PETER BROCK

ROAD TO GLORY

The amazing story of a legend's rise to fame

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COLIN FULTON with photographs by TERRY RUSSELL

ALLEN&UNWIN

Photographs on
Racing at Calder, May 1971.
Peter Brock and Colin Bond, Calder Rallycross, October 1970.

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FOREWORD

It is my pleasure to recommend *Peter Brock: Road to Glory*. It captures beautifully my brother Peter's formative years, which were crucial to the person he ultimately became and the success he achieved.

Growing up in the rural community of Hurstbridge as we Brock boys did, we had freedom and opportunity as well as a great lifestyle. The influences of family were strong and close as we met on a weekly basis with all the relatives at our family farms. This book sheds light on those years in the Diamond Valley, with contributions throughout from family members and Peter's contemporaries. Family, together with the friends of those years, provided a lasting influence on Peter's life.

Among those friends was Terry Russell, an amateur photographer who snapped Peter's early years on the racetrack. Most of these excellent photographs have not been seen before, and they illustrate the book and the times brilliantly.

Colin Fulton interviewed not only family but many of the friends who influenced Peter's life at that time. He has worked hard to ensure the events in this book are chronologically correct, meticulously ensuring accuracy and balance while retelling the events of those early years in an engaging manner.

I'd like to conclude by acknowledging our parents. It was their sacrifice and influences that facilitated Peter's career. Without them, none of this would have happened.

Neil Brock


Castrol
SPARK PLUGS

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PREFACE

This book was first conceived about a year before Peter Brock's untimely death in September 2006. The resulting publicity, state funeral, issues with his will and controversy raised by the women in his life meant the project was put on the backburner: to clear the air, so to speak. Now, some four years after that crash during the Targa West tarmac rally in Western Australia, it is time to look at the period in Peter Brock's life that fashioned his character, created the legend and made him a household name in Australia.

Peter's youth has never been fully and accurately chronicled, while his early racing days are the stuff of legend. It is also fair to say Peter Brock was a somewhat enigmatic figure who received a degree of notoriety, especially in the immediate period following his death. He was a man who achieved 'hero' status long, long before that fateful day near Perth.

Both Terry Russell and I knew Peter in the years before he went motor racing and we kept up our association in varying degrees over the next forty years. This book has not been written to be a warts-and-all exposé, although it may mention the odd pimple or two. Neither is it a document for the racing fraternity – a book highlighting detailed race tactics, times and results, although these are listed at the back. Rather, it is a book about a time in which Peter Brock was not yet an Australian sporting icon: his youth, teenage years and early twenties, and his attempts to go motor racing with the creation of the legendary Austin A30. It also deals with his early successes leading up to when he won his first Bathurst, 'The Great Race' in 1972. From then on he was larger than life and had achieved 'cult' status.

Like many successful people, particularly those driven to excel, Peter Brock had his detractors, especially those who knew him during his late teens and early twenties. It is fair to say, however, that his ambition and single-minded purpose to be successful in his chosen field were a product of his temperament and this did have a downside, especially in the earlier years when he was a man with an unfulfilled dream.

There are people who were close to him during his early racing days who were not always enamoured with either his temperament or his conduct, but all agree he was a man who matured and changed for the better. He was also a very kind man who did a great deal of charity work, and his tireless efforts during the '05' campaign were exemplary. He was a favourite with the fans because he always had time for them and he loved children, spending an inordinate amount of time talking to them and signing autographs. In this he was the antithesis of his great rival, Alan Moffat.

Terry and I visited and spoke at length to nearly thirty people who knew Peter throughout this period of his life and we are very grateful for the time they took to speak with us to detail their anecdotes about, arguably, the most-famous racing driver Australia has ever produced. Jack Brabham may have been a triple world Formula One champion, but even the non-racing fraternity knew of 'Peter Perfect' and the 05 number.

In all cases, the notes of our conversations with the contributors to this book were checked with them to make sure that they were accurate and that I had made the correct assumptions while writing the book. With the help of family and friends I have also endeavoured to clear up the misconceptions and inaccuracies that have appeared in print over the past forty years.

All but a few of the photographs in this missive have never been seen before, let alone published. The ones of his youth and family life were mostly provided by Peter's elder brother, Neil Brock, as well as other family members and friends, for which we are very grateful. The others were taken over a period of eight years by Terry Russell. They are a graphic pictorial of the young Peter Brock, his friends, his environment and the first racing cars that made him famous.

Colin Fulton
August 2010

‘The Boys’ – Peter, Neil and Lewis (left to right) with baby Phillip, 1950. (Neil Brock)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With special thanks to:

Colin Bond – racer, friend and HDT driver

Ron Bentley – engine tuner and owner of Ron Bentley Motors; the man who turned the A30 into a successful racing car

John Brock – Peter's cousin

Lewis Brock – Peter's brother

Neil Brock – elder brother of Peter

Phillip Brock – Peter's youngest brother

Sandy Brock – Peter's uncle and family mentor

Lyne Brown – Sports Sedan competitor and long-time friend

Dennis Clarke – one of the Box Hill mob; was involved with the later development of the A30

John Clark – older brother of Dennis and fellow early Holden owner and racer

David Chandler – part of the Box Hill mob; a friend of the mid 1960s

Tim Ferguson – one of the Hurstbridge mob; childhood and long-time friend

Harry Firth – legendary owner of the Holden Dealer Team, who plucked Peter from the amateur ranks and guided him to his first Bathurst win

Christine Gibson (formerly Christine Cole) – racing driver and former girlfriend of Peter

Fred Gibson – Bathurst winner and Ford driver; later team owner with Nissan and Ford

Al Hamley – a close friend in the early years

Peter Janson – fellow racer and friend who was part of the original HDT

John Lovegrove – one of the Hurstbridge mob, and school and family friend

Eddie Mathews – GM engineer and later Chief Metallurgist

Ken Mitchell – family friend and engineer; co-builder and co-driver of the A30

Terry Russell – brother of Heather Watson, family friend and photographer; involved in the building of the A30

Ian Tate – legendary engine builder and race mechanic; chief Mechanic for the Holden Dealer Team

Bill Tuckey – journalist, motoring writer, Bathurst competitor

Dave Turnbull – fellow soldier and life-long friend

Peter Turner – fellow soldier

Bob Watson – race and rally driver

Heather Watson (formerly Heather Russell) – Peter's first wife

Peter Lewis Williams – the key link in the formation of the Holden Dealer Team and its subsequent operation

On handling the beast, Peter said, ‘I wondered why the steering was so light.’ Phillip Island, Australia Day 1968.

INTRODUCTION

THE CAR THAT CREATED A LEGEND

The small blue sedan that crested Lukey Heights at the Phillip Island racetrack looked almost out of control. Its nose was sitting up and it squirmed and twitched as the driver braked heavily for a right-hander at the bottom of the rise.

It was the summer of January 1968, and this was the fourth race meeting for the soon-to-become famous Austin A30, Peter Brock's first race car and the vehicle that was to launch the most successful racing career in the annals of Australian domestic motor sport.

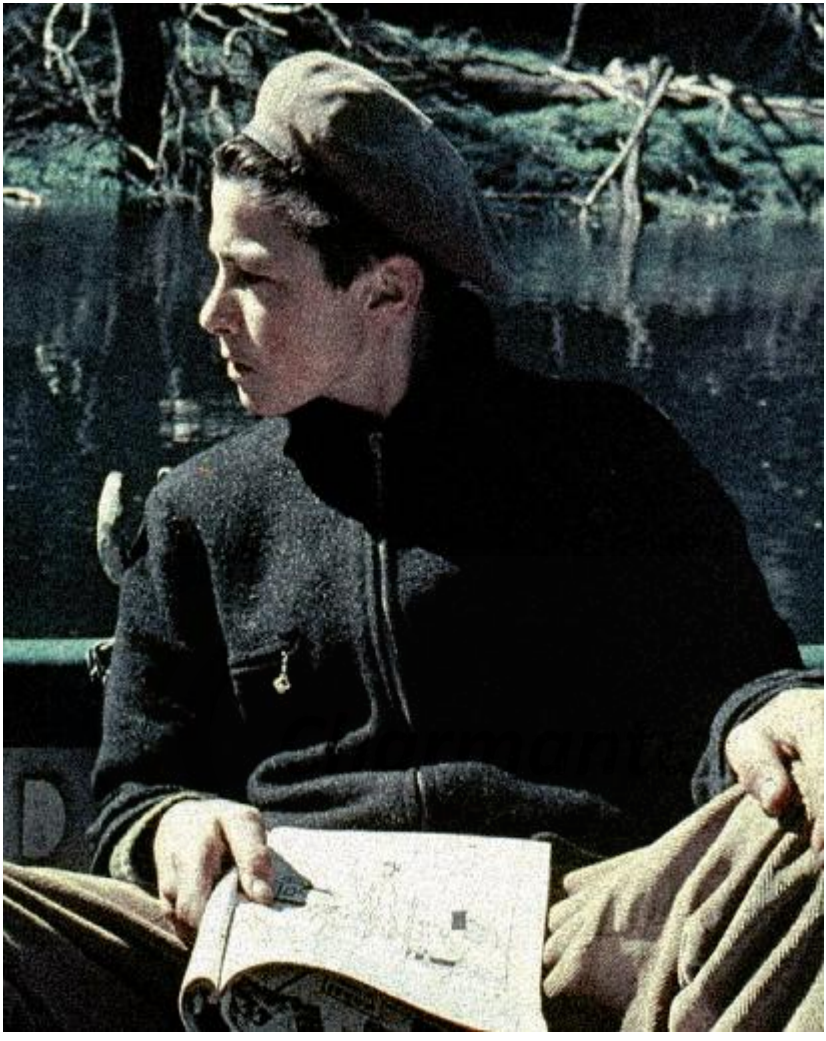
There was nothing dainty or sophisticated about the sedan. Sure, it was small, but it was a rather crude home-built mongrel that only two people could drive, and only one of those could drive it really quickly. In the words of Ron Bentley, the engine tuner who later developed the car, 'It was a hybrid, a real dog of a car with some vicious characteristics!'

At the time of the Phillip Island race meeting the vehicle had only half the horsepower it was to attain later, and the suspension and handling modifications that were to tame some of the vehicle's bad characteristics had yet to be implemented. Despite this, it still finished second against more sophisticated sports cars.

When shown a photograph of the A30 nose's high attitude a few days later, Peter Brock simply said, 'I wondered why it felt so light in the steering'. That statement said it all. At this stage in his career, he knew no better. The car was a work in progress, and he was still learning.

'The car was inherently unstable,' Ron Bentley said, 'but because he learnt to drive it from the beginning, any improvements, or development work, were instantly felt by him and he was able to extract a maximum performance from it.'

‘First love’, the Austin 7. Kirkliston, 1959. (Neil Brock)



Peter – Eildon, 1960. (Neil Brock)

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THE YOUNG
PETER BROCK

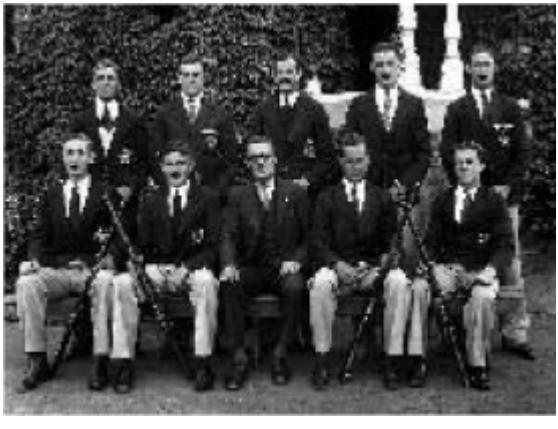
THE YOUNG
PETER BROCK

Peter Geoffrey Brock arrived in this world on 26 February 1945. He was the second of four boys born to Geoffrey and Ruth Brock.

The first son, Neil, was nearly two years older and the third and fourth sons, Lewis and Phillip, were born in 1948 and 1950 respectively. There had also been a daughter, a first born, christened Mary Ruth, but she had died of pneumonia shortly after birth.

Geoff was a man of many talents and had originally planned to be a farmer, having attended and graduated from the famous Dookie Agricultural College in Victoria during 1934/35. In 1940 he married Ruth Laidlay, a union that was both long and happy. With the start of hostilities he applied to join the Royal Australian Air Force but was rejected on medical grounds, having had rheumatic fever as a child. He was more successful with the army and spent most of the Second World War at Puckapunyal, training troops to be radio operators and in electrics.

When Peter was born, Sergeant Geoffrey Brock and Ruth were living at her parent's medium-sized family farm of three hundred acres at Nutfield, north-east of Melbourne, which, in the mid 1940s, was pretty much in the bush. Shortly after Geoff's demobilisation, the family moved to a nearby house in Acacia Road, Hurstbridge. The surrounding area was definitely rural, consisting mainly of isolated houses and small- to medium-sized farms. Many of the roads were not sealed and telephones were not common. There was also no mains electricity and lighting was generally by kerosene lamps. Some families had their lighting plants run by a petrol generator. Refrigerators were a luxury; ice chests kept food cool. There was also no reticulated water supply to the area so corrugated iron or concrete water tanks were the norm.



Geoff Brock (back row, 2nd from right), Dookie Agricultural College, 1935. (Neil Brock)

In late 1945, using his knowledge of electrics, Geoff started a company called Hurstbridge Radio Repair, which also doubled as a lighting plant business. At first, the business was run out of a shed on the corner of Anzac Avenue and Main Road, but shortly after Brock senior purchased a shop with a separate house at the rear just down the road and serviced his business from there.

Running an electrical repair business was a difficult proposition since there was still no electricity, but Geoff turned this negative into a positive by building and installing 32-volt lighting plants. One of these plants was constructed for the Brock family home. Two years later he went into partnership with Bill Hale, a friend who was a mechanic. They bought an existing nearby garage and managed to also become a GM Holden sub-dealer of Preston Motors, one of the major new car dealers in Melbourne. The partnership was a fairly successful business. One of its claims to fame was that Geoff sold the first of the new 48/215 Holdens in the area to a Mr Harry Goodger of Strathewen, who had the Commonwealth Government's district mail run.

Like many bush garages of the time, they sold the petrol products of several companies. Standing outside were three of the old-style, manual, glass-bowl petrol bowsers bearing the logos of Golden Fleece and Plume, or Mobil's Pegasus sign.

In 1949 the family changed address yet again. This time they moved into a new house that had been built for the Brocks at Anzac Avenue in Hurstbridge. The new home was also without mains electricity. Neil remembers that the trusty petrol generator and lighting plant moved with them to Anzac Avenue, so they had some electricity, but it was an expensive way to have light so lanterns and the occasional candle were still used.

The stove, however, remained wood-fired and, before the kids were old enough to wield an axe, Ruth did most of the wood chopping. Mains electricity was finally connected in 1956, but the wood stove remained for some time – electric- or gas-fired cooking stoves were yet to arrive in the area. There was also no television in the early 1950s (it did not arrive until 1956), but like most Australian families the Brocks had a radio, in fact several, since Geoff repaired them as a business.

Geoff and Ruth Brock's wedding, 1940. (Neil Brock)


SECOND SCHEDULE

Peter's birth certificate. February 1945. (Neil Brock)

While only one in four Australian families had cars in those days, they were more common for rural folk due to the simple reason that they were a necessity. The Brock family was no exception; wheels were a fact of life. Neil vaguely remembers the family's first car; a Willys Overland convertible in which, 'Dad used to court Mum.' In those days, Geoff often also towed a small caravan so that the newlyweds could go away camping.

Initially, the four boys shared a bedroom, a recipe for constant tension over territory among four young cubs trying to spread their wings. Eventually, a third bedroom was added to the timber home at Anzac Avenue and the boys were separated two by two – Neil and Peter in one, while Phillip and Lewis shared the other.

As the older brothers, at least in the early years, Neil and Peter were very close. However, the shared bedroom was one factor that later caused much angst between these two Brock boys. They were too different in character and interests, especially when they became teenagers and Peter began his single-minded pursuit of four-wheel mobility. Their cousin, John Brock, who was the son of Geoff's brother Jack, said he

witnessed some ‘ripper fights between Neil and Peter’. He remembers that they were not drawn-out affairs, but they were more than just simple spats between siblings.

‘There was no winner because they did not go on for long, but there was certainly a few punches thrown,’ John said. ‘Peter was usually the instigator, or was the cause, because Neil was a pretty easygoing boy.’

Overall, though, the Brocks were a happy, close-knit family. By no stretch of the imagination were they wealthy, or even well-off, but because of their extended family and what this offered in shared properties and lifestyle, plus access to motor vehicles, the Brocks were able to do things that other average suburban families could not.

‘In many ways we had an idyllic childhood and youth and I have no complaints,’ Neil recalled.

In those days it was generally accepted that the man was head of the household, but with Geoff and Ruth this could best be described as a moot point. They adored one another and Ruth was not a woman who could be told what to do. So the boys’ upbringing and discipline was shared. Generally, Peter was the one who needed the most guidance, although at no point could he be described as naughty or a problem child.

‘He was just boisterous and sometimes a little wild,’ Neil said. ‘Even at an early age he possessed a fierce will, a quick temper and a determination to do things his own way. Usually, the arguments were with Mum over what he could or could not do, although Dad also had to initiate a firm hand on many occasions.’

Willys and van, 1945. (Neil Brock)

Peter, 1948. (Neil Brock)

Neil and Peter, 1948. (Neil Brock)

Peter was short and slight for his age. In fact, he did not begin to really grow until his late teens and did not reach his full height until he was almost twenty-two. Neil reckoned this height and weight disadvantage was one reason why Peter was so forceful and never backed down. It was the terrier syndrome – small dog, big heart and big bark. This trait manifested itself in many ways, the most obvious being that Peter never refused a dare. Whether it was riding a bicycle, charging down the nearby Anzac Hill on a billycart or climbing a tree, young Peter was the craziest and the fastest, and always reached the highest point.

When he went to school his adventurous spirit made him many friends, not only with boys his own age but older ones as well. At Hurstbridge Primary School he was befriended by John Lovegrove, a gentle giant almost a year and a half older than him. This unlikely duo became very close and remained so until John got married in 1967.

'I liked Peter,' John told me, 'it was hard not to. Anyway, the school only had some ninety pupils and we all knew one another. I was also an only child and the Brocks with their large and extended family were fun to be with. They also welcomed me with open arms and I spent much of my boyhood at their various homes.'

Another boyhood friend in primary school was Tim Ferguson. He was even older than Lovegrove. He too remembered the younger Peter Brock with fondness:

Peter really stood out from the primary school kids of his age. He was a live wire – small and wiry. He was like a little whippet. He was cheeky, yet you could not help but like him and that is why we let him mix with us older boys. He was also very good at sport, which was always a help in making friends.

Naturally, Lovegrove and Ferguson also became friends with Neil. Being the same age, they had met at school one year earlier. When Neil and John moved to Eltham High School and Tim Ferguson transferred to Heidleberg Technical School, Peter was left behind in the primary school for another year, something he hated. Despite this, they remained in company, especially when Peter also graduated to the high school a year later. The four seldom mixed with the younger Brock brothers, Lewis and Phillip. Lovegrove remembered Peter referring to them dismissively as 'the little kids!'

Phillip said that as the youngest he had little to do with Peter until he was well into his teens and in many ways he did not want to. 'Neil, as the oldest, was a bit distant, but nice. Peter though was not always pleasant to be around. He could be pretty mean and I tried to stay out of his way as much as possible. As I was the youngest, he used to push me around a lot and I resented it.'

The other brother, Lewis, was some three years younger than Peter and agreed with Phillip as to their brother's demeanour. As younger brothers they suffered from Peter's temperament and there was some serious conflict. Lewis recalled:

Everything had to be his way and I have forgotten the number of times he threw me across the room after an argument. He also had this explosive temper. One day I was standing inside the house after an argument and he was outside in the garden looking at me through the window. Feeling safe because there was a wall, or rather some glass between us, I made a face at him. He reacted immediately and put his fist through the glass in an effort to hit me. Luckily I jumped back in time.

Phillip also reflected on a moment when Peter's temper caused him some real pain:

I was pushing a barrow load of lawn clippings past where Peter was working on a go-kart and some of the clippings blew over him and the kart. For no reason he got annoyed and threw a heavy shifter at me, which struck my ankle. Luckily it did not break the bone, but there was a big bruise and blood everywhere. I cried a lot, but there was nobody at home and I never told my parents. My brother did not apologise. Strangely, in our later life we became quite close and of course I hero-worshipped him when he started racing and became so successful.

Peter (bottom left) and John Lovegrove (top right), Hurstbridge Primary School, 1950–51. (Neil Brock)

Brothers in arms – Neil, Peter, Phillip and Lewis (left to right),1953. (Neil Brock)

Peter's propensity to throw things also came to the fore with Ferguson on one occasion. Again, it was Peter's inability to suffer fools, even if the other person had made an innocent mistake. Ferguson recalled:

One day we were working on our cars and I was helping him. He was lying on the ground tinkering with something and he asked me to pass him a half-inch spanner. I inadvertently passed him a 3/16th and he just threw it back at me, very hard – that hurt! He was not being malicious, he just reacted without thinking.

As with so many boys of the 1950s and 1960s, football was the glue that bound them together. John Lovegrove said:

We were all interested in football. It was football after school, football at home and VFL on the weekends. They were mad Collingwood followers and I was an Essendon man, so there was the usual rivalry.

But when the two teams were playing against one another I would sometimes join the Brocks and travel to the MCG to see the games. It was a great outing and tremendous fun.

Lovegrove even went to see Collingwood play in a grand final: 'They invited me on the condition that since the Dons were not playing I had to barrack for the Magpies. So, even though it went against the grain, I accepted!'

Both Neil Brock and John Lovegrove remarked on the almost idyllic childhood all the boys had. There was little parental control on what they could do and where they ventured. In those days Australia was quite different to now – doors were left unlocked and people were not suspicious of strangers. Nobody thought anything of small boys traversing private property to get to a dam or river, or play football on the nearest unmade road.

'We lived virtually in the bush and we roamed freely as you could in those days,' said Lovegrove. 'Nobody told us where we could and could not go. I lived less than a kilometre away, so we were constantly together.'

There were no telephones at any of their homes – and of course mobile phones were only something out of Dick Tracey comics – but the ingenuity of the boys meant they found another way of keeping in contact with one another. The instigators were the three older boys, backed up by Geoff Brock's electrical inventive talent. Tim Ferguson, who originally thought up the idea, said, 'together with another friend called Athol Graham, we pooled some of our money and purchased a roll of army field wire from a surplus store and created our own telephone service.'

Ferguson laughed at the audacity and practicality of their invention: 'Remember, it was only about ten years after the war had ended and there was a lot of surplus army material available, which was not expensive. Anyway, this roll of wire was pretty large – about half a mile, or nearly a kilometre, of cable.'

The boys ran the wire along the acres of country-style fencing between the four houses belonging to these juvenile apprentice engineers, but there was one problem: a road that could not be traversed. So as Ferguson told it, they came up with a novel solution:

We found a nearby drain that ran under the road, but it was too small for anybody to crawl through. We tied the wire cable to some string which was then tied to the collar of one of our dogs. The animal was then coaxed through the drain by some meat held at the exit on the other side of the road.

The wiring was connected to some old headsets and carbon microphones from a Second World War army radio set and, 'hey presto', they had a fully functioning telephone system. Ferguson described it as 'a party line and we used a buzzer to alert people when we wanted to talk and, more importantly, organise things. Geoff Brock, being interested in all things electrical, advised us on the technical side, but it was our idea. Peter had a minor role in setting it up.'

Lewis, John Lovegrove and Peter (left to right), 1956. (Neil Brock)

Geoff and Peter Brock, Kirkliston, 1959. (Neil Brock)

Apart from his school friends, Peter was close to two special people at one special place: his uncle, Sandy Brock, and his wife Norma and their home known as 'Kirkliston' at Doreen, near Nutfield. Sandy was Geoff's younger brother, born six years later. In all, there were two Brock uncles and two Brock aunts, but it was Sandy who was Peter's favourite.

Kirkliston had an interesting history. It was named after the Scottish town from where the Brock clan had originally migrated. It was purchased by Peter's great-great-grandfather Alexander in the mid 1860s, when it was put up as part of the second great land sales that occurred after Melbourne began its sprawl to

the east, following its founding in the mid 1830s. There is some conjecture as to when the farmhouse was actually built, although Sandy believes it was in the early 1880s. It was a fair-sized property; some 350 acres (just over 140 hectares) of mixed farming, although it was mainly utilised for dairy.

In the 1950s the farm was also inhabited by Peter's grandfather and grandmother, known affectionately as 'Boss' and 'Granny'. They still owned the farm and there were two houses on the property, with the grandparents in one and Sandy and Norma in the other. Neil recalled that it was 'a family meeting place, where uncles, aunts, cousins and friends would gather on the weekends for farm work, family lunches, dinners and conviviality. Most weekends were spent there, although Peter was the most frequent visitor.'

Their cousin John remembered it well, too. 'I lived in East Brunswick,' he said, 'but journeyed to Hurstbridge almost every weekend and either stayed at my Uncle's house or at Kirkliston. All my holidays were also spent there. It was very much a male domain. My younger sister would also sometimes come with another girl who was my aunt's daughter. But, it was not an environment for girls; they just did not fit in. In those pre-teen years Peter paid them scant attention.'

Uncle Sandy could be regarded as one of the main mentors of Peter's early life:

Peter spent most of his school holidays and every free weekend with us from the age of five to sixteen years. We had a big influence on his early life. His aunt and I had a very close relationship with him. Sadly, we had no kids of our own so in many ways the relationship was more like a father and son to me. There was an affinity: he listened to me and Norma, perhaps more so than his own parents. We could do more with him than Geoff and Ruth because with them he was just one of four boys and Peter was somebody who craved attention.

Despite their close relationship there is some evidence to indicate that of the four Brock brothers, Geoff and Ruth paid more attention to Peter, partly because they were closer in temperament to him and wanted to nurture his restless spirit. This caused some resentment with the younger two, Lewis and Phillip, particularly when they were in their teens. But it was not a problem for Neil.

‘Young Rocker’, Hurstbridge, 1961. (Neil Brock)

‘Neil was his own man,’ said Sandy. ‘He was a steady and focused lad. As the elder brother, Peter also listened to him. The younger brothers never really figured in the relationship until much later.’

Neil agreed. ‘I had no problem with Mum and Dad’s relationship with Peter. Sure, they did much to help him, especially when he started motor racing, but as the first born I reckon I was spoilt rotten, especially in the early years!’

Phillip had a slightly different spin on family life. ‘We were not a touchy-feely family,’ he said, ‘which is something I missed, especially since I was the youngest. Mum and Dad were too busy with business and running a household, which with four boys was quite a task.’

Peter’s love of ‘Kirkliston’ and his desire to be there was not quite what it seemed, revealed Sandy:

One of the main reasons he liked coming to us was because we gave him much more freedom than his own parents, and he already had a lot. Although he diligently helped around the farm he was not overly interested in farming, but we let him drive the tractors, first a McCormack Deering and later a Massey Ferguson. This was his real interest!

Neil reckoned that:

Peter was car mad from an early age. In fact he was interested in anything that had an engine. In this he was just like Dad, who always owned a motor vehicle. He was one of the first persons in Hurstbridge to buy a new 48/215 Holden shortly after they were first released. The only other person in the area to own a Holden that they knew was the local doctor. So, for Peter, driving a tractor was a huge incentive to go to the farm and do some farm work.

‘Boss’ and cousins, Mothers’ Day, 1954. Peter is at top left and cousin John is at top right. (Neil Brock)

Peter first drove a tractor when he was only seven, but that was restricted to the front yard of the farmhouse where he could be properly supervised. Initially, there was one major problem: he could not reach the pedals. A year later he graduated to the paddocks and gradually was able to drive unsupervised. However, the pedals remained a stumbling block for some time, so he mainly drove any tractor in first gear.

There was also a Chevrolet truck at the farm, which he soon began to drive. The issue of the pedals again arose but he learnt to drive by using the ignition and switching it on and off. The problem was finally solved by a large, thick pillow jammed behind his back to push him forward in the driving seat, plus the natural addition of a few inches to his height.

'Messing about in boats', Lake Eildon, 1960. (Neil Brock)

'In the evening we listened to the radio serials which were very popular in the years before television and talked, or read magazines,' recalled Sandy. 'Peter would spend hours lying on the floor with a pencil and paper, drawing cars. It had to have wheels for him to be interested. I have some to this day.'

Apart from football, Peter's only other real interest was fishing. Fishing also meant boats, plus Lake Eildon in central Victoria. These three elements featured strongly in Peter Brock's youth.

Lake Eildon is a large, man-made body of water that was built in several stages before final completion in 1955. It was created by damming the Goulburn River. When full, it contains six times the volume of water as Sydney Harbour. As well as water storage for farms and towns in the Goulburn River Valley, the dam and accompanying lake was designed from the outset as a recreational area for boating enthusiasts and fishermen. For the latter it was nirvana as the Victorian Government had stocked the lake with trout.

Peter's grandfather, Lewis (Lex) Brock – or Boss – was a keen fisherman and he passed on his favourite pastime to the boys, especially Peter. In those early days it was the only relaxing pursuit Peter ever engaged in. The whole family would spend many happy weekends and school holidays at Lake Eildon.

Home-made ski, Lake Eildon, 1962. (Neil Brock)

Geoff knew a farmer whose land fronted part of the eastern section of the lake. Initially, they leased a small block on the water's edge from the farmer and just camped at the lake. Eventually, they were allowed to build a small one-roomed shack, which was gradually extended until it possessed several rooms and much improved sleeping accommodation. Their spot was at the far end of the Howqua arm of the lake and was called Mac's Cove. The house remained a pretty basic 'holiday home'. As there was no electricity they had to make use of a primus stove and kerosene lanterns.

The lifestyle at the lake could have been straight out of Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*, with everybody 'messing around in boats'. Neil recalled:

We had a small ex-army flat-bottomed landing barge which was powered by an old four-cylinder car engine. This was later supplemented and ultimately replaced by a large pontoon fashioned from several 44-gallon drums and tethered at the end of a home-made jetty. The pontoon later featured a roof so we could even fish in comfort when it was raining. Peter being Peter had to do his own thing though. From somewhere, he and Dad got hold of an old drop tank from a World War Two fighter aircraft. They split it

in two and fashioned one half into a crude little boat, scarcely two metres long. It had a 12-volt car battery at the front which powered a powerful aircraft electric windscreen wiper motor fixed to a long straight shaft. A propeller was at the end of this shaft which also doubled as a rudder.

This little craft was very unwieldy and only marginally seaworthy as it had no keel and a shallow, rounded bottom. Peter loved 'his boat', and roamed in it over much of the Howqua inlet by himself.

The other activity they engaged in at the lake was water skiing, a recreation that was still in its infancy in Australia, although it had been around for thirty or so years. The old army boat was not sufficiently fast to be used for this task, but some nearby friends had a large steel speedboat powered by an inboard V8 motor. At first the Brock boys did not have enough spare money to purchase a proper set of water skis, so they fashioned their own, which worked well enough and taught Peter the rudiments of the sport. By the time 'proper' skis were purchased he was a master of speeding on water!

The late 1950s saw Peter Brock enter his teens, and the central activity (some would say obsession) that was to drive much of his life had begun to evolve and become a main part of his life.

John, Peter and Lewis Brock with Peter's Austin, 1960. (Neil Brock)

2

TEENAGE YEARS – *AUSTIN 7 AND THE CFA*

TEENAGE YEARS

AUSTIN 7 AND THE CFA

Peter turned thirteen at the beginning of 1958. In all respects he was having a good childhood. His Mum and Dad were happily married and they were model parents.

He had three brothers who he could muck around with if he chose. He had plenty of friends and he was popular at school. While his academic results could have been better if he had applied himself, they were sufficient for him to be liked by the teachers and, therefore, largely left alone. Then there was the gregarious and interesting lifestyle of the Brock clan. All in all it was a great life.

Sandy Brock said he and Norma sometimes helped Peter with his homework, especially when his mind wandered to other thoughts and he was tardy in completing an assignment:

Even though Peter was very bright, by no stretch of the imagination could the budding teenager be described as a good student, though he was definitely not lazy. He only did well if he was interested in the subject and he chaffed at the imposed regimentation of attending classes. His one intellectual interest was reading, including newspapers, which he read voraciously all his life.

Eltham High Senior Football Team – Peter (front row on right), John Lovegrove (centre middle row). (Neil Brock)

Peter’s sixteenth birthday, Hurstbridge, 1961. (Neil Brock)

Henry Barton James, circa 1903. (Neil Brock)

Peter also loved music. The late 1950s and early 1960s were the years that revolutionised music around the world – rock 'n' roll, and later such bands as the Beatles, were changing the face of teenage culture forever. At first, Peter was an avid lover of Elvis Presley and the Australian rock stars Col Joy and Johnny O'Keefe. Later, as his tastes matured, he gravitated towards folk music before including jazz in his musical interest; the latter being further reinforced by his first wife's interest in the genre. When money allowed he collected the small standard vinyl 45s which in the late 1950s cost ten shillings, or $1 in today's currency.

Like most adventurous lads of his era, he did what was asked of him in class, but never really extended himself. Instead, he channelled his surplus energy into sport and the other adventurous activities he shared with his friends. At Eltham High School Peter continued his sporting activities. He had been a star in the Hurstbridge Primary football team so it was natural that he would join Eltham High School's football team, initially in one of the under-age squads. Despite his lack of height and slight build, he excelled at whatever age group he was drafted into and started playing for the school's First Eighteen well before the required age. Neil said:

Peter absolutely loved sport and thrived on the competitive nature of every sport he tried. He was passionate about playing football and had considerable talent. He had dash, was very fast and an accurate kick. Generally, he played in the forward line, or as a rover. He usually won, or came close to winning, the 'best and fairest' award of whatever under-age team he represented at the time. He was also awarded numerous trophies for athletics.

Peter eventually captained the school's football team and was both form captain and a house captain, and he took all three positions seriously. As well, he was part of the school's swimming team, though this was not a key sport in the area for the simple reason that swimming pools were not common in the bush.

'When he was playing sport he set himself goals and he was very determined on reaching those goals,' said his Uncle Sandy. 'He was competitive by nature and could be so to the point of absolute ruthlessness. It is something he carried over into his motor racing and was one of the reasons for his success.'

After leaving school Peter continued playing football, this time with the Diamond Valley League, which was regarded as one of the most competitive Aussie Rules leagues in the state. At one stage his family even thought that he might go the whole way and become a VFL player. However, long before he left school the die had been cast and it was another pursuit that claimed his full attention and became his passion.

Peter's father Geoff had always been passionate about cars and this ran in the family. His great uncle, Henry Barton James, was a keen motor enthusiast and in 1904 founded the Automobile Club of Victoria, which later became the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria (RACV). At a time when the number of cars in Australia only numbered in the hundreds, he was the proud owner of a 12-horsepower French De Dion.

