

LOOSE FILLINGS

GOOD VIBRATIONS

This issue's story of a New Zealand 'mystery' car is a reminder that there is a history behind every surviving air-cooled car. And it can be done - finding that history involves the same sort of detective work we would use to track down another carburettor or a spare gearbox, and the result is just as valuable, because history is an essential part of our 50 year old cars. Sadly, in this issue we also mark the death of New Zealand's tireless 500cc historian, Max Fisher.

BLACKBURN 'COOPER' MYSTERY SOLVED

DAVID MCKINNEY REVEALS ALL

NEW Zealand's first Cooper 500, apparently a Mk2, was landed by Billy Lee early in 1950. Three more followed within the next two years. One was a brand new Mk5, another an older Mk4 and the third - well, what was the third? That has remained a puzzle for almost 60 years, but the answer can now be

revealed - a *Loose Fillings* exclusive!

Landed by Christchurch speedway rider Mick Holland, the car was snapped up by local man Vic Blackburn, who had been racing a Buick Eight saloon, with his young daughter Nola sharing the driving. She also had her turn in the Cooper, and as often as not was faster than her father.

The car - originally orange, then yellow - was used by the Blackburn family in

local Canterbury events for six years, racing on the Wigram and Mairehau road circuits, on Brighton Beach, on grass tracks and even the quarter-mile Aranui speedway. It was also a regular in hillclimbs, where it was competitive enough to win the odd event if the competition wasn't too tough. And, although rarely straying far from Christchurch, it did put in appearances at Nelson's famed New Year Tahuna Beach meetings.

In those days nobody cared much about its origins. There were those who believed it was one of the two 1946/1947 Cooper prototypes, and there was a lot of support for that theory. The Blackburn car shared with the first Coopers features such as Fiat 500 front suspension at both ends, Fiat disc wheels and a rather cramped cockpit, and its tank seemed to be in the right position.

But people who really knew their Coopers eventually put that one to rest, though Bill Lee, who knew a thing or two about early Coopers, reckoned it was so close to the prototypes it had probably been built by works staff after hours.

The Blackburns sold the car in 1957 or '58, and it continued to see action, very much as a club car now, until about 1961. Its

Vic Blackburn in the 'Cooper' shortly after its arrival in New Zealand in 1951.



true heritage still unknown, the little yellow Cooper returned to the circuits when historic racing began to gain popularity in the mid 1970s, and appeared on and off over the next dozen years or so.

It came on the market again in the early '80s and I thought, if I could establish exactly what it was, it might be worth buying. I spoke to Mick Holland's son, and to Nola Brown (née Blackburn), but neither could take the story of its origins any further. I left it to someone else to buy.

In 1991 Graham Vercoe's book *Historic Racing Cars of New Zealand* came out,

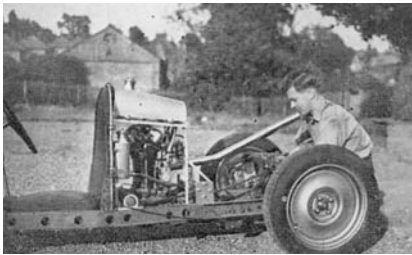
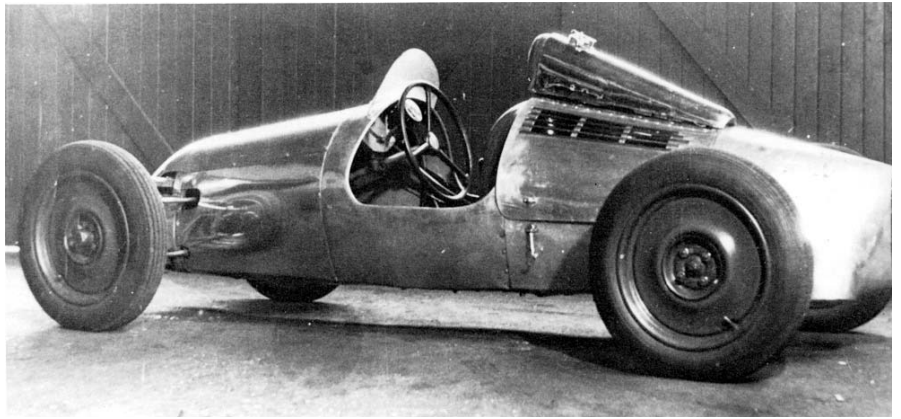
Top: one of the two Cooper prototypes in 1947

