

The Dino story - 17 years is a long time!

I blame Phil Sutton and Mal Simmonds.

Back in 1993, as a new arrival into NZ, I joined the Waikato Fiat Club in time to attend the Nationals. The Bent Sprint that year was held out Tauranga way and both Phil and Mal had their Dino coupes there. I had never seen one before, and after driving them, realised that I would like one too one day.

Finding the car

Fast forward to 1997, and I was off to the USA for work and decided to buy a restoration coupe project to bring home. After scouring Hemming's (remember this was before internet everywhere), I found two cars that would be perfect: a solid 2litre coupe without an engine and box on the outskirts of LA, and a complete car that was so rusty it was 'pink stickered' off the road up in San Francisco.

Calling both owners to say I'll be there in a couple of days to buy them, I landed in LA and purchased the roller for \$700 and arranged for it to be delivered to a shipper for packing. I then rang the San Fran guy on the way to the airport to tell him I'll be there in 5 hrs when he dropped the bombshell: he had sold the car! The bastard!!!!

Now I had a dilemma: I owned a Fiat Dino coupe without its most important asset, its engine! I needed to find something quick. So I called Wally Clark, who ran a group called "the Other Dino" and Wally was very receptive to my plight but really couldn't help. "Except" he said "if you want a Spider".

Now even in those days, Spiders were worth wayyyyy more than Coupes and so were not on my radar for that reason. But Wally suggested that this one could be bought cheap as the owners needed to move it pronto. It was also in San Francisco, so as I was committed to go there anyway I thought I'd have a look.... nothing to lose.

The car was owned by a couple of VERY gay guys who bought it back in 1988 after Enzo died and anything Ferrari was going berserk. They paid some 'restorer' to give it the typical USA "we can restore a car in 48hrs..... Let's make a TV show about it" fashion, which basically meant taking off all the Fiat badges, bogging up all the rust and panel damage, painting it red and sticking a prancing horse badge on. I have no idea how much they paid, but as you will read, whatever it was, it was way too much. They tried in vain to sell the car over the ensuing years starting at \$70000 in 1989, reducing to \$30000 just six months prior to my visit.



As found..... Love the gold wheels... not.

So I turn up and here is the car parked on the street under a leafy tree, uncovered. It had been there for a while. It turned out it was at one of the guy's mother's house and she was sick of it being out the front. It actually didn't look too bad from 20 paces ...ok at 10 pacesand... umm.... a project close up. First things first though: let's go for a drive! The guy at least put a new battery in it before I turned up, but before we cranked it I suggested "hadn't we better check the oil and water?" After I found the bonnet release (he had no idea where it was) it got worse, as in a true cliché that all gay guys must hate, when asked where the dipstick was, he put his finger to his chin and said "oohh...do these have those?" Seriously. It made Dick Emery's impressions look real!

So a quart of oil and 2 quarts of water later I got it started and off we went... smoking like a train, with every ball joint shot, brakes not working, seats sliding on their rails etc, etc. Suffice to say it was not good.

So let the negotiation begin! With apologies to Monty Python, it went like this "So apart from the shitty paint, the rust, the torn upholstery and hood, the smoky engine, no brakes and all suspension shot, what have the Romans done for us?"

Again, just like the haggle scene from Life of Brian, I offered 4k "For this... me with a dying grandmother to support?" ... so he countered with 12k ... and so on until "I won't take a penny less than \$9000 or strike me dead" ... "\$7000?" ... Done.

So now I owned a Dino Spider!!! Oh... and a rolling chassis coupe.... hmmm... what to do? I could just dump the coupe and say I paid \$7700 for the spider, or... or.... see if Mal wanted it! A quick call to NZ, and yep Mal said he would buy the roller for what it cost me as he had no spare body bits at all for his Coupe, and worse case could turn it into a race car!

Ok... so arrange to get the spider delivered to where the coupe was in LA and shipped to NZ... easy. I even paid extra to have a 'proper MAF-level cleaning' of the cars before they were packed. Wow.... and it wasn't that expensive... we would soon know why.....

