

## Buying a Convertible (938 Words)

We seem to be quite fond of convertible cars generally in the UK and it seems that the idea of a Morris Minor Convertible is as appealing as ever. This is, of course, reflected in their value which mirrors their desirability.

As we all know, the Morris Minor has 'monocoque' construction. This word is part French (*'mono' – single*) and Greek (*'cocque' – shell*). It means that there is no separate chassis from which the body can be lifted – as per most pre-war cars. Instead of the chassis doing all the load-bearing work, the car is designed as a structure where the whole body (or most of it) is performing the load bearing function. It follows, therefore that the roof section, being an integral part of the structure of a monocoque designed vehicle performs a vital function in keeping it from collapsing in the middle! You may have noticed the continuity of the tubular sections on the Minor saloon which run up past the windscreen, over the roof and down into the boot. These provide rigidity and strength and help to limit flexing of the vehicle in use. If you cut the roof off a car with a separate chassis, you would not need to provide structural strengthening. You might, however need to add strengthening to stop sideways scuttle shake etc.

So what about the Minor Convertible, I hear you ask? Well, the answer from a structural point of view is that the car floor is converted into a load bearing 'chassis'. This was done during construction, by adding a couple of steel channel sections within the sills. It is often quoted as a testament to the inherent strength of the Minor design that it needed so little additional steel to make it strong enough to survive without the roof. As mentioned earlier, strength was not the only consideration and so it was also necessary to provide some 'fillets' under the dashboard to limit the 'scuttle shake' effect. Also, some struts were provided on the 'B' posts, behind the doors to strengthen the body tub (and probably to stop the rear quarter panel wobbling when the doors were shut). The convertible was available right through production, but was the first to be phased out in June 1969 with total production being less than 6% of all passenger cars. Applying the normal rates of attrition over the years meant that they would become a bit rare later on. Because their construction is relatively simple and there were so many more 2 door saloons around, it became quite popular in later years to make 2 door saloons into convertibles. Kits came on to the market and you could either do it yourself or get someone to build one for you. Thus, the so-called "post-production convertible" was born. If a conversion is done properly, there is no technical reason why it should not be as good as a real one. It is harder to spot a conversion, if the work has been carried out well, but the vendor should not misrepresent a conversion as an original.

We have covered elsewhere, the basic items to check when buying a Minor Saloon and these will apply generally to the convertible with some additional checks as follows which are specific to this model.

First, check the condition of the hood and the operation of the frame. Most owners stand in the rear footwell and raise the hood vertically prior to lowering it onto the front screen and securing with the two butterfly screws. On most cars you will find that the hood hoops rub against the doors and the rear side window frames. This, of course, damages the paint and so many owners have fitted Traveller doors

(stainless steel frames). Also, you need to carefully check the body shape which can indicate weakness in the chassis. Door gaps should be even and parallel. Tapering narrower towards the top of the door usually means a weak or badly repaired chassis. If the door window frame rubs on the rear fixed side window frame at the top, there could be a structural problem. You don't want one where the doors jam shut when you take on passengers either. Make sure, there isn't the opposite problem of the chassis 'hogging' ie bowed upwards so that the door gaps are too wide at the top. This probably means a conversion (or structural repairs) have been done badly and potential 'sag' has been over-compensated for.

You should verify the authenticity of 'original' convertibles - not necessarily taking the seller's word for it. Have a close look at the strengthening panels under the dash and the 'B' posts which will tell you definitively if the car is a converted saloon. It is very difficult to replicate factory spot welds. If in doubt have a look for some spot welds somewhere else and compare them with those in question. Watch out for 'plug' welds which will look similar but should give the game away. Of course, the chassis number should tell you, but don't rely on it. It may have been tampered with. The earlier code used the second letter to denote the body type. So, for example 'FBU' means 2 door saloon, 'FCU' means Convertible. Sometime in 1957, the codes changed as follows. The chassis number prefix 'MA2S' means 2 door saloon and 'MAT' means Tourer.

Once again, there is nothing wrong with properly built conversions, but I would value them a bit less than an equivalent condition original -when you come to sell, you can be sure your buyer will!

Happy convertible hunting.