

SPARES - THE EARLY DAYS.

Sourcing spares for TR's has been an issue which has exercised the minds of TR owners forever, it seems, and every lead of where parts could be got has always been eagerly followed up. In the mid to late seventies the problem in South Africa was acute. Suppliers like Leyland no longer carried stock for TR's. At one noggin, which was then held in the Rollbar, a room in the Alba Hotel in Braamfontein, Alan Grant just simply got up, took an ashtray and put R25.00 in it and announced that he had just started a "Spares Fund". His reasoning was that R25.00 was about the equivalent of filling your tank with petrol (seriously, I kid you not) and that everyone could afford it. By having a lump sum of money we could place an order on Cox&Buckles in the UK. Everyone who put up R25.00 would qualify for a discount. Eventually we accumulated about R1 000.00 and asked Pete Cox and Pete Buckles (who were operating from a garage at home at the time) if they would trust us in shipping spares worth about R3 000,00 – which they did on the turn – and which set in motion a relationship which has lasted to this day in the form of our import arrangements with Moss, London, which is what the original Cox & Buckles morphed into over the years. In retrospect, we worried needlessly about going out on a limb. I remember when the first shipment arrived at my house. Opening that crate was like walking into Aladdin's cave: the goodies were just unbelievable. When word got out that we had some new TR spares the guys descended like vultures. A TR3A grille, for example, went for only R120. Within a matter of days, if not hours, everything was sold and we could pay C&B, and place our next order. Despite the weakened Rand, new spares are still very reasonably priced when compared with prices of any other reasonably up-market new car today. For example, you can get a brand new up rated water pump for a TR3 for about R1 000.00. Try paying that for a water pump for, say, a BMW.

But this story is not about new spares. It is about used spares.

Most of you know that the TR Register was formed in Durban by the late Graham Cheetham. As a matter of interest, the TR Register still exists as such in SA as a part of the larger Triumph Sports Car Club of South Africa, and is still affiliated as such with the TR Register in the UK, which has a world-wide membership of some four to five thousand members. The locus of the Register was, at the time, in Durban and remained so for quite a number of years. That was also the case in 1980 when these events took place. One of the early Register members was John Moore, and his membership number must have been 3, 4, 5 or 6. Graham's membership number was 1, John Dobbins is number 2 and I am number 7, so John Moore fitted in between somewhere. John Moore lived in Durban, and if I remember correctly got divorced – probably because of all the spares stashed around on his property. Somehow, John Roets had got word that there was a huge pile of spares at Moore's house, and that it was going begging, with John having moved out of his house. The word was that whatever was not collected from this empty house was going to get dumped – literally get taken to the scrap yard. There was no way that we could allow that to happen, so John Roets borrowed a Ford F-100 bakkie with a roof railing, and a small trailer from his employer – Reunert and Lenz in Carletonville- at the time. The two of us set out early Saturday morning 31 May 1980 from Carletonville/Johannesburg. I remember the day, because it was the weekend of the Comrades (it was a up-run that year) when it was still held on Republic Day, before the comrades got hold of it and pushed the Comrades to run on the nearest other public holiday which is "Yoof Day". As a matter of interest, the comrades are pissed off with that, because the Comrades attracts so many people that Yoof Day celebrations are suffering and the Comrades will in future be held on the nearest Sunday to Yoof Day, so that there will be no excuses not to join the comrades in celebration. But I digress.

We arrived at John Moore's ex-house in good time and were amazed at what we found. The place was littered with TR things. It was everywhere you looked – in the garage in little boxes, in the house in various rooms, and all over the yard. There were gearboxes, and gearbox housings. There were at least four bare chassis, two of which were in perfect condition and primed in red primer. There were plenty windscreens in their frames. Clutches and pressure plates. Coil springs. Steering wheels. Shock absorbers. Brake linings and brake drums aplenty – probably 20 or so. And so on and so on. If I remember correctly a sizable part of the famed Trevor Crozier's collection had found its way into this treasure trove. Alan Grant could enlighten us on that, and maybe even tell us more about TC. And remember, this was what was left after the Durban guys had already picked the eyes out of it. This was the dregs, but be assured, to us spares starved up-country yokels it was better than gold. It was

