

Brian's dilemma

■ By Ian M. Johnston

I received a phone call the other day from my old bushy tailed mate, Brian.

You will note, I referred to Brian as 'old'. The reasons for this descriptive adjective are three fold. One – we have known each other for many years and shared numerous stimulating adventures with our classic cars. Two – he is one of these rare specimens of humanity that is actually older than me, but to be honest, only just! Three – I use the term as a definitive complimentary interpretation. You see, when one achieves this golden epoch of senescent maturity, quite obviously one has acquired great wisdom and proficiency and can reflect fondly upon halcyon multifarious decades of joy and gaiety, particularly in our case, with the involvement of classic cars, plus (solely in my case) classic tractors.

Brian's telephone call

The purpose of Brian's telephone call was to inform me of his dilemma and to seek soothing words of wisdom, as to his correct procedure in handling the perplexity of the problem.

I have already referred to Brian's interest in old classic cars. But in fact he harbours an affection for an assortment of old and historic artefacts, and this recently has extended to classic tractors. Being a gentleman fostering a vast store of information, he is well acquainted with the fact that in days of yore, the Massey Ferguson 35 could lay claim to being one of the world's most successful tractors, in terms of the numbers sold to farmers in numerous countries.

Accordingly, Brian decided it would be infinitely more appropriate for him to own a thoroughbred British classic tractor, and in particular an MF 35, for the purpose of tending his immaculate hobby farm acres, than the alternative of investing in a brightly coloured modern (possibly Chinese) small acre tractor, complete with all the complexities of high tech doo dahs!

So, what was the consternation responsible for Brian's dilemma? Simply that the MF 35, over a period was powered by three different basic power plants. He questioned which of these would represent the most impressive as a collectable artefact? For after all,

as Brian has established himself as a shrewd and adroit collector of classic vehicles, he therefore has a reputation to maintain!

The Massey Ferguson 35

I felt obliged to point out to Brian (thus possibly confusing the issue) the fact that the MF 35 first saw the light of day in 1956 as a Ferguson 35. This was a replacement for the legendary Ferguson TE Series, or as it was popularly known around the world – The Little Grey Fergy.

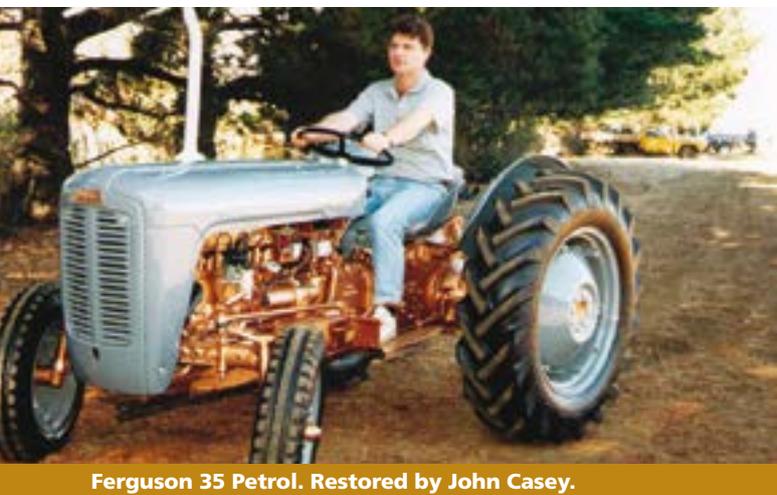
The colour scheme of the Ferguson 35 was a bronzy gold, complemented by a grey bonnet and mudguards. But this livery was changed in 1957 to red and grey when Harry Ferguson sold his enterprise to the Canadian firm of Massey Harris, which gave emergence to the name initially of Massey Harris Ferguson, then simply Massey Ferguson.

But I digress. Returning to the question of engines, coming under the Massey Ferguson banner, it was logical for Bryan to assume that all three engines would share a reputation of integrity. Yes, a natural assumption, one would conclude. But, regrettably such proved to be not the case!

Certainly the MF 35 Petrol engined version was an innocuous but not overly popular machine. It was equipped with the Standard designed four cylinder 34.5 belt hp engine. But farmers had attuned to diesel power, resulting in only a small percentage of MF 35 Petrol units being sold, the majority of buyers being hobby farmers who likely drove Volvos and considered diesel engines to be smelly.

Of interest to Brian was the fact that a first cousin of the MF 35 petrol engine also powered the Triumph 2000, plus the first of the TR series roadsters and the original Standard Vanguards.

