

## “THE BIRTH OF HYUNDAI”

### WHAT ONE MAN LEARNED FROM THE STANDARD MOTOR COMPANY

If I said three particular words to you in the same breath, it's likely few – if any, might make a connection.



*George Turnbull*

The words are “**Standard-Triumph**” and “**Hyundai**”.

Even by adding the name of “**George Turnbull**”, it's likely many would still fail to make any connection.

Looking back through my late father's files from the late 1930's, when he fulfilled the dual roles of Chief Inspector and Works Manager at the Standard Motor Company in Coventry, I have a brief assessment of Dad's impressions of George Turnbull – then aged nineteen.

This was written by Dad as Turnbull completed a six months stint as an Apprentice (Intern) in Standard's Inspection Department at the end of Year Three of his five year training period.

Dad wrote: *“His attention to detail is good and he shows promise. He appears to have little difficulty in understanding key aspects of inspection procedures, although he has frequently demonstrated a level of intolerance in the way certain processes are undertaken. His assessments of why things are undertaken in the way they need to be, can sometimes be regarded as excessively ‘blunt’. This is particularly evident in the way he has been known to talk to people and his manner in dealing with his colleagues has been interpreted by some more senior personnel, as bordering on offensive. His reports from day-release courses at Coventry Technical College as part of his training programme are encouraging and show good promise. His handwriting is appalling. In all other respects, he shows a positive outlook. On the longer term, he could well be an asset to the company, assuming he does not leave at the end of his apprenticeship to join the armed forces in the inevitable forthcoming conflict”.*

World War Two was by then seen as inevitable.

As things turned out, George Turnbull managed to finish his apprenticeship and because he was good at what he did, he was marked by management as *‘ideal and crucial’* for continuing employment throughout World War Two in what was known as a **‘Reserved Occupation’**. Simply, it was felt he was more of an asset to his country as an engineer in a civilian role, than as a fighting man in the armed services.

Turnbull was not happy about this.

He wanted to fight alongside his peers of the same age.

The years passed into the 50's and 60's, and George Turnbull's career progress eventually saw him as Standard-Triumph's General Manager (CEO in everything but title) at the time of the Leyland takeover in 1961.

Leyland liked him because he more than competently demonstrated qualities that appealed to the somewhat dour and pragmatic Lancastrian outlook that pervaded the tough-and-no-nonsense way that the Leyland Bus and Truck business had been run for several decades past.

But in 1968, British Leyland came into existence and because Turnbull had more than competently demonstrated in financially and productively turning Standard-Triumph

around from near bankruptcy, Donald Stokes (British Leyland's CEO) put Turnbull in charge of the newly formed group's largest manufacturing part which was the former British Motor Corporation's volume car, medium truck and light van business based primarily at Longbridge in Birmingham and Oxford, in a new division known as **British Leyland – Austin-Morris**.

For most men, the enormity of the tasks that faced him would have seen most others quake with terror. Austin-Morris was haemorrhaging money, had no new model programme and was a disaster on most fronts that was just about working – but only just.

For the first few years, Turnbull achieved near miracles at Austin-Morris although it was not without some pain to him at such a high managerial level. As a Director on British Leyland's Main Board, it was abundantly clear to many that Turnbull was after Stokes's job – but he wasn't alone in that objective. British Leyland's Finance Director, John Barber, who had been headhunted by Stokes from Ford Europe, also had similar career aspirations. What made matters worse was that both men held the other in much disregard and, when alone in the office of either, the heated arguments that took place were overheard by a much larger audience.

There was no love lost between either of the two men.

Together, they were like a pair of fighting tom cats.

British Leyland came into existence in 1968, and, quite by chance following a conversation your author was having with an unhappy Standard-Triumph customer when Stokes was in the showroom with some VIP visitors, I found myself accelerated upwards in terms of employment position and the six floors between Stokes' office and the showroom. Simply, I became one of two Personal Assistants to Stokes himself. Primarily, I was Stokes's 'fall guy' for all the dis-satisfied owners of British Leyland products – and believe me, they were not few in number! But every job needs a degree of variety, and Stokes also used me as a 'gopher' for other issues in his focus and mostly those issues brought me into very close and regular contact with all of British Leyland's Main Board, together with a large number of other very senior people with a massive range of differing responsibilities.

One of these people was George Turnbull.

