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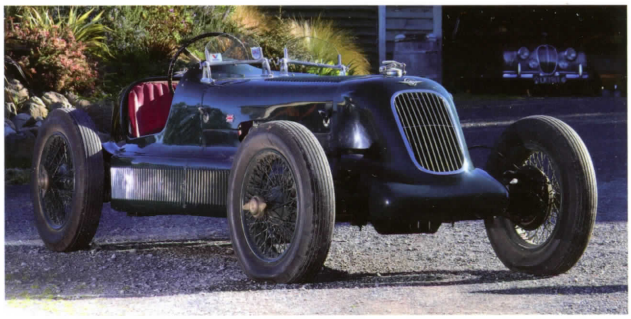

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ParksideMedia
MAGAZINES • TELEVISION • INTERNET
Issue #225 Vol 19 No 09
SEPTEMBER 2009 NZ$8.95 incl GST
9 416803 800210

New Zealand Classic Car magazine

contents

September 2009 Vol 19 No 9

056

features

042 **Special Feature**
racing and rallying your classic car

046 **Future Classic**
Toyota's astonishing Supra

SOUTH ISLAND SPECIAL

048 **South Island Racer**
Part Vauxhall, part Alta, this Kiwi racing special has been named the 'Vault'

056 **Restored in NZ**
We take a drive in an amazing, 1952 Frazer Nash Mille Miglia

066 **Greg's 'Bird**
NZCC's Christchurch correspondent, Greg Price, talks about his latest classic – a 1962 Ford Thunderbird

072 **Iconic Vehicles of the North Canterbury District**
Step back in time as we survey the people and the cars from a bygone age of motoring

082 **Classic Commercial**
This classic 1936 Chevrolet tow-truck is still earning it's living

086 **Vintage**
Celebrating 100 years of Hudson

090 **Letter from Europe**
Find out what's it like to be a Kiwi working for a European racing equipe?

094 **Motorsport Flashback**
Sir Stirling Moss celebrates his 80th birthday

gt newcomer

006 Alfa Romeo's hot new MINI rival – the Mito

gt news

008 New cars from Honda, Ferrari, Shelby and Sportec

news & comments

015 Price On
018 Blairmail
020 All Our Yesterdays
looking back at a century of motoring in New Zealand
022 Eoin Young's Diary
024 Regional News
028 McLaren Festival Update
032 Club Corner
033 BASIS Events Diary
034 Readers' Writes

automobilia

036 Reviews
037 Classic Crossword
038 Classic Automobilia
051 Classics in Miniature

information

012 *NZCC* Sub-Form
check out our latest subs offer
094 Resto Diary
096 Project Cars
098 Club Listing
100 CFS Form
101 Classic Cars for Sale
101 Trade Directory
106 Classic Auction Report
112 It's a PC Whirled

082

072

006

1952 Frazer Nash Mille Miglia

restored in new zealand

Words Mark Wright **Photos** Sean Craig

Any Frazer Nash is a rare car, and Mark Wright recently got to sample a seldom seen Mille Migila model that has found its way to New Zealand

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The rich, green farmlands of Southland seem a world – or at least half-a-world – away from the winding roads of the dry Italian interior. But here I am powering down an almost deserted country road, with the distinctive sound track of the willing 2.0-litre straight-six powering a very rare 1953 Frazer Nash Mille Miglia – one of only 11 made. Surprisingly, all still survive.

My backside is parked just ahead of the rear axle, the steering wheel is close to my chest and the Frazer Nash's shapely bonnet is stretched out before me, topped with an air scoop – there for function not decoration – grabbing vital oxygen for the triple Solex downdraughts that sit high on the engine.

I suspect drivers in the Mille Miglia race would have loved these largely straight, open roads to rest arms fatigued by the kilometre after kilometre of bends and switchback turns they would have faced. Then again, that was what the race was all about; man and machine taking on the conditions – and may the best man, or machine, win.

