

## Classic BDA Escort back to its best



**Peter Bryan driving his restored ex-Mike Marshall Ford Escort rally car. Photo / Brad Lord**

Classic car restorations are never an easy or cheap proposition, but throw in the added challenge of maintaining a motorsports history, and the task is made ever so much harder. Just ask Whangarei couple Peter and Jill Bryan, who have spent the better part of two decades reviving an iconic slice of Kiwi rally heritage.

The story behind the Bryan's stunning Mk1 Ford Escort RS1600 began in Great Britain in early 1970s. Originally a dealer-registered road car, the Rallye Sport Escort RS1600 was snatched back by Ford UK and sent to its Advanced Vehicle Operations (AVO) competition department and also at Boreham, Essex, where it was reprepared as a test and development vehicle. For two years the car served as a test bed for Ford UK's national and international rallying efforts.

The Escort's Kiwi connection came about in 1972 when Mike Marshall - a relatively inexperienced but highly talented rally driver from New Zealand - travelled to the UK with aspirations of taking on the world's best. With the help of John Andrew Ford's Superford division head, Ray Stone, Marshall purchased the then well-used Mk1 and competed in two local British events, before knuckling down with the Boreham engineers and completely overhauling the car for the prestigious 1972 RAC Rally. Marshall partnered with the late Arthur McWatt for that round of the world championship with the car adorned in Woolmark New Zealand livery.

But mechanical problems dogged the Kiwi pair's efforts, leading to a heavy crash and ultimately a forced retirement from the event.

Following the RAC the Escort was rebuilt around a brand new body shell from the competition's department and Marshall competed in two more local events before the car was exported to New Zealand.

Marshall had lined up a proper factory-backed drive for the 1973 Heatway International Rally of Zealand, and for that task Ford UK planned on sending two of its new 2.0-litre alloy BDA-powered, left-hand-drive Works cars that had contested the Safari Rally in Africa. The other car was for Finnish star Hannu Mikkola. Shipping delays ultimately meant that only Mikkola's car could be properly prepared and tested in time in NZ. Marshall wasn't comfortable driving from the left side

of the car, so the decision was made to remove the running gear out of the Safari car and transplant it into his ex-UK car. Operating as a team under the Woolmark banner, Mikkola won outright and Marshall placed second.

After the rally the Escort was returned to its pre-Heatway guise before being sold on and campaigned in the national rally championship with sponsorship from School Supplies. Throughout the '70s and '80s the car was further modified at the hands of different owners, before being crashed and then pushed out into a paddock where it sat semi-stripped and half-covered by a tarpaulin for eight years. In 1996 the Bryan's made a bid to rescue it, and ended up towing it home on a trailer.

After years spent unearthing the Escort's rich history, the huge task of returning it to its former glory began in 2003. Having been exposed to the elements for so long the body was in a bad way and deemed beyond salvage. So a straight and rust-free shell was sourced and painstakingly brought up to the correct Works specification using, where possible, as many bespoke parts from the decrepit shell. That included the Works dashboard, which still carried most of its original instruments. Elsewhere, what was missing and couldn't be bought, Peter replicated in his garage. Everything else was fastidiously restored, except the Halda Twin Master rally meter, which bears the patina of years of use in a subtle nod to the car's past.

The extensive rebuild was completed earlier this year - just in time for Rod Millen's invitational Leadfoot Festival hill climb where Peter put the car through its paces for the very first time. Fittingly, Mike Marshall was there to witness the moment too.