

THE EMANCIPATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL

One of the finest special sports cars ever built in Australia — the Prad Alta, end product of the fertile team of Clive Adams, Stan Brown and Jack Pryor. Power came from 200 bhp Alta.

GOOD THINGS STILL COME IN GLASS

By BILL TUCKEY

YOU can advance a lot of evidence why special-building is a dying art in Australia, but you will be well wide of the mark. It has simply taken different forms. Not least of all is the social and economic one, the steady rise in the level of affluence, the emergence of the younger consumer as a force in the economy. What this means is that the young enthusiast has more money these days, and when he can buy, say, a Sprite for less than \$400 deposit and four years to pay, he no longer has the incentive to build his own car because he can't afford to buy one.

On top of this, of course, the growth of specialist used sports car yards, offering good units at reasonable prices, has brought more and better sports cars onto the market. Additionally, the mushrooming growth of hot rodding has attracted a lot of enthusiasts who would otherwise build sports car specials, simply because a rod is cheaper and easier to build and is not confined by the elementals of design that are essential with a sports or GT car.

So the days of the special are numbered in Australia. Or are they? In fact, there are a lot of new names springing up — fibreglass body makers, kit suppliers, builders of hot little sports racing cars, chassis specialists and so on. The old names of Buchanan, JWF and Nota are being dimmed by names like Bolwell, Competition Cars

with their U2, Henry Nehrybecki's Lolita title, and the VW-based Geneer. No, special building is not dying. It is simply taking different forms.

Ten years ago the specialist shops in the special business aimed high. They wanted volume sales for kit or fully-built cars, working on the assumption that Australians would pay relatively high prices for all-Australian cars. They came up with good and bad cars — good ones like the Buckle and Buchanan Cobra, poor ones like the Tontala. When those ideas slowed down, generally because of under-capitalisation, they turned to selling fibreglass body shells or kit cars. The shells were designed to fit on Holden, MG or Zephyr chassis.

All of these, with the exception of the Buckle, were mainly road cars. They were road cars because they could not then compete with the sports racing cars in open classes. But as motor racing grew, and there came classes that separated the marque sports cars from the rockets, or kept aside the clubman-type cars, the demand switched to the lightweight sports/racing car. So up came things like the Nota, the Stan Brown Lotus-like clubmans, and others. An additional spur to this change of pace was the increasing availability of suitable power plants — engines like the 105 E Anglia, the BMC A and B series, and the Hillman Imp.

The future is slowly brightening again for the special makers. But how many, oh, how many were trampled underfoot. The names are many, for at various stages in the last 10 years it seemed that everybody wanted to get into the business of building a sports or GT car for volume sales, with a VW/Holden/Zephyr base.

A lot of people lost a lot of money in the business. Nat Buchanan who tried for years to crack the market, finally gave it away. Bill Buckle said to us only the other day that he had been in the motor industry for 15 years and was only just starting to make money. Bill Buckle is now selling Toyota and running a big right hand drive conversion business, but he was behind the fabulous Buckle GT coupe and the Australian manufacture of fibreglass Goggomobiles. Stan Brown, certainly the best aluminium craftsman in Australia, with a training from Lotus, now builds more boats than cars. This is a long way from the era of 1955 to 1960, when from his workshops, sometimes in conjunction with Clive Adams and Stan Pryor, rolled the finest hand-made cars we have ever seen.

