

The Tracks of my Tyres - a Life in Cars

For my generation cars were a rite of passage and I can chart much of my life through the cars I have owned and my time spent in them which is not insignificant. Previous generations such as my parents were the first generation where car ownership became almost universal but that change also happened within my lifetime. Certainly when I was in school it wasn't always the case that school friends owned a car in their family so often weekend outings in our early family cars may have been accompanied by friends from families without a car. The writings document the cars I have owned through my life and my experiences with them. Some of them are funny in retrospect but maybe less so at the time. Maybe some of the experiences are mundane but this lays no claim to be the memoirs of a formula 1 racing driver (those are available I am sure.) Instead they are a series of anecdotes that may strike chords among readers from their own experiences with the horseless carriage that has come to dominate our lives and times. I apologise in advance for any technical inaccuracies that will be down to a mixture of amnesia, ignorance and antipathy to accuracy.

My own first car was a child's metal pedal car which I soon grew out and it was passed on to my younger brother although in any event the small size of our childhood garden limited the attraction of this early venture into the world of motoring.



In childhood model cars were an important and the ownership of a scale model garage with a lift, ramp and a showroom behind a curved perspex window was an early introduction to the enticing world of car dealerships. In recent years I have started a small collection of miniatures of some of the cars I have owned and photos of these appear as an appendix.

I am aware that driving is becoming less popular among subsequent generations particularly city dwellers. A number of factors are apparently influencing this ranging from environmental concerns to the cost of lessons - who knows, maybe they are waiting for self-driving flying cars from Elon Musk.

Before I passed my driving test I experienced a false entry into the world of motorised two wheels with the acquisition of a Vespa scooter. For the princely sum I think of £15 I acquired a ten year old metallic blue scooter. Although initially pleased with it ownership was not a happy experience. The only mechanical transport that I have owned that was less reliable was a four wheel ride-on-lawn mower many years later. I spent more time maintaining it than cutting grass with it. Other friends also had bikes and scooters of mixed reliability. The main problem with mine was an troublesome cable change for the gears and I can remember a number of slow returns home with the gearbox stuck in first or second gear. We lived up a hill at the time so the alternative of pushing it home was not an attractive one. Unlike a number of my friends I don't remember any accidents on it. Maybe it wasn't mobile often enough for them to occur. I didn't take my motorbike test so was unable to graduate to larger engined motorbikes which was probably just as well, if I am going to experience rapid acceleration I would prefer it to be on four wheels wearing a seatbelt.

Once I passed my driving test I left the world of two wheels with no real reluctance.

A couple of my school friends had taken and passed their driving tests before I had and this being the 1960's the cars they drove, nominally owned by their mothers, were Mini's and when I did take a few driving lessons and entered for my test it was also in a Mini. Compared to the cars of today and particularly the 21st century BMW Mini they were cars of a different complexion. The first difference was their size - they looked tiny and low to the ground with very small wheels pushed out to the four corners. Inside they seemed implausibly to have more space than you would think from the outside. Some of this space was achieved by pushing the inside close to the outside, that is neglecting any thick insulation panels on the doors, boot and panels. The lowness and lack of sound deadening allowed a greater sensation of speed amplified by the noise of the engine that sounded as if it was in the passenger compartment with you. This was described as giving a sporting characteristic an impression confirmed to owners by the success of the cars in rallying including winning the famous Monte Carlo rally. They would ignore the fact that the rally winner was a Mini Cooper S that had been tuned by a team of rally mechanics - this was an inconvenience - so in a world yet to be subjected to airbags, seat belt laws and breathalysers, Minis were often driven as if in rallies. This was particularly true of my school friends in their mother's Minis. I remember returning in a following car from an outing to a country pub near Llandeilo to spot a friend's car sitting on a lawn of a bungalow on a tight bend, facing towards the road and the occupants clambering out to be harangued by the resident over the recently created gap in his hedge caused by the Mini losing control and spinning off the road. I think it was pushed back through the hedge and driven back home!

My driving lessons were in a Mini but additional practice was in my father's car, a Hillman Imp. This was a rival to the Mini and a less common car but innovative in different ways. Firstly the engine was in the back which tended to

make the front lighter and affected the steering handling because of this set up. There was talk of putting a paving slab in the front luggage compartment to improve handling although I don't remember my Dad resorting to this. There was synchromesh on all four gears which was radical having been described as impossible by Sir Alec Issigonis the designer of the Mini and this made it easier to engage first gear at junctions.

