

## Pre-production Imp Van goes to Finland!

By 'W.M.' (former Rootes Development Project Co-ordinator)

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This might not seem like a normal engineering report on an overseas trip. That's because it isn't! 49 years ago I drove a pre-production Imp Van to Finland. The purpose was to allow the Finnish importer to assess the vehicle and decide whether there was a market for it in Finland.

I have no paperwork relating to the trip other than my own personal diary. Therefore this is more of an account of an individual's (working) trip to Finland.

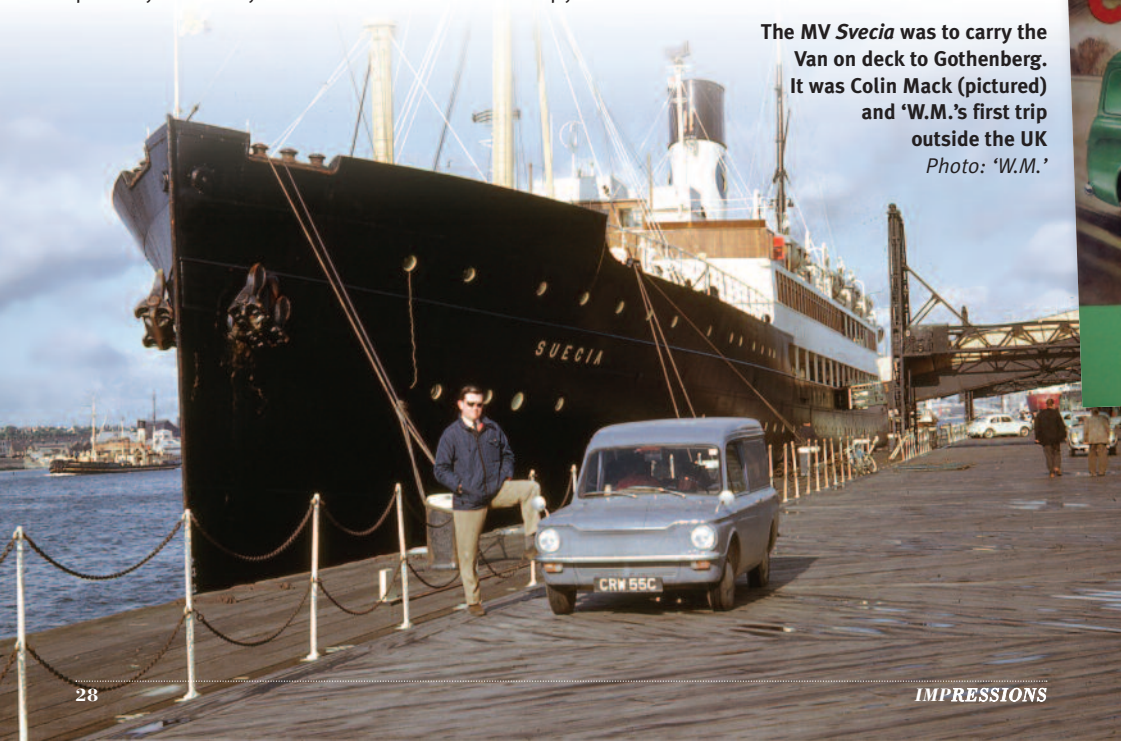
I cannot remember why I had been chosen to go on this trip because at the time I was the Development Project Co-ordinator on the Imp Sport and Asp. Frank Marsden was my equivalent on the Van but as there was a parallel trip to Spain with another Imp Van, Frank might have been involved there.

The van assigned to the Finland trip was brand new, registered CRW 55C. Accompanying me was Colin Mack, a fitter/tester. Colin was about 22 and I was 28. Neither of us had been abroad before! The following is based on my diary notes, so bear with me. Our expenses were £192 + £100 for the van. (£8 per day).

**1st May 1965.** Left work (Ryton) at 11 a.m. The tailpipe fell off on the M45. I stopped on the hard-shoulder and Colin ran back and on to the carriageway to pick it up and promptly dropped it – it was hot! There was very little traffic on the M45 in those days so he was able to retrieve it, undamaged shortly afterwards.

