

John Cummins and Bob Holden

By Paul Watson

John “Cummo” Cummins, the guru of historic car racing in Australia, is 83 now but he was a terror of the racing circuits in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. In 1951 he drove to Western Australia to compete in the Australian Grand Prix in a Ballot-Oldsmobile. But after a disastrous trip over, he was left with only his clothes and his crash helmet, so he decided to prolong his stay.

For our purposes, though, John is of particular interest for three reasons.

First, he drove the Chamberlain tractor that followed the field in the Redex Trial. Next, he drove Bob Holden’s race 203 several times and enjoyed the experience. “It was set up properly, it was pretty quick and handled well,” John said. He said it was beautiful on the old Albert Park track, where you could “drift for half the circuit”.

John was also friends with another Peugeot pedaller, Ian Mountain, who was killed in a race at Bathurst in January 1954. John was asked to drive Ian’s 203 back to Melbourne, towing the wrecked IKM Peugeot Special on its trailer behind.

The other Peugeot link for John is that he was a part-owner in the Sydney Speed Shop in Clarke Street, Crows Nest, which was a popular place for drivers of 203s and 403s, as it sold floor changes and modified manifolds.

John still has a page from *Modern Motor* in 1963 that reads:

Floor shift for Peugeots

“As Peugeots get old their steering-column gearshift transmissions become senile and create all kinds of irksome bothers to harass the driver. Peugeot owners can always solve the problem by fixing the linkage with new parts or by replacing it with a neat floor-mounted lever direct onto the gearbox.

“Sydney Speed Shop has just marketed a kit which can be fitted to early-model 203s in about two hours and to later models in three hours. The kit comes complete with a small cranked extension, and costs 13 pounds 15 shillings, including sales tax.

“Fitting the kit is a very straight-forward operation, which can be confidently tackled by anyone with a 12mm spanner and a pair of tinsnips, a pair of good pliers and a hacksaw,” And so it goes on.

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MOTOR

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SECTION

FLOOR SHIFT FOR PEUGEOTS

Inexpensive conversion kit and two to three hours' work can take the bugs out of your Peugeot's cog-swapping

AS Peugeots get old, their steering-column gearshift mechanisms become senile and create all kinds of irksome bothers to harass the driver.

The Peugeotist can solve the problem by either fixing the linkage with new parts or by replacing it with a neat floor-mounted lever direct into the gearbox.

Sydney Speed Shop has just marketed a floor-change kit which can be fitted to early-model 203s in about two hours and to later models in three hours. The time difference is due to the amount of floor metal that has to be cut.

The kit, complete with a small cranked extension, costs £13/15/-, including sales tax.

Simple Job, Simple Tools

Fitting the kit is a very straight-forward operation, which can be confidently tackled by anyone with a 12mm spanner, a pair of tinsnips, a pair of good pliers and a hacksaw.

Step one is simply to unclip the floor mats and take the rubber covering off the transmission hump. In the 203 and 203A this reveals a plate about five by nine inches. In later 203s and in the 403 there is a

STURDY and well finished, floor shift assembly costs less than £14 all told. **INSET**, its business side.

MODERN MOTOR — October 1963



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“We sold a hell of a lot of them,” John said.

There were eight partners working in the business and John found it was necessary to get a real job.

He worked for Chamberlain, who sent him to England to become qualified on Perkins diesels. On his return John was sent all over Australia for Chamberlain, which gave him plenty of opportunities to race cars.

The Sydney Speed Shop closed in the 1960s but for many years was a very popular place.

John was born into motor racing, as his father used to punt a “PontiFord” around the banked track beside the Yarra, on the spot where Collingwood’s Lexus Centre now stands.

John’s grew up in Melbourne and his first car was a DFP (Doriot, Flandrin & Parant) and he later had a supercharged Allard P type but he also drove such unlikely combinations as a Chamberlain 8 and a Type 35 Bugatti with a modified Holden motor.



