

Jim Bowen's Racing Minor, Pt 1

I remember Bob Hudson's 1975 hit, *The Newcastle Song*, had the line: "Don't you ever let a chance go by". So when Jim Bowen rang, offering me the chance to drive his newest creation on the Pheasant Wood Circuit, there was no way I was letting this chance go.

So, on Friday September 4, at 9.00am on a perfect spring morning, I had the first opportunity in my life to mercilessly flog someone else's car, set up for a race track, on a race track.

The Pheasant Wood Circuit is a relatively newly-updated track, located off Prairie Oak Road, just south of Marulan. To be honest, I didn't even know it existed. I had in my mind we were going to Wakefield Park.



There were just four of us: Gary Evans trailered the car to the venue and Jim's trusty offsider, Jai Sommers, was there too. All I wanted was to not embarrass myself; I had nightmares of understeering the car off the track and into a concrete barrier.

"It was on a box trailer on the way to the tip" admitted Jim. "Ray Selby found it at the end of 2018; it was a red Morrie that had sat under a tree for years. The owner from Hill Top was getting rid of it. The car was just a shell, it had no doors, was on its last journey."



The build took about 18 months and today was just its second outing. It had been fired up for the first time in anger on June 18, just after everything started being opened up after the pandemic.

Low Lights are of course Jim Bowen's Morrie of choice; this is his 4th one. "I think this car is my favourite car out of the lot" said Jim. "I reckon it's more fun than the green one." After driving it, oooh, it was hard not to like it. Speaking of driving it...

Gary was the first to have a go. "It's a 1400cc Datsun engine with a bit of a cam" said Jim. The car started easily and idled quite smoothly, certainly not the lumpiness I had expected. Gary eased the car towards the track, the rest of us walked close behind.



Jai was all smiles all day - and why not, it wasn't his car!

Not only did the car sound good, it looked good, and it looked fast. "Gary, he's the Peter Brock of the group" quipped Jim. Seeing the ease with which Gary handled the car on the track, I wasn't going to disagree. Gary later said "I've been racing for eight years. This isn't the fastest car but it's one of the best around the bends; it corners brilliantly. Ray Selby set it up." Ray Selby, eh? I've heard he knows a thing or two about suspension.

There's not enough ooo's in smooth to describe Gary driving. It wasn't long, though, before he was back in the pits to let Jai Sommers loose. In a word, Jai is fast - this guy can pedal.

Hard accelerating, late braking, clean through the corners, that was Jai's method of driving. Did I mention the f word? Fast.

He easily kept dedicated race cars behind him throughout the twisty bits.

We were able to walk part way around the track to get different views of Jai's driving; it looked sensational from all angles. When Jai pulled in, I expected Jim to have his drive. "You're next, Owen." "Huh? Just give me a minute or two, I need to go to the toilet."

