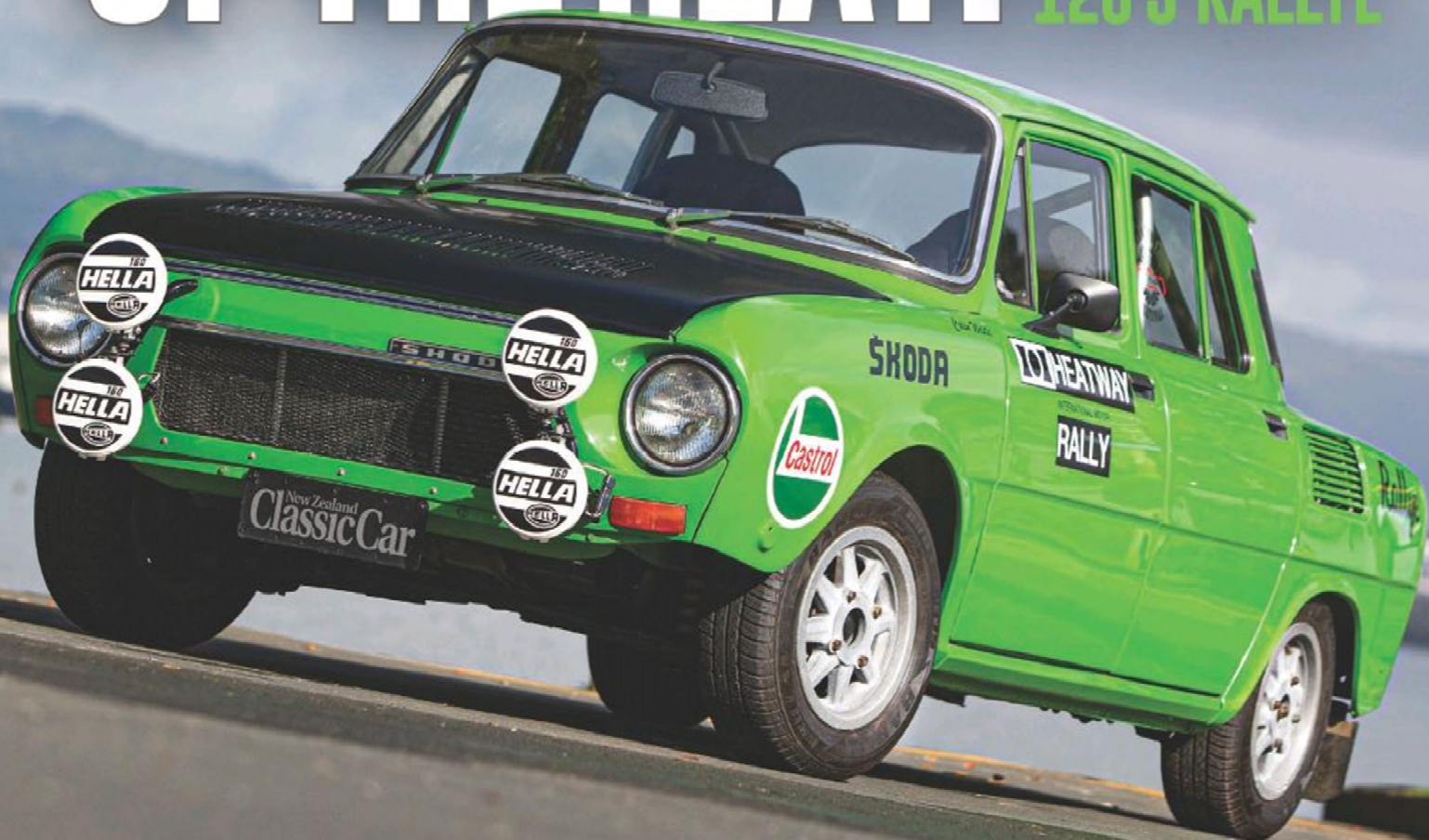


KIWI PRODUCTION CARS — TALES OF TWO CARS THAT NEARLY MADE IT

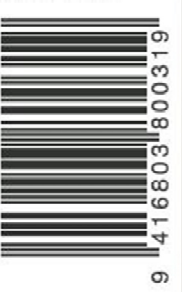
# New Zealand Classic Car

## SKODA TURNS UP THE HEAT!

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FIAT COUPÉS  
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PLYMOUTH  
SUBURBAN  
NEW LIFE FOR  
OLD HEARSE

TURNING THE TABLES ON MOTORMAN DONN ANDERSON — WE ASK THE QUESTIONS



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# FEATURE

1959 Plymouth Suburban station wagon



# ALL IN GOOD TIME

TAKING UP THE CHALLENGE

Words and photos: Quinton Taylor

**G**raham Baird is one of those fortunate individuals who, despite the enormity of the challenge, can sum up the potential in a rusty project car and visualize it through to a stunning conclusion.

In this case, his metal-crafting skills have worked wonders with his latest creation, a 1959 Plymouth Suburban station wagon.

