

The Isuzu- Hillman story.

By Vic Hughes, with thanks to Jan Eyerman and Brett Wild.



At first glance the picture above seems just a normal Hillman Minx; a Mark VI model from about 1953/4. But looking more closely at the plaque mounted on the grille, there are some Japanese characters printed under the word 'Hillman'. And the sign in front of the car is also in Japanese. What does this mean? Simply, that this Hillman Minx (which is in the Toyota museum in Japan) was built in Japan – by Isuzu Motors, under licence from Rootes in the UK.

Today, most people associate Isuzu with trucks and SUVs. If you were around in the 1970s and 80's you might remember the Holden Gemini / Chev Chevette – a product of a joint collaboration between Isuzu and GM. Those who can remember the 1960s may also remember the Isuzu Bellett and Florian cars, and possibly the Wasp utility. But not many people are aware that the first cars made by Isuzu after World War 2 were humble Hillmans.

Isuzu's early history

Isuzu traces its history back to the Tokyo Ishikawajima Shipbuilding & Engineering Co., Ltd. which was established in 1893. In 1918, this company diversified into car making, by starting a passenger vehicle production venture in a tie-up with the British automaker Wolseley Motor Ltd. In 1922, Tokyo Ishikawajima Shipbuilding & Engineering succeeded in localizing production of the Wolseley A9 - the first passenger car ever made in Japan (Toyota made its first car in 1936). During the 1930's "Tokyo Automobile Industries" was formed and in 1949 the company name was changed to Isuzu Motors. The name Isuzu is taken from a river in Japan.

The Hillman connection.

After World War 2, car companies from the Allied countries were anxious to sell vehicles in Japan. By April 1952 six companies – Rootes, Renault, Standard, Opel, Fiat and Chrysler - had conducted Japanese market research studies. The Rootes group initially proposed to set up their own CKD factory and had applied for approval to do so. This was opposed by the Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), and Rootes was required to seek a Japanese partner. Rootes then sought to develop an agreement with Ikegai Motors by which Rootes would import parts, Ikegai would assemble them and then Rootes would sell the vehicles. This was also rejected, and finally Rootes entered into an agreement with Isuzu – under terms set by MITI.

In fact, in June 1952 MITI had basically been forced (by the lodging of proposals by both Rootes and Chrysler) to issue a policy in respect the entry of foreign manufacturers. MITI stated that it would allow foreign firms to enter the market

only through technical agreements with existing local “chassis makers”. They also stated that smaller European cars were more suited to Japan than larger American ones. MITI also controlled the amount of foreign currency that could be spent on auto imports and said they would only allocate enough to allow 1200 cars per manufacturer (per annum). MITI released a further policy statement in October 1952 which provided:

- 1 Foreign capital for sales operations was not permitted.
- 2 Foreign capital for production was allowed if it contributed to local industry development.
- 3 Remittance of royalties and patent fees was guaranteed (in the 1920s there had been issues with Wolseley not being paid some of the royalties due to them).
- 4 Within 5 years of a technology agreement being signed, 90% of parts were to be produced domestically.
- 5 Manufacturing rights for foreign cars must be transferred to domestic companies.

In January 1953 Isuzu and Rootes signed a “Technical Assistance Agreement” under which Isuzu would build (and sell) Hillmans in Japan from CKD (Completely Knocked Down) components. The terms of the agreement were;

- 1 Isuzu received the sole rights to import all types of vehicles made by Rootes.
- 2 Isuzu acquired the right to build Hillman Minx cars and Commer delivery vans – beginning with CKD assembly and moving to domestic production.
- 3 Isuzu would pay £25 royalties for each car (the first 2,000 were royalty free). Also, Isuzu would pay Rootes £50,000. However, Rootes would not remit this money to Britain but use it (along with a slightly larger sum contributed by Isuzu) to establish a sales and service network in Japan. Profits from that network were also not to be remitted to Britain.
- 4 After 5 years, the agreement could be terminated with 1 years notice – if not terminated it would remain in force for 25 years.