By then, I had learned, through experience, that I was judged on my own abilities and most definitely **not** on whose son I was. Dad's long history with the Standard Motor Company in Coventry from 1921 to 1960 was rightly of absolutely no consequence in my own unfolding career. Nepotism in any form in those early British Leyland days and '*did you know my Dad in years gone by?*' queries were definitely not tolerated – and rightly so. There were a lot of young men who tried that tack, but it got them nowhere and much to their chagrin. Turnbull was fully aware of whose son I was and on the many occasions I met him with an array of different issues on behalf of the Chairman, all I got was, "*how's your Dad? Give him my regards when you next see him, please.*"

And that is how things went.

By 1973, British Leyland found itself in dire financial straits and to such an extent that the British Government had to step in, financially bale the company out and the whole lot was put under government control. I've never had much use for politicians of any political persuasion and British Leyland as run by The National Enterprise Board proved that politicians knew nothing about the motor industry in any form. All they were interested in was doing everything possible to ensure jobs weren't lost for employees who mostly lived in robust socialist constituencies so the vote guarantee for re-election for a socialist



*George Turnbull and an Austin Allegro –  
picture taken just before he left  
**BL Austin-Morris.***

government was assured and secure. As for the rest of the business, the restructuring was more or less continuous and highly disruptive. But at the top of the tree, Stokes left the company, John Barber briefly took his place – and George Turnbull, greatly disappointed that Barber and not he had won through, resigned from running Austin-Morris.

Barber's tenure as Top Dog lasted a very short time before he went elsewhere and Turnbull found himself looking for a job. That said, motor industry jobs at the level Turnbull had operated in, were few and far

between and Turnbull had a truly colossal and very convincing career resumé which was widely recognised and certainly held in the highest regard by many global automotive industrialists. Where others had spectacularly failed, Turnbull had, in his six or seven years running Austin-Morris, got the whole organisation running far more efficiently and it was, more importantly, generating meaningful profits, had commendable cashflow and net asset returns were headed comfortingly in the right direction.

At this point, two careers went their respective ways.

I continued to stay in the motor industry but switched from vehicle sales to product support and about ten years before my retirement years came into firm perspective, I decided to leave paid employment and teach what I had learned in the automotive parts and service business management techniques I had come to see and know on a global basis. I saw my prime customers as the UK vehicle importers and the staff of their UK dealer networks and also in English speaking overseas markets. To my immense satisfaction, I found it a virtually unexploited field of specialism and over the course of about three years, I had valuable contracts to run my courses for UK and overseas importers representing Honda, Mazda, Mitsubishi and Nissan.

Business was good and for my part, the only company I had yet to recruit was the Inchcape Group who had a wide range of importer interests in 38 different countries, for Toyota. I felt Toyota was going to be a tough nut to crack but nonetheless I contacted the Training Manager for Toyota GB and was invited to travel to London to present my case. When the presentation was over, the Training Manager made polite non-committal noises and we parted with him saying something like, *"we'll be in touch. Oh, I almost forgot. Our Chairman wants to see you before you leave, if that's possible?"*

I admit I hadn't actually checked out the management hierarchy for Inchcape and said I didn't think their Chairman and I knew one another. The Training Manager smiled and replied, *"well, he knows you from a long time ago. His name is George Turnbull."*

To say I was dumbfounded is an understatement.

Into the lift and upstairs where the fitted pile carpet was about one foot thick and I entered the inner sanctum.

*"John, what a pleasure to see you again after all these years. Sit down – and tell me all about yourself and what you've been doing. I'm very interested. How's your Dad?"*

*"I'm very sorry to tell you, Sir, but he died about fifteen years ago."*

*“Oh, dear. My very belated condolences. He and I went back a long way – but then I expect you know about all that?”*

*“Indeed. Here and there – but not warts and all.”*

He laughed.

*“No matter. I expect he also told you that he and I had some blistering rows when we were both at Standard. Let me tell you, it took me a long time to realise that when I looked back to those times, your Dad was usually right in everything he said”.*

*“They were different times, Sir.”*

*“Not all that different – and to hell with calling me Sir. You know very well my name is George. So, it’s George from hereon in. Okay?”*

I must say I didn’t remind him that in his British Leyland days, everyone knew him as ‘Breathless George’ because he was always in a hurry.

