



# IDLE TORQUE

*stories for classic car enthusiasts*

ALEX FORREST



FREMANTLE PRESS



## CONTENTS

Introduction	4	Viva Torana memories	52
A cat still worth purring over	6	Standing O for Spud and co	53
Driving force behind Coopers	8	GT's extra grunt for Bathurst	54
The yellow Rolls-Royce	9	TCT for home harmony	56
Shelby Mustang captures spirit	10	Turning the Graham-Paige	57
Maserati man of Mandurah	12	Treasure from the depths	58
All go with tiny utility	13	Brabham's nostalgic return	60
D-Type Jag is wild copycat	14	Work on old cars can lift your life	61
Mighty Mouse roars again	16	Racer ahead of his time	62
Early F1 fix lasts	18	Veteran's Valiant effort	64
Go, go, Goggomobil	19	Fast enough to get the heart racing	65
Dream cars just everyday fare	20	Amphicar test goes swimmingly	66
Discarded 'banger' finds a new life	22	Simple solution leads to reliable motoring	68
Race greats back at Caversham	24	Sell my classic car? You're kidding	70
Travolta lyrics hit bum note	25	MG drive makes Dad's day special	71
Reliving the Mad Max apocalypse	27	Racetrack centenary	72
Benz thoroughbreds gather in the Grove	28	Pivotal role in motoring history	74
Street name honour for 'Bentley Boys'	30	A find to rival Tutankhamun's tomb	75
Plaything back as a racer with sting	32	Living the dream in Mad Max's machine	78
Alfa a fabulous 'find'	33	Supercar brings joy to the world	80
Historic carriage	34	Rare Ford sight stirs old fire	83
Killeen Special designed to win	35	When pedals go down – and up	84
Dreams are made of this	36	Early vehicle has antipodean echo	86
A taste for age and character	38	Riches reside in classic places	87
Tradition a double-edged sword	39	Jane's \$11 m racer	89
TC passion still going strong	40	Help us uncover WA's first speeder	90
Distance driver	42	We've found the offenders	90
Way of the Triffids	43	Revolutionary little beauty	92
Oddball Fiat a rare treat	44	Money in auto archaeology	94
Bond's message from Switzerland with love	45	Hollywood glam in muscle marvel	96
Look out for a Leyland	46	Giant profit after 60 years	97
Saab story evokes memories	47	Holy replica car, Batman!	98
Marshalling his memories	48	Finding romance in the shed	100
Face to face with a racing legend	49	50th flag for WA raceway	101
Dwyer had a need for speed	50	Acknowledgements	102
Blast from Bathurst's past	51	About the author	104

# INTRODUCTION



To 12-year-old me, they were the faceless creators of the ripping-est yarns I had ever read.

There, in a dusty old pile of dog-eared *Sports Car World* magazines, lived a collective of writers who ignited a lifelong fascination with telling stories about cars and the extraordinary things people do with them. Faceless names they may have been, but their words took me straight to Bathurst, Le Mans, Reims, Monaco, Monza, the Nürburgring and every other iconic motor racing location. These laconic, impassioned, technically informed and hilarious scribes did far more than just alert me to the preposterous reality that this was a job. They drew me in with their stories, which would later become a solid backgrounding of the most important cars and motoring events in history. As my appetite for exquisitely told car stories increased, the dots in my motoring knowledge slowly joined.

These stories showed me that proper writers ride alongside the greats, like Denis Jenkinson, the journalist who co-drove for Stirling Moss in their Mercedes-Benz 300SLR for 10 hours and seven minutes to win the 1955 Mille Miglia. They showed me that proper motoring writers compete in motorsport, work on their cars, attend events and constantly work to be better drivers, mechanics and, most of all, writers.

Their copy was coated in wry, deadpan humour, such as Romsey Quints's recollection of how he started work at *Sports Car World* magazine under editor Bill Tuckey. Quints, of course, was the pseudonym under which Bill Tuckey wrote for many years:

'I agreed to write for Tuckey on the basis that he must never publish a photograph that would identify me. That is not so much that I have a head like a half-sucked mango – on the contrary, it has sometimes been said that my visage bears a reasonable

resemblance to that of Ernest Hemingway in his younger, better looking days. No, it was just that at the time I had quite a different career and moved in circles that regarded cars and motor sport as a diversion for the lower classes when they weren't robbing banks or flashing themselves in the park.'

