

A large red and white fishing boat is docked at a wooden pier. In the foreground, a bright red classic convertible car with cream-colored seats is parked on the pier. The background shows a blue sky and a building with a corrugated metal roof.

Special brew

Jon Pressnell tries a Buchanan, a heady Aussie cocktail that, after stirring, leaves him shaken

DAVID GOLDMAN

'While the body of Tom Sulman's 'Kangaroo Team' Aston DB3S was removed for repairs, Buchanan pounced on it'

No dampers," warned keeper Graham as the clutch bit. No big deal: we've all driven cars with shot dampers, haven't we? Not like this – my scariest test-run ever. Over-light steering and brakes that pulled so much to one side that you were dragged right off the road – that was bad enough. But the suspension was something else: viciously firm, bouncing teeth-jarringly over poor surfaces, it was so ill-controlled that the car danced all over the antipodean Tarmac, threatening to add another figure to Australia's road-accident statistics.

Peeking below decks, thinking 'what a way to go', quite how – with concrete blocks? – were the wheels attached to the chassis? All became clear: when Graham had said "no dampers" he meant that. Someone had omitted to fit dampers to the leaf-sprung back axle.

It's unfair to judge the Buchanan by this experience. With any self-built car made from a cocktail of different components, plenty of shaking-down is always going to be needed before the thing functions reasonably. When the mix is as odd as in this instance, that's even more true – especially when the last builder hasn't quite got around to finishing the car.

The thing about the Buchanan is that it wasn't so much a kit car as a body kit – so you could do pretty much what you wanted with it. Hence virtually every Buchanan-bodied car was different. Yet there were some constants: large numbers started out with an MG TD or TF chassis, for which the body was primarily designed, while power units – if not MG – were frequently Holden's robust small 'six'.

Nat Buchanan co-owned a TV, record-player and radio factory in Annandale, New South Wales, and was a keen participant in races, hillclimbs and trials through the Australian Sporting Car Club, notably in Lea-

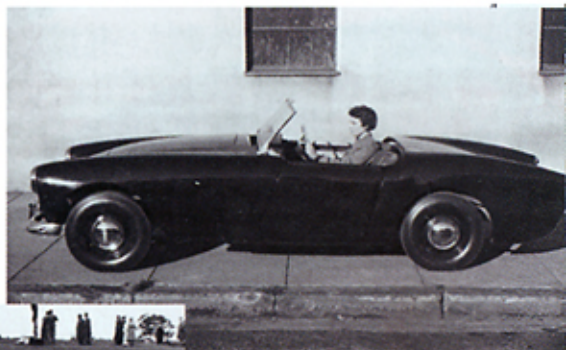
Francis and MG cars. This led to a sideline selling Ford tuning parts and, in the mid-'50s, he built a one-off grp-bodied coupé using Ford Consul/Zephyr parts. This prompted him, in 1957, to devise his own open sports car shell, for use in Australia's then burgeoning club-racing scene. If you think the result looks rather like an Aston Martin DB3S, that's no coincidence. Aussie racer Tom Sulman had damaged his 'Kangaroo Team' DB3S in an accident and, while the body was removed for repairs, Buchanan pounced on it and took a mould – changing a few details in the process, to avoid any difficulties with Aston.

The Buchanan body cost £255, when a hardtop TR3 cost almost eight times as much in Australia. With a used MG TD fetching around £500, a Buchanan-based special had a definite appeal and, by mid-'58, an impressive 80 shells had been sold. The first car used Fiat 1100 mechanicals, and some other early ones used the MG TC chassis. This was rather too narrow for the shell, and a crude pre-war design, so a more popular choice was the TD/TF chassis with its independent front suspension and rack-and-pinion steering. A twin-tube chassis with the later MG independent front end was also available.

