

Best of both worlds

Is it a truck? Is it a car? No, it's a Ford Ranchero. the tale of a vehicle that combines the best of both worlds.



SCAN BY ERIK BOATTAIL MEETING PHOTOS

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BACK in 1957, when the Ranchero first hit the streets, Ford claimed it was a revolutionary new idea. According to them, never before had anyone thought of turning a passenger car into a pickup.

This was a bit of an exaggeration, since Ford in Australia had actually been doing just that with 'utes' for well over two decades. Still, in America it was original, and what's more, the public were finding a place in their driveways for this, the latest motoring fad.

The first Rancheros were based on the 1957 Ranch Wagon, although most customers opted for the 'custom' variant, this being a cut-down version of the higher spec Del Rio Ranch Wagon.

In its debut year, over 20,000 of these curious new vehicles found homes. From this point onwards, the Ranchero was to change each year, progressing with Ford's range of passenger cars. Throughout the Sixties, sales were erratic, falling to about 10,000 in 1964. In the Seventies the Ranchero gained a new lease of life, 40,000 being sold in 1972 alone. This change in fortune was largely due to the fact that men with perms and flares were fast adopting vehicles like the Ranchero as fashionable transport. It was the perfect vehicle to cruise down the highways in, listening to your favourite Doobie Brothers' album on the eight track! As the decade neared an end, so did the Ranchero and in 1979, with sales down to 20,000, it was finally pensioned off.

Throughout its life, the Ford was always overshadowed by its main competitor, Chevrolet's El Camino. This was launched in 1959, and despite the late start, soon proved to be a major commercial success. It outsold the Ranchero every year, on some occasions by an impressive three to one. Needless to say, with relatively few models built, the Ranchero was to disappear fast. Most ended their days in breakers' yards in the mid-Eighties, and today are rarely seen on America's roads at all.

Nevertheless, with his immaculate 1971 model, Alan Blunt is doing his best to keep this unique piece of America's motoring history alive and well in Britain. His Ranchero 500 can often be seen in southern England, where he regularly uses it as everyday transport. Alan is heavily into Husky racing, and although he can't quite fit all 12 of his dogs in the back, the pickup is the perfect transport for his two rigs.

It's hard to believe that it's used as a working truck; in fact, judging by its condition, it's difficult to believe that it ever leaves his garage. The paintwork gleams, the chrome shines and the interior looks as though it has never been sat in. Alan explains that at some point the inside must have been totally restored. It's had a new headlining, door panels and carpet fitted, and a previous owner has even gone to the bother of carpeting the pickup bed too!

When Alan first took ownership of the Ranchero, it was a similar story with the underside also: 'If you'd stood it on its nose you could have seen your reflection in it!' jokes Alan. Since then he's had the good sense to prepare the vehicle for the English weather, spraying the underside with a protective coating.

The reason for the Ranchero's stunning condition is all thanks to its numerous caring owners, and the favourable climate in Charlotte, North Carolina, where it spent most of its life. Although Alan's unsure about its entire history, what he does know is that at some point it was owned by a Deputy Sheriff. It might not be equipped with flashing lights and a

siren, but the law-enforcing owner has certainly left his mark on the Ranchero all the same; there's a gun rack behind the seat! While across the Atlantic, unlike so many other similar sports utility vehicles, it lived a very sheltered life, clearly being used as a car rather than as a workhorse. It eventually clocked up some 100,000 careful miles before finding its way onto the forecourt of a North Carolina car dealer. It was exported to England a couple of years ago, then after covering a further 500 miles, it caught Alan's eye at the Summer Nationals at Billing. It was just the kind of American oddity he was looking for, and before too long a deal had been struck against his '79 Trans Am.

An 'oddity' is the correct word for this beautiful machine. Have you ever seen another one on our roads? Alan has seen later versions around, but never another 1971. Just over 20,000 of them were made, 12,678 of which were 500's. Having said that, Alan believes that his might be even rarer than that.

According to him, the roof once had a vinyl covering, which along with a few other unusual features help to identify it as a much more unusual Squire. He would really like to do a bit more research on the model, but it's difficult to find the information. Can anyone recommend any publications, or is there a workshop manual sitting in someone's garage?

This isn't the only American car outside Alan's house; he's also the proud owner of an amazing 1966 Pontiac Grand Prix which has already graced the pages of *Classic American*. Although he has always had a fascination for American cars, it's only recently he's indulged in the passion. 'My ex-wife

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didn't like noise' he explains, 'but since the divorce I've bought all the Yanks I want and a dozen dogs!'

Although most '71 Rancheros came equipped with a six-cylinder lump, this one is blessed with a 302cu.in. V8 with a two-barrel carb, which is certainly capable of making some noise.

Apparently it's capable of leaving some rubber on the tarmac too. Alan doesn't mind admitting that he's partial to putting his foot down at the traffic lights, then glancing in the rear view mirror to see the look of surprise on the GTI driver's face behind! Not only is the engine quick off the mark, but apparently it's an excellent all-round performer too. According to Alan it's good for about 120mph, or at least it



LEFT: SUCH A MINT INTERIOR WOULD BE UNUSUAL IN A WORKING TRUCK
RIGHT: ALAN AND HIS TRUCK ON THE ROLLING PLAINS OF WEST SUSSEX
CENTRE: POWER COMES FROM A FORD 302 FITTED WITH A TWO-BARREL CARBURETTOR



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would be in Montana, where there's no speed limit!

In recent times the Ranchero has had a lot of money spent on it, and consequently drives like it's just left the factory. It feels solid, the steering is precise, and apparently is an absolute joy to drive. Alan is quite a mechanic, and has done a lot of the work on his Grand Prix himself. However, with this one he hasn't really had the chance to put his skills into practice. Most of the perishables like brakes and hoses had all been replaced before he bought it, so other than giving it a service and changing a corroded battery holder, nothing much has had to be done.

Alan is keen to point out that if, or when, parts are needed, he has no problems ordering them. He uses Gasoline Alley who are just a few miles from his home. They stock all of the car's normal service items and will happily order anything more obscure from the States.

As for seeing the car first hand, you might be hard pushed. Although Alan is a regular on the show circuit, he finds it difficult to make up his mind as to which of his classics to

bring along. More to the point, we wouldn't be surprised if there's another car in the Blunt fleet to choose from before too long. Although he can't rate the Ranchero highly enough, if you've got a similarly aged El Camino for sale, don't be surprised to hear from him. Ford Ranchero versus Chevrolet El Camino, now that would be an interesting road test!

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