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Fibreglass Flier

by Kean Rogers

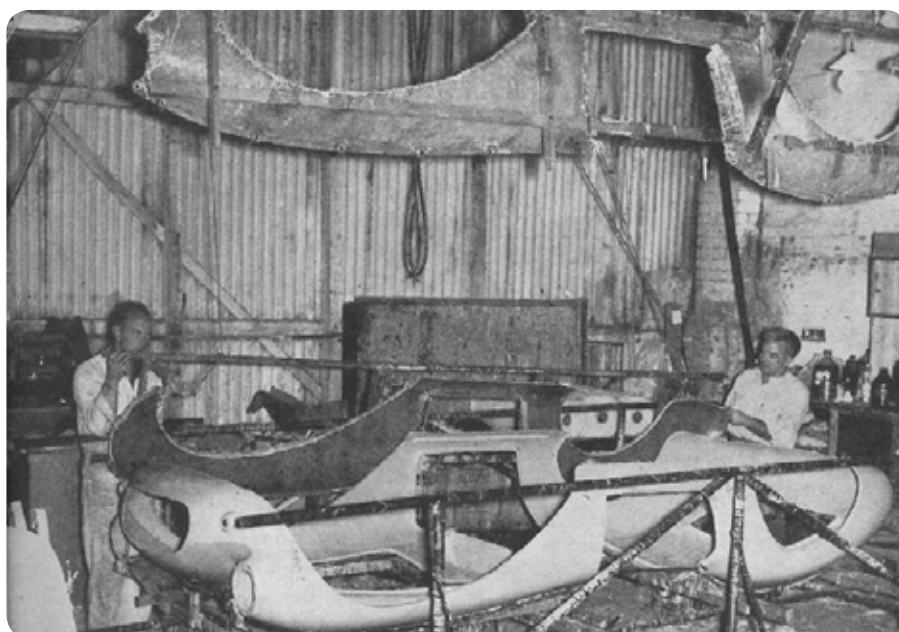
When Doug Whiteford, in a Maserati 300S, and Bill Pitt, in a D-type Jaguar, lined up on the grid for the 1958 Australian TT it would have been understandable if they had pushed up their goggles and rubbed their eyes in disbelief after glancing in their rearview mirrors. Lined up behind them on the Bathurst grid were eight cars with DB3S style bodies, making up more than a quarter of the race entries. What

made it even more confusing was that only three of them were Aston Martins! It was no one-off occurrence, the year previously four cars of similar appearance lined up but only two were Astons.

The explanation was even more incredulous, a tale that played out on separate sides of the world totally unconnected except for the coming together on a famous racetrack in the Australian hinterland.

The story begins in 1953/54 in Feltham, home to David Brown's Aston Martin. Union unrest among the factory bodybuilders had led to investigations of alternative methods and materials to construct the panel work that clothed an Aston. In *Racing with the David Brown Aston Martins*, Volume 2, by Chris Nixon, Sir David Brown made mention, "Later I had a road going DB3S with a fibre-glass body. We gave a lot of thought to fibre-glass from time to time as we found the main problem in making motor cars was in the manufacture of the body. The chassis is reasonably straight-forward engineering, to which we were well accustomed, but the bodybuilding was a problem, (This was why we eventually bought Tickfords.) We turned down fibre-glass (which was very much in its infancy then) largely on the grounds of expense" (p. 5).

The reality of the situation was the worsening state of labour relations at Feltham that led to Mulliners of Birmingham becoming the David Brown Group's bodyshop. While the workplace dispute festered at Feltham in 1953 investigations were made into producing the bodies in fibreglass. While the attempt was somewhat half hearted it served as a bargaining chip with the left-wing leaning workers and their pay demands. As Tug Wilson opined in *Aston 9*, the first attempt was less than successful. He told Richard Loveys, "The racing department investigated the use of fibre-glass when it was being introduced in the industry and made a complete body for DB3S/5. However, something went wrong in the process when the first body was made and it collapsed,





He was actively involved in the Australian Sports Car Club. It was only natural he would become involved in the business side of the sport. By 1956 he had formed a business association with the tuning specialists Johnson and Maher. Jimmy Johnson and Bruce Maher were well known for their prowess tuning MGs and shared the ground floor premises at 6 Nelson Street Annandale with the Buchanan Motor Company Pty Ltd.

