

The 1963 Hillman Imp

Richard Loveys, Bracknell, Berkshire

Richard Loveys was one of the 'Old Rooters' tasked with piling the miles onto pre-production Imps immediately prior to the factory's opening. Another was Michael Andrews who kindly sent in Richard's article – originally written in April 2013 – for publication. The photos were supplied by Richard. Thank you both. GP

The Rootes Group ran an excellent training scheme, as did many other large organisations, at the time that I joined the in 1963. There were three main ways to join the company scheme.

The first was recruitment as a school leaver at about 16 years of age to be an apprentice and follow a structured training programme in the company's school and have practical experience in the various Rootes workshops and departments; this lasted a total of about five years. Most apprentices went to jobs on the workshop floor, became skilled craftsmen or supervisors, or moved into 'white collar' jobs and worked as managers, draughtsmen or engineers.

School leavers aged 18 came in with GCE A levels and were known as pupils; they followed a similar path to the apprentices, but it was shorter and less 'hands on' as the pupils were usually destined for management or professional jobs.

The third category was graduate entrants who were known as trainees, and they were either engineers with appropriate initial university qualifications, or graduates with degrees ranging from psychology, history, economics or a language. The trainees' training schedule was an eighteen-month version of the pupils' one, but being aimed at engineering or general management jobs.

I joined the Rootes Group as a trainee, having taken some time to decide what direction I wished my career to take. My initial plan had been to become a pilot with the RAF but this had been thwarted by failing the medical examination. Fortunately I had sent off university applications in time and was accepted at the University of Exeter from where I graduated with a degree in Economics. After a number of leisurely applications and interviews I joined the Rootes Group on



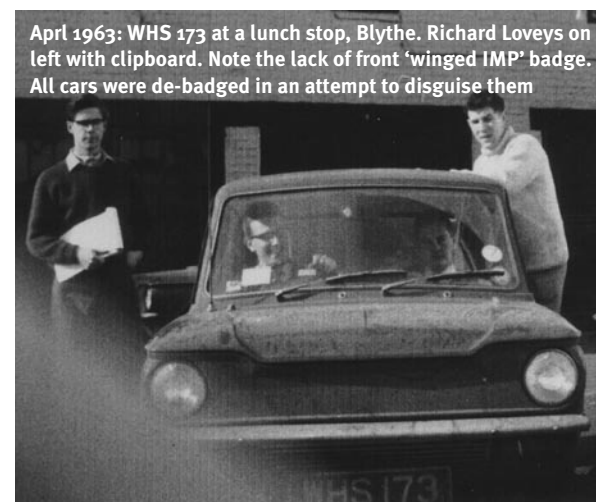
April 1963: WHS 181, one of the pre-production Imps. Test run was from Ryton and along the Docaster bypass A1(M)
All photos supplied by Richard Loveys

Monday, 18th March 1963, several months after most of the others who had graduated at the same time as I did. My induction to the company was short; it lasted one day as Rootes had a major and immediate problem to deal with which needed attention...

The company was in the final stages of opening a new factory at Linwood near Glasgow in which it was going to build an entirely new car – the Hillman Imp – using a considerable amount of new technology and employing a new workforce that had little experience in building cars. The factory was due to be opened by HRH the Duke of Edinburgh and the cars put on sale immediately afterwards and unfortunately these dates could not be postponed. There were still some technical snags with the cars in spite of an extensive development and testing programme, some of which had been done overseas. The company had decided that one way to deal with these still unsolved problems was to put a large number of miles on some cars to see whether or not the engineers had come up with effective solutions. This would need a lot of drivers, and preferably ones who were responsible and not being paid too much. What better people to use than the apprentices,

pupils and trainees?

Some pre-production Hillman Imps were used for this part of the company's high-mileage testing programme. It involved the cars being driven north from Coventry to Boroughbridge, just north-west of York, and back. They did this twice a day, seven days a week. Occasionally a driver would feel energetic and drive the 30 or 50 miles north to Scotch Corner and back. The Imps covered about 500 miles per day. The two shifts started at 6 a.m. and 3 p.m. and



April 1963: WHS 173 at a lunch stop, Blythe. Richard Loveys on left with clipboard. Note the lack of front 'winged IMP' badge. All cars were de-badged in an attempt to disguise them

usually about half a dozen cars were out at a time. Once they reached their destination, a secluded steak house, they stopped for the drivers to have a meal, and then returned to Coventry. The exercise was managed by the company's Competitions Manager, Norman Garrad, who was assisted by Mike Andrews, one of the more experienced pupils. It was based in the Competitions Department garage at the Ryton factory.



Another lunch stop

It should not take much imagination to realise how the group of young men chosen for this task would behave. One instruction was very clear, "There is to be no racing." While we did not race, we did, however, drive as fast as we could because the cars were good and we wanted to see how quickly they would go. We got to know each other well and trusted everyone else's driving skills – with a few exceptions – and we very soon learned the route. These factors meant that we could do silly things. We could drive in a closely spaced convoy, like a train, after dark with only the front and rear cars using their lights. We could signal on blind corners to those behind when it was safe to overtake, and this must have un-nerved other road users. We learned where there was an active policeman looking to 'book' us for speeding, and on one occasion I saw him in the headlights running along to try and catch the registration number.