Henry B. James was also an executive of Dunlop Rubber in Melbourne, as well as a battery company. As part of Dunlop's marketing campaign he set about increasing interest in the motor car by showing the public that it could be a reliable means of transport, which, at the turn of the century, was a bold statement indeed! In 1905 he helped organise the first Sydney-to-Melbourne trial for motor cars. At that time there was no highway joining the two capitals and the entrants had to traverse a tough, natural wilderness with a few bush tracks thrown in for good measure.

Henry Barton James greets Ben Thorp outside Melbourne's GPO on his record run from Adelaide to Melbourne, 1903. (Neil Brock)

Detail of Peter's Austin 7 engine, 1960. (Neil Brock)

James followed this up with a second event and subsequently set a record for the trip in a Talbot, one of the earliest successful British makes. As the number of good (or passable) roads increased, what had originally taken over five days to complete was whittled down over the next few years into little more than twelve hours. Eventually, a combination of the Royal Automobile Club and the police put a stop to these record-breaking runs, although they returned again in the 1920s when speed and record-breaking was all the rage.

In the period before the Second World War, Geoff Brock used to take an interest in the local motorsport events and was even co-opted by a competitor to become a motorcycle sidecar passenger in a hill climb at nearby Doreen. Geoff's father was not amused and quickly put an end to that pursuit. Then, when Peter was a young lad, Geoff often took the whole family to some of the early race meetings that were usually conducted at old airfields, one of which was situated at Altona, a bayside suburb near the city in Melbourne. As Geoff also possessed one of the 'prized' early model Holdens, this helped foster Peter's love of motor vehicles – it also set up his life-long love of Holdens and disdain of the Ford products.

It came as no surprise then that Peter's main aim in his early teens was to buy a motor car. In that he was not alone as his closest schoolmates, John Lovegrove and Tim Ferguson, were planning something similar. Even though the earliest age a person could legally drive a car on the road in 1959 was seventeen years and nine months, the boys' desire to each own a motorcar was not a pipe dream, since they would be able to drive on private property if not on public roads. The deciding factors, of course, were what type of car was suitable and how much would it cost? Both were relatively easy to solve.

By the late 1950s most Australians either aspired to owning, or actually owned, a car. With local car manufacture and assembly taking place, purchasing a car was easier than it ever had been, especially since finance was readily available. This meant there were many old cars available and anything pre-war and, therefore, simple in design and upkeep could be purchased for a small sum. If the vehicles were not going to be driven in the public domain, then they did not have to conform to the normal rules of safety and roadworthiness. The choice of car was thus relatively easy. Peter and John Lovegrove each decided to buy an Austin 7.

This famous little car was ubiquitous, having been in production in various forms from 1922 until 1939. It was the Mini of the inter-war years, an icon of the British motoring industry. All but the earliest versions had a 4-cylinder 747cc side-valve engine, which developed a heady 13 bhp (9.7 Kw). This allowed the simple and lightweight car – it only weighed in at 700 pounds or 330 kilograms – to reach 38 miles an hour (61 kilometres per hour) for the four-seat open touring sedan. The Austin was tough and reliable. As well as the four-seat tourer with a folding roof, there were several other versions, including a two-seat tourer and a four-seat fully enclosed sedan. It was built under licence in Germany and France and in the United States and Japan. There were literally tens of thousands on our roads between the wars and for many Australian teenagers they were their first car.

Despite its small size and simple construction, it was quite a sophisticated vehicle for its time. In modern parlance, the suspension was pretty crude, consisting of transverse semi-elliptical leaf springs at the front (common for the time) and, at the rear, a semi-floating live axle and quarter-elliptic leaf springs. There were no shock absorbers. There were, however, drum brakes on all four wheels – the foot brake operated fronts and the hand brake the rears. The gearbox was a non-synchromesh unit with three forward gears.

Of particular interest to Peter was the Austin's excellent racing pedigree. Soon after it was introduced, Englishmen found that, despite its small engine size, it made a very handy and successful competition car. In Australia during the 1920s there was a growing interest in road racing and record-breaking events, so it was natural the Austin 7 would be regarded as the vehicle of choice for many antipodean racers. The country's first official Grand Prix was held at Phillip Island in 1928. The winner was Captain (later Colonel) Arthur Waite, who had won a Military Cross in the First World War. His mount was a supercharged Austin 7, with another three non-supercharged 7s finishing in the top dozen outright positions, taking the top four Class A placings. Waite's Austin also posted the fastest official time of the day with an average 56.25 miles an hour (90 kilometres per hour). There was, and still is an Austin 7 Car Club and this little car is still raced in historic and special events.

Interestingly, many of the published photographs of the young Peter driving his Austin 7 are captioned wrongly, for the simple reason that there was not one but three 7s, although only two of those were driven. While they did not pool their money, Peter and John Lovegrove each purchased an Austin 7 and a third was a wreck used for spare parts. The boys each sought out cars that were for sale and did their own negotiations with the owners.

'I am not exactly sure who bought theirs first,' Lovegrove said. 'However, it is fair to say we both had our cars within a week or so of the other. It was the end of 1958. We were both very excited – I was 15 and Peter still only 13. He turned 14 a few months later.'

Peter had saved up several pounds from a series of extra jobs he did around his parent's home and at the farm, though the sum was topped up by his generous father.

'I remember it well,' Uncle Sandy recalled. 'The Austin was purchased from an elderly lady who lived nearby. The amount was a princely £5 ($10), which I believe was a fair price!' The price of an Austin 7 four-seat open tourer when new was £165 ($330 to $350) and, depending on the type of body and other additions, could cost almost £200. Lovegrove's car was a later model and cost double – £10 ($20) and was also purchased from an elderly lady who lived in the area. It was in better condition, not that this mattered.

Neil Brock says the car to be used for spares was purchased from a piano teacher – a Mr Sharp who lived nearby at Nutfield and had crashed his car into a tree. To Peter's delight the model he purchased was the so-called sports model, which was supposedly good for 50 miles an hour (80 kilometres per hour) and was probably built sometime in the late 1920s. A further claim to fame for the little car was that Austin 7s could be highly modified and were avidly raced around the world. There was even a Super Seven model that could reach 75 miles an hour (120 kilometres per hour), no mean feat for a car with an engine of barely three-quarters of a litre.

John Lovegrove and his Austin 7, 1960.

The boys wanted their cars to go as fast as possible. Since engine modifications cost money and would have taken time, the simple expedient was to lighten the Austins. Reduced weight meant more speed. They stripped the bodies off, something which was relatively simple because like all pre-war vehicles they did not have a modern unitary construction. The Austin 7's strength was in its simple 'A' frame chassis to which the body was bolted. Therefore, stripping the body did nothing to weaken its structure.

'I carefully unbolted mine and what could not be unbolted was cut off with a hacksaw. Peter was much more impatient and bludgeoned his off with his mother's axe. It was very funny to see as in his haste he did some unnecessary damage,' Lovegrove recalled. He also remembered that cannibalising the vehicles did not go down at all well with everybody. 'I don't believe the lady who sold Peter her Austin ever saw what it was turned into. However, the previous owner to my car actually saw the finished version and she cried. She was not amused.'

Peter tried some interesting modifications to improve his car's speed and handling, including turning the springs upside down to lower the ride height and eventually slanted the radiator back a few degrees in the dubious hope of increasing its aerodynamic efficiency. By the time he had stripped the vehicle, Peter's car was considerably lighter, but it was also devoid of any working brakes. This was hardly a hindrance while paddock bashing as there was little to hit, except the odd fence or gate. But there was one great benefit to having a car with no brakes, as John Lovegrove told me:

With his virtually brakeless car Peter's ability to stop was virtually nil. This is one of the reasons why he developed such phenomenal car control from an early age because without brakes and with his propensity to use a lot of speed it was a hairy drive. Sliding was the norm and it helped him stop the car. It

was also a huge benefit when he eventually reached the racetrack with the recalcitrant and ill-handling A30 racecar.

Another partner in crime in the car escapades was Peter's cousin, John Brock. In pictures of the period John looks older but, although he was a little taller and with a slightly heavier build, he was in fact a year younger than Peter. While he got to drive the car on many occasions, John was more often found in the passenger compartment, which consisted of a wooden plank where the seat had once been. Peter's seat was the original, cut down in height to supposedly lower the centre of gravity.

The passenger also had to share space with the petrol tank, which consisted of a five-gallon Mobil oil can bolted to the square tubing that marked where the bulkhead had been. The battery was next to it in its own cradle. The exhaust consisted of a piece of tubing on the left side minus a muffler.

'The noise was quite interesting, loud and sharp!' John Lovegrove said.

Young Phillip was also allowed the occasional trip in the car, usually in company with his other brother Lewis, and sometimes cousin John. As usual, the aim of the exercise was to drive 'flat out'. 'As an eight or nine year old, it was a thrilling experience but not at all frightening. Lewis sat on the plank and I sat in between his legs and hung on to the battery. Usually the vehicle was boiling its head off and we were covered in a fine mist of warm spray,' Phillip said.

Occasionally, the boys ventured onto public domain. This was definitely a no-no as the cars were not registered and definitely not roadworthy. Luckily, they never attempted to race them on the dirt roads and they were never caught by the local constabulary. Peter's 7 was mainly kept at Kirkliston while Lovegrove's was kept at Tim Ferguson's parent's sixty-acre property at Hurstbridge. Since this was closer than Sandy's farm, Peter spent much of his time with Lovegrove and, during the week, mostly drove his friend's vehicle.

'My Austin was in much better condition than Peter's,' Lovegrove recalled. 'It was a later model and had been a sedan with a fully enclosed body. It was probably built in the early 1930s and when I finished stripping the body it had one great advantage over Peter's – it had brakes. They only worked on the back, but at least the car could be stopped.'

Even when stripped the two vehicles looked different and many of the pictures from that time of Peter driving an Austin were of him in Lovegrove's car. It can be distinguished from Peter's by a larger and more upright radiator and the original long cylinder petrol tank situated over the rear axle. It has often been suggested that Peter jealously guarded the use of his beloved car, but that was not the case. Cousin John was allowed free access and even used to drive the Austin when Peter was absent. This was difficult because, with no ignition and starter motor, starting the car needed either the combined input of several energetic boys pushing, or a downhill gradient.

'Peter trusted me and we were pretty close. Anyway, I was instrumental in keeping the car going and Peter and I used to share much of the mechanical work,' he said, adding:

I was almost as mad as Peter as far as my driving was concerned. Although he was definitely the better driver, I was pretty good also. But, we were pretty lucky we were not killed or injured. We had some mad, mad escapades, especially when we ventured out onto the road outside the farm which ran along the ridge line above Kirkliston. We were able to coax the old Austin up to something like 70 kilometres an hour, a fair speed on a dirt road: but remember, it had no brakes! Sometimes we were travelling so fast that if

Peter missed a gear [to slow the car down] *we would miss the left hand turn to enter the farm. If we missed hitting the gate or fence we ended up off the road, hurtling between some trees!*

Peter driving John Lovegrove's Austin 7, 1960. (Neil Brock)

Posterity has now officially called this road Brock's Road, and you still need to take a sharp left-hand turn to access Kirkliston.

John Brock said that he never had an argument, let alone an altercation with Peter on sharing the Austin, or anything else for that matter. 'He knew that I would not have stood for that sort of thing,' was his simple explanation.

Peter's father Geoff also drove the 7 once, but he was a big man and could not really fit into it properly and, hence, was not game to give it a real go. It is doubtful whether he could have driven as fast as Peter even if he had tried.

Hurstbridge Fire Brigade, 1961. (Neil Brock)

Tim Ferguson, seeing the fun his friends were having, decided that he too wanted a car of his own. But he went one better. 'In the middle of 1959 I was lucky enough to get my hands on a 1932 Chrysler 66, which we stripped down, much the same way as the two Austins. But, it was quite a different car; bigger and more powerful. Naturally Peter wanted to drive it,' he said. 'We all hooned round the paddocks together,' Ferguson added with a smile. 'In fact we did some damage to our crops and my parents were none too pleased. I guess we were rather irresponsible, but we were all still pretty young.'

It was inevitable that the Austins would need constant repair. Tough as the little cars were, they were then thirty-five years old, had travelled several hundred thousand miles and, in their retirement, were being thrashed by young boys with more bravado than sense. Ultimately, the engine on Peter's car gave up under the strain of being revved to within an inch of its life.

'While we had the third car for spares, this supply soon ran out and we were sometimes forced to buy parts from a specialist shop which just dealt in Austin 7 spares and was located at the top end of Elizabeth Street in Melbourne,' Lovegrove recalled.

Eventually Peter's Austin suffered terminal engine problems and had to be rebuilt. Although he wanted more power, this sort of mechanical application was beyond his ability and his pocket, so he was forced to just repair the engine – new valves and bearings. For Neil, though, this had a considerable downside. The two brothers still shared a bedroom and Peter stripped the old engine in the bedroom.

'Naturally I resented having to step over a pool of oil on the timber floor. While the oil was soon mopped up, no amount of cleaning could get rid of the stain,' Neil remembered. 'In many ways I was used

to it as Peter was constantly using the bedroom as a repair shop since Mum did not allow him to undertake the work elsewhere in the house.'

John Brock said this was a common occurrence. 'There was always bits of the Austin 7 lying around the bedroom. In fact on wet days the bedroom acted as a mechanic's shop.'

Around the same time Peter also managed to get hold of a go-kart, which he campaigned briefly; firstly at a go-kart track at Humevalle near Whittlesea and later at one of the local 'Hill Climbs' – Rob Roy. But the Austin days continued for several years until late in 1962, when Peter was looking increasingly towards obtaining his licence and getting a real car, one that he could legally drive on the public domain. At this stage, he and John Lovegrove (and occasionally Tim Ferguson) began a series of pursuits which even in those more lax days could have got them into real trouble: driving while unlicensed in vehicles they were not supposed to have. While it was not theft in the actual sense, it was in the literal sense.

John Lovegrove is pretty candid about these escapades, saying honestly that in their teenage years they were both pretty wild: 'Neil was no goody two-shoes, he was more of a gentleman, but Peter and I could be a little sneaky and we sometimes nicked our parents', or rather our mother's cars. He would have been fifteen and I was sixteen going on seventeen.'

Ruth Brock had a Commer ute and John's mother had a near new Morris Minor 1000, which was a very good car in those days. It was her 'pride and joy' John said. 'If both our parents were away at the same time, which was usually at night, the partners in crime would take these cars out on the nearby public roads around Hurstbridge and roam as far afield as Kinglake and Yarra Glen.'

They would sometimes hold impromptu races along the Yan Yean Road and, although by no stretch of the imagination were the cars powerful, or fast, they did reach some impressive speeds as they were driven along the windy country roads. John added:

We would also swap cars, so thank God we never bent anything. Our parents would have killed us. I expect our experiences bush bashing with the Austins and Chrysler had given us a great deal of experience and car control and I do not remember having any serious loses or really hairy moments. More importantly, the cops never caught us, which was the real benefit. A police record and the inevitable punishment of a delay in getting our driving licence would have been disastrous for us.

By the time Peter was almost fifteen another interest began to surface. Sandy Brock remembers the first instance when this manifested itself: 'Peter's interest in the opposite sex started with a young niece of Norma's, who was about the same age [as Peter]. She was called Mary and she was also a neighbour. All of a sudden Peter and Mary started to spend time together, and much of this was in the hay shed.'

Lovegrove agrees that Peter certainly liked girls at an early age and his interest in them was reciprocated. He describes the young Peter as good looking, and definitely not shy. 'He could really chat them up. My sister-in-law was the same age as him and she confirms this, remembering how he was very forward with the girls.'

Tim Ferguson explained how Peter's propensity to mix with older boys meant he was also confronted by the opposite sex a little earlier than would have been the norm in those days. 'Peter generally hung around us older kids. This was partly because Neil was older and partly because he was brighter than kids his own age.'

All his friends agree there was a downside to this. The other boys say that since there was between one and one-and-a-half years difference in their ages, Peter could be a little immature in the way he reacted to things. They believe this manifested in the way he handled negative issues and why he sometimes exhib-

ited such a short fuse. The age difference did, however, help his budding social life and interaction with girls. The older boys were able to obtain their driving licences well before Peter and this gave them the ability to be free of their parents. Peter tagged along, ever the livewire.

In 1961, aged eighteen, John Lovegrove purchased his first 'proper' car, an Austin A40 Farina. Peter, already the loyal Holden man, derided the little car. It was only powered by a 4-cylinder 1200cc engine and the A40 family had a dreadful reputation of falling on their side, or rolling if pushed with even a little verve. This did not stop Peter from asking to have the odd drive though!

CFA Sports Competition winners at Hurstbridge Fire Brigade, 1961 – front row: Peter (second from left), Neil (far right); back row: John Lovegrove (first from left), Tim Ferguson (second from right). (Neil Brock)

Before he was able to legally drive on the road on his own, Peter took the next step to manhood by joining the Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA). For rural communities it was expected that most able-bodied men in an area would join the CFA as volunteers. The two elder Brock boys were no exception. Neil had joined first and Peter did so soon after he turned sixteen in February 1961, the earliest age he was allowed to join. Neil made the CFA his profession and eventually became a Regional Officer, a very senior position as he had control of up to ninety brigades. His services, skill and bravery earned him several awards, including the prestigious Australian Fire Services Medal (AFSM), which was gazetted in the 1980 National Honour Awards.

Peter was trained locally at the Hurstbridge Fire Brigade under its Captain, Bill Freeman, who was also a lay preacher at the local Methodist church. Like most boys of his age, Peter had little interest in religion and after he outgrew Sunday School he seldom ventured into a church. Tim Ferguson smiled as he remembered when Peter once joined him at a Sunday service at their church, but not for any religious conviction: 'He just wanted to meet some girls, since several pretty ones were part of the congregation.'

Peter's brother Neil said that 'During the next couple of years Peter was involved in fighting several major fires in the area as part of the Hurstbridge Brigade.' John Lovegrove recounted one dangerous situation they got themselves into, during the summer of 1962, which saw some of the worst bushfires to hit Victoria since the major ones that had devastated the state and culminated in Black Friday in January 1939. Those fires destroyed over 1000 homes and five towns, including Warrandyte, and damaged a dozen more. The resulting Royal Commission saw the creation of the CFA in 1944. Lovegrove and Peter were attending the first race meeting to be held at the Calder racetrack and, when they left, they could see masses of smoke emanating from the Dandenongs. They hurried back to Hurstbridge but they were too late; the brigade's truck had already left to fight the fire. Rather than go home, they decided to make their own way to the fire front. Unfortunately, in those days communication was in its infancy so they were not sure which fire front to go to.

'We filled up the Commer van with water drums, plus other fire-fighting equipment – knapsacks, hand pumps and wet sacking – and drove up to St Andrews, where the fire seemed the most intense. It was a useless attempt,' said Lovegrove. 'We could not find our truck, or any other brigade for that matter; we were alone and dangerously exposed. The fire was very intense and moving rapidly, so we abandoned the attempt and managed to escape.'

Tim Ferguson, who also crewed the Hurstbridge truck, remembered that Peter had joined them over the next two to three days fighting the fires, which raged in a wide arc including Warrandyte, Christmas Hills, Panton Hill and the Yarra Glen area – ringing Melbourne's northeastern suburbs.

'It was not for the faint-hearted,' said Lovegrove. 'We fought the fires until they were largely extinguished. At the end we were absolutely exhausted, completely and utterly knackered. Peter did well – we all did.'

As well as the inevitable fighting of bushfires, the CFA offered its volunteers two things: an active social life and the chance to play competitive sport at a pretty high level. Peter utilised both to their fullest extent. The Hurstbridge Brigade competed in the CFA's 'fire brigade championships' as part of Region 13, which was based at Lilydale. Success at a regional level resulted in competition at a state level, something which Peter achieved. This was even more meritorious since he was also either playing for Eltham High School's football team (while still at school), or later in the Diamond Valley Football League.

'Peter was still short for his age, although he had grown somewhat, but what he lacked in height, he made up for in skill and determination,' his brother Neil said.

The social life offered by the CFA provided a real outlet for the teenage Peter, whose interest in girls was becoming more and more noticeable. Tim Ferguson reckoned there was almost an event every weekend: 'Fund raising, bush dances as well as the parties which occurred after a football match, or athletics meet.'

At first, Peter's attendance at these sporting and social events was dependent upon Neil or his older friends, who all had cars, but what he really wanted was his own car, an early model Holden. Cousin John

laughed when he remembered Peter's first 'legal' road-going transport: 'It was a humble Vespa motor scooter which I think he called a "Rabbito".'

Phillip remembered another friend lending Peter a motorbike – a BSA Bantam, which he used to bush bash (and drive on the road) in much the same way as the Austin 7. 'One day Peter asked me if I wanted a ride as a pillion passenger. At first I hesitated, because I knew what would happen and it did. We tore across the paddock and I got covered in mud and eventually fell off. He loved scaring me, but when he got his licence and his first Holden, he did not bother with me anymore.'

For cousin John, however, the relationship continued. 'After he started his first job he sometimes came and stayed at my parent's home in East Brunswick and we went to some of the rock 'n' roll dances together. As I was also interested in racing he used to take me to some of the local meetings. He was great fun to be with.'

From then on Peter's freedom was absolute and the escapades became awesome.

Brock clan and friends, Calder Raceway, 1966.

3

HOLDENS, EMPLOYMENT AND GIRLS

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EMPLOYMENT AND GIRLS

Peter left school at the end of 1961 when he was still sixteen years of age. He had completed and passed his Year Eleven at Eltham High School and, although it was not a grandiose pass, it was a pass nevertheless.

In those days passing the Year Eleven exams earned the student a 'Leaving Certificate', which would almost certainly guarantee a decent job, as those were the days of almost full employment. Generally, only those who planned to go on to university took the next step and did Year Twelve, known as Matriculation.

With Peter's interest (some would say obsession) with cars, there was never any doubt that his first job, and probably his whole working life, would be devoted to the car industry. While he already harboured dreams of motor racing, there was never any real belief he could make a career out of this profession; it was just too hard to attain and too fanciful, especially for a sixteen year old with no money.

Given his father Geoff's links with GM Holden, a job with Preston Motors was not hard to arrange and Peter's first position was working in the spare parts department of that dealership. He joined at the beginning of 1962, a few weeks before his seventeenth birthday. Quite apart from his wish to be involved with cars, especially Holdens, it was a perfect job for him.

'Peter had a phenomenal memory,' Tim Ferguson said. 'Being interested in the "early model" he had immersed himself in knowing everything there was to know about it and by the time he began work at Preston he quite literally knew all the part numbers for all the components of this model. What he did not know when he joined he quickly learned and committed to memory.'

Ferguson went on to explain how Peter would often ask friends to test him on his knowledge of the relevant part numbers, and even had the occasional bet with anybody who was foolish enough to accept the wager. They usually lost their money. Unfortunately, he was also not always the perfect salesman and often exhibited a degree of truculence with some of the hapless clients – those who wanted to buy a spare part but could not explain properly what they wanted, had little understanding of mechanical things or, worse still, had a poor command of the English language. He called migrants refos, wogs or poms but, to be fair, that was normal in those days and nothing malicious was intended by those words and certainly there were no racist overtones. Any wog who followed Collingwood and/or loved Holdens was his instant friend.

Yet when he wanted to, Peter could be charming and had a good sense of humour. Like many people with strong beliefs and a quick mind, he always got on better with strong people and did not suffer fools. His friends say that despite his short frustration level and quick temper he was very loyal and could be very kind, especially to children and those genuinely interested in cars.

When he first started work Peter was not old enough to have a licence so he was forced to travel on public transport, taking the train from Hurstbridge. Though he chafed at not being able to drive legally, he took this with a degree of equanimity, possibly because there was no alternative. After work and at the weekends he usually joined his mates who had their licences and owned cars and he often inveigled them into letting him have a drive as a learner. Failing this, he sometimes took his father's new Holden, having graduated from stealing his mother's car.

Phillip Brock, as the youngest child in the house, knew what was happening, but did not dare dob in his brother. 'It was a risky thing for Peter to do, for Dad would have killed him if he'd found out, or if the car had been damaged. If I had told Dad, Peter would have killed me, and I was not that brave.'

There was another risk to Peter's forays with his parent's vehicles: their next door neighbour at Anzac Avenue was a policeman who was well aware of what was happening. He would have to have been blind not to. Their other neighbour was the local schoolmaster. John Lovegrove reckoned he knows why the policeman never arrested Peter, told Geoff Brock, or both. 'The cop was running a wrecking yard on the side. It was a full-blown business and he did not want his superiors to know. As well, he specialised in wrecking Holdens and he probably realised that in Peter and his mates he had a readymade source of potential clients,' he said with a laugh.

‘Liquid supplies for Brisbane trip’ – Al Hamley (left) and Geoff Easton (right), 1964. (Eric Field)

Neil recalled when his brother’s luck did finally run out. His mother had just purchased an Austin and one night Peter decided he would like to take it for a spin. ‘Unfortunately for him he got the vehicle bogged in some off-road excursion, so he had to walk home and explain what had happened. When our

parents came home Dad went and towed him out. Because it was Mum's car I don't remember him being punished. With Dad's car it might have been different.'

The earliest age you could get a licence in those days was seventeen years and nine months. The law allowed youngsters to obtain a learner's permit to drive a motorbike or motor scooter. Since you could not learn with a pillion passenger, this effectively meant a licence to drive unsupervised. Peter's cousin John remembered Peter obtaining the Vespa motor scooter at the end of 1962, three months before he could get a full car licence. Lovegrove also remembered the Vespa, but does not believe it was purchased by Peter, suggesting some 'kind soul probably lent it to him'.

Since the family still lived in Anzac Avenue, it was a fair distance to drive a motor scooter to Preston Motors, especially when it was wet. As an alternative, Peter sometimes stayed with cousin John in East Brunswick. Peter's parents, especially his mum, were none too happy about the Vespa either. If Peter was regarded as a daredevil on four wheels, his escapades on the scooter were almost as bad.

In the early 1960s the youth of Australia had generally divided themselves into Mods and Rockers. The former drove scooters and the latter motorbikes, or cars. The early Vespas were inherently unstable because all their weight was over the back wheel, making steering very light and inaccurate. They had been designed as a cheap form of short-haul urban transport, not for hairy driving on an Australian country road. If driven with aggression they could easily swap ends and throw their hapless rider onto the road. Their engine size varied from 125cc for the base model to 175cc for the GS version. The most powerful Vespa could easily reach 70 miles an hour (112 kilometres per hour). The author knew one daredevil who was caught by the police on Whitehorse Road, Box Hill, lying flat on his Vespa GS with his legs stretched out behind to cut down his wind resistance. He crossed the amphometers (an early speed measuring device with two wires taped across the road) on his 175cc rocket ship and was clocked at 76 miles per hour (123 kilometres per hour) in a built-up area!

Ferguson remembered Peter's mother Ruth being so concerned at the inherent dangers of the scooter and her son's method of riding it, especially when it was raining and the roads were wet, that she asked her husband to unobtrusively follow Peter in his car for a short distance to make sure he did not fall off and come to grief. There is no evidence to show that Geoff ever complied. Both Neil and Phillip are adamant their father would have regarded this 'as a sookie thing to do' and, anyway, Peter would not have liked being followed.

In other ways, Geoff Brock was also a great help to his son, especially in Peter's wish to obtain a Holden as his first proper car. Geoff Brock's partnership with Bill Hale and the Hurstbridge garage had ended in 1953 – a chronic back condition meant the life of a mechanic was too strenuous for him. He had embarked on a series of jobs as a car salesman with a number of different distributors, first selling Austins and then Holdens. With the advent of television in 1956 and his knowledge of electrics, Geoff then tried his hand at something else and began work for a business selling TVs – 'William Wonder' of Preston. At the time, a 17-inch TV sold for around £200 ($400), a huge sum for the day, especially since you could buy a pretty decent secondhand car for half the price. So in 1961 he went back to the car trade and he joined Campbells Motors, selling the GM product again.

When Peter joined Preston Motors, between father and son they had literally dozens of contacts with GM and several car dealerships, so purchasing a Holden at the right price was relatively simple. Duly, the first of many 48/215s in Peter's life was purchased for the princely sum of £75 ($150). It was black with the registration number TB 495. In the parlance of the day it was known as an 'early model', which some people used to erroneously call an FX. To do so when Peter Brock was in earshot was to invite a scornful verbal bollocking and be referred to as a 'poor one'.

The Holden was actually purchased before Peter turned eighteen, sometime late in 1962. The interval between buying and when he could legally drive it was spent making it mechanically sound, tweaking the performance and engaging in the odd bit of illegal behaviour – driving while unlicensed.

Tim Ferguson said that until he got his licence, Peter was just one of the lads – a little wilder than most perhaps, but with a strong personality, who everybody knew and most liked. As a country lad of the 1960s, he was nothing out of the ordinary. 'We were all pretty wild and by today's standards did crazy things, but once he got his licence he stood out because of his driving prowess.'

Peter turned eighteen in February 1963. A few days later he proudly drove his '48 Series' Holden to a party being held at Tim Ferguson's farm at Hurstbridge. There, Ferguson introduced him to Al Hamley, a fellow tearaway who became one of Peter's closest comrades.

Hamley had a completely different background from Peter's other main group of friends. He was a Scotch College boy and did not come from the Hurstbridge area. He was also six years older and attended Melbourne University, where he was studying for his Civil Engineering degree.

'Even though I did not possess a Holden we hit it off straight away, possibly because we were both interested in cars,' Hamley said.

One of their friends, Geoff Easton, says it was a strange friendship between Peter and Hamley because of their different upbringings. Peter was a spare parts salesman who never completed high school, while Hamley had a private school education and became an engineering graduate. Easton said they got on because 'they were reckless, clueless and out of control most of the time'.

Since Hamley was still a student, money was tight, but a few years earlier he had managed to purchase a 1948 Morris 8/40, a small four-door saloon with a 4-cylinder 908cc side-valve engine. They were an ugly car and had first been manufactured just before the Second World War. What impressed Peter, though, was Hamley's work in 'hotting' the little Morris up by fitting twin one-and-half inch SUs, port and polishing the head and lowering the suspension to improve what was its pretty basic handling. It had been affectionately nicknamed 'The Morrie'.

Early in their friendship they went for a drive in The Morrie along the Hurstbridge–Diamond Creek Road. This was Peter's favourite section of road and contained what the Hurstbridge mob called 'The Curly Mile', a winding section of tree-lined road that needed considerable skill to be driven quickly, especially at night. For two or more years, Peter had used The Curly Mile as his test track for whatever car he had borrowed, begged, or stolen and to hone his burgeoning skills.

He had driven his mother's Commer van along this road while unlicensed, as well as sundry other vehicles belonging to friends and relatives. There are stories he had even tried a record run at night without lights so as to reduce the chance of anybody identifying the vehicle he was driving and informing the constabulary. To do this successfully without coming to grief needed three things: skill, luck and a superb memory. Peter had all three!

'I was driving,' said Hamley, 'and, goaded by Peter, attempted to go a bit faster along the winding road. The Morrie was never the best-handling car, even with my suspension mods, and I nearly rolled it. It scared me, so I slowed down. Peter was not impressed.' On the way back Peter asked to take the wheel and Hamley, having heard from Lovegrove, Ferguson and several others of Peter's prowess behind the wheel, reluctantly agreed. A few minutes later, with the Morris's engine screaming and the car beginning to drift around corners, he was wondering whether he had done the right thing.

‘He drove so fast through The Curly Mile that it scared me shitless, but after a while I could see he was in control, so I began to enjoy the experience. I thought I was a good driver, but I was not a patch on him. He drove with a minimum of fuss, very concentrated, but with a grin on his face!’ Hamley recalled.

Tim Ferguson described how traversing The Curly Mile fast was almost a rite of passage for Peter’s friends. Some had major accidents attempting to better Peter’s times. ‘Two of our friends who had Minis came to grief on that section of road. In their day, Minis handled phenomenally well, but they both rolled their cars racing along The Curly Mile.’

There was another special bit of road utilised by Peter and the gang known as the ‘Greensborough Straight’, a section of the Heidelberg–Kinglake Road that was often used as an impromptu drag strip. Ferguson said that some mornings the Straight was covered in black strips of rubber, testimony to a night’s entertainment.

Nowadays, such behaviour would be regarded as antisocial and subjected to the so-called ‘hoon laws’. Nearly fifty years ago it was not regarded so seriously by anybody, except some of the more zealous police. The road laws of that time were much more lenient than now. Sure, there were strict speed limits enforced in the built-up areas, but on the open road the constabulary had to prove that any person driving over 60 miles an hour (100 kilometres per hour) was actually driving dangerously. If a vehicle was in good condition and not sliding around the road there was little chance of a successful prosecution, so the police usually did not bother.

In 1965 as a cub reporter on the local newspaper, the *Lilydale Express*, I witnessed a magistrate let off, with a caution, a driver who had been chased by police in a Studebaker Lark at over 80 miles an hour (128 kilometres per hour). The man’s lawyer successfully defended his client, explaining that his vehicle was fitted with the then newly developed radial ply tyres and had completed an advanced driving course. At the same time, though, few cars then had anywhere near the performance of even a modest modern family sedan and there were far fewer cars on the road.

It was in this context that most young men in Peter’s entourage thought of little else but modifying their cars to see if they could reach the magic 100 miles an hour (160 kilometres per hour). Needless to say, Peter’s black beast did attain this figure with Tim Ferguson in the passenger seat.

‘The car was certainly quick and we saw 100 miles an hour on the road to St Andrews, but I am not sure if the speedo was accurate – they tended to be a little optimistic,’ he remembered with a smile.

Hamley, Lovegrove and Ferguson also spoke of the many modifications that were made to the black early model. Ferguson remembered that Peter did not always undertake the conventional route in modifying his car. He could do this because he was gainfully employed and able to spend much of his spare cash on the car. After a decade of consuming car magazines he understood the latest technology on how to make a car go faster and handle better.

In the early 1960s the accepted and cheapest way to lower a car was to use ‘lowering blocks’. Usually, these were quite literally blocks of wood, although one could purchase specially made aluminium blocks of varying sizes. Peter did not want to do anything that crude. He took the springs off and took them to Spicer’s Spring Works to have them re-tempered and change their profile. The engine also received some attention. As Tim Ferguson described it:

Peter stripped the engine down and replaced rings and bearings – minor, though important stuff; then had the cam shaft modified, port and polished the head, fitted twin carburettors with revised inlet manifolds, a modified and better quality distributor, plus a slightly more efficient exhaust. It would have deve-

loped some serious power.

A little later he modified the vehicle still further, fitting a rear sway bar that dramatically stiffened the rear end. Not only was the Holden now much faster, but its handling was not quite what he had hoped.

A member of the Box Hill mob, who knew Peter at the time and drove a 'stinkingly fast' Blue early model, was Johnny Clarke. Clarke also later raced these cars and he believed Peter made the Holden too stiff. With his overly rapid driving, he said, Peter ended up rolling the car for the first time. 'The way to make the early model handle was to also include in the modifications a set of track rods [anti-tramp rods], and a Panhard rod to stop sideways movement. If you stiffened the car too much, it would lift its inside front wheel,' said Clarke. 'Another reason the early models did not corner overly well was that the wheel size, which was too narrow and their propensity to flex.'

