Happy Days in South Africa with an Austin 11-55

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Glen Smale recalls his Austin 11-55 in South Africa…

Glen operates Virtual Motorpix and his recollections about his own 11-55 first appeared on own his website blog: http://blog.virtualmotorpix.com

(Kim says: "Just to set the scene, it may be helpful to explain a little about the Austin 11-55. This was a South African version of BMC's 1100 (ADO 16) that was introduced in the UK in 1962, and in the following years became a best-seller.

The South-Africa market 11-55 (sold in Austin 11/55 de luxe, Morris 11/55 de luxe and Wolseley 11/55 versions), featured much local content, but was based on the British 1100.

A significant difference for the 11/55 was that it was powered by an uprated version of BMC's 1098cc engine, with the specification based on that of the automatic gearbox 1100s sold in the UK (with a unique AP four speed transmission). Therefore it retained the same capacity and compression ratio, but featured a large carburettor (1.5 in SU instead of 1.25in), improved combustion chambers, and larger valves plus dual valve springs. This was said to increase power from 50 bhp (SAE) @ 5,100 rpm to 54 bhp (SAE) @ 5,500 rpm (so 8 per cent higher output) – and the engine speed at which the maximum torque (approximately 60 lb.ft) was developed was raised from 2,500 to 3,400 rpm.

This endowed the car with lively performance for the time.



The Apache was another South Africa model, developed by 'Leykor' at Blackheath, near Capetown, and this model arrived in 1971, incorporating the main bodywork design of the 1100, but with restyling by Michelotti, to incorporate a redesigned frontal appearance, plus a longer luggage boot and other changes.

For much more fascinating information on these models, please go to: http://www.mginfo.co.uk/leyland

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Glen writes…

It is necessary to dig deep to recall some memories of my first set of real wheels, the Austin 11-55. Besides a number of soapboxes that all met with varying uncomfortable ends against lamp poles or rocks, life in sunny South Africa was quite, well…colonial. That of course meant that many motor cars in this former southern outpost of the British Empire originated in the motherland, being either direct imports, or were assembled from what was called ‘CKD’ kits. This stood for ‘Completely Knocked Down’ kits, where the original manufacturer despatched a box of parts that comprised a complete car, which was then assembled at a plant in the recipient country.

British Leyland Motor Corporation (BLMC) did this with many of its models, and so it was that our family’s second car, a pale blue Austin 11-55 made its way into our home for my mother to drive. The Austin’s life got off to a rather rough start as the registration number, CE 38508, was also allocated to an identically coloured and same spec car across town. The chances of that happening have got to be infinitesimally small, but our town’s licensing department managed to get it right. That got changed after a bit of a fight with the relevant licensing office, and our Austin provided admirable service for several years carting the kids (my sister and I) around to school, sport and other exciting stuff.



My sister was the first to inherit and enjoy the old family Austin, seen here at East London, South Africa, in 1973.

Then all of a sudden, the car was surplus to requirements, and needed to be moved on. So, as my sister had just graduated from college in Durban, it was shoved her way and served as a student/new employee car for a few years. After some more years, and once my sister had earned some decent dosh, the Austin 11-55 was looking for another home. This coincided with the final stint of my national service time (1977), and not being allowed to have a motor car in camp as a soldier, I had to store it at the back of the local golf club, behind the manager's house. Weekends were spent travelling around the local area playing golf with my buddies, having been granted passes while our fellow-recruits had to stand guard over the weekend.

One evening, returning from one such golfing adventure, I was testing out my new stereo tape in the car and had the volume turned up to full, when I noticed several of the caddies from the golf club dancing to the beat of Neil Diamond's "Cracklin' Rosie" behind the car. Arriving back in camp a little later it was evident that this repeated weekend liberty had not gone unnoticed, and I found my bed turned upside down and graffiti all over the wall behind my bed. And I thought that these were my mates, with whom I had just served in the Border war for the previous six months, it was nevertheless all taken in good spirits. Monday morning at 06h00 was inspection time, and so Sunday night (after several beers) was spent cleaning the place up.

The following year I started my university degree, also in Grahamstown, and suitably loaded up with a large set of golf clubs (this was very important), two very huge speakers, amplifier, tape deck (all of which was also very important), a few clothes and other essentials, the trusty Austin headed out of East London (Cape Province, South Africa) on the

next exciting chapter in its life. What the boot of that car could swallow still astounds me to this day, and trips between Grahamstown and East London (175 miles) were frequent. If the boot wasn't loaded, then there would be three large heavy lads who wanted a lift back home for the weekend.

Then one day the bug bit…the bug that makes you want to do crazy things to your car to make it go faster, have better roadholding, make more noise, in fact just about anything to make it 'not normal' anymore. My friend had a Mini 850, and so we both set about 'improving' our cars during the long holidays. Next up was the obligatory set of half inch spacers necessary to give a wider stance and really good grip, and a letter (remember those) was drafted to Autocar in the UK asking how we could improve the car's fuel consumption. The reply came back a month later with some good advice suggesting that I increase the tyre size to give a bigger rolling circumference, but this was going to require bodywork mods with the wheel spacers, so that idea was dropped as it had serious budgetary implications, such as the amount of dosh available for beers and golf – and that couldn't possibly be reduced!

Next on the list was the SU carb set-up. It was a fairly simple matter to whip off the single carb and polish the ports inside the manifold and the carb itself, while more serious work such as filing off rough edges and rounding corners in the fuel flow system itself was reserved for holidays. Cleaning out the air-cleaner was a more routine task and could be done between lectures at university, and this would always impress all your buddies and some girls (the pretty ones didn't notice, unfortunately) who all thought you were performing some complicated tuning task in a matter of minutes. One's university rucksack invariably contained spanners and screwdrivers sufficient to perform any roadside repair, or minor tuning modification, and if there was space, the books required for that day's lectures. Sometimes you would pitch up at a lecture with the wrong books, but that wasn't too serious if you just stared at the lecturer intently for 45 minutes, looking mildly intelligent throughout.

One sunny holiday the 11-55 sprouted some additional driving lamps, genuine period Bosch

units, and they looked really sporty with their yellow lenses. In a moment of weak financial management, I splashed out and bought some replacement clear lenses when the one yellow lens broke. These Bosch lights went from my 11-55 onto my next car, an Austin Apache, then a Fiat 124 Special… and then into my tool box for posterity, where they can still be found today.

The Austin survived until the end of my first, very adventurous year at university as one sunny afternoon, I overestimated the rallying capability of what was to all intents and purposes, a standard family road car. This was despite its many improvements and modifications to the polished ports, the extra driving lights and the wheel spacers, I found that the beloved Austin could not take a sharp bend on a dust road, and the pale blue 11-55 ended up down an embankment with a fatally bent chassis. Try as we did, a group of enthusiastic student buddies could not push the little car up the bank, despite a lot of very clever suggestions, and so the help of a tow truck was enlisted.

This did indeed spell the end of the little car's life with the family, but the Austin taught me a lot about cars, lying under it for hours fixing this and that, repacking the CV joints (the all-time messiest job in the world… back then) and cleaning and polishing the bodywork. It was a great introduction into the world of car ownership.



My Austin 11-55 at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa.