



# - MEET A TOWNIE -



## A JOURNEY WITH ALAN

(AND A 14,000 MILE MINI EXPEDITION TO GO ALONG WITH IT!)

**I**t's the shortest of treks from Letterkenny to Newtowncunningham but Alan Speer, it can be said with definite certainty, has gone the long way round.

Over 14,000 miles give or take a few thousand to be precise. And much, much longer if you take in an additional trip to New Zealand over and above the marathon half-way round the world drive he and two others engaged in back in the early sixties when they climbed into his trusty Mini Austin to boldly go where few of their peers would have ever ventured and certainly not in a Mini 7!

It was an adventure that made it to television screens – a journey recorded on old 16 mm film but one preserved forever in the mind and memory of the Letterkenny man who participated in it.

He arrived in this world at No. 56 Upper Main Street where the Quiet Moment is located, son of Jack and Masie (nee Gamble from Ramelton). Alan was the youngest of four children, Bertie, Mary and Kenneth making up the quartet.

It was there that his grandfather, Jack (Peoples) started up the general merchants business in 1893.

"I remember as a young fellow helping to deliver groceries to Kilty on the donkey and cart we had."

Alan's own educational path took him, initially, to Barkhall School and on to the Model School in Derry before ending up at Coleraine Institution. "People from Donegal were getting grants at the time to attend such schools in the North," says Alan, recalling that one notable personality from the county attending during his time was the late Derek McMahon.

Alan boarded in Coleraine for six years. "It was okay, I can't say I disliked it," he reflects.

### Hardware store

Upon returning to his native town, Alan commenced working in the hardware store that his grandfather had opened at 96 Upper Main Street where Brian McCormick's sports shop is now located.

"I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. My sister, Mary, went to live in New Zealand and I had an uncle, Tom Speer, a clergyman, who was also based there, and I suppose I had a bit of a longing to go there as well. I always had this notion of travelling."



Alan Speer.

That notion took serious hold when he opened 'The Sunday Times' edition of September 10th, 1961, to find the following advertisement in the Personal columns: "Young man desires travel round world. Suggestions, advice, offers."

And through the box number attached, Alan, his own travel ambitions ignited, wrote to the young man in question, Peter Newman, to ask him what he had in mind. "He was based in London but was originally from near Belfast. And he had a friend living in Derry and they wanted to see the world. And the boy from Derry came out to Letterkenny and we had a chat."

And the trio's choice of transport for the adventure of a lifetime? "I had a wee Mini Austin which were relatively new on the market at that time in the late fifties and early sixties."

They needed an ultimate destination, of course, and settled on Singapore.

"I had read a book called 'First Overland' which charted the experiences of some intrepid explorers from Oxford and Cambridge who deployed two Land Rovers to take them to that specific destination.

"We all had plans for after that. I eventually wanted to go to New Zealand and

they were keen to travel to Australia."

And so after much correspondence the young men set out – but not the original trio. "The boy from Derry had to opt out but another fellow that Peter knew in London, David Harvey, took his place. A week before we were due to leave, they had got into conversation at a party and he asked his pal would he fancy going to Singapore in a Mini 7 and with a few jars in him at that stage he said "aye surely".

But "aye surely" became something more concrete and consequently, Peter's fellow party-goer confirmed his availability. "He would prove very useful as he was a mechanic and knew all about cars."

The mechanics of the adventure was one thing – the finance of it another thing entirely. "We planned to live on one pound a day!," Alan relates.

But another source of income presented itself in the form of an offer from Ulster Television to film their experiences on route and send back footage to be broadcast on the then hugely popular 'Teatime with Tommy' programme.

A B.B.C. documentary, produced in 2012, offered an interesting overview on the epic journey with producer, David Lamrock, summing it all up: "Can you imagine three young men jumping into a

little Mini in 1962 with only a little bit of luggage and a few spare parts and heading off to the other side of the world. No Sat Navs, no GPS, no mobiles – just a few maps and some basic information about where they were going.

"But obviously a huge appetite for adventure that would take them from Istanbul to Baghdad, from Afghanistan to the Taj Mahal and Bangkok. And the great thing is that it was all captured on film."

Captured on film thanks to Alan's expertise and retention of the adventure in his own personal archives.

The Mini – registration number ZP 9629- did indeed cover some ground, an estimated 14,000 miles to be close to precise. "We were in Baghdad and a bit of revolution started up there with Saddam Hussein being one of the instigators. We got out of Iraq fairly quickly."

In Monte Carlo, where the trio visited a casino, a familiar and much more friendlier figure loomed into Alan's eye line. "Almost the first person I saw was Joe 'Bid' Gallagher – it was a wild shock each way!"

And standing on the Rialto Bridge in Venice, a girl asked the global adventurers would they mind taking a picture for her. And it turned out she was a cousin of another Letterkenny native, Clare Ramsay.

So many places stood out but for Alan the Taj Mahal was as close to perfection as it could get. "Just magnificent. It's hard to describe it unless you've been there."

But even the best of adventures must come to an end sometime and after reaching their intended destination of Singapore in February 1963, the trio went their separate ways, selling the Mini within three days.

"We had kept to our budget. No luxuries, of course, and we didn't bring back any souvenirs either."

And true to his personal objective, Alan flew on to New Zealand, visiting Mary and a variety of cousins.

### Telegram

But a telegram from home would alter the course of his intentions. "The hardware shop had burnt down on the Saturday night and my father wanted me back home."

And so he did, thanks in no small part to the friendship his father enjoyed with Hugh Green, the Donegal born businessman who loaned Alan the money to enable him to fly back.

"My father was not interested in carrying on the business after the fire. It didn't

look too bad from the street as it was the back of the premises that was the worst affected. He asked me did I want to carry it on and I thought of grandfather and decided I would. To be honest, I was not entirely convinced I was a businessman but I did take it over, both outlets at No. 56 and No. 96."

They were busy times and on one specific occasion, a fairly frightening experience. "We used to sell rifles and shotguns and one Saturday morning, a boy came in and asked to see some shotguns. And this fellow pulled out a revolver." A time when paramilitaries were on the prowl for weaponry however they could get it.

But otherwise, both the hardware and grocery stores enjoyed solid business over the years. However, just as epic round the world adventures must come to an end, commercial outlets can also reach their sell-by date and following the initial closure of the grocery shop, the hardware equivalent was to eventually follow into the Main Street archives.

"We had a Christian bookshop and kept it going after Jim McCormick had bought part of the property where the hardware business had been. Eventually, however, he purchased the whole plant."

Alan has toiled faithfully as an elder at Trinity Presbyterian Church where both his father and grandfather had operated as Treasurers. "The elders are responsible for the spiritual welfare of the congregation," he explains.

Married to Margaret – the couple have three offspring, Paul, Linda and Andrew – they relocated to Portnablagh after the shop shut, residing there for four years before building a house in Newtowncunningham, beside where son, Andrew, lives.

Alan and Margaret have involved themselves in the 'Educate the Orphans' programme based in Kenya. "We have been out there a few times, sponsoring children for over twenty years. There's over 100 people from Donegal and the North-West involved in the programme," he proudly proclaims.

Alan has used his talents as an acclaimed – not his term but anyone who has viewed his work will readily testify to the fact – artist to sell paintings and drawings and stage exhibitions to help raise funding for the project.

And removed from that aspect of their lives, there are eight grandchildren to spoil! "We have a lot of time and enjoyment with them."

An epic adventure all on its own.

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