There was a hatchback window at the rear and the back seat folded down for load carrying, (maybe useful if you



had filled your front boot with paving slabs!) The engine was aluminium making it lighter and featured an overhead camshaft. All these made it different from the ubiquitous and rather more successful Mini and personally made it difficult to transition between the two cars while learning to drive. Nevertheless I passed my test at the first attempt and can still remember the eerie sense of freedom being in my Dad's car by myself. In those days in-car entertainment was mostly limited to your own singing and the intrusive noise of the car engine and road noise plus any sounds your passengers might make. I was able to experience this first hand shortly after passing my test when my Dad was foolish or kind enough, depending on your perspective to let me borrow the Imp one evening. I collected a couple of friends, I believe beer was drunk and an attempt was made to settle an argument caused by an article in the

motoring press that a Hillman Imp was capable of 70 miles per hour in third gear, whilst a Mini wasn't. Driving on the nearest dual carriageway out of Swansea the little blue car was wound up to the mid 60's mph in third but seemed reluctant to edge the speedometer needle beyond the 70 mark.

One of our number suggested changing up to fourth gear exceeding the 70 mark and changing gear down into third and see if that worked. The effect did indeed show 70 mph, briefly, in third before the combined effect of the car lurching, the engine and the car's occupants screaming in unison meant the experiment whilst arguably successful was short lived and never, ever, to be repeated. We drove home sedately watching the car's temperature gauge hovering near the red mark. My father when he welcomed me back onto the drive at home thought the engine smelled hot and remarked that he must check the water and oil levels as he couldn't remember when he had last done that. This photo of an Imp's interior shows the speedometer, a horizontal instrument, with strange dash mounted stalks for indicators and wipers I think.



The descriptions that follow about my own cars will not be a technical list of details that would be of interest to automotive enthusiasts but rather my own take on the cars, their idiosyncrasies and the adventures and mishaps I enjoyed during their ownership. There will be an ability to vaguely trace car design and innovation over the decades with a number of examples of improvements that were viewed as luxuries or major advances at the time to soon become essentials and mainstream.

My Austin A35

My own first car, an Austin A 35 was less technically advanced than the Hillman Imp but nevertheless provided a more independent way of getting to my second year of university. The car was a very old fashioned design produced between 1956 and 1959 a rounded, friendly bodywork shape the front of which is recognisable as a van version is used in the Wallace and Gromit films as the bakery van. The A35 was quite old fashioned looking and I was mildly jealous of my university friend, Cledwyn who owned the much more modern looking A40, more angular and with an early hatchback rear door.



Though this envy was tempered by a stronger jealousy of another friend's Triumph Spitfire which seemed the last word in style and sophistication. So thanks Mike for sowing

the seed in my mind that may have led me to eventually own one a few years later.

I believe my A35 was from 1958 and I owned it in 1971. It had some 'refinements' - the bonnet had been replaced with one from another car. The car was black whilst the bonnet was grey and wasn't entirely fitted properly so was held down with two leather straps and buckles. This was apparently common in earlier sports cars such as 1930's blower Bentleys with which other racing features mine did not share. Strangely whilst researching and writing for this book I came across a photo of one of my Dad's early cars from my childhood which was a grey Austin A30 - could the bonnet have been a later transplant donation onto my black A35 and hence the poor fitting - spooky!

It did have a feature similar to James Bond's Aston Martin in the form of a sort of ejector seat. The passenger seat wasn't consistently secured to the floor so that occasionally when in motion and perhaps the result of over exuberant 'racing' gear changes the front fixings would release pivoting the whole seat and the passenger backwards - like Bond's ejector seat. I would have preferred the front facing machine guns but you can't have everything. Reading a motoring web site specification of the model they extol the virtues of flashing indicator bulb over the previous A30 model's indicator arms which on many earlier cars popped up out of the side of the car to indicate turning - quaint really. This exciting development must have not been fully debugged on my car as the dashboard switch for this had been replaced with a cheap metal toggle switch which not only didn't self cancel but didn't flash to tell me when they were on and I am sure I spent a large proportion of my journeys flashing the last direction of turn for a number of miles making for a certain amount of confusion amongst fellow road users.

