

# The FJ Holden



**It's here – the 'New Look' Holden!**

**Salesman Gene Limbert shows a new 1953 FJ Special to  
visitors in the showroom of State Motors, Adelaide.**

Photo: Keith Rainsford, by courtesy of Roy Rainsford and Gene Limbert



### **The 'New Look' Holden Utility**

**A brand new FJ utility, owned by Tasmania's Holden distributor, Nettlefold's Motors Pty Ltd, making its way into Hobart, with the old pontoon bridge across the Derwent in the background. The utility had not yet been fitted with any rear vision mirror.**

Photo: Motors Pty Ltd, by courtesy of the National Motor Museum, Birdwood

# The FJ Holden

A FAVOURITE AUSTRALIAN CAR



D O N L O F F L E R



Wakefield  
Press

Wakefield Press  
1 The Parade West  
Kent Town  
South Australia 5067  
www.wakefieldpress.com.au

First published 2002  
This revised edition published 2010

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Designed by Liz Nicholson, design BITE  
Typeset by Clinton Ellicott, Wakefield Press  
Printing and quality control in China by Tingleman Pty Ltd

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Loffler, Don.  
Title: The FJ Holden: a favourite Australian car/Don Loffler.  
Edition: Revised ed.  
ISBN: 978 1 86254 891 6 (pbk.).  
Notes: Previous ed.: 2002.  
Subjects: Holden automobiles – Anecdotes.  
Holden automobiles – Identification.  
Holden automobiles – History.  
Dewey Number: 629.2222



### **Happiness is . . . washing an FJ Holden**

**Little did Ben Stewart know that FJs painted like his parents' Special would one day be a rarity. The car had a light grey roof and a darker grey body. Photo: Brian Stewart**

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# INTRODUCTION

## to the first edition

‘There’s a new Holden out’, said my Year 9 classmate breathlessly, ‘and there’s a picture of it in the *News*.’ I rushed to the corner store to see for myself. The photograph of the ‘New Look’ Holden on page three of Adelaide’s afternoon newspaper, dated 28 October 1953, came as a shock.

‘What a horrible grille!’ I thought. ‘They’ve ruined the beautiful Holden.’ Replacing the elegant, Buick-like vertical grille bars on the original model with a single, fat, horizontal bar full of teeth with black gaps between them seemed like an act of vandalism.

Then came a surprise. A glamorous new model, the Special, was added to the range. It boasted chromed and stainless steel ornamentation, and there was the option of attractive new two-tone paint combinations.

Despite my dislike of the new grille, I found the sight of Holden Specials in the showroom surprisingly attractive. Though the Holden had in reality undergone only a minor facelift, the ‘New Look’ seemed to be a completely new model. This became painfully clear when our relatives, the Jerichos, arrived at our home near the River Murray in 1954 with a stunning new



Special, painted a medium Skipper Blue over a very light Chalet Blue, with the interior trimmed in red leather. It was 'done up' with a radio and rear wheel covers called spats. Suddenly, my family's idolised Holden, though only a year old, seemed thoroughly upstaged by this glamorous newcomer. My brothers and I drooled over every last feature.

The dust on our country road had hardly settled as the Jerichos departed, when the envious moaning began, only to be quashed instantly by our pragmatic mother. 'Well you needn't think we're going to get one!' We didn't either, but many Australian families had this wish fulfilled. Among them were those for whom a 'New Look' was their first Holden, as well as owners of the original model who traded in their vehicles on the new model. Before long, there seemed to be as many new as old models on the roads.

Most people were not aware that the new model was called the FJ, just as they did not realise that the original model sedan was called the 48-215 and the utility the 50-2106. Hence, the terms 'Old Look' and 'New Look' came into popular usage. It was only when the third Holden model, the FE, arrived on the scene that the term FJ came into popular use, followed later by the nickname FX which neatly covered the original model sedan and utility.

By the time the FJ reached the end of its model life in 1956, it had sold 50,000 more than its predecessor, storming the Australian market. In the



**Our relatives, the Jerichos, stunned us when they arrived on a visit in 1954 with their 'New Look' Holden Special, complete with radio and spats. It made our 'Old Look' Holden seem like a poor cousin. DL and RJ**

1960s and 1970s the FJ became a cult vehicle to such an extent that 'FJ Holden' became a household name, which it still is today. It has featured in popular films and songs, making itself known to people who otherwise have little interest in cars.

This is the story of that darling of the Australian motoring public – the FJ Holden.

*Dan Loffler*

Adelaide 2002

# INTRODUCTION

## to the second edition

In this new edition I have updated the text extensively, in the light of many generous responses from readers, my own continuing research, the passing of a number of FJ personalities, and changes of ownership of vehicles.

The photographs, however, remain unchanged, apart from the addition of a few extras, not because of a lack of more examples, but for the very opposite reason. Since 2002 readers have sent me so many FJ photographs from the 1950s and 60s that an updated version of this book could not possibly accommodate them. I therefore included a selection of them in my fourth book, *Me and My Holden*, which consists largely of period 'FX' and FJ photographs, and I plan to include another selection of them in my fifth book, which is scheduled for 2012.

