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Sensational Ford RS200
Inside story of a rally icon



FORD RS200

From concept to reality

The Blue Oval's Group B contender was a long time coming. **Graham Robson** tells the inside story of its development

PHOTOGRAPHY LAT/FORD MOTOR COMPANY



Right: the 200 cars needed for homologation were built in a factory leased from Reliant. The finished article (below) was striking



For me, it all began late in the evening of 9 January 1983. The phone rang, quite unexpectedly, and I should have guessed from the time of day that it could only be Stuart Turner of Ford. Turner and I were long-time associates, and I had often carried out motor-sport assignments for him in the past. After several successful years running Ford Motorsport, he had been the boss of the Public Affairs team for a number of years, and was perhaps ready for another move.

As ever, there was no small talk and no pleasantries. I was used to that. His message was simple and brutal: "This conversation is not taking place. Understand?"

I understood.

"Our motor-sport policy is in trouble. Walter [Hayes – Ford's PR supremo] wants me back in place of Karl [Ludvigsen]. We've got to kill off the Escort RS1700T. We need a new Group B car. I'm calling several people for their views. Can we talk? What do you think?"

An hour later, he had milked me dry of ideas and I was happy to know that my opinions lined up well with those of more technically minded experts. By midnight, he had signed off, expecting me to have written thoughts delivered to his home (not to the office) within three days.

The next day those musings were written down, and I have retained a copy. There were 12 headings – like everyone else, I discovered later. I mentioned four-wheel drive, a target of more than 400bhp, the requirement to build 200 cars 'off-site', and the need to get a star engineer to do the concept layout.

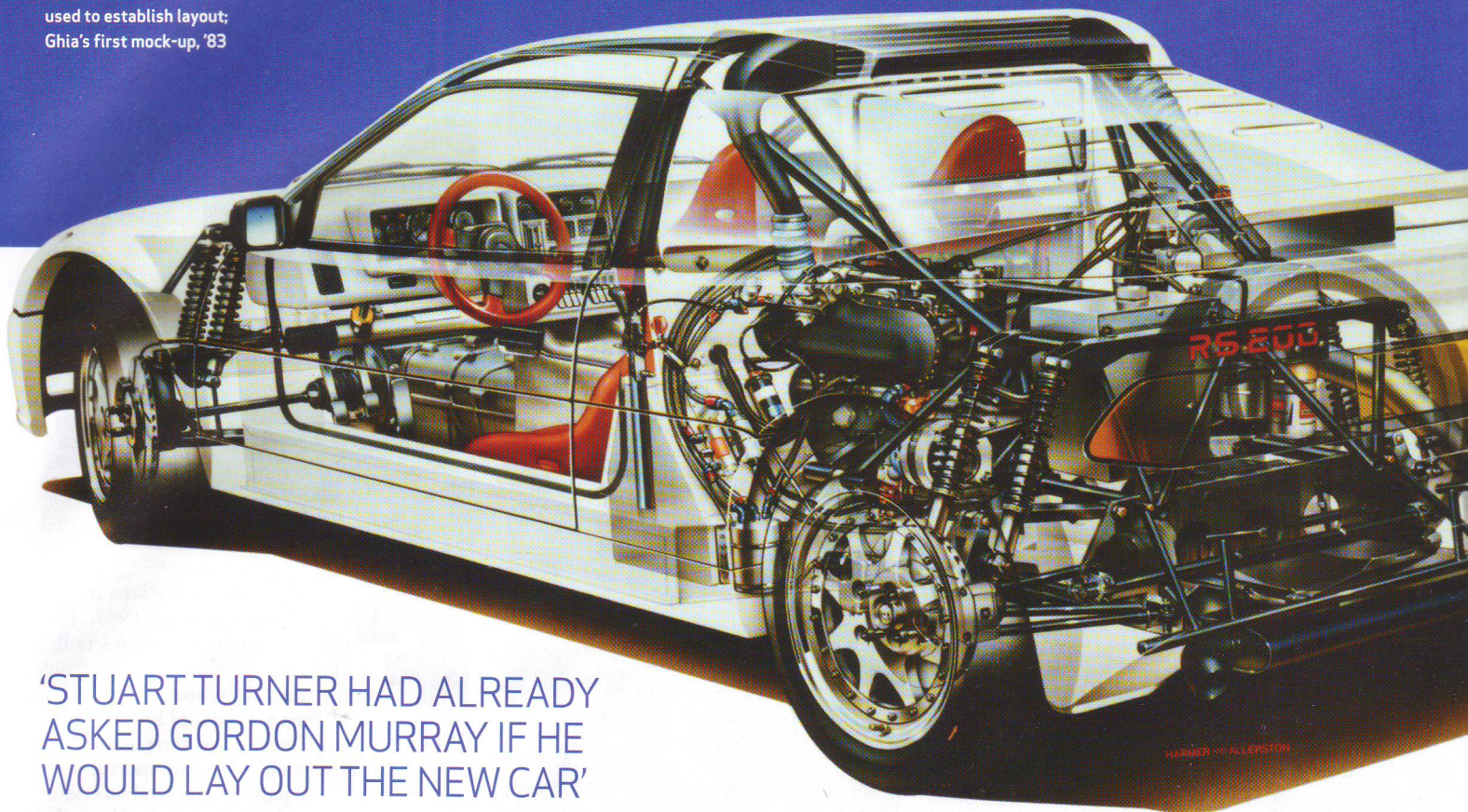
A week later, the phone rang again. "I think we all agree about the general layout," said Turner. "I'm calling the machine B200 for obvious reasons, but I can't get my bosses to understand how special it has to be. Walter understands, but not the others. Do you have any pictures of the Lancia Stratos?"

