

RACING HILLMAN IMP MODELS

The Bevan Imp

Tim Morgan tells the story of the immaculately turned out, giant-killing Imps and compares the two models of this historic racer.

Nobody has ever won the British Saloon Car Championships three years in a row – except a small Privateer team, based in the shed (and kitchen) of an unassuming suburban house in Orpington, Kent. That ‘team’ was George Bevan. Their car was a Sunbeam Imp Sport – the original of which was bought secondhand for £315. Its an extraordinary story of David vs the Goliaths (in all senses of the word) and the success came down to the incredible talents of George and his family in building beautiful racing cars plus the skill of an amazing driver.

The Imp was never quite so ‘iconic’ as the Mini, and the BMC marvel outshone it on many levels. That said, we all love an underdog and it was a better car than some will have you believe. It was also an incredibly successful racing and rally vehicle, especially when you consider how little investment was made by the manufacturer compared to the Mini.

In the late 1960s, there was a boom in saloon car racing and George Bevan’s first foray into the sport

came with his son Peter driving initially an Austin A40 and then he swapped to a Hillman Imp. Sadly, the original Imp met with a sticky end and Peter swapped the steering wheel for tools, paving the way for Bill McGovern to take over the hot seat.

The newly rebuilt Imp was ready for the 1970 season, and it was decided to enter in the Group 2 1-litre class. The beautiful electric blue Imp gained bulbous wheel arches to cover the huge racing wheels, multiple stickers bedecked its sides and in the back, one of George Bevan’s exquisitely built 998cc engines was installed into the car.

For the 1970 season, the Bevan Imp competed in 11 races. Over the course of these 11 races, McGovern claimed eight lap records, seven class wins and two outright second places against some much bigger and much better financed opposition. This success was enough to win the RAC Saloon Car Championship outright.

Not content with this, Bevan went onto win the 1971 and 1972 seasons as well, with Bill McGovern at the wheel of his immaculately prepared electric blue Imps.

The secret to the success wasn’t necessarily power – although some sources have claimed that the Bevan Imps were pushing 135bhp from their 998cc engines. It wasn’t a lightweight car either – it was actually 100lb over the minimum weight limit. It was all to do with how immaculate the preparation was, creating a reliable racer that a great driver such as McGovern could capitalise upon.

There has been much speculation over the years as to what became of the Bevan Imps – note the use of the plural. George built a few over the years. The original car was sold onto Les Nash at the end of the 1971 season. There was a four-headlamp car that had an argument with an immovable object but there was always a glimmer of hope that somewhere there was a dusty electric blue Imp with some faded sponsorship stickers. Incredibly, the wish came true and the car is now under restoration – see the box out for more details.

For a lot of Imp enthusiasts, the Bevan Imp was the Holy Grail and in saloon car racing circles, it’s spoken of in revered tones. So it is somewhat surprising that until very recently there had been only one scale model of this amazing car – and that model was more than a little disappointing.

Vanguards issued the “George Bevan’s 1972 Race Car Sunbeam Imp” in 2000 as model VA26007. It was based on their well-used Imp casting which wasn’t bad as a standard road car, but did have some issues. The shape in general was fairly good, but the base joined the shell in an obvious fashion long the sill line, and awkwardly along the bumper line at the front. This was all but hidden when a bumper was installed but for reasons best known to Vanguards, they chose to remove it for this release. This left an ugly gap and made the front look like an old man who had forgotten to put his false teeth in.

The big issues though, were the non-authentic two-tone blue (Oxford over Loch Blue) paint

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scheme and a lack of wheelarch extensions. The sponsorship decals weren’t very accurate either. The black interior was largely unmodified from standard and only the modern-style Minilite wheels (that were too thin) were a nod to its racing heritage. If you got the car in the light, you could see the cast-in ‘wings’ badge of an early Hillman Imp under the front sticker – definitely not right. It came with a replica tax disc (as all Vanguards did at that time) with a limited edition declaration on the back stating a run of 4000 units.

