

What British car club web site would be complete without a mention of the conglomerate that produced most of the cars we own and love? Here is A Brief History of British Leyland.

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British Leyland was originally founded in the United Kingdom in 1968 as the British Leyland Motor Corporations, Ltd. (BLMC) when Leyland Motor Corporation (LMC) merged with British Motor Holdings (BMH). At the time BMH was close to collapse and LMC was successful, and it was hoped by government officials, including the chair of the Industrial Reorganization Committee, Tony Benn, that by joining forces BMH would be revived. As a result of this move, almost all remaining British car makers were consolidated into one corporation under former LMC chairman Sir Donald Stokes.

Before the merger, BMH had been the UK's largest automobile manufacturer producing more than twice as many vehicles as LHC, though their lineup at the time of the merger included vintage cars like the Morris Minor (1948), Austin Cambridge, and Morris Oxford (both 1959). After the merger, Lord Stokes discovered that there were no plans to replace these designs, and that their designs from the period immediately preceding the merger were focused on niche models such as the underdeveloped Austin Maxi, and the Austin 3-litre, which had no real place in the market of the day.

Dated designs aside, BMH had once been the producer of several popular and successful cars, including the Austin/Morris 1100/1300 line (once the UK's best selling auto) and the Mini, which was never highly profitable. Neither of these cars could compete against new rivals from America, such Ford's Cortina and Escort.

Stokes immediately began gearing up to introduce new models as quickly as possible. The first result of this rushed program was the Morris Marina, which debuted in early 1971, and used parts from various other BL models but sported new bodywork. It became the company's first mass market competitor, and one of the strongest-selling cars in Britain during much of the 1970's, though its reputation had slipped somewhat by the time production ceased in 1980. This slippage, as well as the Austin Allegro, which was introduced in 1973 and suffered a similar trend toward unpopularity toward the end of its 10-year production life drastically hurt BLMC's reputation.

In a way, BLMC was a somewhat schizophrenic company. At the peak of production, it owned almost forty different manufacturing facilities, and even before the merger, BMH's production had included other divisions selling "badge engineered" cars that were similar to those sold under their own name, in effect putting them in competition with themselves. After the merger this internal competition increased, and included marques that had been part of the original LMC, like Triumph, which competed against Austin, Morris and MG, as well as Rover and Jaguar at the upper end of the market.

Taken as a whole, this meant that the BLMC lineup was loaded with duplication and redundancy, not helped by the inability to cement the brand name British Leyland, in the minds of consumers. In addition the company was plagued with union disputes, had to try and weather the 1973 oil crisis, the three-day week (a British energy conservation measure in which commercial users of electricity were only allowed three consecutive days to use electricity, and were not allowed extended hours), high inflation, and bad management. It should be no surprise, then, that by 1975 bankruptcy seemed inevitable.

In April, 1975, the Ryder report, the results of an inquiry into the position of BLMC by Sir Don Ryder, was presented to the British government, and, following the recommendations therein, the company was restructured into British Leyland, Ltd, (BL) with the government a major shareholder. Under the reorganization, BL was comprised of four divisions:

- Leyland Cars: The largest automobile manufacturer in the UK, with a production capacity of a million units a year, and about 128,000 employees in thirty-six locations. This would eventually become BL Cars.
- Leyland Truck and Bus: the UK's largest commercial and passenger vehicle manufacturer, producing 38,000 trucks, 19,000 tractors, and 8,000 buses per year.
- Leyland Special Products: basically the miscellaneous division of the company, including businesses as diverse as construction equipment manufacturers and publishing corporations.
- Leyland International: the division responsible for exporting cars, trucks and buses, as well as overseeing manufacturing plants in Africa, Australia and India.

By 1976, the reorganization had paid off, when the Rover SD1 executive car was named the European Car of the year.

In 1977, Sir Michael Edwardes was named the CEO, and Leyland Cars was divided again into Austin Morris (for high-volume production) and Jaguar Rover Triumph, or JRT (which produced upmarket and specialty vehicles). Austin Morris also included the MG marque, while Land Rover and Range Rover eventually became the Land Rover Group. Even later, JRT would split again, into Rover-Triumph and Jaguar Car Holdings (which also included the Daimler brand).

The next year, the company formed a new group, BL Commercial Vehicles, to oversee all commercial vehicle interests. Under the control of managing director David Abell, this group later merged with the Land Rover Group to become Land Rover Leyland.

In 1979, British Leyland, Ltd., was renamed again, this time called simple BL, Ltd., while its subsidiary, The British Leyland Motor Corporation, Ltd, became just BLMC, Ltd. The subsidiary acted as a holding company for all of the other companies within the group.

In October, 1980, BL's popularity and prospects improved, when it launched the Austin Metro. This was a three-door hatchback which served as a modern alternative to the aging (if still iconic) Mini, and would become one of the most popular cars in Britain in that decade.

In 1982, the Morris and Triumph brands were discontinued, and the car division became the Austin Rover group, though Jaguar Car Holdings still retained the names Jaguar and Daimler. Two years later, Jaguar Cars would once more become independent due to a public sale of its shares, and would subsequently be acquired by Ford. Two years later, BL changed its name to Rover Group, and in 1987, the trucks division merged with the Dutch DAF company to form DAF NV, which trades in the UK as Leyland DAF, and in the Netherlands as DAF. The bus division was also spun off in 1987, becoming Leyland Bus, but would subsequently be sold to the truck division of Volvo in 1988.

1988 also saw the remains of Rover Group sold to British Aerospace, which in turn sold it to BMW, which, after initially considering the entire business, eventually chose to retain only the Cowley plant for MINI production, closing the Longbridge facility. Longbridge, along with Rover and MG, was acquired by MG Rover which went bankrupt in April, 2005, only to resume production in 2007 under the ownership of China's Nanjing Automobile.

In March, 2008, Jaguar and Land-Rover were sold by Ford to India's TATA Motors, which also bought the three brand names Daimler, Lanchester and Rover.

With the final sales, came the end of British industry owned, mass-produced automobiles in the UK.