

Looking Back

Alan Freke, Frenchay, Bristol, Avon

I have just sold my Hillman Imp which I bought in 1998. I was the second owner from new so selling it was not easy as it held many memories...

Back in 1997 we decided we needed a second car and I had the bright idea of buying a classic car as the tax and insurance costs would be much cheaper. I was no stranger to older vehicles, as I had a stable of classic and vintage motorcycles that I restored and maintained myself.



Alan Freke's Forest Green Imp Super purchased in 1998
Photo: Alan Freke

I started looking for a Triumph Herald. My father had owned one (SAE 60 was the only car he ever owned) and I knew from experience how easy they are to work on.

After a few months looking at one rusting hulk after another, someone told me of a Hillman Imp for sale in Gloucester which was

apparently very original and in pristine condition. It sounded like it was worth a look and so a visit was arranged.

UNK 657E was bought new by a lady in Gloucester in 1967. However, as time passed she reached the point where she could no longer drive but would not part with the car. It stayed in her garage, and her son would occasionally take her out for a run in it. Every year he took it for its MoT; the mileage between MoTs was negligible. Unfortunately, she eventually had to move into a care home so her house had to be sold, and as a consequence, the Imp was on the market. When I



The village of Old in Northamptonshire provided a suitable photo opportunity
Photo: Alan Freke

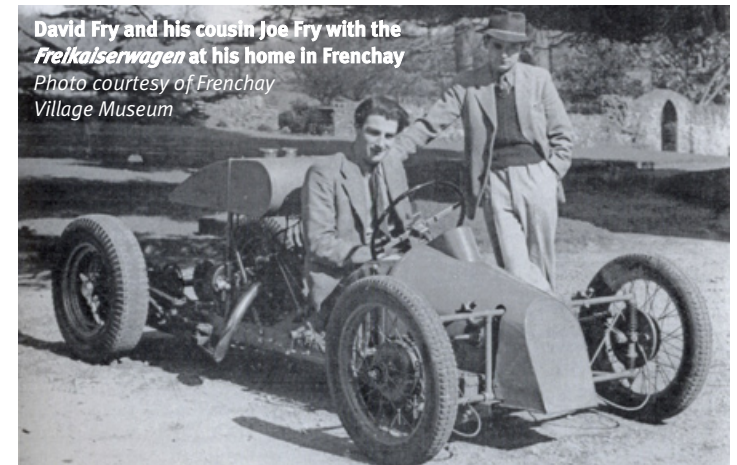
examined it I could find no faults. In 31 years it had only done 68,000 miles and there was no sign of rust anywhere. How often do you find them in that good a condition? So £800 changed hands, and in January 1998 I became the Imp's second owner.

Although the Imp had been bought for day-to-day use, I joined the Imp Club and began taking part in club events, making some good friends along the way. We live in Frenchay, a small village of the eastern edge of Bristol, with a strong Quaker heritage. At the time of the Imp's acquisition, I was involved in the setting up of our village museum, becoming the first curator.

Before long the two interests came together. The Fry family, who made chocolate, had lived in the village from the 18th Century, until the last died in 1957. He was Cecil Fry, the last of the family to be chairman of Fry's Chocolate – for many years the biggest chocolate manufacturer in the world.

Cecil had two sons, who were born and grew up in Frenchay: David and Jeremy. They moved away from chocolate to engineering, with David's Frenchay Products company largely in the aero-space sector, and Jeremy's Rotork company in motorised valves for pipelines.

