

FIRST IMPRESSIONS



Words **Jeff Ruggles** Photography **Ade Brannan**

Simon Drew's seemingly unremarkable 1275 GT is a contender for the most significant Mini find of 2013.

Even the most dedicated aficionados among us probably wouldn't spot anything remarkable about the Mini you see on these pages. OK, early 1275 GTs are rare, but this particular car just looks like an early 1973-registered example in bog standard form, and a hopelessly ropery one at that. In fact, you're probably wondering what the hell it's doing here.

Actually, there's a very good reason. What we have here is arguably the most remarkable Mini discovery of the year, for there's a whole lot of evidence to suggest that this Mini dates not from 1973 but May 1969 – several months before the GT was officially launched in October. The evidence of those extra years is far from obvious, however. Until six months ago, this car had

spent the best part of 40 years quietly masquerading as a regular M-registered GT. Even a seasoned Mini specialist didn't spot its significance until he had a chance to really get acquainted with it.

That specialist happened to be Simon Drew of The Mini Works in Edinburgh, who discovered the car purely by chance. Most people would be dismayed to find out their car was four years older than they thought, but not Simon! "A young lad came in here looking for a project," he explains. "Someone had told him about a 1275 GT in Dalkeith when he was at his work, and he went to see it but it was too much work for him. I said if you don't want it, I wouldn't mind having a look. Sure enough I got the guy's number. It took a while to get hold of him, but eventually I saw it." ➤

School days

Amazingly, viewing the car brought about another twist in the story. "I went to school smack in the middle of Edinburgh about 25 years ago," says Simon. "Every day I would walk past a red M-reg 1275 GT parked in London Street, where my school was. I'll always remember it because it had the big numberplate on the boot. The minute I saw the car and the plate it came straight back. Sure enough, when I got the document back, what was the address on the bottom? London Street. So I was walking past it everyday 25 years ago, and then I never saw it again. Quite spooky really."

The car hadn't been on the road since 1995 and needed a full restoration, but such

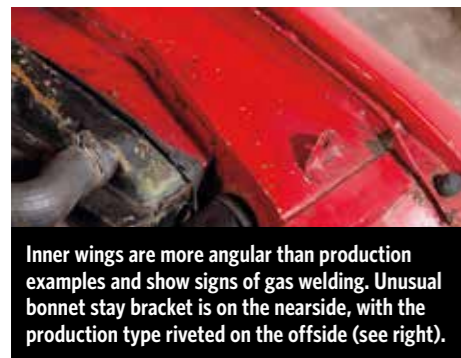
is the rarity of early GTs of any kind that Simon quickly snapped it up; unaware of its hidden past. However, the 'SPL' prefix on the chassis number - standing for Special Products Longbridge - soon aroused his curiosity. "I saw the chassis plate when I went to pick it up," remembers Simon. "I didn't fully know about Special Products Longbridge, I just thought 'Special' had to mean something. And the other thing I saw was the bonnet stay bracket was pop-riveted on. I Googled SPL and did a bit of digging, and as I really began looking at it the penny started to drop."

Simon's next move was to contact Ade Wildsmith, 1275 GT Registrar for the Mini Cooper Register. As the owner of the oldest remaining GT as featured in this very issue

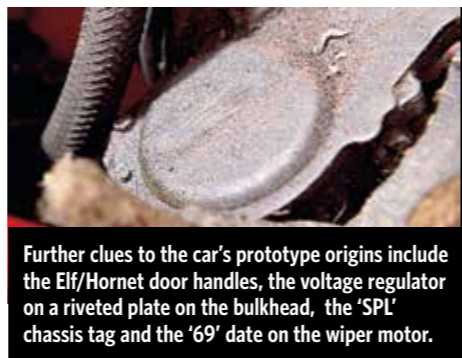
(which has since been sold to Simon), Ade was ideally placed to help shed some light on Simon's new purchase. "I spoke to Adrian and he started suggesting to check this and check that," explains Simon. "That's when it notched up a gear."

