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## Motoring for Fun – ‘Wirral Going on a Summer Holiday’ (and to the Austin Counties Car Club Rally) – in a 1954 Austin A40 Somerset, says Kim

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## Wirral Going on a Summer Holiday - in a 1954 Austin A40 (Somerset) Coupé... Kim Henson explains...

I have to admit that until 2014 I had never before visited the Wirral peninsula, nor indeed Liverpool, but twice in that year I made brief visits to that part of the world, and was keen to return to explore in more detail.

For those who may not know, the Wirral peninsula sits between (to the west) the River Dee estuary and Wales, and (to the east) the River Mersey plus its estuary, and Liverpool.

My wife and I decided to return to take another look there in the summer of 2016...



## Have old Austin, will travel... a bit about our chosen car for this adventure

For many years I have been a member of the wonderful 'Austin Counties Car Club', since I have always liked the wide variety of Austin models covered by this well-run, friendly organisation, and for the last 12 years or so have owned a 1954 A40 Coupé – this is not, as its name implies, a fixed head car, but a four seater convertible based on the Austin A40 Somerset (a four door 1200cc family saloon, built from 1952 to 1954).

(Note: This model is different from the A40 Sports convertible, which in fact was based on the earlier A40 Devon, and featured an aluminium body by Jensen, plus twin carburettors).

We had already decided to re-visit the Wirral, then the Club announced that its 2016 weekend-long national rally would be held there, so my wife and I decided to attend with our Austin, and to combine our short holiday with the rally. Thus we set off to spend a few days touring the area, just prior to taking part in the rally itself.

The drophead version of the A40 is a model I had wanted to own since admiring them as a lad. The Coupé was based on the separate chassis and running gear of the A40 Somerset saloon, but with a steel two door, four seater drophead body by Carbodies of Coventry. This firm cleverly developed and produced a convertible 'system' used across several manufacturers during the 1950s, including Austin (for the A40 Somerset and A70 Hereford), Ford (Consul/Zephyr/Zodiac), Hillman (Minx) and Daimler (Conquest). In each of these cases the chassis and running gear is identical to that of the contemporary saloon version.

One of the aspects that I have always liked about this convertible arrangement is that it enables four adults still to be carried in reasonable space and comfort. In addition the luggage boot, although reduced a little in capacity by comparison with saloon versions (as the hood has to be accommodated somewhere when lowered!), is still generous for a drophead.

In addition, and a brilliant feature, is that when required the hood can be rolled back to the





'coupe-de-ville' or halfway position. With the hood in this position the front seats are fully in the open air, but the hood still covers the rear seats, and reduces draughts throughout the car's interior. The windows in the two long, pillarless doors can be wound all the way down if required, also the rear side windows can be lowered into the bodywork to allow in more fresh air.



I have found the coupe-de-ville position is especially enjoyable on days when the sun is out but the temperature is on the cool side, and on warm evening runs in the summertime, when it is great to cruise through leafy lanes with the sound of birdsong filling the car, and with an 'open air' view of a lovely sunset.

Another great aspect of the Carbodies/Austin convertible arrangement is that the hood can be fully raised or lowered in seconds by just one person (although it is even easier and





quicker with two people).

Now before anyone gets too excited about my car, it should be pointed out that my example of the A40 (believed to be one of just 12 or so still in use on Britain's roads) is not a pristine condition, shiny machine. By contrast, it is finished in the original '50 shades of grey primer'.

However, it is solid enough and the more remarkable thing is that it exists at all...

In a very sorry state it was stripped down more than 30 years ago by a previous owner, who carried out a great deal of structural renovation before selling the car, in 'boxes of bits' to a friend of mine who lives near me.

At the time, more than 20 years ago, my pal telephoned me to tell me he had bought the car, and promised to give me a drive in the Austin when it was completed (as he knew that I loved this model).

However, in 2005 he phoned to ask if I was interested in buying the car, before he advertised it, as he had decided to concentrate on an A70 Hereford that I had told him about, and that he had bought for restoration.

