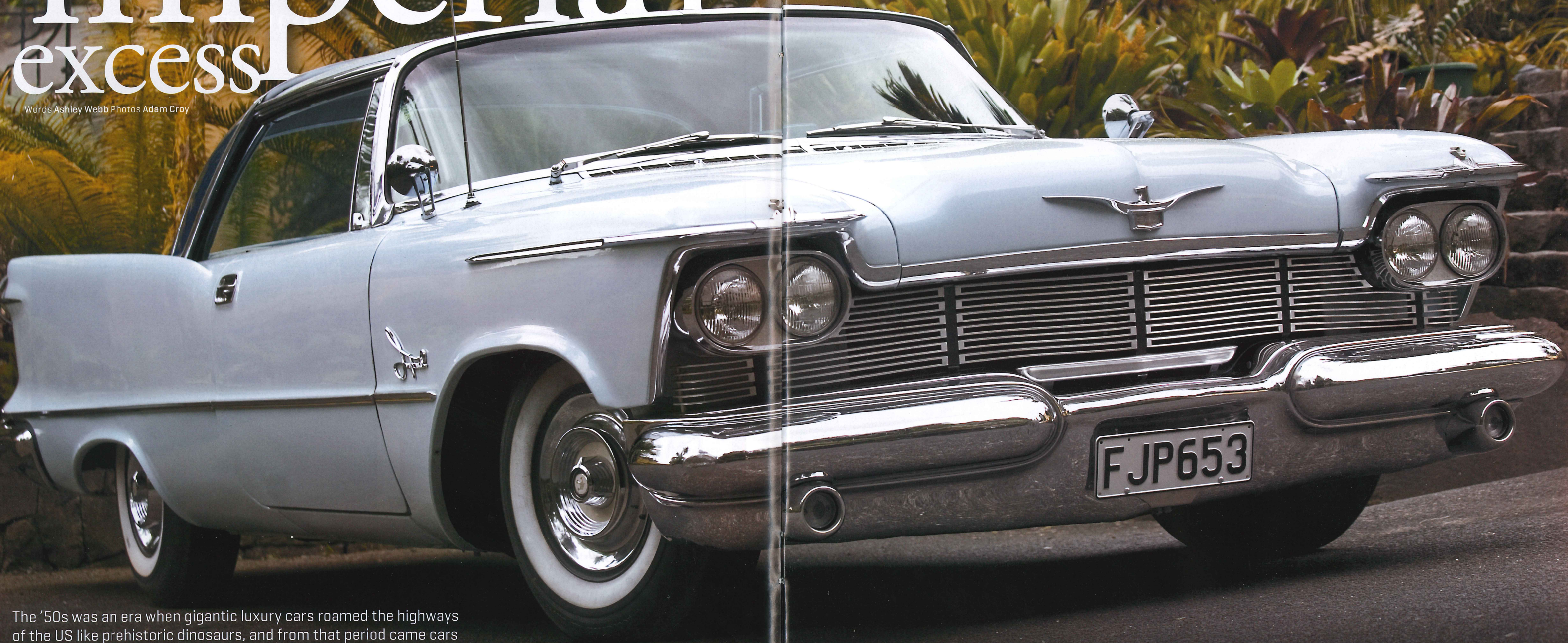


imperial excess

Words Ashley Webb Photos Adam Croy



The '50s was an era when gigantic luxury cars roamed the highways of the US like prehistoric dinosaurs, and from that period came cars of epic proportions – like this 1958 Chrysler Imperial Crown



Actually, in terms of nomenclature this isn't really a Chrysler Imperial. The Imperial was created as a separate marque, but no separate dealership network was ever created to support these cars. This proved to be doubly confusing for the public, as they were used to the idea of Chrysler Imperial and were accustomed to getting them at their local Chrysler dealership.

However the Imperial stood proudly on its own, distinctive of contemporary Chrysler offerings, and was intended to redefine luxury in non-Cadillac style.

Competition amongst the Big Three's top models was virtually militant in the late '50s and, in fact, Cadillac's leadership role in the field of outrageousness can be disputed, not so much because of the 1958 and 1959 Ford

Lincolns, but because of a more kindred challenger – the Imperial.

This car's radical styling incorporated imposing rear fins, masses of chrome and enough sheet metal to build half a dozen modern cars. It was considered unfathomable by the late '60s, belittled as an environmental disaster during the energy-conscious '70s and regarded as fodder for foreign investors in the

'80s. However, over the past decade or so these '50s icons have re-emerged into the limelight and regained renewed recognition as symbols of the ostentatious, flamboyant attitudes that existed during an era of unrestrained spending.

