



Vintage

Words & Photos Penn McKay



Replica Racer

Alfa Romeo 1900 Monoposto Special

Penn meets up with a handbuilt car, and asks whether it is a newly created classic or a re-arrangement of period parts

There's a magic in the term monoposto that is emotively pertinent only to us older blokes – blokes reared on British motoring magazines giving accounts of the victories of Fangio, Moss, Prince Bira – and all the other heroes of the '50s.

In our heads they are also intermingled with other names such as Ron Roycroft, Hec Green and Herb Gilroy; our own local stars who graduated to imported single-seaters after cutting their teeth on locally built specials of various kinds – specials still existing, greatly revered and valued, albeit by older blokes I suspect.

My point is not very accurately placed, I'm dodging around the contention that the younger, newer generations respond to different triggers, and I'm not so sure that the newly created special I'm featuring here would register with these beardless ones so recently graduated from acne. Most of you youngsters of 40 or so weren't conceived until after Ron Roycroft had been retired, so it has much less significance.



No matter, this subject project car, a newly created period special, keeps us old fellers dreaming of past glories. It obeys the old Kiwi adage if you can't find one, set to and make your own.

Classic addiction

John Hearne has been fighting – unsuccessfully – a lifetime addiction to old classics. Back in the '60s he was in love simultaneously with June – a woman – and a supercharged 1937 Maserati 6CM that had been Duncan Hamilton's first race car. It should be pointed out that John's still in love with the same woman! June later discovered the claimed top speed of the



Maserati (repeated by jealous rivals no doubt) and, being freshly enamoured, flexed her emotional muscle and had John sell the Maser as an act of caution. Years later, in 1990, they sat and watched the same car being auctioned off for £480,000 – a big jump from the £500 it was worth in their youth.

You can imagine the rib digging that went on. John decided that it was too late to claw back the Maserati, but he could build himself a period special for a fraction, albeit a sizeable fraction! It would provide him with just as much fun and return his money back at the end.

Note: This is a rationalisation if ever I heard it. John already owns a valuable vintage Alfa Romeo and a genuine Brooklands Riley. How much fun do you need?

What's in this creation?

John's calling this project an Alfa Romeo 1900 Monoposto Special. It's not a copy of an Alfetta 158/159 – although it's very much in the spirit of those great cars – nor is it a copy of a Ferrari. It's a period special from 1955, and all its mechanical parts date from

1955 or earlier. That means he couldn't use an aluminium block Alfa motor from 1958, nor anything else from a later era. It's purely a special, but everything has been done properly by the criteria of the period and the designated marque.

The chassis componentry incorporates Alfa Romeo 1900 parts – including a Peter Bruin-built de Dion rear-end layout. Everything is from one Alfa 1900 donor. Radiator, front suspension, twin leading shoe brakes and drums, steering, hand-brake, 1975cc engine and gearbox. The diff centre is period Alfa and the body is also true to the period, having been built by a gent who did that sort of thing then! The transverse springing is backed up by Houlandie French racing shocks, the Boranni wire wheels are off a Superleggera as are the twin choke 45 Webers – John's a great believer in eBay. These Webers – courtesy of Murray Johnston at Weber Specialties – are mounted on the gem in the centre of this piece of masculine jewellery, a sizeable, polished twin-cam cover with the stock Alfa Romeo script cast in to the metal.

Everything is silver or polished, and the alloy body is strictly period. However, when the whole thing is finished, has been tested and tweaked, guess what colour he'll be painting it – is Rosso Corsa your guess? If so, read on.

Building a dream

I'm pretty keen on 1900s, having had a couple of them including one with an original period five-speed Alfa 'box in it. For various reasons I



I HAPPEN TO HAVE A STEERING WHEEL

When I bought Ron Roycroft's 1900 it came complete with a very stylish, period steering wheel. Alloy spokes, wood-rimmed and classy centre boss with an Alfa logo. When I started the restoration I took off the wheel and had it refurbished. That wheel now graces my living room as a piece of automotive art. Ron drove his Alfa 1900 for many years, so I see it as a significantly historic artifact intimately caressed by the hands of the master – and who knows what it would fetch should I be so crass as to offer it. Mark you, it would take an elderly aficionado to understand its real significance and be prepared to put up the money. I'm frightened that should I remind John Hearne of its existence he may call my bluff in some way – even by offering me money!

IT'S A PERIOD SPECIAL FROM 1955, AND ALL ITS MECHANICAL PARTS DATE FROM 1955 OR EARLIER



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AUTHENTICITY EXTENDS TO THE PERIOD RACE SEAT, TO BE COVERED IN CORDUROY

couldn't complete the restoration of the selected one (formerly belonging to Ron Roycroft) so donated them back to John Roycroft, Ron's grandson. Hopefully he'll get around to them later, he has the skills.

John has another couple of them, and there are a few more around the country somewhere. We believe that only a handful of 1900s came to New Zealand, and those mostly were with returning servicemen from Malaya.

Ron Roycroft and his wife (one each) got their cars from a mate – Jack Johnstone, the original owner of Motor Specs, who bought them when he toured Europe on a couple of trips. Ron was a great believer in Alfa Romeo, and since he was one of our best drivers, what's that telling us?



JACK JOHNSTONE

Jack Johnstone of Motor Specs (now Repco, I think) was a great supporter of '50s motor racing in NZ, and amongst many examples of his enthusiasm he sponsored the BRM V16's visit to New Zealand. Personally, I have clear memories of the unearthly wail of the V16 motor at full chat. Talk about triggering the emotions!

Motor Specs was a serious sponsor to Ron Roycroft who raced (for his father AJ) the Alfa Romeo Tipo B monoposto – amongst several cars. It was thought that Ron should be driving an Alfa as his everyday car, so it became part of his package. Later Jack bought another 1900 on a later trip to Europe, and this car in turn went to Betty Roycroft. Both of these cars have been around for many years. John Roycroft (Ron's grandson) now has the partially restored (during my tenure) 1900 that Ron drove. Plus another one that was found in a garage in Mt Albert, and which was one of the several brought here by Malayan veterans.

Peter Bruin, who built the chassis frame for this special, has done a superb job, completing the task in only 12 weeks during 2002. I was impressed with how far John has got in the four years since he started his project, but he's a bit disgruntled and says with a straight face that it's great now, not having the distraction of the vintage cars in his shed, having taken them to England and got June settled into a job he can now focus full time on this project – isn't he too much!

Graham Brayshaw rebuilt one motor from two 1900 engines. It's not a race engine at this stage, but another motor will be rebuilt for that purpose – possibly with a blower. John bought a second donor car (Betty Roycroft's car) to get a spare motor.

He now has two sets of Boranni wire wheels – one set from a 1950 Maserati. He imagined these period wheels had the long splines, but it turned out that he had to buy a second set with short splines. They look simply perfect.

Authenticity extends to the period race seat, to be covered in corduroy. The very large centre mounted tachometer is from a period race car, and the steering wheel is a copy of the wheel used on the Glen Murray Express and, of course, the radiator badge is a monoposto Alfetta original.

The end result is a beautifully built '50s European-style race car, strictly adhering to its era and promising some truly classic sensations once the driver's bum is wedged into place.

This project should be seen on race tracks sometime this year, when it is finished. I'm telling the world about it now, because at our respective ages John and I might miss out being in at the final act, and so you do things whilst you can.

More seriously I do enjoy our great tradition of special building, and this project is a very worthwhile reminder that there's no reason why it can't go from strength to strength in the 21st century. 🚗