Middle: the Blackburn car today

Bottom: Nola Blackburn with the family 500 at Tahuna Beach

Below: the first Smith 500 – more similarities with the NZ car

Photos courtesy Blackburn and Brown families, Cooper Car Co, Iota and Mark McFadden



and threw in a third possibility for what was becoming widely known as a Cooper Clone – that the car had originally been a Smith Special. Vercoe quoted Max Fisher as claiming it had been built in England as a Cooper copy by Charlie Smith. Vercoe went on to say that C F Smith did indeed build a couple of Cooper copies, and wondered if the New Zealand car was one of these.

Charlie Smith was a motorcycle racer who built two 500s in 1949 under the name of CFS before being killed. One of them became the first – and very successful – Parker Special. But the CFS looked nothing like the Blackburn Cooper, not only because the CFS had wire wheels, but also because the body shape didn't fit the NZ car either. A few weeks ago, looking through some old books for something entirely unconnected, I stumbled across a reference to another British Smith 500, sometimes called the Kent Smith which was built by J B Kent and Gerald Smith*. A quick check showed this one had wire wheels, coil-spring front suspension and a swing-axle rear. Rule that one out too.

But in addition to Charlie Smith and Gerald Smith, there was another pioneer English 500 builder called Smith - Ken Smith, who built two 500s in the early days (and another in the 'fifties). Pictures of the first, reproduced here, made me think I'd struck gold. Like the prototype Coopers, it had Fiat 500 suspension and disc wheels, a similar cramped driving position, and the tank mounted directly behind the driver's head. This was surely the 'Smith Special' Vercoe was referring to, and just as surely the Blackburn 'Cooper'.

Or was it? Ken Smith's second 500 still exists. Would its present-day owner know anything about the first one? That owner is Colin Rawlinson, author of the recent 500 history, *Bodywork Optional But Desirable*. A quick phone-call elicited the information that the original (1948) Smith 500 had been crashed, and the remains taken to the local tip.

I didn't want to believe this and I'll tell you why. Somewhere along the line I'd learned – and I regret I can no longer remember from whom – that the bloke Mick Holland had bought the car from in the UK was a fellow speedway rider called Jimmy Wright. And in the Sheldon/Rabagliati Formula 1 Register Fact Book covering F3 racing in the 1947-52 period can be found a mention of a "J Wright" racing a car called the Wright 500 at Brands Hatch in 1950. Did Wright pluck the Smith 500 off the rubbish-tip, rebuild it, give it a new name, race it once or twice, then sell it to Mick Holland?

Slight hitch in that theory: Smith was racing – and crashing – his car after Wright's efforts in the Wright 500.

The obvious next tack would be to see if Jimmy Wright – presumably no longer with us – had a son or daughter who might have memories or scrapbooks or best of all a photograph of the Wright 500. So onto the internet speedway forums, where I quickly learned that after his motorcycling career and brief circuit-racing career, Wright became a well-known figure in British stock-car circles, driving for Banbury.

My request for leads to the Wright family brought an amazing response, including one lady who said she was about to visit her mother, who had known Jimmy back in the day. The daughter came back to say her mother didn't have any photographs, and had since died...

On a more positive note, someone else said they'd seen Jimmy only a couple of years ago, and thought he had remained in Banbury, and suddenly the chances of reaching the man himself soared. I wrote a letter to a J C Wright in Banbury, enclosing a photo of the Blackburn Cooper, and a couple of weeks later received a phone-call from his wife. Jimmy, now 88, had had a stroke and was suffering from Parkinson's disease, as well as losing his hearing. But he was able to tell me about the Wright 500.

