Great white

In the first of an occasional series, Richard Porter drives the car he idolised as a boy – Ford's Group B rally icon, the RS200

Group B was rallying's coolest moment. Snorting, popping bespoke specials, chewing up dust-tracks in Greece, farting sheet flame between the trees of Kielder, mechanical engineering pushed to its limits on the twisty Cols of Southern France. Even today the cars remain fantastic – to a pre-pubescent boy back in the mid-'80s, before girls and beer and getting the keys to dad's car, they were the most brilliant things in the whole world.

There was the Audi Sport Quattro, a stubby, purposeful charger with a curious off-harmony

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five-cylinder snarl that made you feel all strange and tingly. Peugeot's 205 T16 was the pumped-up glamourpuss that exposed the competitive weakness of the Audi's front engine and monocoque shell. (Around the time it first gave the Germans a bloody nose I could barely contain my junior-school-sized excitement when a Peugeot salesman gave me a model of a T16, probably to assuage his guilt at selling my father a Talbot Solara.) The Lancia Delta S4 was the wild child, what with its mind-boggling mix of turbo and superchargers and a disjointed look that gave it the permanent appearance of light accident damage.

Home team hopes were pinned to the Metro 6R4, a lugging nat-asp V6 in place of Johnny Foreigner's frenetic forced induction, outrageous wings jutting from the body, moustachioed Brit hero Tony Pond at the wheel. I didn't know exactly what Computervision did, but I was sure it must be something good.

And then there was the Ford RS200. Bug-eyed and squat, the RS wasn't like other Group B contenders. They were artfully designed to give at least token resemblance to mundane road cars, fooling punters into thinking that the narrow-tyred hatchback on their drive was in some way related to the shrieking, power-sliding banshee that had just scalped the Monte. Unlike its rivals, Ford sold lots of different cars in different markets – even the Euro and US Escorts were linked only in name – so to appease marketing departments from Brentwood to Belo Horizonte, the 200 couldn't resemble a specific Ford model. Instead it looked like nothing on earth.

Unlike the 205 T16 on my bedroom shelf, the Matchbox RS200 that sat next to it was no freebie – I spent my own pocket money just so I could have a permanent reminder of the coolest car in the coolest race series in the world. Even in 1/75 scale the RS200 was so ugly it was beautiful, and I loved it. ➲

Pictures: Michael Bailie

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THEY SAY YOU SHOULD NEVER meet your heroes. Today I'm ignoring that advice. Beneath a Rizla-thin veneer of adult professionalism, I'm an over-excited 11-year-old again as, 19 years after I pressed myself against the chill steel railings in Buxton watching the Group B machinery wail past a Lombard RAC checkpoint, I have the chance to drive an RS200. It's a strange moment, one charged with jittery nervous energy and echoing with the recent words of two Ford insiders who, in off-the-record moments, issued dire warnings about what to expect from a roadgoing Group B car. I think one of them used the word 'pig'. Or was it 'dog'? Either way, there was some kind of animal involved, and lots of solemn muttering about not expecting too much.

How could they say such things? Sitting in the car park at Ford's Essex headquarters, the RS200 looks terrific; a squat, pugnacious troublemaker showing up Mondeos and Fiestas as the girly-swot squares they are. This isn't just any RS200 either. Under Group B homologation rules, Ford had to make 200 cars and the example you see here is the very last one ever built – two-zero-zero at the end of its chassis plate. It's led an interesting life, starting out as a demonstrator on aggressive 'tarmac' chassis settings so that professional drivers could scare the bejabbers out of potential buyers on the track, before it was retired to the company's 'heritage' collection where it was allowed to fester, unseen and unloved, until the company's press garage boys rescued it from a dusty Dagenham warehouse and, in spare moments and evenings, set about bringing it back to life. So this is it. The keys to a childhood dream are in my clammy hands.