The curvaceous alloy body of the post-war Frazer Nash Mille Miglia seems a big step ahead from the classic pre-war British sports car styling of the chain-drive cars the company built its fine reputation on during the '20s and '30s.

Known affectionately as the 'chain-gang', these well-performed cars fashioned an impressive record of successes in trials, rallies and races.

Origins

Archie Frazer-Nash had cut his automotive manufacturing teeth building GN cycle cars with friend Ron Godfrey between 1910 and 1922. When Godfrey headed off to pursue other business interests, Archie turned his attention to sports cars, developing the distinctive chain-driven Frazer Nash and focusing on those British sports car traits of simplicity, lightness, an effective power-to-weight ratio and great handling.

The handling is worthy of special mention. The chain drive meant no differential, so a relatively narrow rear track was used to spectacular effect, allowing the driver to break traction and slide the car on tight corners, making it as exciting for spectators as it was for the drivers.

Frazer Nash used a variety of proprietary engines, starting out with a unit known as the Powerplus, which was soon succeeded by a 1.5-litre side-valve Anzani unit. The company then turned to a more sophisticated overhead-valve Meadows unit.

In the late '20s the company was sold to HJ Aldington, who continued to develop the brand, with more powerful and sophisticated engines including the 1.5-litre overhead cam Gough which, in race tune, gave 160kph-plus performance. There was even a twin-cam 1667cc six-cylinder Blackburne engine designed to provide a more sophisticated touring variant, but one which was still good for 140kph (87mph).

All the Frazer Nash models proved popular in club competition and even tasted international success in the 1932, 1933 and 1934 Alpine Trials, completing the events with no penalty points. ›

The BMW Connection

It was about that time that Aldington became a fan of BMW's sports and touring models and began importing them to England, rebadging them as the 'Frazer Nash-BMW'. It was the beginning of an important connection with a direct link to the post-war Mille Miglia model.

By the late '30s the BMW 328 had established a great reputation for its innovative design and surprising performance from its ingeniously designed 2.0-litre straight-six. It featured a cross-flow head, with hemispherical combustion chambers made possible by an unusual push rod system. The intake valves were opened using a conventional overhead valve push rod arrangement run off a side cam, but the exhaust valves, on the other side of the head, were operated by vertical push rods which in turn worked through rocker arms and horizontal push rods, to run a second set of rocker arms.

After WWII Aldington was able to bring 328 designer Fritz Fielder to England to work with the Bristol Aeroplane Company and Frazer Nash. In the end Bristol began producing the BMW-designed engine for its own cars, and agreed to supply Frazer Nash with engines as well.

These found their way into a variety of post-war Frazer Nash models, including the Mille Miglia. But the first of the new post-war models to break cover was the cycle-guard style 'High Speed'. Although only 37 of these cars were built they seemed to enjoy plenty of success in racing and rallying, including grabbing a third place finish in the 1949 24 Hours of Le Mans. Not wanting to waste a marketing opportunity the company actually changed the model's name to 'Le Mans Replica' – the name it is still known by today.