It had nothing to do with Ken Smith. Jimmy, fancying a go at this 500 car racing lark, built it himself in Banbury, from scratch. Starting in the time-honoured fashion with two Fiat 500 front ends, he joined them together, bolted in one of his speedway JAP engines, and knocked up a simple body. Not being a panel-beater, he used a meat-dish cover for the nose-cone: the three holes where he took the handle off are clearly visible in photos of the car in New Zealand.

He only raced it a couple of times, at Brands Hatch and Silverstone, before acceding to an ACU ruling that members had to choose between dirt and seal, and he went back to riding the cinders for Cardiff. One of his team-mates there, Mick Holland, took the car off his hands and shipped it out to New Zealand.

So – not a prototype Cooper. Not a copy built by staff out of hours. Not a Smith 500. Instead, this is the one and only Wright 500. At last we know.

The car still exists in New Zealand and, while in dire need of some TLC, in mid-February 2011, in a nice touch, the car was acquired by Duane Brown, whose mother and grandfather were the first to race it in New Zealand.

**For more on the various 'Smith' cars go to www.500race.org and search 'Marques' or 'Men' There is a great deal of valuable history on this sitewhich makes it a very useful reference. TW*

Max Fisher, New Zealand's great advocate for 500cc cars and their history, died on December 24, 2010 after a long battle with a brain tumour. He was a tireless supporter of *Loose Fillings*, and we here carry tributes from two fellow New Zealanders. The author of this first tribute has asked to remain anonymous:

When New Zealand's Historic Racing and Sports Car Club was formed in 1981 in an attempt to stop some of New Zealand's motor racing heritage being exported, there were a amongst the founder members a group of visionaries who had already started to collect and restore some of the cars the HRSCC were aiming at.

Max Fisher (below) was one of those enthusiasts. His Formula 3 RGR Triumph was a runner from the start of the HRSC, and was also frequently seen at early Thoroughbred and Classic Car Owners' Club meetings at Pukekohe. Max also had a Mk4 Cooper JAP which he was quietly working on in the basement workshop of his Mellons Bay home. He was immensely proud that the Mk4 was an ex-Peter Collins car, and was thrilled that an English model car manufacturer made a 1:43 scale model of that actual car. As far back as the late 1950s, Max and Darryl Jeffares as a team were running the Mk8 Cooper now owned by Graeme Brayshaw.

Max's knowledge of New Zealand's F3 500cc cars and their history earned him the title "Father 500," a title that spread far beyond our shores. A quick question about any 500 would prompt a complete run down of the car, its owners and its racing history. Thankfully, Max recorded a lot of this history, but he could never have written down everything he knew.

Max was a refrigeration engineer by trade, but being a good Kiwi bloke he could turn his hand to anything – as witnessed by the Cooper Alta sports car he built on (what else but) an early Cooper 500 chassis. Apart from a little help from Max Mumby with some body panels, "Father 500" pretty much built that car on his own.. It is fitting that Max's three cars,



CLASSIFIEDS

For sale: BB Ariel, built '60-'61, Red Hunter engine, Norton box, complete spare engine plus engine and gearbox spares, new body panels. Chris Tracey, 02 6280 5285

For sale: Cooper Mk5, ex Hawkes, Patterson etc, huge Australian history with 500 and 8/80 JAPs including 1954 Australian Hillclimb Championship. Freshly overhauled 500 JAP. Offers to Peter Harburg, (07) 3839 9699

For sale: motoring and motorsport books and magazines, mostly US and European, email for 12-page list. Graham Howard. grimes@ix.net.au or 02 4787 8772

For sale: Waye 500, built in 1953, CAMS log book, JAP 500 dry-sump engine, Norton gearbox, roll bar fitted, new upholstery TT carburettor, Lucas magneto, eligible to run overhead cam Norton, ready to run, \$15,000 ono, Andrew Halliday 02 9888 6175

