

# Lone Star's Ford Transit



James Robertshaw breaks down the interesting story of Lone Star's Impy Ford Transit.

## Ford's New Super Van

The swinging 60s were a time of vast changes and Britain needed a new van which could keep up. Ford's answer was the revolutionary Transit, or 'Trannie' as it affectionally became known. With car-like performance, handling and comfort combined with a stylish, modern body it could carry larger and more varied loads than any van that had gone before. Of course, the Transit wasn't just a humble van but could fulfil all kinds of varied roles from a trundling milk float through to, rather notoriously, a high-speed 'bank job' get-away vehicle! Production began in October 1965 and the Transit was an instant success.

## Lone Star's New 'Super Cars'

Whilst Ford were busy promoting their new line-up of Transit vans another innovative range of vehicles was about to launch, albeit on a much smaller scale! Also hoping for success was Lone Star with its 1966 launch of an exciting new range of die-cast toy cars that would not only take on the dominant giants; Matchbox,

Corgi and Dinky but attempt to outdo them! Lone Star's competitive edge was to cram each model with as many realistic features as possible, going way beyond what any of the rivals were offering.

The big 3 manufacturers, and Lesney in particular, had slowly started to add improved features to their models so by 1966, when Lone Star joined the market, most Matchbox cars had glazed windows, plastic interiors and an opening part. However, Lone Star had packed their new 'Impy Super Cars' with a truly mind-boggling list of special features! Fitted as standard to each model were: opening doors, bonnet *and* boot, glazing, jewelled headlights, working suspension, working 'axial' steering, non-scratch tyres on separate hubs, a detailed engine bay and a plastic interior complete with a separate steering wheel! How about that for added play value!



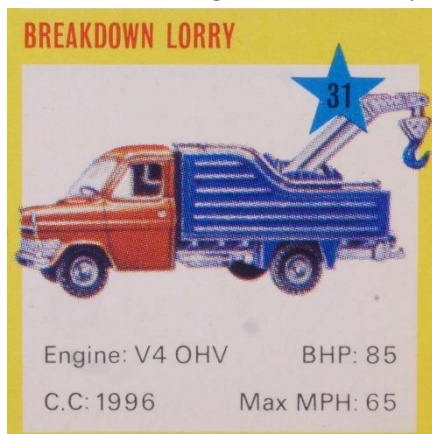
*The Stylish Mk1 Ford Transit as modelled by Lone Star.*

Eight models were initially launched with more promised during the rest of 1966 and into 1967 including some commercial vehicles and of particular interest here, a breakdown lorry. Given the reliability of some of the prototypes Lone Star had chosen to model, a recovery vehicle was probably a necessity! An attractive Foden lorry was the first commercial to appear in the Impy range initially with a tipper body then followed by a petrol tanker. This model could have also been considered for the basis of the breakdown lorry but an 8-wheel heavy-weight Foden

would have been a bit of an overkill for motor car recovery work. Instead, Lone Star chose to produce an entirely new casting based on the exciting new Ford Transit. The Transit was by now hugely successful with model versions also available from Dinky Toys and Husky. Its popularity on the Continent resulted in models from Siku in Germany as well as Best Box in Holland.

### The Impy Transit's Debut

Lone Star's Ford Transit made its debut appearance as a drawing in a fold-out leaflet (dated May 1967) promoting the new Impy Super Cars range and wow did it look the business! This stylish illustration depicted a well detailed Ford Transit cab and chassis fitted with a realistic purpose-built breakdown body featuring, of course, a towing jib and all finished off in an attractive orange and blue livery.



*With the real model a long way off, Lone Star's artist must have had little to go on other than 'Ford Transit Breakdown Lorry' when tasked with illustrating this 1967 leaflet marketing the new Impy range. What an attractive model this would have been!*

This must have caused much excitement at the time amongst keen Impy fans but remember this is Lone Star where things rarely went to plan!