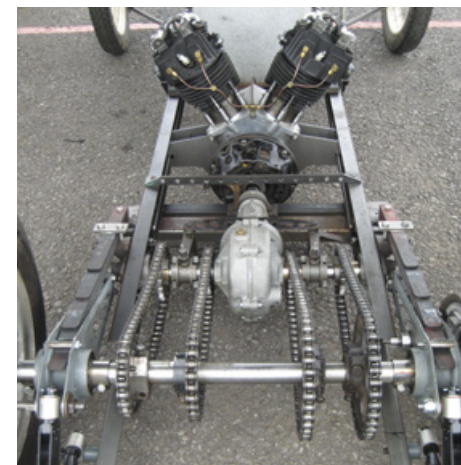
Both brothers were into racing cars. David, with the help of Dick Caesar, built the *Freikaiserwagen* which had its first outing in July 1936 at the Bristol Motor Cycle and Light Car Club's hillclimb at Backwell, south of Bristol. The car was powered by a heavily modified V-twin Blackburne engine. (See photo of the car today, below.) Unusually for the time, the engine was located behind the driver. The highlight



David Fry and his cousin Joe Fry with the Freikaiserwagen at his home in Frenchay
Photo courtesy of Frenchay Village Museum

of the pre-war era for the car was the Vintage Sports Car Club's inaugural hillclimb at Prescott near Cheltenham. The car set the course record, which lasted until 1948.

The car was broken up during the war while the brothers were in the RAF, but in early 1947 David and his cousin Joe Fry decided to rebuild the car. They found many bits still in store at Frenchay, including the precious engine, but had to explore scrapyards for an old GN chassis (that formed the basis of the original car). By September the car was ready and entered for the Brighton Speed Trials, where Joe achieved 2nd in class.



In early 1948 it was decided to completely rebuild the car on a new chassis. David worked out the layout using an IOTA chassis that had been designed by Dick Caesar for 500cc racing. The 1097cc engine was completely rebuilt using special aluminium barrels supplied by Cross Engineering of Bath, and a supercharger was added. Later a second supercharger was added for even more power and in this form the car was spectacular. Probably its greatest triumph was in 1949 when Joe broke Raymond Mays' course record at Shelsley Walsh that had stood since 1938. The car made the cover of *Motor Sport* magazine in December 1947 and in July 1949.



But the *Freikaiserwagen* wasn't the only Fry car at Shelsley Walsh that day. David's young brother Jeremy had produced a 500cc car he called the *Parsenn* (after his favourite ski resort), which was developed alongside the *Freikaiserwagen* in Frenchay.



Among those involved in the Fry car projects were some of the great names in the motor industry, Alec Issigonis (Jeremy took him to Davos to teach him to ski, but says he was unteachable!) and Alex Moulton whose rubber suspension ideas were used in both the *Freikaiserwagen* and the *Parsenn*.

In July 1950 Joe took the *Freikaiserwagen* to Blandford, where he was involved in a terrible fatal accident in practice. Jeremy attributed it to someone failing to put a splitpin in a brake rod. Joe's tragic death caused David and Jeremy to quit motor-sport, and Jeremy told me that the remains of the *Freikaiserwagen* were cut up and disposed of.

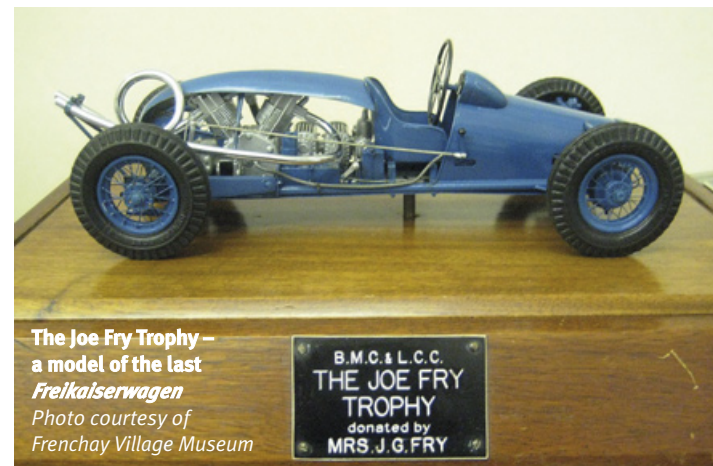
Joe's widow, Pat, commissioned Rex Hays, a specialist model maker, to produce a model of the *Freikaiserwagen* in memory of Joe. Today it is presented annually to the member of the Bristol Motor Cycle and Light Car Club who has made the most outstanding contribution to the activities of the club during the previous year. For more information please see www.freikaiserwagen.com.