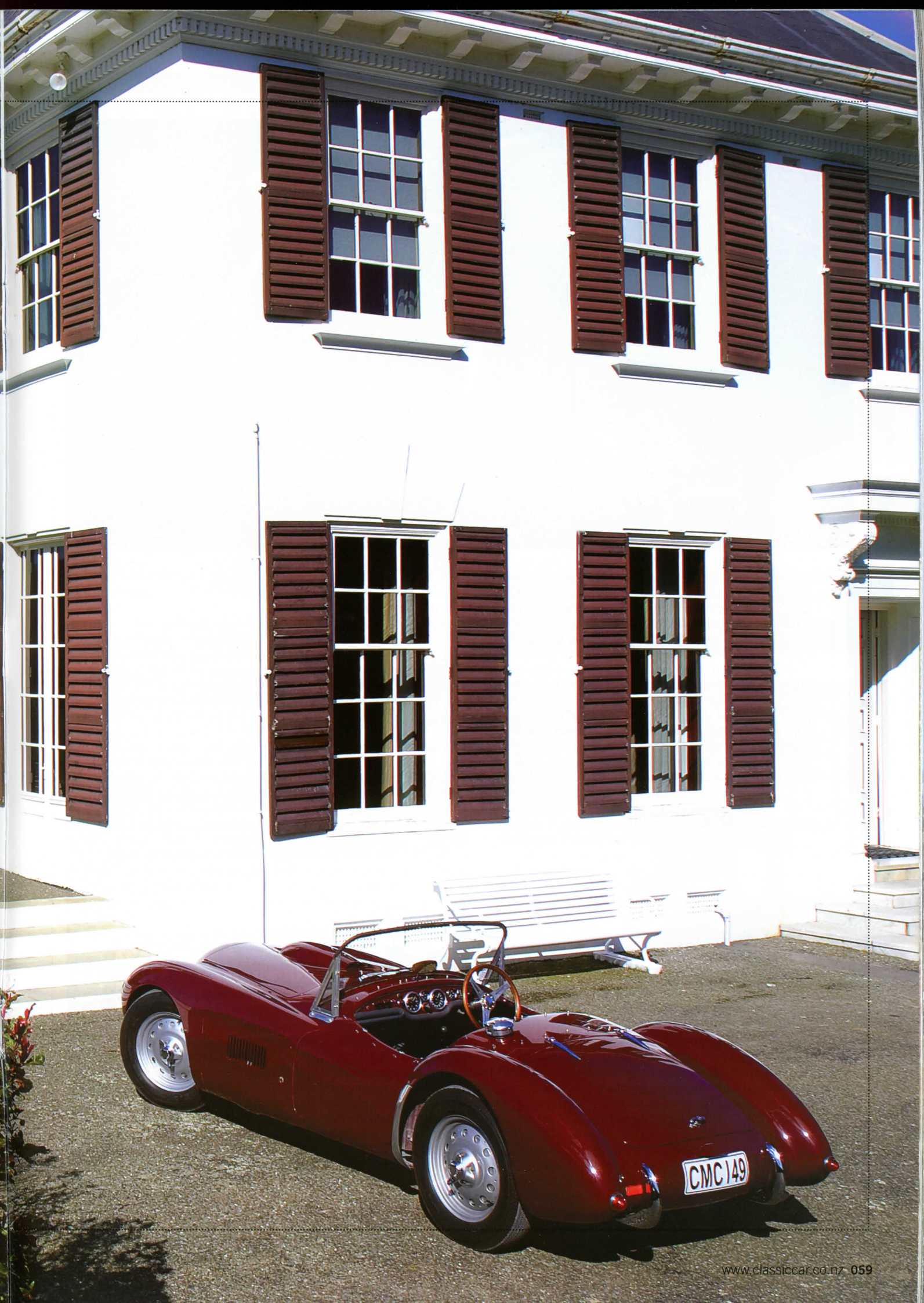
The Mille Miglia

Frazer Nash also decided to ride the coat tails of its own success by changing the name of its shapely new 'Fast Tourer' to 'Mille Miglia' – following a fine showing by a couple of its Le Mans Replica models in the 1950 Italian race. The following year a race Frazer Nash won the 1951 Targo Florio in Sicily, the only British car ever to do so. Although the two models look quite different they shared most of their chassis and mechanicals – including the BMW-based engine.

Sold more as a road car, the Mille Miglia's enclosed aluminium over light tubing body lifted its weight to 813kg (1792lb), around 177kg (390lb) more than the Le Mans Replica, but from behind the wheel it still feels every bit a race-bred car.