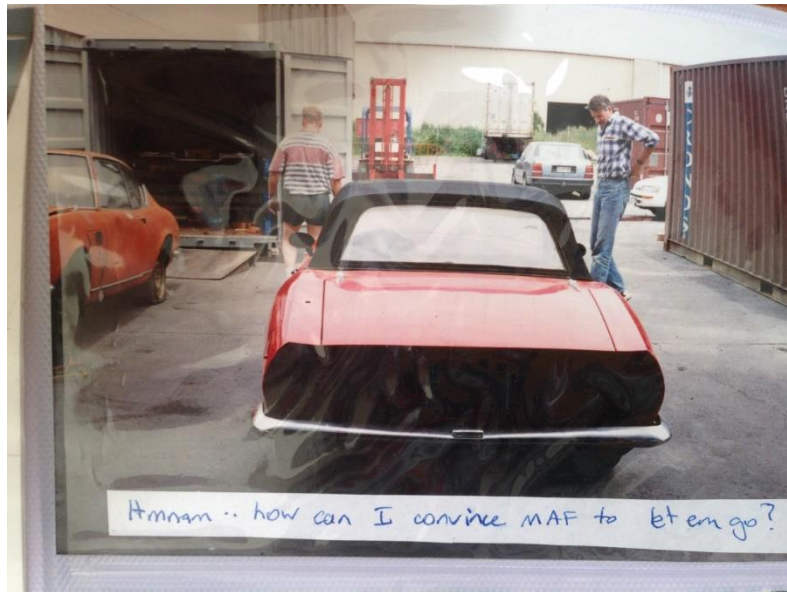
Arrival into NZ

Excitement loomed as the ship had docked and we were told to come up and collect the cars from the container. So with trailers in tow, Mal and I arrive to see the neatly packed cars awaiting. As was the lovely nice sweet MAF inspector.



At least they made it!!

I noted both cars weren't exactly.... what's the word I'm searching for? Oh that's right: Clean! It seems my money paid was for a dozen illegal Mexican immigrants to fart over the cars. Oh well... no problem right? The MAF lass was lovely, nice and sweet. Until she saw the leaves in the Spider scuttle.... and the dirt under the wheel arches. It was then I knew how drug mules must feel like when busted..... She became less sweet and a wholllle lot less lovely as the next few minutes wore on.



I like my note on this photo made at the time.... also note Waikato boy in shorts!

Anyhooow..... long story short, Mal got the Coupe loaded. Despite pleadings of "I'll vacuum it up now" the MAF gal quarantined the Spider, which meant that I had to pay a fortune to have it uplifted in secure transport and taken to a MAF base for fumigation and cleaning..... sighhh. Oh well....

It finally arrived in Rotorua some days later and after fettling a few things to at least make it safe, I took my son Scott (then aged 7) for its first drive on NZ soil!



Aww... little Scottie ☺ ... and what's that on my head? Oh yes... black hair....

The first few years

Ahhh naivety... it's truly cute in young children and puppy dogs. It is painful when you're an adult. "It will be an easy restoration... two years and she'll be done I reckon"... oh dear.

First thing though, we need to strip her down, so thanks to Mal, Dave Jowett and Steve Cannon the process began.



My good mate and coachbuilder extraordinaire Mark Lysaght, who had previously done all the bodywork on the Abarth, was again the obvious choice to do the panel-n-paint on the Dino. So with Steve's help we trailed the car to Mark's workshop and there stripped the interior. A bit of rust here and there was revealed, but not too bad so far (ha-ha). The biggest find was that the car was originally dark green (Yuk!!). It was then I decided that it would be repainted Giallo Fly (yellow).

As dark green was an odd colour (and my car is a very early car; chassis number 92), I did some research and found that one of the English motoring magazines did a road test back in 1967 prior to the car's official release in a "British Racing Green coloured car chassis number 93". So it is highly likely that my car was also a press car too! In later years I made the day on a Finnish Dino owner who now is restoring Chassis 93 when I told him the story and gave him a copy of the article.