I had not realised that during the previous decade he had continued the restoration work on the A40 to the point that it was actually running and on the road, with a current MoT (although it lacked a hood and the seats were, quite literally, falling apart!).

A test drive convinced me that this car just had to be mine, so I bought it and over the past few years it has gained a new hood and the interior has been retrimmed, in addition to which it has been treated to new mechanical components as required (including, for example, brake and cooling system parts). The paintwork will be renovated 'in due course'.

So my shabby-looking but strong-hearted A40 was chosen to take us north to the Counties Club rally. We had previously taken the car on several trouble-free trips abroad (Belgium



and France) as well as around Britain, so we had every confidence in the old Austin (please note, NOT over-confidence...) and were very much looking forward to this next adventure too.

## Aiming the Austin north-westwards

From our home in the south of England my wife and I pointed the Austin towards Gloucester and then proceeded roughly north-westwards through picturesque rural Gloucestershire and Herefordshire, on non-motorway roads which I find more relaxing in an old car like this.

The journey was entirely enjoyable on a bright but cool day, with the Austin cruising happily at a steady speed of about 53 mph (which it seems to like, with some reserve above this to its reputed top speed of around 75 mph – according to contemporary road tests), and we soon arrived at our destination of the Liver View Hotel at Wallasey. This hotel has recently been renovated and from our elevated room we enjoyed amazing views (especially beautiful at night) over the Mersey to Liverpool, and we were made very welcome here throughout our stay.

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Just a short drive away, at the 'top' of the Wirral peninsula, is New Brighton, with a variety of pubs and restaurants plus, again, some great views across the River Mersey and out to sea. On several evenings during our stay we made our way here, enjoyed some pleasant meals, walked around the waterfront and observed some beautiful sunsets over the sea to the west.



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While staying at Wallasey (which seemed to us to be a perfect centre for touring) we took several day trips out, first to Liverpool, using the famous 'Ferry across the Mersey', and also north-westwards from the city to Formby (with its sweeping beaches and its National Trust squirrel walk), then up north-westwards as far as Southport.

On another day we visited Chester (to the south), which we explored on foot, as we did with Liverpool - these are both fascinating cities that captivated us in different ways.

On arrival at Wallasey on our first day, we were told about the 'Walrus Card' system, which, for a very few pounds per person per day, entitles the holder to travel on the Mersey ferries, also the buses and trains (overground and underground) within a large area around Liverpool and the Wirral. This avoids the need for driving and parking your car, and in our



case made our time here more relaxing and inexpensive than it would otherwise have been. So for a few days our Austin rested at our hotel while we travelled around on public transport to all the places mentioned above. (It should be mentioned that the arrangements for this thoroughly sensible and cost-effective system are evolving all the time, with 'smart' technology being introduced).

## Lovely Liverpool



By staying in Wallasey, we could easily reach the various attractive parts of the Wirral peninsula, and also, on most of the days of our stay, take a pleasant crossing on the Mersey ferries to reach Liverpool and the coastal fringes of Lancashire to the north-west of the city.

It is interesting that the famous song 'Ferry Cross the Mersey', by Gerry and the





Pacemakers, is still played today on the loudspeaker systems on the Mersey Ferries, as they cross the river; it's a song so evocative of Liverpool and the 1960s. No doubt at this point, some of you will want to sing along, in which case please click [HERE](#) to watch, listen to and sing along to the song, with original colour footage of the group performing it on a ferry in 1964 (and with the lyrics highlighted)! Enjoy...



A view of Birkenhead from the 'Ferry (a)Cross the Mersey'; just about to depart for Liverpool.

On a previous brief visit to Liverpool, we had enjoyed the rejuvenated waterfront area (including, from the Mersey ferries, seeing the magnificent views of the Royal Liver Building and the wealth of other imposing buildings nearby) and the Beatles exhibitions, but ran out of time for further exploration.





