

IS THIS THE WORLD'S

UGLIEST CAR?

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Ron Hayes and his quirky Zeta, lovingly pieced together from a box of bits.

WHEN Ron Hayes developed the year for a Lightburn Zeta he didn't envisage driving a lightbulb.

"I've always had a hankering for a Zeta," says the 62-year-old Hayes, who has quite a collection of vehicles in his Chidlow yard.

"These little Aussie icons are hard to find so when I found a guy in Northam who had a dismantled 1962 Zeta for sale, I thought why not," he says.

"But it was a bit daunting when I got home with just a huge box of bits.

"It was a matter of 'I think this goes here', putting it on, hoping it was right, but not tightening anything until you were sure."

The Zeta's icon status derives from being arguably the closest the nation had come to producing an all-Aussie car at the time.

"It's something that was designed and built here," Hayes says.

"Only about 350 were built, so it's important some are preserved."

Produced from 1963-66 by Adelaide washing machine, cement mixer and wheelbarrow producer Harold Lightburn, the Zeta also lays claim to having some of the quirkiest features in automotive history.

Hayes says it's the world's ugliest car, but to him, it's also the most appealing.

"It's very, very tiny and fun to drive. People are always looking at you, as if you are Mr Bean or something in this weird little car."

Piecing the Zeta back together again, Hayes discovered Lightburn's versatility.

"He used whatever was kicking around at the time; the steering column was from a Ford Prefect, for example."

One day when he was out looking for bits and pieces, a Zeta universal joint in his hand, a fellow had said: "I know where that joint comes from — it's from a potato planter."

In an era of rational, computer-designed cars, the Zeta is loved for its irrationality.

Today many cars have split-fold rear seats, some of which can be removed.

But the Zeta went one better — all seats can be easily removed, leaving a flat floor area for sleeping.

"I only tried that once," says Hayes. "I was lying down working under the dashboard when I fell asleep."

Bizarrely, the front seat can be mounted on the roof — for watching

horse racing, says Hayes. But he hasn't tried it after putting so much effort into the duco.

The doors also swing all the way open enabling something as big as a Lightburn wheelbarrow to be stowed aboard.

An unsettling feature, though, is the fuel set-up. "The fuel tank sits in the dash just above your knees," says Hayes. "And the fuel gauge is a plastic pipe that comes out of the bottom of the tank and goes back in at the top."

"It works fine at standstill but if you're moving it slops all over the place."

"But most distressing is that the ashtray is right beside the plastic pipe; so if you stub your cigarette in the wrong place you could be in trouble."

Another strange feature is reversing. Step one is turn off the motor. Step two you push the key in further and turn, which puts the motor in reverse.

You can then work through the four gears, reaching the same speeds as you would travelling forwards.

But the jigsaw car's eccentricities only makes it more lovable for the retired Hayes, who also has an Austin 7, Model T Ford, Wolsely 10 and EK Holden in his yard.

"I call my Zeta the mozzie patrol," he says laughing, "because wherever it goes its little two-stroke motor sends out clouds of blue smoke."

Arranging to have Hayes and his beloved Zeta photographed in Midland, I worried aloud about them getting back to Chidlow.

"Oh, I don't mind going up Greenmount Hill — it's the people behind me that mind," he says.