Whatever the cause, rolling the Holden – in fact every early model Holden he ever owned – was a common occurrence. It was also a regular event for his friends, a rite of passage as they sought to go faster along The Curly Mile, or better some speed advisory sign (double plus ten was a common target). All this in the days of miles, not kilometers, per hour!

Family houseboat at Lake Eildon, 1966 – Geoff Easton (left), and Al Hamley (right). (Geoff Easton)

The Holdens belonging to Peter's group of friends varied in age and longevity, from a dozen years to nearly fifteen. These days a fifteen-year-old car usually has a long life still ahead of it, but the same could not be said of the first Holdens, or any other make of the 1950s' models for that matter. Vehicles of those early post-war years were relatively fragile. While the Holden was better than most, having been designed from the onset for Australian conditions, in the hands of the Peter and his friends they were distinctly vulnerable.

The early model Holden had two major weaknesses: brakes and back axles. The former were drums of inconsequential size and, hence, tardy in stopping power. The latter had a propensity to sheer and part company with the rest of the car.

'That certainly affects a car's handling,' laughed Johnny Clarke. John Lovegrove remembered how keeping their cars on the road was a constant battle, and Al Hamley and Tim Ferguson agreed.

The issue of the brakes was helped somewhat by the fitting of steel drums instead of the standard cast ones. Together with better brake shoes and linings the Holdens certainly stopped better and could do so more often without the dreaded 'brake fade', but this increased braking capacity had a negative flow-on effect: the front ones would sheer. This forced the boys to always carry spare brake drums and other sundry parts, including a differential, in the boot of their cars. Because of the thrashing they received, even the engines had a short life and overnight engine rebuilds were common.

Tarrawingee, October 1964 – Peter (left), Tony Higginson (centre), Geoff Easton (right). (Geoff Easton)

'It was nothing for us to stuff an engine, then take out the complete "long" motor, rebuild it and have it back in the car in working order by the morning. Running it in would usually consist of a drive to work the next morning but, if it was on a weekend, carefully driving it to some race meeting or social outing. On the way back, with the engine run-in, it was back to being thrashed again,' said Lovegrove.

Peter's cars were the ones that suffered the most since virtually every trip he took was a race of some sort, whether he was by himself, chauffeuring some of his friends, or in company with other vehicles. As John Lovegrove put it: 'Because of his skill he took some appalling risks, but he never hit anything, or anybody and never caused an accident that was not his own.'

Al Hamley agreed: 'The interesting thing is, we were all happy to be passengers in any car he was driving, or even lending him our cars because we were in awe of his skills. One day, with The Morrie out of action, I borrowed my mum's FJ [the next early model Holden] and we went for a spin along The Curly Mile. As I had done so many times with Peter, I drove first and gave it a real go.'

The early model and the FJ had only a three-speed column shift gearbox (much later, a floor shift 'after-market' modification became available), with synchromesh only on two and three. As Hamley said:

On the downhill section I used second gear and drove in what I thought was a pretty rapid pace. Peter then asked for a go and as usual I let him. We returned to the same section and then he proceeded to drive this twisty downhill section in top gear and at least 10 miles an hour faster than me . . . and this was my Mum's car! Looking back on it now I was crazy for letting him.

Hamley eventually sold the Morris, purchasing his own 48/215. A short time later, he rolled it.

You might ask why nobody was injured, let alone killed in these escapades. There are several reasons. Firstly, despite the modifications and the increased performance of the cars, accidents did not really happen at extreme speeds. They usually occurred when corners were taken too hard rather than on a straight bit of road where speeds could be higher. The second reason is quite interesting considering the general attitude young men have of their own invincibility. Peter always fitted at least one seatbelt to his vehicle. This was a decade before mandatory seatbelts and well before they were even commonly available. Even racing drivers of the time did not always wear them. While their use was becoming more common, some still believed it was better to be thrown from a vehicle rather than be trapped inside. Though Peter only fitted lap belts, this was a huge step up from having nothing, and he religiously wore the belt every time he got in his car. Later he had belts fitted for the passengers also – after all, there was usually at least one friend in the car.

Ferguson said that, 'Peter advised us to fit belts to our cars as well – in fact he was insistent and I believe this probably saved our lives as most of us had several quite bad roll-overs.' Peter's insistence also made it easier for him to borrow his friend's vehicles. Al Hamley said that between he and Peter there were probably at least half a dozen vehicles being shared, usually Holdens, at any one time. They were either being repaired or modified, or driven:

Several of my Holdens were damaged by Peter and I did not mind. It was par for the course and if one was regarded as a 'write-off' then it was replaced by the person who caused the damage. There was a common saying among the group (originated by Peter); 'who fucks, fixes'. It was no big deal because with our contacts we used to buy body shells for a maximum of 50 quid ($100).

With so many cars being written off we had a problem with what to do with the wrecks. One night in the early hours we took a stripped shell to the East Brighton Golf Links, and dumped it outside on the verge. In the cold light of day the next morning we were a bit ashamed and never did something like that again. From then on we did it legally and took the wrecks to the car crushers.

Hamley smiled as he remembered one special tool which Peter possessed to punch out the Holden's roof after it had rolled – his feet. Peter's feet were very large – size 12 in the English/Australian size. When the roof of a rolled car was considered too low he would lie on the seat and use his outsized feet to push the roof back into some semblance of shape. Consequently, he was nicknamed 'Splaw Foot' by some of his closest friends, and it stuck.

Over the next few years Peter's friends can recite a host of stories on what occurred when they went on long distance trips with him. One in particularly remains vivid in the memory of Tim Ferguson, who was a passenger in a Holden being driven back from the Hume Weir race circuit near Albury in northern Victoria. As they sped along a narrow country road they rounded a bend to find a tray truck full of hay slowly pulling out onto the road from a farmer's property. 'There was absolutely nowhere for us to go,' he said. 'On one side was a rather steep bank of about 45 degrees; on the other side a drain, a built-up grass verge and a wire fence. To stop was out of the question; we would have hit the truck, or worse still, slid under

the tray which would probably have decapitated us.' Ferguson says his friend's next move was instinctive and brilliant, with not a hint of panic:

Before I had time to react and barely had time to swear, Peter turned left up the embankment and, as the car was about to roll over, flicked the steering wheel to the right so that the car changed direction, launching itself clear over the truck's tray and the drain on the other side of road. We landed on the top of the verge and punched through the wire fence before careering down a sloping paddock and between some trees without hitting anything.

Ferguson said his friend then calmly threaded the lurching car through the scrub and rejoined the bitumen about one hundred metres down the road. He was completely calm. When they got back onto the road he continued almost as if nothing had happened. All he did was take a deep breath and say with a grin, 'A bit dicey mate!' The only damage to the car was a bent tie rod end.

Hamley said Peter always said it was important to 'have a Plan B in place when driving quickly'. Whether this was an example of his Plan B, or instinctive self-preservation Ferguson never knew.

Hamley has a similar memory. One afternoon they were driving through country New South Wales when they were forced off the road by a Ford Falcon, which did not stop, thus reinforcing Peter's hatred of all things Ford:

It was hilarious. We ended up in a field surrounded by Aborigines who were camping on the paddock. They helped push us out and we limped to the nearest town with a deranged front suspension. We were forced to stay in a country pub for two days as we scrounged parts from the local wrecking yards.

TB 495 was soon pensioned off. Sundry roll-overs, off-road excursions and just plain heavy use meant it was not worth repairing. The new or newer early model must have been built at almost the same time as its predecessor because its registration number was TP 924. It led a similarly eventful and exciting life.

Peter was still in the CFA and was racing to a bushfire when the bonnet flew up as he was negotiating a notorious bend marked with a speed advisory sign. He was cornering so hard that the body flex released the bonnet catch. The result was he rolled the car in front of the PMG truck towing a pole trailer that he had passed a few seconds before. The driver stopped his rig and kindly helped him push the Holden back onto its wheels with a few caustic words as to its owner's sanity and driving ability. He then left as Peter was attempting to straighten the bonnet. A few minutes later the same truck driver was astonished to see the Holden pass him again at undiminished speed and disappear around the next bend.

Dave Chandler, a friend from the Box Hill group, says Peter boasted he had showed the PMG driver he 'was not about to be shown up by a truckie'. Chandler said he was angry the accident had been caused by a mechanical problem that he had no control over, rather than a mistake caused by his own exuberance.

Another one of Peter's strengths was his ability to talk himself out of trouble. This, together with his natural charm and sense of humour proved real assets, especially when faced with the law, which wanted to have him charged over some driving misdemeanour. Al Hamley remembered how Peter recited one story to him the day after the incident occurred.

Apparently Peter had been driving by himself one night when he rolled the car on a country bend. The Holden rolled completely over and landed back on its wheels, but it was quite seriously damaged. Luckily

the windscreen was still intact, but the roof was severely dented and both headlights had been broken. Undeterred, he continued on his way and, a short time later, who should pull him over but the boys in blue.

After a quick examination of the damaged car they told Peter they were going to stick a 'canary' on the windscreen and declare the vehicle 'unroadworthy'. A canary usually meant a trip to the police or motor registration branch, and the unwelcome attention of overzealous assessors who would discover all the car's 'go-fast' modifications. Obviously, this was not what Peter wanted.

'This is where Peter's considerable charm and gift-of-the-gab came into play,' smiled Hamley. 'He spun them a truly inspiring line which had just enough truth to make it plausible, although it was mainly bull shit!' Peter had blithely explained how he was a member of the CFA (true), that there had been a bush fire at Longwood (true), which he had been helping fight (true). The damage had been caused by a tree falling on the roof and he had then run off the road (very untrue).

He promised to have the car repaired before he ventured out onto the road again (probably true). The two constables believed him and, ever keen to help a brave volunteer firefighter, told him the car was not going be made unroadworthy and he 'could be on his way'.

There was a further twist to this charade as the car would not start and, pressing his luck, Peter asked the two policemen whether they would push-start him. Happy to oblige, they duly push-started the battered Holden and Peter went on his way.

It was obvious to all who knew him that Peter would eventually drive a racing car, but how or when was not known. Still in his late teens, Peter was finding his way in the world and for the moment racing was confined to spectating. This he did with a growing passion, travelling hundreds of miles interstate over a weekend to watch the sport at circuits such as Warwick Farm and Oran Park in New South Wales, and Hume Weir on the New South Wales–Victorian border. In Victoria there was Calder, Phillip Island, Sandown and Winton. Being a spectator usually reinforced Peter's belief that he was as quick and good a driver as anybody out on the track, with the possible exception of Norm Beechey, whom he idolised.

With race meetings usually being two-day affairs, as they are now, the mates saved money by camping at a circuit if this was allowed. Certainly Winton in central Victoria near Benalla and Hume Weir near Albury were such venues. Hamley described one such meeting at Winton Raceway early in 1964 as having interesting consequences. Winton Raceway was deep in Kelly country and was always a favourite of Peter's. In fact he contested his first race there.

At the time Winton was only one mile (1.6 kilometres) in length, and a twisting, tricky little circuit that had been started and was run by the Benalla Auto Club. On the Saturday night after official practice and qualifying had been completed, everybody settled in for the evening. The pits were still active as mechanics prepared or repaired various racing cars for the next day's competition, while the camping area was full of rowdy, drunken merriment. Peter, egged on by some friends, decided he should try out the circuit for the first time.

'It was early evening, though there was still plenty of light,' said Hamley. 'Peter had been drinking and was not sober by any means. He had driven up with me, so I lent him my lovely Holden, which was probably a little silly since my car was not remotely set up for racing and Peter had never driven on the Winton circuit, or any other racetrack for that matter.'

To add to the sense of occasion, Peter took a passenger, an accountant called Eric Field, who was to later become his financial adviser. The car was not fitted with a roll bar and neither man was wearing a helmet, but they did have seatbelts.

Hamley's 48/215 drove on to the circuit from the pit area and the boys began to time his laps. To Hamley's consternation, Peter began to circulate faster and faster.

'There were probably some officials still around,' he said, 'but nobody intervened, and here was this bloke with a passenger, both without helmets, going around the circuit at racing speeds. Things were really much more lax in those days. By lap three we were all taking bets on when he would roll the thing and that finally happened at the end of the main straight on lap seven! Amidst much cheering they got out, righted the car and drove back to the pits.'

When Peter was told his lap times he was not very happy. At the same time there were repairs to Hamley's car to be paid for, so he sulked for the rest of the evening and went to sleep in the back seat.

The racetrack also provided Peter and his friends with another form of entertainment – Ford-fan baiting. The tribal nature of motorsport in Australia really started in the early 1960s when Ford introduced the Falcon as a direct competitor to the 6-cylinder Holden product. While the British had several good 6-cylinder models on the market, they never reached the popularity and, conversely, the hatred of those who followed Fords or the General Motors product. The tribal partisanship of the Holden and Ford fans reached its zenith in motor racing, particularly Bathurst, which started to reach the public's consciousness when the V8s entered the scene in the late '60s.

When the author met Peter for the first time in late 1966 the first question he asked me was what sort of car I was driving. I told him I had just purchased an MGTD, which he seemed to accept as okay. His next question was whether I liked Fords or Holdens. I told him I had no preference either way, but that my first car had been a 6-cylinder Vauxhaul Velox, which I had rolled in front of Box Hill Hospital a few weeks previously and written off. The Velox was a good car, and a GM product, and he remarked positively on it. But he was more impressed that I had managed to roll and total my car in a built-up area. I was then handed a beer and had obviously been accepted – I was evidently not a 'poor one'!

The most dangerous part of Peter's escapades was his propensity to drink and drive. In this he was no different from most of his generation. Drink driving was a national pastime. While driving when drunk was frowned on, there were no breathalysers, or other measuring devices for that matter, and point 05 was unheard of. The only reliable method was to take a person's blood, which was time consuming, difficult and needing a trained medical professional. So, unless the person was legless and could not walk in a straight line, the police seldom arrested anyone. A person being .05 would not have been regarded as being intoxicated and would have been universally judged as being perfectly able to drive.

Hanley said there were some silly misconceptions about drinking and driving, which they all believed. The boys used to cram so much in a weekend and travel such long distances that there was always the danger of a driver falling asleep at the wheel, especially if the fellow passengers were also asleep.

'Falling asleep at the wheel was always regarded as the real danger,' he said, 'not drink driving. In fact we drank while driving in order to stay awake. The passengers slept and the driver drank.'

Tim Ferguson agreed: 'Nobody thought anything of it. One day we went to Hume Weir and pitched our tents trackside with a 9-gallon keg of beer. There were only a few of us, but by the time the race meeting was over, the beer had all been consumed and a few blokes then drove the three hundred or so miles home.'

It was also generally agreed that Peter was not a good drinker. He usually only drank beer – it was cheaper and you could drink more of it – and it did not take many schooners to make him drunk. He would then become truculent and moody. On the credit side, he was not violent and never got involved in anything physical when he had had a few too many. While he was prone to verbal abuses he rarely used bad

language in these situations; instead he used sarcasm to make his point. Despite this, he was very popular and his friends loved him.

Hamley described Peter as a loyal and trustworthy friend with a larrikin attitude: 'He was generally laidback with an infectious grin and a great sense of humour. He was enthusiastic about the things he was interested in and had a great zest for life. Everything he embarked on he did at a million miles an hour.'

He claims most people took Peter's temper in their stride, mainly because it never lasted and was without malice. The issue which annoyed most people, though, was his impatience and inability to suffer fools in any way. The line, 'he's a poor one' happened frequently and usually meant somebody was being marked as not worth dealing with.

Undoubtedly, it was Peter's driving abilities and over-the-top view of life that endeared himself to his fellow males. Caution, perspicacity and introspection are not the hallmarks of teenage boys. At the same time he was not faced with the long hours of solitude and discipline needed by those who were at university, like Al Hamley at Melbourne University and Tim Ferguson who was studying Geology at RMIT. Not that Peter was without any intellectual pursuits – he read voraciously, devoured newspapers and was always in tune with what was happening politically. Unlike many youngsters of his generation, he was a fan of Prime Minister Bob Menzies.

Al Hamley remembered Peter's other serious interest, 'Aussie Rules' football, which still featured in his life with the Diamond Valley league. He even contemplated trying for the VFL. 'He participated in one or two under-18 training sessions with the Collingwood Football Club,' Hamley recalled, 'but then decided it was too hard and would have taken too much dedication; so he gave it away and shortly after he left the army and stopped playing football for good.'

Yet Peter continued with other sports – skiing during the winter as well as playing the occasional game of squash. Always the competitor, he excelled at both. But his overwhelming interest was undoubtedly motor cars. He was too smart and ambitious to work behind a parts counter for the rest of his life and, although a life on the racetrack beckoned, the question was, how?

Al Hamley remembered that Peter's initial aim was to race open-wheel racing cars, which, even then, were prohibitively expensive and obviously out of the question for someone with a low-paid job and a family with little spare money. There was also the need to prove himself in some sort of competitive motor sport. It was one thing to drive fast on the road, but it was another matter entirely to pit his prowess against other like-minded and skilled drivers in competition.

The short-term answer was motorkhanas. These have been the mainstay of car club motor sport for almost as long as the combustion engine has been used on four wheels. Together with trials, tarmac rallies on public roads and hill climbs, they form the bottom rung on the ladder for people who want to test their driving skills without doing out-and-out circuit racing. The cost of this was much less and, in the case of motorkhanas, there was no requirement for a graded competition licence.

While he was studying at Melbourne University, Al Hamley was also employed part-time at the Country Roads Board (CRB). Tim Ferguson worked at the CRB, too. They were both members of the CRB's Car Club and began to take part in various events run by the club at venues like Tarrawingee near Wangaratta, which had a short one-kilometre test track. Ken Mitchell, who was to feature prominently with the A30 a few years later and was to become for a time one of Peter's closest friends, was also a member.

Like nearly all his friends, Ken Mitchell was a few years older than Peter. He was studying Civil Engineering at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), though he was also employed full-time as

a part-time student by the CRB – a sort of cadetship. It was his engineering skills and ability to talk about cars in a technical sense that first brought him and Peter together.

Tim Ferguson purchased a Mini Moke and the boys all went to a local motorkhana being conducted in a field near Hurstbridge. It was a multi-club affair and Peter went as a member of the CRB Car Club. Most of the competitors had small sportscars like MG Midgets, Triumph Spitfires, MGAs and the latest release MGBs with the odd small sedan like an Anglia thrown in. The Moke was a perfect vehicle for the event and after watching for a short time Peter requested to enter and 'have a go'.

'He had never driven the Moke, nor had he ever entered a motorkhana, but it was like the proverbial duck to water,' said Ferguson. 'Within minutes he had mastered the open-top car and was doing hand-brake turns around the flags.'

As a front-wheel-drive car the Moke could be placed easily if the throttle, brakes and handbrake were used with a deft touch. After a few minutes, it became obvious that Peter was in the top order and so it remained. He won convincingly and the first of literally hundreds of trophies to follow was presented to him at the conclusion of the event. He was absolutely delighted with his result and accepted the little wooden trophy with a humility his friends had not seen before.

That night Peter went to a local CFA party and participated in his other great interest, meeting girls! As Hamley described the scene:

He had an overdose of testosterone and he absolutely loved women. He also loved quality clothes – nothing lairy mind, but he did have something a little different. Peter possessed a blue lamb's wool jumper, which he called his 'conning jumper' because it helped him 'pull' birds. Girls would love the jumper and want a cuddle so they could feel its softness. Peter was happy to oblige.

Peter's relationship with the opposite sex was to feature strongly throughout his life and was the one factor that caused the most controversy. His brother Neil is blunt when commenting on Peter's love life: 'There is no doubt women were his weak point and his otherwise good judgement failed him when dealing with the opposite sex. It is not that he necessarily had the wrong taste in women; it was rather his inability to resist them or their ability to resist him.'

Another friend commented: 'He had a roving eye and he always followed it'!

Ken Mitchell agreed as he saw firsthand the effect his friend had on the opposite sex and his almost ruthless pursuit of a woman he fancied.

Mitchell had quickly become Peter's closest companion and a firm favourite of the Brocks, particularly Ruth who invited him to stay at their new home, which she had inherited from her parents. This latest move by Peter's parents occurred in the middle of 1964, following the death of Ruth's father. The Laidley home was in Wattle Glen and was a much more substantial building than the one at Anzac Avenue.

Mitchell, Ferguson, Hamley and Lovegrove, as a group, used to regularly frequent the various social events organised by either the CFA members or the CRB, but then ventured further afield and went to the rock 'n' roll dances at the Springvale Town Hall and various other locations around Melbourne. It was also the time when jazz became popular again, with Melbourne the centre of the revival through various jazz venues, such as Black & Blue and Opus. While Peter loved jazz, it was generally agreed 'some really good sorts' attended these jazz dances, another incentive if one was needed.

Peter and his mates were extremely lucky in that their late teens and early twenties occurred when the world was beginning the so-called 'sexual revolution', with all this implied in changed attitudes toward pre-marital sex. What had originated with rock 'n' roll in the mid 1950s had become in the early 1960s a

metamorphosis to a completely new way of thinking for Western youth. Undoubtedly, the advent of the pill helped this along, and Peter was never slow in taking advantage of society's new-found freedoms.

Peter and Ferguson went out with several nurses and then Tim found himself a steady date in his future wife, Libby. John Lovegrove and Al Hamley also found themselves steady girlfriends, leaving Ken Mitchell and Peter to continue to play the field. For Mitchell, however, this proved a little hazardous, especially if a new girlfriend was attractive.

'He could be a loyal and kind friend, but his weakness was women and he had no compunction in stealing a few of my girlfriends. If they were particularly attractive and he thought he had half a chance, he just moved in,' said Mitchell with a rueful grin. 'He was absolutely charming if he wanted to be, but completely amoral; in fact he could be a bit of a prick!' Mitchell says he tackled Peter once about his propensity to target his girlfriends. The answer was disarmingly honest: 'Life's a free-for-all, and if they want to go out with me, that is their choice and you are better off without them.'

Al Hamley, Ruth and Heather at Calder, 1965. (Ken Mitchell)

Libby Ferguson agreed about Peter's ability to be charming and considered he 'was quite attractive'. But a steadying influence entered Peter's life, a young legal secretary called Heather Russell.

'He calmed down a lot when he met Heather,' says Mitchell. 'Some of his closest friends now had steady girlfriends and I believe this influenced him into getting somebody steady as well. He quickly realised that in order to keep Heather he had to change, and for a while he did so.'

Terry Russell and Amilcar, 1965.

To a man, Peter's friends agree Heather was a lovely person and, despite her youth, a strong woman who knew her own mind. Their girlfriends also agreed, saying she was a calming influence on Peter and, for a while at least, he stopped his wandering ways. Heather's brother, Terry Russell, a flag marshall with the Victorian Racing Drivers Club, also had an Austin 7 as well as a vintage Amilcar racer and drove a souped-up Austin Lancer with an MGA engine. With so much in common, it was inevitable that Terry and Peter would become good friends.

Heather and Peter attending a friend’s wedding, 1966.

4
IN HARNESS
– ARMY AND MARRIAGE

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Peter met Heather Russell at a party in Eltham in April 1964. He was nineteen and she a few weeks short of her seventeenth birthday. Peter had arrived with a group of mates, minus a lady friend. Heather was being escorted by a young solicitor from her work.

At the time she was studying part-time at secretarial school, having completed Year 10 the previous year, as well as working for the firm of solicitors. When she was introduced to Peter, she recalls instantly liking the forward young man, saying, 'we hit it off straight away. He quickly requested my phone number, which I gave him.' For Peter, Heather was attractive and intelligent and genuinely interested in cars, an added bonus. He once joked that 'if her parents owned a pub, she would be perfect', even though she didn't barrack for Collingwood, being a Fitzroy supporter.

A few days after their first meeting, Peter called Heather and they started dating. One of the first places he took his new girlfriend was to meet his grandparents and uncle and aunt at Kirkliston. The family quickly came to love Heather and the feeling was mutual.

'I became very close to Granny and Boss as well as Sandy and Norma and became very fond of them,' Heather recalled. 'I spent a lot of time at the property and had my first driving lesson there. I drove his "early model" and I recall inadvertently pressing the accelerator down hard and as the speed built up getting the wobbles. Peter quickly leaned over, grabbed the steering wheel and took control again. He was a calm and patient teacher.' The farm and its surrounding dirt roads were the perfect venue for her to learn something more than the basics and many lessons in car control in the dirt were to follow. These lessons were to stand her in good stead when she began her own motor sport activities a few years later.

'Peter was similar to me,' remembers Heather. 'We had catholic tastes and liked a variety of music, including jazz and rock 'n' roll. Like most young people of the time, we absolutely loved the Beatles.'

During the 'Swinging '60s', Australian youth were either 'rockers' or 'jazzers'. If taken to the extreme, the former (if they were boys) had their hair 'a-la-Elvis' and wore stovepipe jeans, pointed-toe shoes, or boots and leather jackets. The latter favoured corduroy pants, roll top t-shirts (as worn by skiers), knitted woollen jumpers and duffel coats. Jazzers also wore their hair long like the Beatles and the other English bands.

For the women their dress was similar, with the main difference being their hairstyles. Rockers wore their hair pulled up in a beehive, while jazzers bleached their hair blonde (usually with peroxide) and wore it long and straight. If you had curly or wavy hair, it was straightened with a steam iron on an ironing board, usually with the help of a friend. Later, both groups of women quickly adapted to the mini skirt when it was made fashionable by the model Jean Shrimpton.

To the conservative generation of parents, it seemed as though the world had gone mad. Not only did they not understand the music, the lifestyle of their children horrified many. For the Russells and the Brocks, though, there were no such fears.

Heather's brother Terry remarks how both sets of parents with their working-class backgrounds loved a party and a drink. While they may not have understood the music they had no problem with the lifestyle, or just turned a blind eye.

Heather and Peter went to a number of dance and music venues. 'One of our favourite haunts was Smacka Fitzgibbon's jazz club in North Melbourne, known simply as "Smacka's Place". I was very keen on traditional jazz (known colloquially as "Trad Jazz"), which was extremely popular in the 1960s with jazz clubs popping up all over the place. Some of my girlfriends and I had big plans to form a female jazz band and for a couple of years I had been taking trumpet lessons from the leading jazz musician of the time, Frank Traynor.'

After a few months Heather began to sense the relationship was becoming serious. They were going everywhere together, even to the motor races. Heather's love of cars meant her going to the races was different from most of the other girlfriends, who just tagged along to keep their boyfriends happy or to make sure their wandering eyes did not find somebody more suitable. It was at a race that she says she was amazed one day when she saw another side to Peter's personality, a shy and unsure-of-himself aspect:

He absolutely idolised Norm Beechey, the champion Holden touring car driver. Our group would stay on after the races with Peter hoping to get a chance to meet his hero. I remember on a couple of occasions Peter would ask me to go into the pits at Sandown to 'chat up' Norm and then, when I was successful, call Peter over to meet him. I found it strange that Peter, who was usually so forward in meeting people, was not confident enough to approach Norm. This even occurred later when he was racing the A30.

Heather also enjoyed the company of Peter's friends, describing them as 'good natured and nice people'. She would join them in their forays to improve their times on the Curly Mile and even went with Peter as a passenger in some of their nocturnal high-speed runs. 'I went with Peter in his early model Holden when he drove the Mile and was amazed at his speed, and fearless attitude. I felt quite comfortable with his driving – well, maybe a little nervous! Of course it was highly illegal,' she remembers with a grin. One of Peter's friends years later said, 'Now what bird would do that?'

For the first six months or so there were no problems between them, although Heather noticed Peter was smoking and drinking more and this was affecting his behaviour: 'His alcohol and cigarette consumption was increasing and began to change his personality. He would often become very drunk and could become quite nasty and aggressive to all those around him. Peter always wanted to be the life of the party, whether it was in some group sing-a-long, or just plain dancing. He was gregarious and funny and everybody noticed him.'

Unfortunately, Peter's eye began to rove again and Heather remembers there were times when Peter was a less-than-faithful boyfriend: 'There was the odd suspicion reinforced by some female intuition that he was straying and maybe two-timing me. Once I had it out with him.' He confirmed her allegations, quickly apologised and promised it would never happen again. 'And, for a while, as far as I am aware, he kept his word,' she says ruefully.

Peter approached his twentieth birthday full of plans and hopes for the future. Then the outside world intervened. On 24 November 1964, the federal cabinet introduced one of the most contentious and divisive

pieces of legislation of the 1960s: the National Service Act. It required certain twenty-year-old Australian males to serve in the army full time for two years, followed by another three years in the Reserves. Furthermore, the Act was then amended to allow conscripts to be sent overseas in a combatant role. With South-East Asia facing a heightened degree of instability and a Communist-led war beginning to escalate in South Vietnam, the Federal Government concluded that Australia's armed forces, particularly the army, was desperately short of manpower.

Libby and Tim Ferguson (left), and Peter and Heather, 1968. (Geoff Easton)

The method of choosing conscripts was by a ballot that drew several dates in the selected period. All the males with the corresponding birthdays were then called up for National Service. Two ballots were conducted each year using a lottery barrel and marbles representing birthdays. Peter's twentieth fell on 26 February 1965, and just over two weeks later the first ballot for the new conscription was held. His birthday marble came up and, whether he liked it or not, he had just three months before he was in the Australian Army for twenty-four months with the possibility of being sent to South Vietnam.

Both Ken Mitchell and Heather agree Peter was ambivalent about becoming a 'Nasho'. He had no real conviction either way on whether there should be conscription, or the arguments for and against Aus-

tralia's involvement in the Vietnam War. At this stage the general public was strongly in favour of both. Peter's main issue was it would take two years out of his life and disrupt his plans to go into motor racing, which had now progressed from dreams to active discussion, especially with Ken Mitchell, who was providing valuable input and advice. There was also the issue of whether he was suitable 'army' material because, work aside, he had led a rather free-wheeling and hedonistic existence with little authoritative control or discipline.

Peter's father, with his own military experience, was proud that Peter was in the Army. Ruth was also proud, but like all mothers she could see the potential downside. Peter, when with family, therefore kept his feelings largely to himself, but was more vocal in the company of his friends. There was never any thought of trying the conscientious objector route. The Brock family as a whole would not have countenanced such an escape clause. Nevertheless, Heather did try seriously to help him escape conscription. Her boss knew the then minister of defence and she asked her boss if he could approach the minister to see if he could 'swing things and get Peter off'. Her boss kindly agreed to use his influence, but the word came back with an unequivocal 'No!'

The last few weeks leading to the inevitable parting were no different than before, with work, parties, race meetings and weekends at Kirkliston. His male friends threw a monster going-away party and the Saturday before he joined the Army, Peter and Heather spent the evening at a motel for some private R and R. 'It was no big deal,' says Heather:

In those days boyfriends and girlfriends could not share a room at their parent's homes so a motel room was the only place to have some private time together. We had been away before but this time some friends joined us and stayed in another room, so we had a little party. I was not quite eighteen, which meant we had to be a little careful when checking in, but otherwise it was just two young people spending some quality time together. When we returned Peter embellished the story somewhat and told some of his mates he had smuggled me inside in the boot of a car and then hid me in a cupboard when the motel's manager came calling. Nothing like that ever happened; I guess it made a better story.

John Lovegrove agrees, saying many of Peter's anecdotes really made people sit up and take notice: 'Peter had a tendency to exaggerate a bit and would often embellish a story about an event to make it sound more daring, more dangerous or funnier. There was generally a grain of truth in what he was saying, and his life was exciting enough.'

Despite his lack of enthusiasm for the Army, Peter quickly made up his mind that while he would not extend himself, he would 'play by the rules' and do what was expected of him. It was probably the first real test of his maturity and by all accounts he acquitted himself more than adequately. Similarly, like so many before him the Army taught him some valuable lessons and he learnt a lot about himself. More importantly, he made some long-lasting friends. There was one man in particular, Dave Turnbull, who became a close companion and, like so many others, was instrumental in Peter's early racing. Turnbull was also in the first intake and he and Peter met at Puckapunyal in central Victoria, where they began their initial twelve-week basic training. They crossed paths after only a few days and over a beer discovered they had a lot in common.

'We were in the same platoon – C Company – and I got to know him after a day's square bashing. I was very interested in motorsport, but he was the ultimate petrol head. I quickly realised he knew everything there was to know about the domestic racing scene and was already planning on how to become part of it. He seemed to have only one hero – Norm Beechey,' Turnbull recalls. 'Like nearly all of us, Peter did not

like the Army because it was an interruption to his life, especially his plans to go motor racing. Despite this, he was street smart and knew how to play the game – he became a good soldier.'

Turnbull remembers Peter applying himself during basic training. Following this three-month period, the Army gave the new recruits a choice of what they wanted to do and where they wanted to go. 'Choice is probably the wrong word because generally the Army chose for you and seldom gave people what they wanted, or what they were good at,' laughs Turnbull. 'It was a joke among soldiers on how perverse and stupid the Army could really be. For example, if you were a good mechanic they put you in the infantry!'

Peter's choice of what to do was more a question of intuition and luck than careful thought. He discussed the issue with Turnbull, who Peter already regarded as somebody who was very 'canny'. In fact, Turnbull was a pre-eminent wheeler-dealer and he turned his enforced stay in the Army to a very lucrative advantage. Because Turnbull chose the Medical Corps, Peter followed suit.

'We had discussed the various choices and this was the best option for both of us. Some people suggest we chose the Medical Corps because it meant we would not be sent overseas, particularly Vietnam. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, it would have made us more likely to see active service as they were in desperate need of good soldiers on the battlefield with some sort of medical training,' argues Turnbull. 'There were several reasons for our choice. The Medical Corps would give us some relief from the incessant square bashing and rolling around in the dirt, plus a degree of freedom from authority. Much later we also realised it gave us some authority as well,' he adds. He also admits they did discuss the issue of Vietnam and although they were both ambivalent to the Vietnam conflict they were definitely not against it. However, both of them, and Peter especially, were strongly opposed to conscripts going to Vietnam. When the first national serviceman was killed in the conflict they undertook a protest that had huge consequences and made the local as well as some metropolitan papers.

Platoon 3, School of Army Health, Healesville – Peter (top circled), Dave Turnbull (bottom circled), October 1965. (Peter Turner)

'Peter and I were joined in this protest by another Nasho, Peter Turner, and surprisingly a regular army corporal. Just outside Wagga there was the Kapooka Military Area sign. We had taken some surgical forceps, surgical gloves and a tin of red paint with us and we used the gauze to write slogans on the army sign – "Down with NS" [National Service] and "SOS" which stood for "Save our Sons".' The outcome: 'God, the shit really hit the fan,' says Turnbull. 'The authorities never imagined Army personnel were involved,

but when we went back to do the same thing again after the second conscript was killed in Vietnam, we found that the Army had mounted a guard at the sign.'

Peter's brother Lewis was then at Melbourne University and felt very strongly about Vietnam; so much so, he seriously thought of becoming a conscientious objector. It was only an appeal from his mother to not take that course of protest that made him register for the draft. Luckily, his marble was not picked. Lewis remembers Peter joining him at some of the student protest meetings, especially some of the informal parties where student and world politics were loudly discussed.