In the following years, excerpts from some of these stories appeared on my bedroom walls. Some were cut directly from the magazine pages, and others I reproduced on an old typewriter, then cut out and stuck on my wardrobe.

I didn't know it at the time, but this was the genesis of *Idle Torque*, my column about classic cars that ran every week for 21 years and five months in *The West Australian* newspaper. It would become the longest running motoring column in the country. *Idle Torque* would lead to the then completely inconceivable opportunity to live out those imagined experiences, to meet some of the people I knew from these old stories, to compete against them in motorsport and to work alongside them. It was a hobby I was being paid for. But to be paid for a job many people would do for free, one needs to go several levels up from merely enjoying it. Complete, stubborn and blinkered obsession would be another way of putting it.

Now, more than 35 years after first inhaling those *Sports Car World* yarns, cars and the creative process of writing about them with humour, accuracy and affection remain tremendously compelling.

The timing of the very first *Idle Torque* column, in September 1997, could not have been better. It was a time when many of the icons of Western Australian motorsport were still alive – people like the Clem Dwyer, Jack Nelson and Allan Tomlinson. These were resourceful men who, either side of World War II, built their racing cars themselves and made them competitive at a time when all resources were scarce. To have met some of these characters will always remain one of the most treasured gifts that I was blessed with in the course of writing *Idle Torque*. Common to all these men was their grit – their willingness to endure more than anyone else to get a result. What an honour it was to put on the public record, to a new audience, some of the herculean contributions these people made to motorsport in WA.

*Idle Torque* took me to private and public car collections worldwide, from the cars of the York Motor Museum all the way to the Ferrari and Maserati collections in Modena, Italy, the Le Mans museum in France and other private car collections that remain quietly secluded today.

Opportunities to drive iconic sports cars were plentiful but never taken for granted. These included driving the ex-Bob Jane 1963 Jaguar E-Type Lightweight – one of just 12 made – briskly up and down Oceanic Drive in Perth's western suburbs. It sold for A\$10.5 million in January 2017. Driving almost the whole Aston Martin range of early DB models (over several years) to the Gingin British Car Day was another, as was driving a Ferrari Dino around Barbagallo Raceway. Bobbing around the Swan River in a broken-down and leaking Amphicar 770 was invigorating, while governing a Stuart Light Tank across a paddock would also be one for the obscurity folder.

What all of these experiences taught me was that regardless of the value of their vehicles, enthusiasts will almost always want to share the experience of those cars with others. It's a trait that links us all as enthusiasts, and is one that will continue to bring us together, just as it has been doing for decades. As someone who wrote for so long about cars and the people who love them, it became increasingly clear that the pursuit of restoring and driving classic cars was about far more than just that. For some, it was about survival.

Maintaining classic cars requires owners to keep in contact with others. It requires collaboration and often face-to-face contact, and when this is a person's only contact with others, the task of making a new whastit to fit onto the car's fizgig is no longer the main act. One enthusiast I know, a Vietnam war veteran, restored an MGA to help with his post-traumatic stress disorder. Another showed his love for his daughters by restoring Volvo Amazons for them.

Without a doubt, today's modern cars are technically better than their ancestors in every way. But they don't need us to feather the choke on a cold morning, nor do they need us to compensate for slop in the steering, or to know the knack for opening an ageing and wonky door. Classic cars are the cars that still need us.

As I found out over 21 years and more than 1,100 columns, many people still need these cars, too. So if anyone asks why you have to keep spending so much time and money on cars, just hand them this book. And get back to it.

These stories are my favourites, and were chosen because they all, in one way or another, reflect the reasons why so many people still love their cars. I hope you enjoy them.