Its fair to say that most Imp enthusiasts were less than Imp-pressed (sorry!) with the Vanguards model – and the Bevan family were quite put out that nobody consulted with them, as they would not have approved such an inaccurate model to be released bearing George’s name.

In late 2016, Atlas Editions announced a new collection entitled “British Touring Car Champions” and in the literature, there was a picture of a much better looking George Bevan Imp. Atlas Editions approached the Bevan family for pictures of the original car to make the livery more authentic – and it shows.

I managed to get hold of one of these models to compare to the Vanguards, believing that Atlas would have stuck some big wheel arches onto the older Vanguards casting to create it – but I was wrong. The model is attached to its plinth using the three-pointed IXO style screws. Once released, the plastic base plate is revealed and that is totally different to the base plate of the Vanguards. The casting itself is much crisper, with modern style glazing and no ugly gaps.

The paint is much closer to the real thing – although it’s a little more green than the original’s electric blue (its actually very close in colour to that of my own 1:1 version) and the metallic flakes lay very well. There is also a well-rendered stainless

▼ (Left) Atlas Editions accurate replica of the Bevan Imp and (right) the Vanguards model of the same name.





Vanguards two tone paint scheme is not historically accurate.



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steel side trim, complete with the red insert that an Imp Sport should have.

The details continue – the 1972 car featured two headlamps, with a full width front panel alloy finisher panel complete with a red Sunbeam badge. If you look closely you can see the “Imp Sport” badges on the doors – correct for the Bevan car, and a detail that is wrong for a road-going 1972 Imp Sport so full marks to Atlas Editions for that. However, those marks are taken away by them fitting the rear Sunbeam badge to the engine lid and not to the rear transom panel.

Inside there is a spindly roll cage, just like the real car and there is a rendering of the rally-style binnacle fitted to the original Bevan Imp. There is a high back bucket seat for the driver, a low back seat for any passenger and the back seat is also replicated – again, as per the rules for Group 2 at the time.

There are tiny yellow “Britax” stickers fitted to the middle of the front and rear bumpers – just like the real thing and even the choice of sponsorship stickers has been well researched. The big Minilite style wheels are excellent, complete with black centres and chrome dust caps in the very middle.

To say it's a better model than the Vanguards is an understatement. However, what has intrigued Imp fans and Imp diecast collectors is the origin of the casting. I have heard tale of an IXO Hillman Imp casting seen at a Nuremberg show from a few years ago, but if this is to be the only release from it then that would be a waste. Its clearly very well done and I'm sure many of us would love to see some higher quality 1/43 Imp models – and



Atlas Editions version is very close to the original livery.



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1 Vanguards model does not feature the trademark wheelarch extensions.

2 Atlas Editions version captures much of the original car's look.

maybe modify the casting to enable the creation of a Sunbeam Stiletto, Imp Van or Hillman Husky... wishful thinking, maybe.

The best thing is that both these models are very easy to find – even though the Vanguards is nearly 20 years old, there are still brand new unsold examples available. Shop around and you don't have to pay the optimistic prices on eBay. The Atlas Editions Bevan Imp is a joy, and I've seen them advertised new for less than £30 – it's a lovely model that will enhance any collection of classic motorsport vehicles. **DC**

THE SURVIVOR

Out of the blue, three photographs appeared on Facebook showing three unloved racing Imps in a lockup in Germany. One car looked very familiar. It was still painted electric blue, but had different wheels, a slightly different livery and there was a large amount of pale-coloured primer on the front panel and front wing. Could it be? Dare it be?

After an exchange of emails Jonathan Bevan, grandson of George, hitched a trailer to his car and sped off to the Eurostar with everything crossed. His hunches were right, because there in the gloom was his grandfather's racing car, surrounded by the engines and gearboxes George had built to race in the 1972 championship.

Jonathan has since brought the car back to the UK, where Imp guru Colin Rooney completed a sympathetic bodywork restoration and it has now been repainted in its original electric blue livery. Jonathan intends to return the car to the same immaculate state as when his grandfather built it. Jonathan has previously built a superb replica of the Bevan Imp, so will have no trouble in achieving a similar standard with the real thing. Thanks to Jonathan Bevan for his help with this feature.

