

Horace... A Car Full of Character!

By John Stackhouse

Any luck?" We were looking for an Austin 7 to restore, we had missed out by a whisker in purchasing a 1929 Austin 7 'Chummy' (soft top) for restoration. Really it was a pile of rusting bits, but the finished product would have looked great. My wife, Belinda, was disappointed we missed out. So, I continued to scour the Austin 7 Register newsletter for sale columns and many other sources to find 'our' Austin 7. It was out there somewhere, surely!

"No, nothing in the Austin 7 line, but what about a Morris 8?" I called back to Belinda. "Listen to this: Due to lack of storage space I must sell my beloved 1938 M8 Series II saloon (2 door). During the ten years that I have owned this unrestored are it has been in daily use and is in excellent mechanical condition with a detailed log book covering that period. A loving home is required for this vehicle... Please phone Sue... It might be worth having a look at."

"I really want an Austin 7", she protested, but I was soon on the phone and arranging with Sue to go around and have a look at her beloved Morris 8.

She and her husband had a number of cars, including a Daimler V8, an early Riley sports and Austin 7s which Belinda loved. But, tucked away around the corner sat the Morris 8. Belinda took one look at the little black and red Morris and blurted out, "It's gorgeous!"

Austin 7 almost forgotten Morris 8 welcome to the family! After a brief negotiation the little Morris became our first, and only, old car project, along with a load of new and used spares, including two extra engines. Sue had got her wish; her Morris 8 was going to a loving home.

When we got the Morris home, we looked at it and contemplated what it should be called. "It's definitely a boy", Belinda said unwaveringly. After toying with a few names, Morris 8 registration number AL4761 became Horace the Morris. It just seemed absolutely right. He could be no other but Horace the Morris. It was clearly meant to be, wasn't it? But, unbeknownst to us, there was a problem with this name which would later come to light.

So, from 17 March 1986, with 132122 miles on the odometer, Horace became an official adoptee of the Stackhouse family. We are the 16th Owners of this extraordinary, ordinary little car... an ordinary English saloon car of the late 1930s with an extraordinary knack for survival over eighty years.

Now, Horace was by no means a pristine car and could never be advertised as 'low mileage, one careful owner' when we bought him. He had travelled a bit along many Canterbury country and city roads, changed a bit in colour scheme and re-emerged from being on the verge of destruction along the way. He was hand painted red and black over two other colour schemes which various owners had applied over the years. His very worn leather seats were covered in old fabric covers, one layer over another, and there were growing areas of rust. But he was all there, roadworthy and quite driveable.

He was our birthday present because nine days after he arrived Belinda and I shared our birthday, 26th March. He has shared thirty-one birthdays with us since, only missing one because we were living overseas for a year. Armed with a certain amount of information from his ownership papers, I decided to trace Horace's whakapapa, his lineage, from the Morris works in Cowley, England to New Zealand.

Horace could be said to be born in England, but he did not really emerge until delivered to the wharves in New Zealand and passed on to Dominion Motors, who took delivery of him in Christchurch. Twenty-five year old Miss Grace Elizabeth Hewson, from Anama, in mid Canterbury, had placed an order for the car of her dreams and her amazing little vehicle stood gleaming in dark green body and black guards outside the car dealership. On the 27 June 1938 she took delivery of her Morris 8.

The salesman explained the Morris was an advanced saloon car with an 8-horsepower engine, hydraulic brakes and a three speed gear box. He demonstrated the starting procedure, turn the key, await the reassuring click of the petrol pump, check in neutral and pull the starter, using the manual choke if necessary. The semaphore indicators, little lighted arms indicating when turning, were operated from a stalk on the steering column. The car was also equipped with a handy dash light enabling the driver to see

the instruments at night, the few of them that there are. It even had an electric windscreen wiper. Satisfied, and excited to be behind the wheel of her new car, Grace Hewson drove inland along country roads to her farmhouse home at Anama in the shadow of the foothills of the Southern Alps. Grace owned her little Morris for two years and then it was purchased by her brother Jack, on 6 June 1940. Jack was to keep Horace the Morris for twelve years, but his ownership of the little Morris was almost very brief. His daughter, Brenda Hewson, recalled travelling in Horace along dark country roads, but she was always reassured by the warm glow of the little chrome dash light which she could see between the front seats as they motored along the gravel roads towards home.