On 28 October 1953 the first Isuzu built Hillman Minx was produced at Isuzu’s new Oomori factory.



The first Isuzu Hillman PH10 rolls off the assembly line, 28 October 1953.

Known in Japan as the PH10 model, these were basically the normal Mk VI Hillman Minx; 1265 cc side-valve motor, column shift manual gearbox etc. While most parts of the cars were imported, locally made tyres, tubes and batteries were used, and the car was painted locally. The Isuzu Hillman Minx was sold through the Japanese Yamato Motor Company (jointly owned by Isuzu and Rootes) from 12 November 1953.

Rootes UK updated the Hillman Minx every year, with a new model being released late in the year. Thus the Mk VI was released in November 1953 to be sold as the 1954 model; then, the Mk VI was revised and became the Mk VII late in

1954. Isuzu followed a similar path, and the PH10 was replaced by the PH11 (Mk VII Minx) model in August 1954. The PH11 was replaced by the PH12 (Mk VIII Minx) in February 1955. Rootes introduced a new 1390 cc overhead valve motor with the Hillman Mk VIII, and this was also used in the Isuzu built PH12.

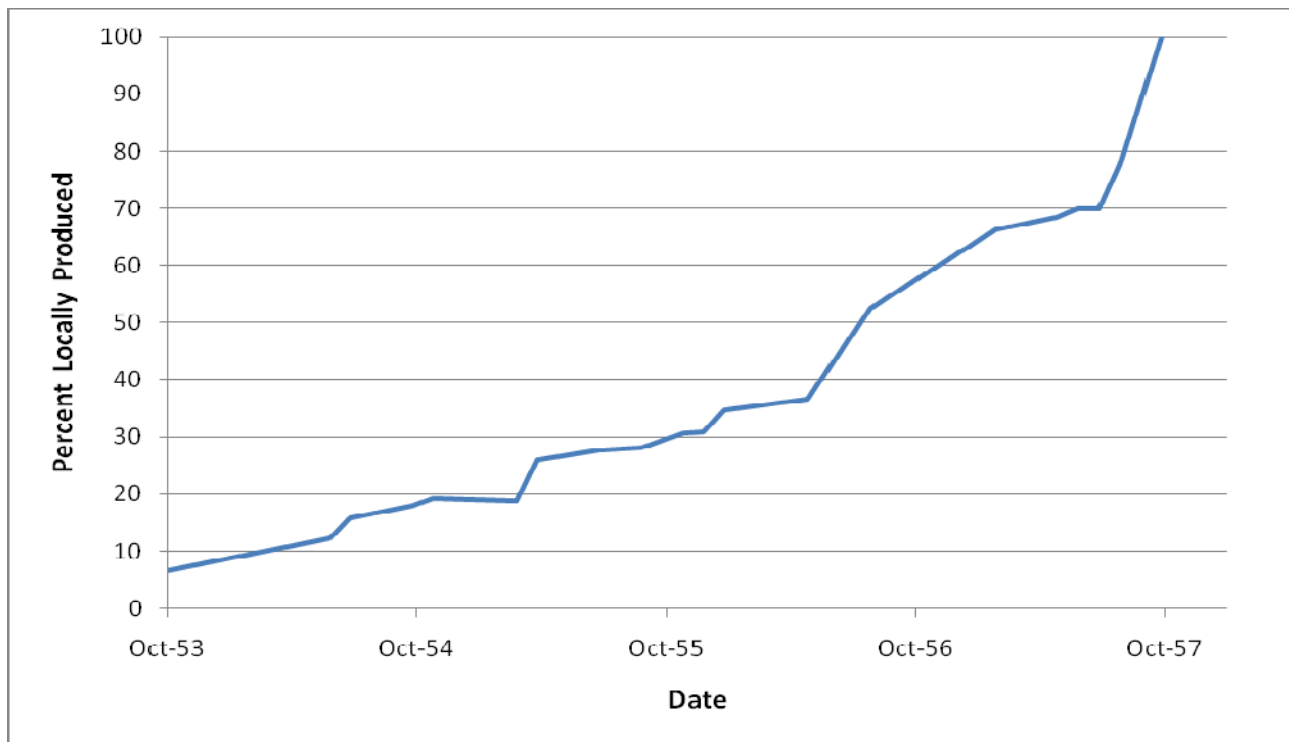
The PH10 to PH12 models were very much sold as Hillmans. The marketing brochures appear to be Japanese language versions of English ones; the illustrations are of people who are clearly western rather than Japanese in appearance, and the use of terms like 'Gay Look' was carried over. It seems that (at least for the PH11 and 12 models) 4 body styles were available: a four-door sedan, two-door convertible, the two-door Californian coupe and a two-door estate.