Once-in-a-lifetime Drive

Given the fact that our featured Mille Miglia is almost a 60-year-old model there is plenty of torquey urge from the little six, and everything about the car feels direct. The suspension is firm, but without being harsh, and the steering requires very little input, with what seems not much more than a sweep of the arms from lock to lock. It soon became apparent that soft hands were best, resisting the urge to try and hang on tight to such a rare piece of motoring heritage. ›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1952 frazer nash mille miglia

Then there was the rorty straight-six soundtrack coupled with that great view ahead over the bonnet. Because you are sitting just ahead of the rear wheels the whole car seems to pivot and swing in front of you when you make tight turns.

The long, almost whippy gear lever goes straight into the 'box and takes you through each gear quickly, precisely and, above all, smoothly – it's a delight to use.

Even Barry Leitch (the Mille Miglia's caretaker), who paints himself as more of post '60s and '70s classic car man, enjoys driving the Frazer Nash, describing it as the most enjoyable car he has driven from that era.

Racing regulation changes eventually spelled the end of cycle-guard cars, so Frazer Nash responded with a new roadster, the Targa Florio, in late 1952 – no doubt in response to his car's success in that event the previous year. Although it shared unmistakable lineage with the Mille Miglia it had much simpler lines, which I imagine also helped to keep the weight and manufacturing costs down. Owners included none other than Errol Flynn.

Other designs followed, including the Le Mans coupé and the stylish Sebring roadster, the last of the Bristol-engined post-war models, named in recognition of the success of Frazer Nash in the 1952 Sebring 12-hour race.

Later versions were also produced using 2.6 and 3.2-litre BMW V8s; these were two closed touring cars. A few other special order vehicles appeared, but eventually the marque finally stopped production in 1960.

It brought an end to another of the small but dogged and determined British sports car manufacturers which seemed to enjoy competition success that was out of proportion to their resources and the number of cars they actually produced.

Bob's Story

For Bob Schmitt, his first drive of his Frazer Nash Mille Miglia in February 2005 was the consummation of a long love affair, dating back to December 1975 when he, his former wife and a friend purchased the well-worn little roadster in Hawaii.

Student years are a good time for dreaming and, fortunately, dreams are free. That's a good thing because most students lack the cash and resources to do much else anyway. Bob didn't let that put him off though, and he carried through with his desire. But after a couple of years of no progress he bought the others' shares in the car, not knowing it would be a long wait before he ever got to drive it.

When Bob first purchased the Frazer Nash it was in a sad state, nothing like it would have been when it was the feature Frazer Nash display car at the Turin Auto Show, where it appeared in its original maroon paint with grey interior and silver wheels.

From there it had been sent to Stuart 'Duke' Donaldson, the company's unofficial distributor in New York, who sold it to Perry Boswell in Florida, who then traded it to USAF pilot Captain Jerry Saubers. When he was transferred to Honolulu the car went with him, where he used it more or less daily for about a year before trading it in on an Aston Martin DB3.

Not long after, the dealer on-sold the car to Robert Scott, who was the last 'official' owner before Bob. Little is known about how the car was used after that, but legend has it that a relative 'borrowed' the car when they weren't supposed to and it ended up against a phone pole, badly damaging the left-hand front corner.

