

Ken Brigden's proud Peugeot history

By Paul Watson

In January 1951 Ken Brigden started work as an apprentice mechanic at the small workshop run by Cecil R. Pierce that was behind an old house on the corner of Pacific Highway and Ryde Road, Gordon (Sydney). He later became workshop foreman. The building had a front wall of sandstone blocks and a verandah decorated with staghorns across the front. Ken said it was “quite a landmark”.

It was an old-fashioned garage that had a row of petrol bowsers of “just about every brand of fuel available.” The fuel side was managed by a Miss Burnett. At that time Cecil Pierce did not have a salesroom.

Then things changed. “Mr Johnston who had just retired from Harden & Johnston, the Peugeot and Dodge distributors, pulled up on the side of Ryde Road and said to Cecil Pierce, ‘Would you mind servicing my car?’ From that we got 203s and later 403s, as well as Dodges.”

About 1956 Cecil Pierce bought a vacant block on the highway opposite Gordon public school and built a showroom with a workshop underneath (accessible from McIntyre Street), and a residence above, where the Pierce family lived. “It had a large verandah towards the west and you could see for miles,” Ken said. Later, the Beard Watson furniture chain opened up next door but their business was not a success,



so Pierce took over that building as well. “There were plenty of 203s and 403s, as well as Chryslers, which kept us very busy.”

Ken had an MGTD for a few years and competed in the North Shore Sporting Car Club, including all-night trials, sprints on the airstrip, hill climbs at Foleys Hill near Mona Vale and the Mt Druitt circuit.

In 1957 he bought his first 203, joined the Peugeot Car Club and competed in trials. He increased the bore to 1500cc with Repco sleeves and pistons, installed an improved camshaft and fitted twin carburetors. He used twin Solex carbies and experimented with SUs, but found they were not as successful.

With his friend Alan Harrison, Ken drove a black early-model 403 in the 1958 Ampol Trial. “On the first night we tore off the Panhard rod bracket. We got into a workshop and welded it up.”

Like many people with early 403s in competition, they were chopping out Panhard rod bushes, “but we finished”, despite a failed rear shock absorber and cracks around the wheel arches and the boot.

“Alan’s father was crying when we brought it back. I was passing another car on a dirt road and we got a bit close to the edge. The car slid into the side of the bank and crushed the front mudguard near the door hinge.” That was Ken’s only big trial experience.

In the 203, Ken started touring car racing on the Anniversary Weekend in January 1958 at Gnoo Blas, Orange, and also raced at Bathurst and the first race meetings at Catalina Park and Warwick Farm.

At Bathurst in October 1958, a sedan car scratch race involved the Peugeots of Ken, Keith Williams and Norm Saville, but Keith Williams won his class in a 403, leaving Norm and Ken in his wake.

At Gnoo Blas, Orange, in January 1959, Ken's 203 was unplaced in the South Pacific Sedan Car Championship, a race won by David McKay in his 3.4 litre Jaguar.

In a sedan car race at the Easter 1959 meeting, Bob Holden's Repco Holden FE outran the Peugeots and came home first in class and second outright, behind the Jag of David McKay. Ken Brigden was 10th and Norm Saville 13th. But in a similar race later in the program, Bob's FE did not finish, although the Pugs of Brigden, Cooke, Saville and Williams did.

On 12 April that year, Ken's 203 finished fifth in a sedan scratch race at Lowood, west of Brisbane. Denis Cooke's 203 was two places behind him.

In October 1959, Ken's 403 was first in class in the NSW Road Racing Championship for sedan cars, with Norm Saville and K. Watts well behind him.

At Gnoo Blas, Orange, in February 1960, Ken's 203 was unplaced in the Australian Touring Car Championship, won by David McKay in his Jaguar. The Peugeots of Keith Watts and Alton Boddenberg failed to finish the race.

At the Bathurst Easter meeting in 1960, Ken competed in the sedan and gran turismo scratch race, which also involved Albert Bridge, Norm Saville and K. Watts.

