

# Sahara Imp

Ron Kane, Morpeth, Northumberland

## Background

In September 1971 I bought my third Imp. This time I travelled to the Antrim Automart garage, in Antrim and, handing over my savings from working in New York the previous year, took possession of EIA 4452, a brand new, Firebrand Red, Sunbeam Imp. The car was one of a hundred left-hand drive vehicles which, part of a cancelled export order to Finland, had instead somehow, ended up in Northern Ireland. The cars were sold, without warranty, at the heavily discounted price of £500.

The best, and most reliable Imp I ever owned, I used it on road/stage rallies over five years while a member of Dublin University Motor Cycle & Light Car Club. Left-hand drive didn't matter on events and, indeed, it was a positive advantage when I took it abroad...



Ron Kane's Imp *en route* to the Sahara – Mohammed (in driver's seat) and Rob Clark pause for a photo  
Photo: Ron Kane

## Preparations for the Journey

Summer 1976 saw me living and working in Lancaster. The sheer boredom at HM Inspector of Taxes encouraged my mind to wander and it was no surprise that the idea of travelling to the Sahara began to emerge. Although the Imp was still ultra-reliable, never having had to do anything to the engine since new, I asked Ernie Larton, in Morecambe, to take it apart and rebuild the unit. Several weeks later the car was ready.

## Under Way

In late September 1976 myself and college friend, Rob Clark, set off, spending three long days in the Imp travelling to the Mediterranean, via France and Spain. From Algeciras in Southern Spain, we arrived by ferry in Ceuta, a Spanish enclave in North Africa, crossing into Morocco as the sun set. Our plan? We didn't really have one – to see how far we might get, and hopefully return home in the Imp again.

It was like stepping back in time. From 20th century mainland Europe, with its traffic and electric lights, to the medieval terrain of Morocco – totally dark at night until perhaps a door might open,

silhouetting a cloaked figure in a pool of lamp-light. Tangier was interesting, but for the wrong reason. Following a minor traffic violation, placing a tyre across a white line at a roundabout, the traffic policeman on duty left his post and, complete with whistle, insisted on clambering into the back of the Imp. He sat, unceremoniously, on top of all the camping gear and ordered us to drive to the main square. A large crowd gathered, and more and more police arrived. Gesticulating arms and arguing followed. Now the thought, "Are they going to shoot us?" did enter my mind, but instead we were, with much flourish, relieved of an amount of money and told to go on our way. I didn't need encouragement. There was, however, one humorous aspect to this encounter. In writing out the ticket (left), the policeman had taken my Lancaster address (Greenwood Avenue) as part of my name. Instead of Ronald Kane I was now, officially, Kane Greenwood – visions of 1970's American actors spring to mind.

It was a relief to leave Tangier far behind. Fes proved to be a very interesting city, with its ancient university and beautiful gardens. Marrakesh was lively, especially at night, with its large market place – a mecca for all forms of trader, acrobat and reptile. Did I mention the aroma from the tanneries?

The High Atlas mountains now lay in our path. I did the driving through the Tizi n'Tichka pass (2260 m), heading south to Ouarzazate. It's not that I didn't trust Rob's driving – but it was a long, long way down. A village at the top of the pass proved a good resting point and my introduction to very hot red chillies, one of which I bit, and swallowed, in one go, thinking it was a carrot. 1970's Ireland hadn't yet discovered chillies. Baptism of fire – literally.

It was at this point that we met a Berber family, one of whose children had a very bad eye infection. Having driven the mother and child to the nearest clinic, some 20 miles away, we were invited to stop with them, and to attend a family wedding high in the mountains. The local leader asked if the Imp could be used as an impromptu taxi, ferrying dancers and musicians to the ceremony. On the first trip, accompanied by the dignitary, three female musicians/dancers were

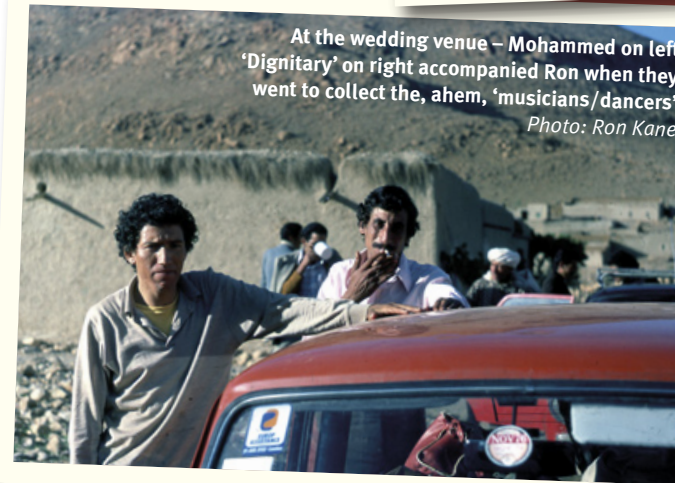
transported up to the wedding. It was only later I discovered that the three ladies in the back of the Imp also performed other services, which delicacy has ordained shall remain unelaborated upon.

