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All will be revealed next month. . .



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# All that glitte



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... isn't gold, and it might not be steel either! John Brigden tells the story of the no-rust Mini

**I**t wasn't long ago that 1992 was slated by the Rover Group as the last year of production of the Mini but somehow, ever since the ink started to dry on the proposal, the Mini has been fighting back.

The new Cooper which the management thought might have limited appeal was intended to let the car go out with a bang, but it has proved such a stunning success that the company no longer even thinks about the ending of production.

World-wide interest too has never been higher and the Mini Cord, the fibreglass Mini made in Venezuela, may be just the start of a resurgence in sales outside the core markets of the UK, Japan, Germany and France.

The dream of a fibreglass Mini goes back to the early 1960s when a Mr A C Hill, the BMC fibreglass guru based at Cowley, started experimenting with a number of materials. There was even a polyurethane Mini built but it proved too brittle and failed the crash tests.

In those days there was a different attitude to research and individuals were allowed to dabble with something and see what came of it. This is the opposite of the present day policy of any company when market research is carried out and products are made to satisfy a perceived demand. In those days, they would discover an interesting fact and try and find a way of using it. Because of this many blind alleys were followed before a project was abandoned.

It was probably more innovative but it was very costly and deflected the efforts in the

company from making cars the people wanted.

While fibreglass bodies never led to anything in those days – there were even fibreglass 1300s built – the idea was seriously taken up by Chile for a while and in 1967 and 1968 there were a few prototypes made and there is some evidence that a small production line was set up, but information is scarce and no-one really knows what became of the Chile project.

It was thought that none still existed outside the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust (BMIHT) who look after all the cars and archives that belong to the companies that have gone into the formation of the Rover Group. They have two and a half cars and one was sent to Venezuela when they expressed interest in reviving the idea a couple of years ago. However, look at the Letters page and you will see a Chile Mini owned by Mike Scarfe at Oxford. It was pure coincidence that he sent in his picture just when we were writing this article, but he has certainly helped with the information he has gathered and some of the pictures he has let us borrow.

His pictures show the Chile production facility and the two line drawings also belong to him showing just how the Chile Mini was made. It's really a sort of giant Airfix kit as you can see, with a space frame/roll cage for strength.

Interestingly he has been told that four Chile Mini prototypes were made over here at, of all places, Pressed Steel Fisher. He says that the bodywork on his Mini is up to 4.5 inches thick in places, and this may well

*Left: Look closely, and you'll see there's something not quite right about these two Minis. Above: A slight flare over the wheel-arch and odd guttering gives the game away*

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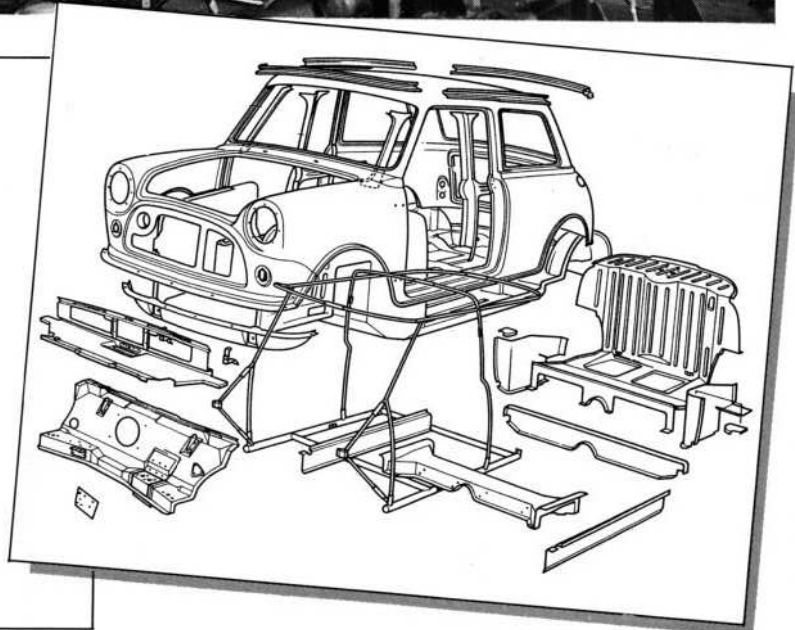
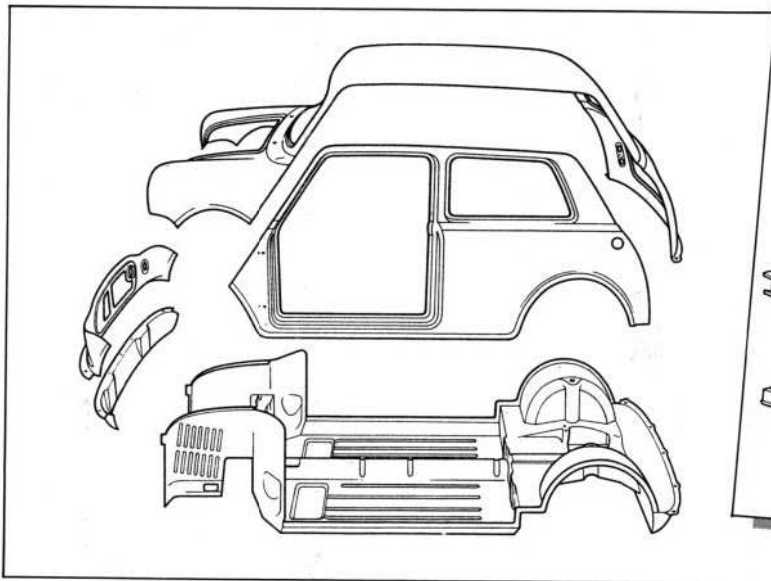
◀ was used in some sections. He has sliding windows but on the production vehicles wind-up windows were installed. Our pictures, taken at the BMIHT headquarters at Studley in the Midlands, of the Cord and the Mini sent to Venezuela for reference give a good comparison of the two cars.