The Imps were totally unknown by the public as secrecy had been well maintained, all the identifying badges and markings were either omitted or covered, including the tax discs, and the cars did not look anything like any existing Rootes product. We had a bit of innocent fun fending off questions from the people in the place where we stopped for our meal, sometimes saying that these were the new small Ferrari, or whatever else we fancied. We occasionally saw people trying to take pictures of the cars. I have no doubt that we were not allowed to take photographs of the cars, but someone did. One of the snaps was of the Imps all parked at the roadside lined up at an angle as if for a Le Mans 24-hour race start. Somehow Norman Garrad saw it and was understandably extremely cross.

There did not seem to be too many incidents considering the mileage travelled. One person did manage to collide with a steam roller and a lorry full of railway sleepers, both were rather large, slow and very solid. He was removed from the drivers list. There was talk of someone being badly injured, but I do not know any of the details.

In our hands the cars performed well, the speedometer needles regularly disappeared off the dial, and I do not remember many cars breaking down. On my first drive I suddenly noticed that the heater had started to blow cold air so stopped to investigate. Another Imp soon arrived to check that all was well and the driver told me that my car had run low on water; fortunately I had stopped before the engine was damaged. The radiator was re-filled and we continued.

The main flaw in the programme was that we were not giving the Imps the same sort of use that they would later receive in the hands of the paying customers. The cars had little chance to cool down between shifts. Not many customers regularly travelled 500 miles a day. Most would drive a bit more sedately than we did and few would make regular checks to the oil and water levels.

From my point of view it was an excellent exercise and I learned a lot of things about driving. We all ate a good meal; I got to know a number of the apprentices, pupils and trainees and it was considerably more fun than working. It also gave the drivers an enthusiasm for the Imp that benefited the company in intangible ways. My time on this exercise lasted until the 11th April. In that brief time I went out 15 times in three cars which were registered WHS 176, WHS 178 and WHS 180.

Later in the year as part of my training programme I was sent to Linwood, near Glasgow, for two weeks to see the factory where the Imps were manufactured. It was an interesting time, with the new factory and a great feeling of optimism in the Rootes Group about the future. The steel bodies were built in the Pressed Steel factory and transported across the road to the Rootes assembly plant using a huge, enclosed, bridge. On the Rootes side there was the high pressure die-casting

workshop where the light alloy components were cast. Some were then taken by road to Coventry for machining and assembly before being returned to Scotland to be fitted into the cars. This complicated – and expensive – arrangement was used because the government had insisted that the factory was built in Scotland rather than in the Midlands where Rootes wanted it. The machining of the cylinder blocks was done at the Stoke factory in Coventry by a huge, fully-automated machine which really was 'state of the art' and produced consistent results but was not as reliable as it should have been.

My fortnight at Linwood included time in the production areas as well as in several of the administrative departments. On the final assembly line I remember being impressed with the skill of the man fitting nave plates (or hub caps). These parts were the size of a small plate and made of chrome-plated steel. They required a firm knock to fit them to the wheels and there was a time set for this operation by the time-and-motion-study people. The fitter had, however, worked out his own method; he walked along the line of cars and as he passed each wheel he took a plate and gently threw it down – and at the appropriate moment kicked it with his soft suede shoe to fit it neatly on the wheel. When he had finished the available cars he walked along the other side to complete that batch and then sat down until it was time to start again.

There were a number of trainees, pupils and apprentices at the Linwood factory at any one time in various departments. On one occasion several of us were asked to dress up and pose with a car in order to provide a picture for use in an export market. One of the resulting images is shown below. We never found out whether or not the pictures produced any sales!



Linwood, 19th December 1963: wearing Santa hats and waving Swedish flags, the trainees attempt to boost Rootes' export drive! Centre-front is Richard Loveys, Graham Deeming and Geoff Stevens are perched on the engine lid and Neil Lucas (with dark hair) is on the left. Rest unknown

At the end of my time as a Trainee I obtained a post in the Market Research department, based at the Ryton factory. The job entailed a lot of statistical analysis as well as getting to know about the UK and overseas car markets, but it was rather at arm's length from the vehicles themselves and I soon wanted to move. The Market Research job lasted a little over a year, and I was fortunate to obtain promotion to the relatively new Product Planning department run by Bill Papworth.

Product Planning, as the name suggests, was the department which looked forward and provided the company's senior management with product information which was used to make decisions about what to manufacture. The job involved gathering data from company departments such as Costing, Engineering, Styling, Sales and Production in order to assess the feasibility of various competing product ideas. We also had to consider what the competition might be doing and this involved trying out some of their cars, as well as being familiar with the Rootes products. One of the new models with which I was associated at this time was the Imp coupé range which came to the market as the Stiletto, Californian and Chamois Coupé.

The two years in Product Planning were some of the most interesting that I had with the Rootes Group; they were followed by two years in Finance and some seven months in Export Sales. While in Finance I bought a Sunbeam Stiletto from the company and ran it for about four years. The car was one of a batch which was damaged at Linwood in a storm and sold at a discount with no warranty on the bodywork. It was a great car and went well – with thankfully no body problems.

My final involvement with the Imp was a small part in a BBC programme *The Car's the Star* which was made in 1998 and examined the Hillman Imp. For some reason I was incorrectly described as an apprentice.

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