We arrived at Tilbury and the Van was hoisted on the deck of the MV *Svecia*. We sailed at 5.30 p.m. My notes say the North Sea was 'a bit lumpy'.

The MV *Svecia* was to carry the Van on deck to Gothenberg. It was Colin Mack (pictured) and 'W.M.'s first trip outside the UK  
Photo: 'W.M.'

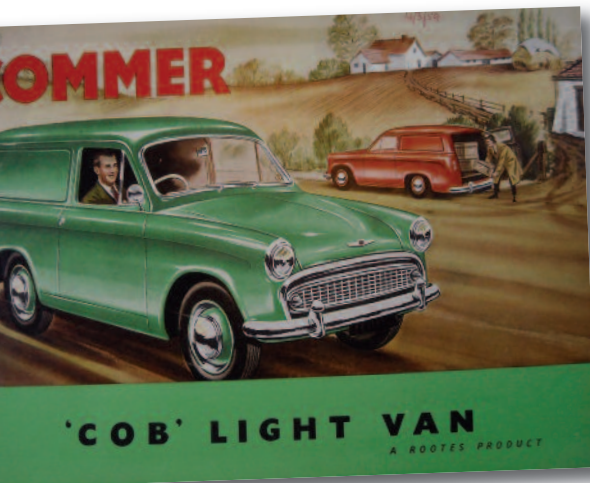


**2nd May.** Still at sea. Well, it was an old ship I suppose.

**3rd May.** Arrived at Gothenberg at 4.45 a.m. and were on the road by 7 a.m. I cannot remember whether the Swedes drove on the left or right in those days. While trying to negotiate Gothenberg, we turned up one road

and oncoming traffic passed *both* sides of us! When convenient, we looked in our Continental roadsign book and learned we'd gone up a no-entry. The now familiar circular red sign with a white bar across it had not been introduced into the UK and therefore we guiltily felt a bit innocent of our action!

We arrived at Linköping at 1.30 p.m. – nearly 200 miles at a steady speed with very little traffic about. We stayed at the Rally Hotel which cost us £11.



prevent the wood from cracking before being moved to a permanent home where people could visit. There was an interesting accompanying film showing how it was located and then recovered. Apparently, it was located by repeatedly dropping hollow, sharp-edged tubes down into the river attached with string. Upon pulling them up, when they found the tubes were full of wood and not silt, they discovered its whereabouts.

We then drove the 40 miles to Nortalje to catch the 10.30 p.m. overnight ferry to Turku in Finland. I awoke at 2.30 a.m. and to my astonishment, found it was daylight!

#### Finland's roads left a lot to be desired

Photo: 'W.M.'



**4th May.** On to Stockholm, another 100 miles. The Grande Esplanade Hotel. That evening we went to Berns nightclub. There was a Swedish comedian on. Everyone else was in fits of laughter, but we didn't have a clue what was going on!

**5th May.** We visited the historic warship *Wasa* which had been recovered from the river, having capsized and sunk on its maiden voyage out of Stockholm. Apparently it was very top-heavy with too many high-mounted cannons plus a crowd of party-goers on deck celebrating its sailing. At that time it was being sprayed continuously with water to

**6th May.** Landed in Turku and drove the 100 miles to Helsinki. We stayed at the Hotel Vaakuna, by the railway station: £3-12-0 a day with no food included. The Scandinavian Rootes rep, Peter Garrett, collected us in his Humber Sceptre and took us to the Autola workshop, the importers.

**7th May.** My notes say we did some things to the Van – reattached the tailpipe probably!

**8th May.** Out with Peter Garrett in the Van south-west of Helsinki for his appraisal. My boss, Alec Caine, and Ken Caine from Commer, Dunstable arrived by air.

**9th May.** Again out in the Van. We were assessing road conditions in Finland and the Autola people were assessing the van. Went to the cinema in the evening. (This was quite a common occurrence in the evenings when there was nothing to do.) I noted there were 21 cinemas in Helsinki, 17 of which showed English-speaking films. Half the screen was obscured with subtitles in Swedish and Finnish. If it was a comedy, they'd read the words before they were spoken, laugh out loud before we'd heard them and drowning them out!

