

THE LIFE OF THINGS

Mat Trinca

photo: George Serras



BY the time you read this the National Museum of Australia will have made one of the most ambitious acquisitions in its history. As I write, the Museum is preparing to acquire two cars that were at the very centre of the nation's life in the 20th century.

One is the Holden Prototype No.1 crafted painstakingly by hand in Detroit, Michigan, at the end of World War II. This vehicle was the first physical expression of the model that launched Australia's car manufacturing industry, the Holden 48-215, better known as the 'FX'.

The other is an 'FX', chassis No.215, sold to the renowned Australian industrialist, Essington Lewis. Lewis, who was a strong supporter of the Australian car project and Director General of Munitions during the war, took delivery of No.215 on 24 February 1949 – the day before the cars went on open retail sale. That makes the car arguably the first Holden sold commercially in the country.

Both cars are connected to people and events central to the postwar reconstruction of Australia. They also serve as examples of the ways that artefacts, or goods, develop new meanings over time. This is what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai describes as the 'social life of things', a dynamic sense of an object's identity dependent on its context and relationships.

The history of the Holden Prototype is fascinating in that regard. As the end of World War II drew near, GMH managing director Sir Laurence Hartnett – also wartime Director of Ordnance Production – persuaded the firm's American chiefs to support manufacture of an Australian-built car. But they were reluctant to let the subsidiary undertake the project on its own and insisted that design work was done in the US.

Holden historian Don Loffler picks up the tale in his book, *She's A Beauty*: 'At intervals during 1945 and early 1946 GMH sent groups of its top engineers and technicians – thirty in all – from Fishermen's Bend and Woodville to the United States...A few were based in Detroit where they assisted GM engineers, led by Russell Begg, with the final design work and construction of the experimental prototype cars.'

Among them was a young engineer, Jack Rawnsley, of Melbourne. Jack recently told me that the trip was one of the most remarkable events in his life. 'It was tremendously exciting for a young fellow,' he said. 'We thought we were doing something terribly important for the country – this was while the war in Japan was still going on.'

'We felt like we were in the middle of things, doing something that was nationally important. Oh, it was fantastic really to be involved in a project like that and you couldn't help being enthusiastic about it all.'

In 1946, the car – and two later prototypes also built in Detroit – were shipped to Sydney for further testing. Understandably, GMH was highly protective of these three experimental vehicles and arranged for them to be driven to Melbourne under cover of darkness. Then followed exhaustive trials on a 138km circuit through rural Victoria. The car was really a work-in-progress at this stage, and improvements were made throughout the test program.

After proving and requisite tooling at GHM plants, production of the cars began and the first 'pilot' vehicle, often referred to as the

No.1 Holden, rolled off the assembly line on 1 October 1948. This historic car is highly prized by GMH and on long-term loan to the National Motor Museum in South Australia.

Generally, prototype cars are held by manufacturers or destroyed. Yet against the odds the Holden Prototype survived. After years of honest service, the car was sold without fanfare to a GMH employee, Arthur Ling. Ling used it for several years before selling it in turn to his brother-in-law Bill Vickery, based at Lakes Entrance, Victoria. Later Vickery – unaware of its history – traded it in on a new FE Holden.

Dealer Des Kelly was astonished when he discovered the car's true identity. Alive to its history, he kept the prototype for almost 40 years, intending to restore it. At one point the car was partly dismantled and the trim and interior fittings lost in a fire. Yet the most significant element – the hand-built body showing evidence of the design work in Detroit – endured.

Finally, in 1999, Gavin Strongman and his father Graham acquired the car for restoration. This marked another era in the car's life, when it was revalued as a collectable car by automotive enthusiasts. The Strongmans undertook a full restoration, detailing the car in its likely 1948 livery. After garnering awards at car shows, the vehicle was sold to Ian Metherall, of Springhurst, Victoria.

This is where the journeys of both vehicles – the No.1 Prototype and the 'Essington Lewis' Holden – intersect. Ian is related by marriage to the Lewis family, his wife Rosemary a granddaughter of the great man. In the 1980s, with the blessing of Lewis's daughter Mary Munckton, Ian arranged for the family's No.215 Holden to be restored. Years later when the opportunity presented, he snapped up the chance to purchase the No.1 Prototype and unite both cars.

Ian was amazed the two vehicles had survived: 'I just thought that these two cars had so much history, they were connected to so many important people over the course of their lives. They weren't just cars, they were part of Australian history. It's extremely unusual to be able to put together two cars like these.'

'I am overjoyed that I have finally achieved my long held dream of bringing the cars together for all current and future generations of Australians to enjoy and love. I always believed that these cars belonged to all Australians.'

For the Museum's part, both cars tell a wealth of stories about the industrial growth and domestic culture of Australia in the post-war years. They are physical evidence of important developments in Australian life, when a mass consumer culture and industrial capacity took root in the country. Today, the Holden car remains an economic icon and a popular favourite in the hearts and minds of ordinary people.

Yet these cars are also valued for the complexity of their histories. Their meanings have changed dramatically over time, through sale, collection and restoration. They reveal what happens to the identity of things or goods over time – how they are made, used, lost, refound and revalued by different generations. The history of these cars has never stopped, and now enters a new phase with their collection by the National Museum. 📍

Mat Trinca, Senior Curator, Collections and Gallery Development