Brochure for the Isuzu Hillman Minx Range

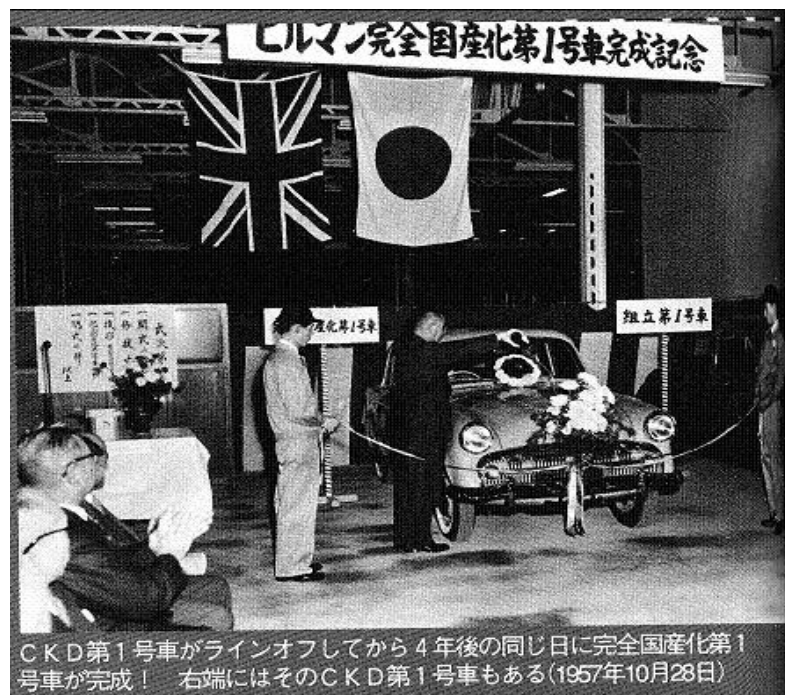
Local Production

Under the terms of its technical assistance agreement (as specified by MITI), from the beginning Isuzu had pursued a policy of gradually moving away from CKD assembly and towards local production of parts. From the outset about 6% of the car's value was Japanese - tyres, tubes and batteries were local and the cars were painted locally. By October 1954 about 18% of the car was produced locally. In 1955 MITI formed the view that Isuzu was not moving quickly enough toward domestic production, apparently suspecting that Rootes was deliberately causing delays (Rootes obviously gained by delaying, as they sold more CKD parts). MITI threatened to reduce foreign currency allocation where "domesticisation" was proceeding too slowly. They also established a schedule for moving to complete local production, which Isuzu agreed to meet. By November 1955 local production had risen to 30%. In August 1956, when the engine and gearbox joined the list of parts locally produced, it had risen to 50%. During 1957 the major body components were built locally taking the percentage to 100. The graph below illustrates their progress to this goal.



