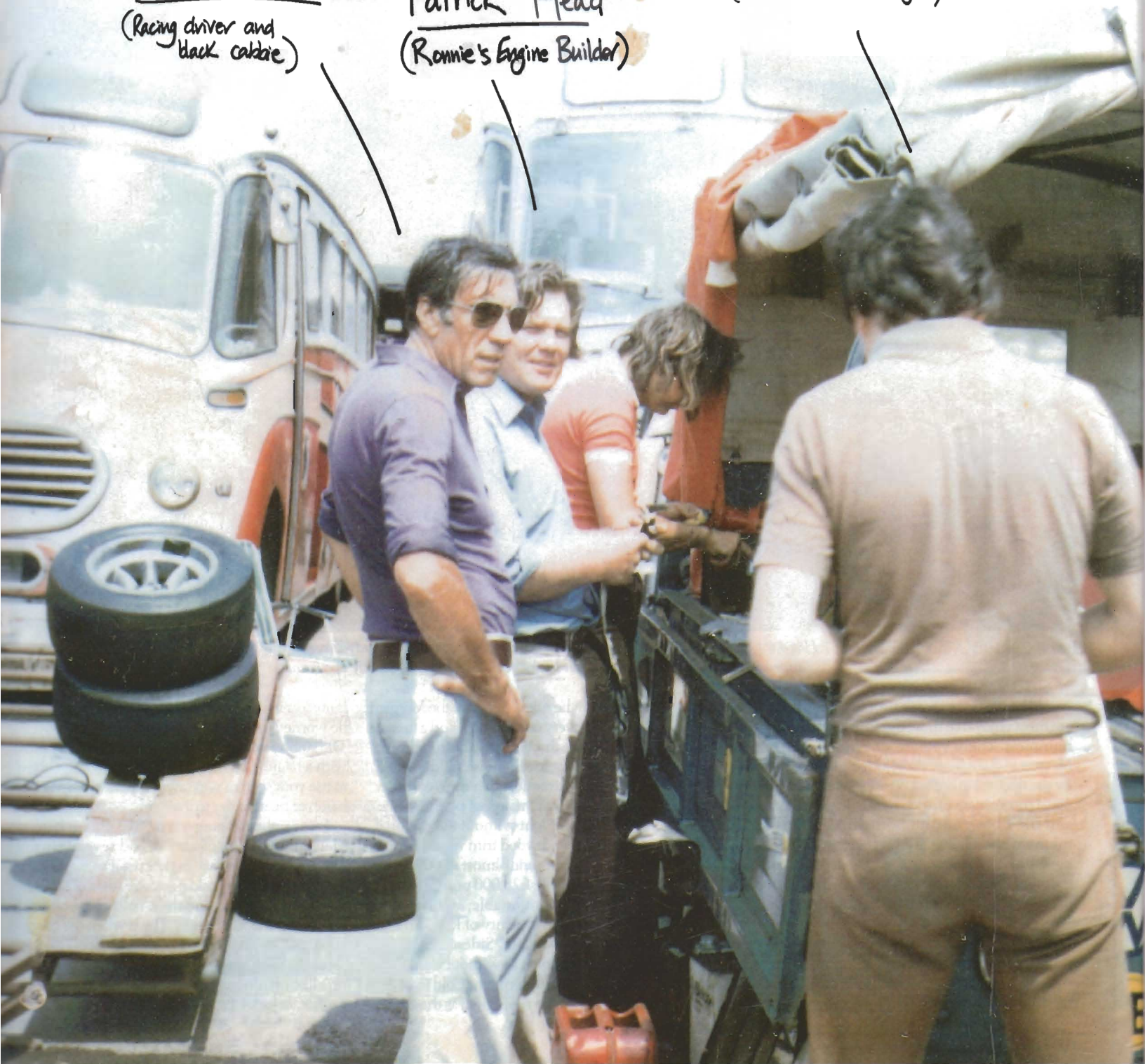


How to get a Head in motor

Ronnie Grant
(Racing driver and
taxi cabbie)

Patrick Head
(Ronnie's Engine Builder)

John Barnard
(Ronnie's Chassis Designer)



racing (and a Barnard, too...)

THEY WERE TO BE TWO OF THE WORLD'S BEST RACE CAR DESIGNERS, HE WAS A LONDON CABBIE. SO HOW DID RONNIE GRANT PERSUADE PATRICK HEAD AND JOHN BARNARD TO BUILD HIM A RACE CAR? ADAM COOPER FINDS OUT

* * * *

... and John's dad

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO HAVE BOTH PATRICK HEAD and John Barnard in your pit, fussing over your car? Forget Niki Lauda, Alain Prost, Ayrton Senna or Michael Schumacher; only one man can have had the two greatest Formula One technical gurus of the era working with him at one and the same time.