She also recalled a tale told by her father: "My father decided to go to the cinema in Ashburton one evening during the war. After enjoying the film, he and my mother, came out of the picture theatre to be greeted by very rough weather, a Canterbury nor 'west storm. The winds were fierce and buffeted the little Morris as they travelled along the dark country roads. With a particularly severe gust my father just caught movement out of the corner of his eye in the dull glow of the headlights. A tree was falling directly onto the road, too late to stop, Dad pushed the accelerator hard and the little car just managed to squeeze through and the tree fell across the road behind it. A very close shave for the Hewson's and Horace the Morris aged about five or six!" Owned by a Methven man, Ray Ireland, for two months Horace then passed on to Alfred Kelland, July 1952 to January 1953. Horace was sold to Charles Barter who owned him for ten months, then Thomas Rowe for three years, Michael Kilkeary for three years, Peter O'Connell for two years, Margaret Kiely for three and Robert Stuart for two and a half, all these owners from Christchurch. Horace had hardly got to know this string of owners over their sixteen years of combined ownership, before being passed onto the next. By the time he was sold to Alan Cherry of Christchurch on 1 February 1968 aged thirty years, bought off his brother for \$20, Horace was a very tired car with nearly 117000 miles on his odometer, stressed bodywork and a worn interior.

Alan's brother, Doug, had almost scrapped Horace because his engine needed to be rebuilt. Doug did not think it was worth fixing the old car and so Horace's value bottomed out at that pitiful \$20, but Alan Cherry was to be Horace's saviour. Alan breathed new life back into the little Morris 8 so it would live to travel another day... or more! Being a young man, Alan energetically reconditioned the engine, retrimmed the car interior, cut out body rust and hand painted Horace in light blue body and dark blue guards. He added a little custom trim here and there, including seat covers, steering wheel cover and chrome side flashes on the bonnet. The flashes were supposed to make the little Morris look faster and a bit more 'modern'. Perhaps they were added to impress the girls; however, they would have failed to do any of these things!

Over the year of the moon landings, 1968, and the following year, Alan added 8000 miles to the odometer and \$120 to Horace's value. He sold the little Morris to Patrick Thorpe on 5 September 1969 for \$140, and Horace's thirteenth owner appreciated his new purchase. Patrick remembered the little Morris with great affection. It was mainly driven by his wife and in the six years Alan owned Horace he was a reliable little car. However, a more modern car eventually replaced Horace and after six happy years in Spreydon, Christchurch with the Thorpes he moved home, only a kilometre or two, to nearby Hoon Hay.

His new ownership was his shortest, less than three weeks, David Wilson then selling Horace on to Sue Vessey. However, Dave had a distinct impact on Horace. Seemingly a strong Canterbury Supporter, Dave hand painted Horace in red body and black guards. He was a distinctive sight on Christchurch roads; you certainly couldn't hide in Horace. Sue loved Horace and used him regularly. He was bought to restore as Sue and her husband Ross were very keen vintage and classic car restorers and had a number of restored and project cars. Horace the Morris became the family's second car and Sue used the little Morris to go shopping, go to work and much more. He proved to be a reliable little car once more and his future seemed to be assured. He now stood out as an old, interesting restoration project, but not for the Vesseys, they had their hands full with many other projects.

So, Sue and Ross made the reluctant decision to advertise their little Morris 8, hoping that the car would go to 'a loving home'. .

Enter the fourteenth owners. I regularly travelled in Horace to the schools I taught at and the kids would love to see him parked in the car park. We often used him through the week for shopping and other tasks, but one of his most important roles was about to be undertaken. He was to be the vehicle of choice for a mercy dash!