Nat's first effort in fibreglass was the Buchanan Coupé, offered as a complete car with a twin tube chassis (similar in principal to that of the DB3S) designed and built by noted fabricator Arthur Rizzo. The body styling had many elements of the Aston Martin Coupés that raced unsuccessfully at Le Mans, the only notable omission being the cutaway front wheelarches. It was first mentioned in the October 1956 edition of Australian's *Modern Motor Magazine*. The 120 bhp two-door coupé was powered by a Ford Consul engine and garnered a two-page spread, generating plenty of excitement in the local sportscar community. Despite much interest only a single prototype was built. Nat also wanted to offer it as a body-only kit; "The other half of the venture is the supply of open bodies for sports cars. The bodies, similar in line but without the fixed top of the saloon, can be supplied to wheelbases of 7'3" to 8'. They will be supplied unpainted and without fittings and furnishings, or complete with seats and all fittings. Indeed, a tubular Rizzo chassis can be supplied as well as motor and transmission" ('Sports cars made in Australia', *Wheels*, November 1956). In all only one open body was built, retained by Buchanan's business partner Jock Morgan, who took it to New Zealand with him once the partnership dissolved in 1957.

As things transpired the plan was modified when the Tom Sulman's ex-Kangaroo Stable DB3S crashed at the Mount Druitt circuit in late 1956. Nat and Tom were old friends through the Australian Sports Car Club and raced against each other over the years. A deal was done and the body became available to take a mould off when the Aston shell was removed from its chassis for the required repairs. In return for Tom's cooperation he was promised the first fibreglass body built. Nat wisely changed a few details here and

over an existing alloy DB3S body; great difficulty ensued in removing the fully cured shell. The inside was extremely smooth but the outer layer needed considerable sanding and reshaping to come close to the level of finish Aston Martin were renowned for. Additionally no allowance was made for opening and closing the doors, boot and bonnet. Once management realised fibreglass production was a dead end they explored other qualified manufacturers to produce the bodies, Mulliners and Tickfords in Newport Pagnell, being the choice of the day. Ultimately David Brown bought Tickfords and all body manufacture originated from their facility in Buckinghamshire. Meanwhile the only fibreglass-bodied Aston Martin was quietly pushed to the back of the racing department and left to gather dust, quietly forgotten.

Chris Nixon mentioned its fate in his book *The Aston Martin DB3S Sportscar*, "DB3S/5: built in 1953 for David Brown, but as a road car with experimental fibre-glass body. Available as a last resort, Aston's desperate shortage of useable cars after the disastrous 1954 Le Mans race meant that David Brown had his personal 3S/5 taken away from him and made ready for its race debut in the hands of Roy Salvadori. The fibre-glass body was replaced by the repaired body from Parnell's Millie Miglia DB3S/2" (p. 126). Nothing more was heard of it.

At the same time that Aston Martin gave up on their foray into fibreglass body manufacture an enterprising antipodean was contemplating building a new sportscar using the same material. Nat Buchanan was well connected in the New South Wales motor racing fraternity. He had competed at Bathurst in 1951 and 1952 in a MG Y type and Lea Francis. Later mounts included a Sunbeam Alpine Nat raced at Mount Druitt.



causing considerable amusement to those who were not too closely connected with the experiment! Another, rather more successful attempt was then made, but for the most part Astons stuck to the traditional methods and materials."

