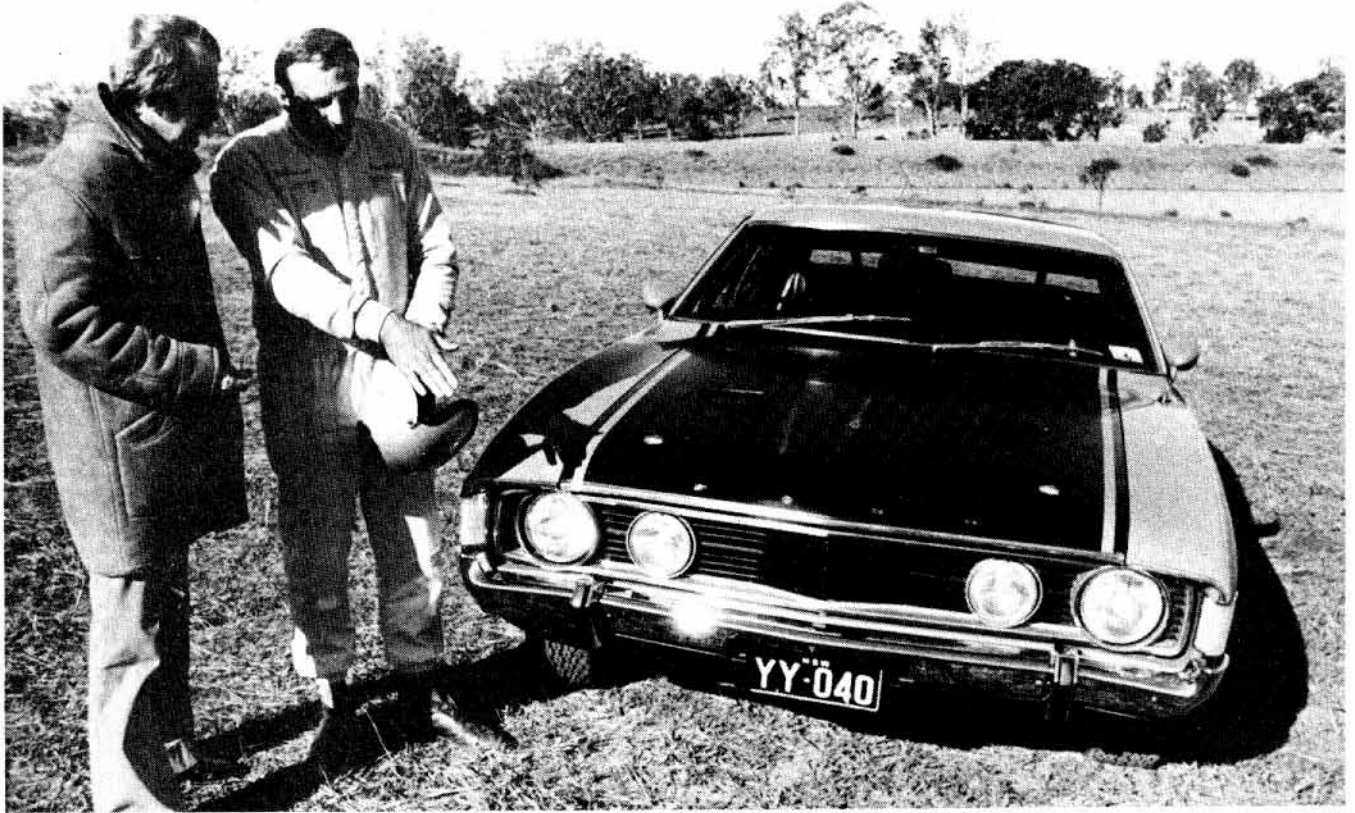


THE CAR THAT NEVER WAS



— Phase Four GT40 Prototype

Story and photos by DON EADE

THEY built them for Bathurst. A big boomer of a car, yet with unbelievable inbuilt sophistication, and the words still raise a thrill whenever they're mentioned, GT40 Phase Four. Back in 1972, Ford and Howard Marsden put all their knowledge, expertise and truckloads of money into development of a car for Bathurst. Allan Moffat and Fred Gibson were the prospective pilots, both with many racing miles behind them in Phase Threes and both unbeatable in the right machinery. Ford wanted that "right machinery" for Bathurst and were convinced they had it in the Phase Four.

They weren't worried about power. They had plenty in their 351-engined Phase Three. Their mission was to get it onto the track. At the time Howard Marsden said, "If we were building a pure track car, we would have gone for wider wheels and other modifications. But we couldn't do that — everything had to be, a compromise between the track and the Australian road with safety and roadholding being prime considerations."

So they widened the track by two inches and fitted 15 inch alloy wheels developed specially for the project by Globe. Not only did the new wheels vastly reduce unsprung weight, but they also cut the brake operating temperatures from 840 degrees centigrade to 450 degrees.

The springs were left as they were, the wider track effectively softening the spring rate to give better ride and greater bump

resistance in the corners. However, a newly developed rear spring, giving greater roll stiffness, let them toss away the rear roll bar, reducing oversteer. The front bar was softened, giving a far more neutral car than the Phase Three.

So much for getting the power on the road. At this stage the Phase Four would have knocked seconds off lap times of its predecessor, on handling alone. But Ford

Fred Gibson buckles up before the test, with owner Barry Bassingthwaite in the background.



had also been working on the heads of the powerful V8. They didn't alter the power output appreciably. Instead torque, and more of it, cut in a full thousand revs earlier than it had in the Phase Three.

