

Gold Dust or Terminal Rust. (The Sixties)

My first car was a 1952 A40 Austin Somerset. I didn't have a clue, but did have a new licence and £40. It seemed large, comfy and the owner drove me around the block to show me what a splendid vehicle it was. You could say I learnt to drive in that car. Due to feeble brakes, and a lack of synchromesh, I discovered the art of double declutch gear changing, closely followed by heel and toe if I wanted to stop as well. The yearly test was fairly relaxed in those days. Even so, such was the decrepit state of the thing that the mechanic advised me to be very careful if I insisted on driving it home.

After its inevitable demise I obtained a rather fetching metallic blue MGZA, again for the princely sum of about £50. It had a problem with the steering which I later found was a small rubber joint half way down the column. That fixed, it drove quite well. Certainly a performance leap over the A40! Which, of course, was not particularly difficult. The ZA met its demise against a concrete fence post, caused by excess enthusiasm and copious mud on the road. The post made solid contact against the nearside rear wing, which was double unfortunate as that was where the fuel pump was attached. I was towed home by a fine chap in a Ford 100E. A task so far beyond reasonable expectations it probably led to the subsequent expiration of the Ford's engine. If you are still out there John, my gratitude and condolences.

I was quite taken by the ZA so, going by the adage of the "devil you know", looked for another. I found a ZB near by, its only distinguishing point from the ZA being a chrome strip which went straight along the front wing instead of following around the wheel arch. Other than that it seemed identical, but what a difference. The ZA may have felt good after the "jelly on a spring" A40, but the ZB gave me a first inkling into what a difference overall condition could make. The ZB was tight, steered beautifully and was smooth and precise. But a bit slow. At least no quicker than the ZA that I could detect.

As experience is gained, so one's expectations change. What was a big, fast car seems to morph into something a bit dull. Besides a friend had bought a Sunbeam Rapier which not only seemed able to out accelerate the ZB, but had other new toys to play with such as overdrive! Time for a change.

From somewhere I acquired a lightly customised Hillman Minx. It had been stripped of its chrome, had the rear door handles removed and was lowered, with fat (for their time) wheels and the obligatory twin choke Weber. Finished off with quarter bumpers, it looked quite neat (for a Hillman Minx). The drummer in a local band took a fancy to it and offered me £100 (plus a leather waistcoat). I was tempted because for a few weeks I had regularly been pressing my nose against the window of a local car dealer's showroom.

Lurking at the back, ignored and seemingly unwanted was a Tornado Talisman. Interesting! A pretty little fibreglass coupe, humorously considered a 2 + 2. The Talisman is what was known in those days as a Component Car, as were early Lotus / TVR's / Rochdales / Ginetta / Elva's and many more specialist manufacturers. The difference

between Component Cars and the later Kit Cars is that the former were available as a collection of all new bits. No scrambling around in scrap yards required!

The other big difference was that most of the component cars were a considerable improvement on the bland offerings of the main manufacturers. I'd bought a copy of J. H. Haynes "Component Cars" so was well aware of what a Tornado Talisman was, which is ironic in a way because what I bought was not a Talisman at all!

By a combination of persistence, and just being a pest, I was eventually allowed to buy it for £100. It was probably worth it for them to keep their showroom windows clear of spotty oiks, and I got to keep the waistcoat! The ride home was enlightening. Not only because of the mind numbing noise, but also the sheer performance of the thing. I also discovered that the redundant switch on the dash was connected to an overdrive! Which was mighty strange when it was supposedly powered by a 1500cc Ford engine.

Subsequent investigation revealed a great, cast iron, lump of a Triumph TR4 engine, complete with twin DCOE Weber carbs and a set of individual exhaust pipes that could have doubled for gutter down pipes. Decades later I discovered that my supposed Talisman was actually a Tornado Thunderbolt with a Talisman body grafted on. Not just any old Thunderbolt but a Tornado Team race car. 130+bhp, stump pulling torque, effectively 7 speed gearbox and a weight of around 1500lbs. Happy days! It was last seen, years later, gathering dust in an open barn in deepest Essex. 89FBL, where are you now?

Still, eventually, I tired of the noise and low 'teens fuel consumption. Besides which girls had, strangely, not the slightest interest in comparisons between different makes of carburettor. Or, indeed, a desire to be rattled about like a ride in a tumble drier. So it was the car or girls. One of them had to go.

I swapped it for a Morris 1100. Never one for half measures, it was at first almost a pleasure. Like how nice it is when someone stops whacking you on the head with a stick!

The space, the quiet, the way it swept over bumpy roads without me oscillating between roof lining and seat. The amusing way it started to lean over to one side, the pretty flickering oil light.

I swapped it for a Jag MkII 2.4 Auto. Sparkly white (down to the waist), red interior, steering that would require a gorilla to move at rest. As long as I was careful to park it so that the lower half was not visible it was quite impressive. A friend's father had the bizarre belief that a person's driving skill was directly connected to the type of vehicle he drove. So overnight I had gone from muppet to superstar. In his opinion! Subsequent experience would tend to lean towards there actually being an inverse law to that effect.

