

Air-cooled in New Zealand

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16/03/2020 Paul Higgins pursues his passion on the other side of the world, in Auckland. And he keeps the telephone lines busy to Porsche enthusiasts in many different countries.

"The dealer specialised in German cars, particularly from Bavaria. He looked at me from head to toe and then deemed me to be uninteresting as a customer," remembers Paul Higgins. "So I turned on my heels and walked across the road to 'Clarks of Khyber Pass', where there were some fine used cars. And it was there that I saw the 911 SC from 1980 in perfect condition. It was a left-hand-drive model and therefore not too expensive. At 'Clarks' they said to me: "Take the 911 with you over the weekend, drive it a bit and tell us on Monday what you think." That was in 1985, I was just over 30 years old, an architect just starting out and already infatuated with Porsche. The simplicity of the design, the flowing contours, the perfect proportions and the lack of any superfluous, ornamental gimmicks. No matter from what angle, the 911 always looked perfect. And then there was the feeling of lightness when driving, the engine sound, the German engineering. So that was that: I brought the 911 home. My wife was heavily pregnant and not very impressed by the sports car. We already had two boys, and the birth

of our third child was imminent. She was certain that it would be a boy again. That is probably why she said: "If it's a girl, you can keep the Porsche." Our first daughter was born a few days later at half past one in the morning. And at half past seven in the morning I was standing impatiently at 'Clarks'. And that is how it started with Porsche."

Paul Higgins' quiet passion for Porsche remained alive over the decades, and he took the term sports cars literally. Paul competed in club races with the SC, and later changed it for a 3.3-litre Turbo. This car too had proved itself, such as in the city race through the streets of Wellington. Everything was going well, and then a connecting rod came through the engine block. In December 1988, the 911 Carrera RS 2.7 was added to the small collection, built in November 1972. The RS 2.7 in Grand Prix White now stands in a hall together with the Turbo. Paul drove a RSR 3.8 from 1997 to 1999 and won two national titles. Even today, he still hasn't forgiven himself for selling this Porsche. There are Porsche race posters on the walls, at the gable end there is a huge photo of the Number 23 – 917 Short Tail, Le Mans winner in 1970.

On the left on the long wall there is a small desk with a PC, behind this a reference library on the subject of Porsche. The red Vespa belonging to a friend is parked opposite, the only greeting from Italy. In between, the 356 Carrera GS 1500 from 1957, found in Sweden, the 356 A Super Coupé from 1958, which came over from Australia, and the 356 B Roadster from California, dating from 1961. Currently absent: the Leyton March CG891 Formula 1 (on its way to Goodwood) and the 1950 Reutter Cabriolet from the Netherlands. Higgins discovered his passion for Porsche's first sports car model series only late on: "I was always a 911 man and thought that the 356 was just an old car. Then the Porsche Club New Zealand 2005 issued an invitation to participate in a trip to the East Cape of the North Island. A friend lent me a black 356 Coupé from 1958 with whitewall tyres. A beautiful car. My wife and I set out on the five-hour journey from Auckland to Napier, and I was filled with enthusiasm about the 356 after only half the distance. The handling on these roads with their long, fast bends is really impressive! You can drive effortlessly and do not hold up modern traffic; in fact, you are probably a little faster. Having said that, I have to admit that the 356's steering is slightly heavy when driving through tight bends.

But the comfort is fantastic for a car from the 50s. When I got back from this trip, one thing was clear: I had to have a 356. It had to be open. A Speedster? Too expensive. A Convertible D? I saw one in California, but could not make my mind up to buy it." However, Paul then met John Willhoit, a renowned 356 restorer, on the West Coast. John had a 356 B Roadster T5 from the summer of 1961 in his collection. Higgins remembers: "I found the Roadster attractive, because with the screw-mounted windscreen, characteristic dashboard and less luxury it was closer to the Speedster than the Cabriolet. The Roadster was also inexpensive, because someone had repaired the wings and the wheel cutouts almost in the style of a pre-A 356 after an accident. I bought the car in 2006 and planned to rectify the cosmetic defects, but never got around to it. In 2009, someone drove into the back of me. And then it had to be done. The Roadster is now how it should be."

I had hardly got the Signal-Red Roadster home when this 356 A 1500 GS Carrera from 1957 turned up again on the internet just before Christmas. Paul had discovered the Coupé months before, but had lost track of it in the meantime. The car was on the other side of the world in Sweden. The engine was not in

the rear end, but was disassembled in a crate. The interior had been stripped and filled with stuff like wiring harnesses, window glass, electrical parts and brakes. “I contacted the owner through the President of the Porsche Club Sweden. At the time, he owned all the 356 Carrera cars that there were up there – three two-litre Carrera 2 models and this 1500. None of the cars was roadworthy. He wanted to make the 1.5-litre car into a replica of the Porsche that won the Midnight Sun rally in Sweden in 1955. The work had already begun.” The telephone call between Auckland and Sweden lasted 75 minutes, but Paul had convinced Erik, the owner: “Sell me the 1500 GS and put the money into restoring the other Porsches.”