The bloke who brought Messrs Head and Barnard together was Ronnie Grant, a larger-than-life south London cabbie and garage owner who didn't even sit in a racing car until he was over 40. Ronnie's enthusiasm pulled both men into a project which, to this day, they look back on with great affection. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the remarkable story of the Taurus SuperVee – chassis designed by J Barnard Esq, engines prepared by P Head...

His name may not be familiar to many readers, but Ronnie was something of a hero when I was a lad. My best mate at school told me that his Uncle Ron did a bit of racing, and to a 10-year-old this was mighty impressive, even more so when I saw his transporter parked down the road. The vehicle in question was a humble VW pickup, its faded paint peppered with stickers. But it was the nose of a real racing car that poked out under a tarpaulin, and that's what mattered.

Now an energetic 72, Ronnie has given up taxi driving. But he still works an 11-hour day at his garage business in the Clapham railway arches which were home to his racing team.

Ronnie was 42 when he started to race Formula Vee in 1966. Despite his late start, he was no slouch – he beat Brian Henton to win the final round of the British championship in 1970. Two years later he made the move up to the more powerful SuperVee cars.

When he heard that Lola had an available chassis, he did a deal with factory manager Derek Ongaro.

"He had a Formula Ford which was being converted to a SuperVee," recalls Ronnie, "but he didn't have an engine. I phoned him up said 'I've got an engine, you've got a car; can we get together?' He said 'Bring the engine up and we'll have a look'."

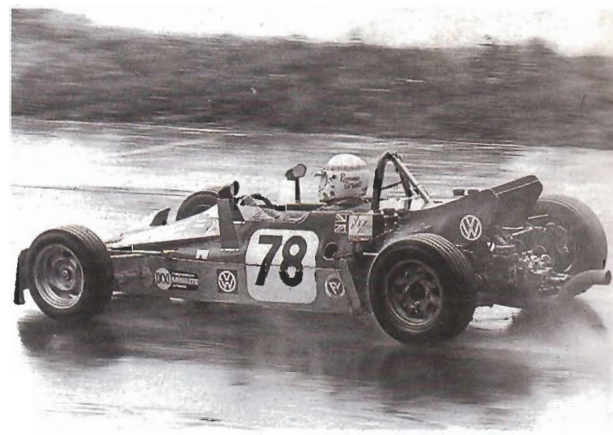
In those days Lola was a hive of activity, and among the staff working under Eric Broadley's guiding hand were budding designers Patrick Head and John Barnard, who were stationed on adjacent drawing boards. Despite their proximity, they only rarely worked on the same project.

"We worked quite closely together on the T290 sports car," says Head today, "and the T280, which was the 3-litre version – unfortunately it was the

car in which Jo Bonnier got killed. Generally John was quite good at having his own projects, and not working with other people on them! I joined a year or so after John, and was drawn into whatever project was going on. It was never decided whether he was my boss or I was his boss...

"We were told that a chap called Ronnie Grant was sending an engine up to be installed in a car, and they were going to go out and do some testing. Somebody said that this guy was quite good, but that he was 48 years old or something.

"I remember John and I almost falling about. It shows how dreadful the youth can be – I suppose we were in our late 20s at the time. The idea that somebody could be a quick driver when he was 48 was a bit of a joke to us. And he was a taxi driver as well. I think John went to the first test at Snetterton, and took to Ronnie straight away. He thought he was a real character, an amusing fellow. I think he was quite impressed with him as a driver as well."



Ronnie gets to grips with the Taurus in the wet during 1974

"It was John's job to get it all up and running," explains Ronnie, "so he'd come testing with me. I wasn't a very good test driver at the time, just coming off Vees, I didn't really study all that hard. Gerry Birrell used to garage with me – he also used to live with me on and off – and he set the old Vee up, and I used to just get in and go."

Barnard was happy to use some of his own time on the project, even after he left Lola to join McLaren – for his first unheralded stint – in 1972. Patrick also left Lola at around the same time, with a vague plan to go into business preparing SuperVee engines in Huntingdon, but, "about a week after I started the place burned to the ground.

"So, I was working in a railway arch in Battersea, which was only about a mile from where Ronnie →

HOW TO GET A HEAD IN MOTOR RACING (AND A BARNARD TOO...)

was in Clapham. I started working part time for him at Trojan. At that time I also started building a boat. I was a little bit itinerant..."

Through Grant, Head then had a second crack at the engine business. Suddenly Ronnie had both John and Patrick helping in his pit at races.