The real story was even more farcical; Feltham's lack of experience with the material saw the first body lay up under-catalysed with a resultant failure of the fibreglass to cure. The engineers involved failed to build a female mould for the body and applied the glass/resin mixture for the second attempt

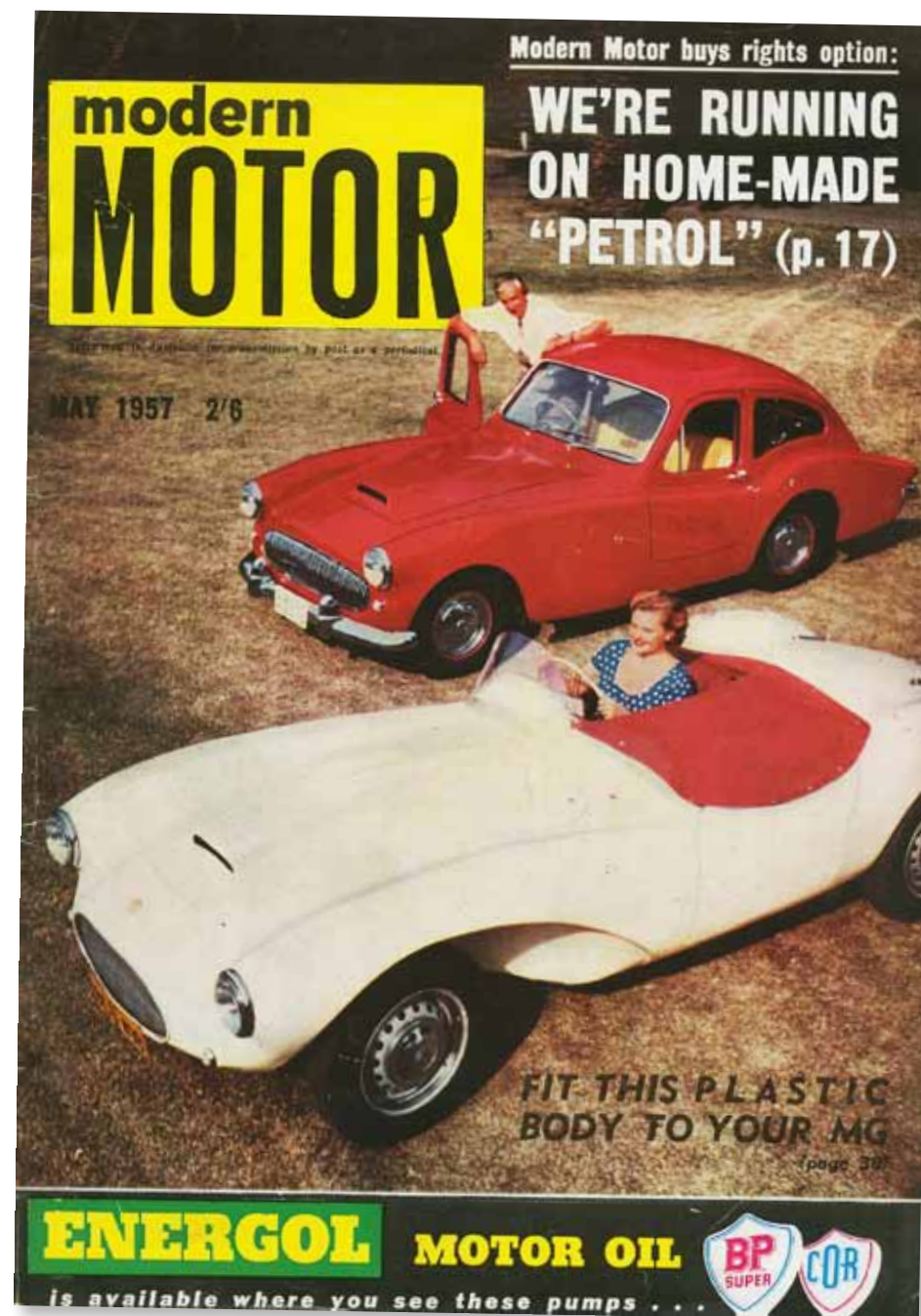
there just in case Aston Martin was wise to what he was doing; he needn't have worried, they never found out! By carefully filling in the mould he deleted the eyebrows around the grille area and reworked it to be oval in shape. An airscoop on the bonnet was a carryover from the one used on the Buchanan coupé.