Graph showing how Isuzu progressed from CKD to full local production of the Minx, between October 1953 and October 1957

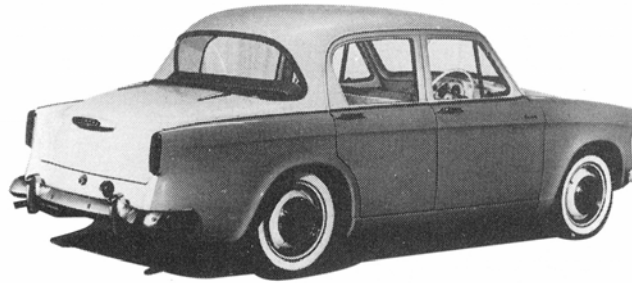
On 28 October 1957, four years to the day after the first PH10 rolled off the CKD line, the first completely Japanese made Hillman was completed.



First all Japanese Hillman, 28 October 1957

The Audax Isuzu Minxes

In 1956, Rootes released the new Audax series Minx – a complete new body which carried over some mechanical components, such as the OHV motor, from the previous Mk VIII. This new model was also built by Isuzu – as the PH100, released on 19 September 1956.



ミンクス

1956年9月19日発表

1956 Isuzu Hillman Minx PH100

In January 1958 Isuzu introduced a new model, the “Super Deluxe”, at a higher price than the Minx. Then in March 1958 they introduced a more basic “Standard” model, at a lower price. The Standard model seems to have replaced (at some stage) the ‘mid range’ Minx, leaving Isuzu with Standard and Super Deluxe Models. Then in August 1958 the range was face-lifted to resemble the Series 2 Hillman Minx. At the same time, power was increased from 46 to 50 BHP in the Minx and to 55 bhp in the Super Deluxe. The car was also now rated to carry six passengers instead of five (from the period brochures, Isuzu had cottoned-on to the Rootes trick of finding those tiny people to illustrate how large their cars were).

この乗心地の良いニュー・ヒルマンで
明るいたのしいドライブを...

巾の広いシート

正確な軽い操向と
強力な確実なブレーキ

楽な乗り降り

Check out the room in the back! Or, Where do they find those tiny people?

In October 1959 the Isuzu was face-lifted again to resemble the Series 3 Hillman Minx. At this same time it gained the 1494 cc motor. There were now two versions, the Standard with 60 bhp (7.5:1 compression ratio) and the Super Deluxe (62 bhp, 8.5:1 CR). They were face-lifted again in October 1960 to what Hillman fans would recognise as the Minx Series 3A - except with the smaller windshield from the earlier Series Minx. There were further minor revisions in October 1961 and October 1962. In April 1963 another revision was made in which power was lifted to 68 bhp (Standard) and 70 bhp (Super Deluxe). Isuzu phased out the Hillman Minx in June 1964 at which time 57,729 Isuzu Hillmans had been made. At £25 per car (minus the first 2,000 cars) that presumably netted Rootes just under £1.4 million in royalties, plus whatever it was paid for the CKD parts in the first 4 years.



The last of the line, a 1964 Isuzu Hillman Minx Super Deluxe



An Australian 1960 (Series 3A) Hillman Minx (Rootes) Note the larger windscreen than the similar Isuzu Minx.

There was very little change to the appearance of the cars from October 1960, the last model still resembling the 3A Minx. The Isuzu Minx soldiered on with the 1494 cc motor until the end, never receiving the 1592 cc motor that was released in the Series 3C Hillman Minx. Nor did Isuzu ever build the revised body shape of the Series 5 Hillman (introduced by Rootes late in 1963), the last Isuzu Minxes being the 'old' Series 3A/B shape.

Rootes had tried in 1961/62 to further extend the period that Isuzu were to build Hillmans cars. They were apparently optimistic about the possibility of the market being 'liberalised', which would have allowed them to sell fully imported cars through the established dealer network (which they owned about half of) – apparently foreign made cars were still cheaper than locally produced ones. Rootes was even prepared to forego their royalties – but the deal never eventuated. In 1967, when Chrysler acquired Rootes they also acquired Rootes' share in the dealer network (by then called Shinsei motors) and attempted to use it as a base for operations in Japan.

