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Touring Europe as a Family in Pre-War Austin Sevens

Ruairidh Dunford

Ruairidh's parents started repairing, buying and selling Austin 7 parts and cars, eventually making a living from this hobby turned business. His father started building his own trailers and Ruairidh continued this family tradition. His parents travelled over 248,000 miles in their Austin 7s and Austin 12s, and even spent their 1968 Honeymoon travelling to Norway in one.

Ruairidh's first vocation was as a Glasgow University educated, primary school teacher, but given the sheer demand for his talents, he graduated to become a full time Austin 7 engineering expert. He is acknowledged as a world expert who built his first Austin 7 aged 15. He now builds and repairs Austin 7s for clients from all over the world; some who even fly in their car from Argentina for repairs!

His hardy wife Tania and daughters Willow, Daisy and Poppy shared in his travels, hobby and Austin 7 lifestyle. Three generations are now involved in building and restoring Austin 7s, and selling and trading spare parts. An 11 year old Daisy built her own Austin 7 engine and their eldest girl, Willow, does Austin 7 rally driving!

The family have travelled extensively through the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Norway, Spain, France and Switzerland to name some. Keeping to B roads and covering such mountainous areas as the French Alps, Pyrenees, Artic Circle (and 40 Norwegian island ferries!) and many famous mountains and hills in the Lake District, Snowdonia and Highlands, they camped in some of the most remote but beautiful locations. Ruairidh commented that it often took up to 18 months to prepare for a foreign holiday trip.

Ruairidh built and customised many of the trailers he took on his travels to carry tents, food, camping cookers etc. Having also bought a Norwegian and then Danish trailer tent from the 1970s, they latterly felt they were in the lap of luxury!

When fully packed the car weighed about a ton and travelled between 30 and 35mph, hence B road travel plans. Like Doctor Who's Tardis when trying to fit in the family and a huge supply of tools, wiring diagrams, spare engine and car parts. Two fiddles, a mandolin and a guitar were also included as the girls have inherited their mother's musical talent. The three girls often went with no more luggage space than a tiny bag similar in size to our projectors case! Although the family have strayed into various Austin 12 (1926) and camper van purchases and adventures, often towing the Austin 7, they have always returned to their beloved Austin 7 for touring.

Ruairidh even customised and negotiated his own car insurance for himself and Austin 7 members club. This includes an agreed amount in case of 'Write off' and salvage rights for the cars.

The 100 year old car! The Austin 7 was built in Longbridge, Birmingham between 1922 and 1939 as an economical car in the UK. Nicknamed the 'Baby Austin', it was the Model T Ford's direct competitor. New in 1922 it cost £165 when the average British worker earned £5 a week. It was built under licence in Germany(BMW), France(Rosengart), USA(Bantam), Australia (Holden) and Japan(Nissan). The Dalai Lamai in Tibet even had one!

Some 416,000 were produced of which 290,000 were built in the UK. The engine was 696cc to 747cc in size and it had 14 brake horsepower. It had a 3 speed gearbox until 1932 when a 4 speed synchromesh gearbox was introduced. It also ran on 6v as against the current 12v batteries.

The posh version of the Austin 7 was the Austin 7 Swallow introduced in 1928. According to the Austin 7 Register over 12,612 are registered, presumably still driving around.

David Boot