**10th May.** Formal meeting at Autola with Klaus Meurman the Managing Director, quite a formidable character. He complained that they had a large number of Imp saloons they couldn't sell because they were not fitted with the correct air-cleaners. (The Finnish dirt roads are very dusty in summer.) Alec Caine said he would look into it. A few days later, Meurman asked Alec what he had done about it and Alec replied that he'd sent a Telex back to the factory. Frustrated, Meurman replied, "But you cannot clean air with a Telex!"

We took the Imp Van down to the docks to be weighed along a Commer Cob for comparison. The Cob (pictured on previous page) was popular with them for its ruggedness and simplicity. In the evening we went with one of the managers to his fishing cottage, giving him the opportunity to assess the Imp Van.

At that time, many people in Helsinki lived in blocks of flats which they purchased over a period of 40 to 45 years. Many also had a fishing cottage in the woods beside a lake to which they escaped at the weekend.



Typical Finnish road  
Photo: 'W.M.'



**11th May.** Out at 10 a.m. in the vans (Imp and Cob), we drove down to the south-west of Helsinki. There was an old castle there: Roseborgs Slott. We covered 180 miles, 130 of which were on gravel roads. Finland had very few motorway roads then. Travelling between towns was on dirt roads. These were surfaced with a dirt and oil mixture, packed hard with a roller. The winters tended to break up the surfaces, particularly on the corners where they became very bumpy and stony. I think this is why Finnish rally drivers were so good in the forest as they were very used and comfortable driving on loose surfaces – they probably did so every day.

**Roseborgs Slott castle**

*Photo: 'W.M.'*



That evening we were taken out to dinner by Klaus Meurman and Kaiser. The bill was £33 for seven of us.

**12th May.** Again a day spent appraising the Imp with the Autola people. Gylden, one of their senior men (one of the few I found with a sense of humour) asked if we would go with him to saoonna that evening. I agreed, thinking it was his weekend cottage retreat, but was greatly mistaken! Saoonna turned out to mean 'sauna'. What an eye-opener for an innocent boy from the valleys! He was a member of a club and it was gent's night. That was all well and good but the place was occupied by women who worked there! Between cooking yourself in one of the rooms, you were allowed out to have a cold shower ("Oh, my God!") and recover. You could also opt to have a scrubbing by one of these old biddies (perhaps an unfair description). While sitting there trying to recover, I looked over my shoulder into one of these side-rooms and there was a man lying down covered in soap suds and this lady was lathering his taters! I thought I was going to faint!

They told us that if you're not fit, you do not try to run 100 metres. I would say, "If you're not fit you do not go to saoonna". This is why: eight to ten minutes in the first (dry) room at 80-100°C, then out for a shower. The second is a steam room where they ladle water on to coals, 100-110°C. The resulting steam intensifies the heat. Out for a shower. The third is a smoke room where we were expected to withstand ten minutes at 115-120°C. They demonstrated by introducing a small container of water which eventually boiled! The heat was unbelievably intense. If you kept perfectly still, an insulating layer of air protected your skin. Any movement upset this layer and it felt burningly hot. Breathing in was very uncomfortable, to say the least. Ken Caine said, "I can't stand it," and rushed out. I bravely hung on! They use birch twigs to slap the skin. This encourages the veins to stand out and improve circulation, but by that time I was past caring!

When all this torture was over, we were allowed to sit in a lounge with a lawn sloping down to the lake (plenty of those in Finland). We were expected to go and swim in the lake – the main road was less than 100 yards away. It was quite comical in a way because everyone sat in wicker chairs in this lounge. When they got up, their backs, legs and backsides had the chair patterns impressed upon them.

It took me hours to stop sweating and for my heart rate to return to normal. This saoonna thing

is almost a religion in Finland. Each apartment block has its sauna and families have regular visits. The lakeside cottages usually have a sauna. Anyway, that event cost 15/- plus 12/6 for a certificate – I should have been ‘certified’ for going!

