

### Rootes Reminiscences: the Imp in Canada

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Let me first introduce myself. I recently joined the Imp Club and in my application I had mentioned that I was a former Rootes employee for 13 years, first in Coventry, then in Canada, in addition to which I was, for twelve years, owner of WHS 165, the third production Imp off the line at Linwood. In responding, Membership Secretary Graham Townsend suggested I might like to contribute to *Impressions* (what a beautifully produced magazine!) with some reminiscences of my Rootes past.

My reason for joining the Imp Club at this relatively late stage in my life is because my son Ben and I have been musing that it would be fun to acquire an Imp if we could find one, preferably in Canada, at a relatively low price. Sound body structure would be a must, but mechanical challenges I could probably handle, given my background. This idea is still at the fantasy stage but joining the Imp Club seemed like a good first move. (Incidentally, this is not my first contact with the club – I've met Billy Meikle at car shows here and admired his impeccable Imp and Husky.)

The account that follows consists mostly of excerpts, with some tweaks, from an article on Rootes Canada that I wrote last year. It was published in the Canadian bi-weekly paper *Old Autos*; the excerpts are reproduced with that publication's kind permission.

First I'll outline my apprenticeship years with Humber Ltd. in Coventry. I started in 1956, straight from secondary school in Edinburgh. The 'pupil' (i.e. student-apprentice) programme in which I was enrolled was for three years, structured to train young men (alas, no young women at that time) for management roles in engineering, design, manufacturing, sales or service. It included a thoroughly practical training regime involving two years in the manufacturing and assembly shops, then a third year specialising in departments relevant to one's chosen career objective. Time was also provided to pursue an engineering qualification.

Inevitably the programme was a hotbed of young car enthusiasts. The following are just some people in the apprenticeship programme, mostly around the same time as myself, though a few were slightly ahead, who later made significant names for themselves in the car world:

**Roy Axe** went on to become head of styling for Chrysler UK, then moved to the USA to become Director of Design for Chrysler Corporation. He returned to Britain to take over as head of design at British Leyland. His memoirs were published in a book, *A Life in Style*.

**Tony Charnell**, a good friend of mine, originally from Birmingham, moved to a Rootes/Simca dealer in Edinburgh and made a name for himself first in Scottish rallying, then in racing, initially with an Imp at the Ingliston circuit near Edinburgh. At Le Mans in 1979 he won the 2-litre class in a Chevron, being the highest-finishing British entrant that year, a success leading to him being invited to join the prestigious British Racing Drivers Club (BRDC).

**Tim Fry and Mike Parkes** (the latter's father was Managing Director of Alvis) joined Engineering after their pupil/apprenticeships, and as a result of talent and initiative they demonstrated were given the job of stick-handling the design and development of a new small car which came to be the Imp. For a lot of reasons, most far beyond the control of Fry and Parkes, the Imp got off to a

very bad start and as a result it never became the threat to the Mini and the Beetle that had been hoped for. I go into this in some detail later, most of which will be well known to Imp Club members,



but let me emphasise my unwavering belief that the Imp was a brilliant basic design, one that showed, particularly in racing, that predictable and controllable handling is quite possible with a rear-engined car. Fry (left) subsequently did design work in Detroit with Chrysler, then returned to the UK to set up his own design consulting company. While Parkes was still working on the Imp project he was also active in motorsport, competing in racing and involved in the engineering of the Gemini Mk3 Formula Junior race car. After the Imp project reached the production stage Parkes left Rootes to join Ferrari and drove in Formula 1 and sports car racing.

**John Harris**, whose family owned Coventry's BMC dealership, Parkside Garage, while still working at Rootes as a development engineer was ahead of most club racers in discovering that the Mini had tremendous potential in touring car racing. However, he became best known in competition circles for work he did with Donald Healey's son, Geoff, in developing the 'Big Healeys' for their successes in international rallying and racing.

**Mike Jones** went to Jensen where, as assistant to the Chief Engineer, he played a leading part in adapting the Alpine so that the Ford 260 V8-engined Tiger could become a production reality.