Ken remembers: "Cooke and Saville used to try everything in the book to beat me. They had their engine sealed one meeting and – you've got to give it to them – somehow they slipped their whole engine out through the wire and put back another engine, without breaking the wire."



Source: *Australian Touring Car Championship – 25 Fabulous Years.*

At the Bathurst October meeting in 1960 Ken entered his bored-out 403 in the Australia GT Championship against such legends as the Geoghegan brothers, Peter Manton, Bill Buckle, Brian Foley and the rising star, Albert Bridge. He came home third in the 1601-2000cc class but Albert didn't finish.

In the late 1950s Cecil Pierce was on the committee of the Peugeot Car Club of NSW and Ken had been invited to join the PCC committee.

But he remembers being approached by Lou Kingsley at a Bathurst meeting, who suggested that a new group should be formed. Ken said he attended meetings of a small group of enthusiasts, including Des West, Alan French, Lou Kingsley, Ron Hodgson, Brian Foley and Bill Thompson, who were keen to be part of a new club. Clive Hutchison, who had been a prominent member of the Peugeot club, was the group's secretary.

In the early 1960s, current Peugeot Car Club of NSW member Phil Bromley joined Cecil R. Pierce as a mechanic, later racing his own 403.

Eventually the Continental Car Club was formed, which Ken and Phil Bromley also joined. Cecil Pierce was its president.

In 1960, Ken Brigden co-drove a 403 with Bob Holden in the first Armstrong 500, at Phillip Island. Continental & General, the Melbourne assembler of Peugeots, entered three 403s in the race.

"Before the first 500, Bob said, 'We'll go down to Melbourne and check out Continental & General and see if they'll help us.' So we flew down and Bob was talking to this manager and said, 'Can you lend us a car?' And the manager said, 'Yeah, yeah' and pointed to one of the people there and they lent us a 403."

“We took it down to Phillip Island and the wire fence was lying on the ground so we got in there and circulated for quite a while. I was a bit slow as I’d never seen the place but we had some unofficial practice. Bob took the car back to Continental & General and said, ‘Oh, we wore a bit off the front tyre’. Because of all those left-hand corners the front right-hand tyre was pretty bald.

“We finished the first 500 fourth in Class C. First {in that class] were Geoff Russell, David Anderson and Tony Loxton in a 403 (I believe it was a new car). Second were Peter Manton and Barry Topen (Morris Major), third were George Spanos and Leo Taylor (Austin Lancer) and we were fourth.”

Another 403, driven by Ron Lilley and Jim Gullan, was eighth in Class C, beating home two Austin Lancers.

“BMC entered three Morris Majors and three Austin Lancers in that race.

“In 1961, Bob approached me and said, ‘How about having Albert Bridge? Three drivers, two pitstops.’ I said, ‘Fine’.

“Albert did the first stint and I was to do the second and Bob the run to the finish. When Albert came in at the first change, Bob had a screwdriver in his pocket to open the very tight fuel flap. Unnoticed, the fuel flap seal was dislodged. Two friends of Bob did the refuelling with four-gallon cans. Albert said, ‘Oh the brakes are a bit low, but OK’. I took off and when I reached the first corner I could hardly stop the car. Then I was black-flagged because fuel was spilling from the fuel flap! That was checked and the seal refitted. Bob said, ‘How are the brakes?’ I said, ‘On the floor!’ Bob threw a trolley jack under the car, slid in on the gravel and adjusted the brakes. So I took off. Later I had to come in for more fuel. Bob took over to the finish.

“Late in the day the car handled strangely. A bolt had fallen out of one of the radius rods from the diff housing to the torque tube. It had an eccentric nut with a lock tab. Anyhow, there was another 403 parked behind the pits, so we got the bolt from that, but we lost a bit of time putting that in.”

Class C in that race was won by Geoff Russell and David Anderson (403), with the Bill Coe-Ron Lilley 403 second in class. A Simca Montlhery was third and the Holden-Brigden-Bridge 403 fourth in class.

There were no Peugeots in the 1962 Armstrong 500, although Geoff Russell and David Anderson were second in Class A in a Zephyr Mark III.