Alex Forrest

Welcome to the first Idle Torque column in which ALEX FORREST will report on a wide range of motoring activities from vehicle restoration to club activities. Veteran and vintage cars, the classics and the exotics and the men and women who own and love them will be regular features.  
– Mick Glasson, Motoring Editor, *The West Australian*, 27 September 1997

## A cat still worth purring over

'I learnt to drive in a two-cylinder car with cross-ply tyres and mechanical brakes. If you had rubber-soled shoes you could open the door and pull up nearly as fast. Then I got a car with hydraulic brakes. I couldn't believe it – you could bang your head on the windscreen if you were being silly.'

Neville Martin bought the fourth right-hand-drive XK120 made for £450. For 25 years, chassis 660004 was his daily transport. Several years later, he discovered that it was one of the 240 XK120s with an aluminium body. It is easy to understand why he is still besotted with it. Sublime styling, 3.4 litres, twin overhead camshafts and twin SU carburettors are as attractive to him now as they were when he was a lad of 22 in 1961.

The car was designed in two weeks in 1948 by the legendary Sir William Lyons. His influences can be traced right through to today's Jaguars, with the XK8 taking strong cues from the E-Type. Released when the company was a strengthening force in motor racing, the XK120 was immensely appealing to the buying public. To be able to drive on public roads a car which was visually and mechanically almost exactly the same as those which were winning races and rallies worldwide was a sensation.

Neville admits that this drew him in: 'People liked being associated with winners. You could have exactly the same engine as those used at Le Mans.'

It was not Jaguar's competition triumphs alone which sold so many cars. Though obviously a fan of the shape of the Mille Miglia BMWs, Sir William's acute sense of line and proportion helped him produce a shape which was individual and unmistakably Jaguar. The lines of its flanks are pure, uninterrupted by such frivolities as door handles, wing mirrors or chrome stripping.

Although Neville feels the cars are not just for admiring from afar, he advises, 'People often forget that they are not going to handle like a new car. They spend upwards of \$100,000 restoring

an XK, never having been in one nor driven one. This is going to be a major disappointment because the car they arrived in will out-accelerate it, you'll go over a bump and not know you've gone over it, and you'll be dry. They're a fast truck, the XK.'

To a point, he believes in originality. He still has its first 3.4-litre engine. But the car must be practical: 'When people rebuild these cars, they go back and put cross-plies on. They think, "Ah, the good old days." It's rather like getting caught in the old tramlines. The car will go where it wants to go.'

Neville has kept a close eye on the value of his car. One was reputedly sold for \$380,000 during the madness of the 1980s. He worries that these preventative values are causing the Jaguar club to age. 'The modern generation can't buy into them. If you're buying a wreck, they want \$20,000. No longer does the club consist of seventeen- to twenty-five-year-olds like it did when it started. We've got to do something to drag kids in, but you can't when you put a \$20,000 to \$50,000 barrier in front of them and say, "Jump over that!"'

A stalwart of the Jaguar Car Club of Western Australia, he is impatient with committees. 'I've done my term with the yoke on where you go and organise things and hope people turn up. And you think, "Crikey, another flop." Now I can sit up the front and

*'People liked being associated with winners. You could have exactly the same engine as those used at Le Mans.'*

pass all the funny, smart comments while the meeting's going on, make the crowd laugh. It's great.' Scratches in the aluminium are clearly visible as I make my way around the car. Every imperfection has its own story. The highest part of the slab-sided wing is about level with my waist. I bend



down to glance at the wide rubber and Dayton wire wheels hiding surreptitiously under the haunches. The aftermarket orange-needled gauges tell me that someone wants to know exactly what is going on under that piece of art being used as a bonnet. The exhaust is the diameter of a household downpipe.

Neville announces that the 'old girl' is a bit reluctant as she hasn't run for a couple of weeks. He places his hand under the peaked cap hanging from the centre of the dash and twists and pushes something with a knack that has been perfected over many years. The car's body twitches in sympathy as the rebuilt 4.2-litre engine is turned over.

Hiss ... pop ... warble ... warble ... warble. The big white-on-black tachometer begins to dance. As we pull out of the garage, Neville forecasts rain. It always rains when he takes it out. 'I should drive it around the Wheatbelt, to help the farmers,' he says.