Reciting my resumé didn’t take all that long and he made some notes on his jotter pad. Eventually, I finished and we looked at one another.

*“Well, that all sounds very positive. Let’s go and get to know one another after all these years and enjoy a nice lunch. I’ve already booked a table at Simpson’s. It’s just round the corner, as I’m sure you know.”*

Yes. I knew of Simpson’s but had never eaten there. Simpson’s had always been way outside my pay grade for business expenses, but I kept that little nugget to myself.

We sat down at our table.

*“I can recommend the roast beef. Always have it when I come here,”* so lunch got underway with the Maître D hovering continually in the near background and the conversation turned to Toyota. I can’t remember now what it was that I said, but it was something about the Japanese reacting quickly to changing customer tastes.

*“Not fast enough for me,”* Turnbull replied. *“When it comes to making fast changes on anything, the Koreans can run circles round the Japanese! What makes things worse for the Japs, is they know the Koreans never hang about - but they’ll never admit to it. Loss of face you see and not being seen to be losing face is crucial to the Jap mentality. Loss of face can never be allowed to happen if you’re Japanese.”*

*“Ah, I do recall you had something to do with Hyundai? I’d be interested to know”.*

At this point, dear reader, make yourself a drink.

This story is already a long one – and it gets even longer!

Turnbull continued.

*“As you’ll surely know, I wanted Donald Stokes’s job – but Barber got there first and I decided it was time to leave Austin-Morris. Spent a week or two at home and mostly drew up a shortlist of what I could offer people at places, the likes of Daimler-Benz, Volkswagen and Fiat, but none of it really appealed or held much promise. And then one day I got a phone call from the Korean Ambassador, here at their Embassy in London. Could I please come to meet him to discuss a proposition that was very close to the Korean President’s heart. I tried to find out more but was so politely informed that all would be revealed at the meeting. Three days later, I was seated in the Ambassador’s office.*

*‘Turnbull, it is the wish of the national President for South Korea to have a full-blown motor industry of our own. We tired of making Ford Cortinas under licence and we believe that based on your track record with Blitish Reyrand, that you are the man to make it happen. It mean you will have a four year contract at the end of which you can either renew it, or find other employment. Would you be interested?’*

*I said that I needed to think about it and discuss it with my wife.*

*'Of course. Let me have your reply by this coming Friday, together with the terms and conditions you want. Be aware, there is no factory at this time. You will need to build one to make car. We also need to know how many other people from England, or elsewhere, that you will need to help you achieve our objectives. We must assure you, that money is not a problem. Whole project being funded by our government. Whatever you want, if you accept our offer, will be provided – no questions asked. John, it was the shortest interview I've ever had and on the way home on the train, I wondered how the hell Marion, my wife, would react?*

*Anyway, the two of us chewed the fat when I got back, discussed it with the children and then I started to formulate what we now refer to as the 'cosmetic elements'. The figure I came up with was horrendous and I knew without a doubt that this job was going to be the biggest challenge I had ever had to face, so I doubled the number staring back at me*



*Hyundai's ULSAN PLANT in South Korea.  
Still the largest vehicle manufacturing plant in the world*

*– and then added another fifty percent! I also identified the people I wanted to 'poach' out of Longbridge and Cowley and devised some finance packages for them that were way beyond what they'd ever be likely to earn by staying in England and with BL. At the end of that same week, I was back at the London Embassy and told them I was flattered to accept*

*their offer, but it wasn't going to come cheap. No objection at all!*

*'When you able to fly to Seoul to take up position?'*

*I said within the month.*

*'No plobrem.'*

*"A month later, after feeling I'd flown to the planet Jupiter – and back, I landed in Seoul to be met by the Minister for Industry with a convoy of interpreters and a fleet of Mercedes Benz limousines. All I wanted was my hotel, a long hot bath, something to eat – and a long sleep. I was to be disappointed. We drove for about an hour in convoy and eventually stopped by a massive expanse of rice paddies in open countryside and a distant sea shore – and everyone got out of their cars. I was again propelled to be with the Industry Minister. He spoke at length in Korean and when he'd finished, the interpreters got going.*

*'Turnbull, Minister say this is where you will build new Hyundai car plant. The area here is known as Ulsan, so factory will be called the Ulsan Plant. It will reflect the way other factories for Hyundai cars will be built in the future, in Korea and other overseas countries. Please to remember that. You need to understand that not only you build new car in new factory, but you also create entirely new dock over by sea that large enough for Hyundai-made ships can tie up and where finished cars can be shipped to world markets.'*

More jabbering from the Minister.

