

In top gear, 50 years on

Motors man still has the drive



Linda Smith

AIRBAGS, electronic stability, CD stackers and power windows are common features in today's new cars.

But when John St Hill started work at Motors half a century ago, buyers got excited about buying a car that came with a radio.

Heaters were optional extras, and the most extravagant upgrade you could splurge on was a sought-after V8 engine.

Yesterday marked 50 years to the day since Mr St Hill started at Motors as a 17-year-old fresh out of The Hutchins School.

Since then he has sold more than 6000 vehicles in Tasmania and now regularly finds himself selling cars to the children and even grandchildren of some of the very first clients he served back in 1960.

The "absolute, 100 per cent car buff" has driven almost every model of car made by Holden in the past 50 years, but he still gets excited when new models hit the market.

And the 67-year-old says he has no immediate plans to retire from the job he loves.

Mr St Hill worked in administration for his first seven years with Motors but realised he "didn't want to be in an office all day" so decided to sell cars instead. It is a decision he has never regretted.

"The time has passed pretty quickly, really," he said yesterday as he reflected on his career.

"It's constantly busy, there's never any sitting around,



LONG SERVICE: John St Hill, sales leader at Motors Pty Ltd. Picture: NIKKI DAVIS-JONES

there's never time to be bored in this industry."

In the early days, Mr St Hill was part of a team of 14 salesmen who worked from a showroom in the Reserve Bank building in Macquarie St, opposite Franklin Square.

Motors later moved further up Macquarie St, where the Myer homewares store is now, before moving to the corner of Macquarie and Bar-

rack streets three years ago.

He still remembers his very first sale — an HR Holden.

Back then it was all about Ford or Holden, he says — there were a lot fewer of the import cars that flood today's market.

Surprisingly, his first car wasn't a Holden — it was an MG TC.

But he never looked back once he got his first Holden.

"I was an absolute car buff and I still am," Mr St Hill said.

"I had a series of cars, including a Jaguar Mark IV, but once I got to Motors I had a few Monaros and became a Holden convert."

He can't imagine driving anything else.

"I've driven almost every model . . . I'm Holden through and through," he said.

"The thought of getting into



GOING PLACES: The Motors showroom in 1971, when it was located at 178 Macquarie St.

“I had a series of cars, including a Jaguar Mark IV, but once I got to Motors I had a few Monaros and became a Holden convert . . . I've driven almost every model.”

a Ford . . .” he added, shaking his head, his voice trailing off.

He said watching Holden win Bathurst — as was the case in 2009 — was always great, and looking back at how much technology in cars had developed was amazing.

“Back [when I first started with Motors] it was fairly mundane what people thought was a great car,” Mr St Hill recalled.

“People had a Monaro with a 350 V8 and thought it was absolutely the ants pants of a motor car.”

“Now there's airbags and electronic stability, cars are miles safer, the fuel economy is better — the changes have been enormous.”

He said of all the cars he had sold, the hugely popular Monaro was most memorable. “The Monaro was the one that caused the biggest buzz. When that first came out it was huge,” he said.

“Before that it was just mundane sedans and then, all of sudden, they were producing this amazing two-door coupé no one had ever clapped eyes on.

“And it was a V8 as well.”

Mr St Hill said the car became even more famous after the Tasman Bridge collapse, when images of a green Monaro dangling precariously over the edge had been

broadcast around the world.

Even Mr St Hill's home life links him to Motors, which celebrates its 100th birthday this year.

He lives at Kingston Beach in the house Motors founder Robert Nettlefold once used as a holiday home.

The late Mr Nettlefold founded Kingston Beach Golf Club, and used to commute from Hobart to Kingston to play a round or two.

Mr St Hill had the opportunity to buy the house 40 years ago and refused to pass up such a good offer. He has lived there ever since.

He said he was proud to be part of the successful company, which employs 500 Tasmanians and sells 9000 new and used vehicles in the state each year.

He has never considered another career and would never sell any car but Holden.

“I've been here half the life of the company,” he said.

“And it's a pretty amazing company, really, a remarkable institution.

“It's never crossed my mind to do anything else.

“Every day there are different scenarios, different people, different problems and different cars.

“I like getting up and going to work each day — I wouldn't be here otherwise.”