While the Isuzu Hillman Minxes generally resemble their British counterparts, there are subtle differences. Jan Eyerman has noted the following from his brochures:

"The first is a "Jubilee" Hillman Minx-the car has a Series II grille but the side trim is NZ Humber 80 style but with Series III style tail lights (with back up lights). Hubcaps are full wheel covers. There also seems to be a base model without hubcaps and no side trim. It only shows 4 door sedans. Engine size is given as 1390cc.

The next brochure I have says "60" but is a Series III and it too has the NZ Humber 80 side trim. Although it is similar to a series III, it has a Series I-II style instrument set up (speedo in center with auxiliary gauges on either side). This brochure shows the 2 door wagon on the Minx wheelbase, the "Express". There again appears to be a base model also. Engine size is given as 1494cc.

My next brochure is "Hillman Minx '63" and appears to be a Series IIIA or IIIB. Again there appears to be a base model and a "Minx Super DeLuxe" (on the front doors). It also appears to have the same smaller windshield as the

Series I-III. The dash/instrument cluster is VERY interesting. It has the old Series I-II instruments but they are mounted in the later Series III panel. The clock and radio are mounted below the dash and the car has a metal covered glove box in front of the passenger. Tail lights are Series IIIA but have a backup light in the center. Headlight rims are chrome instead of body color. Finally, there is the interesting 2 door station wagon on the Minx wheelbase. What is interesting is that it uses the tipped over fin of the Series IIIA (the Rootes built Series IIIA wagons used the Series III rear lights). Engine size is given as 1494cc."

The Isuzu Hillman Express Estate – links to a Commercial vehicle?

As mentioned earlier, the 1953 technical agreement with Rootes gave Isuzu the right to build and sell the "Commer delivery van". This presumably meant the Commer Express – a light commercial van that Rootes had made in the Hillman "Mark" body shape since at least 1950. Images of the Mk Commer Express and Hillman Minx estate show them to be very similar in appearance, both having only two passenger doors, and two-piece tailgates - split down the middle (hinged at the sides). The estate has rear side windows (sliding for the rear passengers) and a rear seat, where the vans have sheet metal and a flat load floor. I was unable to find any reference to Isuzu actually selling a Commer van: However it is apparent from brochures that Isuzu did offer an estate version of the PH11 and PH12 (Mk VII/VIII) Hillman Minx.

With the introduction of the Audax Hillman Minx in 1956, initially Rootes only produced the 4 door sedan. In 1957, Rootes UK introduced a 4 door estate version of the Minx. Isuzu chose not to build the Rootes version, but to introduce its own estate. Known as the Hillman Express, the Isuzu estate was a curious beast. The body was almost certainly inspired by a commercial van design. It was quite different to the English Minx Estate, having a different roofline (more like the Mk Estate cars), two doors, sliding rear passenger windows, horizontal 'bars' on the load area side windows, and a single-piece, side-opening tailgate. The front seat is also split oddly – not down the middle, but 1 third of the way across, on the driver's side. A brochure I have shows clearly that Isuzu marketed the Express as a multi-purpose vehicle: delivery van during the week, family estate at the weekend.