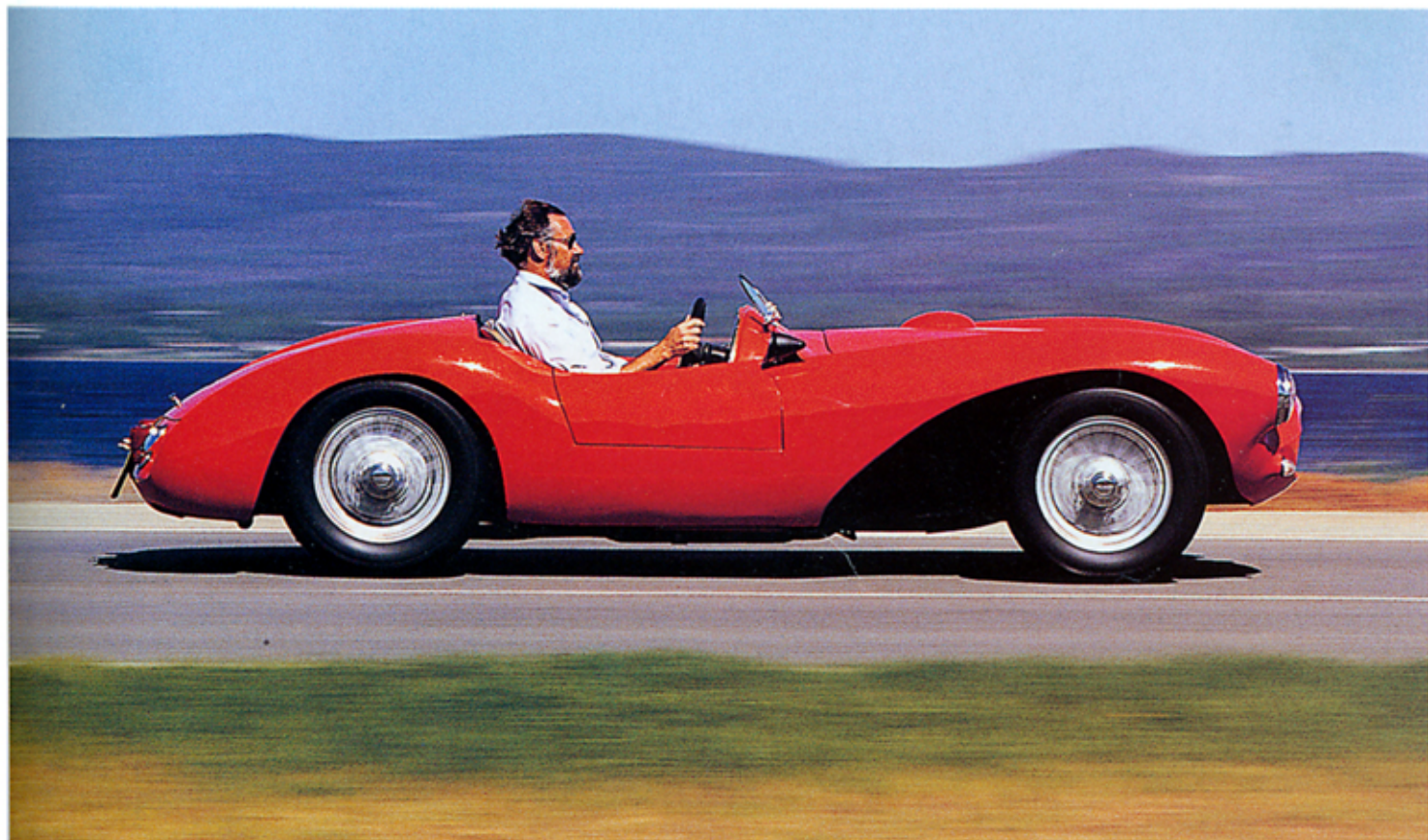
Modern Motor rebodied a TD in 28 hours, so clearly the transformation wasn't that onerous.

Some cars emerged with Triumph TR running gear, while another possibility was to use Buchanan's own cruciform chassis and Holden mechanicals. One of these hybrids featured Mercedes-style low-pivot swing-axle rear suspension and was apparently a real frightener. Another Holden-powered car, typifying the Buchanan's DIY character, ended

up with Peugeot front suspension and – so the story goes – an HRG chassis. Further cars were based on vehicles as diverse as a Lotus and an MG Y-type. In his adverts, Buchanan proclaimed that his shell could also be fitted to Austin A40 Devon, Standard Vanguard, Singer Roadster, Riley 1½-litre or even Morris Twelve chassis, as well as being mated to the running gear of the sit-up-and-beg sidevalve Ford. The secret was that DB3S cutaway to the front wheelarches: it allowed at least 7in of



From top: Cobra; TD-based racer won NSW events such as hillclimbs; 16in wires possibly ex-Riley, finned drums; driver sits high, exposed to elements; body moulded off DB3S



'This car started life as an Amilcar of some description, before being converted into a single-seater known as the Prad'

tolerance in the wheelbase of the chassis chosen to fit underneath.