The body-panel technician from Gore has revived a very rusty piece of Americana and added a few personal touches. With the help of some equally skilled local mates, he has created something with the X-factor needed to keep on winning show awards. Restoring the chrome and stainless-steel trim has helped return the Plymouth to its pristine condition. It has provided the finishing touch for the number of hours put into getting the bodywork just right.

In the little over three years since he finished the project, which he began some 15 years ago, Graham has enjoyed cruising to shows all over the South Island, usually with a group of mates on board.

"It's done over 5000 miles [8000km] of trouble-free running since its first outing to the Great USA Day in Dunedin. I get to every show I can," he says.

That event scored him the first of a long line of accolades: a Top 10 car award.

The distinctive metallic green colour is quite a head-turner, somewhat different from the vehicle Graham rescued from the Christie family in Gore some 17 years ago.

"It was pretty dilapidated and had been sitting rusting away in Wyndham for some years after Jack and Betty Geary had used it for their building business. Before that, it had been a hearse," he explains.

## First life

It was built as a right-hand-drive vehicle to Plymouth factory order in 1959 in Detroit, US, with a dashboard made in Canada. The Plymouth arrived in Auckland to serve as a hearse for Shirley's Funeral Directors, then, in January 1963, it was sold to the newly established funeral company of GM Pellow Ltd in Hamilton.

Pellow's assistant manager, Mike McKeown, was able to provide some old laminated photos and information about the company, which showed that the Plymouth joined the fleet from Shirley's for £1850 (\$3700).

Next, builder Jack Geary from Wyndham in Southland bought the Plymouth from a Nelson funeral home in 1973. As well as being local builders, the Gearys were contractors to Invercargill undertakers Macdonald & Weston. The Plymouth

hearse enabled the Gearys to replace a 1929 Dodge hearse, which was then turned into a utility vehicle. Jack has passed on, but his wife, Betty, now in her 90s, remembers well the long trip to Nelson to pick up the Plymouth in their Humber Super Snipe accompanied by her son, John.

"We followed Jack home. I didn't drive the Plymouth much at all. I didn't like that push-button transmission on the dashboard; I just couldn't get used to it," Betty says.

The Plymouth eventually became a builder's hack in Gore, which was where Graham acquired the vehicle and started on its 17-year restoration, deciding to add some subtle modern touches along the way.

"It was pretty bad everywhere," he recalls. "There was rust in the roof and all through the rear guards. The doors were bad too. I had to buy replacement doors from the States. It really was a labour of love."

Tinted glass was sourced from the US. The Plymouth's old side-valve six was replaced with a Chrysler Poly 313-cubic-inch (ci) V8 motor rebuilt by Autoworx Gore's

Chris Gillan. Chris also tended to the wiring. The original two-speed PowerFlite automatic transmission was sent to Auckland to be rebuilt. A friend, Gore panel beater Michael Hood, came to the rescue with a replacement back end in the form of a Ford nine-inch differential with a 2.75:1 ratio out of his old tow truck.

"It makes a very sedate cruiser with that gearing; it's nice to drive, with about 20 miles per gallon [14.1 litres/100km] easily achievable on a run. Mike also made the entire exhaust system for the 313 motor," Graham mentions.

In the interests of safety, the original Chrysler front drum brakes were replaced with Ford Falcon disc brakes, and all the added features were checked off by Gore vehicle compliance certifier Peter Watson.

Graham toyed with various ideas that he wanted to incorporate and how he was going to restore the Plymouth.

"I have to thank my wife Ann and two boys Campbell and Harry for their patience," he says. "Family life takes over — you know,

the usual day-to-day stuff, and there was only a limited amount of time and money to spend on the Plymouth. The most difficult part, made even harder for me, I guess, was that I never had a set plan. I had a number of different ideas for the exhaust and body mods, front-guard extensions, that sort of thing. The ideas kept coming to me."

The result can be seen in the subtle extensions to the front leading edges of the mudguards and tiny air vents in the bonnet edges, as well as changes such as the side exhausts exiting in the lower rear mudguards.

"It was pretty rusty in those areas. On one side was a door panel for the spare tyre and on the other side was the fuel tank, so that all had to be replaced and that's what I ended up with," says Graham.

The end result is a striking change that works and looks the part without being too customized.

The interior has been fitted with Chrysler limousine six-way electric front seats covered in grey upholstery with green piping, completed by Arrow Upholstery's Hemi Hikawai in

It was built as a right-hand-drive vehicle to Plymouth factory order in 1959 in Detroit, US, with a dashboard made in Canada.





## THE SUBURBAN

In 1949, Plymouth dropped a surprise on the US motor industry when it introduced the first all-steel station wagon, the Suburban. Featuring a two-door body plus tailgate and the capacity to seat six people, it became a popular wagon among commercial operators. It replaced the pre-1949 woodies, which had been expensive to make.