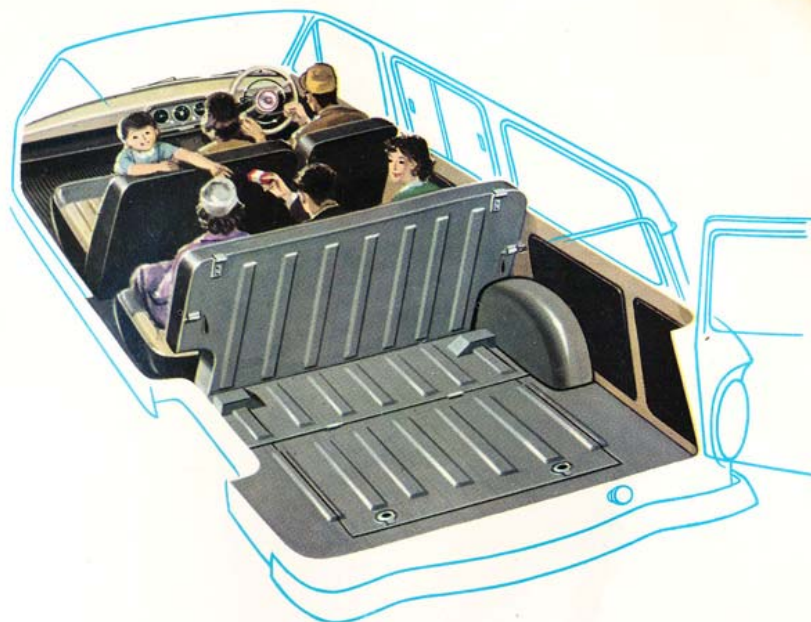
Information from the Toyota museum website suggests that the Express was introduced in 1962, but brochures I have found elsewhere on the web clearly show the Express model with Minx Series 2 styling. Thus, the first Express was probably released sometime between August 1958 (when the "Series 2" style Isuzu Minx was released and October 1959 when the "Series 3" facelift occurred. The Express seems to have been equipped with the low-compression engine used in the Standard Minx.



Isuzu Hillman Express Wagon, circa 1958-59. Note the Hillman Minx Series 2-style front



Rootes Hillman Minx Series 2 Estate, circa 1958. Compare roofline with Isuzu Hillman Express



Layout of the Hillman Express interior, from a 1962 Isuzu Hillman brochure.

The Express name was clearly taken from the Commer Express van – which seems to have had no direct Commer equivalent in the Audax body style. (In the post-1956 ‘Audax’ era, Rootes also sold a Commer Express with a strange combination of the Mark body and a Series 1 style front).



Commer Express van, from a European brochure (French or Belgian?). Note the similar roofline to the Hillman Express Estate above, and the Minx Series 1 style grille on the Mk style body.

Model designations – observations and speculation

It’s quite widely reported on the Web that the first (1953) Isuzu Minx was designated the PH10. Less well reported is that the subsequent “Mark” models were PH 11 and PH12 – but the “Isuzu Memorial” book quite clearly says they were.

With the Audax Isuzu models, it’s widely reported that the first was the PH100, but even the Isuzu Memorial book is not forthcoming with designations for subsequent models, except that when the Standard model was introduced (1958) it was called the PH50 (A 1964 calendar on the Bellett forum also has the Standard model as the PH50). However, the brochure for the 1962 models refers to the Sedans as PH400 and the Express as the PT300. So the following table summarises what I think happened with model designations. I believe that after 1960 they kept the PH400 and PT300 model designations because model upgrades were so minor they didn’t change the appearance of the cars. It seems the Standard model remained the PH50. However, as I said, this *is* speculation.

| Date | Event | Model Designation |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| September 1956 | Audax “Series 1” released | PH100 |
| August 1958 | “Series 2” style facelift for Sedan | Super Deluxe PH200 Standard PH50 |
| “ “ ? | Express Estate released | PT100 |
| October 1959 | “Series 3” style facelift | Super Deluxe PH300 |
| “ “ | Express “Series3 “ style | PT200 |
| October 1960 | “Series 3A” facelift | Super Deluxe PH400 |
| “ “ | Express 3A style | PT300 |

