

After Imp 50

Terence Tracey, Gauteng, South Africa

Unknown by most was the fact that in planning for the JoLon trip one first class Imp member made contact with us and offered assistance to us in whatever manner we required. He also invited us to stay over at his home when we arrived in the UK. Incidentally this chap had in times past tasted adventurous travel himself; not once but twice, taking on the London-to-Mongolia Rally, arriving safely on both occasions. This gent was Alan Hendy.

Interestingly, our arrival in Coventry in 2013 had my head spinning faster than our little JoLon engine had ever run, so organising my scattered brain at that stage was never going to be easy. Un-scattering my limited grey matter is never easy. The point I am heading towards is to say that Alan, who had been so generous to us before, during, and as it turned out, after was actually sitting at our breakfast table and I did not even greet him until much afterwards.

When the wonderful gathering at the Midland Air Museum surrounded by Imps Old planes and of course many new and great Imp folk came to a close, a sad close for me, Geoff [Biermann] and I followed Alan to his delightful home in Aldridge. On arrival Alan asked if we would like to have a nap while he prepared dinner. Geoff very politely declined but I selfishly said, “Yes please, where’s the bedroom?” and headed immediately off to sleep. I believe I was a dead man for about two hours and when I came to I had the strangest tingling feeling in my head and it must have taken me a full hour or so to fully wake up.

A fine dinner with Alan and his lady-friend, a top night’s sleep followed by another great English breakfast gave Geoff and I all that we needed to get cracking on our urgently needed Imp repair. In the warm sunshine on Alan’s driveway we set about replacing the very used and seriously abused drive-shaft coupling with the spare that Austrian club member Peter Rosenweig kindly gave to us a few hours before. As was usual, I took a few phone calls and pretended to plan our days ahead while I left Geoff to get on with replacing the coupling. You see, he was just so good at this now, why interfere thought I?

Leaving Alan’s lovely home Geoff and I did what we had become so used to, we jumped into the Imp and started driving. In no time at all we had arrived in my brother’s home in Manchester. After all, we had no delays to hinder us, no ferries to catch, no borders to cross, no visas to have scrutinized, so to us, a few hours on the roads – jolly perfect roads by comparison to what we had recently had to deal with – seemed to pass like a few pleasant minutes.

My brother Seamus kindly allowed me to beat him in a game of chess and



A reminder of the mud the JoLon Imp encountered in its epic 2013 14,000 km journey from South Africa to Coventry – this was the ‘road’ from Nairobi to Egypt

Photo: Geoff Biermann

Kitty his adorable wife fussed over and pampered us by feeding us a whopping meal and washed and dried our laundry that had not seen water since Africa. However, she did decline to wash – or even to return to me – one of my well used handkerchiefs. It was so black that she deemed it to be well beyond salvation. I had used it for more than its intended use of course and had probably used it a few

times to check oil levels as this was a very important requirement of our little 875 cc power-plant.

Our next journey took us across the Irish Sea to Dublin where we immediately headed south to visit my home town of Cork. A few very pleasant days were spent visiting friends and family including a visit to my old school which was both extremely enjoyable and also quite emotional. Sadly, Geoff had to cut short his time in Ireland and jumped on a plane back to South Africa.

What Geoff subsequently missed out on was a most special gift as organised by Richard and Joanne Gillespie; they organized an impromptu gathering of Imp Club members to meet me in Dublin. Not only did they put this event together with almost no time in hand but they also made my trip complete by having Rosemary Smith join us along with her pristine rally Imp. A proud moment indeed for me to have my battered JoLon Imp stand alongside Rosemary's Imp and not even the freezing wind kept us from comparing notes with each other.

Returning to England I paid a flying visit to my two brothers in Durham and the next morning headed south through the cold rain to again stop in Coventry. This time I had a very interesting meeting with a fellow Imp traveller of note. Frank Clayton had previously driven an Imp in the Mongol Rally.

From Coventry I spent a night with my nephew and leaving his home the following morning I took the JoLon for a quick ride to Silverstone. Sadly the Ferraris had booked the track for the day so I had to be content with driving the JoLon in and around the infield and paddock area. From there I drove and left the Imp at the Beaulieu Motor Museum in preparation for the Spring Autojumble weekend.

