

Imp trialling adventures

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Inspired by Simon Browner's article on his Impish trials exploits in December's *Impressions*, I thought I'd put two fingers to the keyboard. Plot spoiler – it won't be as illustrious as his.

My first experience of long-distance classic trials was spectating at Blue Hills on the 1985 Land's End Trial. It was near where I lived at the time and the weather was glorious after a long dry spell. The atmosphere from the large crowd was something else again. Bikes and sidecar outfits run ahead of the cars in these events and everyone watched in a hush as a BMW R80G/S plonked its way up the steep and stony track. The dust in between the stones was like ball bearings and he soon fell over. The crowd watched a pile of arms, wheels, legs and cylinders writhe for at least a minute, in enraptured silence, until a pitiful voice called out, "Won't anyone give me a hand?" whereupon everyone had the same idea at once and gave him a big hand of applause!

I was hooked by the machinery, the bonhomie, the derring-do and the sheer sense of occasion.

By 1987, my enthusiasm had convinced my mate Jerry Goater to join the Motor Cycling Club and enter his chop-top Hillman Imp in the Land's End with another mate, Mike Evason. We were all recent industrial design graduates. Our preparation left much to divine providence. We had competition Rotoflex couplings but I don't recall any bashplate (sump guard) being fitted.

When the large envelope containing our entry details arrived, we discovered we were in the same class as the big-engined Beetles. This was because Jerry had altered the silhouette of his Imp by removing the roof and welding up the doors. Consequently, the MCC judged his car to be non-standard.

This is the enduring feature of MCC events. You compete against the club not the other entrants. The MCC sets out the course, chooses the hills and provides occasional timed special tests in long distance, overnight events like the Exeter, Land's End or Edinburgh. They provide a route card with start times and directions and the course was theoretically easy to follow with red, white and blue circles to mark each junction. Blue was left, red was right and white was straight on. All you have to do is follow the course instructions and clear every section without stopping unless you have restart. You get a clear for a restart if you successfully get going again after stopping, without rolling back. As well as the nominated driver, the passenger(s) offer helpful advice and bounce up and down to help traction if there's wheelspin.

There are three starting points in classic trials and the MCC annually change their starting order. We chose to start from Lewdown as that was closest to my mother's house near Perranporth. That year Lewdown starters were at the end of the pack. Our running number was 352 so we were 352 minutes after standard time which was when the first entrant set off on his motorbike.



Jerry Goater's chop-top Imp, *Jemp*, on the 1987 Testing Trial
Photo: Bob Blackman

We had to arrive at the start at least an hour before our start time to allow for scrutineering and we easily complied with that as we couldn't add roughly four hours to the times on the instructions, which were in 24-hour format.

During the wait before the start, we heard tales from old hands of disaster and mechanical torture...

"D'you know what they call Beggar's Roost, lads?"

"No," we replied.

"They call it the Imp Breaker! Har har!" they laughed. They may have slapped their thighs, too, and swilled grog but it was probably just tea from a tartan flask.

Jerry tried to persuade the scrutineers to re-classify his car but their response was along the lines of, "We agree you won't be competitive in that class but you have altered it from a saloon. Let's see how you get on and then we might reconsider."



Jerry and his then girlfriend, Alison, 1987 Testing Trial 2
Photo: Bob Blackman

It took a while to 'get into' the route instructions. MCC miles are elastic and darkness alters your faculties. We had great difficulty finding the first hill and finally had to resort to listening for the sound of engines roaring in the stillness of benighted Somerset countryside. We managed it in the

end and cleared the first section with our hearts in our mouths. We may have been right at the back of the pack but we had climbed our first hill in our first trial.

Beggar's Roost was indeed called the 'Imp Breaker' in those days and when we took on fuel at Barbrook control we already felt blitzed from driving through the night. I've never had the same 'running on empty' feeling since. I've got used to it. The sunny morning was now disconcertingly bright after the night sections and we ate chocolate bars for a boost before the Roost.

Our brave little car *didn't* break on Beggar's Roost although we failed the section. We acclimatised to the routine card after that and took it in turns to drive, which isn't really in the spirit of an endurance event. The route instructions made more sense although we still had trouble with left and right turns, despite the red and blue discs. Sorry, that should have been blue and red discs. See what I mean? We would call out knife and fork sometimes and finally cracked it when Jerry got us to tie some string to his left hand when he drove and the navigator would pull that for a left turn.