*The Royal Liver Building, as seen from a Mersey ferry...*

This time we first headed for the city centre, and spent a day walking around the city's famous streets, enjoying the gardens, the architecture old (such as the Heritage Centre at Liverpool Town Hall, also the Wellington Rooms) and new. We also spent some time in and around the two cathedrals (Roman Catholic and Church of England), both magnificent in their own ways.

The Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King is the largest Catholic church in England, and very modern in design and construction, contrasting with the more traditional brick-built Church of England cathedral.



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The Roman Catholic Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King.





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...an inside view of the Catholic Cathedral.





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The magnificent interior of the Church of England Cathedral in Liverpool.



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Even more moving and poignant, we thought, was St Luke's Church (below) and gardens. Designed by John Foster, both Senior and Junior, and built between 1811 and 1831, this attractive building was hit by enemy fire during an air raid in May 1941, and the shell of the building has been left as a memorial to those killed on that night.



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Another





building that attracted my attention was the Futurist Picture House in Lime Street, an iconic and atmospheric structure if ever there was. This picture house opened in 1912 and remained open until 1982, sadly deteriorating over the following three decades. When we visited in June 2016 and I took the photograph used in this article, little did I realise that after much controversy it was to be demolished just weeks later. How sad that it couldn't be saved.



## In and around Wallasey and Birkenhead

There is much heritage in and around Wallasey, including many buildings originally constructed to serve maritime and industrial needs. However, the face of this area is

changing fast. While we were there in 2016, I was fascinated by the 'inland' old docks area and the various bridges (many of which were originally swing bridge types). However, apparently the march of 'progress' will see the imminent replacement of both amazing old bridges on Tower Road. Good job I saw the old ones when I did!



Another interesting building is the now-dilapidated, 110 feet high 'Central Hydraulic Tower and Engine House', built in 1863. I understand that its regeneration to play a new role will happen soon.

In total there are 32 Listed buildings in Wallasey, so that at least some heritage will remain to be admired by future generations.





Similarly in Birkenhead many of the old buildings are Listed, including ventilation stations for the Queensway (Mersey) Tunnel, and the entrance to the tunnel, completed in 1934.

The Hamilton Square Station incorporates an amazing tower that proclaims, "Frequent Electric Trains", the first of which ran in May 1903, although in fact the station had been built some years earlier by the Mersey Railway, and opened in 1886.





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These days



visitors and commuters travelling to and from Liverpool can move rapidly beneath the River Mersey from Birkenhead to the city and back again, on fast, punctual and well-lit trains. The underground train network within the city impressed us with its efficiency and cleanliness.

## Out of Town

We had been told of a beautiful National Trust owned area near Formby, on the coast to the north-west of Liverpool, and including a 'Red Squirrel Walk' through the woodlands there. We were also delighted to find that Formby came within the boundaries of permitted travel using our Walrus Card arrangements, so we took the train to this destination. En route there were some great views across industrial areas dating back many years, and across the Mersey river towards the Wirral.

On arrival at Formby, the weather was wonderful and the small station there, falling quiet once our train had departed, was bathed in sunshine. Several entirely positive things cheered us up here...

First, on the station platform were planters filled with weed-free soil from which beautiful flowers and healthy looking spring onions, lettuces and radishes (etc.) were sprouting. Boards, placed within the planters and headed 'Merseyrail - more than just a journey', bore the further inscription 'When the crops are ready please help yourself to what you need'. How wonderful, and how trusting! Nearby on the platform, a notice advised, 'The plants and vegetables on this station are tended and cared for by Bridge Inn Community Farm and Volunteers'. Well done to them, we say!





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As we walked out of the station in search of some lunch, we passed the station car park, above which a sign proclaimed, 'Free parking for rail users'. How refreshing, that motorists are not being 'fleeced' for every penny – and I reckon that free parking at stations like this may well encourage people to let the train take the strain...

Never before having visited Formby, we were not sure of where we could get a decent lunch for a fair price, and as we left the station we were also unsure of which direction to take. We need not have worried, for two local ladies appeared and kindly listed off a few possible eateries, and at the top of their suggested list was 'Café 48', not far from the station. 'The food's good', they said, adding, 'The local taxi drivers eat there too'.