That said, there's something oddly attractive about the Imperial. Billed as 'The Triumphant Imperial', the 1958 model is long, slender and very low. The low belt-line accentuates the design

concept as it sweeps upwards towards the rear fins. And let's face it, when looking back at that era there is nothing more defining than the fin.

For 1958, changes to the Imperial were evolutionary, and included a different grille with six banks of slim, open rectangles stacked six high mounted over a simpler, multi-piece bumper, a filled-in variant of the previous bi-plane style.

“As history has shown, 1958 was a shocking year for the American car manufacturing industry.”



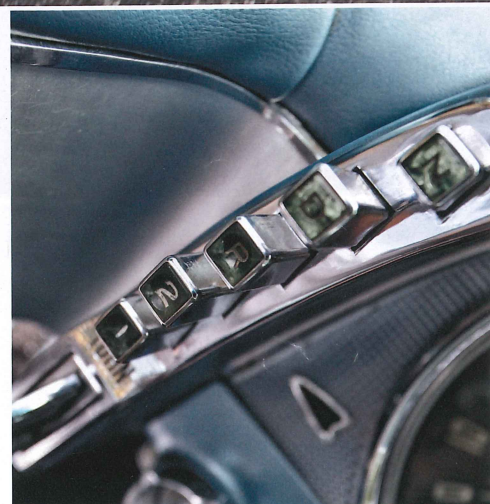
As the advertisement at the time read – “The Imperial is the car for you, IF your eye is pleased by sleek, sweeping bodylines that make the Imperial different from others in the field, IF you are willing to accept lower seating positions as the price of outstanding vision and a sway-free ride, IF you appreciate the outstanding manoeuvrability that stems from Imperial’s quicker power steering and push button transmission.”

As history has shown, 1958 was a shocking year for the American car manufacturing industry. Chrysler fought for survival as GM fielded a heavily reworked Cadillac, while a determined shove from Ford resulted in the massive, angular Lincoln and Continental MkIII twins.

After all, it was the ‘Eisenhower recession,’ a time of plunging sales summarised by that desperate plea; “You Auto Buy Now!”

HEMI BEHIND THE SHED

Dave Vazey was on a mission to find a Chrysler Hemi V8 motor for a restoration project. The project involved his brother Keith Vazey’s Model A roadster which he had raced for many years during the ‘60s and ‘70s. When a friend of Dave’s told him of an old Hemi-powered Chrysler for sale in Henderson, parked up behind a paint shop, he wasted no time checking it out.



PUSH-BUTTON CONVENIENCE

Inside, the Imperial’s dashboard seems relatively plain and uncluttered due partly to the absence of a gear lever and indicator arm. In the centre, two oversized pods house the speedometer, and a cluster of battery, fuel, oil and water temperature gauges flank a small clock. Selecting gears for the TorqueFlite automatic transmission is via push-buttons, grouped closely together and easily accessible by the driver. New interior trim fabrics added to the Imperial’s flair, with the introduction of Fontainbleu and Bahama. It was rather unfortunate that the Bahama fabric virtually fell apart at the seams, throwing Chrysler’s trim department into utter chaos as it worked to replace it.

Under the bonnet, Chrysler’s famous Hemi 392ci (6424cc) V8 powerhouse remained with few modifications since its historic 139.7mph (225kph) runs at Daytona several years earlier. The engine compression ratio was increased to 10:1 and power to 257kW (345bhp).

All 1958 Imperials also employed the lower, shorter, and lighter four-barrel Carter four-barrel carburettor and off-centre, spool-type front engine mounts. The 257kW brute was only available in the Imperial and New Yorkers and these engines were mated to the TorqueFlite automatic transmission that had been introduced the previous year.

The three-speed unit boasts manual override in first and second gears, all operated by the push of a button at a time

when push-button convenience was being applied to just about every appliance known to the American consumer.

Nevertheless, the push-button drive was short-lived due to government regulations prohibiting the system as a result of incidents involving inadvertent gear shifting, as it was deemed a safety hazard.