**13th May.** Autola staff continued to appraise the Van.

**14th May.** We worked on the Van.

**15th May.** Kaila tried the Imp Van. Out with the Cob comparing the two along a particular road, varying the load carried and their respective performance in terms of ride and handling. In the evening, we went with Gyldens towards Turku to collect 80,000 baby perch from a fishing farm. They scooped the fish up in laboratory-type tall, calibrated glass containers. In a short time these

small fish settled towards the bottom enabling the



number to be read off on the side of the container. They were then transferred to large plastic tanks we had in the Van. This was repeated until the total of approx 80,000 was reached. We then transported them to the lake nearby where he and his friends had their fishing hut.

**16th May.** Colin and I went north to Hamelina towards Tampere. We stopped to help a man whose Fiat 500 had bounced off the road on one of the frost damaged corners and ended up in the ditch. Altogether, seven of us lifted the car back on to the road. Further on we helped another car out of the ditch.

Later, we stopped at a small hut in the middle of nowhere to try and get something to drink. It turned out that the man there had once lived in Coventry! We returned to Helsinki along the N3, flat out, 100-120 kph. It was fairly traffic-free. We noted that the nearside-rear tyre had deflated.

**17th May.** At Autola again. Export rear dampers were fitted and tested on the Immersky road. We then refitted the standard dampers and the Van was reassessed. I cannot remember the conclusions drawn, but I think the standard dampers were preferred.

**18th May.** We paid Autola £35 for fuel, heater, headlamp and tyre. I don't remember much about the heater. I think it was an auxiliary system used in Finland, winter time. We probably brought it back for appraisal – the standard Imp heater was a bit borderline at that time, to say the least!

**19th May.** We paid the hotel bill, £182 for us both. We drove to Turku and sailed at 11.45 p.m. on the overnight ferry to Sweden.

**20th May.** We arrived at Nortalje, off at 8.15 a.m., arriving at Gothenberg at 3.45 p.m. – seven hours, 540 kms, 47 mph average. Little traffic and good metalled roads. There was a congress in Gothenberg and we couldn't find anywhere to stay. Eventually we went to the tourist board who directed us to a private house – old, fairly tatty and 15/- a night. I remember we shared a small, sparse room having a wardrobe with no back to it and a wall light switch which slid up and down.

**21st May.** We wandered around Gothenberg.

**22nd May.** We boarded the MV *Svecia* again, sailing at 5.30 p.m.

**23rd May.** Windy and very rough across the North Sea. There were just the two of us in the dining room for dinner. Colin had teased me about how rough it could be, knowing I'd never sailed

before, but ironically *he* was ill and I was completely unaffected! I remember that in the dining room they raised special rims around the table tops to stop things sliding off. I had a boiled egg which fell over! The waitresses had difficulty in doing their hair which hung untidily in strands as they had to hang on to something with one hand while trying to do their hair with the other. As there was no one about, I returned to the cabin to lie down – although not sea-sick I found all this continuous movement very tiring. I remember lying in my bunk and looking at the clothes hanging up. Firstly, they pressed against the cabin wall, then swinging away from the wall and back again. My collar would become tight around my neck (collar and tie always in those days), that would ease then my trousers would become tight, upwards and back again. I ran some water in the sink to wash. This sloshed over the edge and on to the floor.

It was announced that we were passing our sister ship going the other way. So I went up on deck to take a photo. I wrapped my arm around one of the uprights and waited until the ship appeared out of a trough!

**24th May.** We arrived at Tilbury at 6.45 a.m. and were back at work, Ryton, by 11.30 a.m.

I don't know whether the Imp Van was ever exported to Finland. They were keen on the simple,

robust Commer Cob whereas Meurman thought the Imp was too specialised as a Van – all alloy overhead-cam engine, etc. He said the spec was more in keeping with a sports car. I also remember him saying that on their dirt roads, it sounded like a balalaika inside!

Nevertheless, for me, the trip was an unforgettable experience.



Homeward bound: Another rough crossing.  
MV *Svecia*'s sister ship passing alongside  
Photo: 'W.M.'