

From rust bucket

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to road runner!

Serendipity is defined as chance, luck or fate and for one vintage motoring enthusiast it was definitely a case of all three that brought him to the restoration of a 1923 Fiat.

Des Donnan in his Fiat and Geoff Hocking at the window



By JACQUI
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At 81 years young Des Donnan is a member of the Blackall Range Horseless Carriage Club and has restored around 12 cars over the past 40-50 years. "I have a particular interest in European and English cars. I really enjoy the vehicles from the 1920s and 1930s.

"I also have a 1935 Alvis Speed 20 Coupe that belonged to my father until I bought it from him in 1965. I have owned it ever since and have restored it twice. However, the Fiat is something very different."

The old Fiat had long lain abandoned in a paddock when it was gifted to Des as a restoration project by another member of the Horseless Carriage Club. Even with all his experience in restoring old cars, this one left Des scratching his head.

"You see the car is a combination of timber and fabric as well as cast alloy parts. And all that was left were the cast alloy elements. It was a pile of rust, quite literally," Des says with a smile.

Des was not daunted by the project, but he knew he needed expert help in reassembling the vehicle. In a moment of kismet Des ran into his new neighbour Geoff Hocking and his wife, who were out walking their two dogs, and discovered that his project's salvation was right under his nose.

Geoff, it turned out, was an expert timber worker and was more than keen to come on board the Fiat's restoration.

"Geoff has done a brilliant job on the timber in this vehicle. Some of the work will be covered by fabric, but some, like the struts in the canopy will be visible and they are finished to such a high standard.

"In a way Covid -19 has been a godsend for this project, as it meant Geoff and I had the time to really keep working on the car. Something like this usually takes years to get to this stage. This has taken 12 months and is so close to completion now," Des says proudly.

The 1923 Fiat was a contemporary of the Model T Ford. It was popular in Australia with commercial travellers as it had a large boot space which was handy for samples. Each state in Australia had vehicle body-fitting works, as the government had imposed taxes and tariffs on fully imported cars. This meant that car chassis were imported and fitted out in Australia.

This particular vehicle was originally fitted out in the Holden Motor Body Builders in Adelaide. Unlike many other cars of its time it was fitted out in the Italian designed model with a single dicky seat and not the more usual double-width seat designed by local manufacturers. So, this car is even more unique.

"Everything on the car body is made from plywood sitting on a timber frame," explains Des. "The whole lot is then covered by a fabric. In this case it is a leather-look vinyl, which should make it a little bit weatherproof. However, it's not really ideal to drive it in the rain. I can always take the Alvin in the case of a downpour," Des laughs.

"The Fiat also only has two wheels with brakes,



Fiat wreck in paddock

although it was designed for driving in the Alps, I'm not sure I would trust it on some of the steep downhill sections around here," Des laughs wryly.

"A vehicle like this, restored to this standard, will one day be a museum piece. Although I will be passing this one on to my son who is also an enthusiast.

"The vintage car gene runs deep through our family, as even my granddaughter drives a vintage car.

It's something I think we got from my own father, as he always had vintage cars.

"Modern day cars are not something I understand. With these old things you could look under a bonnet and know what you were looking at."

The cars from the 1920s and 1930s are also very beautiful, with their Art Deco lines. They are very much a product of the era with its appreciation of finely finished products, from cars to fashion to buildings. Everything was finished with a master's eye for beauty.

"The next generation of cars will all be electric and that is another big leap in technology. But I think that it is even more important than ever to be able to look back at these vehicles and see where they started.

"Keeping our history alive and in good running order means it is tangible and the engineering of the day can still be appreciated," Des smiles.



The upholstered Fiat



The beginnings of the timber frame of the Fiat



The Fiat timber body