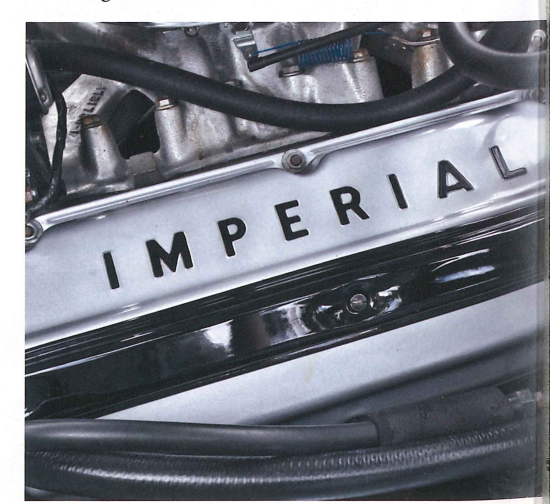
Underneath, the engineers at Chrysler paid significant attention to redesigning the suspension. The end result was a torsion bar suspension that, in part, was an effort to gain more space in the engine bay and to keep the car as low and sleek as possible. In actual fact, this front-end suspension, coupled with rear leaf springs, proved better than expected, providing a softer ride.

Other new options introduced in 1958 included electric door locks, a remote control, outside rear-view mirror, Sure-Grip limited-slip differential, run-flat Captive Air tyres, and the precursor of today’s cruise control; Auto-Pilot.

Developed by supplier Perfect Circle, the Auto-Pilot not only automatically maintained a constant cruising speed, it also could be set to act as a speed reminder, applying back pressure through the accelerator to warn the driver that he was at his preset speed.

A SHOCKING YEAR

By now the suits at Chrysler were fairly certain that their slightly up-spec’d (from the previous year) luxury Imperial could stand up to any challenge in 1958, especially from the Big Three.





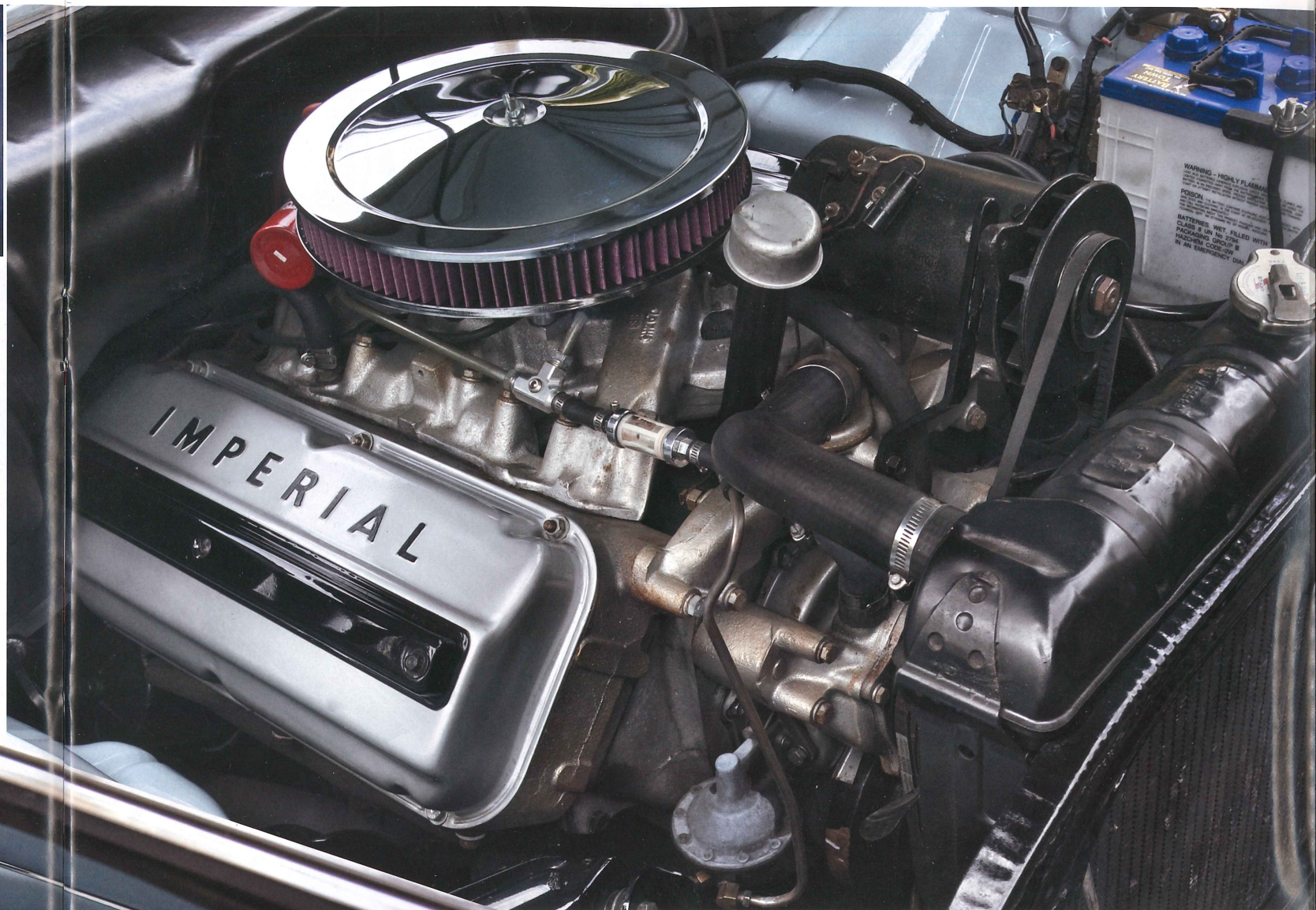
surprise the old Chrysler was in the Imperial Crown coupé with a matching Hemi V8 engine and transmission completely intact. In fact the complete, original and unmolested decided to buy it on the spot.