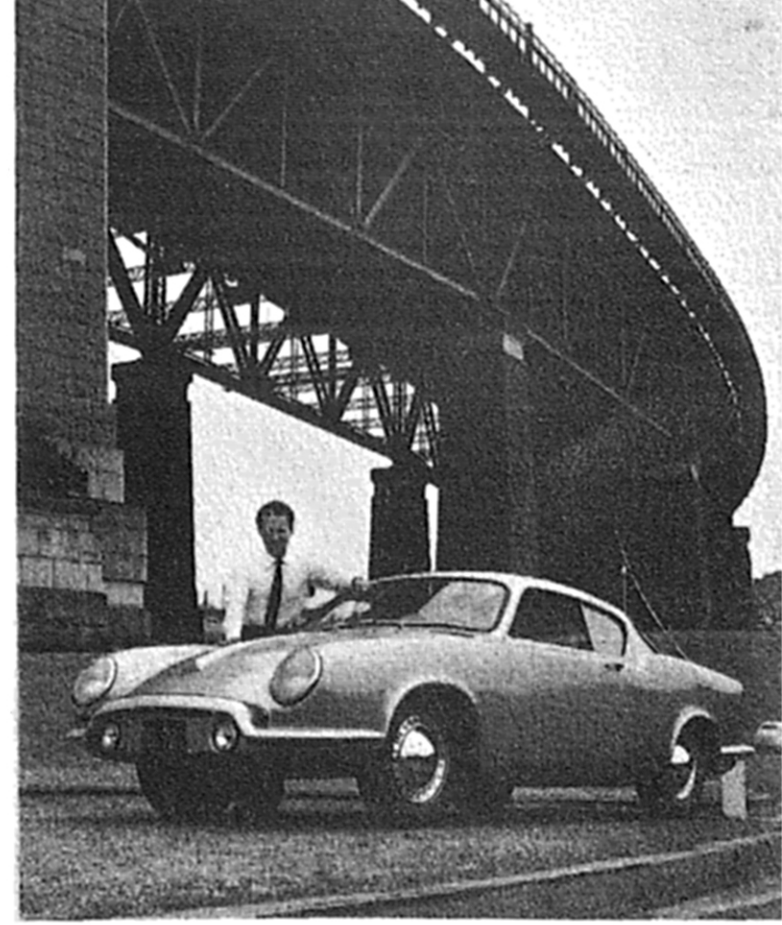
One of the first names in the volume special market was the Tontala. Built by the Tontala Motor Company, of Canterbury, Victoria, this glass-fibre Holden-based coupe was the sensation of the 1955 Melbourne Motor Show. The moulds for the body had been completed in October, 1954, and the car, to sell then for \$2800 (£1400) as a kit, had 90 bhp pulling 17½ cwt. The head of the company was Tony Theiler, but while a number of orders were taken at the show, not enough capital backing was available to enable production to go on.

In 1955 also Bill Buckle completed the prototype of his Buckle coupe. In more primitive form than his final production cars, it was built around a Ford Zephyr engine and gearbox, Zephyr wheels, rear axle and brakes. The boxed steel chassis, transverse leaf front suspension, leaf spring rear, body and furnishings were all to come from Buckle's works. What we saw then was a 17 cwt two-plus-two GT coupe only 4 ft 2 ins. high overall. But it had enormous potential.

Production was slow in getting underway, but by 1957 there were dozens of them on the road. The 1958 car was probably the finest. Selling complete then for \$3900 (£1950), it was beautifully finished and equipped with leather-covered steering wheel, electric door locks, clock, tachometer, full set of gauges, electric windscreen wipers, map light and a folding rear seat that opened onto the big boot. With a 15-gallon fuel tank and three-speed gearbox with overdrive, it would pull 115 mph in its final 95 bhp form, and run from 0-50 in 7.8 secs and 0-90 in 30.8. Buckle raced one car for three years with great success, and several are still racing in Sydney.

The Buckle was indisputably the finest low-volume all-Australian sports car ever conceived; it is one of the tragedies of the automobile business that if Bill Buckle had delayed the car until 1965, he would be selling them by the hundreds right now. It was a classic case of a man well ahead of his time.

From 1956 to 1960 were the golden years of Australian special building. The motor magazines of those years were full of do-it-yourselfers on special building, as well as feature articles on well-done cars that had just been finished. You could build a special for anything from \$200 (£100) up to \$4000 (£2000). One car was built from an Oakland chassis, an elderly V-8 engine and aircraft fuel tanks; it cost \$200 (£100). At the end of the 1955 Sydneysider Ash Marshall, now the country's ace drag racer, completed a beautiful Holden special with an English-made body and astonishing performance. Using Holden, Peugeot and Morris bits, it still cost him \$3500 (£1750). But in 1958 in Australia you could buy



The short-lived Ascort, a well-conceived idea for a local GT built around VW Okrasa components. It was to sell for around \$4000 complete.