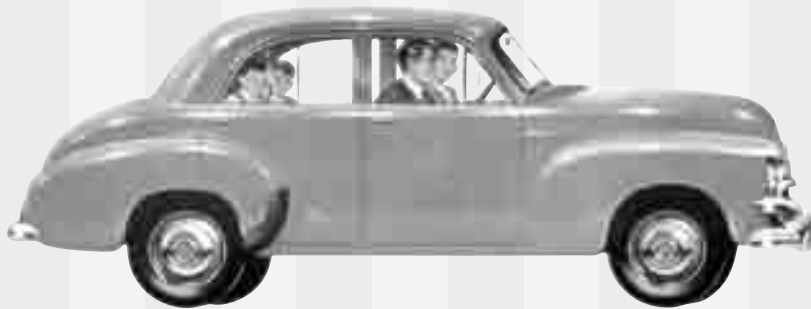
The fact that I have now written over 150,000 words and published more than 1500 photographs solely on the 'FX' and FJ models illustrates how deeply these iconic Holdens are embedded in the Australian psyche.

*Dan Loffler*

Adelaide 2010

1  
*part*

# STORIES





# chapter 1

## BEHIND THE SCENES

### **The development of the FJ model**

‘The new Holden is going to be bigger and it will look like a Chevrolet,’ said my uncle in 1952. This rumour was one of many in circulation at the time. The original Holden model was a remarkable four years old by the end of 1952 and the public was ready for a new model. The two-year waiting lists were gone and most dealers could offer a car for early or even immediate delivery. It was a new experience for dealers to have to work for their sales. As Rex Toop, one of Australia’s longest-serving Holden dealers, recalled:

We went through 1949 without any model changes and we went through ’50, ’51 and ’52 – still no changes. We were selling exactly the same car. It was beginning to become a bit of a battle to raise some enthusiasm, even amongst the dealers themselves, let alone the public.

Then in ’53 they brought out the new suspension model. Gee, was that something to sell – tubular shock absorbers for the first time, and redesigned springs. That was a relief, but the novelty wore off after a while.

Rumours about a new model varied wildly in their content, aided and abetted by a joke being circulated in 1953. Rex Toop remembers how the joke affected him:

## WHY USE THE TERM *FX*?

In my first two books I was reluctant to use the nickname 'FX' for the original Holden model because it was never used officially by GMH. For this book I have decided to use the term freely for the following reasons:

- I have discovered that the unofficial use of FX originated within GMH itself to refer to the 1953 new suspension Holden, well before the FJ was released.
- FX sounds in harmony with the models that followed the first Holden model: FJ, FE, FC and FB. It is therefore an appropriate unofficial name.
- FX is an exceptionally concise way of speaking about the 1948-1953 Holdens as a group, which comprises the 48-215 sedan, the 50-2106 utility and the 48-215-257 Business sedan, subsequently renamed the 48-217. I cannot imagine how such a collection of unmemorable numbers could be more conveniently condensed.
- FX, being neat and brief, can be repeated numerous times without becoming clumsy, whereas the repetition of 48-215 quickly becomes tedious, to say nothing of 48-217 and 50-2106!

I was lucky enough to marry a farmer's daughter a couple of years after I'd started here at Maitland [on South Australia's Yorke Peninsula], but my father-in-law got me into all sorts of trouble.

Some time before the FJ came out, I had a spurt of people coming in and saying, 'Rex, would you please cancel my order for a Holden?' When it happened once or twice, I didn't mind because it brought the other people up on the waiting list. But it got to plague proportions. I lost about a dozen orders and none of the people would tell me why.

Eventually, one of the customers who came in said, 'Well, I'm going to cancel my order because your father-in-law said they're going to make a new model four inches shorter and two inches narrower [than the current model]. There's no way I want to have anything to do with a smaller car. If your father-in-law tells me that's what's going to happen, it must be true. It's right from the horse's mouth.'

What happened was this: There was a joke going around that they were going to make the next Holden smaller so that they could get more of them on the road. Well, there was a group of farmers standing waiting on a street corner in Maitland and my father-in-law had got half way through the joke when the stock agent pulled up in his car and said, 'OK fellows, we're ready to go'. He didn't get a chance to finish the story. So, as far as this small group of farmers was concerned, what Rex Toop's father-in-law had said must be true. That got me into all sorts of trouble.

Most rumours, however, had the new model being larger and more powerful





with completely new styling. The rumours must have worried the General Motors-Holden's (GMH) people involved in the preparation of the FJ, because it incorporated none of these appealing features. To make matters worse, the rumours related with alarming accuracy to the model after the FJ, the FE, which was still three years away.

Work on the FJ model no doubt began before the release of the original 48-215 (nicknamed the 'FX') model, and by 1949 both GMH in Australia and General Motors (GM) in the United States were experimenting with styling changes for the FJ. GMH prepared a clay model of a substantially modernised FX, with one-piece windscreen, a large rear window and a Chevrolet-like grille. GM had a number of FX sedans on test at their Milford Proving Ground in Michigan, and experimental engineers fitted a one-piece windscreen and large rear window to one of them.