Many car designers in the quest for greater speed go to great lengths to reduce the weight of their cars and also

reduce air resistance by removing unnecessary projections and protuberances. I accidentally achieved this one night when my rear bumper became unfixed at one end and alerted me to the mishap by a loud scraping noise in the rear and a cloud of sparks visible in the rear view mirror. Pulling over I found it was securely fastened on the side where it was still attached so it came away with a quick tug. I found it just fitted in the boot where it stayed for a few weeks with the car enjoying the new streamlined look while not actually gaining any weight reduction. It transpired that not opting for the weight reduction option by leaving the bumper at home was to prove beneficial. Several weeks later I was pulled over by the police late one night and having checked my driving licence and established the tyres weren't bald and the car's lights were all functioning, including the non-cancelling indicators the officer was jubilant to notice the missing rear bumper. "Where's your rear bumper?" - I responded by opening the boot to show him. In fairness to him I could see he was doing his best not to laugh so to my relief he muttered. "Get off home and have it fixed tomorrow was a satisfactory end to the matter.

Sadly this was not the most dramatic event in my car although miraculously I never had an accident in it despite driving it as fast as the tiny engine would allow it. No the drama was provided by the car itself attempting to convert itself into a three wheeler which was a popular design for cheap cars at the time. I never owned one until one afternoon driving in Gower when the car just didn't feel right rounding a bend and as I drove into the next bend on the road crossing Clyne Common the car felt a whole lot stranger as simultaneously the car lurched to the left and dropped in height accompanied by a terrible grinding noise and I spotted a wheel heading down the road in front of me before the realisation dawned that this may well be one of the wheels previously attached to the car.

The two following cars driven by friends came to a halt having managed to drive round me when I had 'ground to

a halt.' There was a long scrape on the road surface and thankfully there didn't seem to be any fluids leaking out from under the car. One friend arrived back rolling the errant wheel and cheerfully told me the wheel nuts were still inside held in place by the hubcap. Another friend optimistically told me that the threads on the hub looked ok and hadn't been stripped so the wheel should go back on. Between the three cars we had two car jacks, both of the flimsy scissor type and not suitable to raise the car from its lowly position. A garage was known to be a short way up the road so an expedition was sent off to borrow a trolley jack. This being post 1960's, and as a group there was an air of Led Zeppelins' roadies about us, the garage owner demanded security that was provided by leaving a watch with them. The trolley jack did the trick, the wheel was put back on, my then girlfriend was reassured by all that the car would be perfectly safe and so she somewhat reluctantly got back in. She was entitled to a certain amount of caution as she had recently experienced the ejector seat feature on a previous outing. After a short debate as to whether the watch would be a fair swap for the trolley jack it was returned to the garage and we all drove somewhere for a reviving coffee. Fortunately the car remained a four wheeler for the rest of my ownership. During my experience of cars either as passenger or a driver reliability has improved by a huge margin. There is no better example of this than the seconds before driving off. In my early cars there was always the air of anticipation when turning the key to start the engine - would it fire, was there even enough electricity in the battery to fire the starting motor to turn the engine? There were always particular routines required - some recommended a quick depression of the accelerator to prime the fuel. There was usually in older cars a choke lever to pull out which temporarily restricted air flow to the carburettor and which you had to remember to push back in once the engine was warmer. If these routines didn't work in post war cars there was the option of the manual

starter handle. This was a form of hand crank inserted into the front of the car and allowed the car engine to be 'turned over' to start. That is if the person winding the handle was strong enough and usually required synchronising with someone sitting in the car performing the aforementioned pedal depression or choke operation and if unsuccessful this person was usually accused of 'flooding' the engine by the red faced and sweating operator of the winding handle. It was not usually a happy operation. More fun could be had with cars without a hand cranking option by 'bump-starting' the car. This requires one of more willing helpers to push the car while the driver inside having put the car in neutral gear and released the handbrake turns on the ignition and makes a judgement at a point when the car has achieved sufficient speed to start when one of the forward gears are engaged. Potential problems are to employ a car related term - manifold. Firstly there is likely to be accusations thrown by the breathless helpers pushing at the driver sitting in the car that the handbrake is not completely released, the ignition is not on or the wrong gear has been selected - hopefully not reverse as this would turn mere frustration into potential disaster if the car started. Again there are the same potential pitfalls of choke or flooding errors. Even if the car is successful in starting at best the pushers are usually enveloped in a smelly and smoky cloud of exhaust gas as the car engine suddenly bursts into life. Of course they may be unfortunate to have avoided this by the unsatisfactory tactic of being so surprised at the car starting and lurching forward away from them that they end up face down and prone in the road. Neither option is ideal and I am sorry to say that I have witnessed and participated in both scenarios.

