

An Icon is born

Few people on the planet can afford a Porsche 917, fewer still would be brave – foolhardy? – enough to take one on the road, but there is now an alternative on both fronts, the Icon 917

Words James Elliott Photography Alex Tapley

The Canoe? There's a story behind that. On motoring website *PistonHeads* there is a section called You Know You Want To, which features tempting items from the classifieds. On 1 August 2011 the item was a Porsche 917 bodyshell that had been moulded from David Piper's chassis number 10 to supply panels for an LMK Australian-built replica racer. As the advert stated: 'I believe this is the first and only complete 917 bodywork ever to be offered for sale.' Well quite, a lovely and desirable thing, but even the *PistonHeads* article was guarded: "There must be something you could do with it – turn it upside down and make a canoe, perhaps?"

A canoe indeed. Tangential maybe, but thus begins the story of this car, more formally referred to as an Icon 917. 'No, no, not quite,' says Dave Eaton, the man who bought those clips and turned them into the car you see today, interrupting my train of thought via my interview notes. 'The story of this car started at Brands Hatch in 1970. I was there for the BOAC 1000km on that sodden April day, the one when Chris Amon said "Why doesn't someone tell Pedro [Rodríguez] it's raining?" We were there, at Druids, and that was it. After a famous black-flagging and bollocking from Nick Syrett, Pedro won by five laps and the 917 left such an indelible impression on the 13-year-old me that that was really when the story of this car started.'

It's been a long time coming then. Having joined Ford at Boreham in 1979, Eaton ran his own business from 1982 to 1987 and has been freelancing ever since, often for Ford, but also managing projects such as a set of six bespoke Bentleys for the Sultan of Brunei. Currently he is working on a set of enthusiasm-sapping door trims for a Ford SUV. The Ilford-born engineer's motoring CV kicks off with a Mk1 Cortina and eight Capris, before the Ford loyalist moved to BMW when the blue oval went front-wheel-drive. He then plunged headlong into exotica, which is how he met his 'partner in crime'. John Hartland is another engineer with an impressive CV, and someone else who was at Brands Hatch to witness

the magical Mexican at his most magisterial. Born in Birmingham but brought up in Bournemouth, Hartland started at Jensen in West Bromwich but later moved on to first Lamborghini UK Concessionaire Berlinetta Italia-Roger Phillips (who worked out of a phonebox), and then London Lamborghini main agent Stephen Victors. Hartland then set up Motorapide, which morphed into Hartland Motorsport. Hartland, too, had come a long way from his first car, an MG TA, and restoring the Jeavons-Hartland Special that his father built. In fact it was when buying an Alfa Romeo Montreal from Hartland 25 years ago Eaton couldn't help noticing that he was 'tripping over Lamborghini V12s' and mentioned that he happened to have an Espada with its engine in bits. A deal was done, a connection made and a friendship formed.

When Eaton bought the 917 body from Graham Turner in Norfolk – 'I gave a grand over what he was asking just because it looked right and none of the others I'd seen quite did' – Hartland was the first person he called. And when Eaton told his friend what he was planning, Hartland's instant reaction was: 'I want in... and then I want one.'

They agreed to share the tooling costs and the intention from the outset was to build a rep of 917K 001-021 for Eaton's personal use, as a trackday car that's capable of passing IVA and road legal. The chassis would be built in Wolverhampton from 217 T45 (as in Spitfire) steel laser-cut tubes rather than aluminium, but otherwise chassis and body would be identical to the original. With flat 12s thin on the ground and original 'boxes notoriously tricky, using a 964 era 3.6-litre flat six (it had to be aircooled) and inverted modern G50 five-speed 'box was seen as the way forward mechanically, though the Icon 917 has been constructed to accommodate a Flat 12 and original transmission if wanted.

A mere eight years later, here we are. Who knows where the time goes? Eaton does. 'I had to reverse engineer a Porsche 917 from scratch in CAD including that incredibly complex 220-odd tube chassis. I used Catia software and I reckon I spent at least 6000 hours doing the designs.'



Right
The Icon 917's authentic-looking shape is thanks to panels moulded directly off the real deal for a replica racer and bought eight years ago. The bodywork is wafer thin and .