We followed their advice and enjoyed an excellent lunch with friendly service, and for a reasonable price.





Thus fortified, we walked the mile or so to the National Trust's Red Squirrel Walk, and meandered through the sun-dappled trails between the trees, eventually reaching the sea via paths through wide green meadows and sand dunes.



Alas we didn't see any squirrels on the day of our visit, but I was fascinated to find a very old truck-type axle, complete with rusted lorry-type wheels and sun-perished tyres, half-buried in the sand. I imagine that this was used on an agricultural trailer and by the look of it I estimate it had probably been resting in the sand for over half a century, perhaps longer. Even so, I was amazed to find traces of lubricant still visible around the hub bearings. I took quite a while to study this axle and can't tell you just how fascinated and delighted my wife was at this discovery...





Deep joy at discovering a classic axle...

We walked back to Formby station and caught a train heading north-west to Southport, again new to us and where we explored the attractive old town centre and the beach (with a VERY long walk to the water at low tide), before finding a bite to eat and then returning to Wallasey on trains via Liverpool.



Southport on a sunny



Bandstand, Southport.



evening.



Ouch! Take care in  
Southport.

## Chester

On the Friday of our stay we were due to meet up with fellow members of the Counties Car Club, for a pre-arranged pub meal in the evening, at the start of the Club's weekend-long 2016 Rally. However, before that during the daytime we hopped onto yet another train, this time southwards to Chester.

Although we had visited very briefly in the past, we had not had time then to explore the city, so this time we strolled through the ancient streets with their distinctive half-timbered buildings and shops, walked around the city walls and dodged heavy showers before seeking sanctuary from the weather in the beautiful Cathedral.

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Arriving back at our Wallasey base we jumped into the A40, headed for the allotted meeting point and enjoyed a pleasant 'pub meal' evening with fellow Austineers.

## Wirral Peninsula Tour – with the Austin Counties Car Club

The next morning we met up again with Austin Counties Car Club members, bringing with them a wide variety of Austins of the early post-War era.





A40 Somersets galore (with a similarly shaped but larger A70 Hereford just visible on the left of this picture).

The local organisers of the event had arranged a scenic tour around the Wirral and took us to areas that we would not easily have discovered for ourselves, including 'hidden' viewpoints and other places of interest. It was good to be part of the convoy of ageing Austins as we criss-crossed the Wirral, and to discover pastures new.





Just one of the beautiful views found at the  
Royden Park and Thurstaston Common Local  
Nature Reserve...



...and here's another one!

In fact the peninsula is one of great contrasts; within the Wirral there are built-up industrial and port areas (including Birkenhead and Wallasey, plus Ellesmere Port), beautiful views over coast (for example at Hoylake and West Kirby) and countryside, plus a multitude of pretty villages and rolling farmland. During our morning's tour we saw examples of all these aspects.



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Contrasts... with a Jensen-bodied A40 Sports  
on the left.



A40 Devon-based vans were always attractive. This signwritten example is wonderful – and typical of so many.

In the late morning, having rested awhile during a coastal coffee stop en route, we arrived at the Wirral Tramway and Transport Museum at Birkenhead, where we enjoyed a ride on a vintage tram before viewing the very interesting museum. This includes cars, motorcycles, buses and trams, plus an impressive model railway layout.

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It was then a short ride to the Woodside Ferry Terminal at Birkenhead, where there was the opportunity to look round the German Second World War U-boat, U-534. En route to Norway on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1945 (after instructions to surrender), this submarine was attacked by a Liberator aircraft and sank. It was on the sea bed until August 1993 and is now on display to tell the story of the U-boats.





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Mersey Ferry 'Snowdrop', painted up in a vibrant 'Dazzle' colour scheme similar to those used on British naval ships during the First World War, to confuse/distract enemy attackers and spoil their aim...





A40 Devon based van plus A40 Somersets  
facing in opposite directions!