**Mike Moreton** went to Ford Motorsport in the UK to work on development of cars for international rallying, and to head the team responsible for the highly successful Sierra RS500 Cosworth. Later, with JaguarSport, a company jointly set up by Jaguar and Tom Walkinshaw Racing, he directed operations that saw the Jaguar XJ220 supercar developed from concept to production. There are two books written by him: *RallySport Fords* and *Jaguar XJ220 – The Inside Story*.

**Chris Rawlinson** went on to take charge of setting up and managing the Ford off-site operation that converted Mk1 Cortinas to Lotus Cortinas.

**William (Bill) Towns** left the design department at Rootes to join Rover, and was involved there in the body design of the Rover-BRM Turbine Car which competed at Le Mans in 1965. He later joined Aston Martin and styled the 1976-1990 Lagonda four-door and the 1978 Bulldog concept. Later yet, as an independent consultant, he designed the body for the Jensen-Healey.

**Bernard Unett** stayed with Rootes (subsequently Chrysler UK, then Talbot) as a development engineer. Racing firstly as a private entrant, then later with the works team, he amassed successes in cars as diverse as Imps and Tigers. And driving a works-prepped Avenger, Unett twice won the British Saloon Car Championship (1974 and 1976) and was elected to the BRDC. He was also the first winner of the BRDC Silver Star award.

**Ernie Unger** first worked for Colin Chapman at Lotus, but decided that the Rootes pupil/apprentice programme would provide him with a more solid core training. He worked closely with Fry and Parkes throughout the development of the Imp. Later in his career he was involved in the design, in conjunction with Frank Costin, of the Unipower GT, a mid-engined coupé using Mini Cooper components; Approximately 70 were built, most of them being campaigned in racing.

My career was less stellar. After completion of the pupil/apprentice programme, I worked for three years in the Export Service Office at Stoke in Coventry, processing warranty claims – back then the traditional starting job for anyone aspiring to wholesale service management. I then transferred to Canada. For much of my time with Rootes Canada I was Service Technical Instructor. My job involved visiting dealers across Canada to instruct on the servicing and repair of Rootes products. My first major assignment was the Imp and for this job I had a Commer Walk-Thru, a large van with basically the same six-cylinder engine (of Armstrong Siddeley heritage) used in the contemporary Humber Super Snipe. In the van I carried Imp engines, transaxles, suspension components, special tools, etc. Behind the van I sometimes towed an Imp on a trailer to demonstrate engine, transaxle and other component removal. Later my teaching duties included Alpine twin-carburettor tuning, Tiger familiarisation and, later on, technical aspects of Simca models. I did several cross-Canada tours in the Commer van; it was a wonderful job for a young single guy and I got to know Canada coast-to-coast.

But later, when Rootes and Simca North American operations were merged into Chrysler, I became unhappy with a prevailing negative attitude there towards smaller cars and I quit. Over the next three years I had several jobs, including two good years with Renault Canada. However, I then rejoined Chrysler Canada, this time at their HQ in Windsor, Ontario, (across the river from Detroit), first as a service-engineer dealing with Chrysler's imports – the Hillman Avenger (badged in North America as the Plymouth Cricket) and the Dodge Colt (actually from Mitsubishi). Later I moved to Marketing where the rest of my career involved managing sales publications, some shows, and motorsport programmes of the non-oval variety, promoting the Plymouth/Dodge Neon and the Eagle Talon (aka the Mitsubishi Eclipse) as grass-roots competitors. A very satisfying career.



Peter (on step) being wished *bon voyage* by Rootes Canada CEO, Malcolm Freshney, before an Imp trans-Canada tour. Behind is Rootes' Retail Service Department in Scarborough, Ontario  
Photo: Peter Badenoch

Now let's get to the Imp...

