6000 rpm: in practice, one goes way, way past these and enthusiasm is tempered more by ear than sounds of mechanical strain at 7,000 rpm. The noise created is not typical of an air-cooled engine. This is a determined howl which just goes on . . . and on . . . and on.

We found that with the slightly lower power and maximum revs, the latest N600 was rather more tractable. In normal driving, engine speeds do not have to be taken over 5,000 rpm, and as a result, one appears to be in less of a frenzied hurry. On the credit side again, the acceleration figures have also improved. Compared with the "posh" N600G, which is no longer available, the latest car is equal up to 40 mph, with a time of 8.2sec. But from then on it takes over, reaching 50 in 11.9 instead of 13.1sec and 60 in 16.8, 2.2sec quicker than the older car. With a little car like the Honda, wind plays a very important part in maximum speed. With the N600 Touring, 76 mph was the best

seen, although this could have easily been pushed up a further 4-5 mph in the right conditions.

I came rapidly to the conclusion that the Japanese and I do not have similar wrist actions. The gear lever sprouts from the bulkhead, with the knob pointing upwards. The movement, however, is not fore-and-aft, but more up-and-down. This means that if the knob is held in the usual way, gear changing is very awkward. So one soon develops a technique of lifting and pushing, which I found rather clumsy. Also, when changing into first or third and holding the knob conventionally, the driver can get a nasty rap on the knuckles from the facia.

On the road, I found that a "rally driving" technique was best: that is, keeping the engine revs in the 4,000 to 6,000 range and using the gear lever appropriately. It all seems to work very satisfactorily, and the lack of synchromesh (dog clutches are used instead) makes the actual effort needed very low.

After getting out of the Citroen Dyane, I thought that the Honda had solid suspension. The ride is very firm and short, and you can feel every lump and thump in the road. This is emphasised by the rather hard, flat seats, which provide virtually no lateral location. Handling is very positive, with lots of understeer and lift-off tuck-in. But as the car is so light, there is little of that "plough straight on regardless" feel. You simply use more lock, or, in extreme cases, just back off and feel the front swoop left or right.

I was not very happy with the brakes. There are discs at the front and drums rear, without a servo, and the system has a very "dead" feel and little bite. This was not a fault of the test car: other Hondas I have driven have all felt like this. Even low-speed check braking in traffic calls for a fairly hefty shove on the pedal.

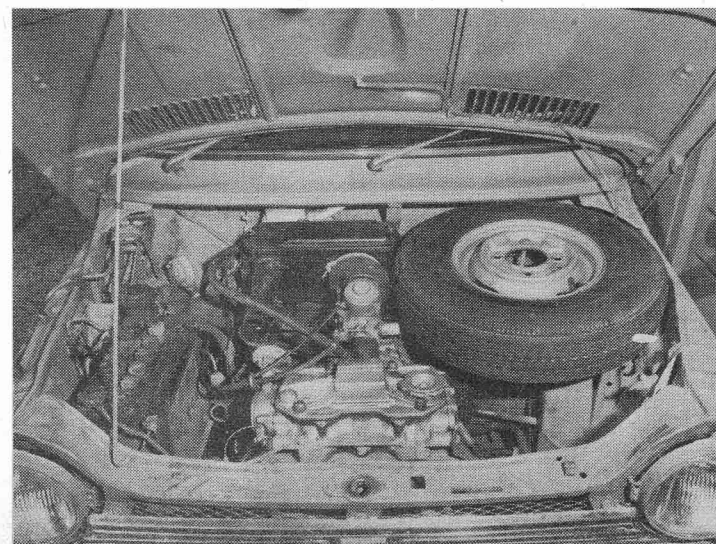
Passenger comfort is quite good. The seats, as I have said, are rather hard and lacking in support. For the driver, the controls are well laid out — and it is nice on a tiny car like this to find an electric screen washer and a cigarette lighter. A single, rather floppy lever on the steering column controls the direction indicators, headlamp main and dipped beams and, via a tiny button on the end of the stalk, headlamp flashing. The horn is a feeble bleeper.

A lever under the facia allows an air bleed from the engine cooling system, and the quantity and output depends directly on engine speed. While we had the car, it appeared quite adequate. The rear windows open from the bottom, like those in a greenhouse.

Nice detail points are the built-in aerial socket in one door pillar, and the thief-proof flap over the fuel filler cap, released by a little toggle on the door jamb. Luggage space is not over-generous, but the spare wheel and jack are stowed under the bonnet.

As a town and around car, the Honda N600 Touring is almost ideal. It is tiny (just 10ft 2.1in. long), and compact enough to weave through city traffic. It is also well able to keep up with (and beat) other cars twice its capacity, and the fuel consumption, despite some pretty impossible engine speeds, is a frugal 40.5 mpg on the cheapest grades.

Martin Lewis



Clearly Japanese, pretty ingenious with its still surprisingly fierce little engine more accessible than it looks, a good boot and quite roomy inside (reclining seat is not standard)

