

Bowland's Bolide!

Curt Bowland, Hinsdale, Illinois, USA (sent in by Sue Ellis, Regalia Officer)

Let me begin by saying how much I enjoy being a member of the Imp Club. From the superb monthly issues of *Impressions* to how the club officers conduct their business. 'Regalia Queen' Sue Ellis bestowed on me the title of 'best customer' as a result of my many purchases. At the same time she encouraged me to write a bit about my experiences with an Imp that I raced...

My interest in racing began many years before I would realise my dream. In my mid-30's I acquired a Sunbeam Tiger. I participated in slaloms and other parking-lot type events. In 1979 I became interested in the new phenomenon of 'vintage racing'. I raced my Tiger for a number of years with marginal success in Sports Car Vintage Racing (SVRA) events, even taking it to the Bahamas in 1985 for a week of racing on their streets. Racing a Tiger is not a cheap endeavour.

At some point SVRA decided to create a 'small bore' class. This was a group of small-in-size and small-in-engine cars. A good friend told me about Imps, a car I had never heard of. By a strange set of circumstances an Imp became available rather close to where I lived. It had previously been a regional class champion with a local racing organisation. I purchased the car and started my association/love affair with Imps.

By the standards of many Imp Club members my Imp was very mildly prepared in the engine area. It came with the required safety equipment which was minimal at that time. The engine had a R17 or R20 cam, a 28/36 Weber carb, and some suspension tweaks. I raced it several times and took it to Florida where I grenaded an engine at Moroso Race track located near Palm Beach. I had also intended to race it at Sebring, but that was not to be. In my localised search for a possible replacement engine I came across an interesting individual who was using Imp engines to power hydroplane racing boats. Several of his boats held International speed records. Most of his engines were intended to run on alcohol or other special fuels. It was an interesting meeting.

Suitably inspired, once home I had a new engine built. Again, quite mild build. I did go to a pair of Weber 40 DCOE carbs on a combined inlet and exhaust manifold. I might also mention that I was racing on DOT full treaded 'street' 12" tyres.

From 1986-'89 I raced eleven times at various tracks in eastern United States such as Sebring, Watkins Glen, Mid Ohio, Road Atlanta, and Elkhart Lake. My finishing record for this period of time was six firsts, two seconds, and two thirds. It was during this period, in 1988, I was a class co-champion with a good friend who raced a Fiat Abarth 850 TC, quite a competitive little car. In the 'nineties there were several second place finishes at various tracks.

I can not tell you how many hours of enjoyment I had with my Imp. It was truly a sensational and fun car to race. I still enjoy reading about Imp racing preparation and successes in *Impressions*. After selling my Imp I went back to racing my Tiger, retiring in 2009 after 30 years of vintage racing. Although I have long since sold my Imp, I think I will probably own one more Imp before I depart! (See Centre of Attention for a photo of Curt's Imp. GP)

I am enclosing an article written Burt Levy which he wrote having driven my Imp many years ago. I have contacted him and he is happy for the article to be reproduced in *Impressions*. Burt is a writer of some renown having written many books, all of which are available on Kindle and Nook for download as e-books though they are also available by post. www.lastopenroad.com.



Pure BS / B.S. Levy

IMPish Behavior

small bore seems no bore at all

Perhaps Curt Bowland's Sunbeam Imp is a joke, but if it is, it's an awfully good one. Sure, it pokes fun at all of us who take our cars and our driving too seriously. But, it is also a certified Fun Ride, and actually better developed in its own way than a lot of the more exotic hardware dropping assorted parts and fluids around the racing circuits.

Now, we've all observed the occasional behind-the-hand sneer directed towards SVRA small-bore racers, but they should realize that much of the magic in our sports comes from the rich and varied texture of its fabric. Just as the Beatles would never have been the Beatles without Ringo, so Vintage Racing needs people and cars like Curt and his Imp to maintain our humanity, humor, and humility. Besides, although it's the cars that make the show, it's the *people* who make the weekends. Having a few cold ones and shooting the breeze with folks like Curt and Mike Miles and Larry Marzano and their entourage (not to mention Chairman Frank) under a summer night's velvet sky, gathered together behind the garages at Mid Ohio, hell, that's a weekend highlight as true as any hunk of hallowed steel.

But, back to Curt's *bolide*. I knew this car from my first incarnation as a would-be racing driver some 17 years ago, hustling a series of ever faster and ever less reliable TR3s around Blackhawk Farms with the rest of the Midwest Council crazies. Curt's Imp belonged to a fellow named Don Shelton, who raced it very effectively in the Council, running in a class called Sedan 1 (the grids of which looked very similar to SVRA Group 1, except the cars were mostly in the deepest valley of their depreciation cycle at the time, and presented accordingly).