Our son, James, decided to make his presence felt, in the middle of the night, on 19 April 1988. He had decided he was now ready to be born. We had two cars, one a low-slung sports car, the other Horace the Morris. Belinda could not contemplate lowering herself into the sports car, or trying to get out of it at the hospital, so Horace was the emergency vehicle chosen. In the early hours of the morning we dashed - well as fast as a Morris 8 can dash - to Christchurch Women's Hospital to be greeted by a chuckling nurse and aide who looked with amusement at the little red and black emergency vehicle outside the hospital entrance. But he didn't let us down and it was a good story at James's 21st birthday... he was driven into hospital in a Morris 8 and went home in a Porsche!

AL4761 Horace the Morris was driven around for three years after we bought him when an important change occurred. Horace officially became HORACE.

I was greeted on my return home from my teaching day with a cheery and excited, "Guess what I've done." A very open-ended question from my wife Belinda. My guesses were all wrong. "Close your eyes hold out your hands". She placed something long, flat and metallic in my hands... two, shiny new personalised number plates, the new craze at the time. So from 14 November 1988 Horace's name was there for all to see. He caused many a chuckle as he travelled the highways and byways around the city, but, there was one little problem with that name, and soon it was to be exposed.

The Christchurch Press ran a little column 'Plates' in the newspaper's 'Diary' section where interesting or clever personalised plates were reported as being seen around the city. On 23 February 1989 Horace got a mention... *Another crop of personalised car licence plates seen around the town: Patsy Creed reports seeing a Morris 8 with "HORACE". Horace the Morris, get it?* But, to ensure that no controversy erupted, I had to clarify something, and I thought it was best to do so in public.

A little piece appeared under 'Plates' again a few days later, written by Dave Wilson. Was this the same Dave Wilson who owned and painted Horace red and black in 1975? *The Owner of Horace the Morris ('Diary', February 23) has stepped forward and John Stackhouse of Westmorland has a tale to tell. His Morris 8 has the personalised plate HORACE, but he has learnt from the previous owners of the fifty-year-old car that it had been known as Molly Morris. Is this the first example of a personalised plate sex change?* Horace is Horace, but he was not aging too well. The plates looked great, but the body was rough. As Belinda often drove Horace with our son James in the back, I was beginning to worry about the state Horace was in. The dreaded rust was slowly eating away at the bodywork to the point where I felt one day, when turning a corner, the chassis might go one way and the body the other. This could be very embarrassing, not to mention dangerous. So, the decision was made to take Horace off the road, pull him apart and fix him up. No hand repainting this time. Add to this, our daughter Demelza arrived in April 1992, another passenger for Horace. So, in my 1992-93 school Christmas holidays I had a goal. Take Horace apart!

This experience led to me breaking into verse, this poem sung to the tune of Food Glorious Food from the musical Oliver gives an indication of the challenges of car restoration.

THE RESTORER'S LAMENT:

Rust, glorious rust!
Bog, dents and scratches,
We really must,
Make sure it all matches.

Fixing old cars Is really fun,
I greatly enjoy it,
Whose idea was this lark?
I'd rather destroy it!

Rust glorious rust,
Flakes falling like rain,
Bolts suddenly bust,
Oh what a pain!

Ripped fingers and skinned knuckles,
Blood grease and dirt, Put on the overalls,
Or ruin another shirt!

Rust, glorious rust,
How I love my Morris,
Soon I'll be proud,
To drive around in Horace.

Ask me to do it again,
And I'll probably say,
No please, please no,
Totally no, no-o-o way!

Horace was in bits, the now exposed chassis emptied of bucket loads of Canterbury road metal, shingle and dirt. The differential replaced with a modified Morris 1000 diff, floor, woodwork and window rubbers replaced, chassis repaired, rust proofed and painted and all the panels stripped to the bare metal by hand and then bead blasted. There was a long list of things to do. In fact, I lost my finger tip skin stripping his paint and rubbing him down, lost the skin off most of my knuckles and rust/dust in the eyes was common. Our son James used to laugh uproariously when I started Horace up after some reassembly and drove him as a rolling chassis up and down our long drive. Through layers of red, black, two tone blue and back to the original green and black paint. To green and black he was to return, after some careful metal work was done.

Nine months later in the September school holidays I had two weeks to put him back together again, from the chassis up. Brakes, differential, electrical systems and 101 others things were done.

