

COLLECTOR CARS

Saskatchewan has but one Scottish-made Imp

DALE JOHNSON
LEADER-POST

Car buffs may have noticed that during the passionate debates of the past few weeks, culminating in the recent referendum on Scottish independence, there was no mention of the most popular car ever produced in Scotland — the Hillman Imp.

It was a far different story 50 years ago, when the Imp was one of Scotland's best-known products.

As part of an attempt by the British government to provide jobs in an area of high unemployment in Scotland, a plant was built in Linwood, a community of 9,000 people about 25 km from Glasgow. This area had been hit hard by a decline in the shipbuilding industry. It meant parts had to be shipped by rail from Hillman's facilities in Coventry, England — about 400 km.

For most of the 1960s and '70s, the Imp made Linwood the Detroit of Scotland. More than 440,000 Imps were produced there from 1963 to 1976. The Imp was designed to compete with the Austin Mini, Fiat 500 and Volkswagen Beetle, as a small, economical car. While the Mini, Fiat and Beetle have been revived and modern versions now are produced, the Imp is long forgotten and rarely seen.

How rare? Well, there's only one Imp in Saskatchewan — and it's owned by Alex McGregor of Saskatoon.

"I know of two in Ontario and one was for sale in central B.C. a couple of years ago. I know of no others in Saskatchewan," Alex says.

No wonder the question he most often hears when people see his car is: "What is it?"

The Imp — marketed as



David Perry enjoyed showing off his 1965 Sunbeam Imp at car shows in Saskatoon, even when it was "a work in progress."

the Sunbeam Imp in North America — also competed against the Envoy Epic, Ford Anglia, Morris Minor, Renault 8 and Vauxhall Viva.

The Imp was a small two-door sedan the same size as today's Chevrolet Spark.

When the very first Imp rolled off the assembly line in Scotland in May 1963, Prince Philip was on hand to take it for a spin.

First-year production was for the United Kingdom market, and exports to Canada began in 1964 where they were branded as Sunbeam Imps because Sunbeam was part of the Rootes Group, which also included Humber, Singer and Talbot. About this time, Chrysler bought a share in Rootes, which meant Imps were sold

at Chrysler dealerships. It was one of the lowest-priced cars in Canada, with a list price of just \$1,680.

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When the Imp arrived in Canada, newspaper ads said: "FIRST TIME IN CANADA! SCOTTISH BUILT! ...

Scottish Engineering has created a new kind of car! New Sunbeam Imp — the car that will out-corner — wet or dry — anything you've ever driven before! ... Imp goes like the devil! Test drive Scotland's most exciting idea since golf."

Different versions of the Imp were sold under different names in other countries, including an upscale version, a station wagon, a delivery van, and a fastback.

Motor Trend magazine tested an Imp in Sept. 1964 and said: "The Imp's low initial price, its outstanding fuel economy, and its lack of maintenance requirements make it quite a buy ... Not only is the Imp fun and easy to drive, it's practical as well."



DAVID PERRY

David Perry used to compete in rallies in England in an Imp.

The Imp had an 875 cc aluminum engine, producing just 42 hp. It was the only car made in the United Kingdom with a rear engine.

The light weight and rear engine meant the Imp was appreciated by people who competed in rallies.

One of them was Dave Perry of Saskatoon, who was living in England when Imps were introduced in 1963. Perry says that building a new car assembly plant in Linwood "was part of the British government's plan to say 'look what we're doing for Scotland.'"

Perry competed in rallies in England in an Imp that had some performance enhancements, including a larger 997 cc engine.

"Imps were especially good for this type of event due to their fairly large wheels and the fact that the weight of the engine was in the back over the driving wheels. It was lots of fun!" Perry recalls.

Imps were also popular among rally drivers in Canada.

Perry immigrated to Saskatoon in 1976, and in 2008 he

bought a 1965 Sunbeam Imp from a person in Regina. It was a project car: it needed seats, carpets, dashboard, door panels and a paint job. But the car had no rust — which is always a big plus.

When Perry took his Imp to cruise nights and cars shows "it certainly got a lot of attention."

A couple of years later he put the Imp up for sale, and the buyer was Alex McGregor, who had been fan of Rootes products ever since he bought a Sunbeam Alpine — a traditional two-seater British sports car — right after high school.

Now Alex is the owner of Saskatchewan's only Sunbeam Imp. Although he has some work ahead of him — on the engine, interior, and body — he says: "This particular car has almost no rust, so restoration should be easy."

But it's not just the rust-free body that attracted him.

"I also like its rarity," he says.

Can't get more rare than having the only Imp in Saskatchewan.