

## Nine countries in four days with a Stiletto

Hans Slenders, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

*In early September Scottish member Scott Clements and I completed a manic run: nine countries in four days in the slipstream of the Triumph club: The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Austria, German and Italy. We hope readers will enjoy reading our story...*

**How it all began.** Reading the *Impressions* articles on the *Imptalian Job* in 2017 about four Imps crossing the Alps into Italy, three Dutch Imp Club members decided they wanted to take on a

similar challenge in 2019; taking the Stelvio pass. But due to many reasons this was postponed. By that time, I had already begun to figure out a route, and to prepare my 1971 Sunbeam Stiletto for that trip. So, with the Stelvio trip on hold, I was somehow looking for another opportunity to flex the Stiletto's muscles and this arrived quicker than expected!

My friend and fellow Imp Club member Dion Fluttert asked me if I had an interest in joining him on the Ten Countries Run (aka 10CR), a run organised by the UK's Club Triumph that crossed ten countries, covering some 2,000 miles, 14 Alpine passes and

everything squeezed into four or five days. Although we would only touch nine countries since we would not be starting from the UK of course, it is still what my co-driver Scott Clements would call "a manic run".

The run is very loosely organised, and after having received the route book and GPS sat-nav files, you are out there on your own, hardly ever seeing other participants. In reality you only see the other cars at the start, at the finish and very occasionally on the road. Also, your overnight stays have to be arranged by yourself. Dion had done the run before and then noticed most Triumphs were driving in groups of two or three cars, in order to have some company and help each other in times of trouble. He decided to create his own back-up party and invited me in my Stiletto. I took me a while to find a co-driver who had the necessary spare time and with the enthusiasm to give this challenge a go. I then remembered Scott Clements. I got to know Scott at the 2016 Going Dutch event which took place near my home town, and during two Imp Ecoses. Although he thought it would be a manic run, he liked to have a go, and our company was complete: Dion and his brother Laurent in a 1963 Triumph TR4, Dion's friend Marcus and his neighbour Paul in a 2005 Aston Martin DB9, and Scott and I in the tiniest car in the pack: a near-standard Stiletto with less than 10% of the horsepower of the Aston.

**Preparations needed.** Although we also had to arrange hotels, motorway vignettes, insurances etc, preparing the little Sunbeam for this endurance event obviously took much more time. The 875cc engine was still original, and had never seen any repairs other than a new head gasket. In

preparation for the three Imps' (non) adventure to the Stelvio I had already fitted a high-efficiency radiator and a small auxiliary front radiator. Discs, callipers and an extra brake fluid reservoir were waiting on the shelf. With the 10CR an even more demanding adventure was going to start, and so the discs, new fluids and also a new alternator were fitted. While testing, the oil pressure was found to be too low after long motorway runs, meaning new bearings, an overhaul of the oil pump and pressure relieve valve were needed. (I think the latter was the cause of the low oil pressure.) By that time I had the impression the Stiletto was ready for the trip, but the car thought otherwise...

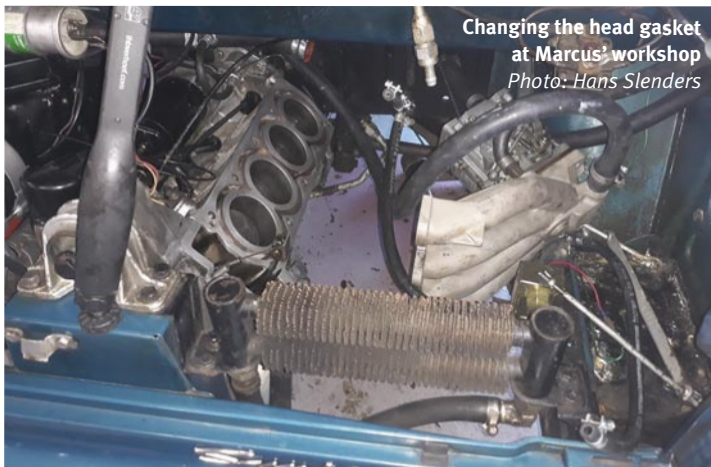
The run was planned from Wednesday 4th of September until Saturday evening, 7th September. Scott and I took the previous Saturday for the last preparations and to meet up with the other members of our party. We met at the car restoration workshop of Marcus in Berkel Enschoot. While there we noticed the Stiletto seemed to be losing cooling fluid. We took advantage of Marcus' facilities and investigated the problem there, which entailed fitting a new head gasket. Six hours later (which included eating a Chinese take-away! the car was ready again.

**Driving to the start.** On Monday morning we left Nijmegen in the Netherlands to take two days to leisurely drive to the start in Sedan in the North of France. Leisurely because a very strenuous endurance test lies ahead!

Our first stop was at the former garage of Luc Willems in Hechtel, Belgium. Luc is a former Rootes dealer and has more than 30 classic cars of diverse make in his former showroom – including five Imps and a Stiletto. 80-year-old Luc visits over 80 meetings a year and has all his cars on the road!



