

Austin 7 Ruby Saloon from 1935 - HH 8507

I first saw the car in 1965 when I was at University in Newcastle upon Tyne. A friend who lived near York, owned it and in addition to daily running about in Newcastle, she used it regularly to travel home at weekends.

She finally sold it to a work colleague who bought it for his wife to use. Two years later the wife had not driven it, and it came back on the market. The asking price was £50, but on inspection the owner could not get it started and so I paid £47.10.0d. (Plus £7 for the ten mile transport from Morpeth to Forest Hall.)

In those days (1969) I did not have the money to pay the road tax, and waited about a month before I could drive it. From then on it became daily transport, summer and winter. I remember driving it with the windscreen freezing up both inside and outside. But driving it was fun. The engine seemed ok, perhaps a bit rough, and maybe the suspension was a bit hard. It slipped out of third gear (either on drive or on coasting, I forget which, but could be held in gear using the left knee.

One day, while motoring through Jesmond, I saw a 1934 Chummy in immaculate condition. Standing near by was an elderly gentleman, who I later found out was Len Thompson. Members of the North East Club for Pre-War Austins, will surely remember Len and his wife Betty. He was a retired motor mechanic who had served his apprenticeship on Austin Sevens, and was very willing to have a look at mine. He quickly established that the engine was in need of new main bearings, and big ends, and that the suspension centre attachment had been tightened solid. Later work revealed a broken back spring. None of this seemed to present a problem.

So I delivered the car to his garage, and was able to learn many of the tricks of the trade. If the centre bearing of the cam shaft is a bit loose, then tinning it with plumber's solder will give it a snug fit. I watched in amazement as he hand reamed the white metal big end bearings, using some blue liquid that clearly showed up the high spots. He told me that one should never use a hammer on the car. He proudly showed me the small brass drift which he assured me was all that was required. Although he later admitted that loosening the centre mounting on the transmission tube had required judicious use of a sledge hammer! But Len was philosophical, and previous owners or mechanics were described with unusual Geordie frankness (of course out of earshot of his wife).

He took the lid off the gear box and replaced one small spring thus solving the problem of slipping out of 3rd.

Len was particularly proud of his Tool Chest that he had made as a project in his apprenticeship. It was made from an old sea captains chest and Len had

cut and fitted drawers, for all the tools and bits and pieces that he used. On one occasion he decided that he could no longer keep it and presented it to me. I am proud to say that 40 years later it still has pride of place in my garage. The paintwork was a very tired black, polished through to the grey primer in places, and so a couple of years later when I heard about a coach painter who could hand paint it for £15 I did not hesitate. I drove it to him on the Monday night. I called in on Tuesday night to discuss progress, and found him nonchalantly hand painting the car with a style reminiscent of the way I would distemper a wall. The difference being that he was using a camel haired brush and achieving a superb finish. By Thursday the car was ready and I was now proud to drive my magnificent dark blue bodied, black winged Ruby. Of course nothing had been done about underlying rust problems on the wings, and so that problem was hidden for a while.

I seemed to remember at this time that the old log books were phased out. I phoned Swansea, and a charming lady whose father had had an Austin 7, said that perhaps if she put the full set of log books in the envelope to me, no-one would notice. So I have the full history of owners.

Life moved on. I was transferred to the Isle of Wight and the car followed by train, and was used daily on the Island. I was then transferred to Belgium (the car came in the removal truck) and during 5 years the car was driven once around the block, just to prove to a disbelieving Belgian that it really worked! Another move, this time to Switzerland. I received an immediate request from the super-efficient Swiss authorities to present the car for inspection, this to ensure that all the Swiss rules and regulations were satisfied. Luckily I had already heard that the Swiss MOT was a somewhat stricter version of the English one. The car has to be presented spotless (including a washed chassis), no oil leaks AT ALL, no play in the king pins, or steering system (dream on Sir Herbert), and above all, no rust. I pleaded that the car was really a renovation project and they said to come back when it was finished.

Five years sped by with no progress, until one day I decided that renovating the car would be a great little job for the winter months. So I disassembled everything over about one week, and the winter sped by with no more progress. In fact the next 5 winters sped by with no progress, until reality dawned. There was no way that a busy bean counter had either the time or the expertise to do the job. So several phone calls later I had all the bits into boxes, and the car ready to be shipped back to the UK, to John Downs Engineering in Essex. I don't remember how I found John, and I knew that I was taking a risk, as I could not visit to discuss the project. But, 24 hours after the car arrived I had received a 3-page fax listing what needed to be done, including decisions on whether to remove the mahogany blocks that were about all that was holding the chassis together. Apart from the mahogany blocks, other period modifications were left in place. At some time the car acquired quarter lights and these, and the rear side window have brass frames, so no rust problems there.

