



# Rover's return



When Melville Cleaver was crawling home from work across Newport Bridge at 12.45pm on November 2, 1957, he had no idea that his ancient Rover had been photographed by the police.

Nor that it would mean a pleasant surprise 38 years later, when amateur detective Nick Larkin hit town in a rather special car Photos by Mark Dixon



**T**WENTY minutes past five. AM. The sound of an extremely loud alarm is followed by my groan for mercy.

Why this unearthly hour? Where am I? Someone is definitely due to happen today. An O-level exam? No, the last one was 15 years ago. Interview for a top job in television? Think not. Holiday? A fire?

Ah! Sensible thoughts seeping through the slush of my mind, I remembered. Newport, Gwent. Tiggy, the Rover. That photograph.

One cold-ish shower later, and the mental picture was complete. We were there to recreate a small part of a scene photographed on Newport Bridge 12.45pm on November 2, 1957.

An extremely small part, actually. There must have been 30-odd cars in that 38-year-old photo, and waiting for me outside our



**Tiggy the Rover returns to Newport in 1995, where he was photographed in 1957, left**

hotel was one of them, brought down from Huddersfield especially for the event.

Thank you Nick Szkiller at classic car specialists Grundy Mack! After we'd originally published the picture, Nick's amazing memo-

ry for registration numbers had been jogged. He had sold one of the cars present, a lovely 1934 Rover 10, TG 7643, a year ago, and wrote to tell us so!

Nick then discovered he was getting 'Tiggy' back. Blame the lack of oxygen at the NEC, but, as we chatted during the recent classic car show, it seemed an increasingly good idea to take Tiggy back to Newport, particularly as he was the only car ever featured in our nostalgia section which had actually come to light.

We'd shaken hands on it. The reunion would happen!

Ten minutes to six. AM. I soon discovered that Tiggy was far more capable of an early cold start than I, jumping immediately into life and sounding very happy. He'd obviously been restored at some time since 1957, but he still retains the original engine, verified by his original log book, which Nick had just received. ▶







Much of old Newport clings on by the skin of its teeth. Tiggy pauses outside the former Odeon, left, and the Transporter Bridge, far right

Newport landmarks he'd have known in 1957. Then we thought further. That log-book. Would, by even the slightest chance, we be able to track down the car's then-owner, listed as Mr Melville K Cleaver, of 4 Slipway Cottages, Corporation Road, Newport, Gwent? Or at least someone who knew him?

Of course not. The slight matter of 38 years having elapsed would surely put the mockers on such an exercise. But Nick was determined to try, and had even contacted a couple of Cleavers via directory enquiries. No success.

The scene in our 1957 photo had changed almost out of all recognition. All the buildings on the right-hand side of the road on the photographer's side of the river had been knocked down. It's surprising they hadn't bulldozed Newport Castle as well!

Across the water, an enormous concrete and glass eyesore with an Iceland store on its ground floor had sprung up where the Newport Mon Motor Coy's premises used to be. Next door, a tantalising glimpse of a Kwik-Fit exhaust centre.

But in the distance we could see some remaining landmarks, notably the war

Just before six we were back at that bridge. Why the unearthly hour? Well, having had the good sense to 'recce' the site the previous evening, we realised the end of the bridge was the hub of Newport's central traffic system. Our original photo had been taken to emphasise just how bad congestion was in 1957, and Tiggy would without doubt have been mown down by a juggler-

the King's Hotel, had a convenient window in their fire escape, so, with 1990s camera technology, Tiggy's picture was taken just yards from the 1957 position.

Success, and breakfast, over which we discussed the rest of the day's agenda. We wanted to photograph Tiggy in some of the

*'Would we be able to track down the car's then-owner, Mr Melville Cleaver, of Slipway Cottages, Corporation Road?'*

naut had we attempted to click the shutter at the originally intended 12.45pm.

Another not exactly slight problem. The building used by PC Photographer 1957, probably The Old Green pub, had been demolished, and an underpass built on the site. Our lensman, Mark Dixon, claimed he could not fly, and absolutely refused to try.

Thankfully the nearest surviving building,







memorial, complete with clock, and the magnificent Odeon Cinema. This, we discovered, is now a run-down snooker hall, but still in all its Art Deco splendour externally, though with a suspicious-looking agent's board outside. Hope the Cinema isn't going to go, or the closed Coliseum entertainment hall of an even earlier era across the road.