Grateful thanks are due here to Graham Anderson who took care of the Imp from this point and was instrumental in having it showcased at the prestigious Classic Car Show at the NEC in Birmingham a few months later. You are probably wondering how the car eventually made it back to South Africa. (No, I didn't drive it there!) In 2014 I managed to find passage on a South African bound RORO and had the JoLon shipped to Port Elizabeth.

With tremendous excitement I arranged to have Geoff and I travel to Port Elizabeth and collect the JoLon. I even booked the car into the local Chrysler dealership to afford us the use of their



Rosemary and Terence swap tales
Photo: Richard Gillespie

state-of-the-art workshop and spanner crew to carry out a 15,000 km service (!) on the well neglected little chariot. You see it had been parked in the English weather for far too long and it was beginning to show signs of extreme tiredness. Not that the roads of Africa and the long trek trans-Europe had done our Imp any favours either.

On arriving at the garage where the shipper had stored the Imp I entered with extreme trepidation. I was very concerned about how reliable the car was going to be. Geoff and I had presentation commitments in both Port Elizabeth and a few days later in Cape Town. Cape Town was going to be about an 800-kilometre journey and a visit to Roy McBride, Imp Club member in Cape Town, was going to be the highlight of that particular visit. With Cape Town behind us a 1,400 km spin would have taken us back home to Joburg. Sadly it was not to be...

To begin with we spent at least three hours trying to get the JoLon fired up. New fuel filters were purchased and installed on both tanks, in front of the fuel pumps, behind them and pretty much everywhere we could slip one. The filters we removed were completely clogged with what seemed like solid muck. The top petrol tank had taken considerable water, in fact so much so that the fluid that we managed to draw out of it was bright yellow goo that was as far from petrol as one could get. Unfortunately a considerable amount must have found its way into our carb so our troubles as it turned out was only about to begin.

Finally the engine fired with much billowing of blue smoke out of the exhaust. Our delight was quickly tempered with genuine concern about how reliable the car was going to be. But a 20 kilometre drive across town to the Chrysler workshops should be manageable to say the least. After all, the car did see us through some hectic challenges *en route* to Imp 50.

So, with Geoff in the lead car we got ourselves moving towards Maritime Motors, the Chrysler dealership, to carry out the aforementioned service to ready ourselves for the road to Cape Town the following morning. Well, we covered at around three kilometres before the engine started showing low oil pressure. I knew it was not too far to go so I added a little oil and persevered but rather gingerly expecting something bad to happen with every hundred metres covered. It was a sweat-full and stressful drive that finally got us to Maritime Motors where we managed a quick and dirty service. It was a fitting slapdash effort of a service but it was in perfect sync with the



Silverstone:
horses for courses...
Photo: Terence Tracey



Egyptians are great pyramid builders but their petrol leaves much to be desired
Photo: Terence Tracey

total lack of preparation for our journey to Imp 50 some two years before. What I had omitted to check was the oil in the gearbox. This would play its grim reaper card the very next day.

With a commitment to do a JoLon presentation to the Port Elizabeth Car Club a short while later Geoff skedaddled back to his folks' house to freshen up and I headed to my in-laws to do likewise. This less-than-ten-kilometre journey took me well over an hour! Just as soon as I got the Imp running at pace the water temperature screamed straight into the red. Presuming an airlock in the cooling system I pulled into a service station and did the water refill thingy. This I did not do once, I must have repeated this exercise at least 20 times. With my brain frazzled with worry and pure panic about the time commitment for my presentation I was no longer able to think logically.

Well, it wasn't an airlock but a gammy connection to our electric water pump. This I

only worked out having returned to my in-laws after the presentation. Proud as punch that I had eventually diagnosed the problem, I again began to prep for our trip along the coast to Cape Town.

The following morning gave us a rainy start to our journey. On top of this we had a spluttering stop-start Imp that was clearly no longer happy to travel. Not even out of Port Elizabeth we stopped numerous times, changing carburettors, adding numerous fuel filters and adding prayers at every turn. I must admit, things became so desperate that I even began praying to Saint Jude, the patron saint of hopeless cases!

The rain cleared somewhat, the traffic thinned and the road opened up. With those favourable conditions and a few nice long downhills Geoff at the wheel managed to get some life into ol' JoLon once again. Becoming hopeful we started to relax. Always a mistake...

