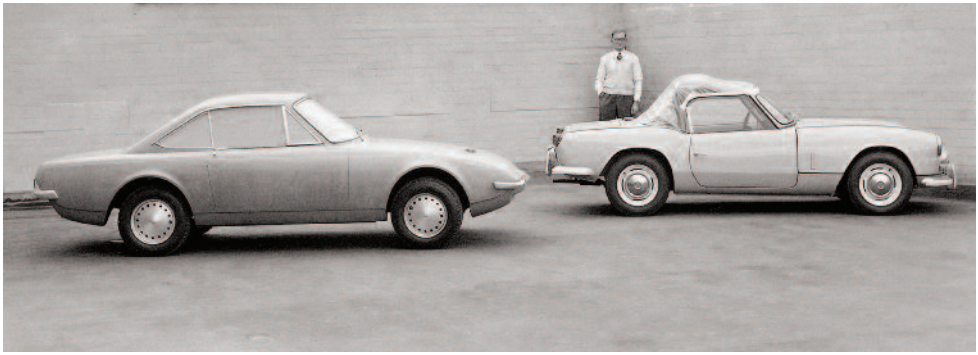
Aspire to an Asp!

Richard Sozanski, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire

Just after the January issue of *Impressions* went to press – with my article on the Asp on page 32 – another photo of the 'what if' Imp sportscar has come into my possession from my source. It is a photo few have seen before.



Looking into the Imp's history there have been some strange decisions made by management as clearly the development engineers came up with a lot of good ideas which never made it into the showrooms. The low-roof estate was one – Rootes instead taking the easy and cheap route (no pun intended) for an estate by simply adding windows and a back seat to the Van – and the Asp was another.

The Asp really looks stunning, what a shame it was never productionised. Even alongside Michelotti's masterpiece, the Triumph Spitfire, the Asp's styling has a mature delicacy which would, in my opinion, have made it a winner. Apart from the Alpine/Tiger there was no sportscar in Rootes' lineup, the Asp could have filled a gap and competed directly with cars such as the Spitfire and MG Midget. GP

Can I claim this as the first Imp derivative Buggy/Dump Truck?

By 'M.R.' (former 'Apex' Vehicle Development Engineer),
via Richard Sozanski, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire

In the early 'eighties a combination of circumstances came together which were the catalysts to the creation of this formidable machine. These were the search for a project that would further enhance father and son bonding, the need for some mechanised device to help us in our agricultural hobbies (the weekly mucking out of sheds, fence repairs and the like), and the third was the gift of a running but MoT failed Imp. This came from a work colleague who said, "You're an Imp man, would you like one?" "Yes" I said apprehensively as I was not too sure what the "one" was.

The Imp duly arrived, and was driven in the field by all and sundry. It was not a pretty sight

parked in the field and I had several hints that something should be done about it from my controlling 'War Department'. *(WD can be seen gracing the front cover. GP)*

Then there was the 'Eureka!' moment – I saw a vision.

The Imp was stripped to component parts and the body shell cut up (sacrilege!).

Now, for me, stripping down the car was a trip down memory lane as most components represented an incident or a personality from the short period of time (around 18 months) when the 'Apex' (the codename given to the prototype Imps) cars were true Ryton Research Department hand-built prototypes.

When I removed the humble rear window stays (they were a work of art) I thought of Bill Lewis, who designed them. Bill's dream was to abandon the drawing board and have his own dairy herd. He had a few animals at the time on rented ground and would attend to these before coming to work. He later moved to the Gower peninsula and achieved his dream.

Removing the front suspension brought Harry White to mind. Harry was a poet, a gentleman and the Manager responsible for the Imp's suspension. My wife (the aforementioned War Department!) often tells me that I am "doing a Harry", when I forget to change up a gear. This comes from the occasion when a senior management group assessed a range of vehicles from other manufacturers. At the first review stop in Oxford, Harry commented that the Beetle was very noisy. It was pointed out to him that he had driven all the way in third gear.

During the Apex development period I cannot recall a failure in Harry's swivel-pin assembly, which I suspect was due to the use of solid stainless steel pins.

There was an occasion when I incurred Harry's displeasure. I had been asked to locate the source of an occasional creak on a car (A10). I drove on the locally-renowned poor road surfaces – nothing. Then on the way back to the works I entered a roundabout, there was a 'crack' and the car smacked into a high kerb. A10 was wrecked. Now, the problem was that this car was used by the Rootes brothers and very senior management for their assessment of the Apex. I therefore thought the demise of A10 would be the end of my short career. My immediate boss, Ken Sharpe, was the only person to believe my account of the incident. It was some two weeks later when Harry's right-hand man, Des, returning from holiday, tried to locate a modified front suspension assembly that he had been working on. (The front wishbones were in the process of being modified to add more rubber to the suspension bushes.) He discovered the unfinished project installed on A10 and noticed the housings had only been tack-welded in place. He went into orbit, but I was off the hook.

