

Operation Matador

or the Adventures of a Ransomes Motor Mower

Four students at Hatfield Technical College approached the Lawn Mower Sales Department in 1959 with the idea of driving a Ransomes Matador lawn mower down the A1 non-stop from Edinburgh to London to prove the reliability of small petrol engines. The Lawn Mower Department Sales Manager, Bob Garnham, invited Mark Grimwade, who had just completed his special apprenticeship, to organise the project.

Ransomes were planning the introduction of the Pathfinder, a rough-grass version of the 24in Matador motor mower intended for council verge cutting with a three-knife cylinder, a pair of side wheels and rubber-coated rear roller. Two 'specials' were produced with trailer seats on pneumatic tyres and standard 288cc Villiers engines fitted with oversize sumps to hold extra oil. The rules did not allow for the engines to be stopped to check oil levels.

Mark and his team had no idea if the mowers would hold together for a non-stop 300-mile journey so it was agreed to carry out some 'in-house' trials on one of them. This involved four Ransomes apprentices driving the mower non-stop in the Ipswich area for ninety hours, which was the time calculated it would take to travel at 3mph down the A68 and A1. The new Nacton Road works were being built at the time and bunk beds were set up for the test team in the old army hut that was being used as the security lodge.

At night, testing was restricted to the roads around the works. Much to the amusement of the security staff, in the evenings numerous student nurses loyally supported the test team consisting of Keith Davidson, Dick Kellar, Tim Reeves and Jack Young. In the daytime the team could go anywhere within the range of their three-hour shift, and on one occasion one of them was seen cutting his girlfriend's lawn in a neighbouring village. The only breakdown occurred when one of the

drivers stalled the engine while attempting to climb Bent Hill in Felixstowe.

With the trials successfully completed, the date of 'Operation Matador' was set for Easter 1959. Mark Grimwade set off for Edinburgh in a works Austin A40 Pick Up truck with two mowers on board (one as a standby) and Don Chipperfield took the Ransomes Film Unit movie cameras. The four Hatfield students had arrived at Edinburgh Castle in a Bedford Dormobile, which was to be their mobile home for the next four days and nights. The gift of a haggis was placed in the grass box for the Scots 'Keeper of the Royal Parks' in London and the long-distance lawn mower run set off to the accompaniment of a lone bagpiper.

Following as straight a line as possible the team went down the A68 over Carter Bar and across the border on a cold, dark Easter night to Scotch Corner, then down the A1 to London. This was long before the advent of dual carriageways and the convoy of a 3mph mower, Dormobile and A 40 Pick Up truck caused considerable congestion, particularly as the A1 still ran through the centre of most towns. As well as keeping a check on and re-fuelling the mower and its drivers, Mark had to roar off to the next town to alert the press, mayor and local Ransomes dealers of the imminent arrival of this wondrous sight. Appropriately the reception, ably assisted by Ransomes' outside staff, usually took place either in or just outside a coaching inn!

A three-hour shift in the cold weather on a bucking and roaring motor mower with no springs was about all the driver could stand. Then it was time for a fry-up and an attempt to sleep in the Dormobile as it crawled south. The mower ran like a dream and, like the test machine, appeared to burn no oil, which was just as well as there was no way of checking the level on an

engine which was not permitted to be stopped. Four days and three nights later a high-powered reception committee of dealers, Royal parks staff, Ransomes' top management, television cameras and the press were waiting to meet the mower as it chugged its way through the London traffic and into Hyde Park dead on time. The haggis, by then somewhat soaked in petrol, was handed over and a ceremonial strip of Hyde Park was mown to Ransomes' perfection.

Don Chipperfield had filmed all the way down the A1 and was determined to complete his epic 'Operation Matador' with a splash. Tim Reeves was called into service again and dressed as a yokel in a smock with straw in his hair. He was given an old bicycle and told to 'act' in amazement on seeing the approaching mower and ride it straight into a duck pond. This he did to perfection. The film was shown for many years and the bike is probably still in that pond!



Heading for London on 'Operation Matador'