Not 70 kilometres out of Port Elizabeth I noticed a rather strange sound emanating from just behind us. Immediately I realised what the noise was and remembered I had neglected to check the gearbox oil. "Slow down and pull into the first service station you see, Geoff".

As I went to buy the gear oil Geoff moved the car to the rear of the station where we could check the oil level. When he started the Imp I heard a distinct tinkle in the engine, a noise different to the groan that the gearbox had been making. Then the engine just stopped.

First things first. With the plug out of the gearbox and little finger inserted to establish how far down the level was. Well, the finger came out dry. Absolutely no oil on it at all. Opening the drain-plug saw no oil flowing out nor even dripping out. The 'box was completely dry. An easy fix, we squeezed gear oil in until it flowed out the top filler hole. Right, fire up the Imp and off we go again. Hmmm, not this time.

We were greeted with a very willing battery merrily spinning our Imp mill but it just would not kick into life. Very strange. All through the trip to Imp 50 it fired up so easily. Something, however, was not quite the same. Now the engine seemed to be spinning much faster than normal. Yes of course, those clever folk among you would have twigged that we had a serious compression loss. Correct, that was indeed our problem. But how, and why? Why there and never before. And why all of a sudden? There was nothing to it but to take out the scalpel and begin the operation...

Camshaft cover removed, we decided to swing the engine over to see what gives. Well you could have bowled us over with a feather, the camshaft sprocket was doing its thing and turning as it should but guess what? The camshaft remained stationary! What occurred was the little dowel that links the camshaft to the sprocket had come adrift. And where do you think a tiny dowel such as that would come to rest? Yes the obvious answer would be all the way down the timing chain cavity to the sump. Well not this time. Would you believe it was sat right on the little ledge next to the timing chain wheel? Very carefully, in fact EXTREMELY carefully, we retrieved the dowel and breathed a sigh of relief.

Dowel back in place, camshaft cover back on, service station forecourt covered in oil, Imp gearbox full we gunned our little chariot into life one more time. It started first time so luckily no valves were bent and we started on our way again.

The rattle was back. Not knowing what it was we decided to take no further risks and arranged to have our beautiful little car returned to Joburg by trailer.

Sans Imp we still visited Cape Town and Roy, had a wonderful turnout at the Crank Handle Historic Car Club in Cape Town for our presentation and flew back to Joburg.

The rattle? Seemingly we had a broken piston ring on number four cylinder, caused probably by detonation somewhere along the line, most likely caused by the terrible fuel in Egypt. The ring had broken into about four pieces and one in particular was tiny, almost like a ball bearing. This tiny item actually bored a channel up and down on the cylinder until it finally broke free into the combustion chamber where it was merrily bashed up into the head by the piston.

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Back in South Africa, Geoff has huge admiration for the JoLon Imp
Photo: Terence Tracey



On display at the
Zwartkops Piper Series, January 2015
Photo: Terence Tracey

With a replacement engine now fitted in the JoLon we showed it proudly off at many car shows, raised money at auction with it for a fellow traveller who lost his eyesight travelling through Africa and generally enjoying tripping around on its home turf. With the rear suspension finally giving up the ghost I decided to strip it completely in order to fully rebuild it for some future jaunt.

Some of the alarming failures we discovered while stripping the rear suspension are as follows:

- The floorpan under the foot wells were both completely bent upwards and out of shape. This would have been caused by the mud hell road of Kenya.
- A tear in the metal of the firewall just behind where the wishbone mounts along with the steering rack.
- Cracks at the base of both B-pillars where the car was trying to bend in half.
- The top fuel tank was solidly rusted.
- The storage box on our roof rack was completely rusted through.
- The offside trailing arm was trailing a bit more than it should; the outermost bush eye had broken away completely from the rear cross member. (Chairman Graham showed a photo of this crossmember failing while he had the car at his home. This failure first was noticed by Geoff and I in Nairobi Kenya but we had no time to repair it then.)
- The suspension bolts were so rusted due to us travelling through the water and mud in Kenya that one bolt head sheared completely while trying to loosen it.
- Another decided to rather loosen the nut on the inside, resulting in us having to drill a hole in the body to get to it.

I still have the front to dismantle and am almost too scared to look more closely in case I find some more crazy damage.

Soon I will repair the body and have it repainted. Watch this space!