The conscript, June 1965. (Neil Brock)

'Peter always joined in as he had a deep interest in current events and I was amazed at the depth of his knowledge and ability to mix with the university students,' says Lewis.

For Peter though, there was another all-encompassing reason for his choice of the medical corps, which overrode everything. He was missing Heather and the Army's Medical Training School was based at Healesville, a stone's throw away from her home in Nunawading. There was also a very generous leave entitlement at the medical school, so for two weekends in four Peter was able to take the weekend off and

visit his lady and attend the occasional Victorian racing circuits. Heather fondly recalls how these were great times.

'We also got engaged shortly after he finished basic training. I was now eighteen and it seemed a good time. He never really made a formal proposal – it was not down-on-your-knees stuff. We just sort of drifted into it, although we did have a formal engagement party. Anyway, I don't think Peter would have thought it was necessary to ask me properly. Rejection from a woman would not have entered his mind,' she laughs.

Despite the good times, Heather was beginning to have doubts about the future of their relationship. They were still very young and in the two years they had been dating they had both changed. Heather in particular had matured, but she reasoned it would be over eighteen months before Peter left the Army and until then she didn't need to make a definitive decision. But events intervened, or rather the parents did: 'After we became engaged our parents seemed to take over and we both felt – I especially – that we were being bulldozed into setting a wedding date. Both parents got on well together and became very close, so this became another factor in our relationship. I wondered later that if we had not had outside influences, whether the marriage would have even gone ahead.'

On completing his medical training at Healesville, Peter's diligence was rewarded with a promotion to Lance Corporal, the first rung up the Army's ladder. Turnbull says the promotion was richly rewarded. 'Peter was eminently promotable. He was intelligent, could communicate well and talk to the officers as an equal. He could pull his head in when necessary and knew how to play the Army at its own game.'

Turnbull says the promotion was no 'flash in the pan' because only a few months later Peter was offered another stripe to full corporal, but he declined. Peter's reasons showed his savvy. He basically wanted to remain one of the boys and, more importantly, a second strip would have meant more authority, which would equal a commensurate increase in responsibility – not what Peter wanted. One stripe was sufficient to set him above the privates, to pull him clear of the herd.

Following medical school, Peter and Turnbull were transferred to No 2 General Hospital at Ingleburn, south of Sydney. From there they went to the Army camp at Kapooka as part of a training battalion. Peter was posted there to work at the camp's Regimental Aid Post (RAP). At first, conditions were quite primitive and he had a difficult time in doing his job, which was to provide the initial first aid (or point of contact) with soldiers who had a medical condition, or needed to see the Regimental doctor. Turnbull describes Healesville and the No 2 General Hospital, Kapooka as 'a bit of a hole'. He was transferred there a month after Peter and in describing the conditions forty years later, shook his head in disgust:

The first aid and medical facility was pretty basic to say the least – a corrugated tin shed which froze its inhabitants in winter and baked them in summer. The other medical orderlies were all regular servicemen, mostly burnt-out ex-Korean War veterans who thought they had a cushy job and neither knew nor cared about the health of the soldiers. Peter was the first national serviceman [of the new two-year conscription] *in the RAP and he had his work cut out for him.*

Every three months another thousand new recruits came to the camp and apart from the usual aches, pains and injuries sustained in training, they all had to undergo various inoculations, especially if they were to join the Field Force – service overseas. With these numbers flooding Kapooka the government, as a matter of urgency, was forced to spend a lot of money and built a modern RAP.

Turnbull's description of how Peter operated shows his friend was diligent, conscientious and good at handling his fellow soldiers. This was duly noted by his superiors, who were generally all doctors, or trained army nurses: 'The new recruits received a total of ten different types of injections during their time at the camp. Without exaggeration, it meant Peter literally gave thousands of injections, sometimes several hundred at a time . . . and, he became pretty adept at it!' Turnbull laughs as he explains the conveyor belt system devised to handle the inoculations: 'The soldiers were lined up in a single row of three hundred at a time outside the First Aid Post. As they stepped inside, their medical records were marked, somebody swabbed both their arms and then Peter would give them their multiple dose inoculations. He became very proficient at this, averaging one injection every ten seconds.'

In order to save time and money, the same syringe and its contents, enough for multiple doses, were used for several soldiers, with fresh needles being used for each soldier. 'Peter laughingly said one day how he would like to save all the used blunt needles and use them on the regular soldiers, particularly some of the sergeants. To the best of my knowledge though, he never went ahead with his threat,' laughs Turnbull. The method of using the same syringe had its hazards and after somebody died (luckily not at the camp), this type of inoculation procedure was banned and it became one syringe and one needle per patient.

Peter's attitude towards his job at Kapooka showed how, if he was interested in something, he set about mastering or learning the subject. He became quite fascinated and involved in the medical side of his job and learnt as much about the role of a first aid soldier as he could. Since he was the first point of contact for any soldier who reported sick, he became the one who made a judgement on whether to refer the soldier and his ailments to the doctors. He was pretty adept at some of the more simple diagnoses and the Army's doctors came to rely on him because he saved them time by filtering out those ailments that did not warrant a more detailed examination or treatment. 'He was very serious about the type of treatment he dispensed and the doctors appreciated his input. That is why he was offered another promotion,' says Turnbull.

Happy parents – Doug Russell, Ruth Brock, Josie Russell and Geoff Brock (left to right). (Neil Brock)

With Peter, though, there was quite often a downside. He got on well with all the national servicemen (because he was one of them), but he did not always get on well with all of the regular soldiers, particularly some of the officers. Though he did sometimes chafe under Army discipline, that was not what irked him. Rather, it was the mindless adherence to rules or regulations that, to him, made no sense. One particular incident put him offside with a couple of the older officers, and it also showed Peter's innate ability to play the system to his own advantage.

Turnbull says, 'We were sick of wearing full uniform while undertaking our first-aid duties. Peter believed it did not make medical sense because, in reality, we should have been wearing something which could be readily cleaned if soiled and was more hygienic in a medical sense.' When Peter broached this idea to Turnbull, he agreed, so Peter then went to the senior doctors. 'He suggested [to them] we wear white overalls as befitting our station as medicos, as well as being able to present a hygienic alternative to our regular uniforms. There was something in it for us also. It meant we could wear whatever we liked under the overalls because nobody could see and it would keep us much cooler in summer.' The senior doctors readily agreed and Lance Corporal Brock and Private Turnbull became the first soldiers to wear white overall as part of their 'official' uniform. But, as Turnball says, 'This did not go down too well with some of the older officers, because we were "out of uniform" and consequently were threatened with disciplinary action. However, the CO of the Medical Unit was on our side, so we won the argument!'

Peter also used his exalted position in another way – caring for the cooks. The staff in the kitchen were always cutting themselves, so Peter went out of his way to administer to their needs and, in turn, they made sure Peter and his mates received the best of the food – such things as really fresh bread (which was hard to come by) and their own personal jars of jam and peanut butter. Turnbull also says, 'I know Peter could be impatient, but in the Army I saw for the first time that he could be a good leader. He became a magnet for some of the other national servicemen; they all liked him.'

Another friend of Peter's in the Army days was Peter Turner, who he had met at Puckapunyal and who was also part of the first intake. Turner was also one of the infamous four who daubed the Army sign. He agrees with Turnbull's assessment of Peter's prowess while in the force, but adds that every now and again Peter's latent wildness would show through: 'One of Peter's roles in the army would be to transport patients in the camp's ambulance – a Landrover – from the Regimental Aid Post to the camp's hospital, a distance of just over a kilometre. He would ask the patients whether they wanted a "quick trip" or a "slow trip". A quick trip meant a hair-raising ride, much of the time on two wheels.'

The Army was good to Turnbull and Peter and the boys received generous leave, which presented them with two alternatives – race meetings in New South Wales or their girlfriends in Melbourne. Often, the race meetings won out and they travelled to Catalina Park, Oran Park, Warwick Farm and Bathurst. The latter included some of the early sportscar races as distinct from the 500-mile endurance event for the touring cars.

When Peter and Turnbull drove for seven hours to Melbourne on a Friday night they would engaged in a robust round of R and R. Heather says he scarcely had time to breathe: 'He still played football for the Diamond Valley League and we were usually joined by family members and friends to cheer him on. Uncle Sandy was a regular supporter because Peter was his favourite. Then, on the Saturday night there was usually either a CRB or CFA party to go to and Sunday was a family day at Kirkliston. In the evening he drove back to the camp.'

Peter was acutely aware a pretty girl like Heather should not be left alone too much – after all, there were wolves like Peter around who were ever ready to move in! Heather says some of his friends kept a friendly eye over her, and she remembers how Al Hamley took her under his wing during this time: 'Some weekends when Peter was unable to come back to Melbourne, his mates would invite me around to one of their homes for "a boys night", where Al Hamley would play the piano, I would play my trumpet and a variety of songs were sung, beer consumed and there was a lot of laughter – all innocent fun.' As Heather was engaged, the etiquette of the time ruled that she could not go out with anybody else. There was the option to find a friendly 'escort' if the need arose, but even this could be fraught and did have some interesting consequences. For one of Peter's friends, it meant the end of their relationship.

Dave Chandler had been introduced to Peter by his good friend Terry, Heather's brother, and they had kicked around together as part of the usual car racing group. While Peter was at Kapooka, Heather's mother and father asked Chandler to accompany Heather to a function, which he duly obliged. Chandler was a tall, good-looking blond bloke, a year or so older than Peter. When Peter found out he was none too happy, but he didn't say anything to Chandler – Terry informed his friend that Peter was not happy. Chandler, who could not have cared less anyway, never raised the subject with Peter in return. Peter did not forget this and simply bided his time.

Needless to say, Chandler was a car nut and was building up a Bolwell, the Australian sports car that is generally regarded as one of the best ever built by a small Australian manufacturer. At this time the model available was the MK4. It was powered by a Holden 'grey motor' and Peter was definitely jealous that Chandler owned such a vehicle. The MK4 could be purchased as a kit car and while the Bolwell was being

finished, Chandler purchased an old Anglia that needed some TLC. Since its engine was not working, it needed a tow back to his home. Peter volunteered, and it nearly ended in disaster.

Peter's tow vehicle was the inevitable hot 'early model' and Chandler advised him the Anglia's brakes were not good and 'to take it easy'. 'The silly bugger drove as fast as he could along Whitehorse Road and probably hit 60 or 70 miles an hour [100 to 110 kilometres per hour]. I tried to slow him down by braking, but he kept speeding and the tow rope did not break. After a short time the brakes failed completely and I was then reduced to using the hand brake, which also wore out,' says Chandler, shaking his head at this stupidity. 'He was very lucky I managed not to run into the back of him. I nearly did so on purpose just to teach him. When we finally reached my home, he just laughed and thought the whole incident was quite funny. I was furious and I had two options: punch him or laugh it off: I did the latter because I did not want to give him the satisfaction of seeing me angry. Our friendship cooled and from then on I stayed clear of him, although Heather and Terry remained close friends!'

Peter was probably not aware how lucky he had been. Chandler was learning karate and became a very proficient instructor in one of the strict Japanese styles – Goju Kai – reaching First Dan black belt status. He was also six foot three.

By the middle of 1966 Lance Corporal Brock was halfway through his enforced stay in the Army and was looking forward to the day when he would be discharged and he could go back to his life and racing plans. At the same time, it became apparent he would not be sent overseas, so there was no reason why he could not put his racing plans into action, especially since he had two qualified friends to help him – Dave Turnbull and Ken Mitchell. While the former was with him in the Army, the latter was back in 'Civvy Street'. Both men were instrumental in helping Peter attain his dream and Turnbull says Peter had also been strongly encouraged by a workmate at Preston Motors, Mick Hennessy, who had a great deal of practical and technical knowledge.

Mitchell and Peter had now known one another for several years and had spent a great deal of time in planning the sort of car they would race. 'They' was the operative word, since they both wanted to race and with their combined resources had a better chance of succeeding.'We had been talking about building a car for years,' remembers Ken Mitchell. 'It was a mutual passion, although as an engineer I was more interested in the technical side. We needed each other – both in a financial sense and for our overall expertise. Because of his constant tinkering and modifying of his cars he [Peter] had a practical knowledge, while I had both theoretical and practical nous through my engineering studies and work at the CRB.'

The obvious question for them was what type of car to race. Open-wheel cars, whether Formula Two or Three, were too expensive, as were some of the better production sports cars. Even though Peter was judiciously saving money for the first time in his life - with the Army providing board, lodging and most of the necessities of life, this was not a difficult thing to do – and his bank account was growing nicely, in reality this was never going to be enough to buy something readymade that would fit the bill.

The first choice was an early model Holden, which was eventually abandoned because there were too many 48/215s racing – the technology and the car was already 'old hat' and the vehicle they were considering was seriously damaged in a street indiscretion. Dave Turnbull remembers this early model had been highly developed and even sported a roll cage, something unheard of in a street car. They generally agreed that with the roll cage the vehicle had been stiffened too much and was unwieldy on the road. On hard cornering it would lift a wheel nearly a foot (30 centimetres) off the ground.

Mitchell says they made the decision to build something radical, or at least a little different: 'What we were looking to do was building a sort of "Sports Sedan", although to begin with there was no separate

class for those sorts of competition cars. We decided to make something which we could also run in the Sports Car class.' There were obvious benefits to this: they could pool their money and use their joint expertise to build something which, though inexpensive, had the potential to be at the 'pointy end' of the field.

The parameters they devised were simple: a small, inexpensive car that could be transformed by an engine transplant. 'We looked at many options, the first being the Ford 100E Prefect of the early 1950s,' Mitchell remembers. 'Right from the start we came to the conclusion that whatever we built would have to be powered by a six-cylinder Holden engine, with a Holden driveline and probably much of the suspension.' One of the options was an Austin A30, especially the two-door version, but they were hard to find. This is where having Turnbull as a friend proved a real benefit.

Turnbull was always regarded by those who knew him as an entrepreneur, a wily wheeler-dealer who could always make a dollar. At Kapooka he ran a lucrative trade in purchasing wrecks or damaged cars from Stuart Auto Wreckers in nearby Wagga Wagga, which was run by a friend, Ted Bartholomew. Since damaged and wrecked cars were cheaper in New South Wales, Turnbull could purchase them at a fair price, either strip them at Bartholomew's or truck them to Melbourne and make a tidy profit. The business proved so lucrative he eventually opened his own wrecking yard in Melbourne.

His main role at Kapooka, driving the camp's ambulance, was in his opinion a case of a 'car thief being left the keys to a caryard! I would drive patients from Kapooka to the Wagga General Hospital and then when they were delivered I would nick off for a while and do some business at the wreckers. Sometimes, Peter would join me and we would ferret around the yard looking for a suitable little sedan to turn into his race car.' It was on one of these forays in late 1966 that they discovered a 'lovely little two-door A30. It was perfect,' says Turnbull with a grin. 'There was no motor, or gearbox, just a completely undamaged Austin. We contacted Ken Mitchell, who came up the following Saturday towing a trailer in anticipation of bringing the Austin back. As he was the engineer we wanted his opinion, which he readily gave. I did the haggling with Bartholomew – Peter would have paid too much – and together with some Triumph Herald uprights, disc rotors and sundry bits we only paid around $50 for the lot!'

After the successful purchase, Turnbull went back to the camp while Peter and Mitchell went to a local pub to celebrate. There they were joined by Peter Turner. Too drunk to drive long distance, they went to the local 'drive-in' and got themselves arrested for 'a disturbance' – throwing beer cans at the hut with the projector – and spent the rest of the night in Wagga gaol! Since Peter was in the Army and there had been no damage to property or limb, they were released in the morning with a caution, and no charges were laid. Hangovers aside, Peter went back to the camp early for once and Mitchell towed the A30 back to Melbourne. Forty years later Ken Mitchell remembers the events with a smile: 'All-in-all it was an interesting and very productive weekend.'

Turner says this was the second time he spent a night in gaol with Peter. The first had occurred shortly before, when he had borrowed an army mate's VW for a trip to Liverpool. 'It was raining and Peter wanted to demonstrate handbrake turns to me in a deserted service station. We'd had a few beers and when the police arrived they hauled us off to Liverpool gaol to sleep it off overnight. Again we were not charged.' After interviewing them both separately the police warned each of the boys to steer clear of the other, saying 'he was no good!'

With about eight months of his service still to run, Ken Mitchell began work on the car despite his Army workload, and was helped by Peter on the weekends. A few small bits of fabrication were undertaken at Kapooka's workshops, but Turnbull says this was just 'small beer stuff'. He is adamant that the stories recounted later by Peter, about substantial parts of the racing car being constructed at Kapooka, are

a fabrication: ‘Purely fairytale stuff. While at the camp Peter was busy almost 24/7 and, anyway, if we were caught doing anything like this it would have meant the guardhouse. I also did not want my spare parts business put in jeopardy in any way.’

When 1967 arrived, Peter faced the months ahead knowing it was going to be ‘his year’. As far as the Army was concerned, he had turned the corner and was entering the home run. His racing dream was becoming a reality and there was Heather waiting for him in Melbourne. For some reason the Army also became generous with weekend leave and Peter was able to spend almost every weekend in Melbourne working on the A30 with Mitchell and some of his friends.

Wedding day, August 1967 – Neil Brock, Sue Watt, Heather, Peter, Nancy Coleman and Al Hamley (left to right).

At the end of June and armed with an honourable discharge, Peter left Kapooka for the last time and headed home. He was still legally supposed to be available for the Army reserve for the next three years, but participation never eventuated. The next six weeks were hectic as he readjusted back to civilian life, helped his father with a new business venture and prepared for his forthcoming wedding.

At this stage of their relationship Peter and Heather were getting along well. Heather’s doubts about her future husband had largely disappeared or, as she recounts, were ‘just pushed to the back of my mind’. With their parents handling all the arrangements it was easy to just ‘drift along and let it all happen’, and living together was not a serious option in those days.

The inevitable shower tea for Heather and bucks night for Peter duly occurred. The first was a quiet affair with about a dozen or so girlfriends; the latter a drunken, riotous night held at Al Hamley's place, in which the chimney caught fire because somebody filled the fireplace with alcohol-soaked paper. 'We extinguished it with the water from our Eskys,' remembers Hamley. 'All Peter's friends were there: Ferguson, Lovegrove, Turnbull, Mitchell, the Lord brothers, the Brock clan, plus a dozen-or-so others.'

On 19 August 1967, Peter and Heather married at the Church of Christ in Blackburn, with the reception held nearby. The honeymoon was a simple and inexpensive affair. Heather was working for the Victorian Employers Federation and her boss organised a five-day tour of the Snowy Mountain Scheme, plus accommodation at Cooma. He used his contacts with the various contractors working on the scheme to assist the newlyweds. 'It was a simple, though nice honeymoon,' Heather says. 'Money was tight so it was an inexpensive way to escape family and friends. It was only a short break, partly because Peter wanted to get back to the A30, which was progressing nicely and was very close to its first test.'

Interestingly, Heather understood the order of things and did not mind in the slightest. Peter had really found himself a gem; the question was, did he appreciate it?

Heather and Peter Brock.

Proud owner – Peter and the A30, Hume Weir, April 1968.

5
THE A30
– A RACER AT LAST

THE A30 –
A RACER AT LAST

The genesis of the A30 and the decision to choose it as the mount to start Peter's racing career was a mixture of the finances available, knowledge, technical ability, pragmatism and luck.

Money was the principal guiding factor as neither Ken Mitchell nor Peter had sufficient funds to purchase something more exotic, such as a Formula open-wheeler, or a production sports car. The knowledge bit was easy since both had devoured every motoring magazine and publication available to further their understanding of the basics of racing and building a competitive racing car. Their technical ability could be divided into two parts: theoretical and practical. In this they complemented one another perfectly, with Mitchell being an engineer and Peter having the best part of ten years' practical experience in tinkering and modifying street vehicles. The pragmatic part was that they chose to go into partnership to further their ends, and the luck was that they began racing at a time when a new class of racing car was shortly to become popular – the Sports Sedan.

All the initial work and cost to build and race the A30 was split fifty/fifty. Similarly, there was a verbal agreement between them that the driving would be shared and they would alternate between scratch and handicap races. The A30 had been stored in Neil Brock's unused chicken shed at Wattle Glen and it was here that the majority of work on the initial version of the racer was completed. The choice of the A30 was not as radical as some people claim. What was radical, however, was its power plant.

There were other A30s competing in the sports car class, some quite successfully. The quick ones were usually powered by MG's B-series motors, some bored out to nearly two litres and developing about 130 bhp. Although this type of engine had been discussed as a possible choice, there were never any real plans to have their car powered by anything but a Holden engine. When the issue of the power plant was first discussed with the author back in late 1966, Peter's talk of a Holden grey motor was regarded as something akin to lunacy. In a discussion with Peter, I measured the engine bay of Heather's mother's A30 four-door sedan and argued that the engine would just not fit inside. Peter agreed it would be a tight fit, but explained the benefits. I was not convinced. Yet, Holden components and a Holden motor made eminent sense as the Brocks and Mitchell had considerable experience with Holdens and GM products and, importantly, the contacts to source material at the right price.

In time the grey motor plan was canned and a decision made to fit the A30 with the larger (in cubic capacity) red motor. There were two variants of red motors – one of 149 cubic inches and the other 179 cubic inches. They were both much more technologically advanced than the grey and capable of being modified to attain double their rated horsepower. Needless to say, the 179 was the one chosen.

In 1966, Peter's father Geoff had moved jobs, joining the Watsons of Geensborough as a car salesman, and a very successful one at that. During the run-out of the EH model he sold eighteen new vehicles in one month – a record at the time. The next model Holden was the HD, which was not a popular vehicle and it was one of these that Geoff managed to source from a Melbourne wrecking yard to be used as a donor vehicle for the A30. It was only its mechanical bits that were needed: gearbox, suspension parts and of course the 179.

Geoff had always entertained the idea of having his own business again, and with Peter's racing plans nearing fruition he saw his chance to kill several birds with one stone. In 1967 he made another move and started a business that was to have a huge benefit for Peter's racing career. Shortly after Peter left the Army his father opened a retail establishment, primarily to sell GM new and used parts, as well as a wide range of performance enhancements. This was the soon-to-be-famous Diamond Valley Speed Shop and GB Accessories, situated in the main street of Greensborough. GB was Diamond Valley's wholesale arm. The business would do three things: employ Geoff, employ Peter, and provide a cheap source of parts for the racing program.

The Speed Shop also made good business sense. This was a largely untapped segment of the automotive market and had a huge capacity to grow as all the baby boomers were reaping the benefits of a buoyant economy and had money to spend. Those who were interested in cars wanted to make them go faster while the automotive manufacturers built an ever-increasing range of cars which, if not out-and-out performance vehicles, had the potential to have their performance greatly enhanced.

For Australian drivers the 1960s was the advent of cars such as the Mini Cooper S, the Lotus Cortina and, of course, the big-banger V8 Fords and Holdens, to say nothing of the average six-cylinder sedans that were producing performances which a decade earlier would have been the province of exotic sports and GT cars. Car Clubs for every conceivable make were formed and flourished, and motor sport grew in popularity.

The Speed Shop sold only performance and replacement parts, nothing tizzy or unnecessary. Father and son would not have countenanced that. Dave Turnbull remembers Peter having an intense dislike for any male who dressed up his car with non-essential items, especially inside: 'Window and dashboard adornments would send him into a frenzy. People who were guilty of this he called "Triffids" after the famous science fiction book and popular film, *Day of the Triffids*.' To be called a Triffid was almost as bad as being called a poor one!

Peter and Heather had decided early on that they would not live with in-laws so, after they were married they rented a flat in Lower Plenty. Nice though it was, it was some distance from the Brock family home. Since Peter spent every free minute there working on the A30 the newlyweds did not spend a great deal of time together. However, on the weekend Heather was happy to join him at Wattle Glen, or went to Kirkliston to see Sandy and Norma. For Geoff and Ruth, the A30 meant they had not lost their energetic and charismatic son and, as a bonus, they loved his new wife.

While it is understandable that Geoff was supportive of Peter's plans with the A30 and his hopes to make this a career, Ruth's total support set her apart from the usual motherly wishes for a son. Neil Brock says his mother 'was totally supportive in every way possible and when the racing actually started was more than happy to trek around the countryside and stand in the cold (or heat) to watch Peter.' The brothers, even the youngest, Phillip, who was now in his mid teens, were also very supportive. Phillip would eventually carve out quite a successful career in motor sport, although it was not as stellar as his older

brother. Neil had no interest in the sport, but even he looked forward to the day when they would all venture to the track to see their brother fulfill his dream.

Heather and Peter, 1968.

The chicken shed at the Brock's Wattle Glen home was not the ideal venue to build a racing car. To begin with, it had an earthen floor and was a little draughty, but at least it had a roof and four walls. The plans for the A30's conversion were somewhere between different and radical. It was not that something like this had not been attempted before – it had – but the builders took it several steps further, mainly through the choice of the mechanicals and the way these were fitted to the car.

'There were no major drawings or design plans for the conversion, although there were a few rough sketches with the odd measurement thrown in for good measure,' remembers Mitchell. 'What drawings there were mainly concerned the positioning of the engine and gearbox because this necessitated some major work and was the most difficult part of the whole conversion.' In order to fit the 179 and its gearbox

into the Austin it was necessary to cut out much of the bulkhead, thus weakening the inherent strength of the car. This strength could be replaced by the fitting off a full roll cage and welding the cage to the body, but it was not an easy task since they were beginners, not seasoned race engineers or mechanics. They also wanted to move the engine back as far as possible, which further complicated matters, especially with the ergonomics as this would place the gearlever virtually behind the driver.

The A30 was designed for a small four-cylinder 1200cc engine and a commensurately small gearbox, not a bulky straight six-cylinder with a capacity of three litres (3000cc) backed up by a bulky bell housing and gearbox designed to handle the horsepower. But there were two major reasons to move the engine and gearbox back into the cabin:

- better weight distribution – to move the weight more into the centre and thus reduce the 'polar moment of inertia'; that is, the tendency of a vehicle with the weight of a heavy engine either in the front, or rear, to spin under heavy cornering
- to reduce weight over the front wheels – thus also reducing the tendency to understeer

Mitchell says Peter chose to use the oxyacetylene torch and set about cutting a large hole in the bulkhead, something which was quite difficult to accomplish without severely weakening the body structure. It was definitely not a case of using an axe as in the days of the Austin 7. Even with the vehicle stripped down it was a small car so it was a cramped place in which to wield an oxy torch. Nevertheless, this part of the conversion went relatively smoothly.

'The A30 was a monocoque with a fairly standard type of chassis rail fixed to the bulkhead and running to the front of the car,' says Mitchell. 'This made it relatively easy to position to weld the engine mounts to the rails. All that remained was to weld a new cross rail to the chassis rails to help position the engine and gearbox and strengthen the structure.' It was a case of positioning the engine and gearbox by guesswork and then visually measuring whether a particular modification was going to fulfill its planned function. One of the main problems was leaving enough room for the pedals and Peter's enormous feet!

By trial and error, they managed to position the engine and gearbox into the little car. It was so far back that, in effect, it was almost like a mid-engine car, albeit one with the engine in front of the driver rather than behind like some of the new exotic supercars of the day. Initially, the engine went largely untouched. Except for a replacement set of rings and bearings (to be on the safe side), the engine's mechanicals (both block and head) were left alone. There was insufficient money to start giving the engine the sort of detailed attention that would result in a wholesale increase in power. It also ran the standard inlet manifold with its single Stromberg carburetor. While the secondary exhaust had to be considerably modified to fit the car, the primaries were also left as standard.

While the near-standard power was no more than a modified MG B-series engine, Mitchell predicted the 179 would have the benefit of considerably more torque, which would give their mount the advantage of better acceleration out of a corner compared with the other A30s. But the gearbox was initially a problem, not because it was weak, but because it was only a three-speed unit. Mitchell says the original unit came with a column shift, but they converted it to a conventional floor mount with a 'Hurst Straight Line Shifter', which was a common modification of the day.

'Even with this modification, it was barely adequate because three speeds were totally insufficient for a racing car. Also, to get it into first, one had to lift the gear arm, something that was difficult to do in a race, especially when the arm was positioned six or seven millimetres behind the driver. We bent the lever so it

faced forwards, but it was still difficult to use cleanly,' says Mitchell who, having raced the car, knew firsthand what it was like.

The suspension set-up was a complete hybrid and gave them a big problem. The A30's initial handling, which could best be described 'as wayward' did not improve until Mitchell and Peter parted company some time later. There were three donor vehicles for the suspension: HD Holden, Triumph Herald and Austin Lancer.

'The rear end consisted of an HD axle with a fabricated system consisting of trailing arms at the top and A Frame lower wishbones, which were not adjustable. Springs were coils (with an unknown spring rate). Both the coil and the shock absorbers came from a highly modified street racer belonging to Heather's brother, Terry Russell. The car was an Austin Lancer, which was powered by a highly modified 1620cc motor from an MGA and had been written off in a street incident,' remembers Mitchell.

Terry Russell and Peter, Warrick Farm, February 1968. (Jan Russell)

The front end was initially Triumph Herald with specially manufactured upper and lower steel blocks machined to take the HD ball joints and uprights. It was adjustable for camber and castor. The front discs and rotors were also from the Triumph, as was the rack and pinion steering. 'The wheels were also a compromise – steel rims widened to six inches, carrying road-going cross-ply tyres – Goodyear Grand Prix. They were chosen because it was all we could afford and, anyway, Peter loved the name, Mitchell says.'

Those who later worked on the A30 and further modified it to make it a race winner, agreed it was not the design that was wrong. It was a clever adaptation, spoilt by inexperience and lack of money. There were no aerodynamic aids, wings on cars were almost unheard of and the body was adorned with simple flares that jutted out from the body to cover the wider track and six-inch rims. Safety included a full roll cage (unfortunately made from square steel tubing instead of round) welded to the floor and the B pillars, with bracing running to the rear.

'We painted it dark blue, which, although it was a crude spray job, really set its lines off - it looked great,' says Mitchell. 'The first tests were a hoot. At first there was no seat, just a wooden box on the floor, but there was a lap belt, something Peter always insisted on even if it was a street car. I reckon seat-belts saved his life on more than one occasion because of the number of times he rolled his cars.'

More than forty years later, Ken Mitchell still remembers the excitement and sense of achievement when the car was fired up and went for its first test run, not on a racetrack but on a public road. It was not registered and would definitely have not passed a roadworthy. 'The old girl had an open exhaust and made quite a racket. Initially, we were not able to test it at a track: both Calder and Winton were too far away and it would have cost money, so we tested it on the road near the Lord brothers' home in Watsonia. We always drove past a convent, which created quite a stir, especially at the speeds we were travelling. We were only able to do this for a short time before the nuns called the cops.'

Generally, the first outings in the car showed there were no major problems. The engine at first refused to run cleanly, but this was just a matter of tuning. The problem with testing in the public domain, however, was it masked what the car's characteristics would really be like once it felt a racetrack under its wheels. To race a car as radical as this Brock/Mitchell special without first having a proper series of shake-down tests at a racetrack was not a smart thing to do.

In their defence, Ken Mitchell says there really was no alternative: 'We simply did not have enough cash to hire Calder or Winton and we believed, wrongly as it turned out, that we could undertake the necessary chassis and suspension set up at the racetrack – during free practice and qualifying. Peter was also dead-set on racing the car and could not wait,' he laughs, remembering his friend's excitement as the day of the first race drew near.

John Lovegrove well remembers his first sight of the finished racer and his subsequent 'hair raising' trip as a passenger. It was a Saturday in October 1967 and he went to the Brock home in Wattle Glen to see the car after it had been painted:

'It looked really great and as we were all standing around admiring it I said something very stupid: "What does she go like?" I should have kept my mouth shut.' Peter instantly suggested that they go out 'for a fang' and Lovegrove immediately began to think of excuses for not putting his life in mortal danger. 'I had been a passenger in enough cars with him to know that a ride in this thing would not be good for my nerves,' he said.

Lovegrove at first thought he could escape by arguing that there was no passenger seat. But Peter opened the left door and pointed to a small cut-down aluminum bucket. Since the A30 was to race in the sports car class, a second seat was mandatory. Reluctantly, Lovegrove climbed in and Peter drove out of the property and headed down the main road towards Diamond Creek, a few kilometres away.

'It was a narrow, windy tree-lined road and Peter drove very, very fast. In one straight section we saw 100 miles an hour (160 kilometres per hour) and it frightened me shitless. I had no seatbelt and hung onto the roll cage and seat like grim death to stop myself from ending up on the floor. Luckily there was no traffic and as we approached Diamond Creek I thought if we continue, we'll get sprung.'

Peter had no intention of 'getting sprung'. At the last corner before the road entered the township he hit the brakes hard and did a handbrake turn before heading back the way they had come at undiminished speed. Three or four minutes later they arrived home safely and a shaken Lovegrove stumbled out: 'The first thing I did was have a cigarette because my hands were trembling, followed by a beer. His parents where there and a couple of others, though nobody said a thing. It was sort of accepted that this type of behaviour was acceptable. Unless he had hit something, or somebody, nobody would have dobbed him in – it was not done in those days.'

The A30 was entered for its first race, which was to take place at Winton raceway in central Victoria on 26 November 1967. It was not an auspicious beginning. This was where the lack of track testing showed itself. All the street outings had not showed anything untoward, but its first race was quite embarrassing.

Both Peter and Ken Mitchell drove the car in practice, but it refused to run cleanly for more than a lap. There was a fuel pick-up problem, which manifested on right-hand bends, of which there were six on the original 'short track', though both Mitchell and Peter managed to qualify in the middle of the pack. They worked on the car in the pits and attempted to find the problem but it reappeared in the first race, which Peter drove. He made a good start – negotiated the first two right corners and then left into the 'sweeper' without a problem. As he switched right again under hard acceleration, the 179 coughed and died – kaput! The field swept past and Peter was last. After a few seconds the engine fired, but the A30 refused to run cleanly and he trundled back into the pits to retire.

Further work ensued, with Geoff Brock also lending a hand in trying to trace the problem. Then it was Mitchell's turn to race, with the same result: another DNF. 'To say Peter was unhappy was an understatement, but there was nobody to blame, so we went home and over the next few weeks we went over the fuel system,' remembers Mitchell, who says he guessed there was a fuel pick-up problem; the question was where? The A30 still had the standard 179 single Stromberg carburetor and the engine was near standard, so it was reasoned the problem had to be with the A30 itself.

The second outing was just outside Albury on the Victorian–New South Wales border at the now defunct Hume Weir circuit, which was laid out in an old quarry. It was a dangerous little track, with virtually no straight, no run-off areas and lined with trees. There was no Armco or safety fencing to speak of. It also had lots of right-hand corners, including the notorious Scrub Corner, which curved about 180 degrees. A driver who got this corner wrong could end up mounting a sloping bank and launching himself into the forest.