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Durite in Wolverhampton cut the tubes – in five different diameters working up the car – and laser-cut all the fishmouths so when all the tubes were dropped into the ARC-built jig it just fitted together. The jig allows 360deg welding, but this ‘prototype’ still took Anthony Maycock 12 weeks to weld. He also built the suspension jigs and the doors. Eaton says: ‘I wanted them done properly. On other reps they are just propped up, but on the originals they folded all the way back and on this they go back 110degrees just like the originals. I am a bit anal like that.’ No kidding.

The resulting chassis and body are 95% true to the original, but there’s a bit more to it than that, not least the headache of making it road legal. ‘We’ve had to do front-end crash: contrary to received wisdom you don’t have to actually crash a car, you just have to demonstrate that you’ve engineered for it,’ says Eaton. ‘Your feet are so far forward in a 917 it’s pretty important – our steel chassis may be 115kg compared to a 50kg original, but this is where the extra strength counts. There was also a theory that you can’t have a road-legal car with your feet forward of the front axle, but that’s not true, it is all about the planning for front-end impact.’ He’s had to design a collapsible steering column, add a speedo, a brake fluid warning light, a heated screen and design 14in and 8.5in rims to take road-legal tyres. The windscreen alone cost £6000, the magnesium wheels, along with the 15in and 10in track set it is wearing for our test and modelled off one that had been turned into a coffee table, a lot more. The CAD-designed uprights nearly £10,000.

Hartland looked after the drivetrain and reckons the engine he has built, even with standard bore, stroke and cams, is good for 6500rpm and put out 280bhp on the rolling road, plus could go 30 more with fettling. Top speed on the current ratios is 185mph and, because it is a lot lighter and more slippery than a 964, acceleration to 60mph is electric. The tricky bit was inverting the G50 box so you get five forward gears and one reverse rather than the other way around. ‘It was a lightbulb moment,’ says Hartland. ‘We were scratching our heads and suddenly it came to me. It took half an hour in the end to do a neat job without any major surgery, but how we did it is my secret. I’m pleased because it was a super-simple mechanically sound solution.’

You may not know it but you have probably already seen this car – unfinished – either atop a giant prong outside of Goodwood House at the 2018 Festival of Speed, or at the 2017 or 2018 London Classic Car Show. Very few have seen it finished, though, until *Octane* was invited to join the team at Bruntingthorpe on a sunny late winter’s day.

Even in the garage under a dust sheet, the short-tail outline is unmistakable, delectable. As the cover is whipped off to reveal the livery of chassis number one, it is an evocative moment and, *that* picture is instantly etched into



From top

Eaton sits in his completed chassis after thousands of hours of CAD design, assembling and welding; prepping the bodywork was also time-consuming; Hartland drops the power in.





your retinas. You know the one where the 25 homologation cars – though to this day it is a mystery how many of them really worked or were to spec – outside the works looking like an advert for Pacers (remember them?).

Long tail, or short tail, flat 12 or flat six, this was going to be a fabulous day. Entry is similar to a Caterham, step over the wide sill and onto the Tiletts bucket seat – Steve Tiletts was yet another involved with this project who watched Rodríguez performing out of his skin in 1970 – before dropping down, pausing to acknowledge that the doors seem to weigh no more than a Rizla paper. Once in the driving seat harness up (full four-point Sabelt) and attach the three-spoke wheel and gape in awe as you catch a glance in the rear-view mirror and see everything behind you framed by the massive converging rear fins as if you are looking through a letterbox. It's a very authentic feeling.

Apart from the modern instruments and reversing camera (a wonderfully necessary modification), you feel

like you are in a 917 staring out of that glasshouse watching the wings crest like waves over the 10.5in front wheels. The revcounter is marked up to an optimistic 10,000rpm and the speedo to a pessimistic 140mph. The Icon 917 is wearing different lights to the ones it will need for IVA, but otherwise all the telltales that it is to be roadable – a switch for hazard lights, a single stalk operating light-dipping, indicators and horn – are there.

Spend a little longer familiarising yourself with the interior and you start to notice how 'prototype' this car is, you can see the sky through the door gaps and the weave of the GRP under the white paint. More reassuring than disconcerting, however, is the thick chassis tube arcing over your head just behind the driver's compartment.