Hans Slender (right) and Scott Clements  
Photo supplied by Hans Slenders



He sure is one busy old-timer!

Driving on to our overnight stop in La Roche in the Ardennes in central Belgium we were hit with more car trouble. On the motorway we hit a bump and the left front tyre hit the wheelarch with a big bang. It continued to rub on occasion and obviously something

needed to be done. But not before we enjoyed some great Belgian beers in the central marketplace of this Belgian gorge town and had a good night's sleep.

The next morning we jacked the car up and the diagnosis was soon made. A combination of a slightly shorter springs, wide 185/60x13 tyres and a wider track as a result of the Mk4 Fiesta discs had resulted in the outer edge of the tyres touching the wheelarch. We got a small length of rubber heater hose, wrapped it over the lower winding of the spring. With some glue and a few tie-wraps the car sat an inch higher. Problem sorted! What may appear to be a bodge held fast for the entire trip.

In the afternoon we arrived safely near Sedan, where we met with the rest of our teams.

**Wednesday 4th September, 8.30 a.m. The run begins!** And so, finally, the official part began. This, the longest day of the trip, saw us driving from Sedan in the north of France, taking short detours through Belgium and Luxemburg, continuing through the Vosges into Germany, Schwarzwald, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and finally Bludenz in Austria. All in all over 400 miles with a planned arrival at 7.37 p.m., and with only one 30-minute break. A coffee break or long petrol stop immediately meant you were behind schedule. As we really wanted to have a decent dinner in our hotel, so there wasn't much time for sightseeing or breaks!

Soon after the start on the long sweeping and slightly climbing roads in northern France it was obvious that the Aston and the TR4 had the legs of the Stiletto on these roads. We decided to agree to separate and drive on our own, meeting only at assembly points, so Scott and I wouldn't feel under pressure to keep up. However, it soon became apparent that the difference wasn't that big after all once speed limits and other traffic are factored in. And narrow roads and hairpins which would give the Stiletto an advantage were still to come! We had good hopes we wouldn't be that much slower overall.

However, Scott then heard a clunk from the front brakes. We had to stop and check the front callipers. Luckily there was nothing seriously wrong and we could continue our journey. We soon noticed the first real mountains and there was a warm welcome by the Swiss Triumph club, who also cheered at our brave Stiletto! It was already dark when we drove through Liechtenstein and into Austria. At 9 p.m., over twelve hours after our departure, we finally stopped at our hotel, which

in fact was 20 miles before Bludenz. We relaxed over a welcome Austrian beer, happy that the first day had gone very smoothly. The car behaved well and its passengers seemed to be just starting to get going!

**Thursday September 5th, 9 a.m. Alpine passes ahead!** The next morning we got

up early, checked and topped-up all fluids and removed the front wheels in order to check the callipers and the play in the front wheels. Again nothing seriously wrong, just a little wear in the kingpins after nearly 50 years. Let the fun begin!

The first pass was the Silvretta, a 2000-plus-metre pass originally constructed for the hydro-electrical works. A great road with many sharp hairpins, steep, but also with big busses to watch out for! The Stiletto was like a hot knife through butter on these roads and also had no problems in overtaking the busses.

We continued over the Brenner Pass into Italy and the Dolomites. The temperature rose astonishingly from 13-30°C! With lovely Italian weather we thoroughly enjoyed some great mountain passes: Sella, Pordoi, Campolongo and Furcia. We even managed to overtake an aptly named Triumph Dolomite while climbing through all of these hairpins! Unfortunately no Stelvio in the route, but rest assured there was more than a sufficient amount of climbs, hairpins and descents. The day just was too perfect. It surely couldn't last. And it didn't...

While speeding down a mountain, suddenly a ticking, somewhat alarming noise from the left of



**The Stiletto and the Aston in front of Hotel Löwen in Feldkirch**

*Photo: Hans Slenders*



the car. Scott thought that maybe the speedometer drive had raised its voice but no, the noise came from outside. A spring from the rear brake backplate had come loose. Soon fixed and on the road again, but we feared we were now far behind our companions. But luck was smiling on us –

they were held up at the traffic light to enter the Staller pass which is only open for 15 minutes per hour. When we arrived the Aston had already been waiting for over 20 minutes for the light to turn green. With dusk approaching, and with Lienz still an hour away at least, we decided to start three minutes before the light was due to turn green (yes, naughty, I know!). And then the competition started... the Aston sprinted away, but Scott showed some great driving downhill to the Flutters in their TR4, and I was just hoping we wouldn't end up at the wrong side of a ramp. What he thought was well within safe limits, to me seemed way beyond. I guess I simply lack the experience with track driving. Since I am writing this, you will deduce we arrived safely and twelve hours after our departure from Feldkirch we rolled into Lienz and some well-deserved pizzas. Another hour driving through the pouring rain awaited before we arrived at our hotel in Grosskirchheim, at the foot of the Grossglockner, to contemplate the next day's challenge...