As the 1950s progressed David was once again building a racing car. The Fry-Climax was designed to be a Formula Two car, using a 1500cc Coventry Climax PPF engine. The design was very state of the art, using all the latest aerospace know-how, such as exotic alloys, and monocoque construction.

Unfortunately, the car wasn't really very competitive, and it only entered 16 races before being laid up. It was entered for the British Grand Prix at Aintree in 1959 but failed to qualify. Its best showing was at Silverstone in September 1958 when it won the *Formula Libre* class race.

However, two of those involved in the car were of special interest to Imp fans. One was Mike Parkes, who was the car's driver, and the other his friend Tim Fry. They were both young men employed by Rootes in Coventry.

Mike Parkes went on from the Fry-Climax to race for Ferrari. He had six Grand Prix starts for them, gaining three podiums, which is very impressive. Sadly he died in Italy as a result of a road accident,



The Fry Climax at Aintree in 1959

Photo courtesy of Frenchay Village Museum



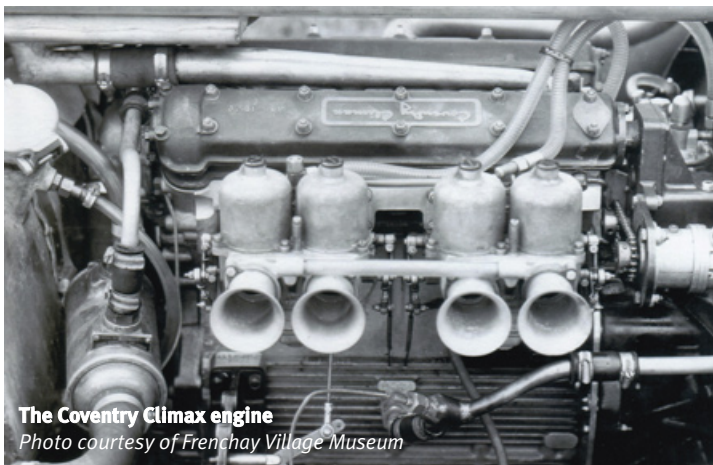
Mike Parkes driving the Fry Climax

Photo courtesy of Frenchay Village Museum



The Coventry Climax engine

Photo courtesy of Frenchay Village Museum



so a possible Formula One star never had time to show what he was capable of.

Parkes' friend and workmate, Tim Fry, who came down to work on the Fry-Climax told me that when he first met David Fry he was immediately asked if they were related. He didn't know, but said that David soon found out that they *were* distantly related, and gave him a copy of a family tree showing the relationship. Tim offered to send me a copy, but sadly he died before he got around to sending it. I worked it out later: they shared a great-great-great-grandfather!

Tim told me that when he first came to see the car, he found it very interesting, but soon his interest in the car was overtaken by his interest in David's stepdaughter, Karin.

Eventually they were married (six months before the Imp's launch), so as he said to me, "I then really did become a relation of David's!"

At the time they were working on David's car; Mike Parkes and Tim Fry had put together a scheme for a small car to fill a gap in the Rootes model line-up, which they presented to the board. Their idea was taken up, and after a protracted period of development, the final version of what had

been codenamed *Apex* was launched in 1963 as the Hillman Imp. Powered by another version of the Coventry Climax engine situated in the rear of the car, there were many similarities to some of David Fry's ideas.

A story Tim Fry related to me was even more amazing. As stated earlier, Alec Issigonis was involved with the Frys' car projects, and it seems likely that through this relationship Mike Parkes and Tim Fry got to know Alec. Tim told me how they met Alec in a pub one evening while they were testing a prototype Imp. They gave Alec the keys and told him to go for a run. He came back a while later with the comment that the car was very good, but the engine was at the wrong end! It seems amazing that professional rivals like the designer of the BMC Mini and the designers of the Hillman Imp should be socialising like that.