The Descendants of the Minx – Isuzu’s own cars

Isuzu had introduced the first car of its own design on 11 April 1961. The Isuzu Bellel was a conventional 4 door sedan which certainly owed little to the Minx in terms of styling (but it was similar to contemporary Farina designs like the Fiat 2300). Larger, heavier (1190 kgs) and equipped with a 2 litre (1991 cc) engine, the new Isuzu was a size above the Minx, and hence not a direct competitor. From what I read, the suspension design was pretty much Hillman inspired. It is said on several websites that the name Bellel resulted from combining the English word "Bell" with the Roman numeral "L" (50). So the name was supposed to mean 50 bells, although why you would call a car 50 bells is beyond me (unless you thought that was a ringing endorsement – sorry ☺). It seems more likely (to me) that it was a combination of "Belle" (beautiful) with the extra "L" for 50. That would suggest it means something like "beautiful 50 times over". Well, that's my theory, and it makes as much sense as 50 bells – probably more given that the spelling lines up as well. There was a Bellel Express estate (4 doors this time), and the Bellel was the first Japanese car to be fitted with a diesel engine. The Bellel was exported (to Europe) and was even used as a Taxi in the Netherlands.



A 1962 Isuzu Bellel

Isuzu's next car, the Bellett, was the replacement for the Minx. Introduced in June 1963, it was actually slightly smaller than the Minx, and the styling was much lower. Isuzu released several varieties of Bellett; the 1500 PR 20 sedan, in "Standard", "DeLuxe" and "Sport" variants, with both 2 and 4 door bodies, and the 1800 PRD10 diesel with Standard trim only. The PR20 came with a 1471 cc OHV pushrod motor, 4 speed floor shift transmission, and independent rear suspension, but it still had drum brakes (whereas the Hillman Minx Series 5 released in 1963 had front discs). At the same time Isuzu released the Bellett Express estate with 1300 cc and 1500 cc variants known as the KR10V and KR20V respectively. The Wasp Pickup in 1300, 1500, and 1800 diesel variants (KR10, KR20, and KRD10) also came out in June 1963 – what a big month for Isuzu. We can deduce from the model designations that the Express was based on the Wasp rather than the sedan (does the "V" in fact stand for Van?) – In a similar manner to the Hillman Express being related to the Commer Van.

The Bellett was an Isuzu mainstay for 10 years. Over time Isuzu introduced the 2 door coupe GT model and a 2 door fastback. The motor was enlarged to 1600 cc, then given an overhead cam, then double overhead cams in the 1600 GT-R, and then enlarged again to a (SOHC) 1800 cc version. There is some uncertainty over exactly how many Belletts were built but the number is around 171,000 (about 154,000 sedans and 17,000 GTs)

The motor used in the first Bellett was very similar in appearance to the Hillman Minx motor, but was different in bore and stroke and used metric (rather than UNF/SAE) bolts. The name Bellett supposedly means "a smaller Bellel" (the ett – suffix indicating "smaller"). But wait; if my theory above about "Belle" is correct, then Bellett might mean "a little beauty". Now who could argue with that?



Bellett sedan



Wasp Pickup



Bellett GT coupe



Express Estate

This story was assembled by Vic Hughes using a variety of sources including:

- 1 The Japanese book "Isuzu Memorial 1953 -2003" (with the Hillman pages translated to English)
- 2 "The History of Anglo-Japanese relations, 1600-2000" (Volume IV, Chapter 6 - A case study of Anglo-Japanese cooperation in the motor vehicle industry: Ishikawajima, Wolseley, Isuzu and Rootes)
- 3 The Classic and Sportscars book "A-Z of Cars 1945-1970"
- 4 The Web references listed below

I am very grateful to Jan Eyerman (Hillman Cars Group, USA) and Brett Wild (Bellett Forum Australia) who kindly checked it for me, pointed out my mistakes and added some details (including the detailed differences between Isuzu and Rootes Minxes (Jan) and the Bellett production numbers and model details (Brett)).

In assembling it, I tried to combine and cross-check sources to come up with what was most likely. For example, it is said in more than one place on the Web that the Express Estate was first made in 1962. The "Isuzu Memorial" book makes no reference to the Express, but the website with Japanese Hillman brochures has an Express with what is clearly "Series 2" 1958 Minx front end styling. Hence my claim that it was first made then.

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Web References

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http://www.jsae.or.jp/autotech/data_e/1-13e.html

Isuzu Bellel Taxi in the Netherlands

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/michiolverburgh/4645387807/>