



In His Own
Words -
Ken Attwell



KVA

In Fortification 114 we ran an obituary of Ken Attwell, creator of the KVA GT40 and, arguably, the father of the entire replica GT40 industry. Ken's sister, Brenda Ward, has kindly made available to us this extract from his unpublished autobiography (written in late 2006), which gives us, in Ken's own words, the inside story of the KVA GT40.

I was made senior engineer at Ford Swansea, responsible for the movement

of components within the plant and between plants. This included automation and robots. I loved the work and there was never a "Monday Morning Feeling". The only problem was that there were gaps of three or four months between projects. This gave opportunities to take up my hobbies such as photography, renovating and building cars, bikes and go-karts for the children. During this time I built one boat and salvaged another. In 1972 we bought

and renovated a cottage in Llanfynydd near Llandeilo. All in all, it was a full, exciting life.

Occasionally my daughter Anne would come with me when I visited suppliers. When she was 17 she asked if we could call at the Morgan factory on the way back from the Midlands. The staff invited us to walk around the workshops by ourselves. It was like stepping back 50 years. Quality was not a strong point but the car's simplicity made it an enthusiast's dream. On the way home Anne constantly talked about it, saying that

Brigitte Bardot owned one, and that she too would have one when she earned enough money. I said that they were not worth the money, and anyone could build one. Her reply was "I bet you can't". Like a fool I said that I could. Six months later she was driving it everywhere. It still goes fine and has never failed its MOT; I plan to restore it and put it back on the road in 2007.

In 1979 I was always looking for another project to interest me outside work. I had restored and fitted an engine to a GT70 for



Ford. I had worked on a few other cars belonging to Ford, such as FEV 1H, a famous World Cup Rally winner, and Roger Clark's Monte Carlo much-modified Fiesta with rear wheel drive (the cars that Margaret drove for Ford's demonstration at Zandvoordt during the Dutch Grand Prix). It was about this time I went for a week testing competitors' cars at the Nürburgring, in the Eifel Mountains. I drove a genuine GT40 and a GT70 and about 60 competitors' cars for comparison. Others who attended included Jean Rondeau, winner of the 1980 Le Mans 24 Hours, and also included with us testers were Manfred Winkelhock, of Le Mans, Hockenheim etc., David Burgess-Wise (journalist), Hans Joachim Stuck and a few other well-known names. It was a great week and what made it better was that I was getting paid just for having fun! Prior to the Nürburgring trip I worked on the GT40 and needed to test it. We had use of Llandow circuit for the day, but it was a very

around Le Mans before the start of the race. I had hardly started and didn't have an engine at the time. He arranged with Bridgend engine plant to supply a turbocharged CVH engine, which had been used for testing, to be delivered to my garage behind my home in Hendrefoilan Road. My garage was so small I had to climb over the car to assemble and build it. By June the car was built but not test-driven, as I thought it was too risky to chance it. I was concerned with overheating during the parade, a fault that was cured by fitting a second radiator. A genuine GT40 was eventually borrowed from a private owner and driven in the Le Mans parade.

Because I had sold my Fiesta to pay for the first GT40, Margaret was driving an old banger Mk 2 Cortina, Anne had the Morgan copy I had built for her, and I used the Mk3 GT40 back and forth to work for about a year.

customers. At first she was thrilled with the business because money began rolling in and she was getting calls from celebrities such as Stirling Moss, Derek Daly and many others. We had taken enough money in ten weeks to buy ourselves a Rolls Royce. It was a stupid ambition because it attracted problems from suppliers who immediately wanted to increase their prices but I either resisted or changed our suppliers. Margaret was by now driving a Granada, Anne had a new Escort and Paul a new Fiesta. Life was even better financially, but it left us very little quality time to enjoy each other etc.

Trouble started when I took on agents to help sell the kits. Within months they started to make their own versions and became rival companies. Legally there was nothing we could do to stop them as we did not own the copyright and Ford never registered the model or the title. In addition a few customers failed to complete their kits due to house moves, redundancies, babies, lack of ability etc., so our own second-hand kits were also becoming competition to our business. This was something I had not anticipated but we still prospered, producing over 400 kits by the time we eventually sold our business to an American company.

Management at Ford became interested, and Sir Alex Trotman (World President of Ford) and Bill Camplisson (Director of Public Affairs) came to my home in Swansea in a Transit truck to take away a kit for Alex Junior as a means of bonding between father and son after an unpleasant divorce. We kept in touch until last year. Bill Camplisson and his wife Maggi are still in touch and stayed in my flat last autumn, 2005. Stuart Turner, Director of BMC and later Ford Motor Sport came to Swansea and asked if I was interested in building the prototype B200, later named the RS200. It was another challenge I couldn't resist. Stuart returned with designers such as Tony Southgate of American Shadow Racing and the Le Mans winning Jaguars, Mike Morton, John Wheeler of Porsche and two others whose names escape me for now. We were all upstairs in our

lounge on hands and knees with full-size drawings spread over the floor discussing details whilst Margaret listened in and took note between making cups of tea and coffee. It was another exciting time in our life to be in the company of people we had seen on TV and only read about in magazines – they had come to us! – such an honour!

