

## Youthful Competition – Part One: The Early Stages

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It all started in 1978 when my dad and grandfather helped me choose my first car; a sensible, practical run-about that wouldn't get a young male driver (me) into trouble. Low cost, easy to maintain and cheap to run. I was fortunate that my dad was very practical and serviced the family cars. My grandfather brought even more skill as he had been trained as a REME engineer.

He would proudly explain how he had repaired a six-cylinder lorry engine in the African bush in 1932 when his co-driver ran the big-end bearings. He had to drop the sump and hand-scrub new bearings by the side of the track. I have a photograph!

My first car was a pretty 1968 Polar White Imp on cross-ply tyres – and a blown head gasket which we quickly fixed. A standard Imp on cross-ply tyres is a good way to learn. Cross-plies are

more forgiving and give excellent feedback on how they are sticking to the road. I soon discovered it was fun to drive. The Imp handled well but had a worn out engine. On the M1 driving back from the Birmingham Motor show with three friends the oil light came on. I stopped on the hard shoulder, topped up with cool, fresh oil and we made it home. I bought a second Imp: a Mk1 in Glenalmond Green with no MoT for a temporary donor engine while we rebuilt the other from the ground up. A 40 thou rebore (to give about 905cc), new pistons, rings, bearings, timing chain and so on. After careful running in it was such a sweet engine, those extra few cc gave just a little extra torque.

I graduated to a Sunbeam Imp Sport (NLR 589L). This turned out to be a good-looking wreck of a car. It had apparently been properly looked



Always handy to have an ex-REME engineer in the family! Tony's grandfather building an Imp engine  
Photo: Tony Duffin



Tony's first Imp had engine issues but was fun to drive  
Photo: Tony Duffin

after; full rust-proofing from new, regular servicing and weekly wash and polish. Unfortunately, we quickly discovered that it over-heated, idled like a pig and stuttered and stammered at low speed once warmed up. It needed a new radiator; one of the Strombergs had been re-assembled wrongly with the rubber diaphragm turned 90 degrees and upside-down. Worse still, the underseal had cracked and we discovered comprehensive rust trapped underneath. It was a good introduction to a more powerful and interesting car but with numerous problems was eventually written off.

In 1980 I joined the Birmingham University Motor Club (BUMC). The scene was set; I was clearly a good driver, wasn't I? The club ran a full season of events from treasure hunts to the Novral Road Night Rally starting at Leominster Car Auctions in Herefordshire. My first entry – into the 1980 Novral – was a disaster. Neither I nor my navigator read the regulations properly and, though we finished the event unscathed, we failed miserably on the points side. I tried again, different navigator and another novice event (Quinton Motor Club's Novice Rally in May 1981). Again a failure to fully understand the regs and an exclusion this time at an oddly laid out junction. Several other competitors suffered the same and submitted complaints. With hindsight this was a great lesson to learn.

By now I had also participated in a few simpler events such as autotests and PCTs – a great way to improve slower speed car control and coordination. Then, another rally event in the form of the



Tony's first rally – the 1980 Novral – did not go well  
Photo: Tony Duffin



Learning car control: a production car trial near Dorking  
Photo: Tony Duffin

Valkyrie on the edge of Wales in summer 1981. This time both navigator and driver were prepared – but the car wasn't. Even the stiffer springs of the Imp Sport were not enough for the rough roads and, not having a sump-guard, we broke the bottom hose outlet of the radiator in the first half of the

event. I was studying engineering so I could post-rationalise this as good experience.

But my knowledge had improved and in Quinton Motor Club's Novice Rally of May 1982 – now driving a four-headlight Chamois Sport (HAN 130K) – we finished 64th overall after starting as number 154 (in a field of about 100 cars. (Note, not all numbers are used – the gaps make it easier to tell which cars are in which class).

On reflection, should I have done things differently at this point? Probably, yes, perhaps with a more strategic approach planning how to progress from autotests, navigational events, and then onto novice rallies, with an experienced navigator as mentor. Hindsight is a wonderful thing.

This takes us to the St Wilfred's Rally in Yorkshire. (I was working in Leeds during the summer of 1982.) We finished 41st out of about 75 starters.. We would have done better, but here is another lesson; the St Wilfred's was a fast event with very long high-speed sections interspersed with long, steep climbs through the Dales. We had to cut some sections and head to halfway as we were out of petrol and would have been out of time. I fitted a bigger fuel tank.

By now the other essential ingredient of rallying was in place: teamwork. A good navigator is vital and when working together regularly a whole event flows smoothly.

The next event was the Dursley MC and LCC Scorpion Rally. This was enormous fun and we were doing well, only we had a number of 'offs' during the event. The worst was on a rutted gravel section when a corner was sharper than mapped and we had a spin across the ruts. We extracted the car and headed onwards but it was clear we had broken the exhaust, despite a sump-guard now having been fitted. The car was now very noisy so we retired.