"The Chile Mini isn't one thing or another," says Mike Scarfe. "They all had 1000cc engines, used the Mk1 grille and Mk2 badges, had the Mk2 bottom rail, Mk2 steering column, Mk2 interior and Mk1 body.

"They were, of course, seamless but had an aluminium gutter to stop the water dripping on you every time you opened the door in the rain."

The main differences are in the bodyshell. The Chile Mini is basically a Mk1 shell style whereas the Cord is definitely Mk4 with the latest style grille. The Chile Mini has very slight lips over the wheel arches whereas the Cord has larger arch extensions and on both cars these run as a lip under the doors along the top of the sill. This is to give extra strength in those areas. ■

*Right: Chilean Mini production in full flight. Below: A bit of glue and some Humbrol enamel, and you've got yourself a car*



## MINICORD: THE LATEST ADDITION

**MiniWorld** is the first magazine outside Venezuela to drive the MiniCord, so here are our exclusive impressions of the latest addition to the Mini family.

Apart from the wheel arches the other immediately noticeable difference between the Cord and a production car are two raised ridges in the roof which have been put on for appearance rather than having any strengthening characteristics. The body of the Chile Mini was deseamed below the window line and the Cord was originally intended to be the same but because the mouldings are joined on the seam lines it was felt that the seams should stay.

The gutters are perhaps the least convincing part of the car as the finish on them is not particularly good. On the roof they are flat and do not make a proper gutter but the Cord is probably built to meet local weather conditions. When **MiniWorld** initially reported on the project in issue no 3 we reported that the Venezuelans at FACORCA who make the car claimed that the bodywork is up to the standards of Lotus or Lamborghini, but a short inspection will show that they are not there yet.

The front end looks like a one-piece item and taking into account the lack of a join along the top of the wings the front is subtly different from a steel Mini.

Generally the work is excellent but there is unevenness in the panels and some rough edges which must be down to mould condition and attention to finish.

Opening the door or more to the point closing it, is a new experience for Mini owners, as it definitely has the sound and feel of a much bigger car. The bonnet seemed to have a very modest opening gap while the boot was excellently finished.

As you can see from the photographs the interior trim is really of quite high standard and it looks and feels very durable. There is even a box for a radio and built-in speakers on the rear parcel shelf. In the back there was plenty of room and there were some shallow pockets for odds and ends. In the front the doors also had pleated pockets.

The driver's seat is very comfortable and the interior, although being a rather uniform grey, is very tastefully done.

Starting the car is no different from any Mini but the good soundproofing that the

fibreglass construction gives is pleasantly surprising. Of course there are still the familiar Mini noises but the note is slightly different as the body absorbs different parts of the sound spectrum.

Being left hand drive, it is not possible to give an exact comparison between the MiniCord and a modern Mini but I was pleased to see that they had done nothing to change its unique character and it wasn't long before I was perfectly at home in the car. I was pleasantly surprised by the sprightly performance as I expected it to be a little sluggish.

However, I was told that the Cord is about the same weight as a steel Mini so there is no reason for the performance to be any different.

There is nothing that can be said about the Mini handling that hasn't been repeated a thousand times but what pleased me most was the way the MiniCord embodies the essence of the Mini despite being very different in construction.

I am sure the Venezuelans will have as much fun with the MiniCord as we have had with Minis over here. ■