Next up, the easiest bit: removing the engine and gearbox. This was done at Mal's shed, as the oily bits would be staying there to be rebuilt once the body was done... so only a year then eh?



Ok.. this bit was easy....



Keep her in a safe place , Mal...we'll need it again soon..

After this out came all the wiring and all other mechanicals , and the body was sent off for media blasting to reveal just how much panel work would be required. The first hint was when I phoned the blaster and asked "so how is the Dino" and was told "wellllll.... I guess I've seen worse..." hmmm.

So it looks like Mark may have teensie weensie bit more panel work to do than first thought.



As the note on the photo shows, by Xmas 1997 the car was pretty much stripped and work begun.

As Mark started to investigate the small rust areas , they ended up as major ones with basically everything from the bottom of the doors down rotten. Added to this were the shocking repairs done after a rear-end accident while the car was in the USA (presumably). All these panels had to be hand made by Mark as none were available then.

Two years later and it was getting hard for Mark to work on the car without it being on a rotisserie, so Steve and I made one!! It also co-incided with my 40th birthday, and as a great present, Mal gave me a complete set of new Fiat Dino badges (as mine of course were all gone). They would be on soon surely! I also received a bottle of Penfolds Grand Hermitage from Monique, and in front of the assembled friends, I stated that it would be opened when the Dino was on the road, or when I turned 50 hahahah..... (here's a hint... I opened it on my 50th!)



Only two years to get this far... .won't be long now...

While all this was going on, I was scouring the world for all the parts needed to make sure all the mechanicals were new or rebuilt. So everything from a full set of nos Koni shocks, through to door handles were eventually located. All suspension parts were renewed and the components painted ready for re-assembly, all chrome work repaired and replated, new stainless steel exhaust, etc, etc. Upon reflection the mind does boggle as to how many parts are in a car! And this had EV-ER-REEE-ONE either new or rebuilt..... we were effectively making a new car. Meanwhile, like an archaeological dig, we were finding more and more work to do on the body.



It was now year three... and Mark was still smiling! The worst was yet to come...



So lets tally up: inner sill , outer sill , inner guard, outer guard, and all floors need to be made new...



Just some more examples of how much work went into the body repair.

The next decade

While all this was going on all manner of other little jobs were being undertaken, from manufacturing tail-light gaskets to plating various parts. From stainless steel sleeving and rebuilding the braking system to having the wheels painted. As things were completed, they were all neatly wrapped and stored as one day (soon surely) they would emerge from their cocoons ready to make the yellow butterfly real. The Nardi steering wheel, for example, was hung as a wall decoration in my study...

Nature abhors a vacuum, so while the Dino was at Mark's, other projects came and went to fill in time: Yambina, 124 BC race car, 1500, Arbonda and some came and stayed: integrale, 130 coupe. Oh and of course the never ending repair and development of the Abarth rally car.

Eventually though, by the end of the first decade of the new millennium, there was light at the end of the longgg tunnel: the panel work was finished. Now it was time to paint and build an engine...

The body was prepped and firstly the interior/engine bay/boot/door jambs were finish painted, and the underside painted with black under seal.



Interior/engine/boot painted finished colour, underside painted black..... all bolt-ons trial fitted.....

Then it was time to move the car to my shed for assembly of the bits for the first time in 14 years, and again my son Scott (now just a little bit taller than he was in 1997) and mate Steve were there to lend a hand.



"Little" Scottie and Steve loading at Marksand unloading at my shed.

Things now could be put back into the car... and there was a lot of bits. The first thing to go on was the last major thing to come off the car: the rear end. Now though fully rebuilt and resplendent in its shiny new bibs 'n bobs!



Let the re-assembly begin.... this wont take long..... surely....

Once all the bits were back on that could be back on to make the car mobile , it was once again taken back to Ric Ensor (the painter) for the several weeks it would take to put on a concourse final paint finish.



Ready to get final paint



all done... on way back to my shed for more assembly

The engine meanwhile was taking shape at Mal's, with Mal and Steve Martindale undertaking a thorough rebuild with again new everything.



