

# Bob did his best time home in a buggered 203

Everyone knows about the 203's Redex win. But what led to its racing glories in the '50s, knocking off hot Holdens in major events? We found the man who began it all ...

By Peter Wilson

When Bob Holden was given a clapped-out Peugeot 203 to get him home from Adelaide to Melbourne in 1950, he discovered the car had great possibilities.

He clocked his best time for the trip in the funny little French car.

His discovery led to his work on the Peugeot 203 – and the popularising of modifying and racing Peugeots in the post-war era.

Bob lived in Melbourne then and made the trip to Adelaide regularly – and in some pretty good cars.

He would ferry the cars for two car dealer brothers who swapped stock between their yards in Melbourne and Adelaide to meet different customer needs.

One trip he took a car to Adelaide and there wasn't anything for the return trip.

The Adelaide brother didn't want to subject Bob to a slow bus ride home so he offered him a battered early Peugeot 203 that had been retired after clocking up over 200,000 miles (320,000km) on the Alice Springs to Kapunda mail run.

He told Bob: "It's worth nothing. Keep it."

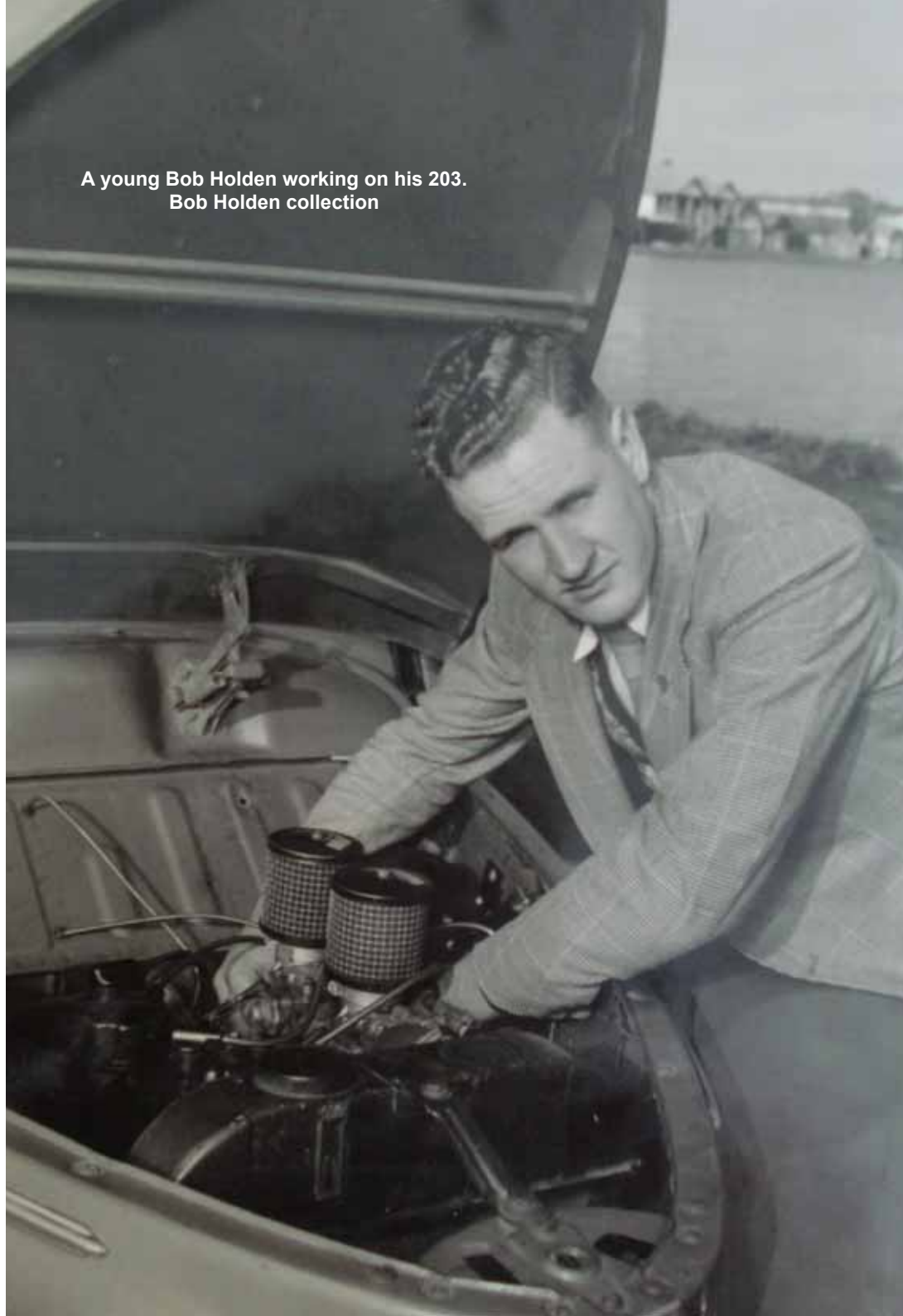
Bob told *The Pugilist* from his home near Taree: "That car was supposed to be at the end of its life. It had done its work and was buggered.

"But once I got over the hills, I just drove it flat out. I did the trip in six hours – and the road wasn't so good then, either."

At that stage Bob was racing in his TC MG.

Bob started looking at what he could do with the 203 and its solidly engineered engine that looked just made for extra power with its cross-flow breathing and solid bottom end.

A young Bob Holden working on his 203.  
Bob Holden collection



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He obtained a spare engine, mounted it on a stand and started modifying it. He did the valves, gave the head a port and polish, raised the compression and experimented with special manifolds.

"I'd play with it and fire it up," he said. "I would listen to it and keep working on it until I got it to sound the way I wanted it."

As Bob was working for Repco Research, it was easy to get anything he needed made or modified, such as dome-topped pistons or hot grind camshafts.

When the 203C was released he put the modified engine in his car with a synchro gearbox from one.

His racing career really took off, with many victories in sedan events. There was no stopping him. The hotted-up Holdens saw his tail, particularly on short circuits with plenty of twisty bits.

What Bob did was boost the horsepower of a 203 engine from its original 45bhp to more than 75bhp, adding various hot bits to produce a 160kmh-plus car.

He laughed and said: "I've actually got a letter [from Peugeot in France] in one of my scrapbooks to say that they thought what I had done with a Peugeot motor was impossible."

Bob chuckled as he recalled another fast 203 trip.

"After the 1956 Australian Grand Prix at Albert Park, about four cars went over to Caversham in Western Australia for an important meeting," he said.

"We drove over. From Port Augusta to Kalgoorlie was dirt then and we did it in the 203 in 36 hours.

"I drove it like a rocket ship – you couldn't do that today or you'd be locked up.

"Everything was so cheap then, not like today. It didn't cost much to get a car and it didn't cost much to do things to the engines."

He admits he wasn't a good driver. But he improved by racing himself, trying each lap to on the last.

He entered a new phase with the Peugeot.

Bob said he's still grateful for the encouragement that Stirling Moss gave him.

Bob arrived in Sydney about 1959 and opened a garage in Killara. He took on a lad named Keith Pascal to help him.

That year *Wheels* carried out a road test on his 160kmh-plus 203 road machine, headlined "Peugeot with a king-size punch". A more stylish beast than a hot Holden.

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