The mother of the bride had been stung by a scorpion the day before and, although obviously in some pain, made Rob and

Attending a family wedding: father of bride and relatives. Rob Clark on left holding camera  
Photo: Ron Kane



At the wedding venue – Mohammed on left 'Dignitary' on right accompanied Ron when they went to collect the, ahem, 'musicians/dancers'  
Photo: Ron Kane



myself honoured guests. We all sat around a low table with the hooded bride and groom at one end. (The hoods were tall and peaked, similar to those worn by the KKK.) The shrill cries of the women, and the repetitive beat of the drums echoing off the surrounding hills, was hypnotic. Although I was invited to take photographs I felt that it might still be rather insensitive, so I declined. Once the ceremony was over and the feasting completed I was inundated by requests to drive the

Imp. I reluctantly allowed Mohammed, the eldest son of our host family, to have a go. The number of car-destroying rocks in the vicinity made me slightly nervous, but I needn't have worried. Drive completed he declared the Imp to be "Très fort!"

After spending several days in their company, we headed further south. Mohammed was deputised to act as our guide in the Sahara. Being the same age as us he had a rather cramped time in the back, but to give him his due there wasn't a word of complaint.

What can I say about the Sahara? Large... hot... sandy. It certainly was all of these, but, to my surprise, much of the surface was very hard and corrugated, interspersed with softer areas of sand and extremely high sand dunes. Inevitably we did get stuck. No amount of struggling on our part could extract the car and we had to sit it out until a truck thankfully appeared. Without a word of explanation the occupants on the back of the truck jumped down and heaved us out. Little was said. We were very grateful – they just clambered back on to the truck and continued their journey.

Overheating (with the ever present fear of a blown head gasket) was avoided by, at some stages, taking the engine cover off and placing it in the back of the car alongside Mohammed. This provided enough airflow to keep the needle where it should be. With the rough surface, suspension gremlins arrived in the shape of the right-hand rear (Spax) adjustable shock absorber. Having disintegrated I was forced to remove it. We completed the remainder of our journey on three shock absorbers, making for some interesting bouncing at certain speeds.

Our journey continued towards the disputed border with the Western Sahara. We camped in a remote frontier town and I vividly remember sitting outside the only restaurant (i.e. mud hut serving food) tucking into camel steaks and Algerian wine, while Moroccan soldiers walked past, staring at us. Uncomfortable was one way to describe the experience. The camel, on the other hand, was delicious.

After speaking to some of the local people, and seeing the steady stream of tank transporters coming back and forth from the border, we made the decision that it would be foolhardy to go further. What amounted to a full-blown war was taking place throughout this area, between the Moroccan army and Polisario fighters whose people had been ejected from their lands. Time to head north again towards the Atlas mountains.

It was during our climb back over the Atlas mountains that disaster struck. On taking a sharp bend there was a sudden crash. The right-hand rear side of the car collapsed, and in doing so, jammed on the handbrake cable, sending the car slewing across the road – and very nearly over the edge. The damage looked terminal. The right-hand trailing arm had split wide open, exposing the wheel bearings on the half-shaft – what five years of stage rallying had not accomplished, the corrugated Sahara had.

My immediate thought was that we would have to leave the car in the mountains. Nobody in



**Shock absorber breakdown – Mohammed is nevertheless highly impressed with the little Imp**  
*Photo: Ron Kane*

Morocco had ever seen an Imp, never mind a Rootes/Chrysler dealership. Breakdown insurance, which I had taken out, only covered Europe. Africa was off limits to the insurance companies. Spares I did carry, but not to that extent. However, necessity adds a certain impetus to life and

several hours later I had dismantled the rear suspension. Rob played his part by handing me tools and acting as official photographer. Fortune then shone on us in the shape of a Dutch couple who were heading south in their VW campervan. They gave us a lift back to Ouarzazate where we met a sledge hammer-wielding Arab mechanic. We could speak some French, but not Arabic. But I don't

think we needed language. He looked, then gave the damaged unit several mighty thumps with the sledge, as I cringed in the background. But this was just an ordinary routine fix for this man. Where main dealers and parts departments did not exist, make-do and mend was the only alternative. A few minutes with the welding plant and the fractured part was knitted back together. The work of a true craftsman.

Back to the Imp. Night was falling and, fortunately for us, a shepherd family invited us to stop with them overnight. We joined them for their meal and were treated most kindly. The only request was to ask if we had any alcohol on board – unfortunately not, but they seemed pleased to fill an empty wine bottle, which we had in the car, with Coca Cola, and this was passed around as the night progressed. We slept in the open, when the flies permitted.

The following morning the Imp was ready to roll again. I was still somewhat sceptical about whether the suspension repair would hold together, but hold together it did, on our several thousand-mile return journey home. When the Imp was eventually sold it went to its new owner complete with welded trailing arm, and, unknown to him, quite a lot of red sand under the floor coverings. I avoided telling him the full story of my red Sunbeam Imp and how one previous prospective purchaser in Morocco had offered me ten camels, and his sister, for this strong little car...

P.S. Like so many former Imp owners I have tried to trace my Imp, but without success. The registration details still show on the DVLA's MoT history website (with colour changed to yellow) but with no current information. A letter to the DVLA explaining why I wanted to trace, and restore the car, enclosing a copy of the original registration document in my name, received a rather curt reply. It's unlikely that it has avoided the scrapyards, but you never know. (EIA 4452, left-hand drive, red sand under carpets!).



**Ron discovers total collapse of the suspension in the Atlas mountains**  
*Photo: Rob Clark*