

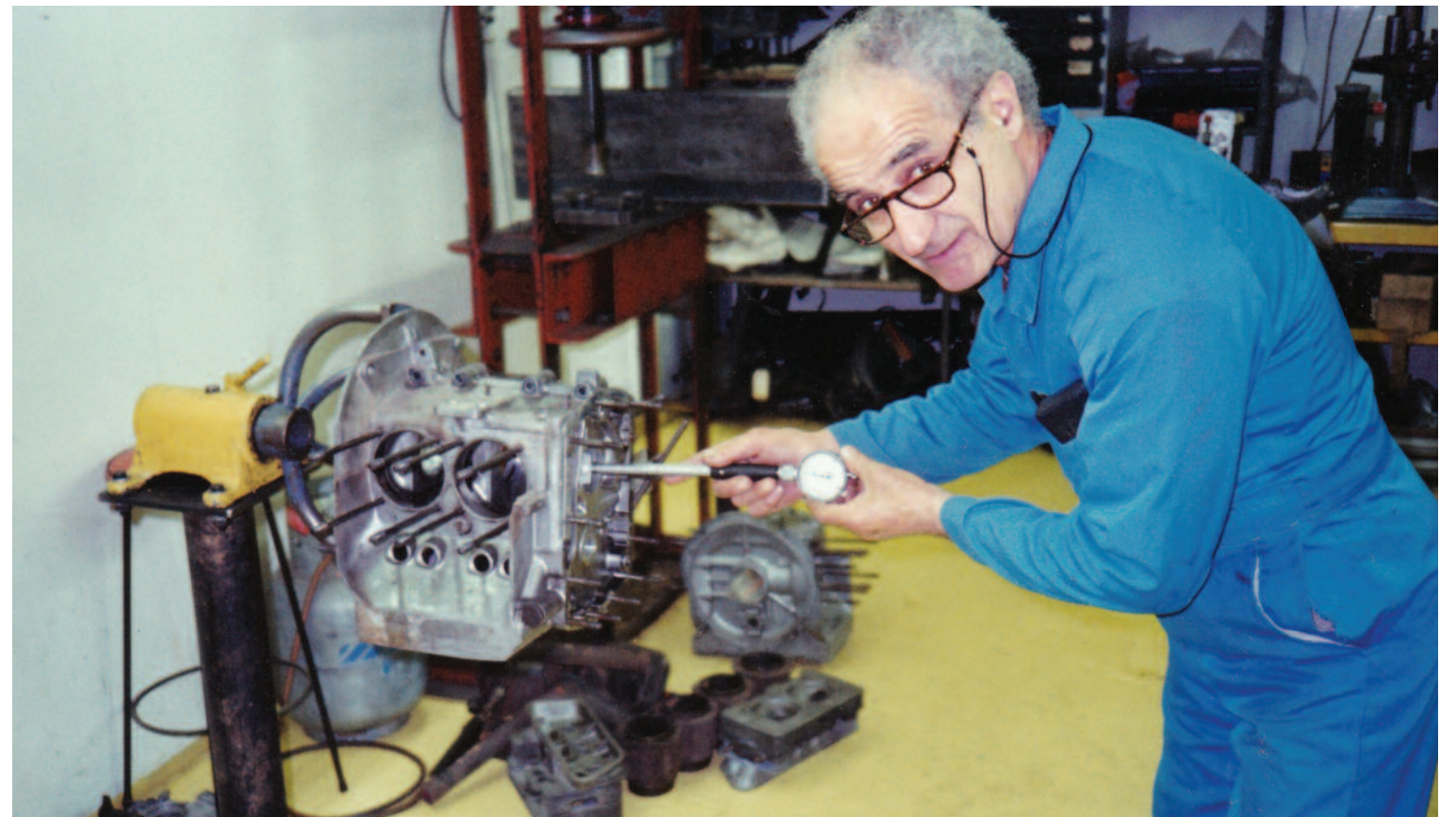


# JOHN GREGORY

## AUSTRALIA'S OWN MR 356

Anyone who is anyone in the early days of Porsche in Australia will know the names John Gregory and Spyder Automobiles – and as John's reputation and that of his workshop grew in stature, it spread to just about every English-speaking country of the world