After two months the Swiss customs wrote enquiring why the "temporary export for repairs" was taking so long. Further discussions, pleadings, and repeated promises, "Yes, the car is coming back, Yes, there were substantial repairs to do. Yes I will present it for the Swiss MOT within two months of it arriving back in Switzerland." In fact I got to visit John (and his wife Rene) two or three times to review progress and was impressed with both the quality of work that was done, and their generous hospitality.

Back in Switzerland and the dreaded MOT. I telephoned and explained what I wanted and was put through to the old foreman on the phone who said it sounded fine, "Just bring it along, and I'm sure we can work something out." He knew the Austin, (or thought he did), and the conversation, in French, was along the lines of "IUTHOOT". So with great optimism I booked an appointment and turned up to meet a very young, very officious, very aggressive mechanic. His first questions and comments included how much it weighed, length, width and height in centimetres, the horsepower (continental measure), the back lights were inadmissible in Switzerland, the 6 volt head lights were useless, the steering had too much play, and in a Monty Python type of voice he said the Swiss equivalent of "YOU ARE VASTING MY TIME!!!"

Fortunately at that very moment, the old foreman came out of his office, and ignoring his younger mechanic's protestations was heard to murmur "Magnifique!"... His mechanic started listing off all the things that were wrong but he brushed them all aside. He took over the test, we went for the test drive (he succeeded in locking the brakes on the downhill part of the test track) and this time I heard "Formidable...!", he giggled as he double declutched, and regaled me with stories of his courting days in similar small cars. I left an hour later with an MOT certificate. I sent him a bottle of fine Swiss wine, and a couple of days later I got a phone call thanking me and saying that he had given the car a special classification that means that it is only tested every 6 years.



Since 1991, there has been an annual meeting of British cars, and in 2003 the car was selected for the publicity poster for the "Classic British Car Meeting". Photographs were taken, posters prepared, and then 8 weeks before the event, the car suffered a broken crankshaft! Phone calls to the UK and finally Mac Bonar, agreed to rebuild the engine. All went well despite holdups at customs and 3 weeks before the meeting the engine was back in Switzerland. Two weeks before the meeting the engine was installed and indeed, it started second turn of the starter motor, which left about 10 evenings to try and get the engine run-in. These were cold dark October evenings and each excursion was under the big question "Will it get home?"

I should never have worried. The car ran perfectly, took pride of place at the entrance to the meeting, and since then has run without any problems. In 2009, the rear springs were changed with a significant improvement in ride and road holding. In 2010 the front spring was changed giving further improvement in both comfort and road holding. With over 100,000 miles on the clock, the car looks set for another 75 years.

Past owners of the car

Chassis 239,840

Engine 241,207

Manufactured October 1935

First registered 1 March 1936

Road tax to 31 December 1937 was £5 5/-

1 1 Mar 1936 Messrs Henderson & Sons Ltd Company car kept in Carlise
Slateford Road,
Edinburgh

2 29 Dec 1937 Thomas Powell Johnson
Yearngill
Aspatria, Cumberland

3 23 May 1939 Thomas Ridley Armstrong
55 Know Park Avenue
Stanwix, Carlisle

4 1 Feb 1941 Dias & Co
Lowther Street
Carlisle

5 11 Feb 1941 Robert William Charters
East Ayre
Torpenhow, Carlisle

6 7 Jul 1941 Harry Christian
Yedmandale Cottager
West Ayton, Scarborough

7 6 Jun 1942 Eric Webb Application for use refused by Northern Division
Keldy of Petroleum Department 18 Mar 1943. Laid up
Moor Lane, East Ayton until April 1946.

8 30 Apr 1946 Herbert John Nash
22 St Johns Road
Scarborough

9 7 Oct 1946 Geoffrey Stare
Ebor
The Crescent, Filey

10 27 Mar 1947 RG Remies
Coachfields
Well Lane, Bridlington

11 Central Garage Repainted Black
South Crescent
Filey

12 18 Jul 1947 JA Magson Ltd
9-11 St Saviour Gate
York

13 16 Feb 1949 Thomas Henry Morrell
10 Heathfield Road
Millfield Lane, York

14 4 Apr 1962 Harry Braithwaite
2 Dundee Street
York

15 5 Apr 1962 Judith A Blundy
Copmanthorpe
York

16 10 Nov 1966 Margaret Blake
Roselea
Longhorseley
Morpeth
Northumberland

17 4 Aug 1969 Keith Anderson
8 Conifer Court
Forest Hall
Newcastle upon Tyne

18 1 Sep 1992 Keith Anderson Present owner
54a Rue de Lausanne
CH-1110, Morges
Switzerland

Article and Image © Keith Anderson