The prototype Buckle, first shown in 1955. While body outline remained the same, changes were made to frontal treatment, roof and interior.

a ready-built new tube chassis for Holden or MG parts for \$130 (£65) plus a works crossmember. Glass bodies were then \$300 (£150) for the basic shell of \$800 (£400) for the fully-fitted unit.

The basic body that probably outsold all the others in those days was the Buchanan. Ready for sale in 1957, it came from Nat Buchanan, who was then associated with Warnefords in Ford engine modifications. It was a one-piece body in fibreglass, with separately moulded doors,

GOOD THINGS STILL COME IN GLASS

bonnet and boot lid. It had a box section chassis with good cross-bracing, transverse leaf front suspension, a 7 ft 7 in. wheelbase, was 13 ft high and 4 ft 8 ins. long. The engine was optionally a 70 bhp Consul or 120 bhp Zephyr. Gearbox and rear end were Zephyr, and brakes were also Zephyr.

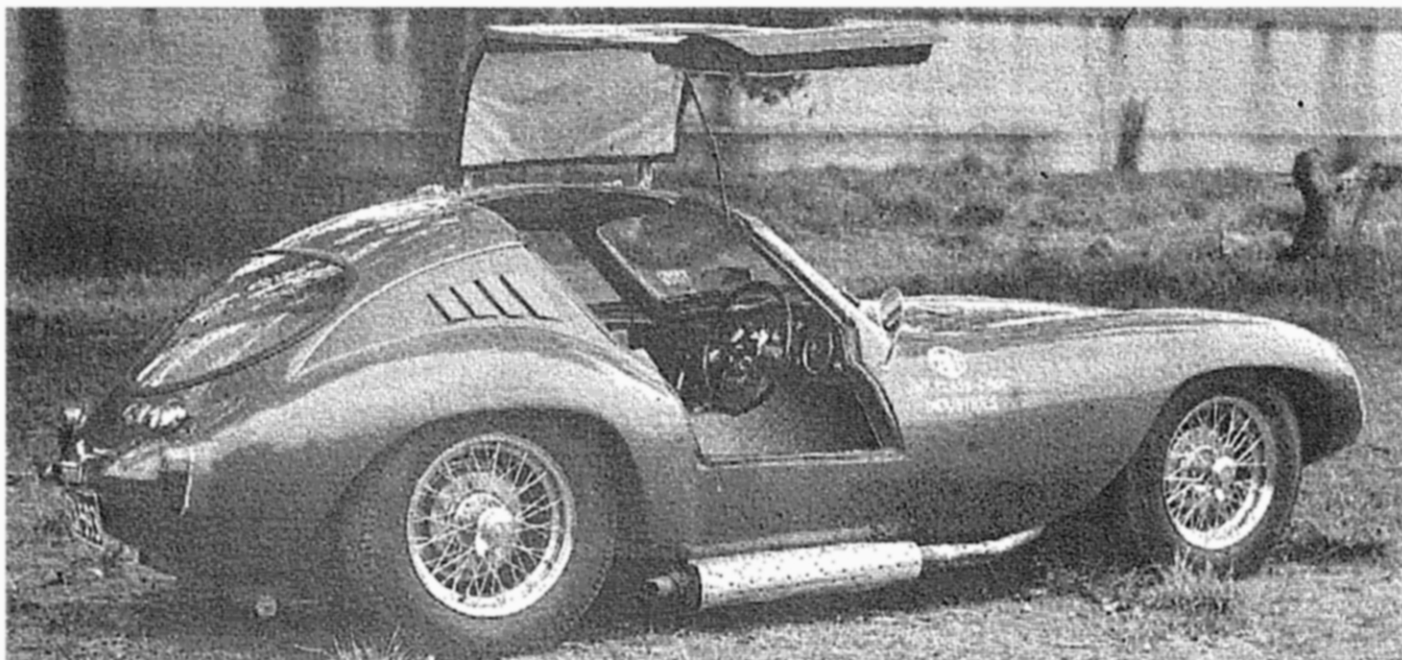
Buchanan's next step was to make the bodies available separately, to fit wheelbases from 7 ft 3 in. to 8 ft. These went well, going mostly over Holden and MG components, and being raced extensively, despite torsional stiffness problems. By mid-1958 there were an estimated 80 Buchanan bodies on the roads.