*'Minister also say that today being specific day of month and month of year, Minister will come back to see first Hyundai car coming off line and he also insist he inspect any other car of his choosing in all cars following first one - and no matter whether they finished or not. Minister insist on Hyundai car being quality product! You understand, Turnbull? You have three years – to the day. Time to start work. Good ruck!*

George buttered a piece of bread and got stuck into his roast beef. I did the same.

*'On the way back to the hotel – my bath, food and my bed, one of the interpreters asked, 'you know what kind of car you want to make?'*

*"I said there wasn't nearly enough time to build a factory, a dock AND design a new car from scratch. The only way out of that dilemma was to take an existing car already in production elsewhere, but to make it better and looking reasonably different.*

*'You have a car in mind?'*

*'Yes. The Morris Marina from England. We didn't have nearly enough time to design it in such a way that it would be an instant success from the start. In order to get it to launch, in the shortest possible time, we had to cut a lot of corners and incorporate features which, while tried and tested, were by no means ideal. I think we could make a much better version of the Marina in the time scale the Minister has given me.'*

*'You have drawings of Marina so engineers can get to work?'*

*'No, but I know people who can get them.'*

*'Ah, so.'*

*Silence prevailed.*

*We eventually reached the hotel and at long last I could collapse into my bath, have a meal – and sleep.*

*Three days later, that same interpreter knocked on my bedroom door – and quite late into the evening.*

*'Turnbull, please to come to hotel garage. I have something to show you.'*

*"We got in the lift and it eventually threw us out in the garage where we walked over to some parked cars that looked – oh, so familiar. Facing me were a Marina 1.3 Coupe, a 1.8TC Coupe and a 1.8 four door saloon. All brand spanking new and on British licence plates to boot!"*

*"Where on earth did these come from? You never told me you already had them!"*

*My interpreter laughed.*

*"When we return from Ulsan site, you told me in car that you could get drawings from England – but that take time and Minister say we don't have time. So he send telex to Ambassador at Embassy in London saying go out and buy cars to copy. They arrive here today by emergency Korean air freight. You not need drawings any more. You just copy what is here – but make better".*

*"We returned to the lift and as he left me at the ground floor, he said 'Turnbull, I almost forget. Tomorrow, people coming to see you about ships Hyundai Shipbuilding will prepare for you to use dockside at Ulsan.'"*

*"I protested that I didn't know anything about ships."*

*"No problem, Turnbull. Hyundai make lots of ships. We want you to tell us how many cars each ship to carry. It take three years to build ship anyway, so we must start design now. How many cars for each ship?"*

*"I haven't the faintest idea!"*

*“Minister say same thing, but he think a minimum of five thousand cars to fill each ship. That figure okay for ship builders so Minister say build ten ships, all the same, so important you provide fifty thousand suitable cars that world customers want to buy”.*

Turnbull finished his roast beef and put his knife and fork together on his clean plate.

*“I can’t tell you how it was that we got that factory finished in time, but we did. The car was going to be called the Hyundai Pony. We managed to scrounge older engines from Mitsubishi who had put them on run-out for new replacements and swapped out the Marina’s torsion bar front suspension in favour of MacPherson struts, the Coupe body style became a hatchback and though I say it myself, it was a bloody good car. Four speed synchro or three speed autobox from the outset - and live rear axle as well. It was everything the Marina should have been – but never was. Anyway, the day came to receive the Minister. We had five continuous assembly tracks, side by side – and looking as*



*though the far end was somewhere near Delhi. The raw painted body started at that far end and the end of the line in final finish was where the completed car drove off the line under its own power. Apart from the many prototypes we’d made during the inter-regnum, the first genuine Hyundai Pony sat there awaiting the Minister’s inspection.*

*The first Hyundai Pony iteration re-styled by Giugiaro. Under various names and variants, this car sold in many millions over the years. It looks so like the Morris Marina Coupe on which it was based.*