I'm not sure what happened to the old Jag. Must have sold it on to some lucky chap. I was starting to hanker after a proper sports car, and, as luck would have it, an elderly aunt died and left me £120! I found a lovely Austin Healey 100/6 in central London. Silver Blue over Cream, silver painted wires and overdrive for £115, which left me a fiver to fill the tank. Those were the days! The previous owner was a tall chap and, as I could not move the seat, I had to perch on the edge to drive it home. For some reason London

seemed almost deserted, it was mid summer, the air was warm as the Healey rumbled down the Embankment. As I approached Blackfriars underpass I changed down and opened it up, the exhaust bark echoing in the tunnel. I headed out east toward the A13 and, contrary to expectations, just drifted along. Enjoying the night in an open sports car. Of all the cars I've owned the Healey is the one I would like to own again. It is also the only one I left a job for! I was in a job of stupefying tediousness, calculating estimates for a rubber band company. It was a glorious summer and I could see the Healey shining outside in the car park. Whispering to me – come and play. Inevitably I walked out and drove away without a backward glance. Naughty but nice. We played throughout that summer. Just drove for the fun of it. Took pretty girls to distant pubs. Then in an act of cringe worthy betrayal I swapped it for a Mini!

The chap had been nagging for weeks. Telling me of this Mini he had tuned and customised. Eventually, like an idiot, I agreed to see it. Then over a few pints the dreaded deal was done.

The Mini was OK, if you like that sort of thing. I swapped it a few weeks later for a Frogeye Sprite. Spent a few weeks prettying it up. Pop riveted on some fibreglass over sills (sorry purists), and sprayed it metallic golden bronze.

Whilst fettling the Sprite I had bought a Minor 1000 Convertible for very little money. It was just a stop gap and served its purpose well enough. It was so weak that if anyone climbed in the back the doors would not close. I had to slam the doors and they clambered in over the back, interesting in a time of mini skirts. Still, I managed to get the spray compressor in the back so it had its uses. I remember lying on my back in the snow one Christmas Eve changing the brake pipes. What fun we had.

I sold it to an ex school chum who did his best to kill himself in it by racing a Ford 100E. A Battle of the Titans. Completely misjudging a corner, hitting a mile post and flipping it end over end. He was ejected straight out through the roof and survived without a scratch. Lucky Boy!

I then saw an advert. for someone who wanted to swap a Triumph TR3A for a Sprite and another deal was done. I suspect the TR frightened him; later experience was to add some credence to those thoughts.

I had a Love / Hate relationship with the TR. Although I liked it some times, I suspect it hated me with a particular malevolence. It tried to kill me at least 3 times, which does tend to colour ones opinion. Once the hood detached from the windscreen and blew down INSIDE. I was doing about 80mph down the Southend Arterial and suddenly could not see a thing. Another time a pin dropped out of the steering as I was descending a steep hill with a tight right hand bend at the bottom. Luckily I resisted the temptation to brake and ended up using the local council flower beds as an emergency stop. It may have even been a Welcome to Careful Drivers sign. The chassis caught alight once driving through London! I was waiting at the lights and was suddenly enveloped in smoke. Somehow a spark?, a flint on the road?, had set fire to oil and grease on the chassis and it was smouldering away with small flames licking around the fuel tank.

On the plus side, it went well, had good brakes and a superb gearbox. I could drive it for miles without using the clutch. It was never going to compete with the Healey. It even kept up its misbehaviour when I came to sell it. I had just concluded a deal to exchange it for another (good) Sprite, when a wind picked up, the bonnet somehow released and was ripped off its hinges to fly away down the drive. I should have had the thing exorcised!

The “new” Sprite was another Frogeye, the bonnet had been replaced by a fibreglass item (as one did in those days.) The whole thing had been painted a rather bright yellow. It had a remarkable engine, in that it actually had a replacement alloy head with a side draught Weber carb. The rest of the engine was standard as far as I recall. The result was that it did very little under about 4000 revs. It used to run up to about 6500 revs with ease when, inevitably, I wondered if it would reach 6800. It broke at 6700. Put a leg out of bed in race terminology. That was the end of that engine and the pretty alloy head!

As it happened I was due to take a rather lovely blonde girl, (called Mandy I think), to Brands Hatch so needed wheels quickly. I picked up a very early Mini for a fiver. Complete other than a tendency to jump out of third. No problem. I remember that is was such a common fault some people used to have a metal hook screwed to the dashboard that they could pop the gear lever in to hold it in gear. Quality Engineering. Not only did it take us to Brands, it also made it back to Kent to pick up a spare engine for the Sprout. That Mini would be worth some serious money now!

My last car of the sixties was a Rapier Convertible. Its main distinguishing feature being that one could fold the hood back half way or “Coupe de Ville” as it was called somewhat pretentiously. Pleasant enough, but a bit too much like a Hillman Minx in a part dress.

There were a few others at some time. Morris 1000 Traveller and a Ford 1000E van for two. Neither memorable enough to remember when

And that was the end of the Sixties.

I hope the above has been of some interest (or even generated some sympathy!) Fact is that with that cantankerous lot, all of them self maintained, it is inevitable that many tricks and tips were devised or discovered. Generally the hard way.

I've sorted and expanded everything I've learnt in 40 years into a manual called [Workshop Secrets](#)

Over 300 tips to hopefully ensure you DON'T have to lie out in the snow!

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