Next on the agenda was another evocative piece of 1930s Newport, the Civic Centre, where the logbook states that Tiggy was taxed. The building was designed in 1936 and begun in 1938 but was halted by the war, meaning the clock tower was not finished until 1964, by which time Tiggy had left town.

Nick, meanwhile, was on his mobile phone again. C A Cleaver. No luck. G M Cleaver. Out....

Hang on, what about finding Slipway

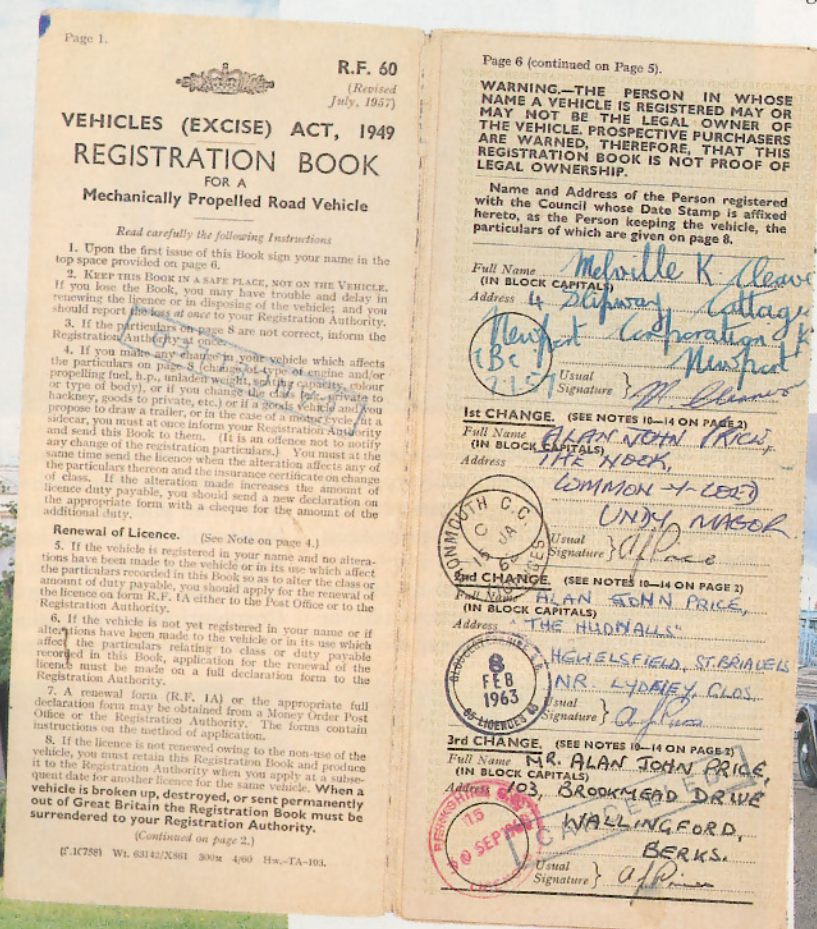


Cottages? Well, Corporation Road was easy to find, but - ahem - a little long. No-one knew where the cottages were until... we looked on the street map we'd bought, and there they were, right along Corporation Road, past The W R Lysaght Institute, which used to be the tram terminus, and via a right-hand turn into an industrial area.

As we headed along Corporation Road we simply had to divert to see Newport's true gem, the Transporter Bridge. One of two remaining transporters in the country, the other, at Middlesbrough, Cleveland, has long fascinated me.

Newport's was opened in 1906. Built of iron girders, the Transporter consists of 242ft high towers from which, suspended by steel cables, is connected a 'gondola' on which people and cars are ferried across the River Usk. At least, they will be when the restored bridge is reopened after 10 years of lying idle.

Thank goodness that public opinion saved this truly breathtaking structure, which will perform a useful alternative to a 20 minutes' car journey across the next bridge. The Transporter is, by the way, powered by a bank of 35hp electric motors, drawing their power straight from the mains. Pity whoever pays the electricity bill.



Left, back in the 1950s, Tiggy was taxed in this very building, the magnificent Civic Centre







Above, end of the road? Slipway Cottages are no more... Right, 1958 bus reunited with Rover

While there, we were allowed to see the bridge's maintenance workshop, in which much 1906 machinery is still in use, and will continue to be so for very many years!