An A40 Somerset sandwiched by an A70  
Hampshire (left) and A70 Hereford (right).

The next day was the main day of the Counties Club Rally, and sadly for us the last day of our short holiday, and so on leaving our hotel we headed for the rally destination of Port Sunlight - another place we had never visited previously.

Today a museum, Port Sunlight is a fascinating village established in 1888 by the enlightened William Hesketh Lever (later Viscount Leverhulme), who ran 'Sunlight Soap' (Lever Brothers). He set up the attractive village for housing his factory workers, as it was his belief that his workers deserved decent quality, affordable clean houses, good amenities and welfare provision. This would enable their lives to be secure, comfortable and happy, in turn so that they would flourish as people, and also in the hope that his approach would encourage their commitment and loyalty to their employer.

Lever also introduced a shorter working day plus improved welfare provision, and also set up education and medical projects.

All this was at a time when conditions for the vast majority of factory workers in Britain





were generally poor, with long working days, often terrible housing and low wages, etc.



We spent the day exploring the landscaped picturesque village, including Lever's extensive art gallery, then looking round the Austins (and 'guest' classic models, including two Model T Fords that were transporting rally-goers to and from the art gallery area of the large site).

With so many fabulous classic cars to look at I was unable to select a favourite, but enjoyed seeing them all and chatting 'old vehicles' with fellow enthusiasts.

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An exceedingly rare Austin A40 Dorset (the two door version of the Devon), superbly restored.



You can wait years to see a Devon-based A40 Sports, then two turn up!

Unfortunately as the afternoon wore on, it started to rain and by the time we said our goodbyes at about 4.30pm, the weather had deteriorated further.

In fact weather-wise it was a thoroughly miserable evening for our return drive. However, our old Austin purred and splashed along undaunted through the rain, pausing for refreshments at Leominster and then carrying on southwards as the evening drew in.



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## Happy Tour

At the end of our thoroughly enjoyable break the A40 had covered a total of precisely 600 miles and thankfully didn't miss a beat. Overall petrol consumption worked out at 31.8 miles per gallon.

Regrets? Just one... Throughout our few days away, during most of the time when we were driving in the Austin (as opposed to the days when we travelled on public transport - with the sun shining!!) the weather was 'changeable' at best, with many heavy showers and quite cool, so we didn't get the chance to lower the hood as we prefer to do when touring if the





weather's more helpful. Otherwise it was a great holiday and we were glad we took the Austin.

(Note: Please watch this space on Wheels-Alive for a future article on another holiday trip in the A40, when the weather was better and we DID roll back that hood to take in some fresh air!)

## THANKS

Grateful thanks to the organisers of the 2016 Austin Counties Car Club Rally, who did a superb job and we enjoyed the fruits of their efficient efforts.

Thanks also to all the fellow Club members (many of whom we had not previously met) who made us so welcome.

Last, but not least, thanks to all the friendly local people who went out of their way to help us in the Wirral, Liverpool, Formby and Chester (particularly when we were looking lost, and/or consulting a map, bus and train timetables, etc!).

You all helped make our Wirral-based short holiday so enjoyable, and great fun.

## OUR CAR FOR THIS TRIP:



## 1954 Austin A40 (Somerset) Coupé

History: Owned by Kim since 2005 (full previous history not known, but restoration started in the 1970s/80s; put back on the road late 2005 by previous owner); 'running' restoration continues!

Bodywork: Steel two door convertible bodywork (by Carbodies of Coventry), on separate chassis/running gear assembly from Austin Motor Co, Longbridge, Birmingham.

Engine: 1200cc overhead valve pushrod, four cylinder.

Transmission: Four speed manual (column change), rear wheel drive.

Power: 42 bhp @ 4,500 rpm.



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Torque: 58 lb.ft. (78.6 Nm) @ 3,500 rpm.

0-60 mph: 33+ sec.

Max speed: 75 mph.

Fuel consumption: Reported when new, 30-34 mpg (actual figure achieved on this trip, over precisely 600 miles, 31.8 mpg).





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