Telltale signs

So, what details helped to identify the car as a potential prototype? Well for starters, the hydrolastic suspension, dynamo and remote change gearbox would have been absent on a true 1973 car as they had all been superseded. Indeed, the car's age is all but confirmed by the wiper motor and distributor, which are both dated 1969, while the glass is stamped March '69. But there's much more...



Inner wings are more angular than production examples and show signs of gas welding. Unusual bonnet stay bracket is on the nearside, with the production type riveted on the offside (see right).

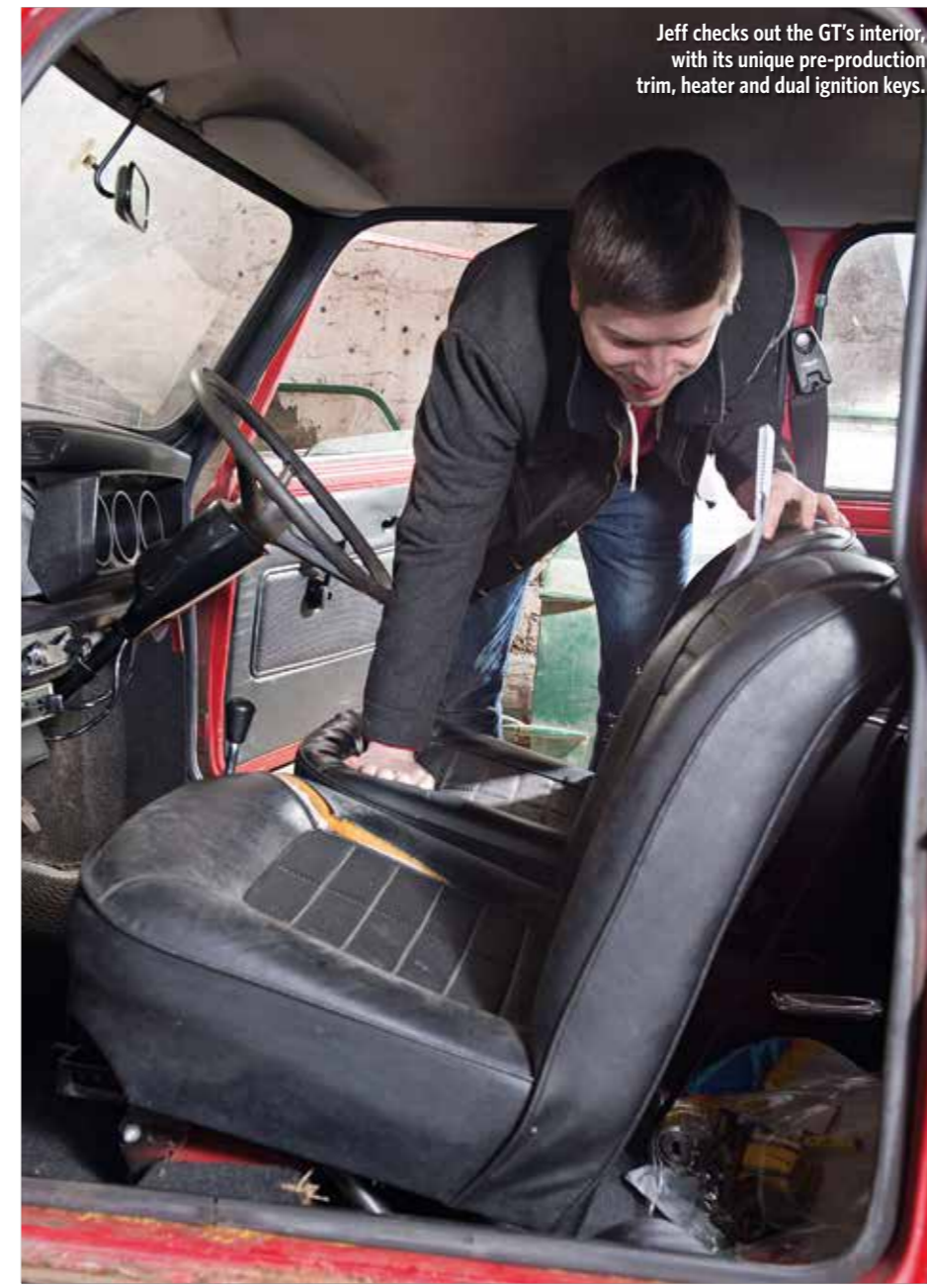


Further clues to the car's prototype origins include the Elf/Hornet door handles, the voltage regulator on a riveted plate on the bulkhead, the 'SPL' chassis tag and the '69' date on the wiper motor.

"As I really began looking at it, the penny started to drop..."



No, it's not lowered. The car's slammed stance is unfortunately the result of tired hydrolastic suspension and a broken rear subframe. Looks great though!



Jeff checks out the GT's interior, with its unique pre-production trim, heater and dual ignition keys.



Glance under the bonnet and you'll see a curious bonnet stay bracket arrangement on the passenger side inner wing. The very earliest GTs had the bonnet stay on the nearside before it swapped sides, but this is a different arrangement entirely. It's feasible that the bonnet stay was moved over to the offside for when the car was sold on in 1973, hence the aforementioned riveted-on bracket to cater for it. Even more significant are the inner wings themselves; they appear to have more rigidly-defined edges than on production cars and show evidence of gas welded joints too, meaning they were most likely hand formed from sheet steel rather than being stamped from a panel press.

A possible theory behind the car's build is that it was based on a MkII shell, with the Clubman front end and Mk3 sides welded on. This is backed up by the voltage regulator box being mounted to a blanking plate on the bulkhead, where the fresh air vent on a MkII Mini would normally be located - a hole thought to be absent on production cars.

