

DIY

The finished 6.5 metre motorhome, 14 years in the making, parked at the beach with Young Nicks Head in the background.



LIFE ON THE OPEN ROAD

Les Spicer talks to Justine Tyerman about his marathon project to build a motorhome from scratch, and the five wonderful years he and his wife Yvonne had on the road. He kept meticulous records of the various construction stages.

PICTURES © Les Spicer

It took 14 years to construct, countless hours sourcing and recycling materials and a considerable amount of money but the pleasure and freedom Les Spicer and his wife Yvonne derived from their motorhome was priceless.

Les began the project in 1983 when he decided he needed a way of retaining his tradesman's hand skills after he was advised his engineering foreman's role at the new Gisborne Hospital was about to change.

"I was told I would be managing up to 12 fitters so with this in mind, I decided I really needed a hobby, something to work on with my hands rather than just organising other tradesmen," says Les who was born in Hastings, moved to Gisborne in 1950 at the age of 17 to start an engineering apprenticeship at JJ Niven, and later worked at Cook and Gisborne Hospitals for 24 years.

"A friend was building a motorhome and another friend a scale

model railway engine but neither of them managed to finish their projects before they passed away. I considered both and decided a motorhome would be more use in the end."

Les and Yvonne gave the project a lot of thought before beginning. "We decided our motorhome needed to have a minimum headroom of six-foot but not be too high in case of wind so I had to keep the floor low. I wanted to keep the weight under 3500kg to allow it to be driven with a car licence. We decided we needed at least two comfortable beds, long enough to allow a good night's sleep, and comfortable seats too.

"For longer-term living we required adequate storage space and sufficient power and water to survive independently for up to three days."

Les started the construction process with the purchase of a 2-litre Austin Princess motor from an auto-wrecker. The motor came from a vehicle that had only done 33,000 miles and had been written off. The next stage was the purchase of an Austin 1800 from which he retained the running gear and engine mounting.

Using his engineering and welding skills, Les constructed the chassis and aluminium framework over a period of 18 months. He kept his ears and eyes open for materials he could recycle.

"It's amazing how much perfectly good material is discarded by our society, simply because people cannot see beyond the original use," he says.

For insulation, Les bought fibreglass ceiling batts from the demolition of the old Common Shelton building. The kitchen cupboards were made from the shower linings at the old Cook Hospital while the mahogany plywood previously graced the BNZ manager's office.

The bathroom and wardrobe walls were household flush doors in an earlier life. These provided strong, light-weight walls ready for covering with vinyl, he says.

The whole floor was secondhand kauri marine ply and he fabricated the shower floor from a flat stainless steel sheet.

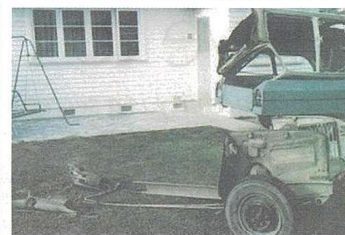
"For water and wastewater tanks, I purchased old sinks from the scrap metal dealer for \$5 each, bolted two together and 'hey presto' — a stainless steel tank complete with a hole in the top for a filler and another in the bottom for fitting a drain.

"The front windscreen was two sheets of specially-cut safety glass. The windows either side of the driver's seat also had to be safety glass to comply with regulations, and I had the rear window made of the same. All other windows were polycarbonate which was slightly more expensive than safety glass but they helped to keep the vehicle weight down.

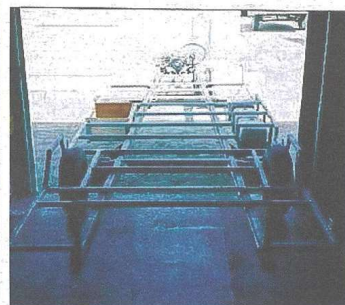
"After much searching around car wrecking yards for suitable tail lights I located new lights made by Hella."

Yvonne taught Les to sew and he made all the interior upholstery. "We were once told by a couple of caravan owners that the secret to living in a confined space was to have everything do at least two things.

"So once finished, our 6.5m motorhome effectively had two bedrooms, two lounges, two dining rooms, a travelling cabin, kitchen,



The Austin 1800 from which Les retained the running gear and engine mounting.



To the top of the 5" x 2½" RHS, Les welded 1¾" square RHS for the cross members and perimeter frame. To the mild steel frame he welded stainless steel plates to rivet the aluminium framework to, in order to reduce the risk of electrolytic action.



The aluminium frame was assembled and welded together inside the workshop (except the corners). The sections were then removed, the chassis wheeled outside and the frame reassembled.



Les and Yvonne Spicer in recent times.

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