

## Studebaker Commander 1939 R/H control

One of 10 imported in 1939 by Studebaker Concessionaires Ltd for the London Motor show which did not happen, the cars were sold at their showroom in Regent St W1, other r/h control cars were shipped around the world and a number of cab chassis units were also shipped, the works records do not show the numbers, but they were small compared to the L/H control production which was 485.000. It was expected that the plant in Canada would make more of the export version, but as the USA started to convert to making green machines this did not happen.

Eventually Studebaker made more Willis Jeeps than any other firm in the USA.

In 1939 Studebaker made a Champion four door with the 6 cylinder engine @78HP on a 110" wheelbase, the Commander had a big six @ 90HP on a 116 1/2" wheelbase and the President with the 8 cylinder unit @117HP on a 122" wheelbase, no Champions or President were imported.

Many of the Stude cars were designed by Mr R Lowey as were the 1938,39 and 40', the floor plan is rectangular, but the 4 door body's are egg shaped with the 'B' post the centre of the egg, therefore no exterior rear view mirrors were fitted, all the export cars were fitted as 12v and the parts so stamped, special wiring loom to allow for Lucas fuel pump, Lucas signal indicators and as the nickel plated headlights did not conform to European spec, Lucas spot and flood.

The front of the car is 4" wider at the front than the back, the front suspension is a transverse 5 spring, the rear conventional 4 leaf spring, the doors have a patented rolling lock which cannot open accidentally if not properly closed, gearing is 3 on the tree with auto overdrive and a freewheel device which I have never disconnected, it was available with a floor gear change but none shipped, used in the truck version, it is a semi-automatic gearbox where the foot clutch is only used to move off in 1<sup>st</sup> gear, after which to shift gear, lift off the power and the mechanical spinning clutch will open allowing the gear box to disconnect to shift a gear up, at 40mph lift off the power and the overdrive will connect, the car can then go as low as 20mph when power can be used to increase speed to where a person is happy, me 60mph on a straight road.

The car is fitted with 600X16 tyres and separate white spats, which fit over the black tyres; this was to reduce the cost of export cars, black cabs still use 600X16s.

When I shipped the car to the USA in 2002 to attend the Stude convention I was asked to drive it on the old Stude test track which is now used by Bosh and is 4 miles by 8, much of it elevated, scary stuff at 80mph. It is in a forest planted by Stude and is the largest advertisement in the world it is made of trees and can only be seen from the air.

This car FXX 533 was purchased new by a Mr C Tubby a weapons engineer in 1940 as the army arrived at his workplace Vickers Ltd and said he was now a Major, they had run out of Humber staff cars so he traded his Austin for the Stude, they paid up. He had a Army driver, both he and the driver were taught by Stude ltd on how to drive the car, the problem is the gear box, it's weird, if you try and drive it as normal using the plate clutch, it's not a happy bunny.

The car was mainly used as his staff car to visit where required such as Bletchley Park and on Saturdays he would drive either to Cheisemans in Lewisham or Harrods in London, 5 gallons to Lewisham or fill it up for Harrods or MOD sites for petrol.

I knew the man that put the petrol in the car, it was serviced twice after WW2 once at a Shell garage in London and once at the Shell garage in Sidcup, I found the shell service book under the front seat, 11s 4d in London and 14s 3d in Sidcup, as part of my business I serviced the heaters in both of those garages, so after I had rebuilt it I was able to park the car on the forecourt and wait to see the fun when they arrived at work, I just strolled up in me overalls to see the crowd looking at the car while a lot of head scratching went on before I showed myself, the fitter in the London garage who had done the service now owned the place as was the case at Sidcup.

And of course only one person at each garage knew how the car worked, apart from me and from years ago an old pre 50 member Billy Kimms, when I met him he still had the wreck of a Commander 39 in the woods behind his house, he told me that I needed to cut the petrol with some diesel to get it to run properly as replacement jets could not be found.

The major had a stroke in 1949 which left him in a wheel chair, he rarely left the house, the car was in the garage and there it stayed until he died in 1980. The car had done 10401 miles and as it had been blown up when at Biggin hill Airfield, it had been repaired with what we now know as fibreglass and painted black.

He told me that he had the most amazing car on one of my visits and I was given the key to have a look, the garage was full of junk put there by his wife, the garage roof had collapsed onto the car which was a heap of rust with the black paint coming off showing the blue, of course I said it was the most unusual car I had ever seen, it was and knackered, what ever possessed him to buy it, well he did not pay for it, the MOD did.

