

Rod Fulton has put a relic from a long-forgotten chapter in Australian motoring history back on the road, writes **Geoff Strong**.

THE old green car that pulled in behind my wife's Toyota outside a Mentone shop was more than just a cute curiosity. It turned out to be the only one of its kind still on the road anywhere in the world. Most significantly for Australia, it represents a path not taken. Had it been we might have had a different industrial future.

I knew it was a Hartnett as soon as it came to a stop, because I had seen one in the Scienceworks Museum, but I wasn't expecting to see one being used for the shopping.

Sir Laurence Hartnett was a feisty Englishman, who, after a career in Singapore, ended up head of General Motors in Australia in World War II. He was among a group of influential industry leaders who became convinced we needed a car industry to give us the manufacturing backbone we had so desperately lacked when war broke out.

He wanted an Australian-designed car for local conditions, but this ran contrary to GM company policy. Hartnett had a falling out with management and left the company about a year before the first Holden rolled off the assembly line at Fishermans Bend. Marketed as Australia's own, it was effectively a Detroit automotive clone.

The little green car I saw has the name Hartnett on a chrome badge above its grill. It was one of only 123 built when Hartnett subsequently tried to go it alone and build a cheap car for the worker in the early 1950s. The project was prematurely killed off by a postwar steel shortage and according to the car's owner, Rod Fulton, the hostility of the Menzies Liberal government.

"Hartnett was seen as having been a bit too close to the former Labor prime minister Ben Chifley," he said.

It is a pity it failed. We might have had a very different car industry today.

ROD FULTON, Hartnett owner

Under the car's bonnet is a two-cylinder, 600cc air-cooled motor, smaller than most motorbikes now on our roads. But the cars zooming along the Nepean Highway these days have more in common with the Hartnett than the original Holden — it was so far ahead of its time.

Compact, fuel-efficient, front-wheel drive and with full independent suspension, yet able to seat four, it was designed by a French automotive designer Jean-Albert Gregoire, but only small

numbers were built in France. It even has an engine mount designed to drop the motor on to the road in a front-end collision instead of crushing the occupants, a safety feature other makers came up with only a decade later.

Fulton took me for a drive and not surprisingly the car is slow and chugging by modern standards, and because of the door design the front seats feel cramped. But it matches the fuel economy of the frugal Toyota Prius. More surprisingly, a 1953 motorsport magazine Fulton found shows the result of a 1953 two-day rally where the Hartnett came first in its class. The car that came second — an MG.

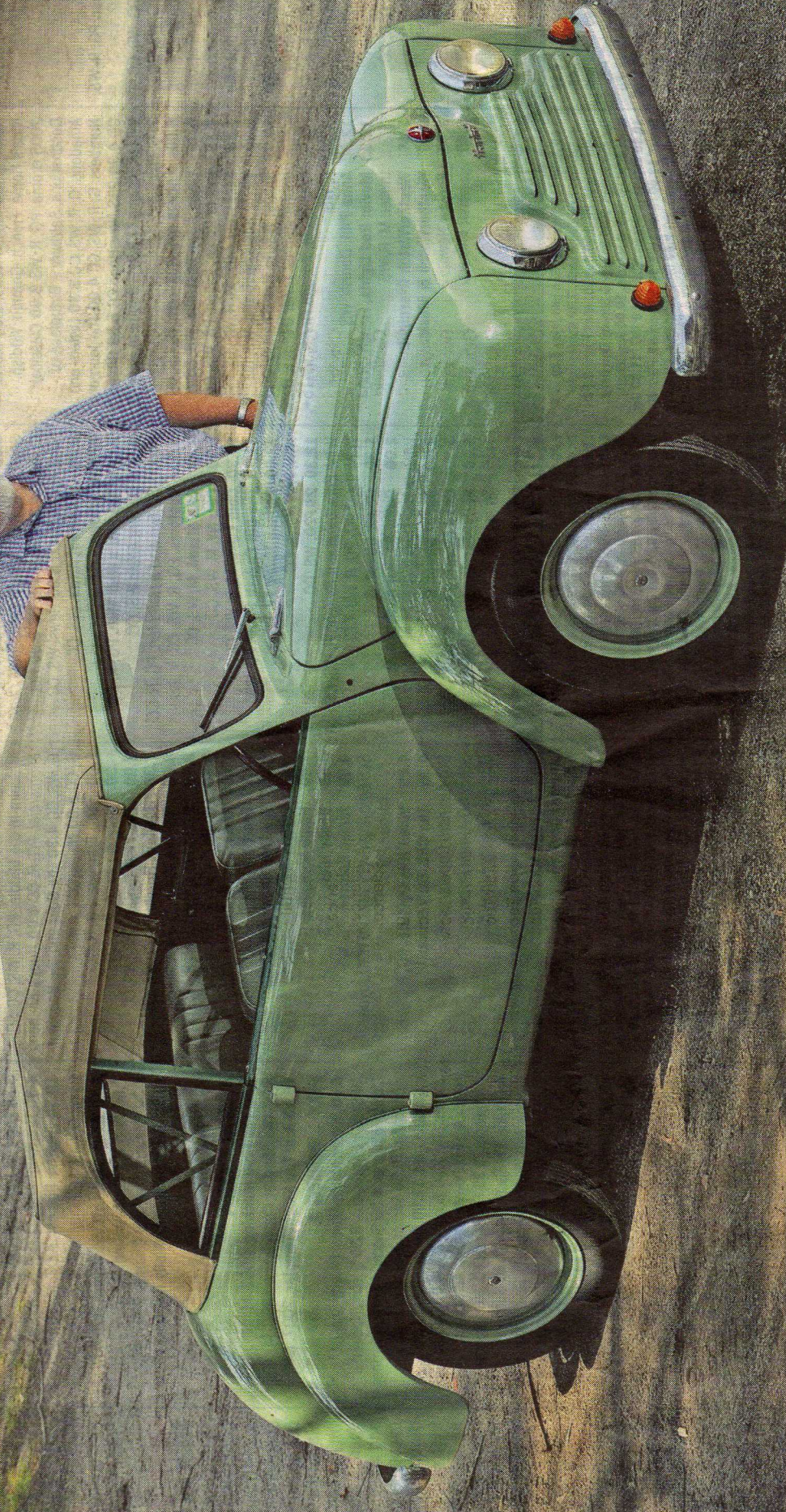
"It wouldn't have won because of its power," said Fulton. "It would probably have beaten the others because its suspension would give it better handling on bad roads."

The car was originally bought by Fulton's uncle and was unused for many years until Fulton began restoring it about a decade ago, a task that took about a year, mostly in his backyard workshop.

"Most people don't know what it is, they think it is a Morris Minor, but it is an important part of Australia's history," he says. "It is a pity it failed, they had orders for 2000, but the government stopped them getting the steel. We might have had a very different car industry today."

Fulton said the car was insured for \$45,000, although he can't exactly go and buy another one at the dealers. But courtesy of the Hartnett family, he does have another complete car stashed away ready to restore one of these days.

The road not taken



Rod Fulton's restored Hartnett was one of only 123 built in the 1950s.

PICTURE: SEBASTIAN COSTANZI