

Hilda's Story

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One of my earliest memories as a child was being driven to the Bath & West Show with my parents in my cousin's company car – a Loch Blue Hillman Imp. I was about three years old and my cousin was a fleet sales rep for Rootes at the time. He lived away and whenever he visited us he would bring me the current sales brochures for Rootes/Chrysler cars. I fell in love with Imps and decided that when I had my first car it would have to be one.

In 1980 my dream came true and I became the proud owner of a 1974 Imp Deluxe RTX 89M (it would be great if anyone knows what happened to this car.) I only owned it for nine months, several of which it spent off the road. My then fiancé Philip spent many hours trying to overcome problems with the carbs and cold starting. I sadly parted with the car as it never seemed to run properly.

Despite my negative experience of Imp ownership, for some inexplicable reason I still loved the cars and harboured the idea of restoring one. Due to the loss of a dear friend we decided to stop putting things off and after 31 years I bought my current Imp, *Hilda*, so named by my daughters because she is an old lady. First registered in February 1973, *Hilda* was bought in York and trailered home to South Wales in January 2011. She had spent most of her life in the Yorkshire area and had been off the road since September 1993, shortly after taking part in the 30-year celebrations of the birth of the Imp at the Imp Club National event in North Yorkshire. (We found a plaque commemorating this event behind the dashboard when it was removed from the car during restoration.) Surprisingly she had passed an MoT in 2008 but had not been returned to the road.



Photos: Lesley and Philip Smith

When Philip and I bought *Hilda* she had recently been re-sprayed and was described as having almost come to the end of restoration requiring “only carpet and trim to be added”. On inspection it was obvious that the restoration had not been done properly as the rear wheel arches were full of fibreglass! The front arches were marginally better. However, the rest of the car was sound so we took the plunge and bought her.

As we had no garage our plan was to put the car back on the road and see where the rust came back, undertaking a full restoration in a few years' time. I began work on tidying the interior as it was in a very poor state. We made new door cards out of ply and I re-covered them. I then sourced a pair of Fiesta XR2 seats and covered these to resemble late Imp seats. This was very time consuming and frustrating as I didn't have a commercial sewing machine, but the result was worth it in the end. The battery was replaced, electronic ignition installed and the brakes replaced but then work stalled due to poor weather and other commitments.

By Autumn 2011 rust had started to bubble at the base of the driver's door so I stripped a small section back to metal. This revealed the extent of the work needed as the door was holed and covered in rust spots which had been painted over. It was obvious that the car needed to be fully restored sooner rather than later. We decided to take individual parts and panels to my father-in-law's garage, six miles away and work on them there. We removed the other door, engine lid and bonnet. The latter was beyond repair so we decided to source a new fibreglass one, but the other panels were stripped to bare metal, repaired and primed by December. The next stage was the shell itself but unfortunately work then stopped on *Hilda* until February 2012 because Philip's MGF blew its head gasket and it needed the garage space.

Once the MGF was fixed and back on the road we trailered *Hilda* down to my father-in-law's and the whole car was subsequently stripped of paint, repaired where necessary and primed, panel by panel, over the next few months before transporting to Aled's in Llanelli to undertake the welding work. The rear inner/outer wheel arches, both sills, front wheel arch back section, and both lower rear quarter panels needed to be replaced with new metal and several previously repaired areas needed to be redone as the quality of the previous welding was so bad. A few small



areas of the underside of the car were also repaired but this area was in surprisingly good condition considering the state of the rest of the car. By December 2012 the whole car had been treated with Dinatrol and Waxoyl and was in primer and we were able to take it to a local paint shop for its topcoat.

Over the following months we rebuilt the car, refurbishing or replacing all parts where necessary. The wishbones and rear crossmember were professionally shot blasted and powder coated. Philip installed fuseboxes and we upgraded the car by using a high-efficiency radiator, Monte Carlo lowered front springs, halogen headlights, inertia reel seatbelts, adjustable trackrod ends and electric screen washers. I also had to make and install a new headlining as ours ripped while transporting to Aled's without any window glass.

Finally, in September 2013, *Hilda* passed her MoT in time for the final Imp 50th celebration event: Wicked Welsh 2013. It was a great feeling being able to drive my car for the first time and we had great feedback from our friends in the club. The reaction we received was amazing and we couldn't have done it without the moral support of club members. It had taken the best part of every weekend for two years, my overriding memory being of stripping the underseal off the underneath of the car in freezing weather with the car inches above my head on axle stands, not the most appealing job for a woman! Apparently I looked like a coal miner!

Hilda's story is, however, not over as on 15th August this year she played a starring role in our daughter Emma's wedding to Daniel Lewis at Oakdale Church, Crumlin, South Wales. Together with Roy Blunt's Imp (*Suzy*) and John Holloway's Stiletto, she stole the show (apart from the bride obviously!) We had a great reaction from passers-by and other cars and the guests were very 'impressed' with the cars. As Roy Blunt said, "You know how people often stop and smile at you when you are driving an Imp? Well, put wedding ribbons on it and even more do so. And if you have three suitably be-ribboned Imps in convoy containing the bride, bridesmaids, etc, it seems as if at least half the bystanders on the pavement stop and grin from ear-to-ear!"

Restoring *Hilda* has been one of the most rewarding things Philip and I have done – she's not perfect as we've done everything ourselves except the welding and top coat, but she's ours.



Lesley and Philip Smith with *Hilda* flanked by Roy Blunt's Imp, *Suzy*, and John Holloway's Stiletto
Photo: Roy Blunt