

Manx Buggy

Serial Thriller

Recidivist Buggy owner Steve Collis explains why for him there's only one man for the job

Words: Mike Pye Photos: Dom Romney

"The way to get the best out of people," explains the printer maintenance engineer from Wiltshire, "is to let them do things their way." I wouldn't necessarily agree with that in all walks of life but, when it comes to building cars, there's definitely some truth in it, because if you try to force someone to build a car they don't like themselves, they simply won't have the same passion for what they are doing, and the end result will almost certainly not be as good.

45-year-old Steve is, while perhaps not unique, certainly in a select group of *VolksWorld* readers who has never driven a Beetle. That's right, despite owning VWs since the early '80s, he's never even sat in a Beetle, having begun his VW career with a Mk1 GP Buggy and, aside from borrowing a Fastback once, he's only ever owned Buggies since. "I've always been into custom cars of the '70s, you know, all the wild stuff, as well as things like Suzuki sand bikes. I suppose I just like weird stuff." That predilection for the odd led Steve some seven or eight years ago to buy Hot Lemon – the Renault V6-engined Rat Buggy built in the late '90s by Kevin Cooper. "With around 150bhp and 220ft/lbs of torque, that was an all-or-nothing car, that. If you gave it a bootfull, it handled like a go-kart, but around town it was a bear as it had

a really heavy clutch. Plus you couldn't go anywhere in it as everyone wanted to stop you and look at it." Various other Buggies passed through Steve's hands after that, including a LWB Volksrod and a couple of Classic Manx, but the turning point was when he saw Mark Dryden of Flatlands Engineering's own Sky Blue Metalflake Manx, as seen on the cover of *VolksWorld* in September 2006. "I remember seeing that car at the *VolksWorld* Show that year and thinking 'wow!' that's the standard I want, so I called Mark up the following week and said 'I hear your Buggy is for sale?' 'No,' he replied, so I said, 'good try, wasn't it?'" he recounts with a smile.

Try as he might, Steve couldn't get Mark (or his partner Maggie, for that matter) to part with the Buggy, so eventually he resorted to his next question. "Okay, how much to build one just like yours then?" As luck would have it, Mark already had one in stock just like his – the one he had built for that accident-prone short-arse on *Top Gear* to hoon around a beach in. "It was great, but every time I drove it I ended up having to Hoover sand out of it. I know that's what Beach Buggies are supposed to be for, but I like my cars to be clean, really super-clean, so I called Mark up again and asked how much it would cost to build a brand new one, just like his one." They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and Steve had every



intention of imitating Mark's car, right down to trying to get him to sell the unusual Pacer steel wheels off his own car for the new build. "I wasn't dead set on a particular colour, but it had to be 'flake', and it had to be left-hand drive. I drive a T5 van every day for work, and I like my fun cars to be different. Every time you get in a left-hand drive car, it just feels different."

Making a Mark

Eventually, after many 'phone calls, a deal was agreed between the two of them which saw Mark take the 'Top Gear' Buggy back in part-exchange against a completely new build – not just any old build though, the car Mark had set aside as his own next project. "I had got to know Mark pretty well by this point, and I knew the quality of his work, so I told him I didn't want to see any pictures during the build, but just to tell me some ideas over the 'phone and to get on with it. It wasn't really a gamble as I knew it would be right."

This is where we come back to Steve's opening statement about getting the best out of people. As anyone who builds cars for a living will tell you, they've always got 'the next one' lined up in their heads, and this was very much the case here. Talking with Mark about this Buggy, it's almost as if it's his own, as he was given completely free rein to build the car he wanted to build. "There's a lot of things on that Buggy that I was going to do on my own car," Mark explains. "Just little things, but it's the little things that are important." Like the Type 3 gauges in the dash, the switchgear relocated to the tunnel, the laser-cut and polished nerf bars and the unique treatment of the roof.

The Brilliant Golden Orange colour was already chosen for Steve as that's what the Buggy had been moulded in,



▲ The seats in Steve's Buggy were re-trimmed in black vinyl with diamond pleat inserts and white piping by Brockwells in King's Lynn. That steering wheel is a Grant, of course.

but this was one Mark had picked out for himself as he felt it was one of the best ones he'd seen come out of East Coast Manx's moulds – his pick of the litter if you will. "It was one of their very early bodies and had a real nice, even 'flake' in it. When I had the opportunity to buy it, I did, then put it away for a rainy day," Mark explains.

It's still been lacquered over the gel coat, as all Mark's show Buggies are, to really make the colour pop, and he's done his neat trick of smoothing the sides, so

the glass-fibre mat can no longer be seen. Likewise the interior – he'd already had that stitched up to use with this body, so that was simply a matter of taking it off the shelf and installing it.

Where he really went to town was on the floorpan and the detailing. "Of course it escalated, these things always do," explains Steve, "not so much in cost, more just in what Mark was doing with the car, because he was so into what he was building.