For sale: 12 volt roller starting system to get your air-cooled car fired up. New and unused. Comes with jump-leads, starter cable and button and "hockey stick" jack to raise the other rear wheel. Garry, 02 9958 3935, or gjsimkin@iprimus.com.au

For sale: Sidney Rudge, built mid-'50s by Len Sidney, 1938 4v Rudge 500, later JAP and Vincent. Ready to roll \$25,000, John Hazelden, 03 5968 4025

For sale: Walkem Vincent, converted mid-'50s by the constructor from his original 1952 Walkem Manx. Comes with Black Shadow(?) motor, all components and CAMS log book. \$50,000, Paul Zahra, z.oz@rocketmail.com

having been bought by Englishman Tim Ross, now compete in British events. Tim always faxed Max after he ran one of the cars, to report on progress and results.

David McKinney sent this tribute from London:

As a 14-year-old schoolboy, desperate to attend the New Zealand GP in 1960, I took the overnight express the 400 miles from Wellington to Papakura and set out to hitch-hike the remaining few miles to Ardmore. It was early in the morning, and not much traffic about, but eventually I was picked up by a young bloke in a blue Morris Minor. He was obviously a Car Club type, as the car was pretty noisy, and he told me he raced it. And proceeded to show me on the way there how it was done...

He was a marshal at the meeting, and drove right into the "forbidden" inside of the circuit, with me on board. So I was able to spend the day wandering around the paddock, seeing famous cars (and drivers)

close-up for the first time – even strolling down to one or two of the corners. It was a great day.

Fast forward 20 years and I was running a motoring magazine in Wellington. A bloke called Max Fisher was rep for an Auckland-based company, and every time he was in Wellington he'd call in and we'd go off for a beer. The chat was usually about old racing cars and their histories, especially the 500s he'd done so much research on.

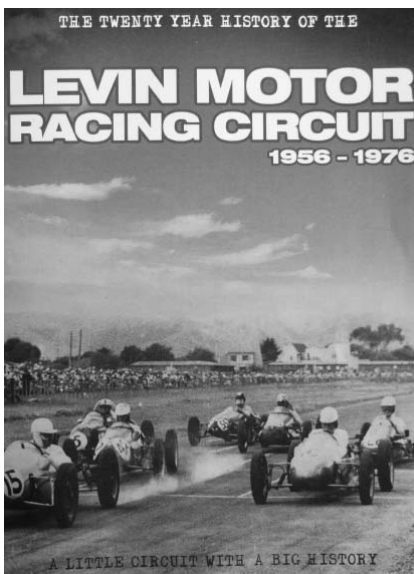
It was during one of these sessions that he mentioned he used to race a Morris Minor, and instantly I could see (as you've no doubt guessed) that this bloke was my old friend from Ardmore in 1960.

Just before I left New Zealand in 1985 I took my Mk10 Cooper Norton to Whenuapai (Auckland again) to race, but discovered it had melted its piston and I had to leave it in Auckland. It was Max who came to the rescue and arranged for its transport and storage. We kept in touch – on and off – and only a few months ago we were still debating whether that 500 went there, or if in fact it was another.

I remain grateful to Max Fisher, not just for getting me onto the inside at Ardmore in 1960, but for his friendship over the many years since.

LEVIN CIRCUIT

The Levin circuit in New Zealand was a popular venue for air-cooled cars in the 1950s, not surprising given that the instigator of this venue was expat English racer Ron Frost (whose racing notes appeared in *Loose Fillings* 7,8 and 9). Set inside a horse race track, Levin's 20 years of racing are chronicled in a 496 page book, "The Twenty Year History of Levin Motor Racing Circuit 1956-1976." Compiled by Murray Carkeek, and featuring a grid of eight air-cooled cars on the cover (below),