Words: Richard Holdsworth Pictures: The Mike Jacobson collection



*Above: Bringing a touch of magic to his work. John Gregory's workshops were recognised as official Porsche service and bodywork centre by the factory in Germany. The company carried the name Spyder Autos*

Today, sixty years on, Spyder Automobiles is very much alive and kicking with his son-in-law, Mike Jacobson, continuing the good work, putting best service and highest standards first for the Porsche world Down Under. My Aussie wife, Heather, and I are chatting over a coffee in Melbourne with Mike and his partner, Lorena, writes *Richard Holdsworth*, and I am reminded of the fact that in 1965 John Gregory's men repaired my Speedster after some errant driver clouted the car after a sunny day's shopping at South Melbourne market. The damage was not great and John and his team had the car back on the road in perfect condition before you could say *Air Cooled Rules!*

*Below left and right: Spyder Autos operated from Mt Alexander Road, Flemington, Melbourne. It is where the author was directed after his Speedster was involved in a road accident. John Gregory's expertise was brought to more than just Porsche 356s*

John Gregory was born in Lebanon, but in 1952 moved with his family to Melbourne where he became a motor mechanic with Devon Motors working on Fiat, Simca and Alvis cars. Aged just 19, he had completed an apprenticeship with a Ford dealer in his home country and had this uncanny knack of knowing what went on under the bonnet of a car as if he'd spent a lifetime in the trade. He was also fluent in five languages. Within a few years he had his own operation, a service station in the Melbourne suburb of Flemington, run with his brother and cousin and specialising in service and repairs to Volkswagens. The operation was named Carrera Motors.

Then came a chance meeting one sunny day in May 1956 –

a meeting that changed John's life. Norman Hamilton, the man behind Porsche in Australasia, drove onto John's forecourt and they started chatting – chatting about the rather unique 356 that Norman was driving.

Years before, Norman Hamilton, a Melbourne entrepreneur, had been on holiday in Austria and had espied this sleek sports car carrying the name of Ferry Porsche and was convinced the cars would find an enthusiastic following Down Under. Norman Hamilton went home, made an approach to the factory in Germany, ordered two 356s and established Hamiltons as the first export dealer for RHD Porsches – the year was 1951.

And on this day in 1956, when Norman swept onto John Gregory's garage forecourt, this also brought a sea-change to John Gregory's life. The two got talking and, inevitably, the engine lid was raised and John's head was soon among the machinery. It was air-cooled and also like the Volkswagen Beetle that John knew so well: it was rear-mounted and bore so many mechanical similarities to the People's Car.

At that time John's mode of transport was a side-valve Ford Club Coupé but he ditched the hot rod in favour of his first Porsche, a 356 Speedster, just the fifth Speeder imported by Hamiltons. But the car was not just purchased – John had to know more and it was not long before he had it stripped bare to find out what made it tick. The love affair really began.

In 1959 John bought a second 356, a Cabriolet, and started







taking on the service and repair of Porsches alongside his Volkswagen work. Over the years, he had specialised in the running gear and chassis alignment of cars and was confident that he could contribute to the Porsche world that was taking hold in Australia. John returned to his friend, Norman Hamilton, and through him was appointed by Porsche in Stuttgart as an authorised repairer and service agent – a position he held until 1975. The Porsche side of his business took the name Spyder Autos.

John's company progressed and Spyder was where Porsche owners headed when they were in trouble, as with my own experience when the Speedster was clouted at an intersection on the busy St Kilda Road. I called Hamiltons and asked, 'Where should I take the car for repair?'

My Speedster had been hit on the front near-side, fortunately missing the wheel but the impact spun the car around wrenching open the bonnet and my weekly shopping (a bachelor at the time) spilling out onto the road. The man at Hamiltons replied, 'Gather your shopping and take it home – but take the car to Spyder Autos. You can't do better than see John Gregory.'

John's empire grew, taking in Chassis Tec, specialising in chassis straightening and component re-jigging using jigs

designed and developed by John so that a severely damaged car would be returned to its owner as good as new.