Also viewing the bridge was Mrs Florence Jarvis from Suffolk, now 83, and on a touring holiday: 'I was last here in 1955,' she said. 'I was with my husband and we had a BSA motorcycle.' Gesturing at her companions, Mrs Jarvis added: 'They just didn't believe me when I told them about this bridge. They thought I'd dreamed it up, but you don't forget something like this, even after 40 years.'

A fitting tribute to Newport Transporter Bridge if ever there was one.

Tiggy, who, we were later to find, had crossed the bridge many times, had been behaving perfectly, with a delightfully easy to

*'A telephone directory appeared - two minutes later, Nick looked as if he'd been offered a mint Bugatti for £500'*

use crash 'box, relatively light and precise steering, and a far from hard ride, plus a turn of speed from the 1389cc engine which meant the car was fine in town traffic, if you kept away from roundabouts.

Call me a complete lunatic if you like (and you probably will!) but I almost felt the car was going quicker as we turned back onto Corporation Road. He was heading home!

Luckily, by this time we had been joined by a friend and fellow bus enthusiast from Newport, Dave Thomas, who'd kindly offered to act as our guide and prevented me from getting lost on 43 occasions.

Dave had never heard of Slipway Cottages, but knew from the map exactly where they were. We turned sharp right, under a bridge and saw no picturesque terrace but a cement works and a large modern factory belonging to Marshalls, who make building materials.

We asked if anyone remembered the cot-



tages, and for that matter, Mr Cleaver. We were greeted by a chorus of 'No, sorry,' until the question was put to a gentleman we met outside Birds commercial vehicle breakers, Phil Donovan.

'You wouldn't mean Mel Cleaver? He's in his seventies now, and he was always a Rover man. He lives somewhere just off the town centre.'

No-one spoke. Had we found our man?

Back we went along Corporation Road to another port of call, Newport Transport, which operated the Guy buses in our 1957 picture. All these have been scrapped, but Newport Transport has preserved a 1958 Leyland PD2 double decker with probably now unique Longwell Green body. This was kindly brought out to meet Tiggy, and the

Nick Szkiller shows the Rover's log-book to a disbelieving Mel Cleaver, still living in Newport

two, which would have almost certainly have stood together when the bus was brand new, were photographed in the depot yard, which still features some cobbles and tram track from a system which closed in 1937.

Whether it was fate, or the fact we'd put Corporation Road on the bus destination blind, we don't know, but a telephone direc-







tory appeared. Two minutes later, Nick returned looking as if he'd been offered a mint Bugatti for £500.

'Found him. Found him! And he said to bring the car round.'

No-one could believe it, and after saying our thanks at the bus depot the procession headed for Mr Cleaver's home.

'I just don't know what to say!' cried a delighted Mr Cleaver, now 74. 'It looks wonderful, in much better condition than when I had it. I would never have thought this car had survived, and I'm so glad it has.'

For the first time in 33 years Mr Cleaver took a trip in TG 7643, this time opting for the front passenger seat.

'I must have had a dozen cars after this one but I certainly remember it as a good reliable car, though I'm pretty sure I do recall changing the engine outside Slipway Cottages. It was an old car then, and all we could afford as we had two young children at the time. We used it mainly for running



**Mel Cleaver takes a look at the car he once owned and hasn't seen in 35 years**

converting cars into two-seat tourers. Tiggy remained intact, however, and was seen only once again by Mr Cleaver a couple of years later. The logbook tells us the next owner, Alan John Price, kept the car until at least 1983, moving to Gloucestershire, then Berkshire and latterly Shropshire.

Mr Cleaver reckons that he would have been on his way home when the picture was taken, possibly from the shops or his workplace, where he was a crane driver with Mount Stuart: 'If it was good weather I normally cycled to and from work, but it might not have been in December,' said Mr Cleaver, who owned many Rovers, including several P4s and a 2000, before buying his present car, a Mk V Ford Cortina.

The Rover has now gone from Grundy Mack to an enthusiastic new owner in Yorkshire, who is delighted to have had many gaps filled in the car's history.

For us, what a long, strange, but wonderfully enjoyable day. It was almost as if Tiggy had talked!

**PC**

*Very many thanks to Nick at Grundy Mack (01484 450466) for all his help, enthusiasm and determination, to Dave Williams for acting as our guide, and to Newport Transport for allowing us to photograph the Rover with their preserved 1958 Leyland PD2, available for private hire on 01633 262914.*