THE LOG

- December 20, Chelsea Rd hillclimb, NZ - Arthur Hopkins (Ian Garmey's Cooper Mk5)
- February 16, Golden Era Auto Racing (GEAR) Lakeside Q - Peter Burford (Kenner 64R Triumph, ran three 10-15 min. sessions)
- February 26, Historic meeting, Wakefield Park NSW – Brian Simpson (Derry Greeneklee's Cooper Mk9 JAP 1100)
- March 10, GEAR, Lakeside Q - Peter Burford (Kenner 64R Triumph, "the best fun!")
- March 12-13, Top Gear Live, Melbourne Showground – John Coffin (Robbins BSA), Graeme Noonan/David Palstra (Cooper Mk7 Norton)
- April 13, GEAR, Wakefield Park NSW – Terry Perkins (Scarab Triumph, "had a great day.")
- April 23-24, Hampton Downs NZ - Graeme Brayshaw (Cooper Mk8 Norton), Arthur Hopkins (Ian Garmey's Cooper Mk5 JAP 500), Also Chris North's Cooper Mk4 on display.
- April 23-24, Historic races, Mallala SA - Brian Simpson (Derry Greeneklee's Mk9 Cooper JAP 1100)

it lists competitors, results, some photos and a brief overview of each of the 60 main meetings, which included a round of the Tasman Series in later years. Available through terrycarkeek@gmail.com, it is a very useful source of information on cars and drivers that competed there, its unfortunate demise being brought about by a new circuit at nearby Fielding and the needs of the horse race owners for more room. Garry Simkin

UK REPLIC ENGINE STANDARDS

Mention in the last *Loose Fillings* of UK standards for replica 500cc engines brought comments from several UK readers, including the following from Roy Hunt, Secretary of the 500 Owners Association.

In the December edition of *Loose Fillings*, which is circulated to UK enthusiasts by James Holland, I noted your complimentary comments about the 500 Owners Association Eligibility and Originality Standards. You are incorrect on one important matter. We do allow modern replicas of the Manx Norton engine both in short stroke and long stroke form - but the specification is tightly controlled to 1950s form so there is no performance advantage. Although the bottom half is virtually free, in the interests of reliability, the top half, in particular cams and combustion chamber arrangements, must be exactly as in period.

LLOYD HIRST DIES

We introduced these standards in about 2002. One of the reasons was that the then current standards were rather loose in the engine area in that, provided the outside looked period, anything was allowed inside. This had been OK for a while but keen competitors discovered that engines built by the classic motor cycle racers gave considerably more power and threatened to blow all our period-spec JAPs and Manx engines away. We didn't want that to happen! The standards have been very successful and you can see from our web site that period JAPs, original Nortons and both short- and long-stroke replica Nortons all figured in our 2010 circuit racing results.

We have also been able to establish our standards as the authoritative document where 500cc racing cars are concerned. Race organisers accept them, both in UK and in Europe, in preference to the very expensive FIA equivalent. A 500 Owners VIF costs only £25, and while I have lost count of the cost of FIA papers I know it is very much more than this - and probably not nearly so accurate. After all, who knows what's right about 500cc cars better than the 500 Owners Association?