I told him that I did – not only images but also an *Autocar* cutaway drawing.

"Perfect. Let me have them tomorrow, please."

After which it went quiet for about six weeks. Then suddenly, in February 1983, Ford Europe

Cutaway shows the mid-mounted engine. Below: Sierra shell was used to establish layout; Ghia's first mock-up, '83



'STUART TURNER HAD ALREADY ASKED GORDON MURRAY IF HE WOULD LAY OUT THE NEW CAR'

announced that Karl Ludvigsen was to move on, and that Turner was to take over as Director of European Motorsports. At Ford, this move reverberated like an earthquake, for Turner wanted to get things moving fast.

Almost immediately, I was asked to work up a 'Club Activities' package (one-make Championships, quiz series, forums, special visits to RS dealerships, a Find A Rally Driver competition, all that stuff), but heard no more about the B200.

14 MARCH 1983

Both the RS1700T and the C100 Group C project are abruptly cancelled. As Motorsport's manager, Peter Ashcroft, later told me: "The board meeting was in the morning, Stuart's 'stop order' followed by phone before lunchtime, and work stopped that very day."

Media reaction to the cancellations is vitriolic. 'What on earth is going on?' they want to know. I know, but am not about to say.

27 MARCH 1983

I dine with Turner and he tells me what is already brewing. Further down his 'Ladder of Opportunity' – the document that he has prepared as a policy mantra – work has already started on a turbocharged Escort XR3 and on a much more powerful Sierra XR4i. He thinks that his Product Planning guru, Mike Moreton, can manage those two programmes without interference for some time.

Setting his targets high, and agreeing that a mid-engined, four-wheel-drive Group B car is essential, he has already asked Brabham's Gordon Murray if he will lay out the new car. He has also seen Keith Duckworth to talk about



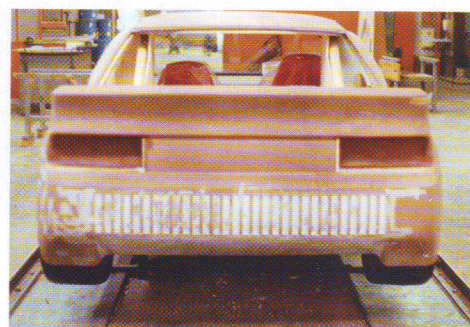
four-wheel-drive technology and Brian Hart about engines. The delay – and there is a delay – is that Murray says he can't spare all the time needed. And in any case, Bernie Ecclestone, his boss at Brabham, is against the idea.

Turner and Moreton are both convinced that such a car, of which 200 would have to be built to meet homologation requirements, cannot be constructed 'in house'. Lotus, Tickford, Aston Martin, TVR and Reliant are being considered as contractors. All have been approached, and all are interested. Reliant is the most keen and could produce bodysHELLS.

28 APRIL 1983

The search for a star designer is proving to be a frustration. Although, in Turner's words, Gordon Murray is keen ("The genius has taken the hook"), he cannot tackle the job without going freelance. Bernie Ecclestone doesn't like that, and forcibly says so.