It is together..... now to run it in!!

Then the magic day came early in 2012, after many tribulations, of firing up the engine and seeing if it ran! This was done at Mal's shed on a pallet..... first kick and she ran like a kitten!!

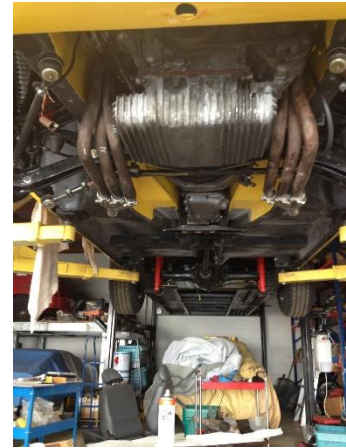


Mal and Steve get ready to fire it upwoohoo.....happy Mike and Mal!!

Things were cruising along, but then I dropped the news that I was moving to Perth in May 2013, and wanted to take the car with me! Eek.... this meant that we had to get a lot of work done in a short period of time to ensure the car whilst not finished, would be drivable.

So now the engine, along with gearbox, had to go back into the hole from which it came! So in a mirror of that day in 1997, we assembled at my shed for the re-fit.





...ready.....on the wayand in !!



Happy Mikearguably happier Mal and Dave !!

Next up was moving the car across the road to Hunts Electrical where Mike would reconnect all the wiring and make sure everything actually worked. This did end up taking a bit longer than hoped , but on 3rd March 2013 (my 54th birthday), the car actually fired up on the key for the first time in 16 years! It was a great sound!!



Let the wiring begin!



3rd March 2013... she fires!!

Clearly the next thing to do was bolt in a couple of seats and drive her around the block! Eventually though it was time to load her into a container to ship to Perth, with a small list of things to do to finish, like "make a roof and completely re-trim" .. oh well...



In she goes for her third sea voyage of her life : Europe-USA , USA- NZ and now NZ-Australia.

On arrival into Perth, the first job was to find a house with a big garage, then join the Fiat Club. Made some great friends there , and thanks to Giles and Paul we managed to fettle a few things. At the Fiat Club day in November 2013, I bravely took the then unregistered car to the show where we proudly won a trophy even though it was unfinished!



Giles Wilson helping out in advance of the show

Drove her 20km to get there!! Phew!

Now the thing was to find a trimmer. Thanks to the WA Ferrari Club president, I met a Czech guy Sidney who worked from his home. He was doing the president's 250PF and had a gap while that car went away for some work and could fit the Dino in.... perfect! We decided to actually make new hood, door linings, carpet and boot linings from scratch, but bought an upholstery kit and hood bag from Superformance as they have the correct patterns. Sidney is a perfectionist and wanted to showcase his skills on the car, so rather than rush, we agreed to take time needed..... hell what's a few more months after so long already!



Lots and lots and lots of things to make and fit.....

December 2014

After 17 years since I found the car, finally the day came to get her on the road, and after much shagging around dealing with bureaucrats getting it registered, she finally got her plates. Then it was shipped half way across the continent to my new home in Adelaide where for the first time ever, I was able to enjoy driving a complete, effectively “new”, 1967 Fiat Dino Spider!

What an amazing car! It is unique in South Australia, so gets a lot of attention, especially with the engine sound. Oh the noise! A combination of carb intake, cam gear drive, and exhaust make for an intoxicating drive. Sure its not as fast as I hoped, but lets be honest: it you want to drive fast, don't get a convertible..... it's a grand open tourer that is sporty and way way cooler than most other things on the road.



It truly is a beautiful car

A project of this length and scale took the help and patience of family, friends, tradesmen, suppliers, and other Dino owners around the world. Thankyou to everyone who has been involved with this restoration, in whatever form.

The car is now being enjoyed and fettled as required. It maybe near-concourse now, but as with all my cars , it is to be used and it will wear it's first stone chip with pride !

Cheers

Mike Lowe

1967 Fiat Dino Spider 2.0 Litre

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