So Nat went a step further. In 1958 he announced the Buchanan Cobra, a better-looking, more modern and better finished body wrapped around Standard Ten components. He sold it only as a complete sports car, and it attracted great publicity despite a stiffish price of \$2200 (£1100). Jack Pryor designed the chassis and Stan Brown the body. Despite a dry weight ratio of 60 bhp per ton, the engine put out only 43 bhp and the little sports car, somewhere between a Sprite and MGA in size, would do only 72 mph, 0-50 in 15.1 and a standing quarter in 22.1. Not many were sold, and Buchanan left the special making business not long afterward.

To those of us in the business at that time, 1958 was a breathtaking year. New Australian cars were coming out of the woodwork everywhere. That was the year the Prad cars rose to fame — the Adams-Brown-Pryor combination. Stan Brown came to Australia fresh from Colin Chapman, and soon built up an enormous reputation as a body designer and builder. In 1958 he started on the first of a long line of specials; this one was similar to the Lotus VI, although it used an Austin A40 engine. It had a 50-tube space frame, three grades of aluminium, a 7 ft 4 in. wheelbase, was suspended by integral coil/damper units all round, and weighed 9 cwt.

Earlier he had bodied a very nice car, subsequently raced by Alex Strachan and Doug Chivas; it looked like a front-engined Lotus XI, only better, and was to be available in kit form then for \$3400 (£1700). But the Adams-Brown-Pryor

A good example of building using the JWF Milano body. This is fitted to a J2 chassis with TC engine, gearbox and suspension. Gullwing doors were dropped for conventional type.



The production Buckle coupe, a shatteringly-fast GT car built around Zephyr components and selling for almost \$4000. Several were raced successfully, and one is still campaigned on circuits.

combination really clicked in 1958 with the Prad IV.

Prad 111 had been a Holden-HRG that Adams and Pryor built and raced in the 1956-57 seasons. Prad IV was Holden-based, although using much of the Prad III chassis, but had a gorgeous body that looked for all the world like a Testa Rossa Ferrari. And no wonder. For Stan Brown had taken many of the Ferrari features and improved on them. Prad IV was a very successful racing car. But better was to come.

Late that year they rolled out of their workshops the Prad-Alta, an incredibly-attractive one-off sports/racing car that still stands as a monument to brilliant design and clean workmanship. It used the 200 bhp Alta engine from the GP Connaught and was Adam's fifth competition car. Once again, the chassis was by Pryor and the body by Adams.

The body was classic in proportion and line, painted a crisp yellow and black, with the then Brown trademarks of low frontal area, sloping nose and big faired headrest. The frame was of



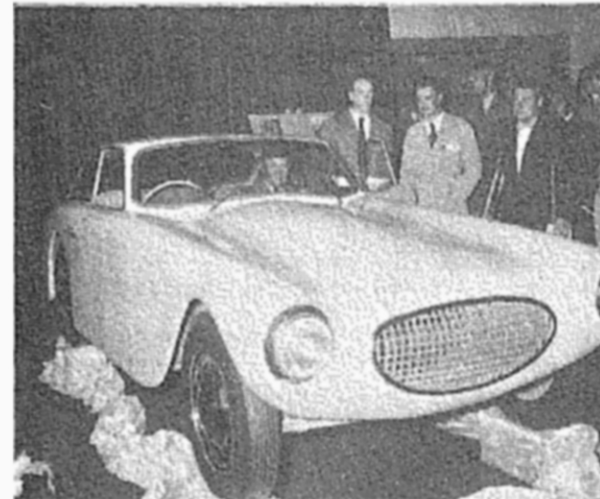
One of the neatest little specials ever built in Sydney was Len Moir's Renault 750-based job. The body was made by J and S Fibreglass, who are still active.