The model continued until 1955 and was powered by a flathead (side-valve) six of 218ci. The L-head motor produced 97bhp (72.3kW) at 3,800rpm. The PowerFlite automatic transmission was introduced in 1954, and the new 1955 models introduced a range of three V8 engines, including an upgraded L-head six-cylinder engine. Plymouth stylist Virgil Exner introduced a new range of bodies in 1957, and the 1958 models were similar in many respects, with the old L-head engine still available but about to be replaced. The Suburban model was discontinued in 1962 and was then offered as part of the Plymouth Fury range until 1978.



## POLY ENGINE

Chrysler's Poly engine was a small block lightweight-design V8 motor of 5.1 litres (313ci) with a polyspherical (hence 'Poly') combustion chamber in the cylinder head. It was used exclusively in Plymouth vehicles until 1958. Similar in the block to the legendary Hemi engines, it utilized single-row valve rocker shafts instead of the Hemi's two, and there were a number of other detail changes. The Poly motor was produced primarily for the Canadian, English, and Australian export markets. It was also the engine used in the low-volume British Bristol 407 and 408 models. The engine was used in Australian Chrysler Royal models, a popular patrol car for the South Australian Police fitted with a 313ci version of the V8 engine. Produced from 1956 until 1967, it was replaced by the improved and further-lightened wedge-combustion-chamber LA engine. It is not related to Chrysler's famous Hemi series engines.



Happy winner Graham Baird with more silverware — this time at the Otautau Car Show

Hundreds of hours of work went into the stunningly straight bodywork before it received its Envy Green mica metallic colour scheme from local painter Thomas Morris

Invercargill. The front passenger seat has been widened slightly for more comfort.

Hundreds of hours of work went into the stunningly straight bodywork before it received its Envy Green mica metallic colour scheme from local painter Thomas Morris. Setting off the colour is a set of chrome Boyds by Cragar wheels, with 15x8-inch front and 15x10-inch rear tyres complementing the stunning finish.

“The colour choice was not an easy one, with many colours considered,” Graham reveals.

The distinctive rear end and tailgate mural, proclaiming the Plymouth ‘The Ratcatcher’, was added by Invercargill artist Robbie Miller. It is a subtle dig at rat rods, which are not at the top of Graham’s list of popular car modifications.

This is a big wagon at 5.6m, and it seats six with ease. The audio speakers in the rear look a little lost in the space.

“There’s more than 10 feet [3m] in the back with the rear seats folded down. It drives very nicely and sits nicely on the road. So far, the longest trip has been to the Timaru [Caroline Bay] Beach Hop. We will all be going back to that again next year,” says Graham.

## 1959 PLYMOUTH SUBURBAN STATION WAGON

<b>ENGINE</b>	L-head in-line six-cylinder (Poly V8 engine as featured)
<b>CAPACITY</b>	196ci (3213.5cc) (313ci [5129cc] as featured)
<b>BORE/STROKE</b>	92.1mm/121mm (99mm/84.1mm as featured)
<b>FUEL</b>	Carter carburettor
<b>SUSPENSION, F/R</b>	Six leaf springs (wagon) and solid axle/combined torsion bars and coil springs
<b>STEERING</b>	Worm-and-ball
<b>BRAKES, F/R</b>	Drum/Drum
<b>DIMENSIONS:</b>	
<b>LENGTH</b>	213 inches (5357mm)
<b>WIDTH</b>	78.2 inches (1986mm)
<b>WHEELBASE</b>	122 inches (3100mm)
<b>WEIGHT</b>	3765 pounds (1708kg)
<b>PERFORMANCE:</b>	
<b>POWER</b>	117bhp (87kW) at 3800rpm (220bhp [162kW] as featured)
<b>TORQUE</b>	205ft-lb (278Nm) at 1200rpm
<b>TOP SPEED</b>	91mph (146kph)
<b>PRICE (NEW)</b>	US\$2865

## Reaping the rewards

In August 2017, Betty Geary celebrated her 90th birthday and, along with a turnout of her family, some arriving from up north and Australia, she received an additional surprise when Graham turned up at the celebrations with the Plymouth, now completely restored.

“I just love the colour and what Graham

has done to it. It looked lovely,” Betty says. This time accompanied by her grandchildren, she enjoyed her ride in the Plymouth, as well as being reunited with a car she remembered as being very untidy and needing a lot of work when she last saw it.

Graham’s labour of love has been a long time coming together, but the result is outstanding and is something that he is very proud of: “I’m very pleased with the result. I think it’s come out just as I wanted it — even better — and, with the awards it has received from car shows, it’s good to see how much other people like it.”

The list of those awards is a long one, and growing. Besides its Top 10 award from its first outing, it rated another Top 10 award at Riverton, People’s Choice at Mataura in 2017 and the Wyndham Races, and Judges’ Choice, a runner up, and People’s Choice awards at the Otautau Car Show this year. The latest and probably one of Graham’s favourites is the impressive Public Choice Trophy that he won at this year’s Caroline Bay Rock and Hop in March.

“I just enjoy driving it, and seeing everyone else enjoying and appreciating it,” Graham tells us. ■