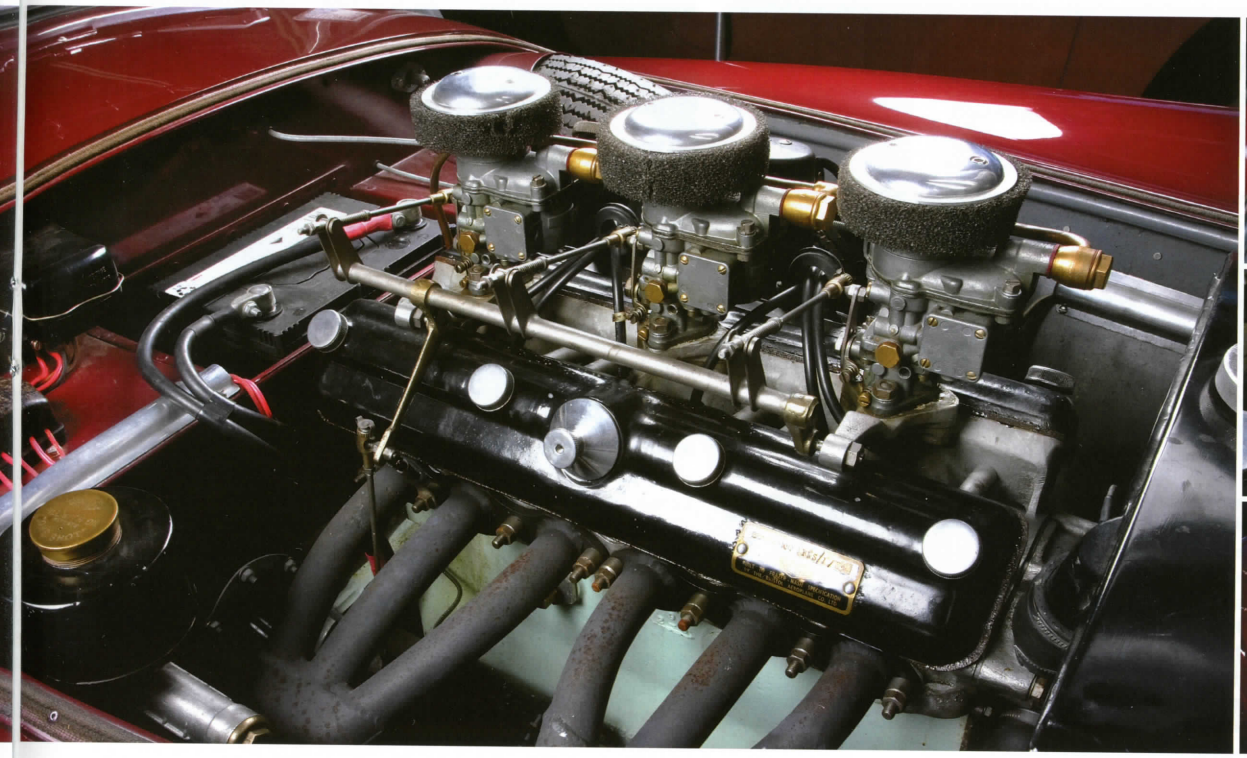
Love at First Sight

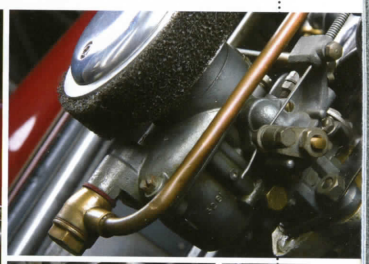
Tipped off to the existence of the car by a friend back in 1975, Bob went to have a look at it in a second-story warehouse loft at 404 Piikoi Street, in Honolulu. TV trivia buffs will know that as the fictional address for Steve McGarrett's Hawaii Five-O squad.

Bob admits to turning up not knowing what a Frazer Nash Mille Miglia even looked like. "It sounded interesting. I knew the Frazer Nash name, but I had only ever seen photos of a Le Mans Replica before."

It was a case of love – or at least intrigue – at first sight,

Survive





even though the car was in a bit of a sad state. The chassis was rusty and a bit bent in the front, while left fender and one wheel were missing, no doubt as a result of the accident. As well as that, the seats and steering wheel rim were missing and the engine was in pieces.

Also missing was the wherewithal to buy the car, as Bob explains. "I didn't have $500. I had to convince my wife and a classmate to put $160 apiece in it."

Fortunately they were all sports car enthusiasts, and at the time Bob and his wife owned a '65 Porsche cabriolet and a Saab 850GT.