The Hunter coupe, designed for fitting with Holden components. One has been campaigned on race circuits by big Holden equipment specialist Sydney Speed Shop.



16 gauge 2 in. and 1 in. mild steel, with front suspension Morris Minor torsion bars, Chevrolet top control arms, Holden kingpin assemblies and HRG hubs. The rear was De Dion, with VW torsion bars and a 3.6 to 1 Jaguar crown wheel and pinion. Up front were Dunlop disc brakes, with Alfin drums at rear, while the front wire wheels were Jaguar alloy and the rear Borrani wires. Steering was Morris Minor rack and pinion.

The Prad-Alta had a Jaguar XK120 gearbox, 10



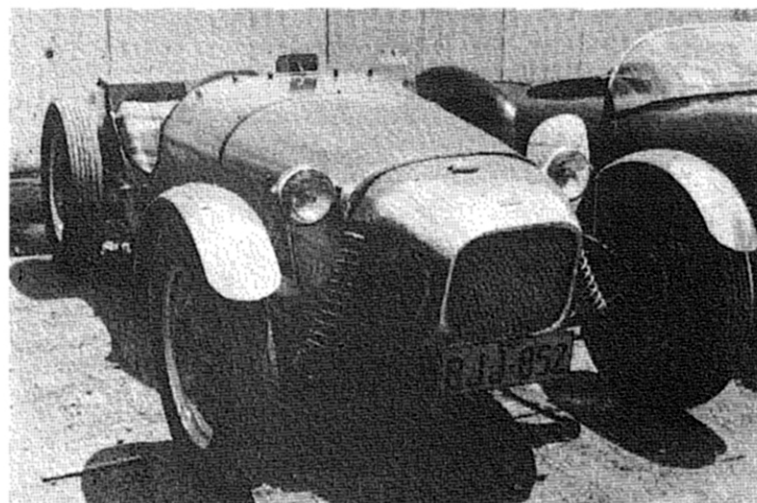
in. Borg and Beck competition clutch and 16-gallon fuel tank. The dry-sumped engine ran on 12 to 1 compression, with an eight-plus hemispherical head and two twin-choke Webers. Top speed was around 140 mph. The front and rear sections of the body, fashioned in 19 gauge alloy, hinged completely back from the scuttle and the seat frame. It was a beautiful car.

Clive Adams and Stan Brown came up with another legendary special in 1959. Surfers Paradise real estate agent Doug Cavill sent his Austin-Healey 100/6 to Sydney motoring personality Bill Reynolds for extensive work. Reynolds overhauled and modified the engine and drive train, while Adams-Brown carried out extensive body refashion. They gave it a new longer lightweight bonnet and big faired headrest, and finished the car in silver. The engine got three twin-choke Webers and extensive work to cooling and braking. A full-length undertray helped the air flow. The big car would top 120 mph comfortably. Successful owners, however, allowed it to deteriorate.

But other things were happening in 1958. We saw the Proctor, a GT coupe based on the ubiquitous VW 1200 and designed by Sydney commercial artist Ted Proctor. It was a distinctive, fair-performing car that could be bought complete for \$2000 (£1000) and three months delivery, or Proc-

The sensation of the 1955 Melbourne Motor Show — the Tontala. It was to be produced in volume, using Holden parts, but lack of capital killed it at birth. Car had 90 bhp for only 17½ cwt.

GOOD THINGS STILL COME IN GLASS



Suspension and chassis expert Guy Buckingham has produced a long line of cars bearing the name Nota. One of his first efforts with Morris 8/40s.

tor would supply it for your own VW plus \$1000. It used VW doors and glassware, modified VW seats, VW dashboard with bigger glovebox and weighed about 3 cwt less than the sedan. The engine was stock, but the suspension was reset. The body was quite well done, with the air intakes forming door handle recesses. Top speed was up by about 8 percent on the sedan, and fuel consumption was around 38 mpg. Demand was slow.

