



*Brian Porter and Sig. Gamba, his Italian navigator, Mille Miglia Commemorative Run, 1930 Le Mans spec Bentley 4.5-litre*

## OUR POST-WAR MOTORING SCENE

# BRIAN PORTER - CAPE TOWN'S DYNAMIC MOTOR MAN

By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*

For over thirty years an enthusiastic member of The Crankhandle Club (CHC) was one of the most powerful and energetic entrepreneurs in the Cape motor industry.

**B**rian Porter was born in Cape Town in 1936, the son of Dr Brian Porter, a well-known GP, and a nephew of Stanley Porter, whose motor business held the local Mercedes-Benz franchise. From a very early age he developed a passion for cars and could recognize most makes even before starting at kindergarten. He caused his family much hilarity when, after his first day at Sunday school,

his mother asked him whether he had enjoyed the morning. He replied "Jesus wants me to be a Sunbeam but I would rather be a Buick"!

After matriculating at Bishops, Brian studied medicine at UCT for two years. He raced a Triumph TR3 at Gunner's Circle and changed careers in 1957 to join Shell Oil as a trainee. At the time the oil companies were negotiating for single petrol brands to be sold at service stations and Brian acquired deep insights into the viabilities of the motor industry. Two years later he joined Stanley Porter (Pty) Ltd and under the expert tutelage of Brian Mannion, sold Mercedes-Benz's and DKWs. He was sent to George to manage a subsidiary, Stanmar Motors.

Long before this Brian had

developed a passion for old vehicles which he shared with his uncle, Christian (Boitjie) Marais, a well-known collector. Brian was an early member of the CHC, joining in 1958, and attended the Natters at Constantia Nek driving both Marais' 1913 Arrol-Johnston and his rare 1930 short wheel-base 4.5-litre Le Mans spec Bentley. Together they undertook the restoration of a 1928 Dodge Victory Six.

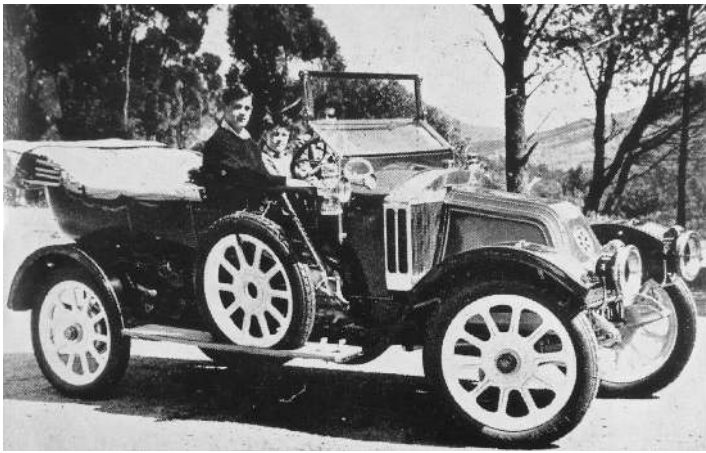
He learnt a great deal about car sales at Stanley Porter, but always aimed to set up on his own. He took the plunge at the age of 25 when, with a loan from Marais, he took over an empty Total service station in Main Road, Claremont in December 1961. It was shortly after Sharpeville and a terrible time to be setting up his own business.

With his wife Liz looking after the finances, Brian had to act simultaneously as mechanic and salesman while being in charge of admin, spares and the driveway. But through sheer hard work, he confounded the critics and broke even after three months.

His first sub-agency was with Fiat, followed by Chrysler. He opened a workshop in Vineyard Road, Claremont and bought a business in Observatory where he did pre-delivery services on new cars and repairs on used cars.

Boitjie Marais died in 1963 and Brian took over many of the old cars in his collection.

