

The BN5

By Patrick Quinn

Just as there was a gap between the BN2 and BN4, filled by the BN3 prototype project, there was also a gap in the sequence between BN4 (two-plus-two-seater) and BN6 (two-seater) projects. This space, in fact was once intended to be filled by BN5, which was another one-off project.

This car started life as a six-cylinder 100-Six model in 1956 (the chassis number was 25927, which means that it was originally a Longbridge-built car from the summer of that year and the registration number was WAC 247, a familiar type of Warwick number, which confirms that Healey registered it in the first place), but eventually became part of the on-going 100-Six development programme. At this time BMC was suffering from the effects of a trade recession, and was trying to wring every sale out of all its ranges.

Compared, for instance, with the TR3, which had just been upgraded with front-wheel disc brakes, the 100-Six (BN4) was beginning to look a little expensive. Early in 1957, for instance, the 100-Six cost 1,144 Pounds in the UK, whereas, the TR3 was priced at 1,021, which was a significant (12 per cent) margin.

BMC, therefore, not Healey, dabbled with the idea of producing a cheapened version of the 100-Six, and Healey was obliged to do their bidding. This was dubbed BN5 at the development stages. These days we would call it an entry-level version. Then, as now, this sort of marketing ploy rarely does more than attract people into the showrooms. Entry-level machinery rarely sells well, or looks attractive, but it does at least make people look at the better equipped alternatives; the BN5 would have been no exception.

It is difficult to see how the BN5 could have appealed to anyone, as it did not look as good, was not as well-equipped, and certainly was not as fast as the BN4. Starting on the basis of a BN4 two-plus-two-seater, the BN5 not only featured simpler equipment, but significantly reduced performance. The major mechanical change was that a single-carburettor version of the C-Series engine was fitted, while overdrive was not available. Even with twin SU carburetors, as used in the BN4, the 100-Six was not as lively as the original BN1. That engine, with its rather restricted cylinder head breathing, was rated at 102bhp, so the effect of fitting the Austin A95 Westminster type of engine, which only had about 90bhp, can be imagined.

In any case, this car was a lot heavier than the BN1/BN2 types had ever been, and because it was not designed to have overdrive its axle ratio would have been raised. The result was a car that was considerably slower than the BN4, and the BN1/BN2, and also - most important, this - it was no faster than the TR3, and potentially still more costly than that car. In fact, as a sporting proposition it was a non-starter, falling between every possible stool.

No wonder BMC was soon persuaded to drop the idea, after which all efforts went into finalising the two-seater BN6 project instead. As Geoff Healey recorded, the car was later considerably upgraded in its specification, used as a practice car for the 1957 Mille Miglia, and was eventually sold off as a BN4 model, though it retained its unique BN5 numbering sequence."