There's exterior evidence too. Curiously, the extra drip rail that features on the gutter of MkII and Mk3 cars is also missing, which is perhaps indicative of the side panels being changed. The door handles appear to be Mk3 Elf/Hornet items rather than the Mk3 Mini versions with their more pronounced lock barrel area, further backing up the pre-production theory. And then there's the grey primer revealed under the chipped paint. "The primer is quite interesting," says Simon. "That would say to me it's a shell pulled off the line, I don't think they would have been grey primed."

Moving inside, the anomalies continue. Those 'Competition Class' perforated vinyl seats may look identical to the production versions, but a closer inspection reveals more panel sections and a less 'bucket' shape to the seats. The heater is interesting too; it looks the same as the proper Mk3 type, but the typeface on the switch panel is all over the place as opposed to being arrow straight on Ade's early car. It's also got two ignition keys, one on the switch panel and



The second ignition key on the column was probably added when the car was sold in 1973.

Could this be Simon's car? This GT is the only car we've seen pictured in 1969 press shots without drip rails, and it's the correct colour too. The MFC 442H numberplate is probably fake - it also appeared on a Clubman at the same time! It's possible that Simon's car was used by Pressed Steel Fisher for its advertising too (bottom right).



After many years of searching for a Works car, Simon has arguably discovered something even more significant.

The Mini Clubman takes shape at Pressed Steel Fisher



Another car body from Europe's largest specialists
 Pressed Steel Fisher Limited

The perforated section of the seats have more panels than on production GTs.



The car's lack of an extra drip rail on the gutter and grey primer are clearly evident.



The pre-production heater is notable for its wonky typeface!



another in the later position on the steering column. Perhaps the fitment of the steering lock was another change for when the car was prepared for sale in 1973?