For almost a whole half term at university my A35 gave me multiple opportunities to witness and practice these as the starter motor failed and I either couldn't get a replacement or more likely I temporarily didn't have the funds to replace it. My student flat was at the top of a steep hill in

Aberystwyth with the shops, friends and much social life on the level near the sea front. Leaving the flat wasn't so difficult but I often had to bribe friends with a free ride back up to the campus providing they participated in the 'bump start' exercise. I also can claim to have performed the procedure 'solo' - quite an act of derring do as it required a quiet, wide road, ideally sloping downhill and after a shove from outside the driver's open door you had to leap into the car and perform the ignition, choke, throttle, gear engagement routine whilst steering it back on a straight course. I got quite adept at it and was told it had entertainment value as a spectacle.

Another method of starting was through the use of jump leads - a set of heavy duty cables, usually one red and one black with a large set of sprung clamps known for obvious reasons as crocodile clips at either end. You would connect your car engine to a 'donor' car's electrical system and while their engine was running you would use their electrics to power your starter. As students you first had to find someone else's car that started reliably, the required set of jump leads, correct connections and the madness to muck about with cables under the bonnet of a car with the engine running - assuming it started. There was also the added excitement of generating electrical sparks in an engine bay likely to harbour escaped petrol fumes and a reasonable number of oily surfaces. Life had its excitement and random dangers in those days.

In a modern car this is not often performed as it's not usually required but if it is the required connections are usually masked by plastic shrouding that disguises the component engine parts.

I can't find any photos of my Austin A35 despite being very proud of it at the time but this is my Dad's A30 which is very similar in appearance.



Roadside repairs were quite a commonplace event in those days and the combination of the relative simplicity of cars of that time, the optimism of youth coupled with the lack of funds for more professional help all served to help with this. I recall two events performed on my father's cars, one without his knowledge and one with. His Hillman Imp was lent to me occasionally and on one such loan on a run with friends to a Gower beach the car refused to move. I believe we had stopped at Shepherd's in Parkmill to buy food and drink for a picnic. When attempting to pull away not only didn't the car move but the inertia was accompanied by a loud clanking noise from underneath the rear of the car. Getting out and crawling underneath revealed some large kind of octagonal rubber doughnut split in two that was the link between the drive shaft and the rear wheel. Checking the other side revealed it should indeed be one whole piece. Youthful optimism suggested that if a replacement could be obtained the repair would be possible. A call from the nearby phone box to a spares garage in Swansea located the required part and could be collected from them, (those were the days - phone boxes and copies of the Yellow Pages - no smart phones and Google searches.) An hour later my friend Geoff arrived back with the 'rubber doughnut' part and a toolkit. Amazingly the nuts and bolts

holding the old part on were removed relatively easily, the new part fitted and the beach picnic resumed. My father was never told about the repair and our mechanical knowledge had marginally been extended. This knowledge was rashly employed a few years later when after leaving university I was back at home waiting to start my first proper job as a graduate trainee with a power company in the south east of England. One day my father announced that the engine in his Ford Cortina had a broken piston ring and had seized while emerging from the garage at home. Having time on my hands and full of youthful bravado I announced that I was sure we could replace the rings and repair it at home. As my Dad was working full-time the 'we' mostly meant me so armed with the appropriate Haynes manual, a borrowed socket set and a large tin of Swarfega (a luminous green, jelly like de-greaser for cleaning your hands.) Although I had never attempted anything so ambitious mechanically I was sure it was possible and also felt this would be a useful start to my career in the engineering sector although thankfully my role was to be in an administrative function and safely away from the operation of the power network. I have to say despite a long career I never fully understood the product or even how the electricity stays in the wall when there's no plug in the socket!

After several greasy days in the garage with the car and many cups of coffee and hours of radio I somehow managed to remove the old piston rings and install all new ones in the four cylinders and reinstall them in the engine block. The triumph was short lived as despite several attempts the engine would not turn over or start. Some days later I was relieved to hear when phoning home from my new job in Kent that my Dad and a friend had bump started the car by towing it and after a bang and a roar the engine was running fine as they proved sometime later by visiting me in Folkestone. Wisely I refrained from offering any mechanical expertise in my new career.

Not long after entering the world of permanent employment I decided that I should re-enter the world of car ownership. This had come to an abrupt end while at university when a failed MOT on multiple issues meant I sold the A35 for scrap after a years ownership