A Sydney Speed Shop cap

Over 1500 c.c.		
14	Scuderia Veloce (Dvr: D. McKay)	Cooper Climax
15	Scuderia Veloce (Dvr: T.B.N.)	Cooper Climax
16	Ecurie Shepparton (Dvr: B. Thomson) (Vic.)	Cooper Climax
17	Capital Motors (Dvr: A. Glass)	B.R.M. Scarab
18	Hilltop Autos (Dvr: J. Brindley) (Vic.)	Cooper Climax
19	Woolgoolga Motors (Dvr: N. Hall)	Rennmax Climax
20	Sydney Speed Shop (Dvr: J. Cummins)	Bugatti Holden
21	S. & L. Service Stn. (Dvr: D.R. James)	Citroen Special
22	A.C. Ross	Dalro Jaguar
23	R. Sach	Nota-Din
24	I.F. Fergusson (Reserve)	Holden Special
25	Elanora Ser. Stn. (Dvr: B. Clampson) (Reserve)	Maserati-Osca

John Cummins and the Bugatti Holden (20) entered in a 10-lap event at Warwick Farm, August 5, 1962

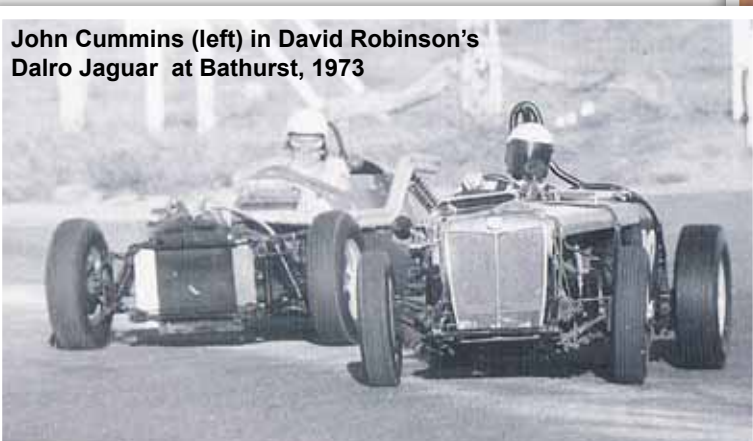
The Bugatti Holden and Bob Holden’s Lynx Peugeot met in a 10-lap race at Warwick Farm on August 5, 1962. The result is unknown.

John said that during World War II, the Light Car Club went into recess but the Australian Motor Sports Club would meet weekly in a church hall at the top of Bourke Street “behind a picture theatre that showed imported films”. All the racing drivers of the day would be there. “Most were jazz enthusiasts as well. I toured Victoria and the Riverina as an organiser with the Graeme Bell band. We had a terrible four-cylinder truck with a canopy on the back. The band used to jam itself in. Lou ‘Baron’ Silbereisen, the bass player with the band, was a Lancia fancier.”

The AMSC would have races frequently, on tracks that are now covered by suburban homes.

After moving to Sydney, John was most often seen racing a black 48-215 Holden. Which tracks did he race on? “All of them,” including speedway.

John Cummins (left) in David Robinson’s Dalro Jaguar at Bathurst, 1973



John Cummins with memorabilia



John driving the Bugatti Holden.

PCCV member Phil Torode is a friend of John's and confirms that there was always jazz playing when John was around. "Years ago when I lived in Sydney I bought my first 203 from John.

"We spent many weekends mucking around with cars together and we are still friends.

"We heard him speak at Winton raceway in 2011 when we all attended the historic meeting.

"John has commentated for so many race meetings, Oran Park, Warwick Farm when it was used for cars, and nearly all historic races in NSW and Victoria.

"John was an expert with historic car-part modifications, particularly old pre-war race cars; he spent years in Sydney Speed Shop and constantly wrote articles for motoring mags about can-do's for modifying early cars with non-standard parts.

Phil is very proud of the Sydney Speed Shop cap that John Cummins gave him in 2011.

"His best mate is Robbie Rowe, who was a mechanical engineer, spending all his time machining parts to fit places they shouldn't fit to make cars faster. Robbie once fitted a 403 engine and gearbox to a small old Toyota tray truck, which was used for many years in the 1960s and '70s to cart an Alvis around to historic races. Now he drives a 1934 Buick Roadmaster Speedcar."

Robert Rowe drove a 1486cc Nota Peugeot in a sports car race at the Bathurst Easter meeting in 1969, placing 20th in a large field. He entered the same car in a vintage and historic scratch race at Bathurst in 1973 but for some reason did not start.