In order to avoid a flurry of protesting letters, it is important I point out that many of the 35 Petrol units were fitted with a lower compression cylinder head plus a 'hot box' attachment, enabling the tractor to run on low cost vapourised kerosene fuel. Plus there were standard and deluxe versions of the



Ferguson 35 Petrol. Restored by John Casey.



Massey Ferguson 35 showing the Perkins 152 diesel engine. (IMJ archives)



Fiat 411R, serious competition for the MF35. Restored by Greg Yarnold.

tractor, also vineyard and industrial variations. But I was anxious not to overburden Brian's grey cells with trivial information, so I remained silent on these nugatory considerations.

British built Ferguson tractors were manufactured for Harry Ferguson by Standard Motor Company in a factory located at Banner Lane on the outskirts of Coventry, which explains the association with Triumph and Standard vehicles. The plant was later acquired by Massey Ferguson, for the continued production of the 35 range, plus other models.

The 23C

The original diesel engine fitted to the MF 35 was also a Standard product and designated the 23C. Frankly I shudder when my thought process strays in the direction of the non-lamentable 23C.

I all too ably recall my days as General Manager of Cumberland Tractors, the firm credited with selling the greatest number of Massey Ferguson tractors in the Southern Hemisphere – the majority of these being MF 35s! Almost daily, semi trailer loads of MF 35s with their diesel 23C engines, arrived at our Auburn premises, direct from MF's Concord West factory in Sydney. On average 1 in 10 failed to start and required the expertise and some 'unconventional therapeutic' treatment by frustrated mechanics in order to coax the delinquent tractors into life. Plus I cannot recall the number of service vans that were worn out prematurely, as a result of continually responding to warranty calls by angry farmers who had taken delivery of a diesel MF 35 powered by the 23C.

I acquainted Brian with the above information and, being a chap with a healthy inquiring mind, he requested I explicate to him the reasons behind the technical inaptitude of the four cylinder 23C.

Where to begin? I could explain to Brian such things as timing chain premature wear, ditto with pistons and valves, but the prime reason why the majority gave problems from day one, was the fact that the design of the indirect injection combustion chamber coupled to a questionably high compression ratio of 20 to 1 rendered the unit difficult to start from cold. This applied particularly in cool weather, and a lesser degree in warm climates.

Accordingly, my advice to my old friend was to not even consider an MF 35 powered by the four cylinder 23C. Particularly, with the passing of time, the situation would only have degenerated.

The Perkins 152

Despite failing to publicly acknowledge the fact, Massey Ferguson knew they had a major problem on hand with the 23C.



Allis Chalmers D270, a marketing failure. Restored by John Rutland.

In Australia, sales started to decline, mainly due to the growing popularity and reliability of the recently introduced Fiat Model 411R, which was being vigorously promoted by Fiat Australia as a direct challenge to the MF 35.

Back at Banner Lane a momentous decision was taken in 1958. Massey Ferguson acquired one of the world's most highly prestigious diesel engine manufacturers, F. Perkins Ltd. of Peterborough, England. A brilliant manoeuvre indeed, as this instantly provided MF with an entire range of modern, economical, high speed diesel engines.

Possibly the most outstanding and rugged of the Perkins range was the three cylinder D152 38.4 hp with a compression ratio of 17.4 to 1. This outstanding engine very quickly replaced the four cylinder Standard 23C. Whilst not as silky smooth as the 23C, the D152 provided instant starting in even Arctic conditions and a considerably higher torque figure, which translated into a 6.150 pounds drawbar pull at 1.17 mph. An outstanding achievement for a lightweight tractor! The MF 35 had been virtually reborn.

The D152 engine proved so successful, that in various configurations it remained in MF tractors for several decades.

No longer a dilemma for Brian

Brian is now totally relaxed about which MF 35 to purchase. In fact he was enticed to inspect an MF 35 just a couple of days ago. Apparently and quite remarkably the owner was unaware of which engine was in his tractor. Brian soon found out! With the aid of Aerostart the 23C (as it turned out) was eventually coaxed into life and proceeded to splutter and blast forth columns of putridity and evil smoke in such volumes, which undoubtedly caused acid rain to fall upon New Zealand the following day!

Brian is a patient chap and states he will happily await until a respectable Massey Ferguson 35, powered by the splendiferous Perkins D152, comes his way.

Tail piece

The problem for Massey Ferguson with what to do with the remaining 23C engines was solved, when an astute salesman off-loaded the entire stock to the UK branch of the Allis Chalmers company. Anxious to include a British made diesel engine into its tractor range, a new model – the AC D270 – was released for both home and export markets. Almost certainly due to the inherent inefficiencies of the 23C, it was a marketing flop, resulting in Allis Chalmers being forced to close down its UK manufacturing operation.