**Friday September 6th, 8.30 a.m. A rainy and misty day.** Finally, we had the chance to meet with some other Triumphs. On the first day in Sedan we decided not to go to the official start since we were not officially registered and of course we were not in a Triumph so didn't feel it was appropriate, but in Heiligenblut only a few miles from our hotel was a central control point, and we had already noticed that we were not the only non-Triumphs. In fact, we were really made to feel very welcome in the pack with comments such as "Brave men in a lovely little car" and "If you can do this, you can also do the Monte". But by now the weather had changed. The roads on the Grossglockner were covered in mist and very wet. On the pass at 2,504 metres above sea level there was snow. And during this weekend the Stelvio was already closed so we were lucky that it wasn't included in the run. I don't know if it was the thin air or just the steepness, but the power from our little Coventry Climax seemed lacking.

And then we made the mistake to take the Zillertalhochstrasse. The roads were very narrow, steep and slippery, and unfortunately covered in the mist, denying us some great views! The Zillertalhochstrasse was an extra loop, only indicated with maps in the routebook, but not part of the sat-nav files. We got lost. We lost a lot of time and had to cut corners – as I will have to do as well with this story, or it will become an endurance exercise in itself!

From the Zillertal we took the shortest road to one of Europe's most beautiful castles,

Neuschwanstein in southern Germany, and with the sat-nav now happy again, straight on to Augsburg, the last official overnight stop, were we arrived just before dusk.

**Saturday September 7th, 9 a.m. Back home over the autobahn.**

Time had passed quickly; it was already

the last day of the run and with a run back to the official finish in the Netherlands ahead of us. Again 400-odd miles, for the most part over A-roads or motorways with, potentially, a stop at the Nürburgring. However, a couple of roadworks and roadblocks made us all decide to head for the autobahns. And, while happily cruising at 75 mph misfortune struck...

Our clutch no longer did what it should do, and the Aston had a nasty knock in the engine – an engine that had just been rebuilt at great expense with a five-digit bill. Scott and I managed to reach the agreed lunch point, and first had a bite but Marcus decided to have his Aston Martin transported back to his workshop to save further damage to the engine. While we had all terrible scenarios in our minds about what could be wrong with the clutch, it turned out only to be air in the slave cylinder so was soon put right. We were reminded how nice it is to drive a relatively simple car; all our problems had been easily fixed and at little or no expense. We were able to pick up speed again and drive home, but had to bleed the clutch one more time, and arrived in Nijmegen again without a fully working clutch, but with full cooperation of the traffic lights!

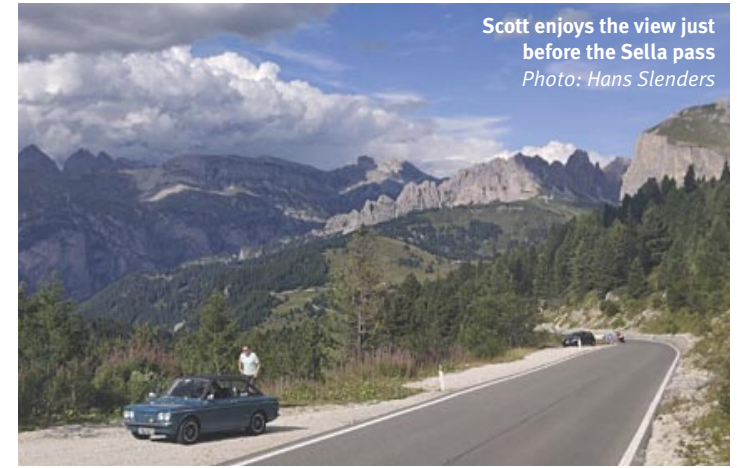
Apart from the stops, we had driven continuously at 75-80 mph for 400 miles. Markus and Paul were less fortunate; they arrived home in the early morning hours of the next day.

Home again we took stick. We had no major issues. We had driven 2,000 miles, used 198 litres of petrol at an average of 41 mpg, five litres of oil and no coolant or brake fluid. The Stiletto hadn't been tested this thoroughly for a long, long time – if ever! – but did a great job.

The following day we rebuilt the slave cylinder with new seals and, checking the engine oil, also found the level way below the minimum mark on the dipstick! Due to the distraction of the clutch issues and the Aston's troubles we hadn't checked it for a while and hadn't realised that when driving at high motorway speeds the oil consumption more than doubles.

Looking back at the adventure it was a great experience and Scott was a great companion on the trip. I learned a lot about fast driving and fast repairs! If doing 10CR again I would take more time to stop every now and then for some photos on the passes or just take a cable up the mountain even if it did mean we were late to finish each day.

And now the idea of organising a *10 Countries, 10 Days, 10 Imps* run is circling in our minds. A real 'Going Continental' – a little less manic, a lot more relaxed.



**Scott enjoys the view just before the Sella pass**

*Photo: Hans Slenders*