

The History of the A40 Special

It would probably make a good Trivial Pursuit question: "What Western Springs A-Grade speedway midget ended up being owned by a Ferrari works Formula One driver and was driven by two Formula One constructors?"

The answer is the 1947 Des Herrick midget that evolved into the A40 Special, which was Chris Amon's first racecar, and was driven by both Chris, and Bruce McLaren.

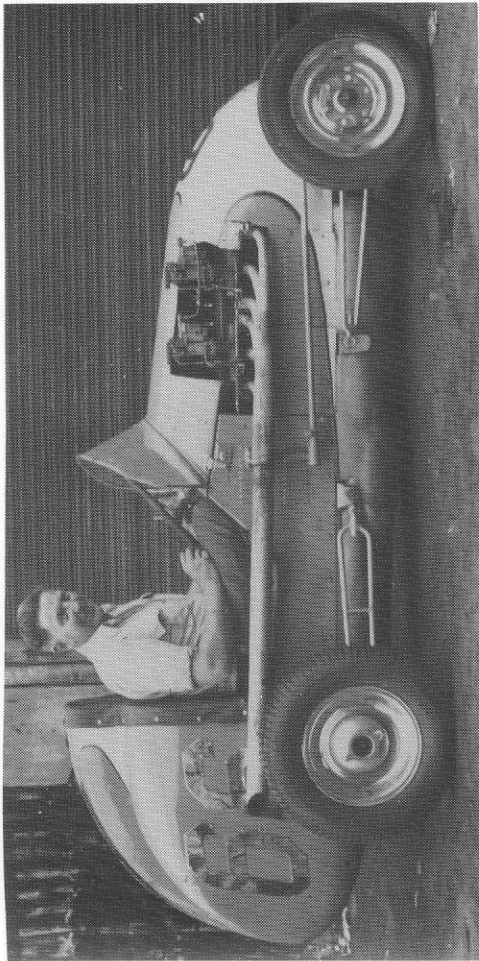
It all started with the established Auckland A-grade speedway driver Des Herrick building a new car to his own design for the 1947/48 season, after coming second in the 1946/47 New Zealand Championships. This new car had a rudimentary ladder chassis and a B4 Ford-based engine. At the end of the season the midget was modified, by replacing the chassis with another ladder frame version, and squeezing in a Hudson Terraplane engine. In this form it was highly successful in speedway, hill-climbing and speed record attempts. Des won the 1948 Mt Eden hillclimb against Herb Massey in another midget with Ron Roycroft in the ex works "Rubber Duck" Austin 7 in third. In a New Zealand record attempt for the flying quarter mile held at Seagrove in April 1949, Des recorded 10.6 seconds.

Des continued to race the Terraplane midget (always as number 66) until he obtained a "pair" drive in 1950. At this stage number 66 was sold to Ron Roycroft, who planned to turn it into a hillclimb car. As with a number of Ron's projects, it didn't eventuate and he sold the speedway midget to Herb Gilroy, with the McMillan Special being either full or the majority of the payment. Herb then set about converting it into a circuit car, with the help of Ralph Watson.

The chassis was lengthened and a Bugatti Type 35 or 37 gearbox that Ron had found as part of a local Chinese market gardener's rotary hoe was installed. Ralph designed a single pivot independent rear axle by cutting a Model T axle in half and putting in a UV joint (evidently this was some years before Mercedes adopted a similar system). Herb said it "...made the car handle like a dream..." It had a Model A modified front axle, hydraulic brakes and a 1938 Ford V8 steering wheel. The Terraplane engine was retained but didn't last long, with Herb blowing it up at Ardmore. The Terraplane was a fragile but powerful engine which, after Des Herrick's modifications, became "thin walled", this leading to it's ultimate demise.

Herb replaced the engine with a 1200cc A40 engine, a close ratio Magnette gearbox and a special clutch. Modifications to the engine were "secret" and it could rev to 6800 without any problems, and had a max of 7300 rpm. The motor ran twin Amal motorcycle carburetors and stub exhaust pipes. Herb raced the car extensively under his "Ecurie Drambuie" team banner, competing at hillclimbs and such races as the Ultimate Echo at Ardmore in 1955. Buster Bartlett was there and recounted Herb in the A40: "In the Ultimate Echo feature race at Ardmore, it could be heard powering into a corner when everyone else had 'buttoned off' and were braking. The car used to be driven really hard at all times". Herb also remembered this race: "... the handling was so predictable, I could drift past faster cars around the hairpin only to have them pass me on the long straights - however some of them eventually overdid things ..."

It all ended at the Houghton Bay hillclimb in Wellington, when a massive accident ended Herb's racing career and caused major damage to the A40 Special. As Buster Bartlett described it: "...unfortunately Herb Gilroy had a rather nasty prang in the car at the Houghton Bay hillclimb in Wellington. He sustained quite bad injuries, if I remember



Above: Des Herrick in his original Speedway midget, here fitted with the Hudson Terraplane engine.
Left: Taken during the Herb Gilroy/Ralph Watson conversion from Speedway car to circuit racer. The old #66 nose-cone is visible on the top right.