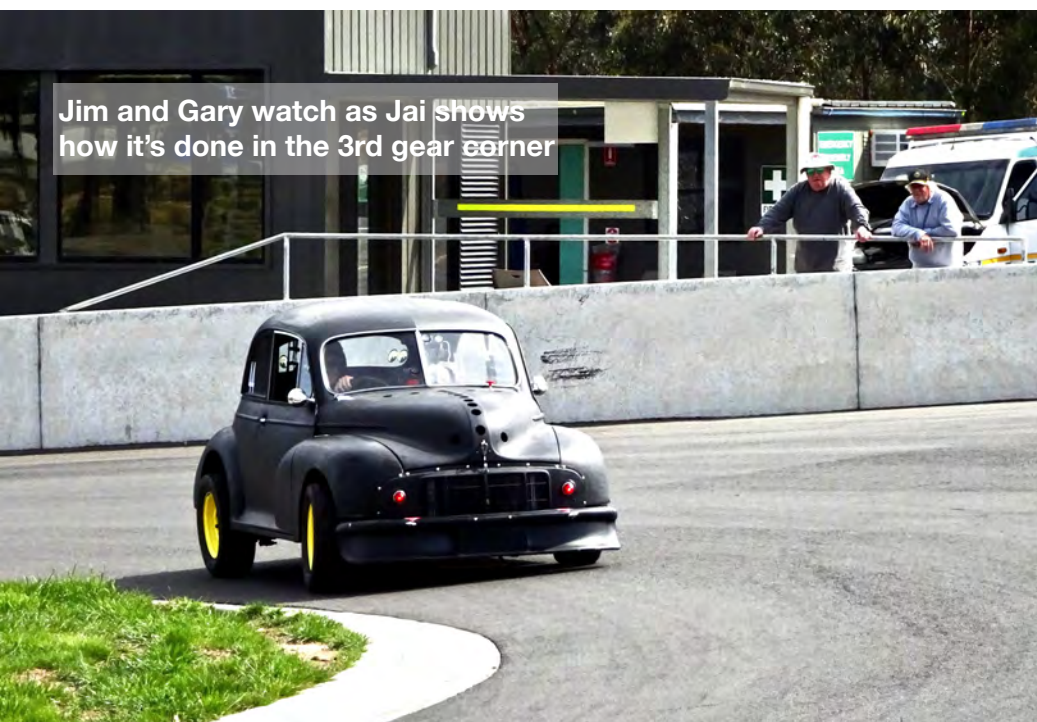


No coronavirus here - the sticky tyres picked up almost everything

Gee, so many instructions, I'm not going to remember all this. I needed all the help I could get. Seat - check. Harness - check. Helmet - squeezed on. Driver's window grill - check. Where's the switch? Oh, *that* huge ignition button? Jim pointed out that I probably wouldn't have time to

look at the tach (he was right), so when the redline red light flashes, time to change up. No worries!

The clutch was surprisingly light and the gear change just a delightful snick-snick; fast changes were mandatory. But that was in the future. My butt cheeks were clenched. I drove it like I was a learner (well, I was), changing gears at 4000rpm. Heck, I didn't want to break the thing. It took more than a few laps for the confidence to set in.



Jim and Gary watch as Jai shows how it's done in the 3rd gear corner

Haha, this is fantastic! The car stayed flat through the corners, acceleration was brilliant, changing gears was a delight, and I was flying around the track. And the noise! Wow, dreams do come true. Too much fun, too little time. Time to let Jim have a go.

Thinking I must have looked pretty quick, the confidence I had in my ability came crashing down. "Owen, that corner at the end of the straight, it's a 3rd gear corner, not 2nd gear. You have to trust your tyres more" advised Jai. So what I thought was quick was actually slow and probably painful to watch.



Jim at the end of the main straight, watched by Jai and Gary



Jim shows his form

Jim was up next. Now here was a guy who really enjoys his driving, and his cars. Passionate is the word that springs to mind. If this was my car, I'd be driving for much longer stints. Not so Jim; 20 or so laps and he was pulling in. Maybe because it was lunch time?

Lunch, time to fire off some questions for the magazine story. "Can I ask a personal question, Jim?" "Sure, but don't expect an answer." "How much did it all cost?" I received an answer but it was a non-answer. "The car cost me nothing. The rest of it, that has to remain a secret in case someone who doesn't need to know reads this story." Then he added "The exhaust pipe alone cost \$1000."

