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A brief history of the world's most affordable cars

Ford's mass-produced Model T set the standard for cheap yet high-quality cars; the Austin 7, VW Beetle, Mini and Eastern Bloc imports ensued

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8 May 2021 • 6:30am

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Henry Ford didn't invent the production line, as is often believed. Manufacturers had been using similar assembly methods for decades. Ford merely adapted and refined the techniques to reduce costs and produce a motor car cheap enough for Mr Average, rather than Mr and Mrs Rich, who were the only likely internally combusted customer in the late Victorian era.

Nor did Henry insist on painting all his cars black, as per another myth. On the other hand, he probably did like to point out that history was “more or less bunk”, a belief that helped shape the first car for the modern multitude. The Model T, commonly known as Tin Lizzie, emerged in autumn 1908, the result of two years of development in a secret Detroit factory. While elements of previous creations had been carried over, much was new, including the epicyclic transmission.

Drivers in the 21st century might wonder at the Model T's somewhat eccentric control layout. Sitting aloft, the T is festooned with unidentified flying objects. More cinema organ than car. All those knobs, pedals and levers have entirely different purposes to those expected. For example, one lever operated both the feeble brake and the transmission simultaneously. Anybody planning to go for a spin might therefore do so all too literally.

Of course, these eccentricities only became apparent as time ticked by and rivals attempted to standardise controls. Nevertheless, the T was responsible for converting America to left-hand drive, thanks to sheer volume of sales. Ten years after the launch, half of the cars in the US were Tin Lizzies. It's easy to see why. They were cheap, but not cheaply made. Or more diplomatically, inexpensive.

Laurel and Hardy in a Model T, which they used extensively in their films | CREDIT: Bettmann

Once fully functional, Ford's moving production line cut the original cost of manufacture by half. Instead of the extra profit landing in the boss's safe, it went to make the car even more inexpensive, thanks to improved materials and bonuses for loyal workers. By 1925 you could buy a factory-fresh Model T for less than \$300, complete with electric starter. As you might guess, customers came from all quarters, not necessarily those who couldn't afford to pay more.

The Tin Lizzie sold on merit, being rugged and practical. Just ask Laurel and Hardy, who used Model Ts in their films. Cue classic "Throw out the clutch" joke. As production ended in 1927, more than 16 million had been sold – and not only in the US. Satellite factories sprang up all over the world, notably in Trafford Park, Manchester. Henry Ford's dream had come true. Meanwhile, the olde world had nothing similarly inspired to offer.

Close in ethos, English car magnate Herbert Austin's tiny 7 arrived in 1923, a contortionist's dream dwarfed by the Model T, which was sized to fit in the ruts of the unsurfaced highways of the US and (maybe another myth) transport two large milk churns. It was probably a struggle to fit more than a pint in the "Baby Austin", but 290,000 sales by the advent of the Second World War suggests the minimalist approach also works.

The Austin 7 was a pint-sized people's car | CREDIT: Alamy

Moving on, surely the Volkswagen Beetle is the epitome of the cheap car? Well, the Beetle doesn't qualify as cheap or inexpensive. The fraction of an eventual 21 million who bought one before production began at Wolfsburg in 1938 were "obliged to" by Hitler's friends. And the vast new factory was basically built by slave labour.

After years of Allied bombs reducing the building to a shell, British car industry luminaries had the chance to walk away with Germany's automotive secrets, including the "People's Car". They pronounced it dead and dud, possibly one of the dumbest decisions ever.

The irony is that VW was saved by a rather more astute Briton, Major Ivan Hirst, paving the way for the Beetle's smiley "love bug" image in the 1960s.

After Austin merged with Morris, what became BMC and later British Leyland produced cheap cars by the million. The 1959 Mini sold for a bargain £500, which is good. But it made a loss, which is bad, even if BL had become a sort of nationalised charity. They should have listened to H. Ford. Traditional markets were in turmoil in the following decades, as imports muscled in, highlighting the inadequacies of, erm, UK craftsmanship.

The Volkswagen Beetle evolved from Nazi people's car to symbol of hippy peace and love | CREDIT: Alamy

After the European onslaught (the first BMW was a licence-built Austin 7), Japanese cars displaced British family motors. Not exciting, but rugged, dependable and reliable... did someone mention the Model T?

In the 1980s we also suffered an invasion of cars from the nearer East, many based on the old [Fiat 124](#), such as the Lada Riva (yours for £2,749 in 1985). Other sub-£3,000 motors from the Eastern Bloc included the [Skoda Estelle](#) (£2,548) and [Yugo](#) 45 (£2,999).

For comparison, the long-in-the-tooth Citroen 2CV was priced from £2,774, although cheapskates of the era had much more choice by daring to breach the £3,000 barrier. At least 25 years have passed since the average driver would tolerate such primitive machines. Bad cars simply don't exist now. Here in 2021, you can have your cake, eat it, then decide you want a refund for gluten intolerance.

Like the Model T, the latest Dacia Sandero is a cheap car but it's not cheaply built

Take the [new Dacia Sandero](#), for instance, reviewed by motoring correspondent Andrew English recently. For only £7,999 you get a car that will do everything, complete with the sort of specification and performance that would have cost twice as much not long ago. Updated for 2021, it's fundamentally a Renault Clio, at a lower price.

Here we come full circle as, like Ford's Model T, the latest Sandero is cheap but not cheaply made. What's not to like, as they say?

The Ford Model T, Mini, Volkswagen Beetle, Citroen 2CV and Austin 7 feature in Andrew English's pick of the 100 greatest cars of all time – click on the link below to see his selection, including video of the top 10. Is your favourite classic car among them?



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