It was great to be putting Horace back together rather than taking him apart. A large pile of bits soon came together to create a new, sparkling green and black Horace the Morris. At the end of the holiday, he sat glistening in the sun for a photo shoot on our front lawn. Horace had been born again!

A few years later and he was reupholstered and relined and his engine reconditioned. He then had a number of leisurely years, and one or two years needing brake repairs. Life was serene and sedate for Horace who was now in his seventies. One day, however, his world was almost turned upside down. With an almighty rumble and violent convulsions Horace was shaken to the core. Items fell around him and neighbouring houses shed their brickwork. Crashing, shattering noise and the glasshouse partly disintegrated. In the mayhem Horace was hit with a thump, ironically by a heavy box of Morris 8 parts stored in some shelves next to him! Other items rained down on him and glanced off his shiny paintwork. The date, 22 February 2011, is indelibly etched into our history and now it was etched into Horace who sported dents and damaged paint work. He was to regularly quiver for years to come as thousands of aftershocks continued to rock Canterbury.

Horace continued to be 'off the road' as we sorted through post-earthquake issues, and there were many of them! He sat patiently as the house and his garage were repaired twice... initially to repair the earthquake damage then two years later, in 2015 to repair the poor repairs!

As the builders undid the botched repairs a scheme was being secretly hatched without my slightest knowledge. Belinda had arranged a taxi for Horace and he was to be picked up and taken away for earthquake damage repairs. The truck duly arrived and Horace was winched aboard. Belinda almost shed a tear as he disappeared down the drive on his short journey to the panel and paint shop.

Our daughter Demelza, however, was a little troubled about what might happen if I visited the house during repairs and noticed a large space in the garage where a Morris 8 was usually parked. She had visions of me ringing the police and initiating a nation-wide search for an aged kidnap victim, a 1938 Morris 8 two-door saloon car. Belinda decided to tell me just in case I got the shock of seeing our garage Horaceless!

What a lovely surprise as she showed me the photos of Horace's departure on her cell phone.

A week or two later and Horace was waiting to be collected. After panel, paint and brake repairs he was ready for the road. Car carpets were added and he was complete. Horace has had 25 years since his 'out of body' (down to the chassis) restoration, many of them lazy years with the occasional outing. Our children adored Horace and loved being driven around in him to school or shopping, with the occasional trip outside the city limits. But, our daughter recently had a very special request. She wanted Horace to be her wedding car. Horace would be back on centre stage, the wedding to be held in the little French flavoured village of Akaroa on Banks Peninsula. He had a challenge ahead, to be driven over some quite steep hills to the wedding venue. He managed the trip on a Saturday morning with flying colours and I had the thrill of driving him via Little River to the Hilltop and then around the summit road. It was a beautiful Saturday morning with spectacular views over Akaroa Harbour and the eastern bays. I will always remember the family that came up a steep slope in their car with smiles a mile wide as they spotted Horace coming down the hill towards them. We finally wended our way down the steep road into Akaroa where the little Morris 8 turned more heads as he chugged down the main street. Oh la la, as the French exclaim! On the day of the wedding, 12 December 2016, Horace was a dream. He carried out his duties without a hitch and helped make a very special day that much more special.

We have added a few chapters to the Horace the Morris story. We bought him when he was the ripe old age of 48 years. Time flies because we have had him for 39 years and this year is his 85th birthday ... quite a milestone for a car almost squashed by a falling tree in the early 1940s and nearly sold for scrap value in 1968!

Horace was 'born' as Neville Chamberlain, British Prime Minister in 1938, proclaimed he had negotiated peace with Nazi Germany. Horace motored through the war years of the 1940s and the recovery years of the 1950s. At the end of the 1960s, at the time of the space race between Russia and the USA Horace almost had his own 'race' come to an end on the scrap heap! Now he is part of the digital age, but no on-board computer for him. He can still be fixed on the side of the road if something goes wrong, he doesn't need a computer analysis done to determine what to do next. He is a simple little car with heaps of character. His character will outlast nearly all of the digital age vehicles which clog our streets now.

As I write, I raise a glass and say,

"Happy 85th birthday Horace!"