In 1963 Bruce Smith approached Cecil Pierce and asked if he and Ken could run a Valiant in the Armstrong 500, to be staged at Bathurst. “Cecil said, ‘Not a Valiant. I will let you have a Simca’. I put in a lot of work preparing that car. The engine was stripped and Bruce had all the engine parts balance through contacts at Qantas and we fitted better brake linings. I became very sick from working at nights and weekends to get the car ready. I managed to do the first half of the race (Bruce did the second half) but I was off work for two or three weeks after that weekend.”

The Simca was placed 13th in its class (won by a Morris Cooper) and 32nd outright. In the same race Bob Holden’s 404 was third in Class D and ninth outright.

All this time Ken was still racing Peugeots in Appendix J competition, and his 203 had been replaced with a 403. He remembers breaking a rear axle and obtaining a replacement from Keith Pascal, who worked for Bob Holden, first at the Killara Garage and later at Pymble.

At the 1961 Bathurst Easter meet, Ken came home 11th in the gran turismo scratch race, in which Albert Bridge was placed ninth. The pair met up again, with Bill Cooke also in the mix, in the Main Event for Gran Turismo Cars.

In September 1961 Ken drove his 403 to Queensland for an Australian Touring Car Championship round at Lowood, where he took eighth place, with T. Uren (203) in 12th. “Mostly my brother came with me. Going to Lowood we’d leave home after work on a Friday night. We wouldn’t be taking much with us because we never had any spares. Once I did a tyre near Tamworth and had to borrow a spare from Bill Cooke. So we’d drive well into the night, then stop and have a sleep and carry on. I used to arrange to take Mondays off; it would take the best part of Monday to get home again.” (*Australian Touring Car Championship – 25 Fabulous Years.*)

At the Bathurst October meeting, Ken was first in the 1300-1600cc class of the NSW Road Racing Championship, ahead of Bob Holden/Albert Bridge



The Holden-Brigden-Bridge 403 leads Ken Harper's Falcon at Phillip Island, 1961. Autopics.com.au

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and Keith Watts. Ken's car is listed in the results as having an engine capacity of 1550cc, while the other 403s were of standard 1468cc capacity.

The following Easter Ken competed against the Peugeots of Norm Saville, Bill Cooke and Gary Cooke in a touring car handicap event at Bathurst. But none made the results of the race in which Martin Faithfull's Simca got home first, ahead of a Studebaker Lark driven by Bob Holden. Later in the day, Ken's 403 won its class in a touring car scratch race.

In 1962 he raced at Longford in Tasmania, where he finished fourth outright behind three Jaguars despite running off the track after failing to make the hairpin turn at the end of the straight because he had no brakes. He had been on the tail of Des West, whose car had a melted piston. "I managed to turn the 403 around and I passed Des West just before the finish!" (*Australian Touring Car Championship – 25 Fabulous Years.*)

In October 1962, there was a six-hour race at Bathurst, in which Ken and Bob Holden shared a 403, finishing out of the placings and six laps behind the victorious Geoghegan brothers in a Daimler SP250, of all things. (Albert Bridge and Bill March didn't finish the race in their Renault Gordini.)

In 1963 the touring car scratch race was the first on the program at the Bathurst Easter meeting and Ken's 403 (by now 1545cc) won the under 1600cc class, with Norm Saville, J. Robinson and H. Fenton (all 203s) and Bill Cooke (403) behind him. In a similar event later in the program, Ken took out the 1301-1600cc class, while Fenton and Saville took minor placings in the 1101-1300cc class. (The outright winner was Max Stahl in a Holden.)

"There was a race meeting the next weekend at Sandown Park. It was one of the first meetings there. They wouldn't let me run with a normal (toughened) windscreen. Anyhow, one of the rally drives came up with a piece of Perspex and we put that over the screen. But it was very scratched and when it rained in practice I could hardly see through it, so I was fairly well down in the field. But I passed nearly everyone on the first lap." I won

the 10-lap race on the Sunday and another race on the Monday, with Ron Flockhart [Morris Cooper] on my tail."