Little did Bob know that the next chapter of his ownership of the car would be long and involve little progress, although he did send the engine off to California to be rebuilt. Unfortunately, that business went broke – fortunately Bob got his rare engine back intact.

Jump forward to the '90s and a couple of Kiwis, Bruce and Colin Kimmins, enter the picture after Bob met them at the Monterey Historic Races.

The Kiwi Connection

"At the time Bruce and Colin were building and restoring cars for Carroll Shelby and others. When they moved to Arizona I got them to take on my car."

They rebuilt the chassis and much of the front suspension, replacing the front third or so of the chassis tube and building new suspension mounting points. The body required plenty of attention too, with new sills, door hinges and lock plates, as well as a new left fender.

The work continued in fits and starts over the late '90s and into the new millennium, but when Bob got wind of a planned Frazer Nash Raid to New Zealand in February 2005, he was overtaken by a fresh wave of inspiration to get the work completed.

At the same time the engine and other mechanical parts were being looked after by Larry Thompson, a long-time friend and mechanic in Honolulu who tackled a range of challenges, including straightening and refurbishing a cracked rear axle housing.

In what proved to be an adventurous stroke of genius, Bob decided to send the uncompleted car to New Zealand to be finished at the workshop of Barry Leitch, at Leitch Motorsport in New Zealand.

Barry and his team began methodically working their way through the boxes of engine parts, figuring out how everything went together

Barry has rebuilt many race-bred cars over the years, and when Bob told him of the task and the time-frame, Barry's simple reply was 'no problem.'

"Believe me, Barry is a 'no problem' sort of guy," Bob says, laughing.

While the reply may have been simple, some of the obstacles still to be surmounted weren't. The car had only arrived at Barry's workshop in September 2004, with the Frazer Nash Raid set down for the following February.

Completing the Restoration

Barry and his team began methodically working their way through the boxes of engine parts, figuring out how everything went together. The Bristol engine, based on the pre-war BMW 328 motor, uses an unusual pushrod system to provide a cross-flow, hemispherical head.

On closer inspection they found the crankshaft was bent and cracked. A Bristol crank isn't exactly an off-the-shelf item, unless you happen to get a tip-off from someone like Arnolt-Bristol vintage racer, Bill Watkins. He put Bob onto Henry Velasco, a well-known manufacturer of billet crankshafts who happened to have a race-built crank on his inventory that happened to be surplus to requirements!

Meanwhile, there was still work to be done to get the body ready for painting. A few of the panels needed a final alignment, and there was the matter of finding another of the rare 16-inch knock-off wheels to replace the one missing after the accident more than 30 years previously. Fortunately, one was made available through a UK enthusiast.

Somehow, in what Bob describes as "an amazing accomplishment" Barry and his team met the deadline.

"The day I showed up I drove the car. It was a stunning experience after all that time. It looked great and it drove really well." ›

1952 Frazer Nash Mille Miglia

Engine	In-line six
Capacity	1971cc
Bore/stroke	66x96mm
C/R	8.5:1
Valves	ohv, cross-flow hemispherical head
Fuel system	Triple downdraught Solex 32 BI
Max power	94kW (126bhp) at 5500rpm
Max torque	165Nm at 5100rpm
Transmission	Four-speed manual
Clutch	Eight-inch Borg & Beck
Suspension	Front: Independent with transverse leaf spring Rear: Live axle with torsion bar located by A bracket
Steering	Rack and pinion
Brakes	Girling hydraulic with finned alloy drums and steel linings front and rear
Tyres	5.50-16 (6-ply)

Dimensions:

Wheelbase	2438mm
Track F/R	1219/1219mm
Overall Length	3810mm
Width	1473mm
Height	913mm
Weight	813kg (1792lb)