With a reputation for meticulous attention to detail, in 1967 Brian was awarded the Port Service Centre, the Shell garage in Newlands, followed shortly by the



*Brian, Adrian and Liz Porter in the 1912 Arrol-Johnston, 1959*



main franchises for Fiat, managed by Nigel Payne, and Chrysler. Within a few years the Brian Porter group had outlets in Sea Point, Salt River, Observatory, Cavendish Square, Paradise Road, Draper Street, Newlands and Parow.

His success had certainly not gone un-noticed. For the previous 40 years Robb Motors had specialized in British marques and been one of the most successful motor dealers in the Cape. Acquired by Eddie Small in 1926, Robbs had taken over the popular Austin agency which had carried the business during the difficult Depression years. In the 1930s Small had signed up other British marques and built prominent showroom and workshop premises in a prime position in Strand Street, the city's motor town. Suburban service stations were opened and a chain of dealerships was set up throughout the Western Cape. At the end of WW II, Robb's Holdings Ltd was listed on the JSE with Small retaining control as chairman and managing director.

Eddie Small died in 1949 and David Bruce was appointed MD. By 1965 Robbs was the Western Cape agent for Rolls-Royce, Bentley, and the full British Leyland range, including Jaguar and Triumph, serviced by large new workshops in Paarden Eiland.

David Bruce died in 1970, and Eddie Small's son Peter became MD. But by then British Leyland was losing market share at a time when competition from Japanese products was building up aggressively. Eddie Carter, the chairman of Robbs, resolved to take action. In 1974 he approached Brian Porter with an

astonishing proposal; to merge the quoted Robb's Holdings Ltd with the Porter Group with Peter Small and Brian Porter acting as joint MDs. Brian accepted with alacrity and moved rapidly to stabilize the business. A large 11 000 sq. m industrial complex in Kuils River was acquired and renovated as an internal preparation centre for both new and used cars. In 1976 he secured the sole Mazda agency for Cape Town; the Mazda 323 was announced shortly afterwards and sales took off.

By the early 1980s the name Robbs Holdings Ltd. had been changed to Brian Porter Holdings Ltd., with Brian as sole MD. The Porter Group was the largest motor dealership in the Western Cape and held franchises for Rolls-Royce, Bentley, BMW, Daimler, Ford, Isuzu, Jaguar, Land Rover, Mazda, Mitsubishi, Nissan, Opel, Porsche, Range Rover and Toyota. To expand nationally, the group purchased the Germiston Motor Group, operating in Randburg, Germiston and Alberton.

A division of Porters that really stood out was Prestige and Performance Cars on the corner of Strand and Bree Streets, selling new and reconditioned cars like Rolls-Royce, Bentley, Daimler,



*Brian Porter, 1976*



*Robb Motors in the 1950s*



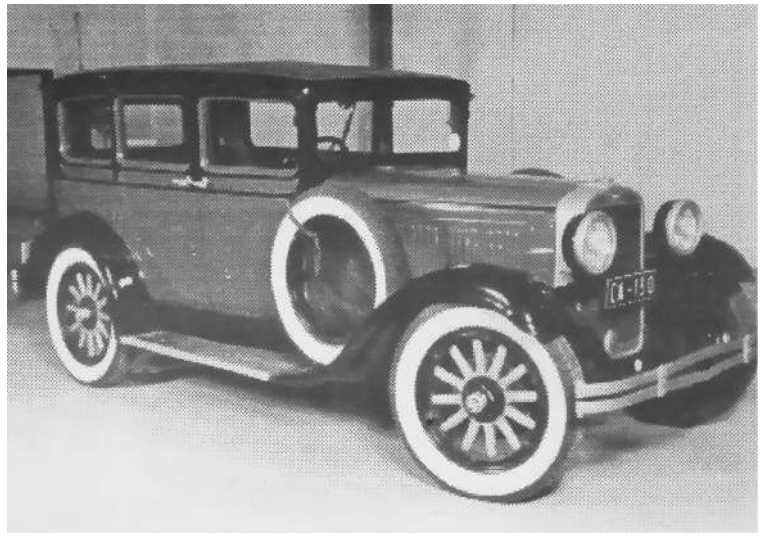
*Porter Robbs motor complex, Kuils Rivier, 1975*