The Gregory family had bought a property at Bacchus Marsh some 40 miles north of Melbourne on the road to Adelaide and John had in his mind retiring there, which he did years later. At Bacchus Marsh he spent his time scouring the country for early air-cooled Porsches, ultimately assembling a collection of over 20 of the 356 model and, later, a handful of 911s as the new Stuttgart car started filtering through to Australia. By now John was married and for their honeymoon he and his wife, Jean, covered 5000 miles touring Australia – it was no surprise that it was in one of John's collection of 356s, a Cabriolet.

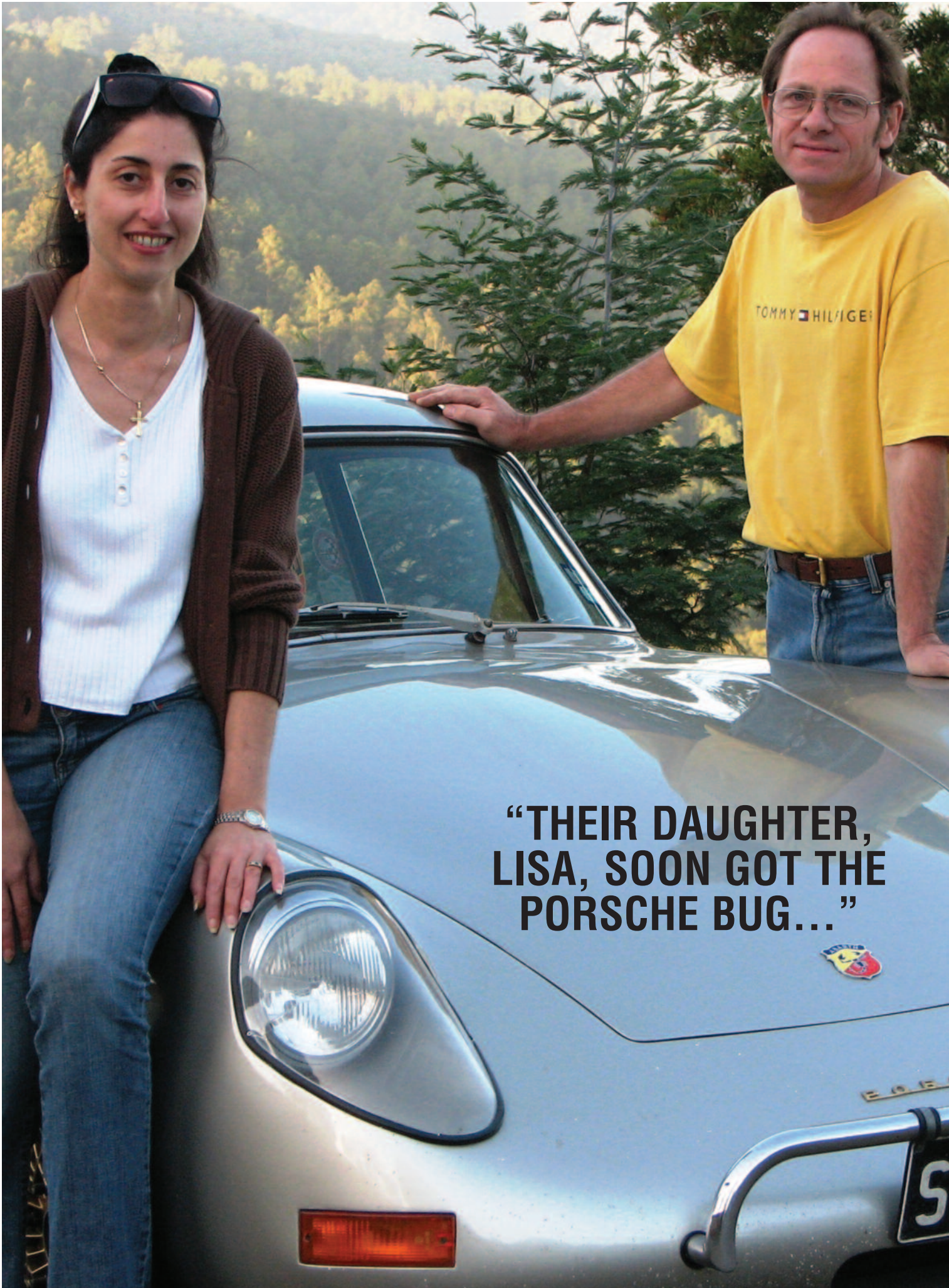
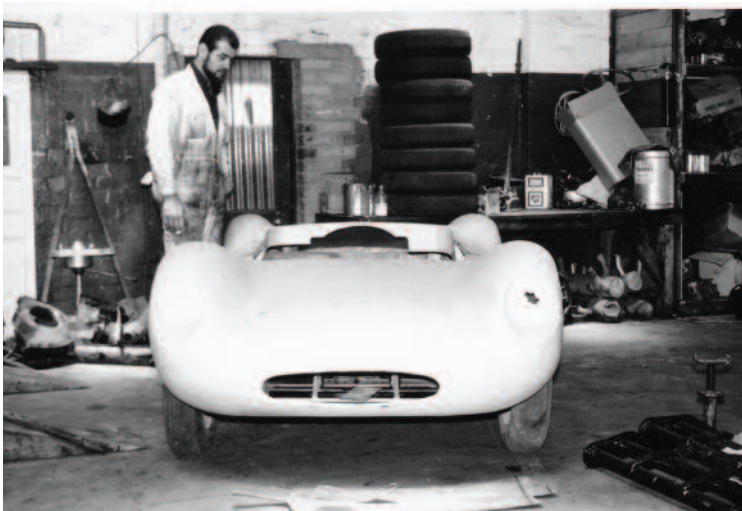
But simply collecting and restoring Porsches never quite brought satisfaction for John and the lure of helping other Porsche owners was too much; he moved Spyder Autos back to Melbourne. The year was 1983 and normal service resumed. Their daughter, Lisa, soon got the bug – being dropped off at school each day in a variety of Porsches and she could hardly fail to be the toast of the schoolyard years later when she was old enough to get behind the wheel of a 356 of her own.