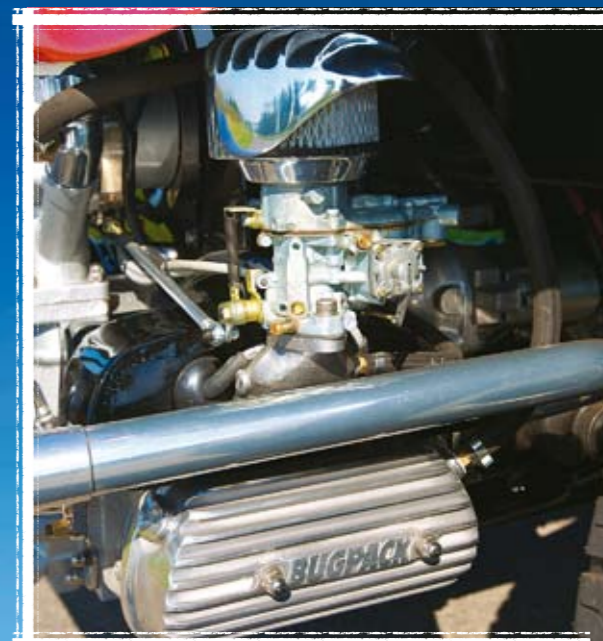
"He'd call me up every now and then

and say 'I've got an idea for this or that', or 'what do you reckon to this?' In the end, I told him to just go ahead and do it, build it as if it were your own car, and that's exactly what he did. The only thing we couldn't agree on were the wheels." In truth, they were in complete agreement about the wheels, it was just that Mark wouldn't sell Steve his wheels, instead just telling him 'something will turn up...' True to his word, something did eventually turn up, at the Pomona swapmeet in California.



▲ Type 3 clocks are a natural for transplant surgery – they look great and give you everything you need.

And as soon as Mark set his eyes on them, he knew they were the wheels for Steve. Yep, you guessed it, another pair of 10 x 15-inch Pacers! The matching pair of 6 x 15-inch fronts came from Kinky Mick, which just left Mark with the task of sourcing a suitable set of tyres. Rather than have another set of redband tyres custom made, as he had for his own car, Mark chose to have the same company in the States make a one-off set of dual whitebands for Steve's car, insisting that the tread patterns had to match front and back. The 195/60s and 275/60s cost a cool £850 landed but, as Mark put it, "we had to have 'em, they make the car." Even things like the choice of wheel nuts show Mark's no-compromise attitude to building cars. When he found the studs were slightly



▲ Instead of cheesy chrome doo-dads on the motor, Mark fitted some cast ali valve covers and air cleaners from Charlie Price's Vintage Speed in the States.

"We had to have the tyres, they make the car"



◀ The roof on Steve's car is a bit of a one-off. It started life as a standard Manx hardtop, but has since had the sail panels cut off and is fitted using hidden mounts behind the back seat. Like the side panels, it has also had the grain effect smoothed out of it and been repainted.

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too long to allow him to use the closed-head nuts he wanted, he didn't change them for something easier to fit, but had some 3mm spacers machined so they fit. You'd never notice, but you'd know it looks right.

Everybody's happy

"It's things like that that make the difference between a car that's built right and one that's just okay," Steve says enthusiastically. "A lot of people have no idea how much work goes into the cars you see on display at The VolksWorld Show."

And talking of The VolksWorld Show, this was where Steve had agreed to take delivery of his latest Buggy but, on the Thursday night of the week before the show, he received a rather fraught 'phone call from Mark. "There's a problem with the floorpan", he told me. I asked how bad and Mark explained the painter had polished through the edges of a couple of the ridges when he was flattening and polishing the 'pan. I told him if it was a problem, not to worry about getting the car to the show, but by the Friday night it was repainted, repolished and back in his workshop. By the Sunday night it was a complete built, running car and was at the show less than a week later as promised." We should perhaps point out here that the car had been fully mocked up beforehand, but that's still damn impressive going, whichever way you look at it. "That's the thing with Mark," continues Steve, "He'll always go the

"He'll always go the extra mile, and he certainly did with this car"



extra mile, and he certainly did with this car. The only way he'll ever let you down is if something happens that's beyond his control."

Needless to say, when Steve saw his new Buggy for the first time at the show, he was knocked out. "I knew it would be good, but it exceeded my expectations in every way. Let's just say I got my money's worth out of Mark on this one, I really did."

And contrary to what you might be thinking, Steve does use his Buggies as well. In fact, he's currently got two Flatlands-built Manx in his garage, but this one is the apple of his eye. "It just looks really clean and simple – that's what I love about it – but there are tricks every place you look. The only problem

▼ Power comes from a brand new 1641cc Remtec Street Power motor, fitted with a pair of dual 34ICT Webers and a ceramic-coated Manx Sidewinder exhaust. Unless otherwise asked, Mark always uses generators, feeling they're more in keeping with the simplistic ethos of a Beach Buggy.

with it is that, even though we've had a great summer this year, I just don't get to use it as much as I'd like, and then every time I use it I have to clean it. But that's just me, I really dislike seeing nice cars dirty."

So Steve never did get to buy the car he desperately wanted, but there's no doubt he did get the next best thing. In fact, in some ways he's got the better car of the two as this one has some of the neat details Mark hadn't thought of at the time, or didn't have the opportunity to do on his own car the first time round. So all in all, he's happy, Steve's happy, even Dom, the photographer, was happy as the weather graced us with the perfect day to shoot a Buggy. Don't you just love it when a plan comes together? **VW**