With limited resources producing a wide range of toys it was not uncommon for Lone Star's announced new models to experience delays or to sometimes never materialise at all! The Impy range and Ford Transit Breakdown Lorry were no exceptions. Any child who had saved up 3 shillings of their pocket money would have undoubtedly spent it elsewhere by the time Lone Star got around to releasing their breakdown lorry, over a year later! It must have also been a surprise to see that the model Lone Star finally produced looked nothing like the leaflet drawing!

### Worth The Wait!

Lone Star's Transit Breakdown Lorry materialised not with a conventional cab/chassis and separate body in a two-tone colour scheme, but as a rather unorthodox 'cut down van.' This resulted in a stylish sweeping chariot body which was finished in all over dark blue. This style of 'cut down van' is actually a modification much more likely to

*It has proved difficult to find a photo of a real 'Trannie' where someone's been brave enough to take an angle grinder to the van body! This cut down Mk2 Transit shows it was possible resulting in a similar body style to Lone star's Impy model.*



*First announced in May 1967, it wasn't until 1969 that the Transit Breakdown Lorry finally appeared as 'new' in Lone Star's Trade Catalogue.*

occur years later when ageing worn-out Transit vans were cheaply available on the second-hand market. A back-street garage might well have performed this type of surgery to give themselves a basic recovery vehicle. Lone Star's chosen body style was certainly not one of the wide range of variations famously offered by Ford who, with the versatile Transit, were keen to capture as much of the 'light commercial' market as possible. This then begs the question, where did Lone Star find the inspiration for this body design and, unlike the other Impy models which were based on prototypes, was this Lone Star's own inhouse creation?

The reason for the change in design from the earlier illustration was doubtless fuelled





*The standard Impy Transit had Esso stickers and was available boxed or carded.*

by Lone Star's desire to keep the retail price of the larger Impy commercial vehicles the same as the smaller Impy cars. The simplified chariot design meant the Transit's cab and body could be cast as a single piece with just the addition of a die-cast base plate and towing jib therefore keeping manufacturing costs to a minimum. Maintaining a

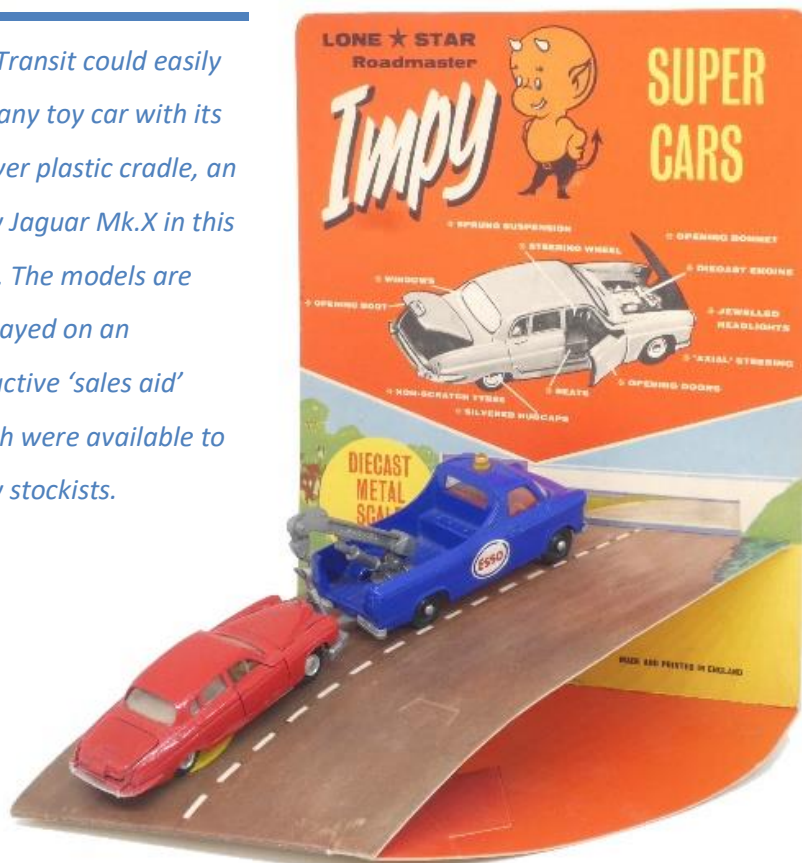
standard retail price across the Impy range also explains why our Transit has forgone most of the special features found on the cars, although it did gain Esso stickers on either side. Overall the Impy Transit is an attractive model which actually benefits from the lack of (often) ill-fitting opening features. Thanks to the inclusion of a clever plastic