Hartland mentions through the window flap that it has done only 40 miles in total. No pressure. Fire it up and the flat six rumbles menacingly; it's no flat 12 but it has a pretty audible sense of purpose of its own. Release the fly-off



handbrake, engage first and rumble away on those 15in rear magnesium rims shrouded in 29/61R 15 Michelin rubber.

Heavens, those pedals feel right. An odd detail to pick up on perhaps, but it shows the thought that has gone into this that they replicated the original pedalbox rather than looking for a cheaper, off-the shelf solution. There's a big organ throttle, two chunky clutch and brake pedals sprouting from the floor and surprising levels of 'feel'.

The gearchange doesn't feel at all like the original, though, nor even like a 964. That's because Hartland has 'had a go at it'. The track day addict – 1500 laps each of the 'Ring and Spa – redesigned the 'change on his full race-spec Ultima and has replicated that revised set-up on this car with carbonfibre tube, titanium fittings and apex joints. As a result there's a solid feel to the remote change via an H-pattern gate to driver's right and a short lever topped with a big wooden knob. It is quite easy to wrongslot between third and fifth at first, but you soon get over it.

What is most incredible is the Icon's balance. The gearbox over the rear axle helps, but so does the 65-litre tank behind the driver. If you fitted a flat 12, the tanks would have to go back into the sills. And that steering. At two turns lock-to-lock, the Titan rack brings new meaning to the word direct. And everything else actually, the fully rosejointed suspension, the current GT3 brakes, everything.

We're limited to 4000-4500rpm by common sense... and John Hartland. We might have hit 4750rpm, certainly not more, but such is the noise and the taut urgency of the engine that Hartland doesn't believe us until he has a drive himself. Then he knows. And so do we, the yowl even better from outside than in. The speedo isn't calibrated, but they say 4000rpm in top is 100mph and that feels about right.

I cannot remember buzzing quite so much on getting out of a car in recent times. I am aware that I am babbling to the others, mainly about getting it right through a tricky little S and hairpin that photographer Alex Tapley wanted me to

Clockwise from left
Despite non-original details – not least the powertrain – the driving experience is authentic; the look is spot-on; 3.6-litre flat six may have only half the cylinders, but is a fine performer.



‘When you get it right the big rear wheels launch you onto the back straight like being fired from a trebuchet’

attack. Up to speed on the straight, brake hard, slice in and immediately jink right then left. Straight after is the hairpin that proves impossible to carry speed through, so then it is all about timing that downchange to second. Blip! When you get it right and those big rear wheels grip and launch you back onto the straight like being fired from a trebuchet, it is an exhilaration so pure it feels dangerous. Almost too big a thrill to be legal. The others, both ‘enthusiastic’ drivers, look at me slightly oddly until they have had their turn in the car. Then they babble, too, and I feel slightly less self-conscious. It is really telling that at the end of the day, with everyone facing a lengthy schlep home, there is a genuine reluctance on all sides to load up the Icon 917 and go home. Just a few more laps...

Now Eaton’s car is complete, they start work on Hartland’s and, despite not having even ordered the chassis tubes, after that taster you know he isn’t going to hang around. And when that is done, they will start making them for customers, promising a build time of a year for a rolling chassis that will cost £100,000. Len Marchant, who, you guessed it, was also at Brands in 1970 having pedalled there on his bike, has made the moulds though they haven’t made any more bodies yet. They say

they could have sold 10 already, but don’t want to: ‘Ours is better than the others so it’s why people will come to us.’

But what if no-one wants the cars? ‘If we don’t sell any it doesn’t really matter,’ says Hartland. ‘For both of us this has turned into a last attempt at establishing a retirement business – if that isn’t too much of a contradiction in terms – but it genuinely started off as two blokes just building 917 reps for themselves and it can still be that. If it doesn’t work out as a business, we will just go round Europe having fun in the cars. We obviously have to recreate that famous shot of the Siffert and Rodriguez cars going into Eau Rouge for a start.’ Eaton adds: ‘Getting it road legal was never part of a business plan, it’s only so important because, after seven and a half years of effort I don’t just want to put it on the track, I also wanted to pose on the roads. There’s a enough stowage for an overnight bag after all. I fancy running around Knightsbridge in it. Even if it doesn’t take off, all I’ve done is buy my dream car... very slowly and very expensively.’

I don’t think they need to worry. But for the £200,000 it is estimated to cost for a finished car, they would have sold one already. To me. **END**

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