By 1958, Buchanan had arrived at his next big idea – a ready-assembled small sports car of his own, using Standard Ten mechanicals in a box-section chassis, topped by a fresh design of grp body. A simply styled straightforward car along the lines of Britain's Fairthorpe, the Buchanan Cobra was well received by the press. Yet it was doomed to failure following the arrival of the Austin-Healey Sprite in

Australia and the demise of the Standard saloons on which the car was based. The final straw was a credit squeeze, which meant that Buchanan couldn't raise the necessary venture capital to continue.

So, after only around half a dozen Cobras had been built, the rights passed to the company that made the chassis. Possibly as a way of using up frames already laid down, Pressed Metal Corporation made between 12 and 25 Cobras, in drabs and drabs, as patchy component supply allowed. The shell continued to be available well into the '60s, however, for fitment to Herald, Austin A40 Devon, Singer Roadster or MG T-type chassis. By then, the body was being made by NSW firm J&S Fibre Glass which, in '59, had taken over the moulds for the original Buchanan shell, after Nat Buchanan had made almost 100 bodies. J&S made a further 45 or so of the DB3S-type shell.

The car you see here started life as an Amilcar of some sort, before being converted, in the '50s, into an alloy-bodied single-seater known as the 'Prad' and powered by an ex-Simca flathead Ford V8. A series of 'Prads' was made by the duo of Jack Pryor and Clive Adams, and Pryor went on to design the chassis for the Buchanan Cobra, so clearly there's an intriguing link between our car and well-known Aussie driver Pryor.

In 1958 or thereabouts, the car was rebodied for road use with the Buchanan shell – perhaps by Pryor himself? – when it was given a Ford Zephyr/Zodiac 2.2-litre engine while still retaining the bare bones of the Amilcar chassis and such Amilcar items as the hubs and brake drums. Taken off the road in the late '60s, it was stored under a verandah for a few years,

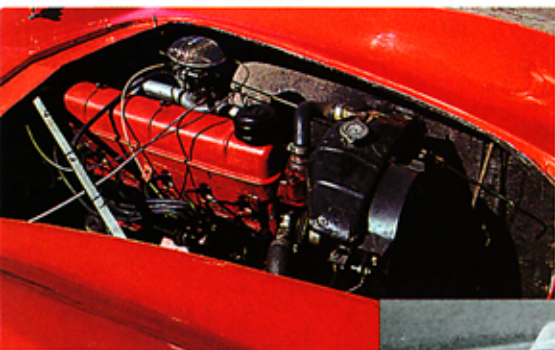
changed ownership in the early '70s, and was largely rebuilt by David Harris of Roseville, NSW, during the 1973-'85 period.

Concentrating on restoration and better presentation, such as a new dashboard with Jaguar instruments, Harris kept the mechanicals much as they were in the '50s and '60s. So there is a channel-section cruciform chassis – presumably of Amilcar origin – and transverse-leaf independent front suspension, with the lever-arm dampers forming the upper wishbones. Steering is by an MG rack, the back axle is a Holden unit, and the gearbox is a Nuffield item probably off a TC or an RM Riley. The brakes use Vauxhall components at the front and Holden parts at the rear, while retaining the finned drums that the car came with.

The result is a bit of a scare to drive, but it's not all bad. Despite only having a single Zenith carb, the Ford straight-six gives a strong red-necked performance to what is clearly a lightweight car, while the gearbox, mated to an in-or-out clutch, is easy and smooth. The body, with just a single door, and braced by a baulk of timber down the driver's side, is acceptably moulded, with only a slight waviness to the plastic. The cockpit is roomy, with a spacious flat area behind the seats, and a small boot. It certainly has potential.

When we drove the 'Buke', as David Harris called it, it was owned by the late Paul Terry, who planned to exhibit it in a museum-cum-gallery. His wife Joan wanted to dismantle the car and hang the body over the chassis, to emphasise the Buchanan's bitza character. My choice would have been to hang the bloke who'd built the damned thing, but that's not really fair on what is a fascinating hybrid. ♦

Thanks to David Hamby for his help



Top: Ford straight-six originally had triple SUs. Above: this one is based on MG T-type. Left: Nat Buchanan in 1958. Right: new dash with Jaguar MkIX instruments, Morris handbrake