When the Rootes brothers came to view and drive the Apex they would arrive in chauffeur-driven Super Snipes and the like. So, to enhance their experience (to use a modern phrase) A10 was the dedicated car for these reviews and 'adjusted' accordingly. Noise reduction materials were stuck on every unseen panel possible and sound absorbing matting stuffed into every accessible space. The engine cooling fan-to-cowl clearance was increased, extra felt was fitted under the carpets, the seats had extra padding and Kapok was stuffed into the seals of the rear window and access doors at strategic places to improve their seal and therefore reduce wind noise. Even the paint finish was high-gloss Ferguson Grey unlike all of the other Coventry prototypes which were mainly matt grey. A10 was probably the quietest Apex/Imp ever built and being hand built must have cost a small fortune.

The Imp Buggy *circa* 1982. Dismantling the donor Imp for this creation brought back many memories for 'M.R.' of his time spent at Rootes
Photo: 'M.R.'

Bill (Adrian) West came to mind when the transmission was removed. I was always impressed with his design; it was a major concept change from the standard Rootes gearboxes and axles of the time. I did have a few occasions when the transaxle gave me a 'moment'. Twice in one week the large underside access disc dropped out when we were on the Mira high-speed circuit causing total oil loss and seizure of the unit and consequent locking of the rear wheels. On one of the occasions a driveshaft broke and the car came to rest in an orderly manner unlike the other occasion when it was a bit 'hairy'. Following these experiences the groove and retention clip designs were changed. On early vehicles, there was a tendency to lose a gear and if this happened while cornering hard, it was difficult to prevent the engine from over-revving, resulting in damaged valves, a view of smoke to the rear and a loss of power. Yes, guilty – and as a penance I was instructed to determine the rpm at which valve bounce occurred. Not a nice job! We took a trip down the straight mile near Dunchurch for this exercise. The design change following this work was the inclusion of the two clearance slots on the piston crown.

The cooling fan and cowl took my thoughts back to Wilmot Bredon at Umberslade Park, where the design was carried out and the prototypes manufactured. My job was to take a car and fitter, fit the parts and then carry out a quick initial noise assessment and a cooling performance test. The blades for the cowl and fan were made individually from a special plastic imported from Switzerland. The failure rate of the initial fabricated fans was very high. Many times we would fit the fan, increase the engine speed and be left with a heap of plastic shrapnel. The good news was that at Umberslade Park the grounds were nice, the receptionist was a delight and the canteen meals excellent.

The people at Wilmot Bredon were certainly on a learning curve when it came to welding plastic, but they eventually sorted the process and some fans were durable enough for us to actually conduct high speed cooling tests at venues such as the Bicester straight, the M1 and eventually MIRA. At high speed if the fan shattered the engine coolant would invariable boil, and sometimes the cylinder head gasket failed before we could bring the vehicle to rest. On the M1 this was not too bad, as the police would stop and contact the works. A failure on the Bicester straight was not so good as there was no public telephone or regular police patrol.

There were many memories prompted by the engine unit, especially the personalities involved,

like Leo Kuzmicki, David Lloyd and John Horton. Leo was quiet, always very smartly dressed and unassuming. He never mentioned the war or his background, but over time (from another Polish engineering colleague) we learnt the he had been a lecturer at Warsaw University, escaped from Poland during the Russian/German invasions, made it to Iran, was a fighter pilot for the Polish Air force and then the RAF. After the war he could not return to Poland and became a janitor in the Norton motorbike factory, where it was discovered that he was an expert on the internal combustion engine. He transformed the Norton's engine. He then went to Vanwall Racing and then on to Rootes. His life story would make an epic book.

Now John Horton was a jolly chap but we did have an on-going issue at one time. I would report a cylinder-head gasket failure, but he would insist it was because I was carrying out cooling tests and had overheated the engine (I do not think that cylinder head gaskets had failed during bench engine tests up to that point in time). But as I was monitoring and recording the coolant temperatures during the tests I could observe when an abnormal rate of change occurred. The department had an endurance car (A4), a cracking car some four inches shorter than the Imp we know (nicknamed 'The Flying Flea') – and it so happened that my girlfriend lived at the bottom of a steep hill. I discovered that if (with a cooled engine) I drove very briskly up the hill the cylinder head gasket would fail. You could almost fail them to order. This and other situations confirmed that there was indeed a cylinder-head gasket weakness and John accepted the problem.