Loose Fillings is always a good read - keep up the good work. *Roy Hunt*

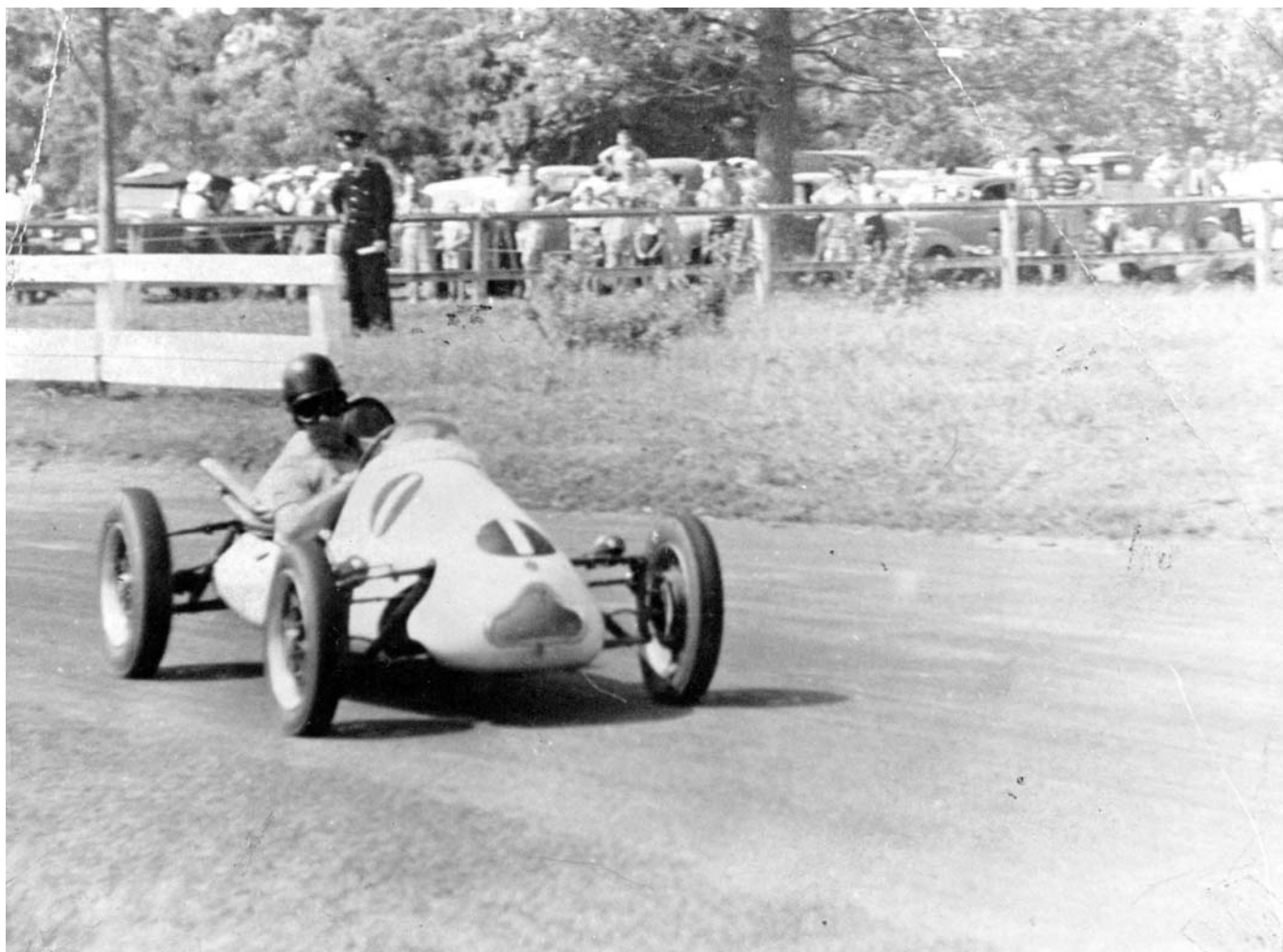
Lloyd Hirst, who raced a Mk5 Cooper JAP 1100 with some success in NSW in 1952-53, died in Kalgoorlie, WA, in December 2010, aged 96. His racing was primarily with motorcycles, and he made his debut ("the curly-headed boy from Canberra") riding an Ariel at Penrith in 1940. In the late 1940s he used one of his fleet of trucks to transport to Bathurst machines prepared by the renowned Sydney racer/tuners Don Bain and Ron Kessing, and was given a ride in exchange. He ran the ex-Kessing Velocette "The Monster," bought a KTT Velocette, added to his stable with a Vincent ("I had to have one of them") for Unlimited class racing, then added a sidecar to the Vincent for outfit racing.

As motorcycle historian Don Cox noted, at 185cm (just over 6ft) Hirst seemed a natural for big bikes: he won the Unlimited sidecar Australian Tourist Trophy at Nuriootpa (SA) in 1949, and won the title again at Lowood (Q) in 1951, the same year he won the Unlimited sidecar race at Bathurst and finished second to Harry Hinton in the Unlimited solo race.