On August 2008, that stripping the running gear of a rare car would be a crying shame, a closer inspection discovered the stone blue paint had been virtually since the day the car left the factory. Further delving into its past, it was covered it had been owned by a man in Pennsylvania, being part of a collection until he passed away.

The Imperial was purchased from the estate and brought to our shores in 2005. Further investigation revealed no other information about the car, except the fact the engine was never started, and the car sat still for many years.

Unfortunately it was in poor mechanical shape, so Dave hauled out the colossal 6.4-litre Hemi V8 which was rebuilt by Carr Engine Rebuilders. The crank and rods were basically the only original parts to be salvaged from the engine's internals. Dave also took the opportunity to have the original starter motor and generator rebuilt and a complete 2.25-inch exhaust system was fabricated including full-flow mufflers.

Dave chose to mount a 750cfm Demon carburettor onto the original intake manifold



and install an MSD ignition system to make the engine more reliable. He has, of course, retained all the original components should he wish to put everything back to its original state.

By this stage, Dave's Imperial had turned into a full body-on restoration project, and the next item to be rebuilt was the TorqueFlite 727 automatic transmission. The suspension received new bushes all round, including new torsion bar bushes, while new shock absorbers were installed and the original rear leaf springs were re-tempered.

paramount, especially when you consider that drums sit at each corner of the Imperial. Dave rebuilt the entire system including re-sleeving the cylinders and rebuilding the handbrake mechanisms.

Apart from the mechanical aspects of this Imperial, the only other item to be replaced was the front windscreen.

MAINTAINING ORIGINALITY

Walking around this imposing machine – and that takes a while as the Imperial is around six

1958 chrysler imperial crown coupe



paint, upholstery, jack, spare wheel and even the driver's handbook and service manual are still intact. He also points out that everything, including the clock, power windows, electric seats, aerial and radio, is in fine working order.

However, Dave is not one to let the grass grow under his feet, that's for sure. As a hot rodder from way back, he comes from a family of engineers, so it's hardly surprising to learn that he loves to make things and has several projects on the go. These include an early Holden V8-powered hot-rod, his son's

Pro Stock-style Plymouth 'Cuda and his motorcycles – which include an early racing Ducati and a Street Fighter-style superbike which he built himself.

Dave also makes wrought iron furniture; in fact anything out of steel, as a tour around his property revealed that he'd built virtually everything – including his magnificent Moroccan-style home.

With this in mind, I have no doubt that we'll be seeing more of Dave's handiwork in these pages. ☺



1958 Imperial Crown Coupe

Engine	Hemi V8
Capacity	6423cc [392ci]
Bore/stroke	102.5x100mm
Valves	Two per cylinder
C/R	10.0:1
Max power	257kW [345bhp] at 4600rpm
Max torque	610Nm at 2800rpm
Fuel system	Single Carter four barrel carburettor
Transmission	TorqueFlite 727 three-speed automatic
Suspension F/R	Independent by torsion bars Live rear axle, leaf springs
Steering	'Constant Control' with symmetrical idler arm linkage
Brakes	Power assisted drum

Dimensions:

O/all length	5735mm
Width	2062mm
Height	1447mm
Wheelbase	3276mm
Kerb weight	2187kg

Performance:

Top speed	192kph
Standing 1/4 mile	17 seconds





To Dave's surprise the old Chrysler was in fact a genuine Imperial Crown coupé with its numbers matching Hemi V8 engine and original drivetrain completely intact. In fact the car was so complete, original and unmolested that Dave decided to buy it on the spot.

