

Lone Star's Lost Legacy

In May 1988 Lone Star closed its doors for good but remarkably this wasn't the end of the road for its famed Impy cars. James Robertshaw tells the amazing story of this recent fascinating discovery.



Introduction

It's been mentioned before how collecting models from 'second tier' manufacturers, and in particular a rather erratic Lone Star, can prove to be particularly rewarding with many exciting new discoveries still to be made. These usually relate to previously unknown model variants or new colour schemes but occasionally something much bigger and much more exciting is unearthed.

The Impy Journey

This story involves Lone Star's well-known and collectable range of Impy cars. First introduced in 1966 they were marketed as 'the cars with everything' and boasted a huge list of exciting features from working steering to jewelled headlights. Two years later when USA giant Mattel launched its revolutionary Hot Wheels Lone Star were quick to react by modifying the Impy cars and

relaunching them as 'Flyers'. Gone were the working steering and jewelled headlights but in their place were new hi-speed wheels, lustre paint finishes and racing stripes. By the mid-1970s the British toy car industry was again under threat, this time from the masses of cheaper toys arriving from the Far East. Lone Star responded quickly by simplifying the Flyers cars to now create new low-cost models. The Impy name was bought back but this time the cars were basic die-cast body shells with blacked out windows and plastic bases. In this form the Impys were able to compete against the Far East rivals and survived into the 1980s. By 1983 sales were likely in decline so in a last-ditch effort some of the cars received football club logos and were now issued as 'Soccer Champs'. However, by this time Lone Star had fallen into receivership and amongst the turmoil this small range quickly disappeared.

These colourful cars are clearly identifiable as Lone Star Impy models but everything else about them will surprise you!

Happily, a European buyer was quickly found and against all the odds production continued at Lone Star's Hatfield factory for several more years. It also wasn't the end of the road for the long-running battle-hardened range of Impy cars.

The Inevitable

Eventually the inevitable happened and Lone Star's sole surviving factory closed its doors for good in the summer of 1988. All remaining plant and equipment were auctioned off along with the dies and any remaining stocks. The dies and tooling for the more popular ranges (mainly the toy guns but also the Farmers Boy range of tractors and farming equipment) had already been transferred to China where production would continue into the 1990s.



Early Pakistan issued Impys were finished in rally colours as seen here on these Mercedes saloons.

With the majority of the commercially viable dies in China it's likely there was little serious interest in what was left. A noticeable exception were the dies from the 'Tuf-Tots' range of small-scale vehicles. These were purchased by 'Microlink Industries Ltd.' and surprisingly re-immersed in the late 1990s as a colourful series called 'Mokes' complete with collectors cards and even a 'Mokes' board game. Microlink are reported to have also purchased some of the surviving dies for models which had previously been dropped from the earlier Impy and Flyers ranges, but that's another story!

It was assumed that any other dies had disappeared forever after being bought up by the scrapmen who also attended the Hatfield factory auction in 1988. However, excitingly this is most definitely not the case!

Lone Star Resurrection

It has recently emerged that the bulk of the dies and tooling were purchased by a family who then had them shipped to Pakistan where incredibly production of Lone Star toys would recommence! In particular it's

thrilling to learn that the dies and tooling for the iconic Impy cars were part of the shipment.

The Khan family attended the auction and as Mr Khan puts it; *"We bought the factory lock stock and barrel, or should I say dies, tools and moulds."* The shipment soon left Felixstowe bound for Karachi where a factory was established. The necessary raw materials were sourced, zinc alloy was imported although it was soon discovered that scrap zinc could be more economically imported and melted down to produce the toys. A particularly lucrative (and appropriate) source arrived in the shape of old carburettors taken from scrap American cars! Thus, piles of old Holley carburettors would soon remerge as rows of Impy toy cars!



The Range Rover was a neat casting by Lone Star (Top) and was available as a police car, ambulance, fire chief, RNLI and as a civilian version. Lone Star produced two different bases, one of which featured extra police lights in the front grille. Surprisingly castings for both bases were used in Pakistan (Bottom), although a Pakistan Police version has yet to be seen.

The Impy cars would again prove their versatility and popularity by becoming the most successful range of former Lone Star toys to emerge from the Karachi factory. Initially they were produced with rally numbers and stripes printed on the bonnets and roofs, something

Lone Star Impy Cars (1978-84)	
No.	Model
71	Range Rover
72	Cadillac
73	Corvette Stingray
74	Toyota 2000GT
75	Police Car (Range Rover)
76	GT Rally (Corvette Stingray)
77	Jaguar Mk.X
78	Maserati Mistral
79	Ford Mustang
80	Lotus Europa
81	Volvo 262
82	Mercedes

There were 12 Impy cars in Lone Star's final line-up. So far only half have been tracked down in Pakistan.

