

## MEMORIES OF PRESS CARS

I have one abiding memory of the many Standard-Triumph Press cars that I drove in the UK between 1966 and 1970.

No matter what model they were, all of them were amazingly quick - except for perhaps just one!

Some might argue that in order to obtain a 'good press' - it was desirable to ensure the cars had a certain something in their power plants that was hidden from prying eyes?

Well, maybe - but I doubt it and if there really was a hidden ingredient, it was pretty inaccessible and very well-concealed!

Certainly, there's no doubt that all the Press cars I drove were undeniably well 'fettled' and no-one could deny they received the very best attention any car could have. If they were specially 'worked' - this would have been undertaken with the very greatest care. No gas-flowed heads or anything that was immediately obvious, though I harbour a personal view that things like camshafts and distributors may not have been exactly 'stock.' In saying this, I have no inside track knowledge, other than the fact that the examples I drove, were convincingly impressive! The sales demo cars prepared for the London Motor Show were equally a tribute to perfection in terms of paint and trim finish but many would have said they bore little resemblance to a normal production car.

All this preparation is attributable, in the main, to two key people. Perhaps the most important was the Coventry based Transport Manager, Jim Holbrook, affectionately known to everyone as 'Big Jim.' I don't know how he earned his nickname, because I remember him as a quiet and unassuming person of only medium height.

Dad usually referred to him as 'Thorough' Jim Holbrook.

This was equally apt - and even if Jim wasn't big, he was certainly thorough. So, with 'Big Jim' at the Coventry end of things, at the Western Avenue Service Department in London, there was another equally 'thorough' person in the form of Mr. A.G. 'Jock' Brown. Looking back, I can't really imagine two more contrasting people.

Jim Holbrook certainly ran his department with a most commendable zeal and I feel sure that those who reported to him, particularly his 2i/c, Bob Train, knew exactly what he required and what the Press expected.

I don't doubt that 'Big Jim' and Bob Train collectively ensured no journalist was ever disappointed.

But for his part, Mr. Brown - as a former Chief Inspector at Coventry, took over on bodywork and ultra fine-tuning of everything where 'Big Jim's' people had left off - if they ever did that?

'Jock' Brown's standards were uncompromising to the nth degree - and for him, total perfection just wasn't good enough. I suppose you could say that where his team couldn't do any more, the 'laird and master' just had to put up with the rest of the mediocrity?

But by blending the qualities of these two very different personalities against the backdrop of their responsibilities, the Press cars in their control were superb.

There was also another remarkable group of vehicles - outside Press reach. These were the various cars used by the Training School for Sales and Service Training purposes.

Example - take any car, especially a petrol injected one on its way to a dealer for an on-site workshop training course. During the journey, there would be a brief stop and a few tweakings of settings in the wrong direction. The resulting puffs of smoke, retarded ignition, pinking and misfires - generally turned a delightful car into something that quickly became rather less than desirable. The Service trainers knew their products inside out and they knew how to get the VERY best out of an engine and ensure it stayed at the peak of its tune. One of my former colleagues, Tim Loakes, worked at the Training School. He tells me of one Stag that was perfectly set up. It had startling acceleration, could cruise at consistently high speeds - and often very comfortably into three obscenely high numbers, with none of the probs we so often associate with Stags - then or now. Then there was RDU 470H, a 2.5PI saloon, whose idle at a rock steady 500rpm, defied comprehension. Ye gods, if my own PI could idle and respond to the throttle as did RDU, I'd swap her straight away!

All these cars both directly and indirectly were the ultimate responsibility of 'Big Jim' to ensure their proper maintenance and continuing care until the time came for them to be sold.

Because of all this, there was usually a queue of people anxious to acquire a Press car when it came off the fleet. On the face of things, that in itself was curious. Press cars by their nature, usually have a hard life early in life and even though I'm writing of things some fifty plus years ago - and more, the motoring writers of those times were just as abusive of cars then, as they are today.

So who would want to buy a car that had had a thorough caning, effectively from birth?

Surprisingly, quite a number of people - and having experienced at first hand on innumerable occasions just what things were like, your money bought you an astoundingly good car that was a pleasure and delight to drive.

In particular, I well remember a very early TR5, registration LDU 158F. Apart from the press pics taken of it, I did see Bob Train putting it through its paces at a local club Sprint, about two weeks after the car was announced.

Bob was asked to attempt to beat the "official" 0-60 time that I now forget - but it was impressive. Sitting on the start line, with the hockey stick timing device under the front wheel, Bob bought the revs up to about 4k, fed in the clutch and kept everything on the boil as the back end squatted down hard - and he was off. The snatched upchange to second seemed 'sequential' in terms of speed and Bob continued to pile on the power, selecting overdrive second when he was about to broach the yellow line on the rev counter - or so he said.

Oh, the sight and sound of LDU getting it all together!

I don't recall Bob's actual time that day - but I do remember he allegedly knocked about half a second off the original figure quoted in the sales brochure. This greatly upset one Hooray Henry - in string-backed gloves and wearing a snazzy checked cap in an 'E' type Jaguar, whose own time was about three seconds slower!