A lot of digging uncovered the whereabouts of some of these cars. We contacted Cross Engineering, who had produced the *Freikaiserwagen's* special engine, and Rowland Cross, the managing director, responded magnificently by organising a dinner for some of us, together with other enthusiasts, with the original Blackburne engine as the centrepiece. It was here that I discovered that Cross Engineering had also produced prototype Imp engines for Rootes. As an aside, I have a copy of a paper on the experimental Imp engines by Cyril James, the Cross archivist. As a result of this dinner, one enthusiast present set about finding a GN chassis to recreate the *Freikaiserwagen*, using the original Blackburne engine.

We also found that Jeremy's son still had the remains of the *Parsenn*, sans engine, in a barn. Since then, Steve Lister and Mike Sythes have reconstructed the *Freikaiserwagen*, and it can now be seen at various vintage events.

Every July, we hold a Vintage Vehicle Day at Frenchay Museum, and in 2013, to mark the 50th anniversary of the Imp's launch, we were lucky enough to

be able to borrow the *Parsenn*, the partly rebuilt *Freikaiserwagen*, and display them together with an Imp. A row of three Fry-designed rear-engined cars!

Meanwhile, as I said earlier, my Imp was an everyday car, as well as going on many club runs. Memorable ones include the Millennium Rally at Blenheim Palace, and a Barnstable charity run.

One memorable event was in 2014 when the BBC came to Frenchay Village Museum to film an episode of *Antiques Road Trip*. They were mainly interested in the Fry family, and their famous chocolate business. Part of the format of the programme is that the two presenters travel around the country in various classic cars, so I suggested to the researchers who came prior to filming, that they should use a Hillman Imp for this episode, as one of the Fry family was the co-designer.



Vintage Vehicle Day at Frenchay Museum, July 2013. (The man in the photo was a visitor)
Photo: Alan Freke



Thomas Plant (now known as Thomas Forrester), presenter of the BBC's *Antiques Road Trip*
Photo: Alan Freke

On the day of filming they brought a Lotus Elan... Anyway, they wanted my Imp there, so that the presenter, Thomas Plant, could arrive in the Lotus, and park it next to the Imp, where we could talk about the car, and the Fry connection. Sorry to dispel viewers' illusions, but the presenters *don't* drive around

the country in the classic car, it arrives on a trailer - the presenter then drives it the last 100 yards!

About four hours of filming took place, and Thomas and I spent some considerable time being filmed standing by my Imp, talking about its relevance. When the programme was transmitted the entire Frenchay section lasted just four minutes. All the Imp filming was ditched, but if you were paying close attention, you might just spot the Imp in the background in the opening scene when Thomas and I are talking outside the museum.

Over the years I have had a lot of technical help. The only garage in our village specialised in vintage and classic cars. The joint owner was a cousin of my wife, Mike Hirst, and he had a 1929 Alfa Romeo 1750 Supercharged Super Sport Spider, with bodywork by Zagato – quite a contrast to my humble Imp. Unfortunately, Frenchay Garage has been closed for quite a few years now.

Some problems I solved myself. The rear widow locking stays stopped working, and were not repairable. Neither were they obtainable as I soon found out, so I set to and designed my own version. An article detailing how to make them was published in *Impressions* back in 2017.

But my main source of help was fellow Imp Club member John Holloway. He rebuilt the engine at one point, and did numerous jobs that were getting beyond me.

With advancing age – ours not the Imp's – the Imp was used less and less, until finally, after a quarter of a century of Imp ownership, we decided it had to go or it would just rot away from lack of use. It was bought on 4th October by Cleevewood Motors, our nearest car dealer, who by chance deal exclusively in classic cars! No doubt they will bring it back to first class condition, and it will then start a new life with its third owner.



Alan's re-engineered Imp rear window stay
Photo: Alan Freke