

AUSTIN (BMC) BUILT FIRST AMERICAN “SUBCOMPACT”

Although not called a subcompact, when it was shown at the Waldorf Astoria on 4 January 1950, the Nash Metropolitan was touted as an “economical and commuter” car meant to be a second car in a two car family. The term “subcompact” had not yet come



into use when the smaller than “VW beetle” was shown at several “surveys” (previews) in 1950. The diminutive little car was actually known as the NKI Custom (Nash Kelvinator International). It did not become known as the Nash Metropolitan until shortly after it went into production in October 1953 in Birmingham, England. Austin Motor Corporation and Fisher Ludlow bodies, which became part of British Motor Corporation, were selected in October 1952 to manufacture and

assemble the cars at the Longbridge plant. Nash and Mason management concluded the car could be tooled and built overseas at a much lower cost. The Metropolitan featured the Austin A-40 1200cc four cylinder engine which produced 42bhp. Two body styles were offered: a convertible (\$1,479), and a hardtop (\$1,445). There were several options available and the car featured uni-body construction at a time when most cars were of body on frame design.

In 1954, Nash and Hudson merged to become AMC, at which time the Metropolitan was also sold as a Hudson Metropolitan. After the first 10,000 cars were built, the engine was changed to a B-series engine along with several mechanical upgrades to the running gear. In November 1955 a series III version went into production and the B-series engine was increased to 1498cc which increased the engine output to 52bhp. The car then became known as the “Metropolitan 1500”. Along with the engine change, there were several cosmetic changes plus new exterior colors were offered. Ride quality was also improved with a reengineered suspension system.

In January 1959 the series IV model was introduced, horsepower rose to 55. A major redesign included a new rear deck lid which now allowed access to the trunk from outside the car. Previous models only allowed access to the trunk from the rear of the back seat. The redesign also included vent windows. The series IV model sold for \$1,672 (hardtop) and \$1,696 (convertible). Sales in 1959 were 22,209, the Metropolitan’s bestselling year. Production ceased in April 1961. Approximately 95,000 cars were sold in the United States and Canada. Only series III and series IV cars were sold in the UK, these cars were sold between April 1957 and February 1961. In May 1960, Car Mart Ltd., (Austin dealership in London) presented Princess Margaret with a specially prepared Metropolitan finished in black with gold trim and gold leather interior as a wedding present. The car was stolen in London in February 1961.

Happy Motoring...Ron Couturier