It may seem strange that the Land of Plenty has a recession but Australia experienced such a phenomenon in the 1960s, but

*Above and right: John Gregory's daughter Lisa with husband Mike Jacobson. Naturally it was the Gregory Abarth-inspired 356 that carried them off on their honeymoon! Sadly, Lisa passed away in 2011*

*Below left: John Gregory's first Porsche and the fifth Speedster to arrive in Australia. It started a life-long relationship with cars carrying the Porsche badge*

*Below right: The John Gregory hillclimb special was built from Porsche and Volkswagen parts. John and the car regularly chalked up best times of the day*



**“THEIR DAUGHTER, LISA, SOON GOT THE PORSCHE BUG...”**





such was the expertise of John Gregory and the support of his faithful customers that he survived, employing 20 men and handling new car preparation for Hamiltons, after-sales and warranty work. But the stress of running the business, sometimes working 16 hours a day, took its toll and John relinquished his Porsche service authorisation in the mid 1970s, moving back to the family farming property. But, once again, retirement was not for him and he was back in town by 1983 re-purchasing his old premises and workshops of Carrera Motors in the Melbourne suburb of Flemington.

By this time his wife Jean and daughter Lisa were active in the business and when Lisa married Mike Jacobson, Mike became part of the team. In 1988 the business was moved to the Melbourne suburb of Moorabbin and business thrived.

John Gregory's health had been suffering for some time and he succumbed to Multiple Myeloma in March 2003; he had worked up to Christmas Eve, 2002, showing typical loyalty to customers by completing outstanding projects and work.

