

An on-road, off-beat beauty. 50 years of the Hillman Imp

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A Great British design icon and a decades-long affair with the only car I've ever loved...



“What’s in the boot then, sonny?” demanded the young policeman who’d just stopped my car on Waterloo Bridge at 1 a.m. The year was 1977, I was almost 18, and I was rushing home to develop the pictures I’d just taken of a punk band at the old Marquee in Wardour Street. In those days you could often get a sale by turning up early the next morning at the offices of *Sounds* or *NME* with a 10x8 print still wet from the chemicals. As much as £30 was paid for a shot; to put that amount in perspective, petrol was 70p a gallon and I earned £3.95 for my Saturday job in Woolworths.

I eyed him suspiciously. What kind of evil bastard copper trick was this? Eventually, as he began to get visibly impatient, I replied warily, “An engine?”

He snorted and made me undo the latches and open the cover. Sure enough, inside, as I’d said, was the all-aluminium 875cc engine, the beating heart of my mother’s Hillman Imp. The policeman’s

sidekick guffawed loudly while my persecutor turned a shade of pink and let me go on my way.

I have driven a Hillman Imp, or variant thereof, almost without break since those far-off days. For the last 15 years I've owned a bronze Sunbeam Stiletto, the 'Mini Cooper of Imps' with its twin carburettors, quad headlamps, fastback styling complete with vinyl roof, oil cooler, servo brakes and unique interior and dashboard. It isn't a concours car – it's as battered around the edges as its owner – but it's not doing badly for a car that was made in 1968 and is driven every day. "They don't make 'em like that anymore", and as we all know it's now 50 years since they started making 'em in the first place.

But the Imp's history isn't just about an idiosyncratic car that few people ever liked, let alone loved. It's also about a government trying to create jobs in a depressed area after the local shipyards closed – an act of social engineering that didn't work. Much like the cars. The Duke of Edinburgh drove the first Imp when he officially opened Linwood, a brand new plant near Paisley in the west of Scotland, created using an incentive grant from the Labour government (*Some of this grant was never paid... GP*). The Imp was an odd beast, yet ahead of its peers: it had an opening rear window and fold-down rear seat before anyone had even heard of a hatchback, and the computer-designed engine was, as the policeman discovered, located in the boot and drove the rear wheels. No other mainstream car save VW's Beetle and Fiat's 500 and 600 did that.

The design, however, was part of the Imp's undoing. Without any weight up front, the steering is light – on motorways, Imps tend to wander from side to side like drunks walking home from the pub – and because the radiator is also in the boot, the engine doesn't get a good cooling draft of air, and the car gained a fearsome reputation for overheating. This in turn would warp the aluminium of the engine, blowing the head gasket, and making repair all but impossible.

Part of the problem with the Imp, too, was the workforce that assembled it. The situation with the government grant made it impossible for management to get as tough with the workforce as it would have liked; meanwhile, the ex-shipyard men, more used to building big ships with heavy tools, were slow to learn the delicacies of modern car construction, and many Imps left the factory in a sorry state. These specimens would then break down, fuelling the car's largely unfounded reputation for being unreliable. (Of the 400,032 cars made at the Rootes plant between 1963 and 1976 fewer than 4,000 survive – although I personally have waved three off to the crusher.)

When Imps are good they are very good. Mine has a big box of tools in the front – not just to assist with the inevitable breakdowns but to reduce the tendency to the weave in crosswinds – and they are a real delight for

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keen drivers. The gear lever passes directly through the floor, where it meets a simple cup and ball joint before pushing a thick rod connected directly into the gearbox to stir the cogs. The result is a gearchange with the positive and satisfying ‘click-clack’ reminiscent of working the bolt on a Lee Enfield .303 rifle. The engine loves being taken to the screaming top of its rev limit in each gear before you quickly tweak the stick and start building the revs up again.

The steering isn’t power-assisted (it doesn’t need to be as there’s no engine weight up front to overcome) so you literally ‘feel’ the road, with every tiny piece of gravel the tyres pass over sending a small impulse up to your fingers via the steering wheel. Add to this the skinny metal doors and a floor pan that leaves your rear end only inches from the road surface and it’s like driving a go-kart – it feels like you’re going far faster than you are, especially in town. Which is just as well as – despite the low weight, twin carbs and all the rest – even my ‘sporty’ Imp does 0-60 almost in *days*, rather than seconds. 0-30 is sharp, though, and that’s mostly what you need in the real world. The rear end digs in and away you go. No power wasting wheel spin or irritating torque-steer. When you come to a corner, you don’t need to slow down; the back end slides slightly out with all that rear weight and then the power pushes you through. I’ve looked in the mirror and seen modern cars suddenly go all out of shape as they try to follow me through the apex at the same speed.

An Imp is also a conversation-starter. People in fancy motors pull alongside at traffic lights and make motions for me to wind down the window (yes, I have to do it myself – no electric windows here), invariably to say, “I had one of those once!” They usually mean an Imp, not a Stiletto, but I don’t quibble.

They were used by the rozzers too; in the ‘sixties the police motorcycles previously ridden by Dunbartonshire Police Force were replaced by two standard Hillman Imp police cars, and many other forces ran them too. If you’re a fan of daytime telly, you’ll occasionally spot a police Imp in *Heartbeat*, although it’s rarely actually in motion. Strange, that.

My biggest memories though are of working on various Imps through my 20’s and 30’s,



This Stiletto is long gone but its engine lives on in Nick’s current Stiletto
Photo supplied by Nick Harman

and through the night, with my late father, both of us fuelled by endless cups of tea and bacon sandwiches supplied by my long-suffering mother. For repairs, the Imp engine and gearbox combo doesn't need lifting out; you simply support it on bricks and push the car away before splitting the two parts to change the clutch. "Refitting the engine", the Haynes manual cheerfully claims, "is a simple reversal of the process." It wasn't of course; we would work in the cold garage, chatting, laughing, cursing and hitting things repeatedly with a large copper-headed hammer until they finally fitted. "Best tool in the box," my dad would always say, and he was right. I still have it.

Fixing the car may not always be easy, but it is always possible. Once in the 'nineties, as I was driving up the ramp onto the ferry to France, the car's water pump bearings – always a weak point – suddenly disintegrated with a fiendish scream and clatter. After having been ignominiously pushed off the ship again, I walked to a parts shop in Southampton, bought a new pump, and had it installed for the next sailing three hours later, thanks to the decency of the port-side staff who let me work unmolested in the arc lights of the customs area, and even brought me a cup of tea.

I still work on the car myself; I don't trust today's so-called 'technicians'. I stagger into our kitchen wild-eyed with my knuckles skinned and black grease covering me, like a commando just back from a particularly fraught night mission. Old cars can be fixed with common sense, a Haynes manual – and that hammer – while eco-wise it has to be better to run a car for as many years as possible than to keep buying new ones. For that reason I also have a ten-year-old Saab, proof of my unique talent for choosing cars made by manufacturers that would subsequently go bust.

It's been a long time since policemen regularly pulled me over, but somehow it still seems like yesterday. When I get into my Stiletto, with its unique old motor smell of vinyl, engine oil and WD-40, and fire up that mighty 875 cc motor – derived from the Coventry Climax race car engine – I feel like a teenage driver again. I'm happy, in this age of average box-car motoring, to be driving a vehicle that stands out on the road more and more each day, as its once classier peers go to the scrapyard in the sky. Happy 50th birthday, Imp.

A brilliant article, Nick, one that I'm sure will strike a chord with many Imp owners of 'a certain age'. GP