GMH engineers must have been disappointed when photographs arrived from the United States of GM's final prototype versions of the FJ. Two FX sedans, a black one and a lighter coloured one, had been used for the exercise. The new grille was similar to that on GMH's clay model but 'teeth' had been added, probably to make the grille look less like that of the proposed American Chevrolet and British Vauxhall Velox and Wyvern. The one-piece windscreen and large rear window, however, were rejected in favour of

- FX appeared in used car advertising as early as 1960. As a result it is now widely recognised by the public, whereas 48-215 is not well known, far less 50-2106; 48-217 is hardly known at all.
- I doubt that I could in any way break the public's forty-year love of using FX simply by refusing to use it in my books, nor would I wish to do so.



**LEFT AND OPPOSITE: GMH stylists in Australia had their first clay model of the FJ '1950 Holden sedan' ready by September 1949. Although there were changes only to the front and rear glass and the grille, the car looked remarkably different from the original Holden model.**  
HOL



May 1950 photographs of GM's FJ prototype show that the stylists in Detroit decided not to go ahead with a one-piece windscreen and enlarged rear window, settling only for a revised grille and the addition of some ornamentation to the body. 'Teeth' were added to GMH's proposed grille probably to distinguish the car from the American Chevrolet and British Vauxhall Velox and Wyvern. The startling interior styling was a dramatic change from the conservative interior of the original Holden. HOL-SLSA



retaining the original two-piece windscreen and small rear window, presumably on the grounds of cost. Scarcely any changes were made to the sheet metal on the prototypes. The final decision would have been made by GM, but I do not know how much influence GMH had in this.

I also do not know whether the two American prototype FJ sedans were brought to Australia, but suspect that they were, as the original 1946 FX prototypes had been. Former GMH engineer Paul Stanley recalled that a light-coloured prototype FJ stood under cover in the Fisher mans Bend service





garage, next to the area where he worked, as early as 1951. He had assumed, however, that the vehicle was built at Fishermans Bend, not in America.

The exterior styling of the American prototypes was amended by GMH only in minor ways but the styling of the interior trim was not adopted, probably because it was considered too Hollywood-like for average Australian tastes and too expensive to produce. A more conservative version was fitted by GMH to a 1952 FX, registered YO-871. Externally, the car was barely distinguishable from a standard production model, so it could have been tested



**GMH stylists used a 1952 Holden in which to create an interior more conservative than the 1950 American version. Even this was considered too elaborate and expensive for the final production version. There appears to be an experimental turn-key starter on this car. Externally, the vehicle could only be identified as a prototype by the word 'Special' appearing on the side of the bonnet and on the boot lid, and by the small reflectors on each rear guard. HOL**



on public roads without much fear of being identified. This trim version must also have been considered too elaborate and expensive, for the final production version was more conservative still. Even when GMH did introduce its own two-tone Elascofab trim in 1955, it was not as eye-catching as the American prototype version.

The Woodville (Adelaide) and Pagewood (Sydney) body plants began sending FJ sedan and utility bodies down the line in September 1953 among the last of the FX bodies. It is intriguing that FX bodies continued to be produced even in October, when FJ bodies were in full-scale production. It seems that in the vehicle assembly plants – in Birkhead (Adelaide), Fishermans Bend (Melbourne), Mosman Park (Perth), Pagewood (Sydney) and The Valley (Brisbane) – final batches of FX models went down the line

**An FJ prototype utility photographed at the Fishermans Bend plant. Date not given. HOL-SLSA**





among the FJs. It is not surprising, then, that the occasional FJ part found its way into an FX and vice versa.

Rumour has it that GMH wanted to hedge its bets and ensure that there would be a small stock of the old model to cater for those who did not like the look of the new one. Certainly, there were people who asked for, and obtained, an FX after they had looked at an FJ on the showroom floor.

As far as I know, no scoop pictures of the FJ were published before the release of the model. The closer the release date approached, however, the louder became the rumours about an all-new model. The managing director of GMH, Earl Daum, felt constrained to make a statement to the press, which the *Adelaide Advertiser* of 7 October 1953 reported in the following way:

The Managing Director of General Motors-Holden's Ltd (Mr Daum) has denied reports that a new Holden car with a larger body, increased weight and power will be released early in the new year. Mr Daum said it would be some years, if at all, before any radical changes would be made.

I doubt whether this denial prepared the public for the arrival three weeks later of the FJ, a 48-215 minimally and yet dramatically changed.

**The FJ panel van began life as the 50-2108 panel van, sketches of which were being drawn in the Fishermans Bend styling studio in October 1949, with 48-215 Prototype No.5 standing in the studio to assist the draftsmen. The 50-2108 did not go into production, but its design work was developed into that of the FJ-2104 panel van. HOL**



**As late as August 1952, GMH was still experimenting with the final styling of the panel van. The single-leaf rear door was not adopted in the final design. HOL**