### Montgomery Ward Gift Sets

Following on from the May 1967 leaflet drawing, the Transit's next appearance was surprisingly 'State Side' in the impressive 430-page 1968 Christmas catalogue from Montgomery Ward. This huge mail order business offered all types of goods, including toys, and had successfully offered two Impy Super Cars gift sets in the previous years Christmas catalogue.

The 1968 catalogue again offered Impy models in either a '6 car set' or '12 car set' but this time both sets contained the new Impy commercial vehicles including the Transit Breakdown Truck or 'Wrecker' as it is described here for the American market. As the previous year's gift sets had included the first 12 Impy cars it must have been agreed that the 1968 sets would only include the very latest Impy models new that year. So much

*The Transit could easily tow any toy car with its clever plastic cradle, an Impy Jaguar Mk.X in this case. The models are displayed on an attractive 'sales aid' which were available to Impy stockists.*



so in fact that most of the models shown in the catalogue photograph are pre-production mock-ups! Most noticeably the Mobile Crane and Crawler Tractor appear to be one-piece resin moulds whilst others have hand painted silver trim including the Transit which also features non-standard BP transfers and strangely a left-hand drive interior!



*The very latest 1968 Impy models were available from American retailer 'Montgomery Ward' in that year's Christmas catalogue. The deadline to get the models produced and photographed for inclusion in the catalogue must have been very tight as several are actually pre-production mock-ups resulting in this fascinating photo.*

A small number of these BP Transits exist so was this how the initial batches were hastily issued or are these rare pre-production trial models? The left-hand drive interior wasn't a deliberate move for the American market but is actually an ill-fitting cut down section from the existing Impy VW Microbus! Presumably this was used as the Transit's own interior moulding wasn't yet ready!

With the coup of featuring in the prestigious Montgomery Ward catalogue it's obvious Lone Star were working hard at promoting their new Impy range throughout America and with some success

*This early issue Impy Transit is very similar to the one featured in the Montgomery Ward catalogue and is most likely a trial-run model. Note the hand-painted silver trim and left-hand drive interior pinched, at the time, from the Impy VW Microbus!*

as tens of thousands of model cars were exported 'across the pond'. However, as depicted in this same Christmas 1968 catalogue, the toy car industry was about to be turned on its head!

Whilst the Lone Star illustration portrays the company struggling to get their latest Impy models into production, further down the page a second alternative range of brand-new toy cars are much more professionally presented. This is a new range of 'High-velocity scale models' with 'low friction bearing mag wheels' in 'dazzling Spectraflame' paint finishes! These are of course the revolutionary Mattel Hot Wheels models which were about to decimate the toy car market not only in America but across the globe. Indeed, a quick flick to the toy car page of the following years Montgomery Ward catalogue and we find that the

Impy Super Cars have disappeared with Mattel's Hot Wheels taking over the full page. To give Lone Star their credit they were quick to respond, fitting low friction wheels and rebranding the Impy cars as Flyers which launched in early 1969. Meanwhile all the Impy commercial vehicles (including our Transit) retained their standard traditional wheels and were now marketed separately as, slightly confusingly, "Impy Super Car Commercials!"