Lone Star perhaps should have considered as it certainly gives the cars extra appeal. These Impy 'rally' cars still featured Lone Star and Impy branding underneath with just the 'Made In England' script crudely blanked out. Other than the wheels, which now featured a gold printed design, the cars remain very similar in appearance to the Hadfield produced originals although in very different colour schemes. Not surprisingly the quality and finish of the cars was not on a par with Lone Star but would have been deemed more than



satisfactory for the intended market.

Despite the cars retaining their Impy branding they were packaged and marketed locally under the brand name 'Zoom'. Different packs were produced including a set of 10 Impy cars branded as 'German Motors' which was thought an easy name for the local market to

promotional giveaways and placed an initial order for 1 million cars! This later production run now had 'Lone Star' blanked out on the bases although the 'Impy' brand and model names remained. The 'Natural' toothpaste brand was printed across the bonnet of the cars which were available in an attractive array of colours.

The Corvette Stingray was part of the initial eight Impy models launched in 1966. It's incredible to see it in a line-up spanning 30 years of production! From L to R: Pre-production trail model (1965), 'Impy Super Cars' (1966-68), Hi-Speed 'Flyers' (1969-76), Plated 'Silver Flyers' (c.1972), Low-cost 'Impy' (1976-84), Pakistan production (1988-96).

these were issued by Lone star between 1976 and 1984 and were loosely based on 4 trucks (including a Scania and bonneted Volvo) which, fitted with plastic bodies, gave 12 different models. Again, the versions produced in Pakistan, with the same 'plastic body married to a die-cast base and cab' construction, were very similar in appearance to Lone Star's own versions. The 'Lone Star' and 'Impy' wording still appears on the underside of the trucks although again 'Made in England' is blanked out. The



Base plates initially retained their 'Lone Star' and 'Impy' branding. On later models, as shown here, the Lone Star name was blanked out. As expected 'Made in England' (behind the rear axle) is also obscured.

understand. Not that it would have mattered, but only one of the line-up of 12 different Impy cars was based on a German model!

The popularity of the Impy cars was highlighted when 'Unilever Pakistan Ltd.' placed an order for 200,000 Impys as part of an upcoming promotion for its detergent range. Mr Khan states that this was their big breakthrough although it was to pale into insignificance when later on a local toothpaste manufacturer used the Impys as

What Else?

The vast numbers of Impy cars produced in Pakistan does at least ensure examples still survive today. Some of the other Lone Star ranges manufactured in lower volumes are proving difficult to track down. It is known that Lone Star's corresponding range of Impy trucks were also produced in Pakistan. Originally

This photo found some years ago on a Malaysian collectors website remained a complete mystery until the recent discovery of the Pakistan operation. A real rarity for any Volvo or Lone Star collector.



mind boggles at the vast array of colour schemes potentially available from combining the 3 main components as its likely each were produced in several colours!

A range of larger trucks was also produced which made use of the 'Kings Of The Road' castings. The 'Kings' were a series of 12 generic trucks which first appeared in Lone Star's 1978 trade catalogue. As they were aimed at the younger end of the market, they are fairly basic playthings limiting their appeal to only the most die-hard of Lone Star collectors! Lone Star later issued these with trailers, some in the liveries of iconic British brands, which resulted in more pleasing models. Hopefully time will tell exactly which versions were produced in Pakistan.

It's exciting to consider what else might have been manufactured in Pakistan. Of course Lone Star's diverse range of toys goes well beyond the scope of the pages of this magazine and Mr Khan has mentioned that amongst other things "Walther toy guns" were produced, undoubtedly stemming from Lone Star's licenced James Bond range.



So far just this single example of a Pakistan produced Impy truck has been discovered. How many more are out there?

The End?

Production of the Lone Star toys lasted almost 10 years in Pakistan, ending abruptly in



A blue 'Natural' Pakistan Impy Cadillac is flanked by earlier versions all produced by Lone Star in England. Flyers versions are on the left whilst the later low-cost Impys are to the right.

1997. All the time the operation had been fighting against not only cheap toys arriving from China (sound familiar?) but also problems caused by economic and political instability and corruption. The Chinese toy cars were often smuggled into the country avoiding taxes making them virtually impossible to compete against. In the end Mr Khan was forced to pretty much abandon his factory and now enjoys life (coincidentally) in the 'Lone Star State' of Texas. He reminisces; *"I really worked hard to make the plant work but I guess now I look back and say life's too short, especially in the 'Wild West' of the then Pakistan, it was definitely a ride."*

So what's happened to the abandoned dies and tooling? Well everything (including stocks of finished toys!) was left for

good in a warehouse. Having investigated this tantalising information further I'm told, in no uncertain terms, that the region is now a hotbed of gang wars making it a no-go! Besides, it was all abandoned 25 years ago so the chances of it still being there are very slim. Never say never though, for the last 34 years it was thought that the old Hatfield factory dies had disappeared for good before this amazing story surfaced. Who knows where Lone Star's resilient Impy cars could resurface next!

Acknowledgements

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