Eventually Mrs Tubby telephoned me as she could not get any of the local garages interested in buying the wrecked car and being as I was a Morris Minor man I would know what to do. I could not give it away, several people looked at it and then discovered that none were around and no spares only 6v stuff, having got a builder to put a new roof on the garage. I could not get any money for it from the scrap man either.

Oh and the engine was seized solid, the windows had been left open, the rain had got in the interior looked OK but it was scrap and when the scrap man cleared the garage the remains of the exhaust could be seen on the floor under the car.

I then made a very stupid decision to see if it could be re-built, I asked a friend of mine who is into old Rolls Royce cars 1912 and so, we looked at it, we decided that if we could free off the engine, make a exhaust up, get tyres [easy] and see what was bust [not a lot that we could see] so we removed the starter, dynamo regulator and carburettor, drained the oil which was red, then I remembered that some Shell pre war oil was red, we managed to get the plugs out and filled the engine with diesel and went off with the wheels and to get exhaust bits.

After making a replacement exhaust, cleaning all the engine bits, replacing the brake lines and sealing the fuel tank and a load of other stuff, we took the front off the car and removed the radiator and fixed a big spanner we made up to the nut on the crank shaft flange, slid on a lump of scaffold pole and heaved one way and then the other, after about three weekends of doing this, it moved, then more, then we could turn it.

Drained the diesel, filled it with oil, re fitted the bits we had taken off, put the car on axle stands, went and got some fuel and borrowed three big batteries from the Shell garage, told him it was to start an old Morris.

Came back on the Sunday, opened the garage doors, connected the batteries with jump leads and the starter, pressed the button, bang, it fired, clouds of smoke and the engine was roaring so we blocked off the air intake to stop it while we worked out how to get the auto choke off, then the shouting started, we looked up, outside was a very big black cloud. Oops.

It took three years to replace all the rusted metal, repaint it, I did not do a very good job of it and it was redone in Bristol, Pre 50 members, it's still good, new interior and head lining, all new chrome, it works, and I had the wreck from Billy Kimms before he died and a lot of information from him and he had only ever seen one 39, the wreck in his old yard.

Over the years I have traced 5 of the 39s and this year another one, for the first 5-6 years of using the car, many people in Kent and Sussex had seen the car and realised who the previous owner was, the Major as he was known before he was ill, and to put them at ease, I told them of some of the places where I had worked, they then in their turn told me without revealing too much of how they met him or worked with him, some had known it as a blue car, others as a black one, so it was easy to know when they were talking about.

They have all gone now and with them, what they did, nothing was written down, if it was, they burnt it, they were told to forget about the place that laid the golden eggs.

Quite by chance, a film was to be made about Bletchley Park, they chose an unusual US car to open the film, the 39' and a Rolls, there were also hundreds other WW2 vehicles, during filming one of the other owners knew about the Major, when the film Enigma was released, we watched it and found that the car was also used to close the film.. This was not on the call sheet so I called the car man and asked him why, he said because it was there in the war, the only car in the film that was there, Did not get any money for that bit.

The major could be quite amusing if I called in to see him, he had watched a film on the TV about Bletchley Park and said that the problem is so many people who worked there had never talked about what they did there and if Peter Wright had not written Spy Catcher after retiring to Australia and Gordon Welchman had not written his book The Hut Six Story after retiring to the USA then a lot less would be known about what we all did there. Both Spy Catcher and Hut Six were banned books for a time in the UK and those in the Service went after both writers.

I once asked him what he actually did at Vickers and for the Army, he said myself, a couple of chaps and about 150 women made every day items explode when required !!, he then asked his wife to select one item from the box under the kitchen sink, she came in and put a lump of coal in my hand, he said turn it around a bit, I did and there was a hole drilled in it, that piece of coal is the same as is available in France, so we drilled a hole in it, filled it with explosive, filled up the hole with coal dust and cement, sacks of the coal were sent to France and the boys would drop a couple of bits into coal trucks passing under a road bridge, bang !! on fire, the Germans would not give coal to the French.

He said the first time we did it was because the Germans changed the Enigma codes and BP wanted us to do something, so we made exploding coal and BP waited for it to be reported to Berlin, it was in code, but far easier to find, that is how they got back into a message system.

I have done a lot of Charity work with the '39, one was a open day for the hospice, we did a 'what is it and when was it made,£1 a go, the ladies were taking lots of money, I was doing bash the rat, one said I think we might have a winner, a old lady had given her £1 and asked if she could write what the car was on the paper list, she did, she was right, it turned out she was one of the 'ladies' at Vickers who made everyday items explode when required.

Mike Whitby.

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