Pressed steel fishing

With all of its unique features and SPL chassis number, there's enough to conclude the car is a pre-production build. But could it be even more significant? According to Ade, Leyland published its trade papers in The Times newspaper during that period, with an entry in May 1969 revealing that Pressed Steel Fisher in Cowley had hand built the first Mini Clubman bodyshell. On Simon's car, the radiator cowl is hammer stamped 'PSF 14' for Pressed Steel Fisher. Could this have been a numbering system for the 14th BMC/BL prototype car it had built? The only other number the car carries is a reverse-stamped 'FO' tag on the floorpan, although the significance of which is unknown.

Given the SPL number and PSF stamping, plus the various date stamps and host of unique features, the car's status as the hand-built Clubman prototype is surely all but confirmed. However, it doesn't take a genius to spot that this car is in GT guise rather than regular Clubman saloon spec. Ade believes the it could've have been subsequently modified to GT spec, explaining the change. This is certainly feasible; the boot board brackets on production GTs are spot welded, yet they are riveted in place on this car.

With all its other unique features, it's possible that the factory took the prototype Clubby that was floating around and thought they may as well convert it to use as the GT prototype too. A closer look at some early press shots would seem to confirm this; a red 1275 GT registered MFC 442H was used for various shots including the 1969 Autocar Motorshow Preview. As well as being red, the images show the missing drip rail and Elf/Hornet door handles. And although other cars in press shots have the same door handles, we were unable to find another car without drip rails. Cars pictured with the drip rails in place include a standard Clubman saloon that also wore the very same MFC 442H reg plate. It's even possible that the Simon's car was pictured while still in Clubman spec in a Pressed Steel Fisher ad that featured in the motoring press of the period. It wore a later sequence MFC 947H plate, but as the other Clubman and GT press shots prove, numberplates were often used on cars they didn't belong to!

Unfortunately the Gaydon archive only has records for production chassis numbers, so unless more information comes to light, we may never be able to completely fill in the gaps relating to the car's build. And why did it hang around for

four years before being given its Birmingham registration in 1973? We may never know.

However, it's almost certainly the oldest Clubman-type shell in existence. And what makes it even more fascinating is how its unique features have survived unscathed after almost 45 years. It's pretty rotten in places, the hydrolastic suspension has collapsed on the driver's side, the rear subframe has snapped and it wears the dreaded oversills, but it's all there. Even the key in the centre switch panel is still present, despite being useless!

Dream fleet

So what now? Simon is considering a sympathetic restoration, maintaining as much of the car's originality as he can. That's not bad for a car he initially bought to raise funds for The Mini Works' impending new premises. "Originally I thought I'd just punt it and it'd go towards my garage. But now I've got to keep it unless someone makes a silly offer."

Thanks to the purchase of Ade's GT, Simon is now in the enviable position of owning arguably the two most significant slab-fronters in the world - the oldest production 1275 GT and most likely the oldest Clubman in all existence. We doubt he'd predicted that whilst walking past an innocuous looking red GT on his way to school 25 years ago...

TECH SPEC

BODY Prototype Clubman bodyshell believed to be from May 1969, MkII-type bulkhead, hand-made inner wings, left hand bonnet stand retainer, PSF stamp in radiator cowl, no drip rail, Mk3 Elf/Hornet door handles, riveted-on boot board brackets, stuck-on GT Stripes. Paint: BL Flame Red over grey primer.

ENGINE Standard 1275cc four-cylinder A-Series engine with dynamo and single HS4 carburettor.

TRANSMISSION Standard four-speed remote change gearbox, 3.65:1 final drive ratio.

BRAKES 7.5-inch Cooper S/GT disc assemblies front, spacer drums rear, remote servo.

SUSPENSION Hydrolastic 'wet' suspension.

WHEELS 4.5x10-inch Rostyle steels (but not all currently fitted).

INTERIOR Pre-production 'Competition Class' seats, pre-production heater, three-clock dash binnacle with 6500 rev counter redline mark, March 1969 stamped glass, boot board.



Simon recognised the large rear plate from when he used to walk past this car on his way to school!



The correct GT boot board brackets are present, but they are riveted in place rather than spot-welded.