The clutch bites for the first time and the urgency of the car is evident even below 2,000 rpm. We slowly make our way to a

main road as the mechanicals warm through.

As forecast by Neville, the sky begins to spit in our faces as we wheel out onto Grand Promenade. The massive rate of change of speed takes over. 'I only took her up to four grand, she's not warm enough yet,' Neville says.

One more burst of acceleration and we are forced to turn back. We pull into the driveway, and the wind stops ruffling my hair.

The one that started it all, and what a way to kick off the first ever edition of Idle Torque. Neville Martin's legendary and completely unhinged aluminium-bodied XK120 in some light springtime rain was wild. It was the first of many extraordinary car and people experiences, and the beginning of what would turn out to be a dream career so far. Today, aluminium-bodied Jaguar XK120s in good original condition sell for between \$600,000 and \$750,000.

## Driving force behind Coopers

He speaks almost in whispers. But this only makes you listen harder. There is no media spiel that has been developed over the years to feed to journalists as they file through the door of his shop in Rokeby Road. Unusual for a racing driver of Bugattis, AC Cobras, Coopers and Lotuses whose business has just turned 40.

Don Hall was putting the finishing touches on his 1951 Cooper 500, which he has been restoring, when I asked him about its early days. 'Instead of using tubular (chassis) parts, they used pressed metal which came off old ammunition boxes,' he said. 'After the war, they had to use what was available.'

These cars were so successful in the 1950s that their basic design is still being used in Formula One racing. Beginning in an entry-level class of racing, they were developed by Formula Three racers into Formula One winners. Cooper 500s were often seen on racing grids ahead of much bigger and more powerful machinery. HWM Jaguars, Cooper-Bristols and Altas could not compete with the lightness, agility and the power-to-weight ratio of the early Coopers.

In 1955, Don built his own version, installed an old Harley-Davidson engine and called it the Hall Special. He ground his own cams for it and later installed a JAP engine, which was highly successful on short circuits and hill-climb events. During this time, word spread about his engineering talent and he was employed by Aub Melrose to develop and tune his racing Austin-Healeys as well as occasionally race them.

I asked him about some of the more serious mishaps in his long career. 'I've hurt myself most with speedboats,' he said. 'I got thrown out of one down at Crawley doing sixty to seventy miles an hour. I went a long way in the air and when I came down I thought I was sliding along a gravel road, not water.'



Of course, he was not deterred. Before I arrived for the interview, he had taken out many fragile old books and photographs. As we sifted through them, he casually pointed to some pictures of a car which would easily fetch a six-figure sum. 'There's an old Bugatti (T51) I drove at Caversham for a few years – straight eight – we had fuel injection on it for a while which we made up,' he said.

Don took a break from racing while his speed shop (the first in Western Australia) was growing, and in 1967 returned with a class win in the WA Racing Car Championship. In his Ausper Formula Junior, he was second outright to a 2.5-litre Cooper Climax, pedalled by Don O'Sullivan.

In 1968, he bought a Lotus Elan and turned it into a highly competitive track car. He picked up another photograph, yellowed with age. 'That's at Caversham, one wheel off the deck – which if they don't do that, they're not going quick,' he said.

Of all the conveyances he has driven on the racetrack, from a door-handle-scraping Austin A90 Atlantic to a Caterham Super 7, Lotuses seem to be the objects of his special affection. There is an unused ashtray in the shape of a Lotus steering wheel on his desk and a huge sign on the wall – remnants of his days as the WA distributor for Lotus Cars Limited. His wood-shelved office smells of old rubber and leather, and is lined with pictures of his Elan and Lotus 47.

In the 1969 Six Hour Race at Wanneroo, Don's standard Europa performed faultlessly, and in 1970 and '71 he returned with a 47, a racing version of the Europa. In 1973, the Australian Design Rules pushed him out of his Lotus dealings. Compulsory seatbelts had been introduced and having a backbone chassis meant that there was no mounting point for them.

From his showroom next door, Don then sold Datsuns, but his heart wasn't in it and his attention moved back to speed equipment, accessories and motoring books.