When we found an observed section, we would join the queue and hop out to lower pressures in the rear tyres for more grip. At the head of the queue, we'd announce our number and the start line marshal would say, "Haven't you lost something?" every bleddy time (*Cornish spelling. GP*). We would look at the sky and register surprise, as if we'd never heard this banterous remark before or noticed that our Imp had no roof. Sometimes, they might also ask what happened if it rained. We would simply say that we got wet. This seemed to please the marshals we met and further repartee would often ensue, particularly if we had to come back down again after a failure.



Jerry and Mike Evason, Darracott, 1987
Photo: Bob Blackman

Sometimes we were towed to the top if we failed to proceed. The winch at Blue Hills is so old no-one knows who made it and the one at Crackington used to be hidden by a hedge. The cable seemed to disappear up the trouser leg of a grinning marshal sat on the bank. That was a quick haul and he didn't mess about. We barely stopped an inch away from his Wellingtons. They were size nines. I couldn't help but notice.

On occasions, a tractor was on hand to pull us out. There was one section I remember especially, called Crossleigh. They never used it again. There was a hole about three feet deep and the same length as an Imp. We fitted it perfectly. If we'd had doors that opened, we wouldn't have been able to open them. It was that snug. Just as we were about to leap out, a huge four-wheel-drive Massey Ferguson reversed down to us and almost parked on our bonnet, before lifting us up on our towrope using his hydraulics and hoicking us out of the hole.

We often had travelling marshals in the last car on our tail, having lost time looking for the first hill, and, by the time we got to Blue Hills, it was dark. We failed Blue Hills 1 and decided not to do Blue Hills 2 in case we broke something. We just wanted to finish the event. However, by the time we made it to Newquay after a leisurely comfort break the signing-off desk was shut and everyone else had gone on somewhere.

For the 1988 Land's End, we had learned a lot. I have a vague memory of raising the ride height with packing pieces. Our guardian angels had checked that the G-clamps we used to compress the springs had no casting flaws but we later got a card (at Christmas, which was nice) quietly warning all three of us against similar tool abuse in the future.

Jerry made and fitted a bashplate and Mike was too busy to join us so another mutual



Jerry and Mike, 1987 Land's End Trial
Photo: Motor Cycling Club

friend and industrial designer, Gavin Cawood, made up another threesome. Jerry was of the opinion that since we had a genuine four-seater we ought to have more than the usual two crew members. We continued to change drivers when no-one was looking.

The MCC had not seen fit to change our class, despite our performance in the previous year. This is another enduring feature of these events. Thankfully we were not in it for the awards; we were in it for the crack.

We got as far as Darracott where we had one of those dreaded restarts. In an attempt to prevent the engine from bogging down on the hill, Gav slipped the clutch just that bit too much and suddenly we had no drive. We pushed the car back beyond the start line and onto a vacant patch of grass, where we reviewed our options.

A local resident came to our aid and offered us refreshments and the use of a phone. I checked the map and decided that, if I phoned my mother, she could pick us up at a junction on the A39. Directing her remotely to the foot of Darracott seemed too involved. We packed all the contents of our open car into rucksacks and then marched through the lanes to our pre-arranged rendezvous at Eastcott, a “blink and you’ll miss it” settlement on the A39. We had literally just sat down on the verge to rest when my mum’s little primrose Talbot Samba came into view.

I put Jerry and Gav on a train the next day as we all had work to go to but we had a quick trip out to Blue Hills to see what we could have done. Jerry and his dad came down to Cornwall from Hampshire the following weekend and changed the clutch at the foot of Darracott, much to the amusement of the locals. The first thing Jerry did was successfully climb Darracott, because having had a refusal you had to rebuild your steed’s confidence.

We also entered the Mere TT – that’s Testing Trial not Tourist Trophy. This is a single-venue event



Bob and his Llama,
1999 Land's End Trial
Photo supplied by Bob Blackman

run by the Motor Cycling Club that takes place in the summer. It's like a picnic with competition cars and more like conventional PCTs (Production Car Trials). In its earliest form, it took place to the north of the A303 on some grassy plains just west of Kelsey Down services. This was a laugh and we met many people who remembered us from earlier adventures.

However, Jerry was dissatisfied with his little car. Since it was doomed to be classed as a special and his policy is one of continuous improvement (colours in the brochure may change), he decided to make the *Jemp* – as I called it – even more special. A big fan of Alfasuds, Jerry bought a 1500cc drivetrain and began to stuff that into the *Jemp*. It took some major restructuring and he got as far as making new driveshafts with help from his wryly enthusiastic dad. However, work, travel and other life events prevented completion of this conversion and we got our fix of trialling by marshalling for many years, until I acquired a device that seemed to be tailor made for such high jinks...

