

The Flying Spencer Seven

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By Peter Tait (Published here with permission from Boating New Zealand)

Not seven feet, not seven metres but seven horsepower!
The Flying Spencer Seven, painted a delicate shade of yellow and styled for the 'Fifties in plywood, turned heads wherever it went.



John Spencer's 'new' car prior to modernisation

The late John Spencer, studying architecture in the late 1940's was known as a designer of buildings and perhaps boats, but never cars. His family like many others were still to get back on their feet after the hardship and shortages of the war years. Money was extremely tight. Somewhere to live took priority over the acquisition of all the gadgets, fridges and washers etc that are considered to be so necessary today. There was absolutely no show of a family car for a student son to borrow and he never fancied bikes.



Framed up and ready for the 'chines'.

No car and no money would have represented an insurmountable problem to most but to young John it was a challenge. His mind, always a labyrinth of ideas, struck upon the thought; why not buy a cheap 'old bomb', one that was mechanically reasonable but with a clapped out body? If he could design a building and build a boat, making a car body should not be too much of a problem. After discussions of great length and a thorough

exploration of all possibilities it was decided that an Austin Seven had all the attributes; reliable if you found the right one, cheap to run, easy to fix yourself, and the right sort of chassis to fasten a new wooden body on to. It would be a Spencer designed and built body. What's more and here is the bonus, the new body could be the latest shape, just like one of the shiny new models from the car magazines. His experiences with boatbuilding would come in handy. It would be mostly plywood over a timber frame and stringers, not dissimilar to a boat left upside down.



The Flying Spencer Seven at Lake Tarawera in 1951. John is at right.

The old body stripped off easily and framing up went well, It only took a few weeks and turned out very smart with no roof and a fold down windscreen like the sports cars of the day. The shape was reminiscent of the first Humber Ten, radical in its day for being the similar both ends, the boot shape matching the bonnet. The colour, a startling pale yellow.

The 'new' car was a great success. It was well used and kept going for years, not only locally but for trips like Auckland to Rotorua. John's sister Enid from Rotorua says, "It was probably the only do - it - yourself plywood car body ever! It got lots of stares and comments and went OK as well. A shape before its time."

Now that's an interesting comment. 'A shape before its time.' I have heard that said of John's designs somewhere before!