The only way to benefit is for Turner and Brian Hart to spend an evening tapping Murray's brain. 'We listened enthralled as he set out his



ideas on how a special sports car should be engineered,' Turner later wrote. 'It was a memorable evening, and a masterclass in design.'

15 MAY 1983

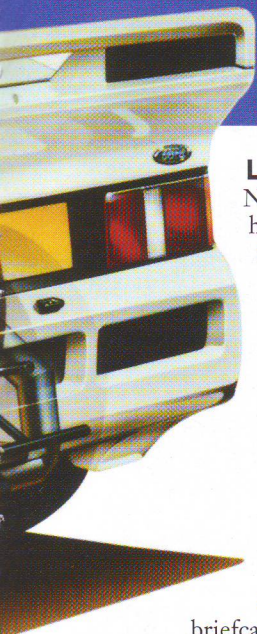
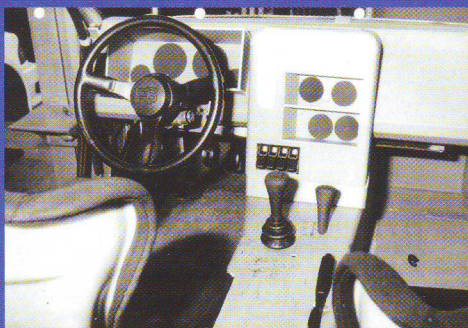
Turner decides on a 'design competition' among respected freelancers to choose a concept. Phonecall after phonecall mentions names as diverse as Patrick Head (Williams), Tony Southgate, Mike Loasby, Gian Paolo Dallara, Derek Gardner, John Barnard and Nigel Stroud.

Three of them – Loasby, Southgate and Stroud – are finally invited to provide a 'paper project', on the basis that 200 BDT turbocharged engines are already in stock from the aborted RS1700T programme.

Turner's design brief has this to say: 'Key Objective – to produce an outright international rally winner. Nothing must be allowed to compromise this.'

Along with this: 'NOT a lie-down racing driving position. Windscreen angle is critical in rallying. No body styling is required – this will be done by Ghia.'

From right: early interior plan, late '83; the first top-brass viewing at Ghia in '84 – Turner is in centre, Moreton on right; original prototype complete with fictitious plate; final mock-up – the front end would change before production (bottom right) started at Shenstone in the winter of 1985



LATE MAY 1983

News comes through that Boreham's John Wheeler, who had engineered the RS1700T, is offended at not being invited to tender for a new design. He insists on being involved, and becomes the fourth to submit a scheme.

10 JULY 1983

While I am carrying out a commentary job at a classic car show at Knebworth, I am visited by Turner who, in true cloak-and-dagger style, slips a package into my

briefcase, winks, and backs off without saying a word.

Inside are the four design proposals for my information. All are very well presented, but all differs in several basic ways.

Within days, Turner and Mike Moreton have studied them, and prefer Southgate's and Wheeler's designs to the other two schemes. They decide to amalgamate their best features and forge ahead. Southgate's concept is technically elegant but rather race-car orientated, while Wheeler's is a more practical car for 'side-of-the-road' servicing on events. Southgate's design, in other words, is beautifully detailed, while Wheeler's is more 'quick and dirty' where maintenance is concerned.

The object is to build the first car at once, 200 to follow by end of 1984, and to aim for homologation on 1 January 1985.

AUGUST 1983

Boreham goes into a state of 'lock down' with no casual visitors – certainly not the author – allowed through the doors while preparation work starts for building the first B200. At one stage, literally, pieces of cut-down Sierra bodywork (doors, front roof and 'screen') are mocked up on the floor, with mechanic Mick Jones acting as the 'mannequin'. At the same time, the other mechanics are kept busy working on turbo-charged Escorts and the forerunners of what will become the Sierra RS Cosworth.

Meanwhile, Ghia (Ford's styling house subsidiary in Turin) starts work on the shaping of the body. Turner's three-page brief notes that he wants: 'An ageless design... an exciting (but unaggressive) design with a "Ford family flavour". A "Porsche Sierra", perhaps.'

MID-SEPTEMBER 1983

On his way back from the Italian Grand Prix, Turner calls in at Ghia, collects some sketches, and shows them at a meeting at Boreham,



An unfulfilled career in rallying

When Ford conceived the RS200, it could have had no idea that the Group B regulations for which it was designed would be abruptly outlawed in 1986. The car's time in rallying was therefore limited. Malcolm Wilson gave it a winning debut on the Lindsfarne Rally in September 1985, but that was 'only' a single-day national event. With a budget of £14.4million behind it, the works team began its 1986 World Championship campaign with a promising display on the Swedish Rally. The two cars were driven by Stig Blomqvist and Kalle Grundel, the latter setting five fastest stage times. There was tragedy just around the corner, though. On the next event, the Portuguese Rally, Joachim Santos' RS200 struck and killed two spectators.