I acquired my Siva Llama after failing to rescue one from a scrapyards near St Day. It seemed obvious to enter it in the 1999 Land's End Trial, LET for short. My old trialling mate Jerry Goater offered to be my passenger/bouncer/navigator so it seemed that the stars were aligned. All I had to do was get it roadworthy.

After a lot of effort and last-minute problems, including drilling through a heater hose and running dry on the shakedown trip the afternoon before the evening of the start, Jerry arrived at my house to an oasis of calm.

We set off for the start (number 335 out of an entry of 365 but pulled into services on the M5 as the temperature was creeping up. There was nothing obviously wrong so we proceeded with caution from there on and said “No!” to any further Llama drama. Just like the *Jemp* before, we were in a class full of much more competitive machinery. The Siva Llama was documented as a kit car so we were in Class 6 with Marlins and Dellowes. We could only look wistfully at the Imps and small engine Beetles in Class 4 and envy them their lack of restarts. Nowadays, you hardly ever see an Imp in long-distance trails but in the 1999 LET there were eight Imps and one Stiletto.

Once underway, the night drive across the Somerset levels was brilliantly moonlit and I felt this was the pay off for my recent efforts. The car seemed happy enough but, despite having a 998cc engine, it wasn't as lusty as I'd hoped. It had a single SU and didn't seem to be getting enough juice. We had grip but not enough ground clearance. I had made a comprehensive bashplate for the Llama and this successfully reduced our ground clearance but got terribly bashed about. Afterwards, I had to remove it with a hammer even with all the bolts removed, so wedged on was it.

Our attempt at Darracott was literally beset by snags. At one point we hit a concrete lump that hooked on the bashplate and span us around through 90 degrees into the bank. We found that we hadn't lost any of our finely honed navigation skills.

We had a long wait at a course control in a farmyard just before Crackington and I spoke to Robin Davis from Treviscoe who was in the process of developing what proved to be a very successful trials Imp. He was most intrigued by the Llama.

The marshals on Crackington, however, were *not* impressed with my Llama. Thanks to the ground effect bashplate, we didn't get very far. Crackington is world famous in Cornwall for being mysteriously doctored the night before the trial by farm tankers emptied of mud and slurry. We came to a sticky stop but the mud behind us was planed beautifully smooth between our wheel tracks. As the marshals waded out to us, someone asked what the hell I was driving.

“A Siva Llama,” I explained. Blank faces all round. “It’s based on a Hillman Imp,” I added, helpfully. “Should have kept it as an Imp,” someone muttered. It’s just as well that I was already inured to the blatant jealousy aroused by my splendid example of brutalist rolling sculpture.

We failed all the major hills and I can’t honestly recall anything approaching what could be called successful climbs but – and it’s a big but – we made it to Penzance and finished. Jerry even managed to fall asleep while we were going along the A30 in a cloudburst. It must have been my reassuring driving technique.

The last section sticks out in my mind, however. It was called Trungle Mill and was a slippery, fast mud track between hedges, without steep concrete steps or big rocks or roots. It felt like the Llama was, at last, in its element.

I subsequently entered the Llama in that year’s testing trial. The weather was glorious but my bouncer couldn’t make it. In the end a lovely lady who’d just come along to watch offered to be my passenger. Her husband was a sidecar rider and she had



Bob with Bee Hayes, an innocent spectator
co-opted as ‘bouncer’ on the 1999 Land’s End Trial. She still spectates
Photo supplied by Bob Blackman

sworn never to cheat death on three wheels. However, the Llama appealed to her and we had a fine day’s sport, sometimes on three wheels, truth be told, but she loved it. We only suffered a gearbox leak and the throttle cable winding itself around a driveshaft.

That same summer, I stopped off in Okehampton and checked out the secondhand bookshops, like one does. I found a volume of *World Cars 1976* and the Siva Llama is listed in that as a production car. Subsequent research backed this up. I discovered that Chris Griffin had bought his Siva Llama brand new as a completed turn key vehicle from the factory in 1974. He was kind enough to send me a copy of the invoice as proof.

Another slight complication is that commercial vehicles are banned in classic trails following some lurid stories about poor visibility and reversing down sections hills following failed attempts at a hill. My Llama is actually a van, although you’d never know that by looking at it. I never drove it anywhere with roof panels or doors fitted. I just travelled everywhere with sunshine in my heart and trusted to my close relationship with the Met Office, not to mention divine providence, again, or my overworked guardian angels.

So, if I felt like it, I could probably enter it in Class 4 for Rear-Engined Production Cars up to 1300cc but the sections have become even rougher since the turn of the new millennium and I feel disinclined to bash it about, especially as I have a Class 7 car to play with these days.

Besides, Imps in the main classes of long distance classic trials are a now thing of the past (he said provocatively...)