That year also a Sydney man named Ken Kirkness built for £150 a plywood and fabric three-wheeler looking a little like the Messerschmitt. Just 11 ft long, it would do 55 mph and 60 mpg on a Jawa two-stroke engine. It used Austin 7 front end, handlebar steering, and a 6 ft 9 in. wheelbase.

That year was also notable for the KM-300, another glass-fibre kit or basic body shell. Designed by Sydney engineer Keith Morrison, it was meant to be hung around Hillman components, but its buyers put Holdens, MG and Zephyr engines in it. Quite a few have been raced. In its complete prototype form, with 90 percent Hillman bits, it weighed 10½ cwt and would turn 105 mph. The chassis was a space frame, with new rear suspension of parallel radius arms and coil/



Buchanan fibreglass bodies were fitted over many different chassis with varying success. This one, on a Holden, was one of the better efforts.

Buchanan's last effort to get into the volume market was the Cobra, a Standard Ten-based lightweight sports car with minimal performance.

damper units.

In August, 1959, we had the big announcement of the all-new Australian car to be built in Queensland. An American company called Woodhill Fibreglass Body Corporation of California announced that it had negotiated with Buzacoot (Q'ld) Limited to build a fibreglass sedan and sports car for the Australian market. The sedan was to cost \$1000 (£500) and 5000 a year would be exported to the US. The sedan would be a 1000 lb four-seater with rear-mounted engine, laminated fibreglass body and all-independent suspension. Nothing ever came of it.

In 1958-59 Englishman Guy Buckingham was starting to make his mark in Sydney and interstate with his Notas. His original business lay in putting together neat and quick specials for customers with Ford Ten or Morris 8/40 basics. His body man was a craftsman called Jack Wiffer, who once worked with Tim Birkin, Malcolm Campbell and Reid Railton. In those year's Buckingham's cars had his own ultra-light space frame and unique suspension. One of his first ventures into the monoposto field was a Consul-engined car he built for John Schroder. It was nicknamed "Tonce".

(Continued on page 50)



Sydney Motor Show, 1958: The N. H. Buchanan Motor Coy Pty Ltd had a big stand featuring its fibreglass body construction and sales activities in car market.

Hillman components formed the basis of most KM300s, a body marketed by Sydney engineer Keith Morrison. Fibreglass was color-impregnated in original manufacture.

More from JWF: These bodies were designed to fit around pre-1932 Austin Sevens, and big weight reduction gave the tiny cars very good performance.



GOOD THINGS STILL COME IN GLASS

(Continued from page 13)

He later built several cars for the Howard brothers, then a Formula Junior; nowadays he seems to have standardised on clubman types and Formula Vees; three of his first Vees were ordered by the Australian Automobile Racing Club for members' use.

The start of 1959 also brought us "firm production scheduling" for the ill-fated Ascort TSV 1300. This was yet another attempt to build a volume GT car around VW components. Designed by Mirek Craney, then of the Hermex Company, a specialist in fibreglassing equipment and techniques, it was to be built by the Austro-American company Continental Coachwork Pty Ltd. The schedule for 1959 called for 42 cars, priced at \$4000 (£2000) including tax.

It used a stock VW chassis, with a VW engine modified to 54 bhp. The attractive close-coupled two-plus-two body was in double skin fibreglass, with extensive insulation and very good styling. It had moulded bucket seats front and rear, with the rear seats divided by a removable armrest that concealed the optional first aid kit. The makers were then claiming 92 mph and 45 mpg.

The windscreen was Peugeot 403, the side glasses specially made, the rear window from an Austin A95. Manufacture was to be a revolutionary German fibreglass-spraying machine, which reduced the resin content normal in laminated work and raised the glass content to 65 percent. The floor was lined with black carpet, the upholstery was in beige imitation leather, and the headlining a perforated pvc. The seats were fully reclining, instrumentation was complete enough to include a vacuum gauge, and the fascia included a big glovebox with built-in Kleenex dispenser. The steering wheel was Porsche, as were the sun visors and rear vision mirror.