When I removed the steering wheel, there was one person who came to mind, because he was the only person I knew that could span the wheel with his hand – that was the late Mike Parkes. I liked Mike, for he would always show an interest in what I was doing and have a chat, but we never talked about his activities outside of Rootes, such as car racing, flying and the like. Our backgrounds were worlds apart. I did manage to literally burn his figure one day. He poked his finger at a piece of work saying, "What's that?" Too late – "It's hot," was the reply. Mike was very tall, 6ft plus, and his 'partner in crime', Tim Fry was quite well built. Now these two in a car were a dangerous mix – on one trip they were observed exchanging front passenger/driving positions without stopping or apparently slowing down. Mike used to call me 'Sparks'. I was at MIRA one day when he arrived in his Mini Cooper (Registration 600 HP). Mike said, "Sparks, do me a favour, drive my Mini around the handling circuit for a few laps." I did so with no questions asked. It turned out all he wanted to do was to watch it thought the curves and listen to the exhaust note. I confess now that I did play a rotten trick on him – never did own up. After a weekend, just putting miles on an Apex, I happened to clean out the car when parked next to Mike's Mini. In the Apex I found a bra (no there was nothing like that!) and I placed it in the Mini's glove compartment. I still feel guilty as it could have ruined a happy relationship between Mike and his girlfriend. The last time I saw Mike was the day a bunch of production Imps were driven around the Silverstone circuit. (I remember being a bit miffed as I did not get a drive). I was walking across the centre area of the circuit when a Ferrari came to a stop and a voice called out, "Hey, Sparks". At Mike's side there was an attractive young lady and as I spoke to her the bra incident drifted across my mind.

Back to the Buggy...

The aim was to create a vehicle which would tow/push a single-axle trailer or four-wheeled trolley through a tortuous route and carry tools and materials for fencing, ditching and general clearing up with the minimum of expense. Now for some reason beyond my comprehension,

I changed the concept from a rear-wheel-drive to front-wheel-drive/rear-wheel-steer (I think I wanted to try pushing the four-wheeled trolley into a yard rather than reversing).

As can be seen in the photo the chassis was basically a rectangle made from hollow section tubing with hanging brackets to support the repositioned rear suspension arms at the front of the buggy. The vehicle had the full Imp braking system and rack and pinion steering. The main complication was the connection of the pinion to the steering wheel. In the end this was achieved by the use of a length of bicycle chain. There was a sprocket at the base of the column, which through various guides drove a sprocket secured to the pinion. The gearshift mechanism was simple but I did later block 3rd and 4th (too fast for my teenage son). The fuel tank was a modified ordinary petrol can located under the main cover. The can was removed when the vehicle was not in use. 'Health and Safety' would be pleased that the seat belt was reused but may not have approved that it was used for strapping down the tiltable box. And it was perhaps very remiss of me not to fit a roll-over bar.

Being light, the buggy was quite quick, with reasonable steering and good brakes. It achieved the basic design requirements. As the rear tailgate dropped down and a section of the front face lifted out, long rails and timber lengths could be transported. 35 normal size straw bales could be transported, 10 on the buggy and 25 on the four-wheeled trolley.

Agricultural styling aside, the negatives were that the gearing was far too high and if the 'going' on grassland was wet it would be cut up very quickly. This vehicle is the only one that I have driven in which you could do 'wheelies' in reverse. When any of my friends drove the buggy, their faces would light up and they would grin from ear to ear. It was interesting to observe drivers' first reactions to rear-wheel-steer; some would even turn the steering wheel in the wrong direction. Anyway, it was all good fun to me and I do think that we should all have some folly in our lives.

No, I would not admit to the buggy being driven on the road, but I bet you that driven at full throttle in top, it would have made your eyes water from sheer terror!

The Times not the Imp's biggest fan!

Mike Goodwin, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire

I thought Imp Club members might be interested in this piece that appeared in *The Times*, 18th December. It is not very complimentary!

Thanks Mike (and also Richard Sozanski who also sent in this clipping). Who was it who said, "All publicity is good publicity."? Clearly not Ross Clark, who cannot resist a cheap snub at the Imp. GP

Britain must invest or lose the global race

Ross Clark

Published at 12:01AM, December 18 2013

While we dither about airports and power plants other nations are surging ahead

Had I been leading the commission into airport capacity I would have begun by asking the public one of those focus group-style questions: if the UK were a car, what sort of car would it be?

The answer, I suspect, would have been a souped-up Hillman Imp where the suspension has been lowered, plastic fairings glued on to the wheel arches and twin carburettors bolted on to the engine, all in the cause of squeezing a few more miles per hour. It just about does the job but remains incorrigibly a piece of faulty and badly-built 1960s technology.