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,
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 the body and applied the cure. The engineers involved failed to build Feltham’s lack of experience with the material. Astons stuck to the traditional methods and attempt was then made, but for the most part causing considerable amusement to those behind the scenes. At the same time that Aston Martin was pushing to the back of the racing department fibreglass-bodied Aston Martin was quietly 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 DBR3 Sportscar, "DBR3/5 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 DB3S crashed at the Mount Druitt circuit was promised the first fibreglass body built. In return for Tom’s cooperation he was given the Tom Sulman’s ex-Kangaroo Stable repairs. In return for Tom’s cooperation he was given the first fibreglass body built. In return for Tom’s cooperation he was given the first fibreglass body built. He wanted two bodies a week were being shipped out Nat wisely changed a few details here and 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 epoxied around the grille area and reworked it to be oval in shape. An aircoop on the bonnet was a carryover from the one used on the Buchanan open cover.

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 Weeks and mounted on its MG TD. 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 his DBR3/5 was not up to sportscar level and 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. Weighting 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 the new bonnet and new 2/3 seat was the Gladiator, a MG-powered Rizzo chassis built up by Barry Taylor. Wal Anderson’s replica Lotus 6 chassis featured a body with all the above features minus the headrest feature, as did Gordon Dummer’s MG TC special. Jim Corcoran’s Dragon &JC Edwards' HBR Holden ‘Godfrey Special’ and the RM Spyder’s Buchanan Repco-Holden special, both in 1957 by Harvey Brown for the Gladitor. MG-powered Rizzo chassis (and Druitt circuit of mid-1957 mentioned that the body was available to fit the following donor cars: MG, TA, TB, TC, TD, TF & T 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-bred 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 Longwood in Queensland, Mount Druitt, Schofields and Orango’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 Fibreglas; 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 founds 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 1957 highlighted the success of the ‘fibreglass fliers’ down under.