There were more visits as work progressed before I was sent to Italy to meet Filippo Sapino, President of Ghia of Italy. He was a proud man who had made some beautiful prototypes in the past. He took me around the museum so proudly to show me his creations. Sapino was given the task of producing a full-size clay model of the new



To provide more working space, Ken rented a small workshop near his home.

short one-mile circuit. It was arranged that we would use the M4 at around 6am, when the police changed shifts. One of our test cars went half a mile ahead of me, and when it passed the police hump near Penllegaer he would touch his break light if there was a patrol car waiting. There was no warning light so I gave the GT40 its head and it quickly reached 165mph down and 160 mph on the return run. That afternoon I was caught driving a company Granada at 80mph on the M5.

My week at the Nürburgring, organised by Ford director and now very good friend Bill Camplisson, made me want a copy of the GT40, so after getting permission I employed a glass-fibre company to make a mould. To get the money for labour and materials I sold the Fiesta I had won as a suggestion-scheme prize, and added the £1,000 cash award. During the January I was asked by our archivist, David Burgess-Wise, if the car could be ready for the parade

At weekends we drove the GT40 to many places and shows including Prescott Hill Climb and two BBC filming sessions, one at Swansea and one at Bristol Airfield. One Sunday we took our GT40 to Fairwood to watch Freddy French fly his home-made plane, a Rand K2 that eventually killed him. Someone with a camera asked to take a photo of the car. About two weeks later a copy of the now defunct "Titbits" magazine had a picture of my car together with a write-up. This started much

interest. The Motor, Autocar and several other car magazines sent journalists and photographers to test drive and write reports. Soon we were being asked to provide kits.

Within a year of building my version of the Mk3 I had built and sold about 20 kits. Because I was still full time at Ford as Senior Engineer, Margaret ran the business. She was very knowledgeable on methods and parts required to build a kit and could answer many questions asked by

27



rally car. I asked for a few release angles to be increased to remove the mould from the clay before it was brought to Swansea for us all to start the prototype. Something Sapino said to me that has stuck in my mind ever since - "You may make very small changes but if you make major changes without my permission... I will hang you... not by the neck but by zee ballz!" I did make many changes but never told him. He was a great and brilliant man who wanted me to produce a road-going version of one of his concept cars so we would share the profits 50-50. Around this time I had the first of four heart attacks and was warned not to accept any more work. Soon after, Filippo died of a heart attack.

Within three months the prototype RS200 was finished, tested and approved by Bob Lutz who was then President of Ford Europe, then later became President of Chrysler. I drove and tested the car near Boreham, in Essex. With a 350bhp engine and four-wheel-drive it was very quick and handled well. It was designed with two suspension locations so the basic car could be used for rallying or, by raising the pivot points, could be used for group B racing. The multi-plate all-metal clutch was a pig; either it was in or out with nothing in between. At 4000 revs on a tarmac road the clutch was let in and with smoke pouring from the tyres the car could accelerate away very impressively. The noise of the rose-jointed suspension, straight-cut transmission gears and the engine was almost unbearable. All this work was going on while I kept my eye on the

GT40 production and also carried on my full time automotion and robotic-engineering job at Ford Swansea, and at the same time the renovation of a house and flats. All this meant time away from my family, and missing them growing into adulthood. The RS200 was very competitive and put up better times when taken to Portugal a week after the World Cup Rally had been run there.

A few months later I went to Athens (Glyfada) to see the Toyota works car and other rival cars during the Acropolis Rally. I

met Elios Bucolus, to talk about building a small utility truck for farmers, using engines and transmissions from the Ford Fiesta, and also a low profile all-terrain GRP vehicle designed to avoid radar (now called Stealth) and to be able to take two men close into a target, fire a missile and quickly withdraw.

It was to be a disposable vehicle, and the two occupants were also to be disposable. I later found out the assault vehicle was intended for Colonel Gaddafi of Libya, so I quickly declined. The Greek Government offered me a free factory building and wages for up to 30 men for 6 months - a





tempting offer but I already had too much on my plate to be able to accept it.