The telephone rang two days later: Erik told Paul that the body painter had already done his work on the GS and wanted 6,000 US dollars. Paul: “I didn’t have a choice. When the car arrived here I could have cried. The painter had hastily sprayed over everything without any pretreatment. The paint therefore all had to come off right down to the bare metal. Bob Garretson in Sonora, closed to San Francisco, did the engine for me. He became a good friend through this project. Bob can tell great stories about how he earned his fortune mass-testing computer chips. And about how he won in Daytona in 1981 in a 935 together with Brian Redman and Bobby Rahal. Anyway, I suggested that I would go to California when he had the engine on the test rig for the first time.

He made a better suggestion: “You pay my flight to New Zealand. I’ll come with the engine and get it up and running properly in your car.” That was in 2010. Today I really enjoy driving the Carrera, there is something quite magical about it. The quad-camshaft engine is a jewel – even though it does not deliver remarkable torque and has its own special moods. Starting the engine is not that easy because it has large ports for high engine speeds. But when it is running and you press the accelerator, there is no stopping it. It’s pure pleasure.”

Like an invitation to a Sunday excursion, the third 356 in the most delicate Meissen Blue is standing next to its cousins – the 356 A Super Coupé from 1958. The only right-hand-drive vehicle in Paul Higgins’ eye-catching collection. A monument to South-West Pacific Porsche patriotism, if you like: “The car came from Zuffenhausen directly to Australia, and then travelled to New Zealand with its owner in 1961. When he was transferred home again, he left the wonderful Porsche here. At some point we heard that the Coupé was going to go back to Australia. I didn’t want to let that happen, because there are only very few attractive A Coupés in our country. I had it repainted after someone drove into a door. The Coupé is an aesthetic delight, and with the one-piece seat bench it is even a special 356.”

And the mysterious 1950 Cabriolet? Paul turns on the PC and takes a deep breath. The photos. There it is. Currently being painted in Brixen, Italy. “A work of art! That will be the jewel in my collection. The Reverend Ronald Roland had it in his hall in New Haven, Michigan, for a few years and then sold it to the Netherlands, where my son David found it in 2007, took it for a spin and immediately fell in love with the Cabriolet.

It is the Reutter Cabriolet with chassis number 5.135. Reutter built twelve of these Cabriolets. As far as I know, five or six have survived and three have been restored. Ours is the fourth.” It is planned to

complete restoration at the end of 2019. The Cabriolet will then stand in the small hall in its original "Radium Green" with dark-green interior. The oldest Porsche in the southern hemisphere.

One Coupé stands out from the rest in Paul's room full of priceless vehicles – the 962 C from 1989, which Brun Motorsport from Switzerland raced in 1989 and 1990. Paul: "I was very interested in historic motor sports, and had my eye on a 907 or a 908. But my older son Andrew, who has had some success in Formula 5000, among other things, warned me: "Dad, you will kill yourself in a car like that." In 2015, I saw a lot of men of my age at the Rennsport Reunion in Laguna Seca who were having a great deal of fun with RSR and 962 cars. So I thought: "Anything they can do, I can do too." Andrew found the 962 C with a carbon fibre chassis from TC Prototypes in England.

In May 2016, work started on overhauling the transmission and engine in the UK. I took care of the chassis, running gear, brakes and electrical system myself with my own special company Classic Revival." There were hardly any limits to the passion for detail. For example, a housing for the modern electronics from Motec was produced with a 3D printer and is almost impossible to tell apart from the Bosch original from the 80s. At the start of May 2018, Paul and Andrew drove the shakedown in Donington, and the father and son then went to the Spa Classic: "I hadn't driven in a race for 18 years and I reached my limit in Spa, which meant I was overcautious.

After a break in Italy, where I admired our Cabriolet, Andy and I took part in the Le Mans Classic, to which we were invited after Goodwood. We got the 962 there, and I experienced some of the best automotive days in my life. In the 70th anniversary year of Porsche! My wife and I could hardly believe it – two Kiwis from the other end of the world in Goodwood, our 962 C parked next to the Le Mans winner from 1987. Derek Bell came across for a chat. We then received an invitation to dinner, and my wife and I quickly bought a dinner jacket and evening gown. 1,600 people were sitting together in the evening. On the next day, we drove up the hill in Goodwood seven times. My son in a 935, me in the 962 C. And a few weeks later, this unbelievable year continued in wonderful fashion at the Rennsport Reunion in the USA. But Goodwood was one of the highlights. That's for sure."

And then from the 700 PS of the 962 C back to 75, with luck also 110 PS in the 356? "Wonderful," says Paul. "There is this saying that fits perfectly for the 356: 'It is much more fun driving a slow car fast than driving a fast car slowly.'"

Info

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