It had a big boot, with engine well and boot moulded integrally with the outer body shell, and rear seats formed into main rear sections. The engine had Okrasa modifications, which included a stroked crankshaft for a stroke of 69.5 mm against the stock 64 mm and swept capacity of 1300 ccs. The chassis platform was entirely VW.

But the Ascort went the way of the others, which was a pity, for it was a promising design. And there were more, many more, some famous, some unsung. These were the golden years of Australian special building on the track as well as on the road; we shall probably never see their like again. #

HORS D'OEUVRE

(Continued from page 7)

But we know what happens, don't we? Our friend McSpecialbuilder arrives at the first corner, turns the wheel, and the finckmobile continues indomitably ahead, taking out 180 yards of good three-strand wire fencing and ending up amid the pumpkins in Ah Foong Lee's prized market garden. Velly solly. Back to old dlawing board.

The handling, it seems, is not exactly spot on. Or so you tell your friends. Actually, it's catastrophic. It must be the only car in the world with maximum positive final understeer that manages to oversteer itself through the hedge backwards, upside down, in neutral and on fire. Maybe it's the king-pin angles . . . hmmm . . .

So the suspension gets a minor rebuild, one that takes a little over 13 months. This done, out onto the Queen's highway again, full of bonhomie and warm feelings towards the man who invented

the motor car. This time, the thing points properly. Past the de-restriction sign, down with the big tootsie, feel that punch in the back, shazam! Then up comes a 25 mph bend, you put in the picks, and the situation instantly becomes one of those Our Father moments when the revelation dawns that not even an anchor from the Queen Mary would pull you up for THIS corner. Off through the hedge again, backwards, upside . . . etc. Back to the ole drawing board. After the convalescence, that is. Must have been those five-inch drums you put on each corner.

And so it goes. Month by torturous month, the special gets built. When it is finally perfect, finally registered, going well and drawing the attention it deserves, it's too late. For by that time your fiancée has sent back your ring, your mother has given up and taken to wardrobe drinking (not hooch, just wardrobes, finely ground up, one dash of semolina, a squeeze of lemon, tapioca juice and a dash of Old Soldier rum), your father has written you out of his will (Thank God, that's got rid of the worry about those SP chits and IOUs), your grandmother has been committed, and your bank manager has been transferred to Outer Mongolia.

But not to worry. For you have your extension of your personality, your individual's protest against the conformity of mass production, your priceless gem of automobildom finely tuned to your own demands. And in that you can rest happy. Rest happy, that is, until the inevitable day when a small and dirty urchin comes up to you and says:

"Hey mister; whereja git the ole bomb?" #

MARK ONE

(Continued from page 32)

The little car was easily transformed at moderate costs, over a period of time that depended on the purse of the owner.

This was the real Sprite attraction — the adaptability of the basic form to streamlining, lightening, enclosing. The car was easily made faster, more comfortable, cosier or more weatherproof, more individual, or stylish. Yet it still retained its sporting character, its initial attractions of ruggedness, reliability, roughness, roadability. It gained speed performance and a host of other features depending on the whims of the owner. It could also be driven straight on to the track for class wins, or could be modified to win races. It was rugged enough to trial, manoeuvrable enough to win a gymkhana.

These are the attractions that the later Sprites have failed to hold. There is still a large school of thought that says BMC would have been better advised to add a Sebring nose to the later model, then the wind-up windows, and other creature comforts (which some owners proved could be cheaply installed) would naturally follow with development. The mechanicals, and performance could easily have been boosted and beefed proportionately until a fine, comfortable, compact and economical sports car was derived. This they feel, rightly or wrongly would have made the ultimate economy sports car. Having driven both the better Mk 1 Sprites and BMC's latest cars I feel qualified to offer an opinion: but I won't. You see, I might just lose the battle: Mk 1 Sprite sales stand at about one third of the later Sprite models.

Despite the arguments, you are still very likely no further convinced that the Mark One Sprite was the world's best-ever sports car, but at least there is a chance you understand the device a little better. Understanding the owners of such cars I leave up to you, but you will doubtless find it a little more difficult. #