The initial bodies to come out were fairly rough. After the first batch a new mould was built up that was more rigid and better reinforced. The first Buchanan body, as we know it today, debuted 16 March 1957 at Strathpine in Queensland driven by Bill Weekes and mounted on his MG TF. Nat cleverly marketed the body as a replacement shell for MGs. *Modern Motor* writers watched as they fitted one in less than 28 hours on a MG TD, the TC and TF models accepted them as well. The article describing the exercise appeared in their May 1957 issue of *Modern Motor* with both Buchanan cars on the cover. As soon as the magazine hit the newsstands orders flooded in. At one stage two bodies a week were being shipped out of the small Annandale premises that were home to the Buchanan Motor Company, over 80 were built in the first year alone.

Buchanan was savvy enough to realise that the best publicity for his fledgling company was to get a car ready for the track. Along with Johnson and Maher, who shared his premises, they built up a MG TD works racer. Bruce Maher handled the driving duties and recorded eight firsts and three seconds out of 13 starts at Mount Druitt and Bathurst. David Mackay, another ex-Kangaroo Stable racer and DB3S driver, tested the car for *Modern Motor* in October and found the 'fibreglass flier' to be a delight with fantastic performance.

Amongst the large number of bodies Nat Buchanan was churning out from his factory was, to special order, a simplified version specially suited to sports car racing. Weighing in at around 90 lb, with only one door of regulation size and minimum interior fittings, it was designed for purpose-built race cars. The bonnet was also offered without a scoop and a headrest available for fitting in place of an opening boot lid. The first racer with all these features was the Gladiator, a MG-powered Rizzo chassis car built up by Barry Taylor. Wal Anderson's replica Lotus 6 chassis featured a body with all the above features minus the headrest fairing, as did Gordon Dummer's MG TC special. Jim Corcoran's Dorcas MG TC, the Jack Edward's HRG Holden 'Godfrey Special' and the 'RM Spyder' Buchanan Repco-Holden special, built in 1958 by Horst Kwech, sported these lightweight racing Buchanan bodies but with the hood scoops. Interestingly the works race cars all featured the standard fittings available on the production bodies.

As production went along lightweight race seats, moulded off those fitted to the Porsche



Spyder, and a hardtop to meet the regulations for closed racing cars in the GT class, became available. Additionally a chassis designed in conjunction with Arthur Rizzo, who had worked closely with Nat on the original Buchanan coupé, was available incorporating a narrowed Holden FJ front crossmember and rear axle, suspension and engine/gearbox assembly. The marketing brochure issued in mid-1957 mentioned that the body was available to fit the following donor cars: MG, TA, TB, TC, TD, TF & Y type, Austin Healey and A40, Standard Vanguard, Triumph TR2 TR3, Morris 12, Riley 1½ litre, Singer 9 & 1500, and Holden (chassis supplied).

By late 1958 the Buchanan-based racers had made over 70 starts at Bathurst, Australia's most iconic racetrack. It wasn't just

there that they featured on the entry list, they could also be found competing at Strathpine, Leyburn and Lowood in Queensland, Mount Druitt, Schofields and Orange's Gnoo Blas in New South Wales, Phillip Island, Hume Weir in Victoria.

In total Nat built close to 100 bodies before selling the second set of moulds to Jennons and Simmons Fibreglass; they went on to produce a further 50 before production ceased in the early 1960s. Over 50% of the bodies are still in existence and the cars can be found as far a field as the USA and England. Even to this day Aston Martin knows very little of their existence and even less of the record on Australian racetracks. That fateful day at the Australian TT in 1958 highlighted the success of the 'fibreglass fliers' down under.