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COLLECTING

Britain's 3-Wheel Solution to Mobility for the Disabled

By TUDOR VAN HAMPTON
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Momence, Ill.

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Sally Ryan for The New York Times

Mr. Hellings with two Model 70 cars, a 1977 Invacar and a 1973 A.C.

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Sally Ryan for The New York Times

TRINITY Ian Hellings's collection of three wheelers includes a 1946 Nelco Solocar.

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SOLO No passengers were permitted.

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IAN HELLINGS had heard of invalid cars, but he did not realize he was bidding on one.

"I bought it by mistake," Mr. Hellings, a 62-year-old retired economics professor, said of the purchase he made on eBay five years ago. "I just thought it was another cute little minicar."

At the time, the Australian-born collector was unaware that his latest acquisition, an odd single-seat conveyance with three wheels, was an artifact of British social policy. But it was not long before he embraced the car.

Today, Mr. Hellings is considered the world's most active collector of the motorized three-wheelers built after World War II under a government program that provided reliable transportation to Britain's wounded veterans and disabled citizens.

"If he is not right now, he very soon will be the largest collector," said Stuart Cyphus, 28, who maintains the Invalid Carriage Register, a British organization that tracks these unusual vehicles and helps owners preserve them.

No member of Congress — at least none hoping to stay in Washington — would dare suggest adding such a vehicle program to the health care reform legislation working its way through Congress. But the existence of invalid cars is a reminder of how

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Sally Ryan for The New York Times
Handlebar controls were an option.

far the British government once took its health care services.

In those less-sensitive times, the brand name of one model, Invacar, became a generic label for vehicles designed for invalids.

"I'm fascinated by it," said Mr. Hellings, who had his \$180 eBay car shipped to his workshop here, about 55 miles south of Chicago, from England. He restored its fiberglass body shell and gave it a fresh coat of pale blue paint.

Though he has since acquired another two dozen trikes, that first one, an Invacar Model 70 from 1977, remains the centerpiece of his collection. Designed by A.C. Motors and built by both A.C. and Invacar Ltd., the Model 70 was the last model of invalid vehicles built under the health service's program, and it was the most common.

"It runs like a top," he said. "Of the invalid carriages, this is probably the easiest one to find."

The car operation for the disabled began in 1948; government contracts were eventually signed with eight producers for three-wheelers built to its specifications. The early efforts were crude open-air affairs designed by committee, but over the years the designs evolved into enclosed cars. Model 70 cars like the ones in the Hellings collection ceased production in 1978; when the program was canceled, there were some 21,500 invalid cars in service.

As three-wheelers, the invalid cars skirted some tax and licensing laws and were able to negotiate both roads and sidewalks. Still, police officers ticketed scofflaws who ignored a directive affixed to the dashboard: "Passenger carrying is forbidden."

"Officially, they have never been regarded as proper road vehicles," said Mr. Cyphus, who owns a rare 1949 Argson Electric, an open-air trike that preceded the Model 70.

Powered by a 600 cc Steyr-Puch gas engine in the rear and fitted with a belt-drive automatic transmission, Mr. Hellings's Model 70 sits inches off the ground. The doors tilt away from the body and slide forward for easy access.

The car has no foot pedals; controls for the accelerator, brakes and steering are on a motorcycle-style handlebar. "This particular car was designed for a person who had lost the use of his legs," Mr. Hellings said. The Model 70 offered more than 50 variations of control arrangements.

"They were built specifically for the patient," explained Ken Weger, 61, a collector in Crystal Lake, Ill., who owns a 1969 A.C. Acedes with an L-shaped tiller so the controls could be operated with one hand — probably made for an amputee.

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By the 1960s, the program's cars were painted the same shade of pale blue — nicknamed Ministry Blue for the Ministry of Health — so drivers could be easily recognized. But as war memories faded, the diminutive cars became eyesores. Able-bodied drivers gave them such nicknames as “mobile roadblocks.” People who still drove the boxy blue Invacars became the butt of welfare jokes.

“A lot of people see them as the ultimate comedy car,” Mr. Cyphus explained.

Regardless, many drivers loved their Invacars. They “would look at them with the same faithful passion as their pet dog,” he said.

Marion Webb, 79, of London received her first invalid trike, an open-air Argson Runnymede, on Sept. 6, 1949, when she was just 19. Mrs. Webb remembers the date clearly because it was the first time she left home alone.

“I had to be pushed everywhere,” Mrs. Webb said of life before the Argson. She was thrilled with the freedom: “It was a nervous excitement — I couldn't keep any food down for a week.”

Mrs. Webb's Argson, with no weather protection, was not the most comfortable way to get around, especially in the rain. But it gave her, and thousands of others, mobility. The trikes helped disabled Britons shop for groceries, visit their doctor — even fall in love.

Mrs. Webb met her husband, Dennis, in September 1951. He was driving his invalid trike around London when he saw Mrs. Webb sitting on a Hyde Park bench. They married in March 1954, but they still celebrate their wedding anniversary in September.

Mrs. Webb received periodic upgrades through the years, including a Model 70 in 1979 that she drove for 25 years.

Of all the government-subsidized producers, it was A.C. Motors that became the most famous — though not for its slow-moving invalid trikes.

In 1962, A.C. adapted its Ace sports car for the American racecar driver Carroll Shelby, who brought international stardom to A.C. with the Cobra, an Ace powered by a Ford V-8.

A.C.'s roadster had classic sporting style but its wimpy 2-liter engine left much to be desired on the track. The company's contract to supply Invacars to the government helped provide the resources for the Shelby project.

A.C. was already a market leader in invalid cars. Last April, Mr. Hellings acquired what enthusiasts call their holy grail — a 1950 A.C. All Weather. With its tapered nose, single headlight and bifold door, it was the first of Britain's mass-produced invalid cars to protect drivers from the elements.

Flash fires and other problems plagued the ragtop car, though, and relatively few were produced. It was long believed to be extinct, but Mr. Cyphus found one in a shed in Essex several years ago. He kept its location secret and later helped Mr. Hellings buy it.

After several rounds of negotiations, Mr. Hellings paid \$1,600 for the car, which is en route to Illinois in a shipping container along with several other cars and spare parts. He plans to restore the A.C. in time for a large microcar meet in Chicago next August.

Though only a few known survivors remained when Mr. Hellings bought his Model 70, more are surfacing. You did not have to be an invalid to drive them, Mr. Hellings said. "And it's still inexpensive."

They usually are in good working condition because the government provided free maintenance — a huge capital expense that eventually contributed to their downfall.

"We've never seen a poorly upkept invalid carriage," Mr. Weger said. "It was a real gravy train."

Eventually, the money dried up. The government recalled the last few Invacars on the road in 2003 and began issuing weekly allowances to drivers to finance their own vehicles. Mrs. Webb's Model 70, retrieved in 2004, was the last in use. "I suppose a bit of my life went that day," she said.

Mrs. Webb's Model 70, which she said she never drove faster than 42 miles per hour, sits in the foyer of the Mobilise Organisation, a nonprofit club for drivers in Norfolk, England.

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