The Imp – branded in Canada and the USA as a Sunbeam – was planned to take on the Mini and the Beetle. Had it been successful, Rootes might have survived other setbacks and remained independent. However, as we know, the Imp got off to a bad start. It was rushed to market much too fast and was plagued with reliability issues for its first couple of years. Financially, from the start, the project was a gamble, the government having forced Rootes to locate the new assembly plant in Scotland – at Linwood, Renfrewshire, near Glasgow – hundreds of miles distant from Coventry where many of the Imp components were produced. And another nightmare developed: the labour force came from the closed-down shipyards on the Clyde and it was totally unaccustomed to assembly-line production. That resulted in chronic labour problems with one wildcat strike after another. So, although production of the Imp at Linwood lasted from 1963 to 1976, at best production volumes were about a third of what had been hoped for. The car never achieved its sales potential.

But with a flexible-revving, SOHC all-aluminum four-cylinder engine of Coventry Climax origin, synchromesh on all four forward gears, front and rear suspensions designed to give the rear-engined car remarkably stable and predictable handling, an interior roomy for the size of car, a hinged, hatch-style rear window, and really attractive styling, it could be a delightful car to own and drive. And in racing, Imps trounced the Minis, winning the British Touring Car Championship over three successive years.

Let me advance an argument which at first glance might seem almost farcical. Back in the 1960's Alec Issigonis was on the way, with the Mini, to convincing the public, and the industry, that transverse front engine and front-wheel-drive was the only effective layout for small cars. But suppose for a moment that the Imp, with its cute styling, its people-carrying strengths, its lively performance and its excellent handling, had been a resounding sales success from the get-go, taking away a major volume of sales – as had been intended – from the Mini and the Beetle. Would the automotive world have then so whole-heartedly embraced FWD configurations as the only way to go for small cars? Or might some manufacturers have subsequently achieved equal success by staying with the rear-engined approach? Assuming, of course, that they abandoned treacherous rear-swing-axle suspension. Let's not forget that Porsche, over decades, has done an outstanding job with rear-engined configurations.

But that's conjecture. Let's look at my particular interest, the Imp in Canada.

The Imp was introduced to the UK market in May 1963. But fully sixteen months before that there had been Canadian involvement with the Imp. On 2nd January, 1962, a Coventry-built prototype, with no badging, arrived by ship at New York. The purpose was a month's cold-weather testing in Canada. Travelling with the prototype were two development engineers, Ken Sharpe and David Lloyd. The factory code-name for the Imp at that time was *Apex*, and the left-hand-drive prototype shipped for testing in Canada was *Apex* Number 6, with Coventry licence plate 5846 RW. The engineers drove it from New York to Niagara Falls where they were joined by an engineer from Solex Carburetors, Fred Howlett, and George Blane of Rootes Canada, who brought along a Super Minx as the service vehicle.

Testing of *Apex* at temperatures of minus 20°F and below was first carried out in Northern Ontario, much of it from a motel in a little town called at Kapuskasing. Engine starting, after parking



**Prototype Imp on test in Northern Ontario, January, 1962**  
 Photo: Peter Badenoch

outside overnight at these temperatures, without block-heater assistance, was found to be good but heater performance was dismal. The final week of testing simulated daily, urban, winter commuting, again at below freezing temperatures. From a motel outside Montreal the team would

drive into the city, using wipers, heater blower, radio and headlights, park *Apex* on an outside parking lot and go off in the Super Minx to visit dealerships. They would return, six hours later, and drive *Apex* back to the motel where it would again sit outside overnight. The commute would then start again the next day. With short journeys in such cold conditions flat battery problems were soon encountered. On *Apex* the battery was located at the front of the car for weight distribution advantage, but in this location it never really got warm and under severe winter conditions would not accept an adequate charge. *(Being at the front, there would be some voltage drop with the long cable needed to reach the solenoid in the engine compartment. GP)*

At the end of January the prototype was shipped back to Coventry. The trip had been worthwhile: design changes for production included relocation of the battery to the rear and increasing the capacity of the heater core – more on that later.