Peter and Mitchell shared practice, but again the problem manifested. Mitchell drove the first race to see if he could replicate the problem and once more pulled out with a DNF. However, he reckoned he now knew what the problem was. 'We should have recognised it earlier,' he says. 'The fuel pick-up at the tank was designed to feed a small four-cylinder engine, not a big thirsty six-cylinder. This was compounded by the cornering forces which sloshed the fuel around the fuel tank. All we did was drill out the fuel pick-up and Peter managed to finish the next race. We later fitted a larger diameter fuel line and the problem never returned.'

Hume Weir also revealed for the first time the cracks in their relationship and Mitchell was smart enough to realise their partnership might not last.

The next race was at the fast-flowing Phillip Island circuit situated off the Victorian coast in Western Port Bay. Peter finished third in a handicap race and the car behaved itself, although there were overheating problems. All was well, however, for race four, which was held at Calder Raceway at the end of January 1968. The circuit in its original layout basically consisted of two long straights with just six corners, a perfect layout to capitalise on the A30's excellent power to weight ratio. Peter finished second in his race after a close-fought battle with Doug Whiteford in a Datsun 2000, a highly developed out-and-out sports car. Whiteford was also a racer of the first order, having won the Australian Grand Prix no less than three times. Mitchell finished fifth in his handicap race, so there were smiles all round!

While engine power remained the same, or only slightly improved, the two spent some time trying to improve the handling and braking. The latter was greatly enhanced by fitting bigger master cylinders. With the A30 now beginning to finish races and be on the track for longer periods, a further problem started to raise its head – overheating. A temporary fix was to raise the rear of the bonnet about two millimetres to allow the hot air to escape and provide a clean airflow through the radiator and out the engine bay. A larger diameter radiator and the removal of every second slat from the radiator grill, plus cutting a number of air holes in the front bodywork, finally cleared the problem.

A30 in the pits, Phillip Island, December 1968.

‘Peter’s first foe’, Doug Whiteford (Datsun 2000), Phillip Island, December 1968.

The A30, Phillip Island, December 1968.

The Brocks were ecstatic with their son's racing success and always joined him and Ken Mitchell at the circuits. Heather also came along and thoroughly enjoyed herself. The couple were getting along famously and Heather remembers this as a truly happy time. 'Peter had attained the first part of his dream,' she says. 'The car was beginning to perform and he was getting results. He enjoyed his work at the Diamond Valley Speed Shop and socially we did everything together: it was wonderful.'

To say Peter's whole existence revolved around the A30 and racing is an understatement. In this he was lucky as he had his parents' total support as well as Heather's. In fact Neil Brock says the very existence of the Speed Shop was to provide support for Peter's racing first and foremost. As a livelihood it was a very poor second. This is not to say the business was not a success, but both Peter and his father thought nothing of leaving the shop in the care of an assistant if they wanted to take a day off to go motor racing.

Increasingly though, Geoff was interfering in the relationship between his son and Ken Mitchell. With Peter and Geoff being exceptionally close, as well as being father-and-son, there could only be one outcome if the wedge continued. As the car was constantly being developed and modified, it was initially hard to know who the quicker driver was. If Mitchell was faster in one run, they would change something on the car and Peter would go out and better his mate's time. Generally, their times were about the same, although gradually Peter started to draw clear until he was constantly about half a second per lap faster. As he grew in confidence and skill this gap became wider.

The first race with the raised bonnet was their second meeting at Phillip Island. Increasingly, the powers that be were becoming concerned at the growth of the home-built vehicles that were competing in the sports car class and beginning to win races. So scrutineers began to pay them more attention and at the Island they disputed the A30's flares.

This race meeting was held over the Australia Day long weekend and proved to be the turning point in the relationship between Peter and Mitchell. 'Up until then we never had an argument,' Mitchell says, 'and the only cross word between us was when he had thrown a screwdriver at me in frustration early in the A30's construction. The car had been built to our joint ideas; we had shared the workload and the cost. It was the driving that was to break us up; that and Peter's father.' Mitchell says he saw it coming and had already looked at alternatives.

Ken Mitchell in the Ford 100E Anglia, Sandown, 1969.

It was Mitchell's turn to drive in the first race and there was a competitive field of sports cars and sports sedans, including a wickedly quick sports sedan Mini driven by Tony Farrell and an equally fast Lotus 7 driven by Maurie Quincy. The long straights showed two things – the inherent instability of the A30 and the relative power of its 179. Mitchell was running third behind Quincy and Farrell when the understeer caught him out and he spun at Repco Corner. This put him out of contention, although he still finished third. Geoff Brock was angered by the incident because the on-track commentator thought Peter had been

driving and had said so over the PA system. He rounded on Mitchell in the pits and claimed his driving was ruining Peter's reputation. An angry confrontation ensued.

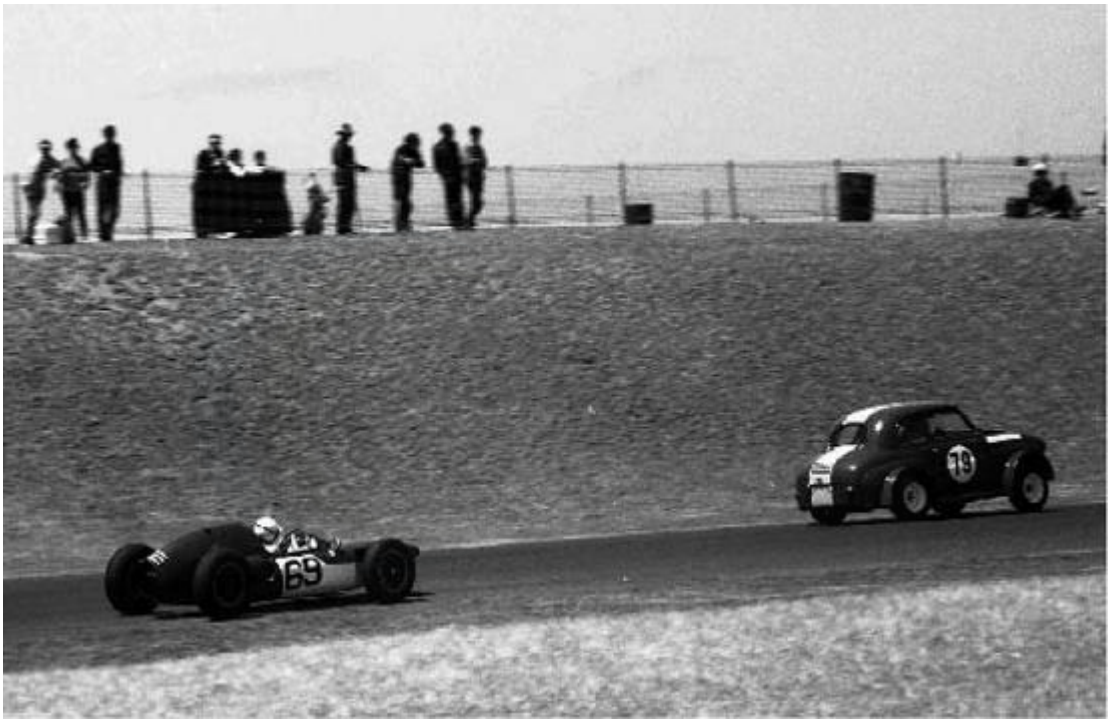
That Peter could do no better in the handicap race, also finishing third, held no sway with Brock senior, who then began a campaign to denigrate Mitchell's engineering and driving capabilities. Shortly after, he suggested it was time for the Brocks to part company with Mitchell and purchased his half share of the racing car. 'I am a realist and I knew this issue would not go away,' Mitchell says. 'The car was difficult to drive and Peter seldom spun it. He was better able to extract a performance from it than I could, although our lap times were nearly the same. Peter wanted more power from the engine and this cost money. He, or rather his father, was willing to spend more money on the car, and this was something I did not have,' he says with a shrug. He is also adamant that initially Peter did not want him to go, siding with him against his father.

Peter, Ken Mitchell (front) and the Lord brothers' 48/215, Phillip Island, Australia Day 1968.

Mitchell also grins when he remembers his next move: 'Anyway, I wanted out. I realised he was a better driver and I was more interested in the mechanical side. I also had another race car in mind and believed I could make something at least as fast, without being such a pig to drive. Peter and I knew what each of us had spent, so they bought me out. Even though it did not really cover my labour I accepted their offer; it was an amicable decision.'

Mitchell was not finished with racing and he also felt he had something to prove. He set about building his own small sports sedan, which proved to be very quick and gave Peter some real competition when it hit the track nearly a year later. The Brock money was used to purchase an old 100E Anglia in which he shoe-horned a Holden grey motor. This was bored out to 2.4 litres and, highly tuned, produced around 165 horsepower. Mitchell also claims it was a better sorted car and much easier to drive than the A30.

'I beat him in a two-race series being held at Sandown months later and he was not happy. While we had still kept in contact after the bust-up, my win did not go down too well. His brothers were happy to congratulate me, but he didn't and we did not speak again for several years,' says Mitchell, who was hurt by his friend's attitude.



Cooper verses A30 – raced by two beginners (three stripes indicate provisional licence), Phillip Island, Australia Day 1968.

The A30's sixth outing was at Winton raceway in early March. There was only one race, which was full of some very potent production and limited production sports cars and Peter finished well back, although he acquitted himself with a strong drive. A week later he took the A30 to its first hill climb – the famous Templestowe climb – where he won his class, the under-three-litre sports car category. This earned him a nice trophy to add to his growing collection.

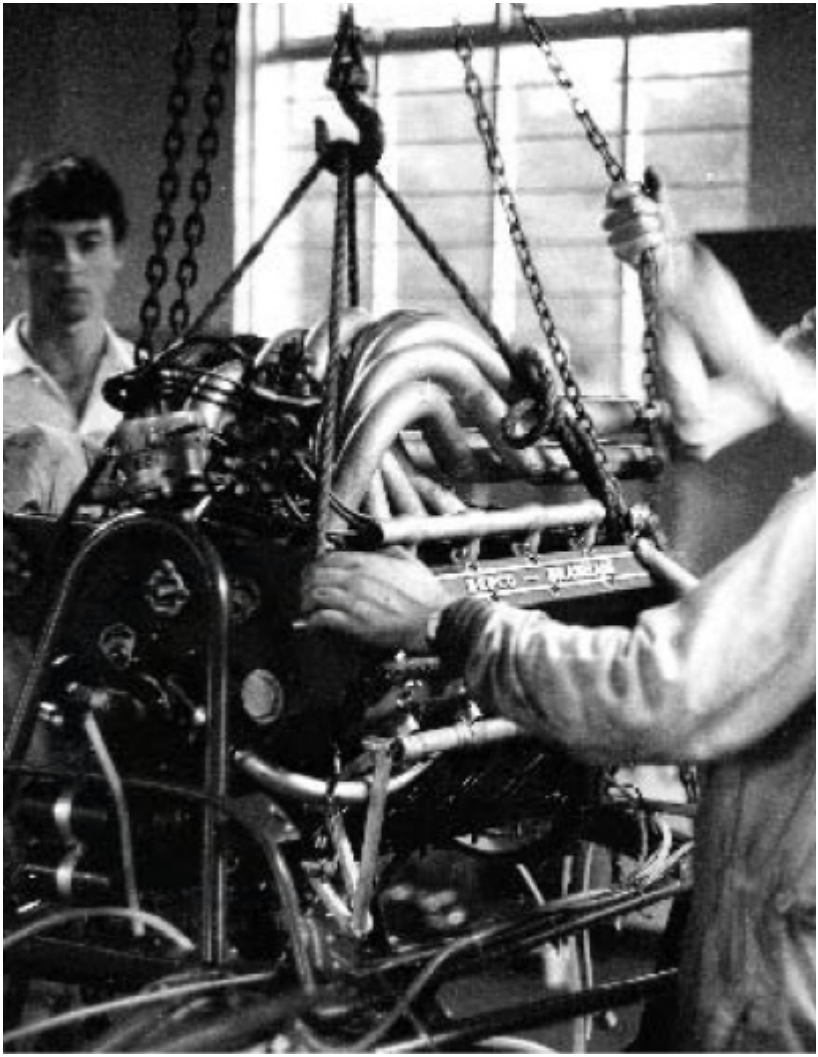
Looking at Terry Russell's Phillip Island photographs showing the A30's nose high attitude, they realised something had to be done about the car's serious under-steer characteristics and twitchy handling on the

straights, which made accurate steering difficult. Because of its short wheel base this was inherent and could not be entirely cured, but it could be lessened. A quick modification and partial fix was the fitting of a front air dam. The method chosen was crude in the extreme, but certainly effective. An external sun visor off an FE Holden sedan was shortened and welded to the front of the Austin. While it did not blend in with the flares, it did run the whole width of the front and, together with a partial under tray, made a huge difference to the car's handling. While the A30 still understeered, its handling on the straight was more stable and its turn-in characteristics much improved, allowing Peter to place it much more accurately.

On 14 April the Brocks were back at Hume Weir, where Peter contested two races. The car showed its new potential, although he was beaten by three very quick Minis that had journeyed down from New South Wales. In the second race he had mechanical problems and suffered a DNF. That night the car was placed on a trailer and immediately driven to Phillip Island for the following day's Easter Monday meeting. The car ran faultlessly on that track but, against stiff opposition, was unplaced.

PB's A30 and Maurie Quincy's Lotus 7, Phillip Island, Australia Day 1968.

Phillip Island, Australia Day 1968.



The Gopher – Peter and Brabhams's Repco Brabham, Warrick Farm, February 1968.

'The Racer', Phillip Island, Australia Day 1968.

Two further meetings followed: another at Phillip Island and his first race at Sandown in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. In both races he was unplaced. Sandown provided some major problems, but not of the racing variety. The A30 received the unwelcome attention of the scrutineers, not because there was anything intrinsically wrong with the A30 per se, rather because of what it represented. Australian motor sport has always had a history of one-off specials, generally consisting of shoehorning powerful engines into European chassis, but now this antipodean ingenuity was spawning a whole class of vehicles that needed their own home.

Three years earlier the demise of Appendix J – the old touring-car class – saw a new racing class formed, mainly to find a home for these older touring cars. This new class laid few restrictions on what could or could not be done to a car and consequently bred a family of wickedly fast and innovative hybrids, of which Peter's mount was the most extreme example. These cars created a problem. To begin with, there were few specialist races for these types of cars and they were allowed to run with production sports cars and the limited production sports cars known as prototypes: vehicles from such small manufacturers as Elfin. In some cases older open-wheel racing cars were also included. To the cloth cap brigade and some traditionalists their inclusion was bad enough but, when they started winning and providing close exciting racing, enough was enough.

In those days Sandown's motor sport was controlled by the Light Car Club of Australia, an august body whose history dated back to the earliest days of motoring in Australia. The club's scrutineers examined the

A30 and were horrified: a tiny sedan with the engine protruding far back into the cockpit leaving little room for the pedals and ergonomics that would faze the dexterity of a monkey! While they let Peter race, they made it known the car was not welcome. Calder followed suit. But, with so many of these cars now breeding and with the public eager to see them in action a new official category was formed – Sports Sedans.

During this hectic time Peter realised that if he was to develop the car further he needed somebody to fill Ken Mitchell's shoes, preferably someone with a dedicated workshop or garage. He knew such a person; the question was what would it cost? Ron Bentley more than anybody else was the person who turned the A30 from an ill-handling, problematic and underdeveloped racing car into something in which Peter's talent could really shine. The two had met the previous year when the Diamond Valley Speed Shop had just opened less than half a kilometre from Ron Bentley Motors in Greensborough.

HOW THE A30 GREW

The Austin A30, like many racing cars, was a work in progress. Its owner and the two men who helped develop it, Ken Mitchell and Ron Bentley, turned this home-built special into an awesome little sports sedan in which Peter was able to hone his skill.

'Nearly ready to race', the Lord brothers' garage, October 1967. (Neil Brock)

There were several A30s racing when Peter's car first hit the track in late 1967. His, however, was the first one with a Holden engine, a decision that was both a hindrance and asset.

A hindrance because the engine was heavy and it required major structural changes to the car in order to fit it into the engine bay. An asset because it blessed the little car with a prodigious power-to-weight ratio.

Ron Bentley accurately described it as a mongrel with a viscous handling streak, and only one man was ever to tame it properly: 'Peter Perfect'.

In its original guise it had no aerodynamic aids, which in 1967 was a developing science. The result was a racing car that lifted its nose at speed and under acceleration, and under-steered badly in the corners. Braking was also a nervous undertaking.

The first attempt at curing the tendency to lift its nose was partially solved by the addition of a crude air-dam, which was a sun visor from a Holden sedan. Gradually, this morphed into a simple yet effective aerodynamic package that integrated the front spoiler with the wheel flares, backed up by suspension modifications and an engine that ultimately produced nearly 250 horsepower.

The result was a weapon that launched a career.

A30 and Tony Farrell Mini, Winton, May 1968. (Ron Bentley)

‘The Hump’. Templestowe Hill Climb, 1968.

A30 Final configuration, Hume Weir, December 1969.

RBM began in 1962 and in the intervening six years Bentley, who was in his early thirties, had already built a solid reputation as an engineer and developer of a wide variety of competition cars. These included the Mini Cooper S circuit racers belonging to Ian Harris and Roy Layton, actor Leonard Teale’s little production sports racing Austin Healey Sprite, the rally Cooper S of John Leighton of Leighton Constructions fame, and the famous ‘Land Crab’, Evan Green’s London to Sydney Marathon Austin 1800.

Bentley says he ‘first met Peter when he came in to deliver some parts from the Diamond Valley Speed Shop and he would nearly always stop and look at the race cars like a kid in a lolly shop’. Bentley smiles as he remembers his first conversations with the tall, skinny, black-eyed young man and his infectious smile. At this time, Peter had already nearly completed the A30 and Bentley had no input into its construction or early development, although they had discussed the car and Peter’s plans: ‘I first got my hands on the car a few races after he and Ken had parted company and it was obvious from our early conversations he was now very serious about developing it and making it a consistent winner.’

‘Peter’s Corner’, Sandown, April 1968.

‘You can’t race that’, Sandown, April 1968.

‘Scrutineering’, Sandown, April 1968.

Ron Bentley, Bentley Garage, circa 1966. (Ron Bentley)

Ron Bentley was very generous to Peter. While it was agreed there would be some financial remuneration for the work carried out by Bentley, Peter would be able to store the racer and work on the car at the garage for free. Similarly, advice and some expertise would also be gratis. Peter had once again landed on his feet. What impressed Bentley was Peter's total dedication to the sport and his quick grasp of things mechanical: 'He still had a lot to learn, but he was a voracious reader of car magazines, especially those with some technical input.'

Like all racing drivers Peter wanted more power and this was an area where considerable gains could be made because the 179 was still rather basic, with little in the way of power gaining modifications. Peter and Ken Mitchell's first aim had been to get the car on the track as quickly as possible and make it reliable. Lack of money had also hindered any extreme engine development, a factor which was now not as critical since the Speed Shop was doing well and the initial cost of building the car had ended.

Nevertheless, the engine was not something Ron Bentley tackled first. He looked at it with an engineer's eye and knew from experience much could be done in improving lap times if the car's handling was attended to. Given the vehicle had been constructed in a chicken shed with little in the way of proper chassis and suspension development, this was the area he believed needed attention.

His first attempts to look at the chassis revealed a major problem, one which left him scratching his head in disbelief at how Peter had been able to drive the car successfully. Since the vehicle was now housed in a building with a concrete floor, measuring and setting up the suspension could be undertaken more accurately, even if it was only with string, chalk and a tape measure. 'When I got the car into my workshop for the first time I examined it with a critical eye and interrogated Peter about its handling characteristics. Since he had never driven a well-developed racing car, or any other racing car for that matter, he had nothing to compare it with. Yet, he did have a great deal of natural feel and was able to explain its idiosyncrasies,' remembers Bentley.

Peter explained that one of the main issues seemed to be the A30's predilection to want to turn left all the time – it just would not track straight. Bentley immediately realised the suspension was out, but even he could not have imagined by how much. 'A track car's suspension is set up to the smallest tolerances: one or two millimetres are regarded as a lot. Well, when I measured the A30's track I found it was way, way out with one side longer than the other; something like an inch and a half [four centimetres]! In a car with such a short wheelbase this would have made accurate steering very difficult.'

Further checks revealed the whole suspension set-up needed to be changed. 'It was all wrong including caster and camber angles, although this was understandable since it was a modified hybrid road suspension with limited adjustment capabilities. The car also flexed a great deal because it was not designed to take the power and torque of the 179. I knew if we increased these still further without some strengthening, the chassis might not be able to handle it.'

Bentley and his staff set about stiffening the car. The roll cage received more mounting points on the body and a steel bar with brackets was welded across the suspension towers – both the front and rear. The next target was the standard three-speed gearbox. This was replaced by a four-speed Opel unit which, being a GM unit (from Europe), was relatively easy to mount to the 179. All that was needed was a different bell housing. There was a downside, however:

The A30 had a Holden back axle with a 'cone type' Limited Slip Differential [LSD] out of an EH. While the Opel had the added advantage of four speeds the ratios were only standard and they did not wear as well as the original three-speed unit because they were not designed for this level of power, especially when the engine reached its final development. Together with the stresses of a racing application the gear sets would break while second and third would invariably give trouble.

Bentley remembers that even though Peter nursed the gearbox and was relatively gentle with it, it was a battle to keep it operating and they were constantly rebuilding the Opel unit.

With the Speed Shop and the Bentley business so close, Peter found it easy to spend a great deal of time there, partially because Geoff Brock did not mind his son goofing off to spend time with his baby during the day. He was also beginning to spend most nights working on the car which, to begin with, Heather did not mind.

The first step in gaining the much anticipated increase in power was to replace the totally inadequate single Stromberg with three two-inch SU carburetors off a 3.8-litre Jaguar. Bentley designed and built a new inlet manifold while an exhaust specialist, Ron Brownrigg, designed a special one-off primary exhaust manifold. The next stage was to fit a new Wade camshaft, although the head was yet to be given the full treatment. By this stage the A30's power had increased dramatically and it was estimated it was producing close to 200 bhp (150 Kw), plus a commensurate increase in torque. More importantly, it handled better, although this was a bit of a misnomer – better than what?

Ron Bentley Motors became a home-away-from-home for Peter and some of his friends, who used to congregate there at night and work on the A30 and the other competition cars. During the winter of 1968 the cold was kept at bay with kerosene heating and liberal quantities of Stone's Green Ginger Wine. 'Peter was basically a beer drinker, and it could be said, liked the amber liquid; but he was also fond of Stone's and would try to convince us it was non-alcoholic – yeah, right!'

It was fun and the work was enlivened by some escapades that showed Bentley, who was some ten years older, was also still a big kid at heart because he allowed some pretty crazy antics to take place at (or rather outside) the workshop. Once again these show a completely different community attitude to things than would be accepted in twenty-first-century Australia. It also shows the good-natured complicity of the police to these attitudes.

It is fair to say Peter was extremely lucky with Victoria's finest. Not only was he never caught speeding, when he did transgress he was usually let off with a caution or the convivial understanding of the police. This led to his life-long appreciation of the boys in blue. Yet, it must be said that some of the escapades must have stretched their patience. Bentley remembers one such escapade with a shake of his head. 'We must have been mad, and the police were certainly very understanding.'

Ron Bentley Motors was situated in a little cul-de-sac called George Court, in Greensborough. Then, like now, there were other factories around, although forty years ago the area was not built up. George Court sloped down from the Main Road and was only a couple of hundred metres long. At its base were scrub and a creek. One night, Peter, Ron Bentley and half a dozen other young lads decided they would improve their driving skills by pouring 60 litres of used Castrol R engine oil onto the roadway at the end of the court. A thin spray of water and, hey presto, an instant skid pan. It was a dark night, approaching the

early hours, so they used some powerful spotlights to illuminate their antics and the boys were having a great deal of fun until a local resident rang the police.

At the sound of the approaching sirens, everybody drove off, parked their cars and pretended to be busy, or ran into the scrub. Unfortunately, there was a great deal of incriminating evidence left lying at the end of George Court and with their siren blaring the police turned into the court at undiminished speed and skidded on Castrol's premium product. Depending on who you talk to, it was either very funny or plain horrifying. The police car skidded on the oil and came to rest with its front wheels almost in the creek.

Sports car race, Winton, May 1968. (Neil Brock)

Peter and Lyne Brown, Hume Weir, December 1968.

Peter and Lakis Manticas, Hume Weir, December 1968.

One of the cars that had been used in the festivities was the Diamond Valley Speed Shop's hot EJ van, which was parked innocently outside RBM – innocently except for the tyres, that is, which were covered

in oil. The police then spied a sedan parked nearby, also with its wheels covered in oil, and the driver sitting inside, pretending to look innocent. When they ordered him to alight they recognised the son of one of the local magistrates, so they let him off with a caution.

With their muddy feet, the police went into the workshop looking for a fresh target and found Peter, supposedly working on the A30. Bentley is still amazed at how Peter extracted himself from what could have meant a night in jail, being charged with something serious, or being given a hiding:

To their questions, Peter put on his most charming and innocent face and blatantly told the police he had not been driving the van and did not know who had because he'd been too busy working on his car. And, they believed him. Most likely, they probably thought it was too hard to pin it on one person when they had already let one hooligan off and there were probably several other perpetrators who they had not seen. Anyway, we helped them extract the car, promised to have the road cleaned and they went on their way.

Bentley says he was in awe not only of Peter's driving skills but also of his apparent fearless attitude to life. Like all top racing drivers, though, Peter had a weakness. He was not comfortable when he was not in control of a situation and Bentley remembers very clearly the effect a particular incident had on him during this period of their relationship. 'We were taking a light plane trip in a single engine aircraft which had engine trouble. With the windscreen covered in oil we had to make an emergency landing and Peter went as white as a sheet. Yet, when the engine was repaired he continued on with the flight. I, on the other hand, refused.'

While the A30 was constantly being developed, at RBM the racing continued. It was a hectic period, with the car entered into as many events as possible – ten between May and the end of the year. It is generally regarded that the Winton meeting on 26 May was a watershed for the car, with Peter beginning to show consistent speed and a run of good results. In the race, a hard-charging Peter spun the car but drove a spirited number of laps to finish second – a race it is generally regarded he could have won. Second place was again the result at the next meeting at Hume Weir, where he chased Lakis Manticas in his cut-down fibre-glassed bodied Mini Sports Sedan in a close-fought race.

Over the next months Peter encountered a competitor who was to provide stiff competition and was to be his first serious rival, something which was mirrored later with drivers such as Alan Moffat and Dick Johnson. Lyne Brown also drove a much modified and wickedly fast Mini and the two competitors spent much of the next few races shadowing one another, scarcely centimetres apart. Together with Lakis Manticas, Lyne was to provide Peter with his first real taste of hard racing and he knew that from then on he could mix it with the best: consequently his confidence soared.

Hume Weir on 9 June saw another second followed by a first in class at the Lakeland hill climb. A six-week gap in competition provided the A30 with some much needed TLC and it was during this period the car received yet another major upgrade courtesy of Ron Bentley. The little A30 was now developing some serious power and eventually after its final development was dynode at Jack Hunnum's workshop in

Lakis Manticas, Lyne Brown and Peter (left to right), Hume Weir, December 1968.

August 1968, where it topped the magical 200 horsepower figure for the first time. With a little tuning it eventually recorded the stratospheric figure of 247 bhp (184 Kw) at 6000 rpm, although the motor would spin to 7000 rpm, which was very high for a red motor. This power was more than eight times what the original little A30 achieved with its four-cylinder motor. No wonder it was such a little rocket ship!

Bentley says he was never game to drive the car fast on a track. Despite its changes, he still regarded it as a 'dog of a car' that needed to be driven in a very precise way to extract the best out of it. 'I was not prepared to drive it anywhere, except out in front of my workshop where there was about 200 metres of straight road and I could test such major componentry as clutch, brakes and diff.' A few times Bentley and his crew went to Calder with Peter for private testing and watching the car's behaviour under brakes and on the straights convinced him it needed further major suspension development to make it handle, something that was never really done:

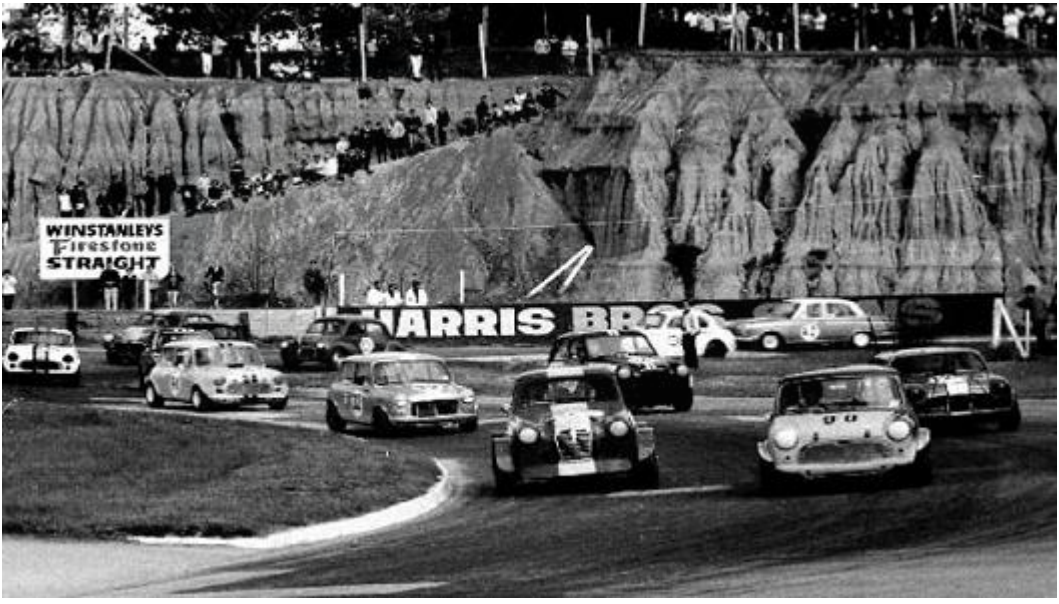
Even at its most developed it was very raw and unrefined and needed much more work on the suspension. However, it was never even weighed and such refinements as doing the corner weights was never attempted. For me, sitting in the car made me realise how difficult it would have been to drive under the pressure of racing. The ergonomics were a problem. The pedals were off set to the right to clear the engine and the gear lever was situated at the driver's hip, which meant Peter had to virtually reach behind to select some of the gears.

The A30 also lacked an important safety feature, something which has now been mandatory on all racing cars for nearly thirty years: 'As far as I can remember there was no steel plate protecting the driver from the clutch and flywheel if these became detached from the engine. If this had happened he would

have lost a leg, and with the sort of power the 179 was developing it could easily have happened,' Ron Bentley told me.

Bentley's relationship with Peter was also good, with never any hint of a disagreement or temper. Peter was probably wise enough not to pull such antics on the man who he needed to fettle the racing car. But Bentley was well aware of his friend's temperament:

There was never any real temper or outward signs of anger with me, although he had a low-frustration threshold. When he got annoyed his eyes went an even deeper shade of black! We never had a major personal disagreement of any type although he quite often frightened the hell out of me with his driving, especially in the hotted-up EJ Panel Van belonging to the Diamond Valley Speed Shop. One day we went to Phil Irving's to obtain some advice on developing the head and he was driving faster in the wet on the treacherous and ill-maintained outer-suburban roads than most people would, or could, in the dry. His car control was incredible and he was not even trying. When we got to Phil's I asked whether he could loan me a set of jocks, since I had filled mine. We all laughed.



Formation lap, Hume Weir, December 1968.

Typical positions, Hume Weir, December 1968.

The engineer also ventured out as a passenger in the A30 on one occasion at Calder and was left speechless by the car's behaviour and Peter's prowess behind the wheel.

On 1 September they were back at Hume Weir, where there was a three-race card for Peter. He led the first, but spun after a touch by Lyne Brown. He rejoined, but the car retired with electrical problems. Race two saw him finish second while in the third, a handicap event, he started from the rear of the grid, but overhauled the field to win.

Peter's first interstate meeting was at Oran Park, which only saw him record two fifths and a fourth, although the racing was incredibly close against competitors such as Lakis Manticas, Don Holland, Denis Cooke and John Leffler. A third in class at Lakeland was next, followed by a winning streak that lasted until the end of the following year.

The Templestowe hill climb in late September was the venue for the Australian Hill Climb Championship, in which Peter dominated the Three Litre Sports Car class. His time was only three-tenths of a second slower than the previous year's winner, a Porsche 911 driven by Alan Hamilton. Next, it was back to Winton where he scored his first scratch race win against a top-class field including a Lotus 23 driven by Stuart Anderson. Tears were to follow, however. In the next race Anderson spun while leading and the A30, together with two other drivers all came together. Three-and-a-bit weeks later, with the car repaired, he won again at Hume Weir and recorded the fastest lap.

The traditional New Year meeting at Phillip Island in 1969 was the year Peter Brock's life metamorphosed from an amateur who paid the occasional starting fee to a full-time professional racing driver. The Island set the tone for the remainder of that year. On the Saturday he had a clear win, and finished a fighting second on the Sunday against a top field of sports cars including a Lotus 47 driven by Peter Woodward, another driver of the first order. Back at the Island on 26 January saw him again compete in the Sports Car class, scoring a clear win against his old antagonist, Doug Whiteford in the Datsun 2000.

While all was going well with his racing, there were clouds beginning to form over his marriage because Peter's eyes had begun to rove again. His transgressions were not at the race meetings since Heather always came with him and enthusiastically helped with lap timing and holding out the lap board. Heather claims Peter was still very immature as far as relationships were concerned and in many ways still regarded himself as a free agent: 'Several times I noticed he was taking his good clothes to Bentley's and when I rang I was told he was not there. Also, some of my friends warned me he was two-timing, but at first I did not believe them, or rather did not want to.'

Talking usually elicited an apology and an explanation, 'how nothing had happened', and he would promise Heather this sort of behaviour would not happen again. 'When I first raised the issue he made it perfectly clear he wanted us to stay together. For a while he would make a determined effort to change and since I had put a lot into the relationship I stuck with him.'

'Blast off' – Templestowe Hill Climb, 1968.

Heather competes in the engine building competition, Melbourne Motor Racing Show, December 1969.

There was another problem raising its head – his drinking. This had a major effect on their relationship and with some of their friends: 'Sometimes he would drink too much and this brought out a nasty side, so when he was like this he was better left alone. Thankfully, at least initially, this extreme behaviour was not common, but it was becoming more regular and I did not like it. When he sobered up, though, he was always contrite, especially when or if he found out he had behaved badly.'

Heather explains that despite his growing success and general popularity there was still a degree of insecurity in him and she could never work out why. 'Later on he became much more confident and was happy to talk to anybody, but in the early years he was much happier surrounded by people he knew and who would be happy to listen to his racing exploits. He always wanted to be the life of the party, to be number one and, generally, this is what happened. He could be great fun.'

Heather also explains leaving the marriage in the early days would have been hard since they had a common set of friends, a common love of cars and their families were very close. Things did settle down again and Peter continued on with his racing. Sandown in the middle of February saw him entered in a

sports car race, although this time the Light Car Club and its scrutineers left him alone. He won the handicap event against a highly modified Healey driven by Ross Bond. It was a hard-fought race and Peter passed the English sports car only at the crest on the back straight in the last lap. The A30 obviously impressed Bond because when the A30 was finally put up for sale he purchased it.