The RS200 idles with that rattly, unhappy beat of an engine optimised to head-butt the limiter on the closing stages of the 1000 Lakes. The clutch is hefty, but that's nothing to the sterling effort required to move the gearlever. First engages with a *thunk*, the revs rise, feed in the clutch… the car stalls. Damn. Repeat the procedure. The car stalls. Try again. The car stalls. More revs, extra delicate clutchwork, the RS200 splutters and jerks, we move off. Then it stalls again. This is bad enough. Try getting it moving with a bit of steering lock and it's even worse as the entire driveline winds up, snuffing the fire unless you pile on a whole heap of revs, dump the clutch and hope for the best. Was it 'pig' or 'dog' or maybe both?

We're heading up to the top of Essex, where it meets Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire. Legend has it that the quiet, twisting roads around these parts were where RS engineers developed some of their finest fast cars. I'd love to give you specifics but Ford people are understandably coy about revealing precise details, since some of these roads remain chassis development favourites and the last thing they want is to find two spy photographers and a load of people from a Honda Integra internet site clogging up a good corner. Besides, said one Ford PR gloomily, the engineers don't even tell *us* where their favourite roads are. So we're taking a guess, and to get there we're on the M25. The traffic is pretty light but the RS200 is not in its element. This being a standard road spec car, it's turning out just 250bhp – a far cry from the steroidal 900bhp RS200 nutter car that threatened to rip off John Barker's beard in **evo** 072 – but it doesn't even feel as strong as that. The engine makes a flat, soulless drone, providing bass to the treble whine of the transmission, punctuated with an ominous clunk every time the

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Road version of RS200 is no beauty, with uneven bodywork and panel gaps you can put your hand into. Under rear clamshell is Ford/Cosworth 1.8-litre twin-cam 'four' with Garrett turbo, bolted to rear bulkhead, flanked by twin springs and dampers holding each wheel tight against the road. Road engine rated at 250bhp; competition versions had more like 450bhp

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Left: they threw in some carpet and a few extra switches, but you soon realise the interior is just somewhere to sit. On the road the RS feels underwhelming until you hit 5000rpm, when it all suddenly gets a lot more interesting

stroppy gearbox is wrestled into another gear. So far, so crushingly disappointing.

We pause for photography somewhere near the M11. I know it's churlish to pick holes in your heroes, like meeting Roger Moore and noting that he's rather wrinkly, but it's impossible to ignore the fact that the RS200's body is spectacularly shoddy. Ford contracted Reliant to build these things, reasoning that they knew more about moulding fibreglass panels, and the build quality makes a tired Rialto look like a 1980s S-class. Is that front clamshell actually shut? Have they touched up the paint chips with Tippex? Could I climb into the passenger seat without actually opening the door? Despite an impressive array of gauges and those proprietary '80s Ford switches rearranged into a cool, aircraft-like bank of eight, the interior is pretty shabby too, the gearlever sprouting gracelessly from the ill-fitting carpet they slung in there to make a raw racing car seem more homely. Pinnacle of this weak attempt to civilise the RS's cabin is above your head – it's the posh interior light from a Granada (Ghia X spec and above), complete with separate map reading lamps. Nice try, lads.

Lift the rear clamshell and you see where the real work went. Braided hoses snake across an engine bolted tight against the rear bulkhead, flanked to the rear by those fantastic twin-spring-and-damper units for each wheel. Truth is, the interior is just somewhere to sit, the bodyshell simply something to cover the weapons-grade mechanical bits underneath. And if you want the looks without the engineering excellence there's a company that will sell you an RS200 shell, from the original moulds, and all the bits to make a home-build lookalike based on – oh the horror – the Austin Maestro. Sometimes the truth is stranger than the people who make kit cars.

The static photography is over and so, I fear, are my Group B fantasies, dashed by this sluggish, stroppy white elephant. Why did I love this car? It never covered itself in glory, competing with marginal success in just one full season of rallying before Group B was banned. Plus, it was easier to be seduced by that ugly body when I wasn't jamming my whole hand into the panel gaps.