This happened in August 2008.

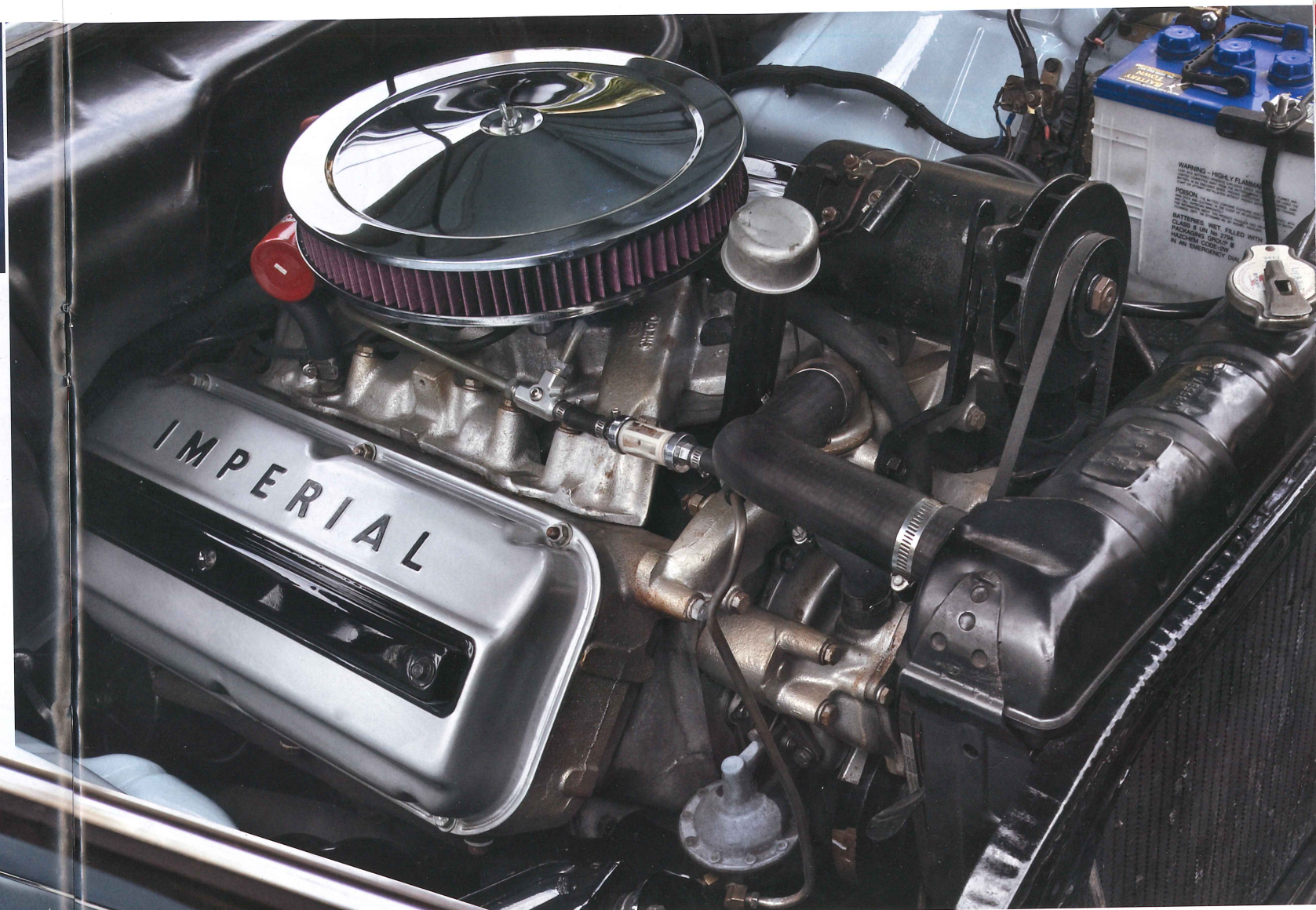
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When you're driving almost 2200kg of Detroit's finest then stopping becomes

paramount, especially when you consider that drums sit at each corner of the Imperial. Dave rebuilt the entire system including re-sleeving the cylinders and rebuilding the handbrake mechanisms.

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MAINTAINING ORIGINALITY

Walking around this imposing machine – and that takes a while as the Imperial is around six metres long – Dave proudly points out that virtually everything you see is original. The