A second at the next Winton round was followed by firsts at the Templestowe hill climb and again at Phillip Island. The following day the team all journeyed north to be spectators at the Bathurst Easter weekend race meeting, which was to end in tragedy. One of the up-and-coming stars of Australian racing, Bevan Gibson, was killed when his sports car flipped going over the rise on Conrod Straight, killing him instantly. Peter knew Gibson well and attended his funeral, which was held in the country town of Mansfield a short time later.

Sports car race, Sandown, February 1969.

Other than the A30, Peter only dropped one other vehicle in competition before he ultimately joined the Holden Dealer Team. It was not strictly a racing car, but he did race it. A local car dealer, Watson's of Greensborough, had a Holden HR sedan that had been souped-up and run as a drag car. They were having difficulty selling it so they decided to engage Peter to race it in an effort to provide it with some favourable publicity. They bolted on some six-inch wheels and some special Dunlop tyres and took it to Winton in March 1969, where Peter finished third.

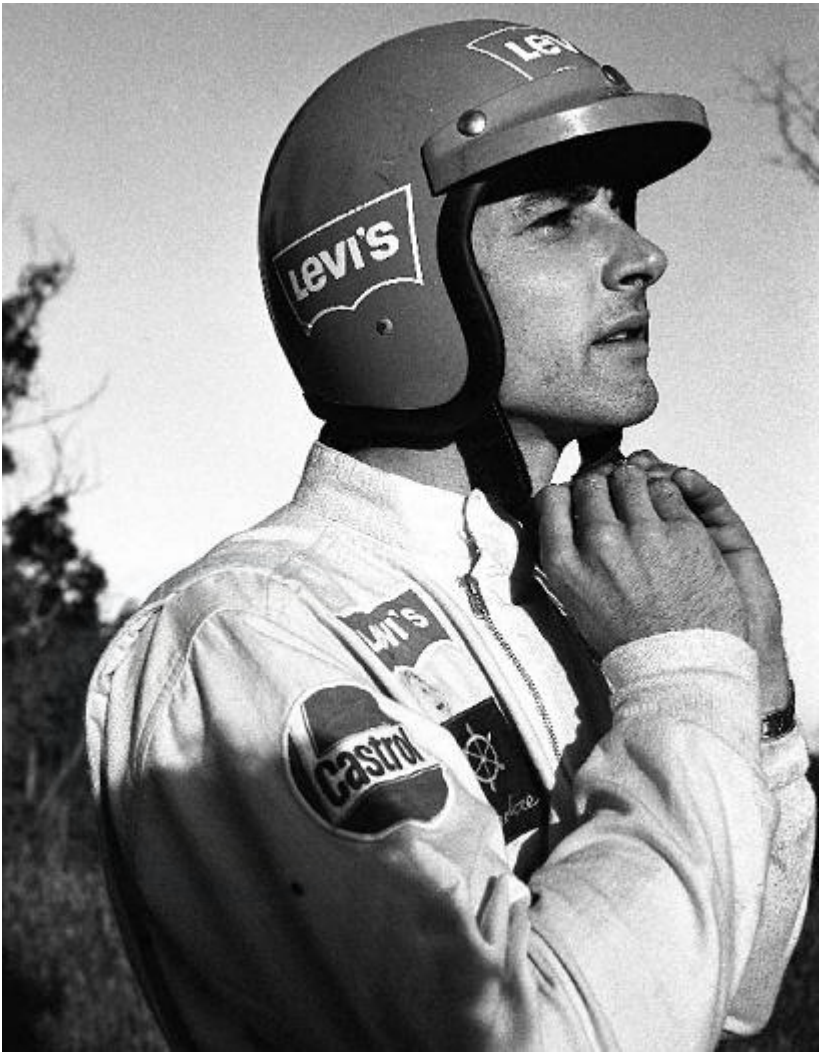
While there was still plenty of racing to be undertaken in the A30, Peter and Ron Bentley began to talk about what to do next. Peter wanted to drive open-wheelers but their initial cost and upkeep would prove prohibitive unless he could find a good sponsor or rich benefactor. Failing this, there was the initial thought of building up a new sports sedan as a successor to the little Austin. If the latter was the chosen course there were various options for suitable vehicles, but Peter in his stubborn way refused to drive any

model if the parent company's name began with an 'F'. It had to be a GM product, so the obvious choice was a Torana.

Peter and Terry share stand, Melbourne Motor Racing Show, December 1969.

'A handful – Holden HR', Winton, March 1969.

‘A handful – Holden HR’, Winton, March 1969.



The professional, March 1970.

6
HARRY FIRTH
AND THE HDT

HARRY FIRTH
AND THE HDT

Sport is littered with 'what ifs'. For Peter Brock, the 'what if' is: Would he have made it into the big-time without Harry Firth?

More than any other sport, with the possible exceptions of off-shore power boat and ocean yacht racing, money is the deciding factor of success in motor sport. Motor sport needs a lot of money, as well as driving skills backed up with luck and enhanced with a competitive vehicle. Peter definitely had the skill, and he definitely had some luck since his parents and others, such as Ken Mitchell and Ron Bentley, backed him. He also chose a vehicle that could compete in a new and exciting class of racing . . . but he had insufficient money to take the next step. Despite this, it is generally accepted that Peter would have got to Bathurst one way or another and probably would have won one or two races. It's all conjecture and could be argued with no definitive resolution. What is not in dispute though is that Harry Firth was instrumental in Peter's ultimate success in the sport. Without him Peter may not have reached the heights he did or, at least, not as quickly.

Harry Firth did more than provide the wherewithal for Peter to shine, he also acted as guide, mentor and to some degree driving instructor. For Peter, Harry was a sort of Yoda figure, at least in his early days and, despite his headstrong nature, Peter accepted being told how to drive or, more importantly, how to nurse a racing car over long distances. The question was, how did Firth pinpoint Peter when there was a great deal of talent around, especially in the new sports sedan class?

Peter always had a good relationship with the motoring media. Almost all the writers admired his talent and found him stimulating company. Probably the first to recognise his talent was Bill Tuckey, and Peter could not have found a more important journalist to impress. Without a doubt Tuckey is the doyen of Australia's motoring journalists and has some fifty years experience in writing about cars, drivers and the industry. At the time of their first meeting, Tuckey was the editor of the prestigious *Wheels* magazine as well as *Sports Car World*. He remembers that first encounter well: 'I attended a Phillip Island meeting in early 1968 and saw the A30 for the first time. After watching the race I went in search of the driver and found this long-haired, black-eyed lunatic. I remember examining the car and saying to him he was "fucking mad". He simply grinned and said, "it's okay!"'

‘The Fox’ – Harry Firth, Bathurst, October 1970.

Peter (right) with mate Bevan Gibson, Phillip Island, December 1968.

Tuckey was well able to recognise driving skill because, alongside his journalistic career, he had been a successful racing driver, having raced Fiats in the 1967 and 1968 Bathurst races and due to race a new Monaro GTS for the 1969 event when he met Peter. One year on and Tuckey was speaking to Firth at Lakeside about up-and-coming drivers. He mentioned Peter and advised the team manager to watch out for him saying, 'He's got talent.'

From the middle of 1969, as Peter's race successes increased, his star was beginning to shine brightly among the motor-racing fraternity. He was being compared with the other top sports sedan runners: Manticas and, particularly, Lyne Brown. With Sports Sedans now an exciting fixture on the racing calendar the promoters and circuit owners began to provide more and more races just for them, especially since they were able to fill grids and provide close-fought and exciting racing. On 18 May at Winton Peter won the first 'official' race of the new class. This, however, was the precursor to something a little more significant.

Hume Weir nearly a month later was the venue for the first major championship for the new sports sedan class. The event was to be billed as the 'Australian Sports Sedan Championship', but the Confedera-

tion of Australian Motor Sport (CAMS) refused to sanction the name since it was only one event, so the Australian Drivers Car Club (ADCC) called it the 'Australian Sports Sedan Trophy'. Chris Neal, writing in the Victorian Sports Car Club's newsletter, penned a colourful article about the race:

With the ant wearing Firestones for the first time, Peter Brock out drove all opposition to win the first Australian Sports/Racing/Closed trophy at the Hume Weir circuit on June 15th. It was a good weekend for Peter, who still suffering from a dose of the flu, plus the after-effects of a hectic week at the Racing Car Show, won three races, from three starts.

Sports Sedan Trophy – Lyne Brown, Peter, Barry Grainger line up (left to right), Hume Weir, June 1969. (Chris Macgeorge)

'A cigarette paper between them – Peter and Lyne Brown', Hume Weir, June 1969.

It is not surprising that pre-race jitters were rife among all competitors – there was $750 prize money at stake, with $300 going to the outright winner. The favourites weren't the only ones with nerves. Several other drivers were inspired by the theory that Peter and Lyne would set a cracking pace (which they did), that there was a possibility they would wear each other down and out of the race. The front row for the big race consisted of Lyne Brown on Pole with Peter Brock and Barry Grainger (NSW Mini). The rest of the field made up a full grid of 18 starters.

The Brock A30 immediately hit the front – a position it was never to lose throughout the race . . .

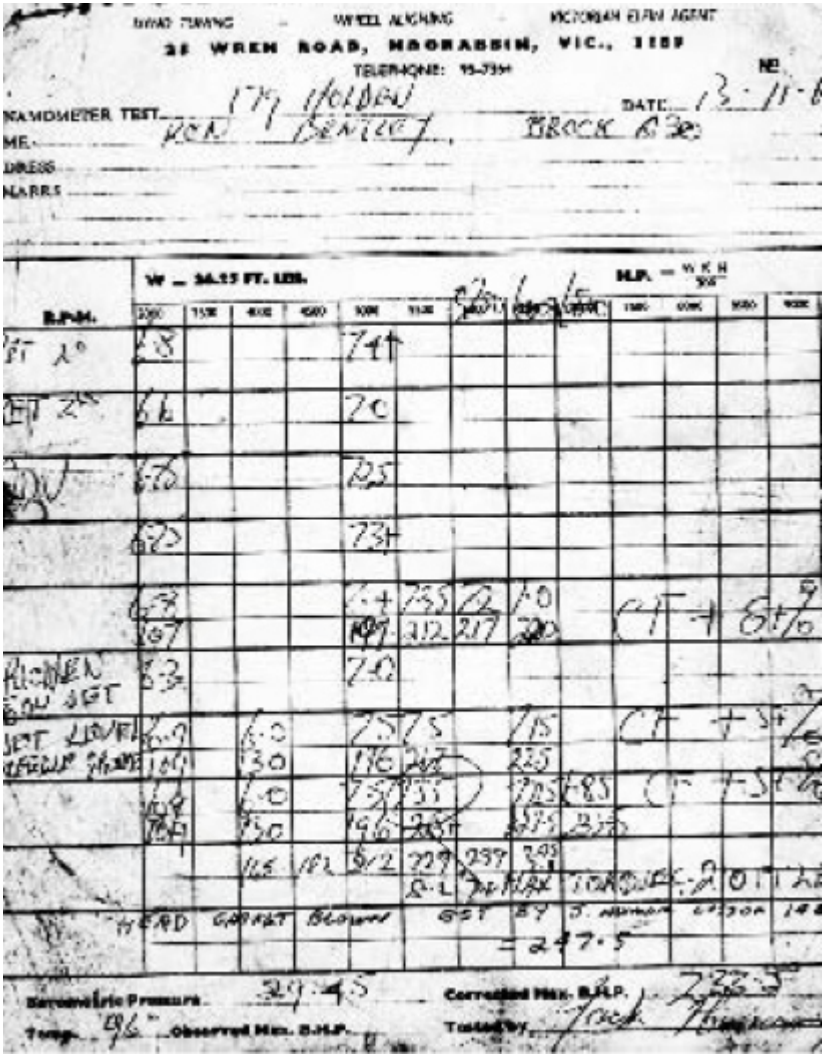
Down into Scrub Corner and Peter surely did have it made. There was the Brown Mini off the track – driver OK, but the car had locked up into the hairpin, blown a tyre in a big way and run out of road (and consequently the race).

On the slow-down lap Pete was stopped at Scrub to collect his laurels so he could wave them to the large and enthusiastic crowd. In a beaut gesture they were grabbed from a surprised official, and given to Peter by the stranded Lyne Brown. A fitting end to a tremendous race.

The title race, according to people who saw it, was a 'ball tearer'. Years later Peter admitted the race was the first time he had really been put under such intense pressure, with Lyne Brown's Mini literally inches (millimetres) from the A30's rounded rear for most of the race until the Mini crashed. For nearly all of the twenty laps the class's two leading drivers left the rest of the field in their wake as they swapped fastest laps. Both clocked 52-second dead, a record.

Lyne Brown became a close friend of Peter's and still admits the Austin's pilot was the toughest competitor he ever faced. His Mini was a handy car in its own right, but it was gradually bettered by the Austin as Ron Bentley tuned the suspension and extracted more power from the 179. The Mini had been bored out to 1370cc and when racing the A30 produced 118 bhp (89 Kw). At the time of the trophy race, the A30 had reached its full rating of 247 bhp (185 Kw). In contrast, the Mini was lighter, handled considerably better and could stop on a five cent piece. But the pace of the Hume Weir race was so hectic that, in his efforts to stay with Peter, Brown boiled the brake fluid in his car and welded the brake pads to the front discs. With his front wheels locked, he blew a tyre and crashed.

Brown commented, 'I can safely say, nobody I knew could have driven the A30 the way he did that day. It was so intense and his concentration so great I could see his black eyes staring back at me through his rear vision mirror. I will never forget it. He was a racer through and through. Our racing was always so close that one day I miscued and clipped the rear of his car and he spun. After the race I went to his pits and apologised. He would not hear of it and just laughed – "shit happens" he said.'



Peak Power – A30 Dyno Sheet, November 1968. (Ron Bentley)

Brown also confirms many people's impression of Peter as an enigmatic, though charming person: 'He had stacks of charisma and I personally got a real buzz out of being with him!'

A week later and Oran Park proved to be an anti-climax with the A30 suffering mechanical problems and a DNF. All was put right for the second race, a ten-lap sports sedan 'Feature Race' in which Peter and Lyne Brown wowed the partisan Sydney crowd with another thrilling duel that Peter won by one tenth of a second.

Not long after, Peter was working at the Diamond Valley Speed Shop when out of the blue there was the phone call, the most important call in his life to date. Harry Firth was not yet the legend he was to become, but he was recognised as one of the country's leading team managers, having just helped form the soon-to-be famous Holden Dealer Team. He was looking for drivers to spearhead his attack on Australia's most famous race, the Bathurst 500!

What made Firth unique as a team manager as mentioned before was his considerable prowess behind the wheel. He had been (and probably still was) a driver of the first order, with a motor sport history stretching back to the late 1940s. At that time he stood head and shoulders above other team managers as far as experience and engineering nous was concerned. Firth won the Bathurst 500 in 1967, driving Ford's first V8 Falcon, the famous XR model, plus three of the long distance races that had preceded Bathurst, including the three Armstrong 500s contested at Phillip Island. The Bathurst 500 win included Fred Gibson as his co-driver. Gibson also had a first-grade career as a racer and was later to emulate Firth by recording a host of major wins as a Ford touring car driver before becoming a successful team owner/manager in his own right, first with Nissan and then with Holden. The Armstrong 500s were co-driven with the legendary Bob Jane.

Firth's success was not confined to circuits either. He had won the Australian Rally Championship in the preceding year and the Southern Cross Rally in 1966. He also won the Alpine Rally five times between 1953 and 1962. In 1962 Firth's workshops in the Melbourne suburb of Auburn were also the base for the Ford Works team, which continued until the beginning of 1969 when Ford and Firth parted ways and he ultimately became the Team Manager of the newly created Holden Dealer Team.

Firth's call to Peter was short and to the point. He wanted Peter to come and talk with him about the possibility of joining the HDT and driving at Bathurst. Firth confirms the legend that at first Peter did not believe who was on the phone, believing it was a 'wind up'. Forty years on Firth remembers his exact words: 'No Peter, it is me. If you are available I will give you a job driving a proper race car, but you will do it my way! I will give you a proper drive and it will be up to you whether you'll keep it.'

In reality Peter should not have been so surprised by the call. Heather confirms he had been informed on at least two occasions by friendly spectators that Firth had been seen making notes as he watched the Sports Sedan races. Yet he had not believed those reports either!

Firth says Peter took only minutes to agree to his terms – money was not even discussed. He simply told Harry, 'This has always been my dream.' The question that was asked back then – and still is now – is why did Firth choose Peter? It could be argued he was no better than Lyne Brown, or several others who were competing in sport sedans or in touring cars.

There have also been claims by various people that Peter had met the team manager before when Firth helped his brother Norm strip down the A30 in his garage as part of the Light Car Club's investigation, following the Sandown scrutineer controversy. Peter's pit crew who were at Sandown say the vehicle never left the track. Talking to Firth four decades later, he was adamant to me that he had not been involved:

Norm might have seen it, but I never examined the car and would not have wanted to – it did not interest me. Similarly, I had never spoken to Peter until my phone call. I regarded him as a very rough diamond and he was not in my league. I would not have socialised with him then. However, I recognised his talent and this was all I was interested in.

He adds, ‘Word had reached me about Peter and the A30, so I made it my business to see him race. There was this wild-looking bastard driving this A30 and I reckoned I could do something with him.’

‘The Brock Boys’ – Peter and Phillip’s first race, Sandown, September 1969.

John Leffler (mini) and Peter, Oran Park, September 1969.

'Ken Mitchell, Ford 100E Prefect', Sandown, November 1969.

Peter Lewis-Williams.

Harry was the dominant team owner of the 1960s and 1970s and, at least initially, had the greatest degree of control over his personnel compared with the other team managers. When Holden approached him about forming a team he told them he wanted no argument about his choice of drivers. He would choose 'a new batch of people: drivers I can mould,' he told them, and they agreed. His second choice was also surprising: the brilliant young rally driver and hill climb specialist, Colin Bond. With these two people Firth had astutely picked two of the greatest touring car drivers Australia has produced and started them on their subsequent careers.

Heather says Peter came home in great excitement, telling her, 'I've had the ultimate call. Harry Firth rang me.' Heather says his first thoughts were of his father Geoff and how 'ecstatic he would be – a factory drive in a proper racing car, and in a Holden!' Heather believes the 'works drive' spelled the 'beginning of the end' for their marriage, which was again in trouble. They were growing apart, but Peter was not prepared to admit it. Heather says it was a matter of pride with him not to lose her. She also says that even though they were still close and shared a lot, Peter's parents, particularly Geoff, could see no wrong in him, so she could not reveal to them what was going on.

Before the press was told of Peter's inclusion in the team there were a couple of race meetings in the A30, followed by two more after they were informed. He raced at Oran Park twice, the first on 10 August where he finished third, then on 21 September, which resulted in a first and second. Sandown was driving in between these two, where he finished second, and, finally, Hume Weir, where he won. From then on it was all about preparation for his first race as a 'professional driver' in a 'works team', and it was the big one – the 1969 Bathurst 500 – where his mount was to be one of the new supercars, the two-door HT Holden Monaro GTS with the 350 cubic inch V8. The earlier model, the HK, with the 327 cubic inch engine had won the previous year with privateers Bruce McPhee and Barry Mulholland at the wheel.

To grasp Firth's operation it is important to understand the intrigue and machinations of the Holden Dealer Team's origins and why this happened. The HDT was created to circumvent the edict by Holden's parent company, General Motors in America, that as a company it would not be involved in circuit or road racing of any type – rallies and trials, though, could be accommodated. Other than Firth, the key players were a Holden executive, Peter Lewis-Williams, and Holden's Director of Sales, John Bagshaw. Peter Lewis-Williams was the original brains behind its formation, actually setting it up and acting as everything from bag-man with the funds to secret link between Firth and Holden – in effect the 'go-between'.

Lewis-Williams began his motoring world career as a mechanic with Holden in GM's service centre. This led him to GM's warranty office, where he assessed warranty claims. At night and on weekends, he moonlighted as Norm Beechey's spanner man on his early model racing car and a dragster that Beechey entered for the very first Australian Drag Racing Championship. This was held at Fisherman's Bend and the car won, though with another driver at the wheel. His next position within Commercial Vehicles and Field Sales was important for the company as it involved tendering to government. He also had some good skills as a driver, campaigning an early model in circuits and hill climbs, and he took the Templestowe hill climb record off Norm Beechey.

For a humble mechanic, Lewis-Williams had an interesting background and he possessed some important skills that were to lead him to a varied and very successful career. He'd had a private school education, was an excellent writer and communicator and was very good with people. These, together with his motor sport experience and motor racing savvy, made him the obvious choice when Bagshaw decided Holden should emulate Ford and take up motor racing in Australia.

When interviewed by the author in 2009, Lewis-Williams revealed some hitherto undisclosed facts concerning the intrigue needed in setting up and, more importantly, financing the team. In doing so, he explained Holden's Australian motor sport involvement, as it was in the mid 1960s. When he became involved, the company had in place the Holden Dealer Trials Teams, two separate teams from New South Wales and Victoria. The Victorian team officially looked after two V8 HK Kingswood sedans (fitted with automatic transmissions) and one of the early four cylinder 'Brabham' Toranas. The New South Wales team eventually ran two Monaros that, although big, achieved some good results. Yet, compared with Firth's successful Ford rally team, running a supercharged Lotus Cortina, they did not rate.

What hampered the team was the drivers and navigators having to prepare the cars 'after hours', a common practice in those days, with a budget that could best be described as shoestring. 'To become more competitive I felt we needed an outside rally operation run by a competent manager,' Lewis-Williams told me. 'I was aware Harry and Ford had parted company and I knew he was not happy at what had happened. I also knew Bagshaw wanted better results to help Holden's marketing, so I approached him with the idea of engaging Harry. Bagshaw agreed, so I approached Harry and the three of us then met in Bagshaw's office.'

With agreement all round, the team began in January 1969 and Lewis-Williams' responsibility was to organise the cars, parts and, importantly, to channel funds. Initially, there was no need for secrecy as it was an official rally team, and even though it was not the ideal car for rallies, Holden provided Harry with a GTS Monaro. 'However, Bagshaw knew rallies were not the answer in promoting the company,' Lewis-Williams says. 'The most effective exposure for Holden was circuit and road racing, so he put his toe in the water to try it out.'

Indirectly, the subsequent formation of the HDT less than a year later was boosted when another famous racer entered the fray – David McKay. Importantly, he had the ear of John Bagshaw. McKay had been a driver of some distinction, finishing third in the 1961 Australian Grand Prix and fourth in 1964. He'd also won the 'one race' 1960 Australian Touring Car Championship in a 3.4 litre Jaguar. With Bagshaw's blessing McKay formed a 'quasi' works operation of three GTS Monaros for the 1968 Bathurst under a team called the Holden Dealer Racing Team (HDRT). Lewis-Williams was also involved behind the scenes:

McKay's operation was looked at as being a one-off – a sort of experiment. It was funded through the dealers, not by the dealers, though the vehicles were provided by Holden to McKay (as Team Manager) via the dealers. The three cars were put on their books as 'demos' and there was a 'handshake-arrangement' between Holden and the three key dealers that they get the cars back after the race. These cars received minimal mechanical changes and were virtually stock-standard for the race.

One of the most important parts of the new operation was funding, which was primarily supplied by Castrol as the team's sponsor. This subterfuge achieved two aims: it kept the origins of the program secret and hence did not break the American edict; and it also enabled GM Australia (Holden) to put its toe into the water and see if could give the company a new and successful marketing tool. McKay's team did not win the race – it fell to two privateers in their Monaro GTS, Bruce McPhee and Barry Mulholland, thus blunting Ford's marketing push with their new XT Falcon GT.

With Ford now planning a major campaign for the following year with its XW GT Falcon (the first of the GTHOs), Lewis-Williams in late 1968 recommended to Bagshaw that a circuit-racing program be undertaken through Harry Firth's operation. While it would definitely be a 'factory' team, the subterfuge to keep Holden's American parent company happy would need to be retained. Bagshaw agreed and initially did not tell the parent what its Australian affiliate was up to.

Ironically, when the team became so successful Bagshaw did ultimately make a presentation to the GM board in America on the marketing benefits of the program. The issue of funding was never really touched on and the subterfuge of the dealers supposedly putting in much of the funding was allowed to remain. Lewis-Williams says there is no doubt GM America knew what was going on because there had been a similar operation set up in the States to run a racing program there. One senior GM executive joked it was like, 'having a house of ill-repute attached to a church and pretending the girls were part of the choir!'

McKay agreed to relinquish his control of the name and the word racing was dropped. Subsequently, in the first weeks of 1969, the Holden Dealer Team with Firth as its titular head was formed. However, its formation remained secret for many months. Again, funding was to be the main issue because there was only so much that the Australian operation could hide from the accountants and the eyes of their American parent. There was also the need to have Holden advertise what it was doing and promote its successes. This is where Lewis-Williams's skills came to the fore and he created a vehicle with which to fund the operation:

Peter Lewis-Williams and the legend – Norm Beechey (right).

To help source funds for the racing effort I arranged with Castrol for a joint advertising program to announce our successes. These were carefully designed to look like Castrol ads, but actually promoted the Monaro. Once again, this kept the racing at arm's length from Holden and General Motors. These costs were split fifty/fifty. The deal was that Holden would pay all the advertising costs and Castrol would pay its share to Firth, thus providing a separate racing budget.

Lewis-Williams still smiles when he remembers how this secrecy actually played out within Holden: 'In 1969 we knew what we wanted to do and we went ahead and did it – we just bypassed all the red tape and there were very few people really in the know. Initially, within the company, there was an informal Motor Sport Committee made up of the Director of Engineering Bill Steinhaghen, the Director of Sales John Bagshaw and myself.'

The advertising funding was equally kept 'under wraps' with only three people in the know: Lewis-Williams, Holden's Sales and Promotions Manager David Lawford, and Castrol's PR Manager Mike Jennings. Holden's input in vehicles, parts and kind, was substantial. The running and some of the development costs were controlled by Harry, who sent his racing accounts directly to Castrol and they paid the bills. 'Holden provided the technical and R & D support as well as providing the vehicles. However, Firth had complete control over the racing cars, their development, team tactics and choice of drivers,' acknowledges Lewis-Williams. This was the operation that Peter Brock joined in the middle of 1969 – a secret works team run by a wily team manager who, because of his racing intellect and organisational ability, had already earned the nickname of 'The Fox'. As Lewis-Williams admits:

I met Peter shortly after he joined the team and I knew of his history, but because of my position I had been told to keep away from the team during race days. In fact, I was often banished to the stands during these race meetings so nobody would guess I was involved. Consequently, at least in the early days, I did not spend time in his company while he was competing, but of course I had a lot of interaction with him at Harry's 'works' and saw at close hand the sort of person Peter was.

One of the most important people within the HDT, and who became a long-time ally and friend of Peter's, was Ian Tate. By 1969 Tate already had a long history with the wily team manager, having joined him in his Ford days in 1963. He had helped prepare the 1967 green XR GT in which Firth and Fred Gibson won the 1967 Bathurst. For the 1967 Bathurst, Firth and Tate had actually prepared two XT GT Falcons for Bathurst and the following year prepared three Falcon GT rally cars for the first London-to-Sydney Marathon. Their cars won the prestigious Team Prize.

The break between Firth and Ford was to leave a sour taste in Firth's mouth. Ford imported the legendary American team manager Al Turner to take over Ford Australia's racing division and Firth was, in the words of Tate, 'very pissed off, mainly because he had already undertaken much of the preliminary design and preparation work for the forthcoming Phase 1 Falcon GT.' Ian Tate and the other of Firth's Ford mechanics, Frank Lowndes (father of the current driver, Craig Lowndes), met with Al Turner and Tate was offered a position with the new operation. Taking into account numerous factors, including the issue of 'the devil you know' and the fact that he was aware Firth had been talking to Holden, Tate elected to join Holden. Ironically, if he had joined Turner he would have looked after Alan Moffat instead of Peter Brock!

In the beginning Tate was Firth's sole full-time race team mechanic, but this role gradually metamorphosed into that of Chief Mechanic and probably one of the best V8 engineers and engine builders in the country. He agrees with Firth's reasoning in choosing drivers, saying how it showed the remarkable insight The Fox had in identifying talent and nurturing it: 'Harry never discussed the issue of drivers with

me – who was to drive what and who was to be approached was solely his decision. He had a good eye for choosing young and untried talent who he could mould. One part of this moulding was to pair them with established and trusted drivers who were quick and experienced.'

Tate agrees with the assertion that all of Firth's drivers had to possess two important traits: 'They all had to recognise him as the boss and they had to be sympathetic to the cars!' Other than what he had read in the racing magazines, Tate knew almost nothing about Brock and his career. He was able to view first-hand both the driver and the notorious little blue Austin at the Sandown 500 – the precursor to Bathurst: 'Peter drove it in one of the support races and this was the first time I saw the car and, knowing he was to join us, I paid particular attention to his driving.'

He was quite impressed at Peter's speed and throttle control in the wet, especially when he had a close look at the A30, which he described as a 'little rough around the edges', although he recognised Bentley's skill as a tuner. 'When Peter first came to our works in Auburn,' Tate says, 'he was obviously a little over-awed and, compared with how he would become later on, very quiet and unassuming. I don't think he really thought it was all going to happen until we painted his name on the side of the car which he was to race at Bathurst.'

One of the biggest problems facing Peter was his lack of testing in the Monaro since most of this work was undertaken by Colin Bond. That Bond was Firth's first choice was understandable since Bond was an established rally driver, a medium Firth understood. As far as Firth was concerned, at this stage of his career Bond was also a far better test and development driver because of the wide variety of cars he had driven. Firth remembers Colin testing the new Monaro at Amaroo – probably around 130 laps – with Peter completing just less than a dozen. Tate remembers also a few extra miles that he clocked at Calder Raceway.

Firth though was quite happy with his new charge, especially when Peter asked many incisive questions and did what he was told. Firth was especially pleased when Pete said after one session, 'I am beginning to understand what you are on about.' The issue that Firth was trying to teach Peter and all his drivers was how to conserve the car for 500 long racing miles or they would not last the distance – the cars needed to be nursed. The problem was the new breed of supercars had made a quantum leap in power and performance, but they were still lacking in two areas: brakes and handling. These problems were not confined to just the Monaros; the Falcons also suffered.

The new XW GT Falcon received a bigger engine – the ubiquitous and very famous 351 cubic inch Cleveland V8, which was conservatively rated at 290 bhp (216 Kw). It could be confidently expected that a tuned and tweaked race engine would develop considerably more. Holden's answer, the Monaro GTS, also received a bigger engine than its predecessor – a 350 cubic inch Chevrolet V8 that was supposedly rated at 300 bhp (224 Kw) at 4800 rpm. For their day, though, it was the torque figure which was dramatic – 515 Nm.

Firth and Tate are more circumspect about the power figures. Tate says, 'Holden's Fisherman's Bend factory received three competition engines from Chevrolet's competition arm in the US. They had four bolt mains and were supposedly the best there was. Unfortunately, one was damaged at Fisherman's Bend and they built two engines up themselves and gave the best one to us, together with the undamaged engines. I also rebuilt one of our engines which the engineers at Fisherman's Bend had also damaged.'

'The American engines were reputed to give 285 bhp (214 Kw) at the flywheel, but when we dynode them they gave 220 to 230 bhp, but the one we built gave a reading of 244 bhp! However these figures must be taken in context: ours were not a flash, but steady readings. These were good figures for their

time,' argues Firth. On the other hand, Tate says that while the US figures were optimistic he remembers the figures as some 20 bhp more than what Harry remembers.

The rebuilt engine was put in one of the race cars which, like all their competition cars, was road registered and Tate ran it in by driving all night on public roads. Of further benefit for the Monaro's race longevity was the replacement gearbox – the equally famous Muncie four-speed close ratio unit, which was easier to use than its predecessor, the Saginaw, which was not well-liked.

Although the front brakes were thicker than those of the 327 model they were the same diameter and it was expected the Monaros would be seriously under-braked for racing on the mountain. In an effort to help braking, slotted wheels were introduced and there was some channeling of air to the discs through revised bodywork. Ian Tate well remembers the care needed to enable the cars to last over 500 racing miles:

In those days the Bathurst cars were far removed from the purpose-built racers of today and they had to be nursed to last the five hundred miles and this was something Harry knew how to do. He was an expert in conserving a car, especially tyres and brakes. Though the 350 Monaro had quite a bit of power, it only possessed a slightly upgraded road suspension and pissy little brakes, which were small for the road, let alone Bathurst! They were run with softer suspension than is the case now and there was a degree of body roll. Handling, therefore, was also pretty average.

Tate says it was one thing to drive a little sports sedan for ten laps, another thing entirely to race for nearly six hours and have the car last. Interestingly, he described Peter at the time as 'quiet and unassuming'. He also said Peter was wise in how he deferred to Firth: 'Drivers were expected to do as they were told and nobody argued with Harry because at that time he could still drive as fast as they could. In testing he was just as quick!'

A few weeks before Bathurst the driver pairings were announced. Car one was Colin Bond and Tony Roberts, both ex-rally drivers. Car two was Henk Woelders and Spencer Martin, who was to be replaced by Peter Macrow after the former was hurt in a road accident. Car three was Des West with Peter as co-driver. Tate agrees with Firth's choice: 'West was a steady, mature and an experienced driver. He drove like clockwork, with consistently fast times, and Firth trusted him.' In turn Firth says West had little ego and he looked after Peter: 'He was a cool character and used to race with some oranges in the glove box which he would eat on the straights.'

‘Time keepers’ Heather and Pam Elam, Bathurst, October 1969.

Bathurst, October 1969.

Harry laughs when he remembers another little quirk: ‘He was also known to have the odd cigarette while racing: you could do that with an open helmet in those days!’

There was no doubt that Colin Bond was the team’s star. He was well-mannered, even tempered and very laidback. The mechanics always loved Bond, and both Tate and Firth say they never heard anybody speak ill of him. His nickname within the team was ‘Goldie’ as he was Firth’s favourite.

Peter and the team headed for the mountain and Heather says it was only then that Peter actually believed he was going to finally realise his dream and race at Bathurst. Heather joined him, though in truth

she did not want to be there. She was already thinking of ending the marriage: ‘I had made a commitment to Harry and the HDT to attend Bathurst as part of a female group promoting the team, so I fulfilled my obligations. I did enjoy the event and it was exciting to watch Peter. He was a little nervous and unusually quiet, but he drove very well.’

By any comparison Peter certainly acquitted himself with diligence and skill. It must be remembered he had never raced a touring car, had never raced the Monaro, had spent little ‘seat time’, and it would be difficult to find a more imposing track on which to make one’s professional debut. Tate remarked on Peter’s persona for that first race meeting: ‘He was quiet and thoughtful, but he was learning the car and the track. Practice on the Friday and Saturday was the first time I actually saw him in the car. There were no dramas.’