We've found one of those roads that may or may not be a public-domain proving ground for Ford's chassis engineers. Fast, sweeping, lots of open bends with clear lines of sight to the exit. Down a gear, bloody stupid 'box baulks slightly, the sound of big, heavy, chunks of pig iron smashing into each other, hoof the throttle… MOTHER OF GOD, where did *that* come from? Somewhere just shy of 5000rpm there is an *explosion*. The RS claws at the road, the revs rise fast, the flat thrashing engine note suddenly becomes a red-meat roar, we're moving fast along pitted tarmac, those fabulous double dampers holding each wheel tight against the road, wind rushing in through the open window… Grab for another gear, a smooth change at last, no bangs or

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'It's a tiger and I've been driving it like a Puma. The 200 doesn't like that'

thunks, visceral power thundering through industrial strength driveshafts, propelling us rapidly towards that corner up ahead. Hard on the brakes, so wooden and ineffectual at low speed, now so perfectly weighted and strong, turn in, beads of sweat peppering that tarty red wheel rim, the RS turns sluggishly, the front end seems to go light, unhelpfully so, no real feel to the steering either, then back on the power and we're gnashing frantically up the next straight. The RS200 has come alive.

It was obvious really. This car was conceived as a rabid monster to attack special stages. Even when it was neutered and booted to appeal to lily-livered millionaires who might want to pop one in their temp-controlled garages, the spirit of a competition car lives on. This car is a tiger and I've been driving it like a Puma. The 200 doesn't like that. At medium speed your modern rally-bred Imprezas and Evos are all nicey-nicey, flattering you with puppy dog eagerness ('Oooh, you took that corner nicely mate, let's do another one'). The RS isn't like that, it only knows maximum attack, demanding that you really *drive* it. Or else. ('Come on! That was rubbish! Ari Vatinen would be back at the hotel getting a round in by now, you loser!')

Take the RS200 by the scruff and you've committed to something you can't back out of. Don't want the front end to wash out? Get on the power NOW, let the four-wheel drive do the work, otherwise you've blown it. Fancy entering the corner with a delicate twitch of the wrists? No chance; you've got to wrestle the whole wheel, make it understand that we're going at least vaguely towards that apex. Can't be bothered to blip the throttle on down-changes? Then you're in real trouble, the kind that has you coasting into a bend in neutral. Let the engine drop off boost? That old git in the Micra will be all over you, one cutesy headlight all that's visible through the tiny slot in the rear spoiler.

That's the way it goes with the RS200. It's raw, mechanical, primeval, *physical*. We head cross-country in the direction of Ford's HQ. Sinuous roads threading back into the London overspill, the RS in its element. The engine snarling hard behind – stuff your VTEC, why can't all four-cylinders sound like this? – punching each gearchange with a clenched fist, I'm the boss you little bastard and don't you forget it, hauling on the wheel, hard on the power, dig in you l'il beauty, and we're through, spearing past slower traffic, the sides of a horsebox adding a burst of reverb to the soundtrack, hard on the brakes for unfamiliar bends. There's no ABS but you'd struggle to lock them up, just feel for the limit, hard tap on the throttle, into second, catch the falling revs, keep the boost up, power, power, power, into third, and onwards. The noise, the fury, the demand for unswerving attention; it's like nothing else I have ever driven.

It's only when we trundle up to Ford HQ – the RS200 stalling a couple of times, just for old times' sake – that I realise I'm dripping with sweat. My hands hurt too. The blue-striped beastie has worn me out. After a rewarding, life-affirming, fantasy-fulfilling day of wrestling with a mere wuss-spec RS200 I've learned that sometimes it's okay to meet your heroes. But, given the intensity of the experience, it turns out the real heroes of Group B weren't the cars. It was the guys who drove them for a living. ■

SPECIFICATION
FORD RS200

Engine	In-line 4-cyl, 1803cc, 16v, turbocharger
Max power	250bhp @ 6500-7000rpm
Max torque	215lb ft @ 4500-5000rpm
Transmission	Five-speed manual, 4wd
Brakes	285mm vented discs front and rear four-pot callipers
Wheels	8x16in front and rear, alloy
Weight	1180kg
Power-to-weight	212bhp per ton
0-60mph	6.1sec (est)
Max speed	140mph (est)
Basic price	£49,995 (at launch in 1985)

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