A Caterham Super 7 is now his daily transport, and the six-year restoration of the Cooper is nearing completion. As we walked from the workshop, he picked up a twisted length of metal and said, 'I made the grille surround from a roller-door locking mechanism using the old photos as a guide.'

Don Hall closed his shop in 1999. The Cooper was sold at around this time. Don died in September 2020 aged 87.

## The yellow Rolls-Royce

'At 60 miles an hour, the loudest noise in this new Rolls-Royce comes from the electric clock,' proclaimed advertising man David Ogilvy in his famous campaign for the English firm.

The clock in Louis Mostert's 1924 Silver Ghost still keeps accurate time and has never been taken apart. The rest of the car came completely apart for the first time in 1991. Louis took it down to the last split pin and completely rebuilt it as originally as he could. It is one of the most authentic of the 300 Silver Ghosts left in the world.

Everyone knows how beautifully made Rolls-Royces are. First rides are never forgotten. A modern one is nice, with the delicious leather smell, burr walnut, supple, featherbed ride and the way your upper lip stiffens slightly as you enter.

In this car, chassis 69EM, it is the smaller systems and details that impress. For example, the screen dividing the chauffeur's seat from the rear cabin needs only to be touched to descend at a constant speed into the back of the front seat in silence. There are no electric motors, just an accurately weighted mechanism, wonderfully engineered and intriguing.

'It has a nice history,' Louis said. He is proficient in the art of understatement. The car transported mourners to Claude Monet's funeral in 1926, from Paris to the burial site in Normandy. It was also used in 1933 to help buy Captain Cook's Cottage. Louis continued, 'The trade attaché was given government money to go and buy this house and bring it to Australia. They decided they'd better have a good British image, so they went to Lord Scott, who still owned the car, and said to him: "Let's drive up in the Rolls." So they went up to Great Ayton, Yorkshire, to negotiate with the old lady and she agreed to sell them only the house. It now stands in Melbourne.'

In 1940, the car was still in the hands of its original owner, Lord T.A. Scott, who owned a number of hotels in France. While it was parked outside the Moulin Rouge, a popular cabaret theatre, it was confiscated by Hitler's troops during the takeover of France. In September 1944, after Paris was recaptured by the Free French army, the car was returned to the British authorities.

The name Silver Ghost originated from a 1907 40/50. Rolls-Royce's accountant, Claude Johnson, suggested that the company should concentrate on just one model. He took the 40/50 and silver-plated the radiator, headlight surrounds, windscreen and other bright work and painted the body silver. It was the first Silver Ghost and is now owned by the company. That car began a production run of 6,000 between 1907 and 1925.



This car stayed in England after World War II and next appeared on the farm of Ted Harris, founder of the Rolls-Royce Enthusiasts' Club. He was storing it on behalf of two 'London playboys' who did not pay their rent. The Paternoster farmer bought the car for £37 10s. According to the RREC, Mr Harris gave the car a light restoration because he could not afford a full one. Colin W. Hughes recalled in the club magazine, 'I remember 69EM standing next to a hedge, with a sheet of corrugated iron over the cabriolet top, nominally to keep out the worst of the weather. I think it had traces of dark blue paint.'

It is now resplendent in pale yellow. Louis explained his colour choice: 'It's a heavy car. In dark colours they look even heavier. Yellow makes the car seem lighter.'

Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee celebrations in 1977 included a parade by the RREC through Windsor Castle. This was the leading car and Mr Harris greeted the Queen from it as he entered the castle.

The car was sold at auction in 1989 and brought to Australia in 1990. Louis promptly acquired it and it took him two years just to dismantle. 'It doesn't help when you've got one piece of metal in the car that's original and the rest is all remakes and fakes. I fix things, as opposed to replacing them,' he said.

Irrevocably damaged items, such as the hood and interior, were renewed. But even these materials are exactly as the body-maker used when they first clothed the chassis between March and May in 1924. The front seats have Connolly leather, there is West-of-England cloth lining the roof and rear seats, and Wilton carpet on the floors. As well as the upholstery, Louis also sought outside help to have the huge crankshaft machined, the six cylinders rebored and the body painted. 'The whole fitting of the engine, rebuilding the gearbox and differential I did myself,' he said.