*Porter Sigma, Bree Street, 1977*



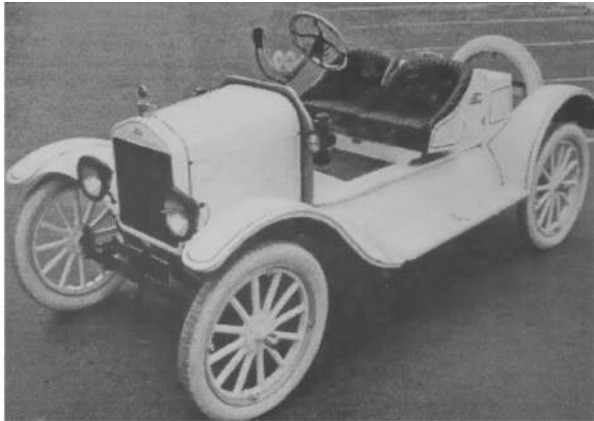
*Launch of the Mazda 323*



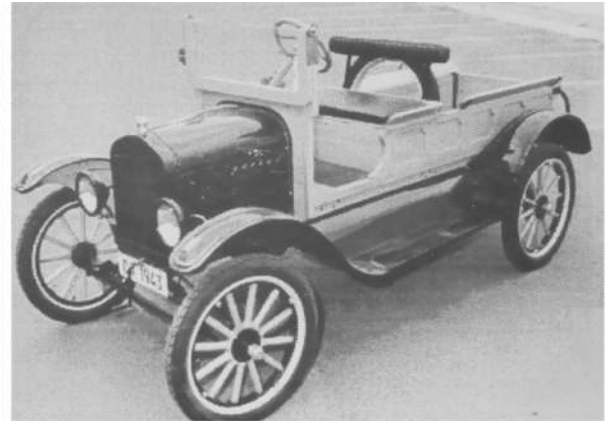
*1928 Dodge Victory 6*



*Adrian Porter, who died in 1997*



*1920 Ford T Speedster*



*1916 Ford T Woody Depot Hack*

Jaguar, Porsche and Range Rover. An adjoining showroom housed a museum of old cars, many of which were part of Brian's own collection. This included a 1904 Humberette, the 1912 Arrol-Johnston, a 1924 Fiat 501, the 1928 Dodge Victory Six, the 1930 Le Mans spec Bentley, a 1936 Rolls-Royce P3 and vintage Raleigh, Sunbeam and Norton motorcycles. His younger brother Adrian, the Group Service Director, was also a member of the CHC, with a collection of Model T Fords including a Woody Depot Hack, a Speedster, a Tourer and a Doctor's Coupe.

Brian travelled overseas regularly and enjoyed participating in both the London to Brighton Veteran Run in his Humberette, and the Mille Miglia Commemorative in his Le Mans Bentley. His relaxation was long distance driving at speed in his Porsche and three classic Maseratis. One of these, a 1964 Mistrale, was a prototype with an interesting history. It had been brought to SA by a pre-war local racing hero, Mario Mazzacurati, and sold to the ex-Springbok rugby captain, Jan


Pickard, who had made a fortune in the liquor industry.

Sadly, Brian was cut down in his prime when he was diagnosed with cancer and died in 1992 at the age of 55. He was disciplined to the end and planned his funeral

meticulously. He chose the hearse and requested that the tyres be changed and the hearse touched up and polished!

Survived by his wife Liz and sons Brian and Robert, Brian Porter was a great loss to the motor

industry, the Crankhandle Club and local old car enthusiasts.

*Acknowledgements to The Argus 31 March '88, the Automobilst Sept '92, CHC Chronicle Sept '92, John Dales, Andre du Toit, Gordon Bruce and Dave Lyons.* 



*Mario Mazzacurati with the Maserati Mistrale prototype, 1964*