

## Trusty Memories

“We used to have one of those!”

It was our first visit to the Milton Keynes Museum, not long after we'd moved in to MK. All quite interesting it was, until, tucked under a shelter in the yard, was a Trusty Tractor., much like the one of my youth, though fitted with a seat and rear wheels. Interesting suddenly became nostalgia.....

The Trusty Tractor of my youth was just one of those things that I grew up with. The family business was market gardening, sometimes known as smallholding, in the Vale of Evesham. We had some seven acres of highly fertile land, spread over 4 sizeable plots, the three not adjacent to our house being held according to the 'Evesham Custom' on a tenancy from the local Squire. We had two tractors, the smaller being a Gravely model D (though for many years I thought this was called a Bugga), and a Trusty Tractor of unknown age. Though much the bigger beast, the Trusty was actually the easier to handle. In my tiny years I would be allowed to ride sitting on the handles; as I got older and bigger I was eventually allowed to have a go at some 'tractoring' under very close supervision, and finally, at around age 12 or 13, I was allowed to use the Trusty all by myself.



It wasn't used that often, but it was an ideal tool for restoring the heavy clay land that had been autumn-ploughed and winter-weathered to a good tilth ready for spring planting. Most of the time we used a yard-long tool-bar with a set of three 'skim feet', the whole lump, equating to a push-hoe on steroids and weighing the best part of a hundredweight, being hung on the spigot at the rear of the Trusty. The less-used alternative was to replace the skim feet with a set of scuffles – seven if I remember right – which had much the same effect as today's spring tines. We also had the option of dragging along a set of steel harrows some eight feet wide – these could be used with the tool-bar, or as a stand-alone fitting.

So, one had arrived at the field with petrol can in hand, set up the Trusty's tool bar, removed the old piece of corrugated sheet that covered the engine, put some fuel in, and then tried to start it. If you look at the museum's Trusty, you'll see a hole on the left side of the engine where a starting handle could go. Look in the tool box and you'll see just the handle for the job. This handle is of the type that is supposed to eject itself once the engine starts turning faster than the arm can.

“Thee dussent want to ever use that thur 'ondle, my bwoy, 'er 'ull 'ave thee 'ond off!”. So I was warned, and I've never chanced my hand at that method. However, if you look on the right side of the Trusty's engine, you'll see a tube about 3” diameter, which could be used as a pulley. Ours had a bolt set into it with the head standing proud to provide a lug. Beginning at this lug, a yard-long leather strop was wound round and round the pulley. The fuel was turned on, the carburettor 'tickled', the drive to the wheels disconnected (see below), the throttle set slightly open, and a steady heave on the strop turned the engine over.

Sometimes the Trusty started. More often, having stood out in the rain and the cold for some weeks or months, it did not. Often, persistence was the solution. Repeated attempts with the strop would eventually produce a couple of coughs and some black smoke, and then finally the Trusty would chuff-chuff-chuff into life. On occasion though, more cunning was needed. The engine was old and worn, so the plug would come out and a good gloop of oil would go in through the hole. The plug was cleaned off and re-fitted, and the start procedure gone through again. With the oil now helping to provide extra compression, and a good spark from the cleaned plug, the old Trusty would soon fire up, blowing an impressive amount of burnt oil out of the open exhaust. Once started, she'd be fine for the day – restarting a warm engine after a break was rarely a problem.

And so to work. The throttle was closed to a tick-over, and the drive dogs engaged. This was controlled by the two long, springy levers set just inboard of the handles. With the levers up against the handles, held by springing them under a convenient hook, no drive went to the wheels. Releasing them to their rest position engaged the drive dogs. A little extra throttle increased the revs, a centrifugal clutch engaged, and we were off. The engine revs were governed, so the Trusty would not proceed beyond a fast walking pace, though extra throttle did produce extra power, so the throttle was set to give a sensible pace for the operator. The running depth of the skim or scuffle was set by a pair of 'they back 'uns' on the tool bar. All that was needed to keep the Trusty going in a straight line was some judicious pressure left or right on the handles. Coming to the end of the piece of land, turning round was normal practice (the alternative, tractoring off in to the sunset in a straight line, found little favour). Throttle closed to tick-over, disengage the left or right drive dog, lift the handles to raise the tools clear of the soil – not difficult, as the Trusty was very well balanced – then with the slightest whiff of throttle, the drive to one wheel only would pivot the Trusty about the non-driven wheel, “...and thee make sure 'ee be just a whiff, my bwoy, else 'er 'ull whip roun' un take thee with 'er!’”.

A fine piece of kit, the Trusty Tractor. It was massively engineered. Ours, like many others, was fitted with a JAP side-valve single cylinder engine with a Lucas magneto providing the spark. Have a look under the lift-up tool-box of the Museum's Trusty – you'll see the drive train and sliding dogs, and perhaps agree with what I say about its construction.

And, in a sense, the concept of the Trusty, a powerful two wheel pedestrian operated tractor, lives on. In Portugal, for example, modern look-alikes are in common use. Some can be fitted with rear wheels through an integral gearbox that gives four wheel drive. Attach this to a trailer, and smallholder, wife and dog can take their wares to market, or a hunting party can go up into the hills where even a trendy 4WD could not go. But, of course, this modern stuff is boring. No character. No oil down the plug-holes, no leather strops. Give me a Trusty Tractor any day.



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