Lisa had started a sign business, Affordable Sign Systems, running this alongside Spyder Automobiles until the decision was made to move to Warragul, some 70 miles to the east of Melbourne where Spyder Autos operates to this day. Lisa was well known in the Australian Porsche world – and beyond the shores of Australia – and when she died of cancer in October 2011, words of sympathy came from many quarters of the globe. One was from America. Dave Bouzaglou of TRE Motorsports

is the organiser of Targa California – an annual three-day rally of 850 miles across some of California's best sports car roads. The rally is for pre-1975 cars and air-cooled Porsches feature heavily. And such was the name of John Gregory and daughter Lisa that Dave Bouzaglou used the 2012 event as a fund raiser for breast cancer with the funds being split between Australia and the United States. Mike Jacobson accepted the invitation to travel to the 2012 rally and became navigator for Chuck Miller in his 2.7 Carrera; they have stayed firm friends to this day.

Mike and I are still chatting and it seems appropriate to take a break as I find out the next move and how this brought Mike Jacobson into the John Gregory family, his daughter Lisa, and Spyder Autos.

Mike's training had been as an apprentice at a major Ford dealer in Melbourne and he explains: 'The Ford dealer had a rich history in motorsport and I cannot remember a time when motor racing of one sort or another was not part of my day. By age 18 my interest had grown and I joined a sporting car club where I met John Faulkner and helped him at race meetings with his 3.0-litre Ford Capri Touring Car. Then I was enlisted by David Cannon with an RS2000 Ford Escort. It was at this time I first started competing in club events then progressed to open race meetings.'

Mike tells us that after his apprenticeship he was seconded to Brian Wood Ford, another dealer that was a major motorsport supporter and it was not long before he was

*Above: John Gregory and his skilled panel-beaters adapted a 356B T5 and turned it into a tribute to the Abarth 356 Carrera quad-cam aluminium-bodied racers*

*Below left: Interior of the 'Abarth' 356 – note RHD for the Australian market*

*Below right: If only Porsche had adopted this design for the rear of the 356! How much easier engine access would have been. Plenty of room, then, for the installation of the MFI-equipped 911 engine...*







competing with his own Mk1 Cortina GT. ‘But I had the misfortune of writing off the Cortina on the local track at Sandown. It was time for me to build and develop a Ford Escort with an RS2000 engine and by 1982 I won the Victorian Sports Sedan Association under 2.0-litre Championship, and I repeated that in 1983.”

For the 1983 season, Mike replaced the 2 litre engine with a Mazda rotary power plant and also developed the chassis. This work on the RS2000 saw him competing at National Championship level. He still had to work to keep the money coming in and enable him to keep racing and in 1986 he started at City Mazda as workshop foreman and then two years later was promoted to service advisor for the dealership.

“The year 1990 was another big break as I was invited to drive for the Porsche Club team competing in the 24 hour race at the Winton track near Benalla in Victoria. The car was a 2.8 RS ‘clone’ owned by Mike Tankard, and this is where I met Lisa who became my wife in the following February. To cap it all, we won the race and Mike and I completed 12.5 hours of the total 24 hours of a relay race where the team has up to six cars and they change drivers during the race. We led most of the time and had a great weekend! 1990 was also the year that Peter

Jackson held a series of race events searching for the next generation of champions. I entered and constantly set the fastest time during the day but missed out by one point on going through to the end of the competition.

‘October of that year was when I joined John and Lisa Gregory at Spyder Automobiles and the rest is history. At Spyder restoration work is at a very high level – we have had a Concours d’Élégance-winning 356A Speedster and we have helped prepare Mike Tankard’s 911 2.8 to compete in the Australian Porsche Cup which he won in 1992 by a record margin. Now I take on the role of test driving clients’ competition cars helping them get good results including many club and state victories in hillclimbs and sprint events. Much of our business is advising owners and preparing cars for competition and we are pleased to say we have many successes to our name.’

While Spyder Autos is well known for looking after Porsche cars, it also takes on other European makes including Mercedes-Benz and BMW. And the doctrine of John Gregory in giving the very best service and workmanship continues unabated. If John were to look down from on high, I think he would be mightily pleased! **CP**

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*Below left: Mike Jacobson’s Escort was unbeatable in the Victorian State Sports Sedan championships, 1982 and ‘83*

*Below right: Sharing with owner Mike Tankard, Mike Jacobson drove the 2.8 RS ‘clone’ in the Victoria 24-hour event at Benalla in 1990*