He thought a motorcycle-engined Cooper "might be a good idea" and bought

his Mk5 (MKV/L7/51) new from John Crouch early in 1952. With this car, prepared by Don Bain and painted cream, he won races at Mt Druitt, Parramatta Park and Gnoo Blas, and set a lap record for the long circuit at Mt Druitt at around 1.46 (subsequently lowered repeatedly during the duels between Dick Cobden's Mk5 JAP 1100 and Jack Brabham's Mk4 Vincent). In one of his rare hillclimb appearances, at the South Australian championship at Collingrove at Easter 1952, he ran a 40.45 to finish second to Crouch's 39.95 FTD. By late 1953 he seems to have retired. He fitted his Black Lightning Vincent engine to the Cooper, which was bought by Brabham and sold on to Queenslander Bill Pitt (although there is no clear evidence that Brabham sold it with the Black Lightning engine), to later become John Joyce's Cooper BMC.

Below: Lloyd Hirst in his 1100 Mk5 Cooper JAP at Parramatta Park in November 1952, where the Cooper's lap times closely matched those of George Pearse's supercharged MG and Jack Murray's 5-litre Ford V8 Day Special. A big man who liked big-engined motorcycles, Hirst raced his Cooper with success from early 1952 to mid-1953



AIR-COOLEDS IN TOP GEAR

David Palstra and John Coffin had invitations through the VHRR to run at "Top Gear Live" at the Melbourne Showgrounds, hosted by Clarkson and May, on the Labor Day long weekend. But just as I was leaving the Island to help him out, David rang to say he could not start the Newbounds BSA (timing problems?), so I doubled back to pick up the Cooper Mk VII, which had not been run since Rob Roy in November, 2010.

David and I "bumped-in" on Thursday, along with the ubiquitous John Coffin in the Robbins-BSA who was the only other air-cooled, and walked the temporary 1.5 km track laid out for the extravaganza: very narrow, tight and twisty, and lined with Armco and water-filled barriers. Four runs per day were originally planned for each of the 120-plus historic and modern cars which were garaged in two of the permanent pavilions, but this proved too optimistic. Over the four days however, most competitors managed to get at least two runs each day.

Both 500s improved 6 seconds over the weekend as the track gained grip, with David progressively improving his times in the unfamiliar Cooper-Norton to finally record a very creditable 1m15.5 secs, with John not far behind in the Robbins-BSA at 1m18 secs. As owner, I managed to sneak in a "sighting" lap in the Mk7 on Friday. Fastest cars overall were the tiny 200 bhp SAE formula cars at under the minute.

Top Gear's MD says this is the first time they have featured a track in their travelling show, but that they propose to repeat this every year. We'll see....

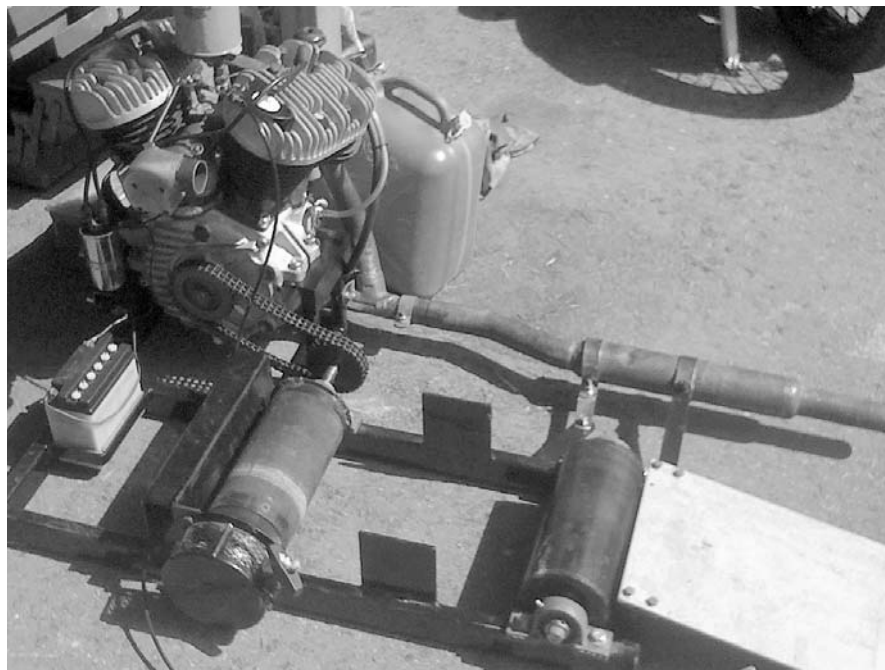
The Cooper was on display in the Expo Shed at Phillip Island Historics (where I ran the Lotus twin-cam in Group S), and in the Automobile Avenue display at the Albert Park F1 GP the following weekend, where two Cooper F1 cars were also displayed.