At the beginning it seemed the Ford GTHOs were the car to have. Firth’s replacement at Ford, the American Al Turner, had flown in at great expense some of the latest American Goodyear racing tyres. Firth, ever cunning and ever cautious, reasoned it was crazy to try an untried tyre on the mountain and stuck with Michelin XAS road radials, which were a known quantity in racing. ‘I also knew Mike Babitch, Goodyear’s race manager, and spoke to him at Bathurst and he also had his doubts [about the tyres],’ reveals Firth.

Peter and Des West drove well and qualified a credible tenth for the sixty-car grid. Bond was quicker and qualified seventh. Pole was taken by the Geoghegan brothers, Leo and Ian, in a GTHO. The Falcons looked like they were the car to beat as they were quicker in most sections of the track, including some six miles per hour (ten kilometres per hour) down Conrod Straight. They were topping 136 miles per hour (219 kilometres per hour). Interestingly, Peter’s greatest opponent Alan Moffat, then an almost unknown, was driving his first Bathurst in the Ford factory team.

In speaking to the author forty years later, Firth said he had not been concerned with the Ford GT’s outright speed: ‘I imposed rev limits on our cars – five hundred less revs both up and down the mountain – as I wanted to conserve the engines. We could have gone faster if we wanted to.’ Both Colin Bond and Ian Tate dispute this. ‘That is complete bullshit. Five hundred revs down Conrod Straight would have meant a huge drop in speed,’ says Tate. ‘What we did do was short shrift to maximise the massive torque of Monaro. That certainly saved the engine,’ remembers Bond.

First lap carnage, Bathurst, October 1969.

First lap carnage, Bathurst, October 1969.

Stricken Seton/ Gibson GTHO, Bathurst, October 1969.

Peter passes a disconsolate Bo Seton (note fuel pouring from car), Bathurst, 1969.

Peter's first Bathurst GTS Monaro, 1969.

In deference to its sponsor, the 1969 Bathurst was known as the Hardie–Ferodo 500 for the first time and it is generally regarded as one of the most exciting and incident-packed races ever held on the mountain.

As he was more experienced than Peter, Des West started the race – a fortuitous choice as it turned out, because he missed the lap one carnage at the top of the mountain. It was the usual first lap mayhem as the sixty-car field on cold tyres, cold brakes and with full fuel tanks jockeyed for position as they raced up the mountain. Then at Skyline it all went wrong for Bill Brown in his GTHO. Another competitor cut across him, forcing him to put two wheels on the near-vertical bank on his right. The Falcon then began a series of spectacular rolls, finishing up on its roof in the middle of the track with Brown hanging upside down in his harness and fuel sloshing from the car.

Some of the other drivers came over the blind brow and somehow managed to avert the stricken Falcon; others were not so lucky. A multi-car pile-up ensued. Most of the faster GTs had been in front of the accident and were not aware of what had happened. Des West was one of these quicker drivers. Alan Moffat had pulled up a few seconds before with a box full of neutrals and it took some time to sort the gearbox and start again.

‘Lead driver’ Des West, Bathurst, October 1969.

‘The victors’ – Harry Firth and Colin Bond. Bathurst, October 1969.

Somehow, in the intervening two-and-a-half minutes before the field returned the flag, marshals managed to clear some of the stricken cars, although Brown’s Falcon was still upside down in the middle of the track. Waved flags warned the leaders as they approached the blind brow leading to Skyline and the drivers managed to thread their way through without another accident. Four cars retired on the spot with another dozen or so suffering various degrees of damage and being forced to retire during the course of the race.

Just under an hour into the race and Bond was third, with West fourth. Then, fortune started to favour the Monaros as the GT Falcons began to suffer tyre problems. They may have had the speed and been able to stop better, but Al Turner’s much vaunted racing tyres could not handle the pace and were beginning to wear at a prodigious rate. The Falcons were over three seconds a lap faster than the Monaros but were forced to spend time in the pits changing their tyres. After 68 laps the Bond/Roberts car was in the lead with their sister car, the Macrow/Woelders Monaro, second and the West/Brock Monaro running a comfortable fifth.

There was more drama for the Fords when Fred Gibson’s GTHO, being driven by Bo Seton, blew a tyre at McPhillamy Park and ended on its roof. By this time West had handed over to Peter who, heeding Firth’s instructions, drove a cool, steady race and without any drama finished a strong third. Colin Bond and Tony Roberts won the race by three quarters of a minute from the GTHO of Bruce McPhee, who had driven all but one of the laps.

HDT victory cake, Bathurst, October 1969.

For the Holden Dealer Team it was a triumph. For Firth it was vindication over Ford. For Peter it was a brilliant result – third in his first touring car race on his first visit to the mountain! His fastest lap time had

also been marginally faster than Des West, something he personally found very satisfying. For Al Turner and his Ford team it was a case of '. . . but for the tyres'.

Bill Tuckey, who had been consistently in the top ten with his GTHO until an engine had blown, said few felt any sympathy for Turner: 'He was a typically arrogant Yank, who felt he knew it all and did not listen to the experts who had warned him the mountain was hard on tyres. What worked on a flat American road or oval circuit would not work at Bathurst!' Firth is kinder: 'Al was an engine man and had no comprehension of our type of racing; he should have listened to the locals.' In the final analysis, Firth's pragmatic approach with a proven tyre was the correct course and in the following year, when he finally began to use pure racing tyres on his cars, it was with enough knowledge to know what would work and what would not.

The aftermath of Bathurst was something of an anticlimax for Peter. The plusses were important. Firth was very pleased with him and confirmed his permanent place in the team, but for the remainder of the year and for much of the first part of 1970 the drives for the HDT were not plentiful and it was left to Bond to undertake most of the development work and races. The GTS Monaro's next race was the second Rothman's 12-Hour Endurance Race held at Surfers Paradise. It was a Series Production race and Firth again paired Colin Bond and Tony Roberts in their Bathurst winning Monaro. With no 'official' factory GTHOs entered, they duly won the race.

'Scrub Corner', Hume Weir, December 1969. (Chris Macgeorge)

‘Concentration’, Hume Weir, December 1969.

‘Garland for the winner’, Hume Weir, December 1969.

Oran Park, April 1970.

Oran Park, April 1970.

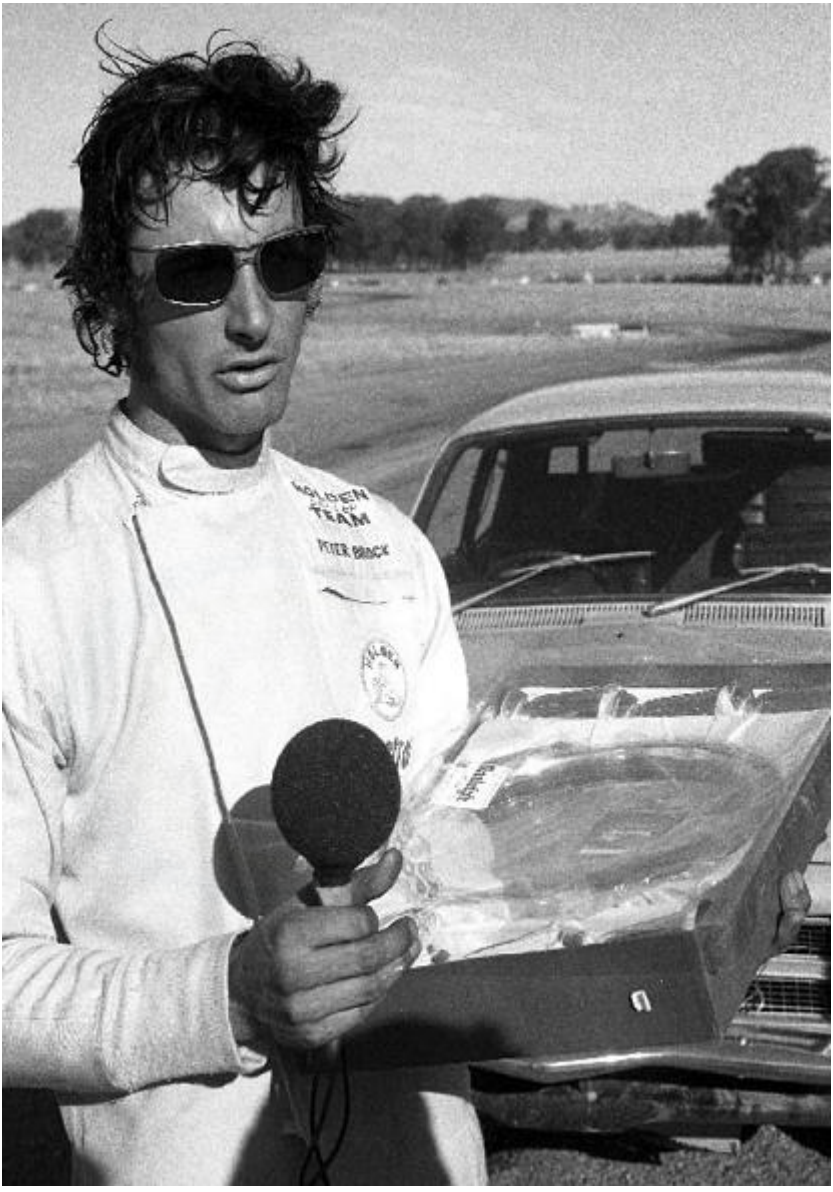
Terry and Peter, Calder, 1970.

Peter was not entered so for him it was back to racing the A30, with a race at Sandown followed by the Templestowe hill climb. Neither yielded a result. The A30's second birthday was celebrated at Winton in early December and resulted in a second place, but it was not until Boxing Day 1969 at the Weir that he saw the chequered flag as a winner again.

The A30's swansong was at Oran Park on 3 January 1970 and it went off with a bang: first place and a lap record! Subsequently, the little blue racer was sold to Ross Bond who found that the car was difficult to drive and he did not like its nervous manner and vicious characteristics. Journalists who drove it at the time did not like it either. After a few races Bond sold it and the purchaser eventually wrote it off in a substantial accident.

Firth let Peter drive the Monaro at Oran Park, where he retired after an accident, something Firth still argues was unnecessary and caused by his inexperience. It was during this time that Peter's marriage finally ended. Heather says things were becoming very strained as her husband's frustration at not getting more drives ate away at him: 'His drinking and temper were a volatile mixture and after a serious incident I decided I'd had enough and left him.'

Firth remembers the break and said he was not surprised because he did not believe 'Peter was treating Heather at all well.' Heather went to stay with her brother Terry and it was a contrite Peter who came calling the next day. Heather refused to talk to him and a firm Terry told him it was better he should leave. Terry Russell was and is a big and powerful man and you did not argue with him. He was close to his sister and, despite their long friendship, Peter realised there was never any doubt whose side he was on.



‘The Winner’, Winton, March 1971.

7

PROFESSIONAL

RACING DRIVER

PROFESSIONAL
RACING DRIVER

His marriage may have ended and there were not enough races for him to enter, but there were some hopeful prospects on the horizon for Peter Brock. Firth had told him he was now part of the HDT's long-term future and he was invited to be involved in the development of the GTR Torana as a racing car.

Harry Firth was, and is, a sophisticated man with a wide range of interests and knowledge of life far and away from the closed and incestuous world of motor sport. Both these assets were to directly benefit Peter since Firth took him under his wing and set about moulding him into more than a racing driver.

The team manager recognised Peter's charisma, looks and ability to communicate with people, but wanted to smooth the rough edges. With sponsorship and industry involvement coming to the fore, Firth reasoned that a driver whose sole ability was to pedal a car quickly would not be much of an asset with sponsors, so he asked Peter Lewis-Williams if he could use his contacts to provide some social training for young Mr Brock. That Peter was willing to undertake this sort of coaching shows just how ambitious he was.

Peter, March 1970.

‘Peter the official’ with Tony Farrel (centre), Tasman Sandown, 1970.

Lewis-Williams arranged for Holden’s advertising agency to organise some personal development. Peter Brock duly undertook a course that included manners, decorum, dress sense and public speaking. Some of the lessons obviously rubbed off because increasingly his public engagements became quite polished, although off centre stage his demeanour was still that of ‘one of the boys’.

Firth carefully tutored and helped Peter with his driving and it was interesting to hear the comparisons Firth made with Colin Bond, who was the lead driver in 1970: ‘He was capable on the race track, but not yet as good as Colin. Bond was more experienced and was probably the best all-round driver in Australia. He was also streets ahead of everybody in rallies. By the early ’70s Peter also became a good rally driver, but still not in Colin’s class.’ However, Firth saw plenty of potential in Brock and reasoned Peter’s fierce will and competitive nature could be harnessed: ‘Peter had more intuition and he absorbed things. He was also more technically minded and this was important as we began to develop the GTR Torana. He always asked questions and was quick to provide feedback on a car’s characteristics. At first he was not as good as Colin in this department, but he soon learnt and became as good, if not marginally better.’

After Bathurst and following a few more outings with the GTS Monaro in Series Production – The Tasman Touring series and the Grace Brothers-Toby Lee series held at Oran Park in Sydney – it became evident the GTHO was the better vehicle for racing. Peter did not drive in any of these races, mainly because they were held in Queensland and New South Wales and it was cheaper to have the Sydney-based Colin Bond drive the car. And he was not happy about it but kept his feelings largely to himself. Despite this, Peter and Bond got on well and spent a lot of time together. ‘To begin with Peter and I were quite close as friends,’ Bond says, ‘and we spent a lot of time together as we were expected to also tow the cars to the

various tracks around the country. One day near Benalla our panel van spat out an axle and we were forced to spend the night repairing the car. We did a lot of things together and he was good company.'

The friendship cooled somewhat over the next few years for two different reasons. In 1970 Bond got married while Peter played the bachelor game, and the pressure of being competitive rivals vying for supremacy within a race team caused some tension. Bond may have been a laid-back character, but he was also very competitive and he was determined to be seen as the quicker driver, which he was for quite a while. Both Harry Firth and Ian Tate are clear on this fact. Bond was the quicker driver in the early years and he was also much easier on the machinery, especially the gearbox. 'Peter was destroying gearboxes as he attempted to match the lap times of Bondy,' says Tate.

Colin Bond is a little kinder in making his assessments of their respective performances and says some of this margin could be laid down to differences in their machinery:

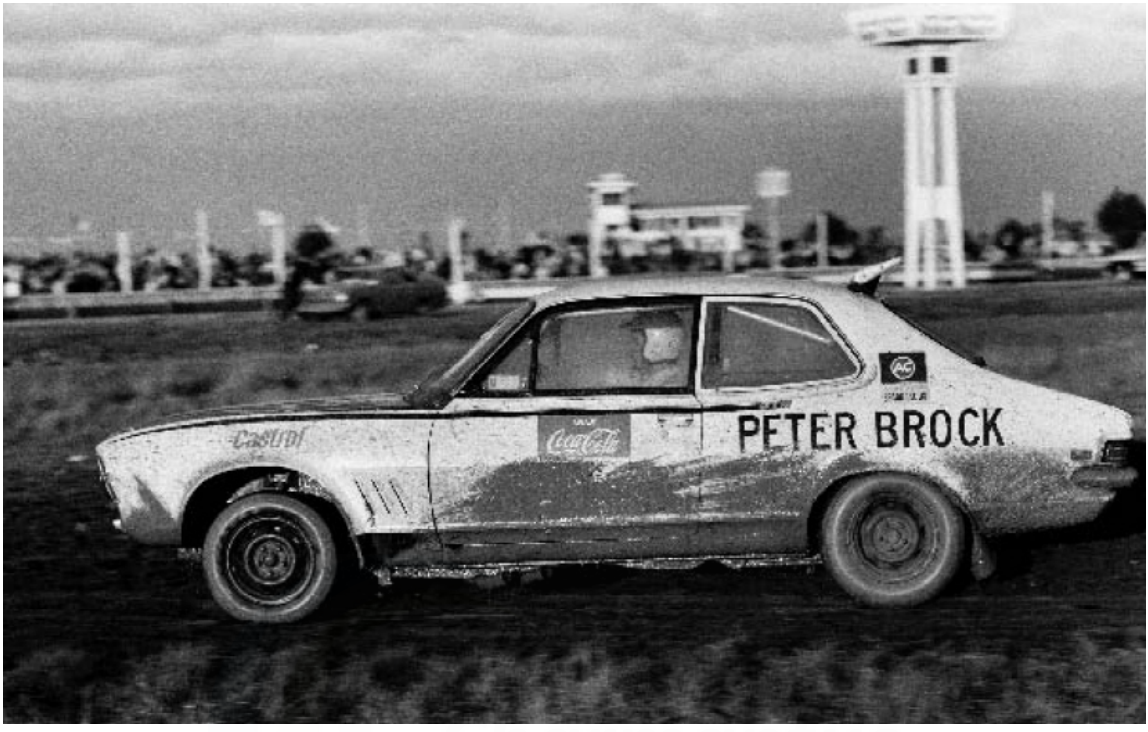
We were generally very close in lap times – initially I was faster, but as he became more experienced and got more race drives it became harder to make a comparison as the cars often ran different specifications and parts. I clearly remember I nearly had a huge accident at Sandown trying to match Peter's time, which was a whopping one second faster! I tried really hard and got within half a second before having a major slide and scraped the Armco. I could not understand it!

Bond did not know both cars (Series Production models) were running different spec engines as Firth had not told the drivers. To his relief he learned the truth when GM's Chief Engine Designer, Freddy James, remarked: 'That new camshaft in Peter's car is working well because he was clearly faster than you!'

What did annoy Bond was when Peter resorted to a little psychological gamesmanship: 'I had hit the Armco in practice and Peter hung the damaged mudguard on the garage wall with a sign saying "Bondy did that". There was also the factor of my living in Sydney while Peter lived close to the Auburn works, so he was able to spend more time with Harry and the cars.'

When they began to run the Toranas there was also the added factor of Peter having done the lion's share of the development work and therefore understanding the car's characteristics better. Despite this their lap times virtually mirrored one another. With Ford planning an even more powerful and more competitive GTHO, Holden had to make a decision whether to develop the Monaro still further, or take a different route.

‘Chasing Fred Gibson’, Oran Park, April 1970.



Calder Rallycross, May 1970.

Peter Lewis-Williams says the decision to switch to the Torana was Holden's decision, not Firth's. The decision was basically made by Holden's Director of Engineering, Bill Steinhaghen: 'With the furor in the media over the so-called super cars, Steinhaghen did not want to develop the 350 Monaro into what he termed "a weapon" in a power and speed war with Ford. A so-called "Super Monaro" was just not on the cards.'

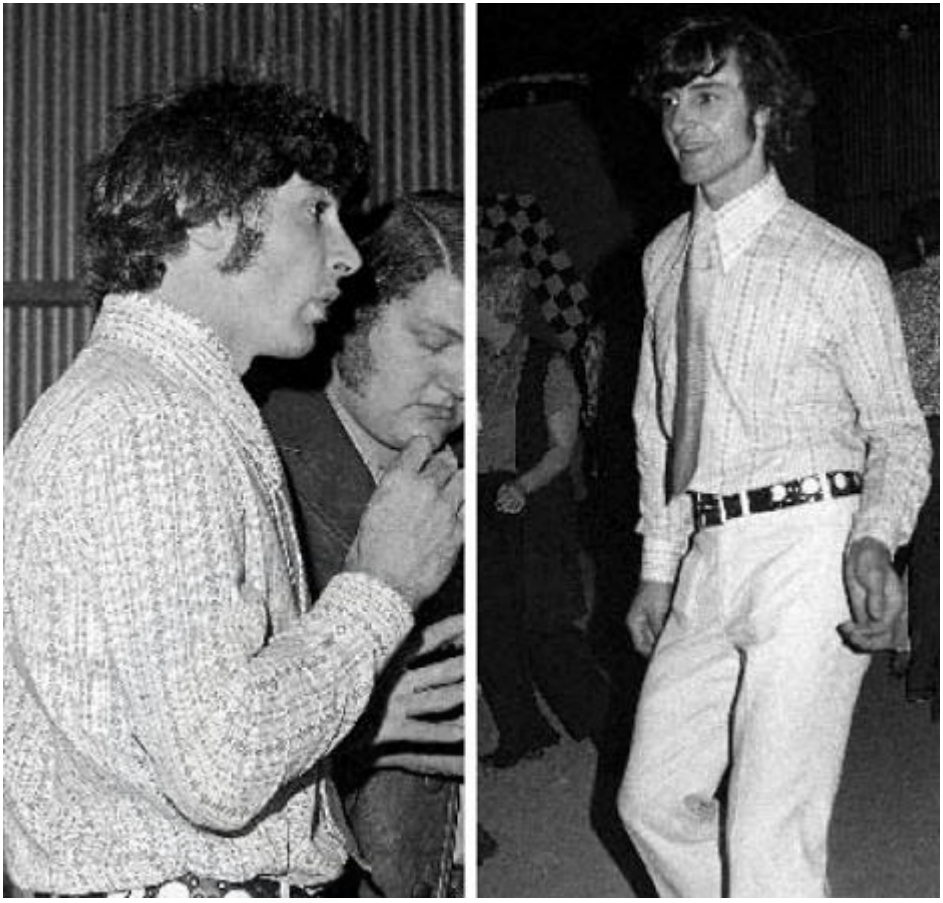
The Motor Sport Committee felt Holden did not have to prove how good the Monaro was – after all, they had proved their point with the Monaro winning two Bathursts. They decided Holden's production efforts would be directed towards a smaller performance orientated car that could provide a base for a competition car. The starting point was the GTR Torana with the 186 cubic inch straight six, which ultimately spawned the very successful GTR XU1.

Tate says that to begin with HDT were doubtful over the wisdom of this choice since the early Toranas suffered from mechanical failures as they attempted to keep up with the fleet GTHOs, although in the shorter races on twisty circuits the Torana fared well. 'The Falcons were well into their development cycle,' Tate remembers, 'and were proving nearly unbreakable. On the other hand the early Toranas still needed to be developed and they often failed because we had to wring their necks in order to compete against them and the Valiant Chargers, which were also becoming very fast.'

'EJ works van', Lakeland Hill climb, 1969.

To begin with Peter did not get much opportunity to run the GTR Torana in circuit races. He spent much of the year running in 'rallycross' events at Calder Raceway. Rallycross had been born in the UK in the late 1960s and was a cross between circuit racing and rallying on dirt. The Calder events were made for television and the circuit's infield was turned into a giant mud pit through which the competitors raced between sections on the regular bitumen parts of the track.

Peter preferred circuit racing, but he put up with rallycross as it helped his burgeoning reputation with the public. It also brought him into contact with Heather for the first time since they had split up, and into direct racing competition with the man who was now squiring his soon-to-be ex-wife, and who ultimately married her, the rally ace Bob Watson.



At ‘Women for Wheels’ barbeque in the barn, 1970.

Presentation by VFL legend Bobby Skilton, Calder Rallycross, July 1970.

Peter and Bob Watson (Renault R8 Gordini), Calder Rallycross, August 1970.

Heather with the ‘Bathurst Beast’, Calder Rallycross, August 1970.

Heather had always been keen on competition and even when married to Peter had undertaken some series club rallies in the Diamond Valley Speed Shop’s EJ van, which was now powered by a hot 186 engine. Then she entered a few of the Calder rallycross events, although not in competition with her ex. Firth recognised her abilities and provided her with a GTS Monaro, which she also entered in rallycross at Calder. She ran a Mini in some club rallies as well, but her ambition was to compete in the Southern Cross Rally, Australia’s then premier rally. A dealer loaned her a stock standard six-cylinder Torana and with some sponsorship from a cosmetic company she finished a credible twenty-first out of eighty-eight cars and won her class.

Of her relationship with Peter at this time, she simply explains, ‘As we both moved in the same circles we sometimes ran into one another and initially things were a bit strained. As time went on it became easier and we developed a friendly relationship and just moved on.’ There was one issue which confronted Peter, and that was Heather’s new boyfriend, who became one of Australia’s best and most famous rally drivers.

Bob Watson was a mechanical engineer and worked in Experimental Engineering at Holden and undertook the chassis development work on the early 327 Monaro at the Lang Lang Proving Ground. He’d been a member of one of the Holden Dealer Trials Teams and in 1968 had tried his hand at circuit racing with

very good results. With Tony Roberts as co-driver, he had won the 1968 Sandown Three Hour race, his first circuit race, and finished third – first in private entry class – in the subsequent Bathurst event.

When Holden closed its rally program he joined Renault as a driver, eventually leaving Holden to join the French manufacturer as Technical Director. Renault provided him with a 1300cc Renault Gordini to race in rallycross against Peter's 3.3-litre supercharged Torana, which had originally been developed as a sports sedan. Despite the huge discrepancy in power, the tiny Renault had a number of outright wins over the HDT car. Even so, Peter won the championship.

With Watson's relationship with Heather blossoming, it was a situation tailor-made for confrontation. There was really only one incident and, even so, Watson remains complimentary about Peter as a competitor:

Peter was always a very clean competitor and I had no trouble with his driving on the track. However, once when we were filming a rallycross commercial at Calder for Coca Cola he deliberately rammed the back of my car and caused a fair amount of damage. I was going out with Heather by then and I know he did not like the fact. His mechanics thought it was a great joke, but mine did not and I thought it was a childish thing to do. After that, things cooled down and we had a normal and healthy relationship, both on and off the track.

'Mates' – Bond and Peter, Calder Rallycross, October 1970.

‘Satisfaction’, Calder Rallycross, October 1970.

'Not friends' – Peter and Bob, Calder Rallycross, April 1971.

Peter rented a flat near the Auburn works and set about becoming a 'certified' free man. Firth says he threw some 'great parties that were well attended by the motor racing fraternity and the fair sex'. For a short time he squired various women before finding a new love interest in Christine Cole, another strong and independent woman who is generally regarded as the best female driver Australia has ever produced. Cole was not just excellent when compared with other female drivers, she was able to competitively take on the men.

At the time of their meeting Cole had joined the HDT at the invitation of Firth, who wanted her to drive the V8 Torana sports sedan in selected rallycross races. She was also utilised by Harry to ferry cars around. As drivers were not paid handsomely in those days she had three jobs to help pay for her racing. Firth was so impressed with her abilities during the year that he provided her with an XU1 and she competed in the 1970 Bathurst against her boyfriend. Her co-driver was Sandra Bennett. She ultimately entered Bathurst nine times and her highest placing was a competitive sixth outright in 1981. She was also placed second in the 1975 Touring Car Championship driving an Alfa Romeo GTV 2000.

Peter and Christine Cole, Bathurst, October 1970.

Cole was also very popular with the HDT mechanics and Tate says on several occasions they took Peter to task when he was two-timing her. ‘Christine was absolutely gorgeous, both as a person and to look at, and Peter was told in no uncertain terms to treat her right,’ remembers Tate. Cole did not actually live with Peter. She lived in Sydney while he had an apartment in Melbourne and, depending on where they were racing, they shared each other’s homes. This arrangement also gave Peter plenty of free time, and he used it to pursue other women. Cole says she and Peter did very little socialising together: ‘Peter was not interested in the theatre, or going to restaurants and anyway we were always too busy. We shared a love of cars and of racing and we went to the occasional party.’

Bob Watson and Christine Cole, Bathurst, October 1970.

Prototype XU1 Sports Sedan (rallycross car), Sandown, September 1970.

Prototype XU1 Sports Sedan (rallycross car), Sandown, September 1970.

Dice with Norm Beechey (Valiant Pacer), Sandown, September 1970.

Series production three-hour race, Sandown, September 1970.

Sandown, September 1970.

They were together for barely two years before Cole realised Peter was still wandering, so she ended it. 'There was no drama and no harsh words. I just ended it and we remained friends,' is her simple explanation.

Strangely, Firth had no problem with Peter's womanizing. He claims it made him a better driver: 'As far as women were concerned, at least in his early days, Peter had few scruples. I was not concerned that he had all these girls, even on the night before a race, as I believe it calmed him and made him a better driver. It was a physical stimulus and kept him on a high.' Firth also recounts one incident that shows how attune Peter was to a pretty face, even when he was racing: 'During one race he came in for a scheduled pit stop and the first thing he did was clearly describe some girl he had spied at the end of the straight and ask the mechanic to find her and "pick her up". He then made some requests about the car, went out, completed the race and won!'

From the middle of 1970 Peter became very busy as he was virtually racing three types of Toranas and was actively engaged in all their development work. Firth was using all types to develop different specifications, especially in the engine department. The latter meant the cars often ran illegal, or rather non-homologated parts, which caused trouble with the scrutineers who, on one occasion at Oran Park, excluded the car after Peter had won because of its exhaust manifold.

Pit stop with Ian Tate (left), Bathurst, October 1970.

‘Having a go’, Bathurst, October 1970.

In April 1970 Peter gave the HDT’s sports sedan Torana its first circuit race and first victory at Sandown. This was the same vehicle that he was racing at the rallycross events. Meanwhile, the Torana XU1 touring car recorded its first win in the hands of Bond at Warwick Farm.

The Esses, Bathurst, October 1970.

The one hundred and thirty lap Sandown endurance race, the traditional precursor to Bathurst, was next on the schedule, and it showed just how far behind the LC model XU1 Torana was to the GTHO Falcons. Alan Moffat finished one lap ahead of the second place Bond XU1. Peter finished fourth after engine trouble.

The 1970 Bathurst race was a disaster for the HDT. The pairings were interesting: once again Peter was to have an experienced competitor as his co-driver, Bob Morris, but Bond was given the job of running solo, a practice that was soon outlawed as the race was becoming too fast and too competitive for one driver. But since the Hardie–Ferodo race was run for both outright and class victories (classes based on price), the Toranas were running for both outright and class placings. However, even a class win was not possible.

Ford Winners Bib Stilwell (left) and Al Turner. Bathurst, October 1970.

Peter with Dieter Glemser, Macau, November 1970. (Pemberton Publishing)

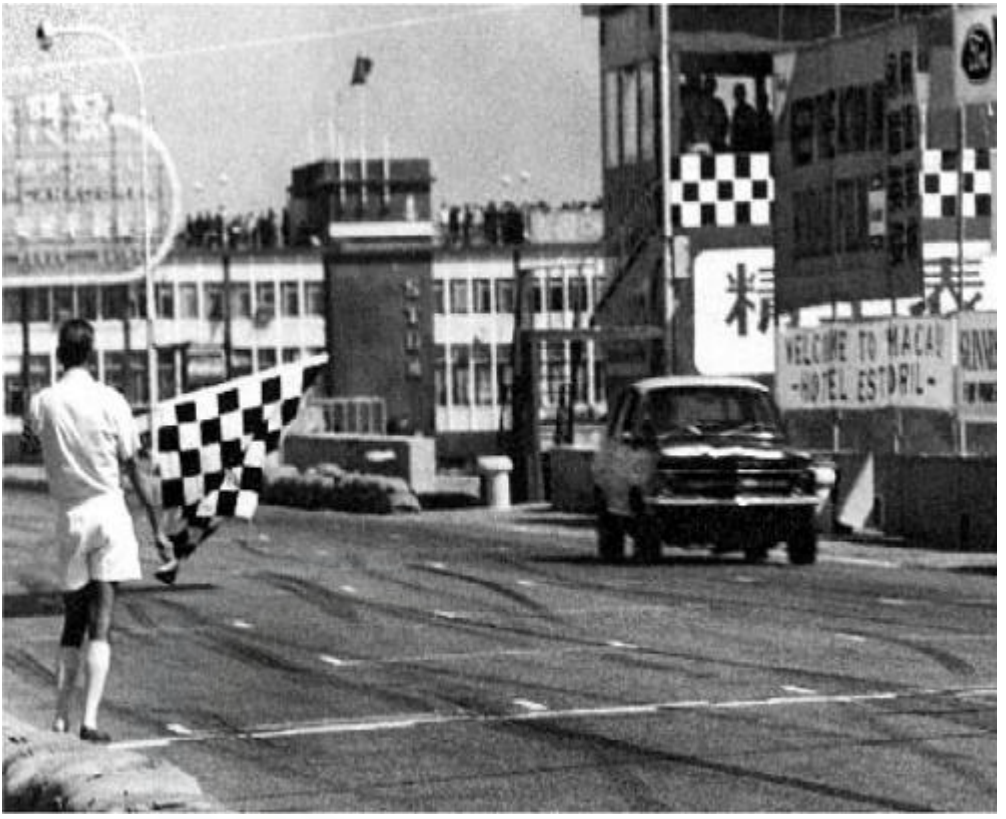
The race showed once again how much faster the GTHOs were compared to the LC model XU1s since the Falcons qualified in the first three places. Moffat on pole was nearly five seconds quicker than Bond, who qualified fourth. The Brock/Morris car was two places back with a time eight-tenths of a second slower than Bond. The race was its usual hectic free-for-all. Driving superbly and using the better handling characteristics of his car to his advantage, Bond out-braked Moffat at the end of Conrod on the first lap to take the lead, which he held for five laps. Brock was well back but leading 'Class C', with Christine Cole running sixth in class. On lap eleven Peter clipped a guard rail but continued without pause.

Bond pitted with carburetor problems and was sent out after repairs. A short time later he came in with engine problems and the mechanics diagnosed a dropped valve and it took 49 minutes to repair the engine. Even though he continued he was effectively out of contention. Bob Morris, who was driving the Brock car, suffered the same problem and although it only took 31 minutes to repair the engine, the result was the same and the car ultimately finished thirtieth.

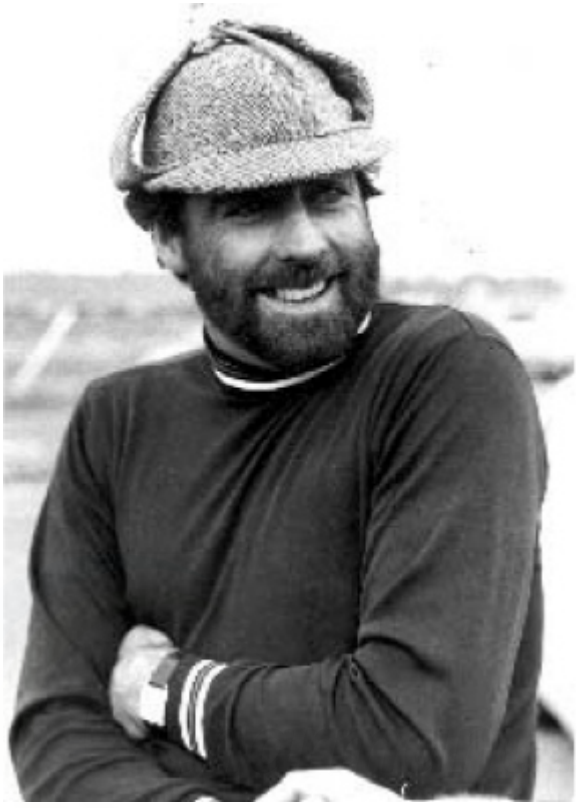
Pupil and mentor – Peter and Harry, Macau, November 1970. (Harry Firth)

After the previous year's results the 1970 Bathurst was not something Peter was happy about. The result was not good and he knew the XU1 Toranas needed a great deal of work to become race winners. On top of this was the knowledge that Colin Bond was still the faster driver. Scarcely a week later Firth loaned him to another team. He drove an XU1 with Digby Cooke at the Surfers Paradise 125-lap endurance race, finishing second to Alan Moffat's GTHO. Bond in an HDT car finished a lap behind in fifth, after suffering mechanical problems. The last race of the year did see him better Bond for the first time with two class wins in the Lakeside 1500 for Series Production cars. This helped both his self-belief and his persona.