Under the bonnet looked impressive,

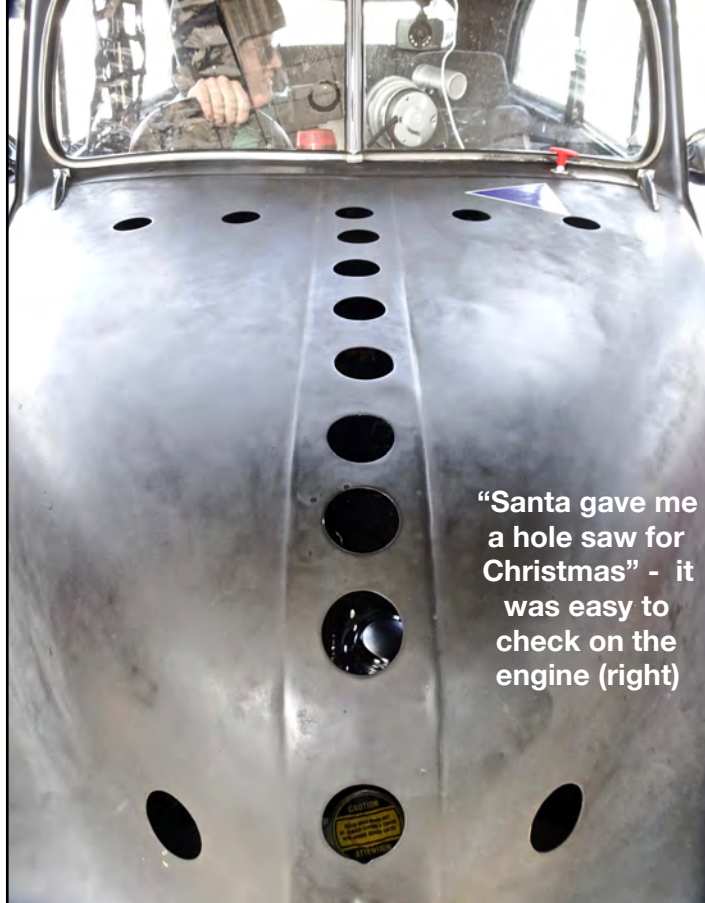
but why so many holes in the bonnet? "Santa gave me a hole saw for Christmas, that's why there's so many holes in it" answered Jim, his sense of humour getting in the way of the straight answers I was desiring.

After lunch, Gary had a good session, followed by The Flash Jai. Then my second go. Jai reminded me, "Owen, trust your tyres" and Jim added "Owen, listen to Jai." Well, I thought, time to see what the tyres can do.

A couple of laps to get my bearings, try to remember the corners, then let her rip. OMG !!! This thing really does go! And those tyres, they're made of glue! Woohoo! The steering started to load up in the corners but the fight was well worth the



The nerve centre. Huge tacho was difficult to watch, but the flashing red light attached helped. The other red light was for oil pressure



effort. I even managed to stay away from the concrete barriers. And the 3rd gear corner really was. Honestly, I am surprised the government doesn't tax fun like this, they'd make a fortune. Each lap I tried just a little harder, pushed just a little further, cornered a little quicker, until a combination of fear and mortality flashed in front of my eyes. Oh, and the dread of bending Jim's car.

And fear wasn't the only thing flashing. If the tacho didn't have that warning flash at six grand, the pistons would have well and truly launched themselves through the block, or through the bonnet, or through my butt. Yep, definitely no time to

look at the tacho. For someone who has never done this before, the word 'exhilarating' barely scratches the surface.

"This is the most fun I have even had sitting down!" I exclaimed as I rolled into the pits. "How were my lap times?" Jim, in his most gentlemanly, polite way, answered "Yeah, they were quicker than before." Quicker? Are you kidding? Is that all you can say? If that car had wings... The brutal honesty was evident: "Quicker than before" was code for "Quicker than your first attempt" and "You're probably the 4th fastest here."

So herein lies a lesson, or two, for us all: we're probably not as good as we think we are. And, if Jim Bowen rings, answer it. Honestly, you'll never regret picking up that phone - it's the best fun you'll have sitting down. Don't you ever let a chance go by.



Look for Part 2 of this story in the November-December issue of *Minor Torque*: [The Faces Behind The Machine.](#)



Owen Sinden

And in the end...



This young man has talent. Jai Sommers pedalled Jim's car really hard - and very, very well. Up against a full-blown race car, Jai easily kept the other guy at bay in the twisty bits.