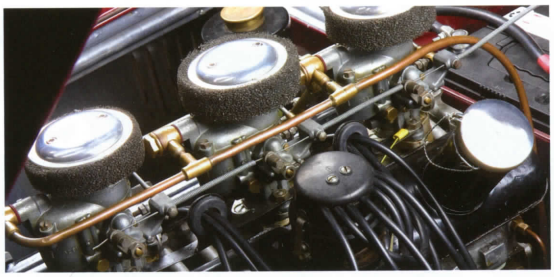
Performance (As tested by *Autocar*):

Max speed	177kph (110mph)
0-60mph	9.0s
1/4 mile	17.0s

Over the next few days the Leitch Motorsport team put the finishing touches to the car, while Barry spent time running around in bureaucratic circles sorting out its New Zealand registration. Back at the workshop Bob joined in the madness waxing and polishing to bring the paint, lovingly applied by Howard Kingsford-Smith's workshop, to its final glory.

At 6pm on February 17, just an hour after all the paperwork was done and the new plates were on, Bob and Shannon hopped in the Frazer Nash and headed north to join the Raid.

Aside from a battery charging issue on the first day, the rest of the trip around the South Island went without a hitch.



Permanent NZ Resident

"In all respects, the Frazer Nash was more fun to drive than I expected, even after waiting 29 years for the experience! It was comfortable, handled and steered well, had good acceleration and sounded like a sports car that really wanted to go racing!"

The car is now a New Zealand resident, looked after at Leitch Motorsport, so it is ready for Bob and Shannon's annual visits to New Zealand. They hope to be able to stay here for longer chunks of the year in the future, and there are certainly no plans to take the car back to the United States.

"No – I'm not tempted," Bob explains. "It's a combination of things. The traffic is too insane – although there are places you can go – but who is going to fix the thing?

"People who can actually do the job without you having to prostrate yourself before them are very rare. I think New Zealand is the right place for the car. We enjoy touring here – especially in the South Island."

Looking back over what has been a long process Bob is adamant that he wouldn't have done it any other way.

"I don't think I could have made it go any faster anyway," Bob says. "For everything there is a season."

He points out that in the end each step fell in place, and eventually brought him to the point where the car ended up in New Zealand and in Barry's hands.

Bob puts it very nicely on his Frazer Nash USA website.

"I had no idea when I bought my Frazer Nash 'project' in December 1975 that I would not drive it until February 13, 2005, and then only down a driveway in Invercargill, New Zealand, but that's exactly what happened and still, it felt timely and right!"

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1952 Frazer Nash Mille Miglia

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taxing and spending

By Peter 'PC'Callen **Illustration by** Steve Richards

To say that these are interesting times is indeed an understatement

A couple of issues ago I lampooned the clowns who took it upon themselves to disrupt law-abiding, road-user tax paying motorists on the Auckland Harbour Bridge. My argument was (and still is) that if cyclists want a cycleway they should contribute to the building of such, and I'm not talking about general taxation or rates, I'm talking about tolls and so forth. Why shouldn't they pay? Why shouldn't they pay ACC fees like motorcyclists and motorists? Cyclists have accidents too, don't they? They also often have them on roads that they contribute little toward.

The other day I was investigating the government's pledge to invest billions of dollars in our state highways, and I stumbled across the Cycling Advocates Network (CAN) website. Harmless enough, you might think, until I discover that CAN has recommended that government increase fuel tax by 20 cents per litre in 'year one' and another 10 cents in 'year two.' I nearly fell off my chair! All that is going to do is remove food from our table, thank you very much.

Minority Group?

My home is 28km from my partner's place of work and 25km from mine. If you think that (to avoid suggested, ridiculous fuel taxes) we are going to ride bicycles that distance carrying groceries, head down into a howling southerly with an appropriate wind chill factor you've got another think coming. The lunatic fringe in New Zealand appears to be expanding at an exponential rate, and it won't be long before normal, hard-working people, going about (and minding) their own business, will be a minority group.