Before the year was out Firth showed his faith in his young charge by entering him into his first overseas event – the famous Macau Grand Prix weekend, which featured a touring car race: 'I believed Peter would benefit from the experience so I loaned him to Teddy Yip's team "Theadore Racing". Pan Am flew one of our new XU1 Toranas to Macau and we felt confident we would do well as the car was well suited to the twisty street circuit, which was really public roads closed off for the event.'



Second place, Macau, November 1970. (Pemberton Publishing)



The ever-charming Peter – Sandown, 1970.

At Macau there was a special high-level reception held for all the drivers and team owners at a conference centre in one of the major hotels. There, Peter was confronted by dozens of eager and very beautiful Chinese models and hostesses who all wanted his autograph. At first he was a little nonplussed. How did they know about him?

'Peter asked me what was happening and I asked one of our guides, who pointed to the driver's biographies. It was written in Chinese, so of course we could not understand what it read. When asked what it said the guide explained how, as well as his racing exploits, it described Peter as "a great lover". He thought that was wonderful and I know he later decided to live up to his reputation,' laughs Firth. He also added another anecdote. 'One of the local officials was married to an absolutely stunning Thai woman and Peter asked me to engage the official in conversation so he could be free to chat her up. I duly did what he asked, but I am not sure of the outcome,' laughs Firth with a knowing smile.

The race went well. Peter hired a taxi and had the driver negotiate the circuit for him and then hired a car so he could drive several dozen exploratory laps before the roads were closed and it was turned into a circuit. Peter drove magnificently and finished a very competitive second to a Group Two Cologne Capri driven by German touring car ace Dieter Glemser. Years later in an interview Peter enthused over the race

and the result:

The competition was driving very highly modified cars and we just drove our XU1 touring car. It was fantastic. In the first practice session I was actually the fastest as my car was very well suited to the circuit as it was twisty and narrow. The other drivers just could not believe it. We finished second to this Cologne Capri, which was a lightweight with aluminium panels!

While 1970 had been a year of consolidation for Peter within the HDT, 1971 was a year of improved performance, close racing and increasingly better results.

'Grin for Terry', Winton, March 1971.

Peter and John Harvey, Calder, May 1971.

Calder Rallycross, June 1971.

‘XU1 with radiator scoops’, Calder Rallycross, June 1971.

‘The ultimate rallycross XU1’, Calder Rallycross, June 1971.

‘Whose the biggest kid?’, Calder Rallycross, June 1971.

However, there were some unsavoury incidents within the team that caused problems, first with the mechanics and then with Harry. The former was all Peter’s doing, while the latter also involved his father Geoff.

Both Tate and Firth say Peter was not very popular with the mechanics and this was causing problems within the team. Tate is much blunter, mainly because he saw things first-hand, something Firth did not: ‘As he became better known and was getting more races he started to voice his opinions and he complained a lot. When Bond was quicker he complained about his equipment and took it out on the mechanics. In this he was often egged on by his father, who constantly claimed Colin was getting better equipment.’

Tate says there was never any suggestion of favouritism. Except when different parts were being tried or tested on the cars, all the HDT drivers received the same equipment. That Firth sometimes utilised team tactics, which meant one or the other driver would win, was never in doubt. But blatant changes to a car to favour one driver never happened. While it is agreed ‘Goldie’ was a personal favourite of Firth’s, the wily

team manager also paid plenty of attention to Peter, who benefitted from his mentor's largesse on many occasions.

Friends and protagonists – Peter and Alan Moffat, Calder Rallycross, June 1971.

‘Contact’, Bob Jane’s 350 Monaro touches Pete’s car, Calder, August 1971.

‘Trying hard’, Calder, May 1971.

Bill Evans and Peter, Sandown, September 1971.

Alan Moffat, Sandown, September 1971.

‘The Comeback’, Calder, August 1971.

Sandown, September 1971.

Colin Bond, Warick Farm, February 1971.

Then Peter received his comeuppance and it had a salutary effect on his relationship with the mechanics. Tate explains:

Peter's temper was causing problems with the crew. One eventually had enough and threatened him, but Peter still complained, so the mechanic hit him on the left arm. The punch was so hard it caused a massive bruise and Peter was in a degree of pain; so much so, he had difficulty putting on his race suit. More importantly, it also hampered his ability to change gear and he struggled throughout the race. However, to his credit, he never blew the whistle on the mechanic and they made peace. For a long time Peter was careful how he approached the mechanics and this helped mend his relationship with them.

Another thing that irked the mechanics was Brock's propensity to leave the moment he had finished the race. This usually happened because he had lined up some girl he had met in the pits that day. Tate says Bond generally stayed behind and mixed with the crews and they loved him for it. The solution: 'Peter would quite often leave his race bag with his personal possessions and clothes lying around for the team to collect. One day the mechanics hid them and for several hours Peter thought he had lost his race suits and other valuable personal possessions. He learned his lesson,' laughs Tate.

The problems with Geoff Brock were potentially more serious because it meant Peter had to choose between Firth and his father. The issue surfaced over the team's English double-decker bus, which belonged to Peter Janson, a racing driver and businessman who had extremely close links with HDT. Janson was responsible for putting together much of the sponsorship gained by the team in the early years.

These included backers such as Levis (clothes), NGK (spark plugs), TAA (airline) and the major sponsor of the time, the cigarette company Marlboro. He worked closely with Peter Lewis-Williams, whom he regarded as the best organiser in the business. Janson always describes himself as 'a gentleman' who just happens to race cars and engages in business. He was, and is, one of motor sports' and Australia's greatest characters with his style of living. Since they both loved cars and lived a freewheeling lifestyle, he and Peter were natural allies and became firm and long-lasting friends.

The double-decker bus was reserved at the circuits as a 'spectator home' for sponsors and Holden executives who wished to join the team incognito. On several occasions Geoff and Ruth Brock, together with their friends, installed themselves in the bus uninvited and monopolised the best seats. Geoff was also very loud in his comments about Firth's alleged favouritism for Bond. Janson says, 'Firth did not like Geoff and regarded him as a country lout. He did not want him hanging around and ordered me to only allow Geoff and Ruth to sit at the back of the bus, and then only when they were invited.'

'Win from back of grid', Winton, March 1971.

Ian Tate says the issue of Geoff Brock came to a head during the 1971 Sandown Hang Ten endurance round: 'Harry found out Geoff had positioned himself at a different part of the track with a lap board and

was telling Peter his lap times without his [Firth's] knowledge. Harry was furious and immediately banned Peter's father from the team's pits from then on. After this incident things in the team quietened down and Janson took Peter under his wing.'

Those with the team at the time say Janson's influence on Peter was positive as the 'gentleman' was regarded by all who knew him as a man of good character. He was also a driver of the first order. Even though he was an amateur, his record at races such as Bathurst was astounding. He drove in twenty Bathursts between 1973 and 1992, finishing second twice and third once. All three podiums were with Larry Perkins as co-driver and in various Holdens with engines prepared by Ian Tate.

Peter spent much of his time at Janson's homes, first in the Federal Hotel and then at the famous penthouse at the top of the Windsor Hotel overlooking Victoria's state parliament. There Peter mingled with Janson's myriad of friends, from senior business executives to politicians, foreign princes and minor members of the English aristocracy. It taught him how to conduct himself with people he never had any dealings with. Janson best sums up his friend as, 'All his life Peter had simple tastes – sure, they may have gone a bit more up-market when he had money, but his main aim in the early days was to drive racing cars and sleep with women; in that order! However, he had a questioning mind and adapted quickly and, as he grew more confident, could handle himself at any level.'

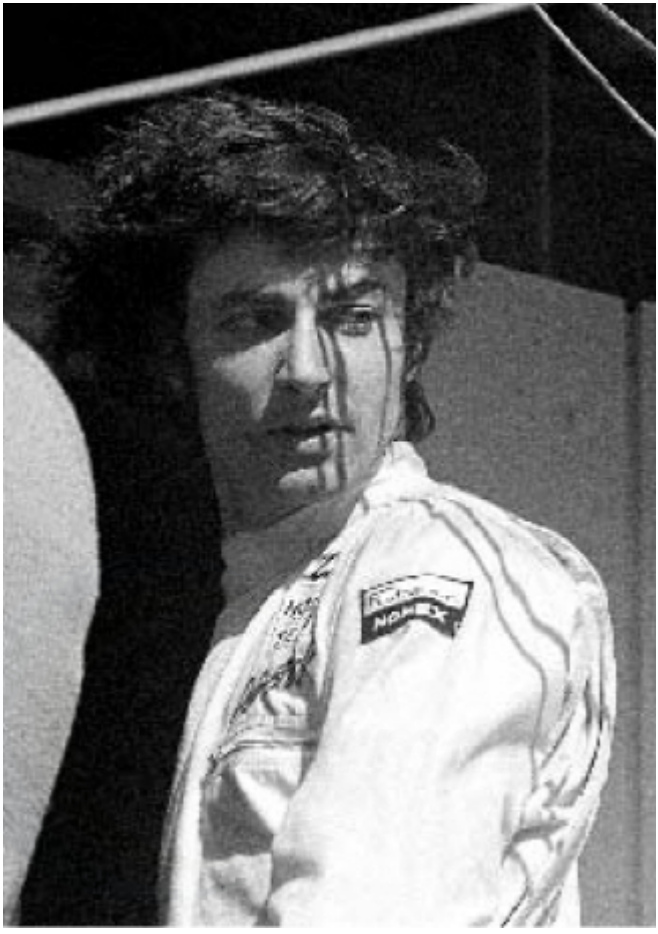
'Forest Elbow', Bathurst, October 1971.

'Hello Terry', Bathurst, October 1971.

At this time Peter's racing was going well; in fact, from strength to strength. With Firth's careful development program and Tate's engine and mechanical flair, the GTR XU1 LC model Toranas were certainly the cars to beat in the shorter races, especially the ones held on the twisty shorter tracks such as Hume Weir, Winton and Oran Park. On circuits with longer straights, though – Phillip Island, Sandown and Warwick Farm – they could not better the GTHOs. At the Easter meeting held at Bathurst, Peter only finished third (and first in class).

From the start of the year the HDT entered more than twenty manufacturers championship events, with Peter contesting about three-quarters of them. A good many he won after hard, close racing against Bob Jane's Monaro and the GTHOs of Moffat and Gibson. For many of the races Jane and Peter were separated by less than a metre and contact was a frequent occurrence. The crowds loved it and Peter's reputation grew. He had wins at Winton, Calder and included a 65-lap race at Hume Weir on 13 June.

His driving was becoming more consistent and in the shorter races his times were sometimes better than those of Colin Bond. In the longer 'manufacturers championship' events, though, Bond was still ever so slightly quicker. Peter was also becoming kinder to the machinery. Importantly, for Holden, the general public as well as motoring aficionados were beginning to recognise the growing rivalry between them and Ford. 'The HDT were gaining huge spectator support and it was seen as a David and Goliath battle – Big Ford GTs against the small Toranas – with Peter and Colin driving their heart out against the foreign interloper, Alan Moffat,' remembers Tate. 'It was also recognised (partly through the subterfuge of the dealer team) that we did not have the funding of the factory Ford team.'



Bathurst, October 1971.

The Sandown 250 endurance round in September was not good for Peter. His Torana was unplaced after suffering gear selection problems. The race was won by Bond, though he was lucky as his car suffered the same problems as Peter's but on the last lap. The team had replaced the Opel gearbox with a locally made four-speed unit, but poorly machined synchro dogs meant they kept slipping out of gear. There was also a severe vibration.

Bathurst was not the result the team would have hoped for, but it was better than the previous year. The Torana XU1s were placed in a different category for the event – 'Class D', mixed in with the Valiant Chargers. As usual, a class place was not what the HDT were after. They wanted an outright victory against the hated XY Ford Falcon GHTOs; the awesome and very famous Phase Three version. Tate says bluntly, 'We realised how much further we had to go. We were outgunned. Colin and Peter drove their hearts out, but even though we were reliable we were simply outpaced.'

Qualifying was satisfying for Peter on a personal level as he qualified eleventh, just over half a second quicker than Colin Bond and the quickest XU1. However, it was a hollow result as Moffat on pole was nearly eight seconds quicker. The first ten places were all made up of the Phase Three GTHOs plus two E38 Chargers.

The die-hard Holden fans hoped the more nimble and economical Toranas would outlast the Fords as in the previous year, but it was not to be. Compared with the previous year the race was a relatively tame affair with Moffat blasting off at the start and, by the top of the mountain, having a lead of 100 metres. Bond had managed to overtake Peter and was leading his class, but the Falcons were well away.

Depending on the pit stops the two HDT cars swapped the lead several times. Their lap times were virtually the same, although this depended on the state of the tyres and brakes as well as the amount of fuel carried. The result was mixed. The HDT cars won their class, with Bond first and Peter third. Their fastest times, though, were a mirror image – two minutes forty-seven seconds dead. In their heart-of-hearts the result was not welcomed. Moffat finished a lap ahead, with his quickest lap a full three seconds faster than that of the Toranas, and the Falcon GTHOs filled the first eight places.

‘David and Goliath’ – Peter, Phillip Island, October 1971.

Alan Moffat, Phillip Island, October 1971.

Three weeks later and a light appeared on the horizon. The next event was a 500-kilometre endurance race at Phillip Island. This time the GTHO of Alan Moffat was not able to run away and disappear into the distance. Even though the GTHO was considerably faster on the island’s long straights, the XU1’s better braking ability and maneuverability allowed Peter and Bond to close right up on Moffat, and lap after lap there was close racing. Eventually, Peter passed the Ford for the first time in a race, but lost the lead again a few laps later.

Not long after, the close racing caused the Falcon’s hard-pressed tyres to wilt and Peter again took the lead only to be forced into the pits several times for an oil top-up. A faulty rocker-cover breather was allowing some of the precious liquid to bleed away. Bond won the race with Peter coming third, while Moffat faded away to finish fifth. Christine Cole remembers Peter being over the moon because he had been

able to take on Moffat and actually pass him: ‘Peter was always a little arrogant about his ability and I believe rightly so, but now his confidence soared.’

Phillip Island, October 1971.

‘Even God can make mistakes’, Phillip Island, October 1971.

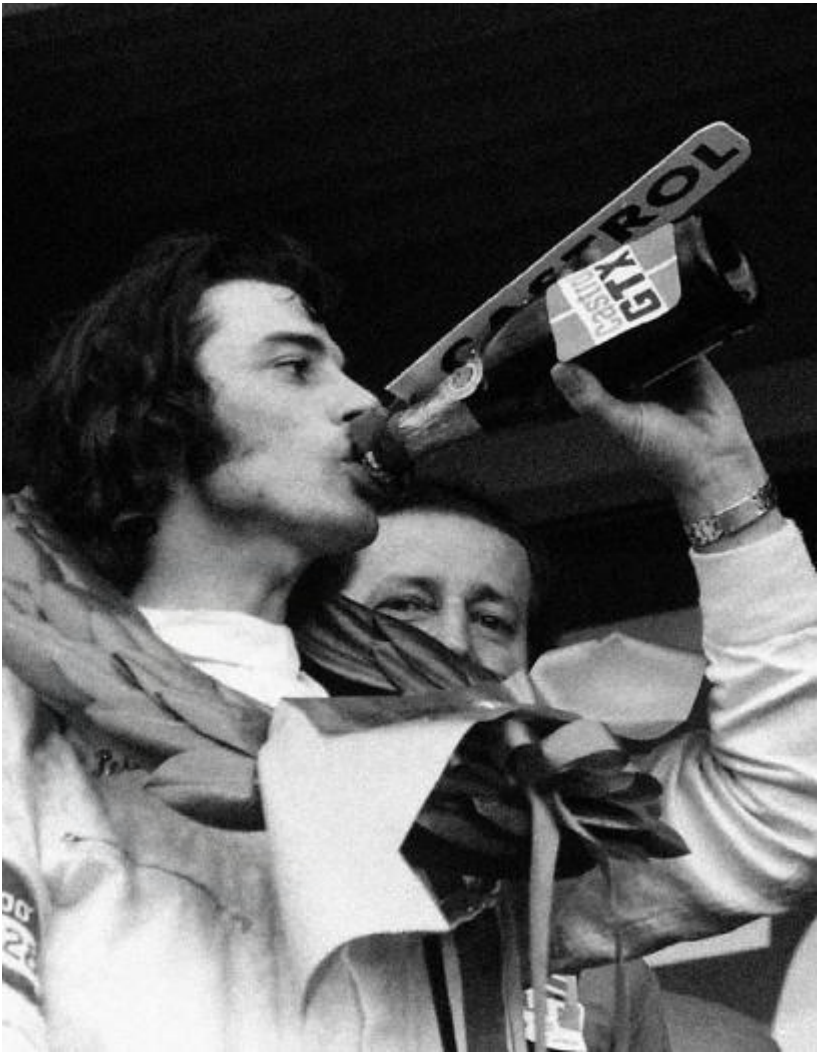
Brock and Forbes, Phillip Island, October 1971.

‘Chasing the Big Bad GTHO’, Phillip Island, October 1971.

Brock and two Valiants, Phillip Island, October 1971.

‘Still chasing my hero’ – Norm Beechey and Peter, Winton, March 1972.

Peter dices with Frank Porter, Calder, May 1972.



‘Glory Day’ - Peter, Bathurst, October 1972. (Autopix)

8

‘I’M GOING TO RACE *THAT ONE DAY’*

‘I’M GOING TO RACE
THAT ONE DAY’

By the beginning of 1972 Peter had vindicated Harry Firth’s faith in him and he was well-ensconced in the HDT. More importantly, Holden was about to provide him with a weapon with which he could better take on the big bad Falcons and his arch enemy Alan Moffat.

The new LJ model Torana XU1 was a little rocket ship containing everything the HDT had learned in the Torana’s development over the previous two years. It was now upgraded with a 202 cubic-inch motor instead of the 186, and this gave a useful increase in power from approximately 170 bhp at the flywheel to just over 190 bhp. While it was some way short of the GTHO’s V8 power, the Holden product was lighter and, consequently, the power-to-weight ratio was almost as good. It also stopped better, handled better and was kinder to its tyres. The stage was set for an interesting year.

The first race of the year was at Surfers Paradise, where the XU1s kept up easily with the Fords, especially when it rained. Although Bond blew an engine and Peter suffered a flat tyre, an XU1 driven by a young Dick Johnson won the race. Peter was still able to finish fourth.

Fast though the new cars were, they experienced a degree of teething problems and were not able to defeat the Falcons. After Surfers there were three indifferent races for the team. In the first, at Warwick Farm, Peter’s XU1 suffered tyre problems and, although he finished the race, he was unplaced. At Sandown he finished fifth, and at Adelaide third. For Peter, though, there was some consolation as in both cases Colin Bond was one place behind him.

Calder, May 1972.

Peter out front, Calder, August 1972.

New paint job LJ XU1, Calder, August 1972.

Sandown, September 1972.

On 12 March, Winton Raceway in central Victoria was the scene for a memorable race because Peter defeated his boyhood idol Norm Beechey, who had forsaken his Monaro and was racing a GTHO Falcon. At thirty laps, it was a relatively short race. For Beechey it was particularly difficult because the tight two-kilometre track meant the GTHO could not stretch its legs while the superior braking and handling of the Torana were a huge benefit to them. Nevertheless, it was a close contest and Peter was justifiably proud of his achievement.

There followed a brace of race meetings. At Calder and Adelaide International Raceway the longer straights were expected to benefit the Falcons. There were three short races at both circuits and Peter finished well up – two second places and a third at Calder, while at Adelaide he won three seconds, plus a lap record for the 'Improved Production Class'.

Around this time Firth split the racing and from then on Peter and Colin Bond rarely raced against each other in the shorter races. Bond, who was based in Sydney, contested all the New South Wales and

Queensland races, while Peter covered those in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. This meant that once again Peter undertook most of the development and test driving since the team was still based in Melbourne. Firth says he began to adopt the European options of setting up a car – making it stiffer with changes to springs and shock absorbers – and this was beginning to pay off.

Winton in early May showed how the shorter tight tracks favoured the Toranas, with Peter greeting the chequered flag in first place three times and taking a well-deserved lap record. A Calder meeting followed, with one podium and a fourth. While the HDT's racing was going from strength-to-strength, the team was still behind the Ford's in the promotional area. Firth was notoriously tight with money and while he was willing to spend money on the mechanical side he scarcely looked at the presentation of the cars. 'We were called "Harry's Gypsies" by the other teams,' remembers Tate. 'The team was also desperately short of such things as tow cars and trailers, which we usually had to borrow.'

Back in 1969 Holden had stepped in and forced Harry to have the Monaro's appearance improved after complaints from some of the dealers, and the same thing happened in 1972. In the middle of the year Holden's Director of Sales, John Bagshaw, approached Peter Lewis-Williams to say Holden's management and the dealers did not like the rather haphazard approach to signage and the overall look of the cars. (Lewis-Williams had left Holden late the previous year, moving to the advertising agency George Patterson to head the GMH account. Joe Felice took over his role with the HDT.) He says, with a smile, 'Together with the ad agency's Creative Director, Ian Blain, a new and very distinctive colour scheme was created and approved by Bagshaw. Harry had nothing to do with the decision and he did not pay for it either. By this time the team had plenty of sponsorship money, as well as the funds from Holden, and I controlled the bank account.'

The annual precursor to Bathurst, the Sandown Enduro, was not a good result for the team. Conversely, it gave some optimism. Brock was leading near the end of the race when his engine broke a piston. Bond also suffered the same problem. To the team's relief the cause was traced to faulty heat treatment of the pistons and not something inherently wrong with the engine. With rebuilt engines the team entered two cars at Oran Park two days later and the result was a one two for the HDT, with Bond winning the race.

‘Pressure’ – Peter chases John Goss, Sandown, September 1972.

‘Winners are grinners’, Bathurst, October 1972. (Autopix)

The focus then changed to the mountain. Ian Tate says unequivocally that the Peter Brock who faced The Great Race in 1972 was a completely different person to the one who had raced there the previous year: ‘He was a changed man. As well as being very focused, he became a great help around the works, turning up early in the morning and beginning to bond with the mechanics – the Peter Brock of old was gone.’ Tate’s admiration of his friend also increased when he witnessed an act of courage, and it was nothing to do with his race driving. He describes an incident he witnessed, something which he still much admires:

We were driving back from Adelaide International Raceway that year when we came upon an accident involving a Valiant sedan, which had caught fire. Everybody was just standing about helplessly. Peter was still wearing his Nomex racing suit. He calmly reached into his bag, extracted his racing gloves and put them on. Striding to the blazing car he wrenched open the damaged door and, reaching inside, dragged the driver out before returning to the passenger side and repeating the act. They were both farmers and he definitely saved their lives. At the next Calder meeting they came to the track with boxes of fresh produce to thank him.

Peter and Moffat, Bathurst, October 1972. (Autopix)

Even though the team was one of the best in the country, it still did not have a transporter and the cars were either put on a trailer or sometimes driven to a circuit. Bathurst was no different. Tate remembers the road trip to the mountain being nearly as exciting as the race itself. 'The engines of the car needed to be properly run in, although they had done some miles on the dyno. So, after a few hundred Ks we were able to stretch them a bit and we really pushed it,' laughs Tate as he remembers the incident-packed drive. 'We travelled north at a steady 100 miles per hour and then Peter insisted on practicing slipstreaming techniques. We hit 130 miles per hour and Peter would sit close on my tail and then pull out to pass, then drop back again and repeat the manoeuvre. He wanted to know what the Torana would do when it pulled out of the slip stream.'

‘Glory Day’ – Peter and Harry Firth, Bathurst, October 1972. (Autopix)

Peter then changed cars with Tate and drove Colin Bond’s car to ascertain whether the car was different in any way – it wasn’t. There was no open speed limit in those days – the police had to prove that the person was driving dangerously – but in their case it could be argued it was a moot point. Tate says, ‘At one stage I lost sight of him, so I continued, only to discover when I stopped for petrol that we had been travelling so close stones had smashed both his headlights and his windscreen, and he had slipstreamed me for a long time with no lights and no windscreen – and I never saw him; incredible!’

The team was very confident at the mountain. Both Bond and Peter were driving solo and even though the new Torana LJ XU1s were still slower than the GTHO Phase 3s, they were much closer in lap times. Tate says as well as having a significant increase in power, they were a better handling car. There was also a choice of tyres and diff ratios.

Qualifying went without a hitch; Peter was fifth and Bond seventh. Peter qualified only two point four seconds behind the pole sitting GTHO of Moffat, but four-tenths of a second quicker than Bond. Importantly, Peter’s time was set on full tanks.

Race day brought a big advantage for the nimble Toranas – it rained! As the cars lined up on the grid every team manager and driver was wondering whether they had chosen the correct tyres. Firth was seen wandering around the grid checking the tyres of the Fords and then reporting back to his drivers. To this day there is still argument among those who took part over the issue of tyre choice. Firth says Bond chose the tyres he was to race and Bond argues strongly that this was not the case. In this he is backed up by Ian Tate, who says tyres decided the race and the decision was made by Firth.

'We had a choice of tyres – Goodyear wets, or an intermediate hand-grooved Dunlop tyre,' remembers Bond. 'I asked for the wets, but when I lined up on the grid I saw my car was fitted with the intermediates. When I tackled Harry, he argued that the intermediates were the tyres to have since the rain would not last. Unfortunately, I never lasted long enough to prove this because the car was difficult to drive in the conditions.'

The race began in a wall of spray as the cars scrabbled for grip up the mountain. Bond's run was cut short. At Reid Park he understeered off the road, mounted the bank and rolled his car. Although it landed back on its wheels it was too badly damaged to continue.

On lap 28 Moffat also ran off the road and spun at Castrol Curve, finishing on the grass verge. The car was undamaged and he returned to the track but had lost just over half a minute, allowing Peter Brock to take the lead. Race commentators of the day say the remainder of the race was a game of cat-and-mouse between the lone HDT Torana and the big Fords, plus one of two of the quicker Valiant Chargers, especially the one driven by Leo Geoghegan. Then John French in his GTHO managed to pass Peter, relegating him to second place.

By lap 72 Peter was back in the lead, only to lose it again when he was passed by Moffat. Yet, Peter was not concerned. He knew the Ford driver was carrying two one-minute time penalties and he reasoned Moffat was pushing the car too hard for the conditions. That proved to be the case. A blown tyre necessitated a pit stop for Moffat and with the time penalties he was right out of contention.

A pit stop for the HDT car saw Peter return to the track with a handy lead, but he had incurred a penalty for firing up his engine in the pits before the petrol cap had been replaced. Luckily, this penalty had no effect on the result and he finished the race one lap in front of John French's GTHO. Not only had he won the race but he had buried his arch rival, Alan Moffat, and, in the words of Harry Firth, 'stuck it up the Fords.'

Prophetic Words

Eight years previously, in 1964, Peter and some of his friends went to Bathurst for the first time. They were spectators and any thought of driving a racing car there in the future was just a young man's crazy dream – something almost impossible. Peter's old friend Al Hamley remembers it well:

Peter saw the track for the first time and wanted to walk it. We all told him we were not interested, it was too far. So, he set off on his own. Two and a half hours later he returned, tired and a little footsore. He had not only walked the course he had examined every corner, every dip and every nuance of the place. All he said in a very determined way was:

'I'm going to race that one day!'

PETER BROCK – RACE HISTORY 1967–1972

Circuit	Date	Place	Comments	Car
Winton	26-Nov-1967	DNF	Retired upon debut – fuel feed problems	A30
Hume Weir	26-Dec-1967	Unplaced	First race finish	A30
Phillip Island	1-Jan-1968		There was a meeting w PB (cars & bikes)	A30
Calder	21-Jan-1968	2nd	Sports car race	A30
Phillip Island	28-Jan-1968	3rd	No dam, bonnet raised	A30
Winton	10-Mar-1968			A30
Templestowe	17-Mar-1968		PB wins class	A30
Hume Weir	14-Apr-1968	4th		A30
Phillip Island	15-Apr-1968		Easter Monday – no PB	A30-RB
Sandown Park	28-Apr-1968			A30-RB
Winton	26-May-1968	2nd	Had spin	A30
Hume Weir	9-Jun-1968	2nd		A30
Lakeland	30-Jun-1968	1st in class	Hill climb event	A30
Templestowe	14-Jul-1968		82nd THC	A30
Hume Weir	1-Sep-1968	1st	Handicap event, won from rear of the grid, set fastest lap	A30
Oran Park	22-Sep-1968	5th, 5th & 4th	First interstate event	A30
Lakeland	29-Sep-1968		3rd in class	A30
Templestowe	17-Nov-1968	1st	84th THC Won 3-litre Sports car National Championship class	A30
Winton	1-Dec-1968	1st	First Scatch Race win	A30
Hume Weir	26-Dec-1968	1st	Fastest lap	A30
Phillip Island	2-Jan-1969	1st & 2nd	Sports car race	A30
Phillip Island	26-Jan-1969	1st		A30
Sandown	16-Feb-1969	1st	Handicap event	A30
Winton	9-Mar-1969	2nd		A30
Winton	9-Mar-1969		HR Holdens only race	HR
Templestowe	16-Mar-1969	1st	Hill climb, 1st in class	A30
Phillip Island	Easter-6-Apr-1969	1st		A30
Lakeland	13-Apr-1969		PB	A30
Templestowe	11-May-1969		PB	A30
Winton	18-May-1969	1st	First race in new sports sedan class	A30
Lakeland	1-Jun-1969		PB	A30
Hume Weir	15-Jun-1969	1st	First Australian Sports sedan Trophy meeting (Firestone Racing Tyres first time)	A30
Oran Park	29-Jun-1969	1st & DNF	Beat Lyne Brown in 1st race. Stripped clutch lining against Geoghan Mustang	A30
Oran Park	10-Aug-1969	3rd		AA0-RB
Templestowe Invitation Club Event	24-Aug-1969		Heather's A30 & Holden Van	H A30 & EJ Van
Sandown	14-Sep-1969	2nd	Phillip B first race	A30
Oran Park	21-Sep-1969	1st & 2nd	First in Sports sedan sprint, second in combined Tourers	A30
Hume Weir	28-Sep-1969	1st		A30
Bathurst	5-Oct-1969	3rd		Monaro
Sandown Park	09-Nov-1969		Lost 2nd gear – failed to start Toby Lee	A30
Templestowe	16-Nov-1969			A30
Oran Park	22-Nov-1969		Night meeting – Bell Housing Failure in Prac so no start	A30
Winton	07-Dec-1969	2nd	A30's 2nd birthday – broke diff, new paint	A30
Templestowe	14-Dec-1969			A30
Hume Weir	26-Dec-1969	1st & 1st		A30

Circuit	Date	Place	Comments	Car
Oran Park	3-Jan-1970	1st	Night meeting – New lap record – PB Last A30 race	A30
Calder RC	15-Feb-1970		Brock not named - No Pics?	Torana GTR
Oran Park		DNF	Retired after accident	Monaro
Templestowe	01-Mar-1970			A30
Winton	8-Mar-1970			A30
Phillip Island	15-Mar-1970			LC-XU1
Calder	21-Mar-1970	3rd & 2nd	Jane won	LC-XU1
Oran Park	28-Mar-1970	3rd & 2nd	Goss won	LC-XU1
Oran Park	12-Apr-1970			XUI
Sandown Park	19-Apr-1970			GTR SS
Templestowe	3-May-1970			
Calder RC	14-May-1970		Rallycross	GTR
Oran Park	16-May-1970	2nd	Lost wheel while in front	LC-XU1
Calder	23-May-1970	1st & 7th		LC-XU1
Hume Weir	13-Jun-1970	1st	65 lap race	LCXU1
Calder RC	28-Jun-1970		Moffat–Cortina#9 – Van#40LN-	GTR
Calder RC	28-Jul-1970			GTR
Calder	15-Aug-1970	1st & 1st	Beat Jane	LC-XU1
Calder RC	31-Aug-1970	4th		LC-XU1
Sandown	13-Sep-1970	4th		LC-XU1
Calder	17-Oct-1970	2nd & 3rd		LC-XU1
Bathurst	30-Oct-1970	30th	With Bob Morris, dropped valve	LC-XU1
Surfers	1-Nov-1970	2nd	Fair Deal car with Digby Cooke	LC-XU1
Lakeside	1-Nov-1970	1st & 1st	Ahead of Colin Bond	LC-XU1
Macau GP	21-Nov-1970	2nd	20 lap race won by Dieter Glemser – 1st overseas & international race	LC-XU1
Lakeside	29-Nov-1970	1st & 3rd	Ahead of Colin Bond	LC-XU1
Calder	17-Jan-1971	1st & 2nd	Behind Jane Monaro	LC-XU1
Oran Park	Feb-1971	Excluded	After winning	LC-XU1
Surfers	28-Feb-1971	DNF	Left circuit after 40 laps	LC-XU1
Winton	Mar-1971	1st	From back of grid	LC-XU1
Bathurst	12-Apr-1971	3rd	1st in class	LC-XU1
Warwick Farm	2-May-1971	2nd		LC-XU1
Sandown Park	1-Sep-1971	Unplaced	Gear selection problem	LC-XU1
Bathurst	1-Oct-1971	3rd in class		LC-XU1
Phillip Island	24-Oct-1971	3rd	500K	LC-XU1
Surfers	7-Nov-1971	3rd		LC-XU1
Surfers	6-Feb-1972	4th	Flat tyre	XU1
Warwick Farm	13-Feb-1972	Unplaced	Tyre trouble	LJ-XU1
Sandown Park	20-Feb-1972	5th	Bond 6th	LJ-XU1
Adelaide	27-Feb-1972	3rd	Bond 4th	LJ-XU1
Winton	12-Mar-1972	1st	30 laps (Diced w Beechey GTHO)	LJ-XU1
Calder	19-Mar-1972	2nd, 2nd & 3rd		LJ-XU1
Adelaide	9-Apr-1972	2nd, 2nd & 2nd	Improved Touring races took SP record	LJ-XU1
Winton	7-May-1972	1st, 1st, & 1st	Lap record	LJ-XU1
Calder	14-May-1972	4th & 2nd		LJ-XU1
Calder	13-Aug-1972	1st & 1st	New paint job	LJ-XU1
Sandown Park	10-Sep-1972	DNF	Piston failure while second	LJ-XU1
Bathurst	1-Oct-1972	1st	Fastest lap	LJ-XU1
Calder	15-Oct-1972	3rd	Took record	LJ-XU1
Phillip Island	22-Oct-1972	2nd	Starter failed	LJ-XU1
Surfers	26-Nov-1972	2nd		LJ-XU1
Calder	3-Dec-1972	1st		LJ-XU1


Levi's