About 1975 Ken was still working with Cecil Pierce when he took on Nissan and BMW franchises but after Alto Ford took the BMW dealership away the business was not profitable. The Pacific Highway property was sold to Sundell Motors and Cecil set up business in a rented workshop in Thornleigh, with Ken as his chief mechanic. About 1985 Cecil Pierce retired and his son took over the Thornleigh workshop. Eventually that business folded too and Ken spent the last six years of his working life with Trivett's LandRover garage, near Rosehill Racecourse. Ill-health forced his retirement about nine months before his 65th birthday.

But there is still a 403 in Ken's life. His brother John moved to a property near Tweed Heads in the 1980s and when he returned to Sydney some years later, he asked Ken to meet him at Central Station, where he would get a surprise: he had brought a "very sad" 403B race car down to Sydney on the train for Ken.

Ken had some serious work to do, cutting out rust in the sills and the floor and using some parts from a donor car. John did a lot of the bodywork. He resprayed it in Ford's Atlantic blue paint, while Ken rebuilt the engine and fitted 45mm Webers.

When he entered the car in its first race in 1985 he put number 49 on the car, as he was about to turn 50. He then ran it at the Classic Cup race during the 1988 Australian Formula 1 Grand Prix weekend in Adelaide. Ken had been to two previous Grand Prix meets, but only as a spectator.

In 1988, Ken travelled to Adelaide with his brother and sister-in-law in their Falcon, with the 403 on a trailer behind. On the weekend before they left the car's transmission needed repair and Ken suspects that the oil used by the workshop that serviced it had been contaminated because the drum was not properly sealed. He spent a whole Sunday rebuilding it, buying transmission fluid from a small local parts store. They stopped overnight at Hay on their



Ken Brigden racing at Bathurst, 1991.
Ken Brigden collection

way to Adelaide and the next morning as they were driving down the main street on their way out of town the transmission refused to change up.

Ken was mortified, imagining that the transmission had failed again, but it only happened once and the rest of the trip was completed successfully.

He enjoyed being part of such a big-time event as the AGP, even if it was just in the Classic Cup, competing against Mustangs, Mini Coopers, EH Holdens, a Lotus Cortina, Chevrolets and Valiants. "The only problem was the brakes, cooking the brake fluid."

The Group N practice session was from noon to 12.30 on the Thursday, then the cars had two 10-lap, late-afternoon heats and Friday before the Grand Prix weekend. At the first heat Ken was approached by Ken Zinner, who had a grey 48-215 Holden, and suggested that they should drive the 10 laps together as their cars were capable of similar speed. "Afterwards he came up and apologised, saying, 'I didn't see which way you went'." The results of the 10-lap Classic Cup race show that Ken's 403 beat the Zinner Holden by 55 seconds.

After the racing there was plenty of socialising. "We met around a bar near the pit area. Alan Barrow, who drove an FJ Holden, was an engineer with one of the big companies. He was a tall bloke who liked a drink and a yarn. He retired early and moved to somewhere near Canberra but he got a brain tumour and died." Alan's son Phillip still drives the distinctive two-tone green FJ, with an unusual manifold set-up – two Webers for a six-cylinder engine. One carburettor feeds two inlets and the other carburettor feeds one.

Ken took the 403 around other circuits too. "I used to run it a bit at Eastern Creek." In 2011 and 2012 he was invited to display the 403 at the Muscle Car Masters at Eastern Creek and was able to drive the 403 in the Heritage Hot Laps at about 80 per cent speed. "It went OK," said Ken, modestly.

At time of writing (November 2012) Ken lives in Lalor Park, Sydney.

(With acknowledgement to Ken Brigden and Jim Lever.)

Some Bathurst results have been taken from Bathurst: Cradle of Australian Motor Racing, by John Medley.



Ken Brigden's 403 at the Australian GP meet, Adelaide, 1988. Ken Brigden collection



Ken's outstanding 403 engine. Ken Brigden collection



Ken Brigden, November 2012. Jim Lever collection