That took care of performance and power. The new heads also gave better fuel consumption and the factory welded two XA fuel tank bottoms together to give a colossal 36 gallon fuel cell, the same as that in preceding HOs.

Large "ears" were welded on to either side of the sump, increasing oil capacity by three pints and concentrating the oil around the pump pickup. The front spoiler used on the Phase Three was dropped, with a subsequent increased airflow past the sump and over these "ears", and better oil cooling.

The list went on and on — every modification adding still more to the sophistication of the new car. It was to be



Barry points out the bottom cross member of the roll cage

the ultimate Bathurst car, the supercar to end all supercars. An immensely powerful, four door sedan with a guaranteed top speed in excess of 150 mph. Ford were set to do battle.

Then the axe fell

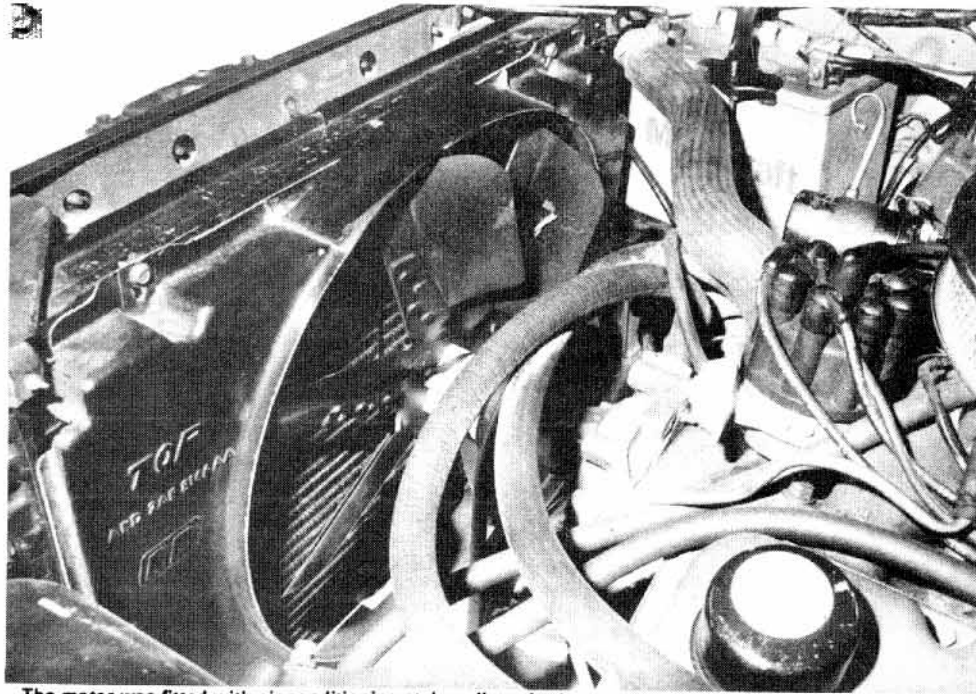
The Moffat and Gibson cars were barely finished at Ford's Special Vehicle Development Centre and another three cars had been taken off the assembly line and were being built up to HO specification, when Ford's management killed the project. The Great Supercar Controversy raging at the time closed the doors on one of the most exciting Bathurst factory projects ever.

So imagine our reaction when Barry Brassingthwaite phoned RCN's office a couple of months back with the news that he had bought one of the original XA GTHO cars, complete with roll cage and only 1900 miles on the clock! Before you could say "Graviner Extinguisher", we had conned him into letting us try it out on Oran Park, and had lined up Fred Gibson as our pilot. A meeting of the car-that-never-was and the driver-who-was-not-to-be.

Fred was rapt when he finally sat in the black bucket seat behind the wheel, no doubt thinking of past Bathurst possibilities.

"Beautiful. She's a beauty," were his only comments as we eased out on to the track and the motor grumbled out its first hint of immense latent power.

The day was cold, but Barry was sweating on the sidelines as he watched us wheeling off. I couldn't blame him. The car, costing \$6,000 when it was first made and now a valuable collector's item, represented a



The motor was fitted with air-conditioning-style radiator for better cooling and a variable pitch fan which alleviated a lot of the considerable horsepower loss experienced with the previous fan.

considerable investment. But the ride, although fast and thrilling, was almost an anti-climax. The big HO handled so well and drove so smoothly we could have been out on a Sunday country tour.

Fred took it easy for a lap then ran two hard laps on Oran Park's long circuit. The motor sang sweetly up to 6000 revs, talking in unison with the tyres as we shot under the Bridgestone bridge, changing gears as sweetly as any car on the road.

Slight understeer showed going into BP and a couple of the tighter corners, but that disappeared and moved over to comfortable oversteer as power came in. Fred confidently hugged the wall at BP, already starting to feel at home behind the wheel. Our time was up all too quickly. We pulled

off the track, now being used by a bike, and over to the relieved owner.

"She's a lot smoother, a lot better car than the Phase Three ever was," grinned Fred, reluctantly prising himself from behind the wheel. "The suspension is more sophisticated and the car is much better balanced. She's a lot easier to drive as well and would be a lot faster than a Phase Three. There's no vibration. It would have been a beautiful road car and could have developed into a top race car."

He was grinning with real pleasure. But the ear-to-ear smile must have hidden genuine disappointment at not being able to run the big, beautiful Ford GTHO Phase Four to possible line honours in that premier event at Bathurst in 1972.

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