Graeme Noonan

REG SMITH COOPER

All the known remaining pieces of the 1949 Mk3 Cooper originally run by Reg Smith are now owned by Sydney restoration specialist Ivan Glasby. He has recently acquired the original body panels, a JAP 500 engine, a Norton gearbox, two more wheels and the steering box to add to the chassis frame, one wheel and a rev counter he bought in 2009 from the family of the late Rob Kirkby.

Even by air-cooled standards, this car has a colourful history. It was one of the original batch of four Coopers imported by Victorian Keith Martin, and landed early in 1950. Two of the cars were brought in



unbodied, including this car, fitted with an 8/80 JAP. It was first bought in early 1952 by Lex Davison, who sold the JAP engine as part of his plan to build a Cooper with Vincent power. However, Davison did not immediately proceed with his plan and in mid-1953 the car – still unused – was bought by Reg Smith, who ran Reno Auto Sales in Melbourne.

According to the late Jack French, a later owner, the car was given a Mk5-style body by a company in South Melbourne which made the bodies for Pioneer Tours buses. Possibly it was also at this time that the car's chassis was modified by the addition of a tubular superstructure in the style of a Mk5 Cooper.

Smith called the car "Warm Rod," to distinguish it from "Cold Rod," his genuine 500cc Mk5 JAP, which was originally Dick Cobden's 500cc Mk5. Smith ran Warm Rod with a JAP twin, mostly in hill-climbs, facing stiff opposition against the big twins of Stan Jones, Bill Patterson, Lex Davison and Bruce Walton.

In early 1957 the car was sold, less engine, to former motorcycle racer Jack French, who bought a Featherbed Norton in order to use its engine. French competed very successfully in it until early 1959 before selling it, less engine, to motorcycle racer Dave Powell Snr in Tasmania while French built the remarkable rear-engine Holden-powered Faux Pas. Powell competed in the car using a (non Gold Star) BSA single, and advertised it for sale in late 1964.

Little is known of its later Tasmanian history until it was bought by Melbourne academic Rob Kirkby who sold off the BSA engine. His plans for the car were cut short by his untimely death early in 2000.

Kerry Smith

Above: seen at a recent post-classic motorcycle meeting at Eastern Creek was this Harley-powered starter-roller system. A pull-rope on the left-hand roller starts the Harley. Below: 2010 winner of the Ashley Cowan trophy for best performances with an air cooled car was Victorian Brian Simpson, driving Derek Greeneklee's Mk9 Cooper. Photo Peter Schell



*Edited by Graham Howard,
22 Bridges Street, Blackheath,
NSW 2785 phone 02 4787 8772
grimes@ix.net.au*

*Produced by Terry Wright,
(tsrwright@gmail.com)*

*Published by Garry Simkin,
28 McClelland Street, Willoughby,
NSW 2068 phone 02 9958 3935,
(gjsimkin@iprimus.com.au)*