immediately obvious that we could not possibly take everything, so we had to sort the wheat from the chaff. We loaded the F-100 and the trailer to the gills, and although we were much younger (but I hasten to assure you, and especially the ladies among you, that to this day the both of us are still extremely active in all respects) it was heavy going. With two chassis tied on to the top frame we looked like an Easter week end taxi going to Pietersburg. Sorry, Poepholkwane. Sadly we were going to have to leave behind nearly as much as we took. Now, John Moore's house was north facing with a long driveway leading up to the street. And I mean up, because it was quite steeply up hill, and about 30 metres long. John Roets manoeuvred the Ford at the bottom of the drive to get the maximum run-up and gunned the big six. But there was no way the F-100 plus trailer, fully laden with, essentially solid steel, was going to make it to the top of the drive. He carefully backed down, with the trailer behind, to the bottom of the incline. A second attempt yielded no better results. The clutch was screaming in agony, and ponging to high heaven. Getting really serious with his third attempt John nearly, nearly got to the top, but not quite. He hit the anchors and I chocked the wheels with bricks and rocks and anything I could lay my hands on. As it happened, the driveway had a small lay-bye about half way up its length. With great skill and determination John managed to back down the hill so that the trailer was sidelined onto this little lay-bye. Back down the hill came the Ford, and this time, sans trailer, it managed to crest the hill, but only just. So, there we were: piles of spares in the house, in the garage, in the yard. The trailer half way up the drive and the Ford in the street. There was no way we were going to unpack the trailer, carry the stuff up the hill and then push the trailer up by hand. Strong as we were (and, as I said, we still are) that was one straw too many. Another plan had to be made. We looked around the place and found a motley collection of ropes and chains which we joined together to make a tow rope which was long enough to reach from the trailer to the truck up in the street. Now on level ground the Ford could quite easily pull the trailer. I don't know if you have ever tried to pull a trailer on a rope, when it is not securely hitched to a vehicle. We did that weekend. The front end of the trailer (north of the Hennops River they call it a disselboom) is like the trunk of a crazed bull elephant. It either digs in or rears up. It has a mind of its own and swings from side to side. On the uphill, with a slight curve and the trailer in the lay-bye, all we had to play with was the width of the street. This meant that we could move about 3 metres, chock the wheels, take up the slack, move the width of the street etc etc and in this way ratchet the trailer to the top of the drive and into the street. Bidding a sad farewell to all the spares we had to leave behind we set off for Howick where John's boss had an off the beaten track week-end away chalet. It is an A-frame building equipped with every convenience, set into a hill overlooking the rolling valleys and hills of the Natal midlands. At night it is pitch dark. It is so quiet you can hear your ears sing (not to be confused with tinnitus). At today's prices I would set it at about R4 million. He had won it in a poker game. But that, too, is another story.

By now John had, had enough of driving and I took the wheel. Dodging between Comrades runners (I don't recall the roads being blocked off for the runners) we went along without speaking for a few miles. (kilometres had not been invented). John broke down first and asked me if I was thinking what he was thinking. I said I thought I knew. We were both thinking: there was no way we could leave those bits, large and small, behind, even though it was the second choice stuff. At the same time we would not be able to go back the following week end, and in any event by then the stuff may have been carted off to the scrap dealer. Whatever we planned to do, we had to do there and then.

So, we went to John's boss' chalet and unpacked the truck and trailer. And then we went back to John Moore's house in Durban. And we packed the truck and trailer and got nearly everything on board. And we repeated our trick with the lay-bye and the trailer and ratcheting it up to the street. And thus we arrived at the chalet which we decided to use as some sort of half-way house whence Reunert and Lenz messengers who travelled regularly between the Reef and Durban could cart the parts in small bites to Johannesburg/Carletonville during the ensuing months. Only problem was, the choice bits were on the ground and the dregs were on the truck. So we unpacked the truck and trailer and loaded it with the good stuff. By now we were working in the dark, but we had become so familiar with the parts that we could load and unload by touch. But we got it done. And we slept like logs.

The trip to Johannesburg the next day was uneventful. At my house we unloaded the (by now very familiar) stuff and John went off to Carletonville with the Ford and trailer. My place looked nearly like that of John Moore in Durban, with chassis stacked on top of one another, gearboxes and housings standing around, brake drums, backing plates, clutch pressure plates et al stashed in my garage and outbuildings. But word went forth that there was some TR stuff at chez de Villiers, and soon the old familiar- and very welcome- vultures started circling and settling. And not too long after that, what was left was down to manageable proportions.

Post scriptum:

A few years later bumped into John Moore whilst on holiday in Hout Bay. In fact I saw this reasonably nice looking TR3 parked along the road to Chapman's Peak and was standing around admiring it when John Moore strolled up with a smashing, much younger than him, redhead on his arm. Like a true TR enthusiast he could not remember my name, but remembered exactly what my TR looked like. We dined with him in his flat in one of the three "salt shaker" blocks of flats set against Table Mountain and relived the good old days. After that I lost touch with him completely.

In 1981 John Roets joined Axiom Hydraulics and moved to Benoni and I decided to tackle a Wits MBA. The combined result was that John took over the last bits of the slow-moving stuff and I dropped out of active Club affairs. Harry Fairley took on the task of importing new parts from the UK – which he carried on doing for nearly 20 years. When he had had enough of it he handed over to Gary Blake who computerised the whole lot and thus dragged the Club screaming and kicking into the 21st century. The wheel turns and now I am again looking after importing new parts from Moss Europe.

René de Villiers. Johannesburg. February 2007.