Fuel taxes are high enough in this country, and while in reality we enjoy reasonable fuel prices in comparison to many OECD countries, I doubt anyone would like to see prices leap by 30 cents a litre just as a strong-arm incentive to hop on a bicycle all in the name of reduced global warming, doomsayer-waffle, don't-start-me, gasses. At this point I would hasten to add that many bicycles on the market today are made in China, and the emissions produced in making those bicycles would far exceed what our little commuter box pushes out, I can assure you. If CAN wants to prevent 'global warming' I suggest they stop spouting hot air.

User Pays?

Now, a billion dollars is apparently going to be spent on our highways in the next three years. Sounds great, but there's always a catch. Just as irritating as the above might be, the fact is the government plans to extract about a third of that billion via increased fuel taxes. In the same breath it proposes to increase the maximum allowable load on heavy trucks from 44 tonnes to 53 tonnes (correct me if I'm wrong.) There are bridges to strengthen, some corners to widen and much more besides, so who is going to get the maximum benefit from the billion dollars spent? Sure, Road User Fees will cover a certain amount, but why is it I get the distinct aroma of rodent here?

The heavy transport industry is big in NZ, meaning there are a lot of trucks on our roads. Some would suggest that to have larger loads would mean fewer trucks – I won't be holding my breath!

I have read that state highways represent 11 per cent of our roading system but carry 50 per cent of the traffic; a large volume of that 50 per cent is heavy transport. I sincerely hope that some of the projected expenditure goes into additional passing lanes, but my gut tells me a large amount will be sucked up by cost overruns, budget blowouts and administration costs. We'll probably get one or two bridges strengthened and a corner or two shaved off, but I doubt that too much will change. I also hope that regional roads, not included in the government's plan, don't suffer too much and cause a horrendous increase in local rates.

Heavy fleet operators might argue that the increase will be beneficial by way of decreased fuel consumption and increased productivity, and the roads can handle the higher loading because in NZ trucks have a fairly high axle-load ratio. There may be some truth in that, and I'd be more likely to listen to those who are contributing to the cost of improvements.

As for banning hand-held cell phone usage while driving; good job I say.

Read this column online at www.classiccar.co.nz

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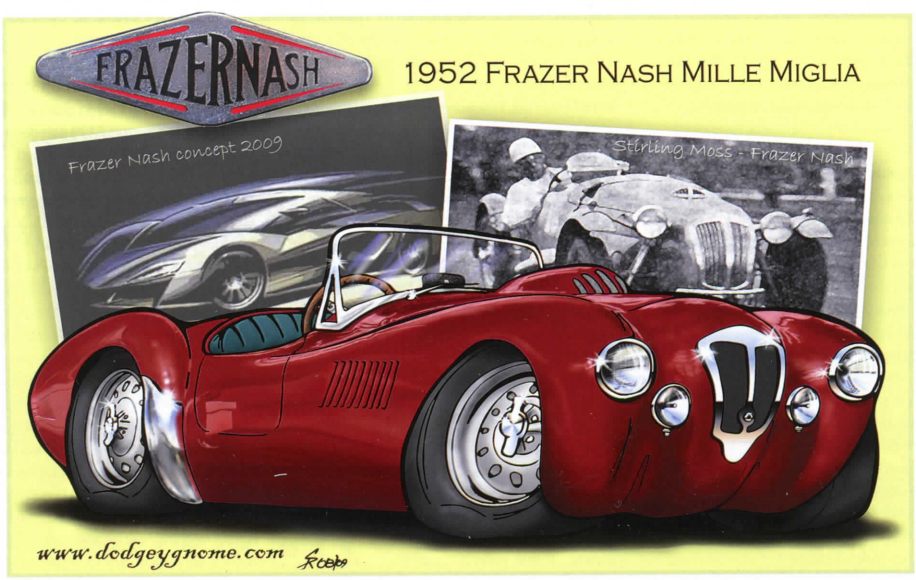
by Steve Richards