But that wasn't all. In January 1963, four months before the Imp's UK introduction, and a year before it would be launched in North America, the third Imp off the line at Linwood (B411000003 HSO), also with no badging, was shipped to Canada for long-term evaluation. This right-hand-drive car, with Renfrewshire licence WHS 165, registered to Rootes (Scotland) Ltd., was to remain in Canada, performance and reliability issues being reported to Coventry over the next 15 months. At the end of this period, WHS 165, by this time on Ontario plates, was retired. Nobody wanted the right-hand-drive car so I snapped it up for \$550. I kept it twelve years. During some of that time it was my daily driver, including a trip to Florida (in convoy with a Tiger!) for the 1966 Sebring 12-hour race, a 3,000-mile round trip. Then, with engine and suspension modifications, and the radiator relocated to the front, I raced it at two Ontario circuits, Harewood and Mosport. Not spectacularly – unlike Imps being raced in the UK – but I had fun. I also ice-raced it, then gave temporary ownership to a friend who competed with it in ice-racing, gymkhanas, and brutal rally-cross. Inevitably this Imp suffered most of the teething-troubles of the early cars, but on the plus side it served us well and was a lively and delightfully controllable little car.

Incidentally, the engine modifications mentioned included a Sport manifold, Sport camshaft, twin Stromberg CD carburettors and, the *pièce de résistance*, a 998cc short engine salvaged from the works Imp which Rosemary Smith, with Anne Coombe of Toronto, took to 8th overall out of 60

entrants, and won her class, in the 1966 Canadian Shell 4000. (The endurance rally, over 4000 miles of mostly unpaved roads, caused the Imp engine to ingest more than its fair share of road dirt, and after the rally a new short engine, sourced from Coventry was installed. Enter yours truly doing a deep dive into the Service Department scrap bin...)

More on that heater, which in Canada is something that has to be really effective for a car to sell well. After Imps went on sale in Canada, in March 1964, buyers very soon complained about poor heater performance; it was clear that the larger heater core, dictated by the Kapuskasing tests, had not done the trick. Some time later an even larger heater core was specified for cold-climate markets but even that was not very good. Tests by us at Rootes Canada showed that the problem was three-fold. Firstly, at sub-freezing temperatures the engine's aluminum block and head were so efficient at dissipating heat that the engine seldom reached optimum running temperature even with the thermostat remaining closed. Secondly, the heater hoses were routed from the back of the car to the front through uninsulated sills so before the engine coolant reached the heater core its temperature had dropped significantly. Thirdly, there was no helpful engine-warming of the firewall/scuttle, so blower-air entering the heater core was frigid. At Rootes Canada we first tried an engine undertray but that didn't help much. An effective solution was then developed: the installation of a petrol-fired coolant heater called the 'South Wind Minute Heater', manufactured by Stewart-Warner of Indianapolis. With this, the car's heater reached a healthy temperature very quickly, and travel in an Imp, regardless of outside ambient, was toasty-warm. I went on a tour across Canada to demonstrate the Minute Heater, installed on an Imp towed behind the Commer. Dealers were impressed, but with the \$100 cost of the kit (installation extra) on a car costing only \$1500 new, dealer and owner response was poor.

Through the later 1960's Imp sales in North America were at a less-than-impressive pace, partly because its early problems had tarnished its image, partly because Chrysler dealers did not understand the appeal of smaller cars. Around 1970, as part of the Chrysler import product plan for Canada and the USA, the Imp was dropped from the model line-up, the decision being taken to continue, at least for a while longer, the rear-engined Simca 1118 (1000 in Europe), less attractive to the enthusiast, but a larger four-door car, and with a solid reliability record. Alas, yet



another nail in the Imp coffin.

**Third production car off the line on test in Canada. This RHD Imp was subsequently bought by Peter and gave 12 years' service before being sold in 1976 having succumbed to too much Canadian winter salt. It's buyer wanted it for the engine so it is doubtful the shell of this historic Imp survives**

Photo: Peter Badenoch