

## Renewing a long-lost love affair with all things Imp

Freddie Brown, Guildford, Surrey

In the late seventies/early 'eighties I had a number of Imps, from a Mk1 Super, to a Singer Chamois, eventually graduating to a Stiletto, which I painted matt black by hand! That was very radical in 1981.

Unfortunately, despite the application of copious amounts of Isopon and GRP, they all succumbed eventually to the dreaded tin worm and had to be scrapped or sold for a pittance. But somewhere buried deep in my subconscious was this memory of how much I loved those cars despite the whole series of mechanical problems they were prone to. Whenever I saw one on the road or at shows they made me smile, and over the years that irrational yearning grew and grew.

Fast forward 40 years or so and I have grown-up kids, a recent divorce, and my business nosedived. To cap it all, in 2012 I had a very serious climbing accident which broke most of my limbs and shattered my pelvis. My life came to an abrupt halt, literally and metaphorically. If I was a computer I would have been rebooted; being human it wasn't quite so easy.

As I lay in my hospital bed for some months following operation after operation I decided, firstly, I was definitely going to recover and, secondly, this was now MY time of life so I put together a bucket list of things I must do while I was still physically able.

Many things went into this bucket (and have since been taken out and experienced, such as a recent three-week Harley ride around USA with my best buddies, skiing in Austria again and riding my motorcycles again) including a new mantra for life: work less, do more leisure activities, travel more and... obtain a car racing licence.

At the same time a good mate of mine, Gary Fletcher, was talking about all the fun he was



As bought, but GRP bonnet, engine lid and doors would have to be replaced with steel items  
Photo: Freddie Brown



The superbly prepared Fraser look-alike when owned by Jim Mckenzie  
Photo: Jim Mckenzie

having with his Imp in the CTCRC Pre-'66 race series. This was my Eureka moment!

It was a case of once bitten forever smitten. With a new Novice race licence in my hand I was now on the lookout for a racing Imp. As an engineer I am quite mechanically minded and therefore had a good understanding of the standard Imp's foibles and felt confident I could build one from scratch so I bought a 'project car' consisting of a colander of a shell, standard 875 engine and gearbox and a box of bits. Despite my initial confidence this was a big mistake because at that time I had no idea how different a competitive racing Imp would be from the standard vehicle.

At 60 years old and having some issues with physical mobility following my accident I realised I had neither the time nor the patience to build a race Imp after all. Nor, frankly, the skill and experience. So I joined the Imp Club and placed an ad saying, "Racing Imp Wanted" on the Forum.

Within days Tom Blackwood told me he had a Fraser Imp replica for sale up in Glasgow so I was on a plane in hours and when I saw the Imp among Toms quite impressive collection of other Imps (and Cosworths!) I was smitten. Due to the Saltire on the roof he (the Imp) was immediately christened *Hamish*.

The car had been very well prepared in 2010 by Jim Mckenzie as a Fraser replica and was approved in writing by none other than Alan Fraser himself and with help from Ron at Impspeed, Colin Rooney and our very own Bob Allan. It had some racing pedigree in the HSCC Series. It even has a HSCC passport.

The car was immaculate but unfortunately, during the shortest test drive in history, the rotor arm disintegrated at 9,000 rpm and Tom didn't have a spare.

We shook hands on the price and Tom arranged to fit a new rotor arm and transport the car to Surrey for me the following week. He also gave me a steel bonnet, engine cover and doors so that I could replace the GRP panels and enter the CTCRC series Gary was in.





Butterflies in the stomach as Freddie waits to head out onto Thruxton's wet track  
Photo supplied by Freddie Brown

Once the car arrived, the GRP doors and panels were duly removed and the steel replacements were sent off for refurbishment and repainting in the Fraser colours. I then realised I had two other doors from the Project Imp which were in much better condition so promptly sent these off for

overhaul and painting, blissfully unaware that these were later-type doors that don't fit a Mk1 shell! A lesson well learnt.

The CTCRC insist on originality so the doors had to have cards, door opening mechanisms, quarter lights and even wind-up windows. Initially this looked to be an almost impossible task due to the original internal window guides having rotted away. However, Bob Allan came to the rescue again and he put me onto Vince at Merlin Motors who sourced me some secondhand guides and also most of the very rare Mk1 chrome trim.

Building up the doors was a really fiddly job taking several days, the full range of expletives and a number of plasters to damaged fingers.

The final touches prior to racing was to service the extinguisher, fit the transponder and stick on the decals.



All hitched up for dawn departure to Silverstone for the first race proper. Tow van is ex-RAC – can you tell?  
Photo: Freddie Brown



"You can cross this off the bucket list now, Freddie!"  
Photo supplied by Freddie Brown

At last the car was ready for its first outing and shake down with me at the helm. The venue would be Thruxton (a very quick circuit) in early March. We arrived to a damp and slippery Thruxton and I was in at the deep end as the British Touring Car Drivers had chosen the same day and were all out testing their new cars while I, the novice in the silly little slow car, was in the mix. A terrifying experience – you have never seen so many blue flags and annoyed professional drivers! Nevertheless, the car performed *impeccably* which was quite a lot better than could be said of the driver.

Hamish and I were now as ready as we could be for the first race meeting of the season at Silverstone on the 28th and 29th March. An early start for myself and crew in the ex-RAC van and Brian James' trailer complete with a very shiny Fraser Imp.

It all happened so quickly: sign on, scrutineering, driver briefing and then qualifying. And all that before 9am! And guess what? it was pouring down again.

Having started 3rd from the last on the grid, I was the least powerful car there with my 998cc *circa* 90 bhp engine. But never mind, here I was in my first ever race in my amazing Imp!

My God, it was slippery out on the track! With quite a few cars going sideways or off I managed to stay on and bring it home two places better than I started. I will never forget the car howling up the main straight at 10,000 rpm and almost 100 mph and feeling very, very much alive. The noise inside the car from exhaust, twin Weber intake and straight-cut racing gears was like Armagedon.

It was the same again on Sunday but in even worse weather and this time in front of TV cameras from MotorsTV. No pressure, then.

Inevitably my good luck couldn't last... I span off at Maggots but managed to recover it and lose



Freddie's brother-in-law Luciano helped out and, yes, it was cold!

Photo: Freddie Brown



only one place. The TV commentator informing everyone that I was 60 and in my first race and that I “still had it”. Followed by the words, “Bless”. Patronising b\*\*\*\*\*d! Despite that, an unforgettable experience in a fantastic car, loved universally by everyone who saw it.

Having owned some motoring exotica in my life I have never been so

proud of my car as I felt that day. Talk about David and Goliath.

My advice to all Impers is don't think too long about things you want to do and rather than read about other people, do it, get involved in any kind of motorsport be it hillclimbs, sprints, rallies or anything. These cars are cute but also very capable once properly prepared.

I couldn't have done this without you lot out in the Forum giving advice and solving problems as soon as they arose.

My costs to date are in the region of £20k which includes tow van, trailer, car, mods and painting and while I appreciate this is not an insignificant sum it is more than justified in that I get to race the car I have always loved at the best circuits in UK with a bunch of like minded individuals.

I now can't wait for Castle Coombe in April and Prescott Hillclimb in May where I hope to improve my skills to match the capability of my car. My love affair with all things Imp goes from strength to strength. Watch this space.



With the track stuff over the serious business of the Ford Transit drag race could at last get underway!

Photo: Freddie Brown