### **From Impys To Commercials**

Almost three years passed until in late 1971 the neglected range of Impy commercial vehicles received some overdue attention. Finally, high speed wheels were fitted to the Foden trucks, Fire Engine and Transit Breakdown Truck. The range lost the confusing 'Impy Super Car Commercials' branding which was shortened, rather

uninspiring, to just 'Commercials'. The 1972 Lone Star trade catalogue hastily shows the new 'Commercials' with a mix of standard and high-speed wheels. Interestingly the Transit is shown with square Shell labels rather than the standard Esso ovals. This Shell version was issued although given how hard they are to find now it must have only been for a short period.



Around this time Lone Star issued a number of the Flyers and Commercials in a gaudy chrome plated finish. Perhaps this was an attempt to outdo Mattel's 'Spectraflame' finish or

*Finally, in 1971 Lone Star updated the Impy Transit with Hi-Speed wheels. Briefly this newly branded 'Commercials' version had a change of stickers too. In typical Lone Star fashion it was still some time before the packaging caught up! Despite the new Hi-Speed wheels 'Commercials' continued to be issued in old Impy packaging!*

### End Of The Road

With the toy car market becoming increasingly competitive Lone Star were soon forced to introduce a number of cost-cutting measures to both the Flyers and Commercials ranges. The Transit didn't suffer as badly as some only sacrificing its silver trim and then later losing its die-cast base in favour of a plastic one. Inevitably the decision finally came in 1976 to discontinue the ageing



*Around 1973 the 'Commercials' Transit received a new lighter blue finish. Different colour components and variations in the application of the silver trim help give these Transits differing appearances and plenty of scope for the dedicated collector.*

to fight back at the 'plated' Corgi Rockets cars. These short-lived 'Silver Flyers' and 'Silver Commercials' ranges seem to have been produced exclusively for the Japanese market where Lone Star had also established a strong foothold. The Ford Transit was included in the 'Silver Commercials' range with the model number S31. These are garish toys but very rare and keenly sort after by dedicated Lone Star collectors!

*Lone Star were well versed in applying plated finishes to their toys but perhaps they should have stuck to applying it to their cowboy guns and accessories! A gaudy model but now very rare and sought after by avid Lone Star collectors!*



Commercials models and replace them with a simplified range of modern trucks which saw the reintroduction of the Impy name. A breakdown truck still featured in this new 'Impy Super Models' range and was based loosely on a Volvo N Series. Despite the Impy name these basic trucks were nowhere near the quality of the previous Impy models and were more in keeping with the low-cost models now arriving from Hong Kong manufacturers.



*This final 'Commercials' transit had no silver trim and a low-cost plastic base. Carded and boxed models are seen here with a rare shrink-wrapped trade pack of 6 models. Finally the new 'Commercials' packaging with attractive Hi-Speed artwork had arrived, just in time to see the model discontinued shortly after!*



*In 1976 this basic breakdown truck which is loosely based on a bonneted Volvo replaced the much nicer Transit model. It was also used in a twin pack towing a car which initially used up stocks of the discontinued Flyers cars as seen here with Flyers Corvette and Mustang models.*

Production of Lone Star's Ford Transit had lasted a respectable 7 years although the real Mk1.

Ford Transit soldiered on even longer finally being updated in 1977 with the facelifted Mk2. Strangely the iconic 'Transit' name was never utilised by Lone Star who, in their usual confused fashion, preferred to list the model as a 'Breakdown Lorry', 'Breakdown Truck' or 'Ford Wrecker Truck'. Only the baseplate ever declared this model to be a 'Transit' on what is without doubt one of the most

wordy toy car base plates ever. The full inscription reads:

Lone Star Scale Model, Road Master "Impy" Super Cars, Ford Transit L.W.B. Breakdown Truck, Made In England. An impressive title for an impressive model!



*No article on Lone Star Ford Transit Breakdown Lorries would truly be complete without brief mention of their vinyl squeaky toy version! The front grille may have been replaced with a smiley face at the Mk1 Transit's lines are unmistakable. It's good to now Lone Star catered for even the youngest Transits!*