There was another event during which we had the most ridiculous problem: Swindon Phoenix Car Club's Highwayman. We were doing fine until at around a quarter of the distance the engine

#### 1983 Highwayman Rally

Photo: J Harvey Woodstock



#### 1982 Scorpion Rally

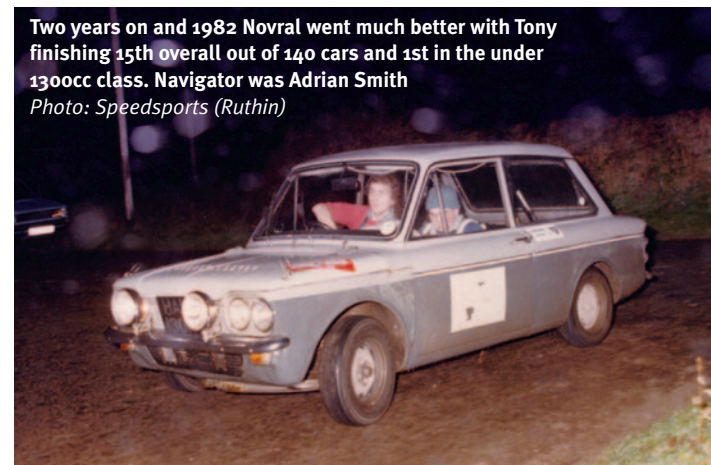
Photo: J Harvey Woodstock



just stopped producing power. We stopped and it idled fine. We drove off again and within a mile it did the same thing. Intermittent electrical fault? No, or it wouldn't idle. Fuel problem? Made sense from the symptoms. Vapour lock? Nothing apparent in the engine bay and on a cool April night. It did it again and so I tried blowing back up the fuel lines to see if it was a blockage. Brilliant – problem solved – until a few miles later. I blew the line again, problem solved again – for a few more miles. We did what we could for the rest of the frustrating event. At the finish I was wondering what it could be and then it dawned on me. I had done a fuel economy run a few weeks earlier. The marshals had put masking tape over the fuel cap and signed it to stop cheating. Had some of this tape got into the tank? Sure enough, later the following day I took the fuel gauge sender out and I could see a piece of tape at the bottom of the tank near the pipe where the fuel leaves. I wrangled it out with tongs and never had the problem again. The moral of the story – don't do economy runs!

1982 was the time to have another go at the BUMC Novral. The car was ready and in good form, driver and navigator had a little experience and the event should suit the Imp with its twisty narrow sections and sufficiently challenging route. It started well with some familiar routes to warm up on. We kept the car on the road, avoided those costly penalty points and by half way were well up the running order. This was the time to focus. We avoided disaster on a 'not-as-map' piece of route; survived a 'yump' without damage and suffered only one minor spin. Through this we avoided picking up penalties and were more than content to complete the rally; a really good run and the car was still running well. We were placed 15th overall out of a field 140 cars. These included many Escort RS2000s, a 2.3-litre Chevette, and 1300cc Mini Cooper S. Better still, we were 1st in the

Two years on and 1982 Novral went much better with Tony finishing 15th overall out of 140 cars and 1st in the under 1300cc class. Navigator was Adrian Smith  
Photo: Speedsports (Ruthin)



under 1300 class. That excellent placing gave me a great start to the BUMC overall competition which I won that academic year.

I hardly need say that attention to detail in car preparation is clearly important. You cannot rest on your laurels. A year later, for the 1983 Novral I had missed a couple of apparently minor mechanical details. On one section my navigator's light failed when a wire broke. Not only does repair slow you down, but you lose the flow and confidence drops. Once we had got over that, a little after half way the oil pressure warning light came on. I quickly stopped and rushed around the back to investigate. There was oil all over the back of car. The dipstick showed the sump was virtually empty. After a few minutes of peering around the engine bay with a torch and plenty of head scratching I discovered that one of the oil cooler hoses had dropped onto the exhaust where it had melted through. I bypassed the oil cooler with the remaining good hose and started the engine. Phew, all was OK – except with so little oil we could barely brake nor corner without the oil



light coming on again. We had lost over 20 minutes. No point risking the engine for a poor placing so we retired and limped to the finish with another lesson learned!

After another few months of general competition we decided it was time for more and entered a full year's championship – the 1984 Association of Midland Motor Clubs (AMMC) Road Rally Championship. This comprised up to ten events from which the best seven were counted to an overall placing.

I have a few vivid and enduring memories of these events: of a high-speed downhill section which for about a mile had big bumps about every 100 yards so we flew for half this stretch and each time we landed the sump-guard hit the tarmac and I could see sparks in the rear view mirror; of putting the car slightly sideways in top gear downhill to scrub off speed before a tight left tight right over a bridge, which all went like a dream.

On one event there was heavy mist, approaching fog. This meant driving very much more carefully and slowly – but everybody had to do this so the relative lack of power from the Imp was no longer a disadvantage. We were around 10th at half way. Mist and fog also makes driving much more tiring and stressful and both navigator and driver made mistakes, and we lost points as well as time, dropping down the rankings.

The most dramatic incident was on an otherwise uneventful drive on a long rally. The road went slight right, over a brow then slight left. As I turned-in the steering went light – frost on the surface of the brow. We headed straight on onto the heath at the side of the road which then launched us up and over the road. We landed on the front right wheel with a huge bang as the suspension hit

bump-stops. As if in slow-motion the cabin was full of floating objects, everything in the door pockets leapt in the air, the interior light cover and the centre cap of the steering wheel jumped off. We shot onward as the other three wheels came back into contact with the ground and on to the scrubby heath on the other side of the road as I wrestled the car back towards the intended direction of travel. I managed to keep the car moving, dropping down the gears, until we were back on the road. But things were not right; the steering was vibrating horribly and now had a vague dead zone for straight ahead. We stopped a mile or so further on to investigate. One wheel rim had collected a huge clod of earth throwing it out of balance, which I cleared. I guessed a track rod must be bent but later found that the strengthened wishbone had collapsed on impact so one wheel had much more negative camber than the other. The vibration had now gone but not the dead zone, so we made slower progress to the finish – but we did finish nonetheless.

We competed in seven events that season. We finished them all; our best placings were 17th overall, 1st in class and 3rd Semi-expert. By the last event, we were given car number 28 – a real acknowledgement that we were not just making up the numbers. Over the championship we did extremely well. At the end we were 6th overall in a field of about 120 and third in class, missing the silverware by just five points. If only we had done an 8th event!

*To be continued*