For those of you not boned up on the strange and unusual products of the English Automobile Industry (as it was once called), let me tell you what little I know about the Imp. The Rootes Group was a one-time Giant (comparatively speaking) in England, and their products included such well-remembered models as the Singer Gazelle, Hillman Minx, and the Humber Super Snipe. I am not making this up. Actually, these cars were rather popular in England, even though they didn't make too great an impression on this side of the Atlantic. More familiar here would be the Sunbeam Alpines and Tigers, which did quite well stateside. At any rate, with the coming of the Great Small Car Revolution, the Rootes Group gathered all its best and brightest to build their entry into the techno-whizbang-econobox sweepstakes. The Sunbeam Imp was the result.

It was actually a pretty clever design, powered by a rear-mounted, all-alloy, laid-over SOHC 4 that owed its pedigree to the race-proven Coventry Climax FWA (the powerplant-of-choice for small-bore English sports racers). On the debit side, no amount of race breeding or sophistication can make 875cc feel very hairy-chested in a box-like vehicle intended to carry four human beings and one human being's luggage. The Imp's suspension was fully independent and truly unique, especially in front, where a verison of the ever-popular (cheap to build, expensive to replace) struts mated up with W-I-D-E based lower A-arms pivoted from nearly the centerline of the car.

The Imp was never a great commercial success, in spite of its interesting mechanicals. This was partly due to the generally declining fortunes of Rootes, iffy build quality, and the styling, which might have looked racy compared to a pop machine or a coin-operated dryer but was less than inspiring for an automobile. To say that the Imp was simple and basic is to flatter it, and yet it had more sporting pretensions — again, in its own way — than much of the so-called competition. In fact, I believe Don Shelton took this particular car to a few class championships back in ze olde dayz.

Did I want to drive it? You bet!

Like any car which has been raced effectively for many years, the Imp works. It's simple, straightforward, and honest: Seat fits great. Pedals just right. Oil pressure and temps fine forever. Starts right up every time. No worries.

Except maybe that it might tip over. A visual inspection of the Imp leaves the viewer with the distinct impression it is too short for how tall it is (or perhaps it's too tall for how short is, I'm not sure which), but in any case, you kind of visualize the car falling over on its doorhandles at the least provocation. But, looks can be deceiving! Read on . . .

After fussing and fighting my way inside various Lolos, Loti, and Elvas, getting into the Imp is about as difficult as sitting down at the dinner table. The view is about the same too, with the hood and dash somewhere between chest and bellybutton level. The dash is as simple as an old AM radio, with a tach, a temp gauge, an oil pressure gauge, and an ignition key. No bother with flipping the wrong switches here!

What's it like on the circuit? Just listen: The engine is about as fussy as a lawn tractor (but pulls slightly better) and the shifter has that rubbery, cartoon-mition feel that anyone with a VeeDub in their past would instantly recognize. There is some speed available in the Imp, but you've got to more or less wait for it. Brakes (drums all around) work fairly well, but make strange drum-brake noises under typical Journalist-Driver abuse. The sound might be likened to a rhinoceros being raped by a subway train.

Speaking of rape, handling is where the Imp really shows its mating plumage. To my everlasting surprise, instead of tripping over its wheels, the little box scoots smartly around the corners with hardly any body roll obvious from the driver's seat. It can't weigh a hell of a lot, and a quick bounce on the fenders later in the garage confirms the springing is, to say the least, firm.

As the laps rolled by, it became obvious the Imp was *fun* and easy to drive, but not that easy to drive *really* quickly. Chaffeurs of more potent machinery don't always realize that, while there is danger and daring in Big Power, there is also redemption. There is no worse sensation in racing than feeling a car oozing towards the point of no return and having nothing there under your right foot to save or stabilize it. Likewise, drivers with Big Motors can cover up all kinds of sloppiness by leaning on the loud pedal. In an underpower racer, jerks and glitches and sideways motoring scrub off great heaps of momentum that tiny engines cannot recover in any great hurry. Quick driving in a car like the Imp requires a certain delicacy and planning, particularly in passing situations.

All in all, the Imp is an entertaining and enjoyable ride. Sure, it will never be worth a quick two mil in ready cash, but it belongs in vintage racing. Friends who know and appreciate Curt and his racecar realize that the Imp and its owner are worth their weight in golden moments.