"I based myself partly at Ronnie's place," says Head, "and I was doing SuperVee engines though not really in any commercial sense. I'm not sure if I ever asked Ronnie if it was OK – I just plonked myself at his facility. He was very good at keeping me out of trouble. There were lots of characters around the place, taxi drivers called Coldhands and Lefty."

"The only reason he stayed with me was that I had an engine brake where we could try the engines out," says Grant. "We'd be in there at 11 o'clock at night revving these things like there's no tomorrow, and we used to get the neighbours from the next road phoning up and complaining about the noise!"

Barnard recalls the engine testing well: "Ronnie came up with this – and I put it in quotation marks – 'dynamometer'. The back of the arch was like the black hole of Calcutta, and Ronnie decided that this was the place for his dyno, so he cleared it all out.

Patrick would spend days and nights just fiddling and farting around. He was driving a van of some sort – it may even have been a Minivan – and there were a good few nights when he'd finish off sleeping in the back of this thing..."

At the same time, there was progress on the chassis front. The Lola worked well, but Barnard reckoned he could make it better.



Ronnie Grant – a late starter at 42, who raced until 65 in 1990

"He wanted to change it from a spaceframe into a monocoque but keep the suspension and so on," says Ronnie. "It would be much better, because the original Lola was a cobbled up Formula Ford thing."

"The blokes that built the chassis were three of the fabricators who worked for Lola," says Barnard. "They were moonlighting, and we found this little barn or garage around Huntingdon way somewhere. I did the drawings and they knocked a couple of chassis out. Actually it was quite a nice little aluminium monocoque. I think he had a big shunt in it at one time, and it stood up very well."

"It looked bloody good," says Ronnie. "I'd never seen a proper monocoque up close. It was a difficult job, it wasn't like he could just draw a new car. He had all the suspension and everything else, and he had to make that fit his monocoque. He used to come over every night, and if something didn't fit he'd alter it. It was bloody marvellous really. John was so far advanced even then. They worked all over the winter, and then we had to find a name for it. We called it a Taurus because John was born in May and my girlfriend Sheila was the end of April."

Could the designer have named it a Barnard? "I could have," says John, "but it didn't sound right to me. Yes, I suppose there was this thought that we could start selling them and that kind of thing. The

problem was we didn't have time."

John's father was also always in tow, making bits. Head recalls Barnard ordering his old man around.

"I tended to be the one who directed operations," says Barnard. "My dad and I used to have the odd dust up – that was quite amusing for the rest of them, the way we used to go at it."

But was the Taurus any good? Patrick Head is not so sure. "If the truth be told, I don't think that it actually made the car any quicker, though it probably made it a little bit safer from Ronnie's point of view."

"It worked alright," says Grant. "I won a few races with it. It was a bloody good car, and got better and better. It progressed a lot. John altered it, and Patrick got more speed out of the engines. Patrick was very cautious – he'd run something for two days on the brake to make sure it really worked. But we did have a valve bending thing when he accused me of over-revving the engine. I said, 'No, you're taking too much metal off!'"

"I don't think the engines I produced were particularly good," smiles Patrick. "They were good in many areas, but the camshafts were poor."

"John never got a penny for all his work," says Ronnie. "I paid for the bits, but he never ever said to me 'I've worked 40 hours this week, I want so and so.' And nor did Patrick. The only thing Patrick ever said to me was 'Can you change a cheque?', and he'd write out a cheque for cash or whatever. Patrick didn't need to be paid because he had his own money, but John was struggling, really."

"I don't think they used to argue. John was 'We'll do it that way,' and Patrick said, 'Oh well.' But Patrick was going to go places. He was very well educated, miles above my head. I knew that some day he would make it."

Grant would race the Taurus all over Europe, often in GP support races, until he sold it in 1978. It went to Sweden. Inevitably, Head and Barnard had long drifted away from the Clapham arches, although they remained in touch as their careers progressed. In 1979, Patrick's Williams won the British GP. A year later John's Chaparral took victory in the Indy 500.

"We were all nobodies," says Barnard, "coming up, scratching away. We went racing because that's what we liked. Patrick came from a very different background to me, but basically we lived and breathed racing cars, and that's what it was all about. You never considered Ronnie's age. He's got such a vitality about him, and even today you don't consider Ronnie's age. He was a quick driver – we weren't quite so sure how quick he was! – but you just did the best you could. It was educational, looking back on it. You were learning all the time." ❏



Ronnie and Taurus under the Clapham arches around 1976; son George behind. Right: John Barnard tries the Taurus for size at Brands, 1974, under Grant's eye.



By 1978 the car had a March-style nose added, left – and a 'TAXI' sign; compare with 1975 shape at Thruxton, below



Below: British GP 1983. Patrick Head steps over from the Williams pit to talk to former teammate Grant, on the grid for the F3 support race