A week or so later and early one morning, I drove LDU to London. Without any doubt at all, it was the fastest petrol injected TR5 I ever did drive - and later versions, as well as a multitude of TR6's, both injected and Stromberged were positively athsmatic by comparison. I don't suppose I'll ever own a TR again, unless our lottery does me a favour - but if the winning line did hurtle in my direction, I'd go out and treat myself to the bestest TR5 I could lay my hands on - and regardless of the cost! If that car just happened to be LDU, I'd be willing to spend the rest of my life eating macaroni (which I loathe) - with ground beef once a month, for a treat!

Going to the opposite end of the scale, a 1200 Herald saloon that had graduated to the lowly status of a Western Avenue 'hack,' had started life as a Press car. It later became a London-based customer demonstration car and eventually wound up as the 'bike' for anyone who needed a set of wheels to go somewhere.

From what I can remember, it was the only Herald that any of us actually *wanted* to drive and just before it left the fleet for pastures new, I drove it 'convoy-fashion' with a colleague at the wheel of a Herald 13/60 Press car. The 1200 was quicker. In fact, it wasn't too different to a slightly laid back 1600 Vitesse - and if such a description can ever be given of a bog-standard Herald, it was blindingly fast. It's best party piece was round the back roads of Acton and Paddington when they were nice and damp - rather than soaking wet. Only then could you truly savour to infinity, the exciting properties of a rear swing axle when shod with Dunlop C41 crossply tyres.

The nadir of Press vehicle experience was a former Press minibus, in the shape of a Leyland Twenty, used briefly by Western Avenue's parts department when it's Herald Courier van had had a coming together somewhere on the route back from Coventry. One trip in the Twenty was enough and a week after my stint at the wheel, another colleague used it and approached a crow on the freeway near London's Heathrow airport. The crow was actively engaged in enjoying a dead rabbit and while John claimed he gave it a warning headlamp flash, followed by a friendly toot on the pathetically feeble horn - he realised, too late, that the rabbit was more important to the crow than its own continuing mortality. When there was well less than one hundred feet per second left in credit to the crow, it lazily lifted off the freeway to have a very rude awakening via its tail feathers, as the Twenty's screen engulfed - and swallowed it. Judging by the state of John's suit, stiff collar, Jermyn Street tie and highly starched cuffs on returning to the sepulchered confines of the Berkeley Square showroom, we all came to the same conclusion. There were obviously better things to have in your immediate vicinity than a smashed screen and a surprisingly mobile but much bloodied bird flying around and doing its best to get out!

In the end, I think the rear door lock succumbed to the internal air pressure - and burst open. No doubt, this new variant of 'through-flow' ventilation quickly disposed of the crow?

But back to 'Big Jim's' charges.

A white Mk 2 Vitesse saloon that Jim's son, Chris, bought - was another epic.

Anyway, Chris didn't keep that car for too long - and soon changed it for one of

the prototype TR5's - a hardtop in Conifer. If passenger seat impressions were any guide, 'the Holbrook 5' entirely matched LDU 158 F on the performance stakes. In fact, it might have been even faster – but not by much of a margin. Chris could never be accused of failing to let it perform! The only time it ever did 90mph (or less) was when it was accelerating to a much higher denomination of whatever.

At Berkeley Square, we kept another ex-Press car in the form of a Damsen 2000 Estate (Wagon). In contrast to its earlier life, gentlemanly trundles around the very up-market districts in London of Mayfair, Belgravia and the smarter parts of Kensington, later ensured it had a gentle existence - but I don't think this really suited it. One day, I had to make a return trip to the factory via the main freeway between London and the Midlands for some urgently needed brochures and colour charts. The Estate was the inevitable choice. On the outbound run, things were distinctly dull, until we reached the first Service area at Toddington. I'd noticed up to that time, via the rear view mirror, that lots of muck and filth was coming out of the exhaust as she cleaned herself up internally. From Toddington onwards, it was very much a change for the better. Indeed, it was almost a question of, *"okay, I've got it together now - so let's GO!"* - and bah gum, us did!

No doubt, we were helped on our way by "Caroline on one nine nine" (a pirate radio station) via a factory fit Radiomobile 1080 (AM only and with the customary single dash-mounted loudspeaker!) at full power. On the return trip, with the back seat folded flat and a bellyful of brochures neatly stacked in brown-papered packets, she flew!

Coventry to the West End of London in two and a quarter hours isn't bad for today's traffic - but I did that more than fifty years ago, with single speed wipers in deluging rain - AND I stopped off at home for a snack and a coffee on the way!

A very satisfactory day indeed, as so many of them were - and more often than not, all in Press cars.

But tampered with to make them go better?

Good heavens, I don't think so.

After all, it really wouldn't be cricket, old boy - and think of the longer-term consequences.

What would the Press put in print if it thought it had been misled?

Nice ones, Jim - whatever you did (or didn't) do to them - and as for Chris 'Slipstream' Holbrook, that hire car he used to visit me one summer's day many years ago, was several cookies short of a full packet.

It just didn't go nearly as fast as that Conifer TR5 hardtop - though heaven knows, I'm totally confident its driver tried very hard to persuade it!