The deaths of Henri Toivonen and Sergio Cresta later that year signalled the end of Group B. The factory entered only two more WRC events in 1986 – the Acropolis, where both cars retired, and the RAC, where Kalle Grundel was the best-placed RS200 in fifth.

There was great success in national events, however – Mark Lovell winning the '86 British Championship despite not taking victory in a single round – and the model dominated the rallycross scene in the late 1980s. JP



Kalle Grundel sliding to fifth place on '86 Swedish Rally

Final spec included air scoop for intercooler.
Below: early '85 – the team includes John Wheeler leaning on the left-hand car, and foreman Robin Vokins (in shirt sleeves)



which concludes that more work is needed.

'The big argument', Turner later comments, 'was over the working environment for the drivers. We wanted an upright 'screen so that there would be no distracting reflections when flashing through forests. Ghia wanted a more raked and sporting one. Eventually we won.'

20 SEPTEMBER 1983

Bob Lutz – by this time running Ford's worldwide automotive operations from Detroit – chairs a meeting in London, where approval is finally given to spending \$293,000 on the first prototype. One car, no more, can be produced. Now the rush really intensifies. It is hoped to get this running by January 1984 with expert help from ART – John Thompson's Woolaston-based firm in which Tony Southgate is involved and which built the first chassis tub.

Even though Turner has been reluctant, FF Developments – 'Ferguson', as it is still known by almost everyone – gets the job of designing the four-wheel-drive system. JQF of Easton Neston, near Towcester, looks after the re-engineering of RS1700T engines from 1786cc to 1803cc. A specialist in south Wales, Ken Atwell, is hired to make the body moulds.

The official model name – RS200 – has been chosen, and will appear on every Ghia sketch thereafter. It could not be done overnight, but time is now definitely the enemy.

JANUARY 1984

Turner holds his annual pre-season motor sport press conference in London, where he stone-walls all media questions about new models. Immediately afterwards, in a private briefing, the



author learns that the first ART chassis/tub has been completed, the rest of the running gear is making steady progress, and Ghia has satisfied Ford with its final styling suggestions. A clay mock-up is being completed in Turin, and will shortly be transported to Ken Atwell.

Unhappily, the original timetable is already slipping, and there is now no chance of getting the car on sale by the end of 1984.

12 MARCH 1984

This is The Big Day, for everyone from Hayes downwards, and especially for Turner. This is the day on which the Top Brass will see the completed car – which has not yet turned a wheel, though it is beautifully finished and liveried for the occasion – for the first time.

The cloak-and-dagger aspect is maintained to the very end, for instead of showing off the car at Boreham, or even in the styling studios at the company's design/development HQ at Dunton, an upstairs showroom at Ford's personal export garage in Balderton Street, off Oxford Street in London, is chosen. Stuart Turner, John Wheeler

and Mike Moreton are all present to make the presentation – Turner carrying out the marketing pitch, Moreton the manufacturing survey and Wheeler the whys-and-wherefores of the technical layout. All of them are anxious to get speedy approval.

Their visitors, led by Bob Lutz and now joined by Alex (later Lord) Trotman, are impressed. And so they should be, for it has taken only five and a half months to progress from project approval to having a car that is ready to show – so what follows seems surprisingly straightforward.

The request to build five more pre-production prototypes, followed by a further \$600,000 for testing, development and certification work, comes first. This is followed by instructions to Mike Moreton to finalise a production contract with an outside concern. Given the chance, Bob Lutz – a real petrolhead – would no doubt have driven the car out on to Oxford Street for its first trial, but that is premature, even by his elevated standards.

SUMMER 2013

So there it was – and that was what the original phonecall of January 1983 had been all about. I was extremely privileged to get my first glance of the car on that day in March '84, for after the directors, and then Prince Michael of Kent, had taken a look at the new machine, I was allowed into the upper sanctum in Balderton Street.

From that day onwards, though, Ford's job was to follow all the hard work that had taken place up to that point by turning the pretty prototype into 200 production cars – and that would take it until the end of 1985. 