Back to the RS200: During a rally a car overshot, and killed four spectators and the driver, so rules were changed, and after all that effort and about £9,000,000 the car became redundant, but they became very collectable and were commanding £100,000 each. I sold one RS200 rally version over the phone to Fuminari Ishedo of Japan. The car was built at Tickfords and shipped by air to Japan without me seeing the car. I made £8,000 after a 20 minute phone call.

Things were getting back to normal again in 1983, when a request came to restore the Queen Mother's old Ford Pilot Estate. Apparently HM had been wandering around the old coach houses at the Sandringham Estate where many old cars are kept, some dating back to the Daimlers of the early 1900s. She saw the Ford Pilot in a sad state and asked her equerry to contact Ford to have it restored. It had good memories for her, as King George VI enjoyed driving it around Sandringham, and later Prince Charles and Princess Anne learned to drive in it. I still have a copy of the original receipt for the car sale.

I had it taken on a low-loader to our apprentice school and used two carpenters and four apprentices to carry out some of the restoration. The bodywork was stripped and replaced by "grown ash" timbers, from a Llandeilo timber yard, for the framing. After about three months it had all the chrome parts re-plated by Howiston of Ammanford. The body was completed and painted in the original Brunswick green, and it was ready to be returned to Sandringham. A request was made for me to drive it to Sandringham for a reception and presentation to HM. I had just got over a heart attack and did not have the urge to drive it all the way there. One of our drivers went in my place and when he returned he said what a wonderful time he had, a great lunch and HM was delighted with the estate car. A letter of appreciation was sent to Swansea and put on display in the plant reception hall, and may be there still.

In 1984 a new company came on the scene and built one car that was shown at a few motor shows including the



NEC in Birmingham. Unfortunately the two proprietors decided to meet at a hotel in Gloucester in what I took to be an attempt to by-pass me. I found such action deceitful, and it destroyed all my trust in them both, so at the first opportunity I took the moulds away to another GRP company at Cwmgors who made several good-quality body mouldings and were very pleasant and honest people to deal with.

We, as a family, had done well out of the company, so with worsening health it was a good opportunity to retire from stress. We survived and prospered while other UK companies fell by the wayside. In 1985 we supplied bodies and a chassis to Ray Mallock Racing, but they were different from the other companies by being skilled and professional, and they worked with integrity. They produced some beautiful examples at

Stuart Turner about the deal. He wouldn't give details but advised me to be very careful about my financial arrangements. I took this as a warning, and soon found that the Rondeau company was on the verge of bankruptcy. Worse was to come, as a few days after our meeting the tragic news was received that Jean Rondeau had been killed on a railway level-crossing near his factory at Le Mans.



Another venture involving one of the same pair and my son, Paul, was a copy of the Ferrari Daytona, that was to be marketed by another company, but things turned sour, and Paul lost a little money. They were not giving me the correct number of kits being sold, so I sued and obtained £2,500 awarded against them. Their company folded soon after. Similar unethical behaviour was

experienced with GTD in Dorset. They started as an agency and quickly copied bodywork and the basic chassis. They also went bankrupt later (twice) leaving some very unhappy customers behind. There were other companies who wanted involvement but I soon realised the kit industry had more than its fair share of rogue companies and individuals. Bit by bit we sold rights to Germany, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and ERA (?), America. Finally, in 1994, we sold the remains of K.V.A. Ltd to Integrity Motors of Florida.

£57,000 + VAT (*Editor's note: a history of Ray Mallock's GT40s can be found starting on page 22 of Fortyfication 113*). We worked closely together for about a year until all were sold. Ray Mallock has gone from strength to strength after preparing and racing GT40s, and Nissans for Le Mans, and is now preparing the Chevrolet touring world class series races.

In 1984 Jean Rondeau, who won Le Mans in 1980 and placed 2nd in 1981, asked us to supply twenty kits to be completed in his workshops and raced in a new series at Le Mans. After a meeting at his works, there followed a hair-raising drive in his Porsche down the Mulsanne Straight. He would overtake lorries and cars either side if there was a gap. With Phil Porter and Jean we lunched at the Mulsanne Straight restaurant where we discussed and agreed details. On my return to Swansea I had a call from

In 1993 new legislation came into force that made kit-building more difficult, and using renovated parts from scrap yards was out of the question. GT Developments went bust again and went down owing more money to various people. Out of the blue, from the United States came Jules Hoffman who offered to buy the jigs and moulds and the rights to use the name KVA. I was glad to see the company go because it was now putting more strain on Margaret and me. It was duly sold, and eventually we paid an enormous tax bill. It was all over, and we said goodbye as the last container went off for good, across the Atlantic to Integrity Motors of Florida.

The whole venture earned quite a lot of money but left me with four heart attacks, and, who knows, the stress may also have caused Margaret's stroke that eventually killed her. **KVA**