*He was clearly very pleased with how he*

*found things in the front seats and I breathed an enormous sigh of relief. Then he decided to try out the back seat – and that’s where things went rather pear-shaped. Frowns, lots of jabbering and clearly a very unhappy Minister. I asked an interpreter to explain the apparent displeasure and it was made very clear to me the rear seat backrest was inclined too far backwards. He wanted it more upright, so I said I was extremely sorry the seat was not to his liking, but we could re-design it once we had taken the necessary measurements. This was relayed to the Minister and seemed to satisfy him, so I felt relieved. That relief lasted no more than fifteen seconds.”*

*“Minister say important to ensure back seat comfortable. So he come back tomorrow at same time to check. He also insist he check any other cars with their fitted seats and will want rear backrests removed to make sure no-one has put in packing to adjust angle.”*

*“My heart sank. We had at least a hundred cars on each track with their rear seats fully fitted and that backrest needed a complete re-design, quite apart from making the damned things. That’s why I challenged you when you said the Japanese could react quickly to making changes. Would you believe it, but the following day when he returned, those amazing people had achieved the impossible. Every damned car on those five lines had had a revised back seat backrest re-raked – and fitted! What’s more, the Minister did insist on selecting a few cars entirely at random and had the backrests removed to ensure*

*no packing pieces. Big smiles all round. We then left the lines, jumped into golf buggies and set off for the harbour where not one – but THREE brand new and empty Roll-On Roll-Off ocean freighters were tied up to the quay ready for the first fifteen thousand cars to be shipped off to various world markets to importers who had already been signed up to represent us. In my opinion, there is absolutely no way on God's earth that any vehicle manufacturer anywhere in the world can do what the Koreans do and at the speed they can do it. Failure on any mission doesn't exist in their minds – and winning is the only thing that matters”.*

Our lunch was concluded and I walked with him back to his office. I had thought we'd be shaking hands in farewell but he insisted I came with him back to his own office where, on entering, I was offered a chair facing his desk.

He apologised for not talking, saying he needed to check something important – and that was fine by me. He opened a large document wallet and studied a piece of paper, pausing to make a handwritten alteration to the top copy and the 'flimsy' behind it. Then he signed it, put it in an envelope and passed it over to me.

*“Your contract, John – to provide Inchcape Group with Parts and Service Training courses. There is a small typo that I've had to adjust, but here it is.”*

He smiled at me.

*“Well, aren't you going to open it? After all, I hope I haven't made a mistake – and I'm sorry if I have.”*

I opened the envelope and withdrew the letter. It promised more than I'd ever dared hope for in terms of the fee I would be paid for delivering each course – and I was dumbfounded.

*“George, this is incredibly generous. Thank you so much. Will you take my word as an acceptance – or do you want my signature as well?”*

He smiled again – and then said something which touched me so much, I felt a lump in my throat and tears pricking behind my eyes. I managed to control my feelings.

*“Your word's good enough for me, John. Very many years ago, when you and I first met, you were working for Stokes and I was running Longbridge and Oxford. I knew from that very first meeting that I was dealing with your father's son – the son of a man for whom I held the greatest respect, even though he and I had some bitter arguments and blistering rows on how we both thought things should be done. With hindsight and more often than not, your Dad was absolutely right - and I was wrong, but that's all a long time ago. Welcome to Inchcape and Toyota. I'm confident that what you are offering us is dependable and we'll be in very safe hands. Goodbye, John. Drive safely as you go home.”*

That was the last time George Turnbull and I ever met.

Six months later, he was dead from a heart attack. His funeral was 'family only', nor was there a memorial service for him.

A pity in so many ways, because he was the product of a very small Coventry-based motor manufacturer known in its day as The Standard Motor Company and perhaps it's as well for all of us to remember that just a few of the things he may have learned there in his youth - and as he went on to much later and amazing achievements, came out of that little company. In the reality of things, Standard-Triumph was a little company when compared to Hyundai.

I like to think that as George Turnbull applied his experiences gained over the years, that some of those experiences went way, way back to his time in Coventry and provided

some of the vital foundations for one now massive automotive business that is building cars and other vehicles, not only in south Korea, but around the world as well.

Well done, Sir.

You have every reason to be proud of what you achieved. But there are so many others from Standard-Triumph, Jaguar, MG, Austin, Morris, Rootes Group, Lotus and elsewhere who went on to join other much larger and prestigious organisations, taking with them the knowledge and experience they had learned as very young men and applied those skills to their new employer's products. Too often – and too sadly, none of the contributions those thousands of men – and some women too – are never acknowledged.