

# THE focus I CREATED

Richard Parry-Jones reveals how the lessons learned during the Mondeo project went on to make the Focus so great

Words **Nathan Chadwick** Photography **Simon Thompson**



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he man responsible for the Focus very nearly wasn't... 'I was all packed and ready to run a factory in Valencia,' says Richard Parry-Jones. 'I had the house and children's school sorted, and then I got a phone call. "We want you to go back to research and development and take over vehicle engineering," they said. "We're in trouble."

For RPJ, the call was irresistible. After all, he is Blue Oval through and through – he started as an undergraduate trainee engineer in 1969, and swiftly rose through the Ford ranks to run the Cologne plant. He'd played an important part in the game-changing MkIII Escort and Sierra. Ford, reeling in the wake of the calamitous Escort MkV launch, needed his help.

And boy did they need him. The Escort MkV had been a disaster, one borne out of an old-school mentality, according to Richard. 'I'd worked for Ford for 20 years and for most of that time, the company was really good at selling to fleets, and didn't really sell to retail buyers – hence the focus on costs. As such, there wasn't much about it the user actually wanted,' he explains. But big changes were afoot – the Japanese and French had become wise to the profit margins possible in the UK market. More retail

customers were entering showrooms, and with more choice in car fleets, Ford's profits had plummeted. The mediocre Escort MkV really didn't help.

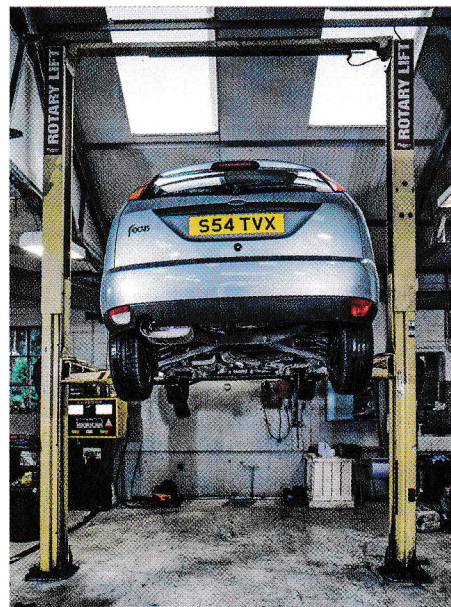
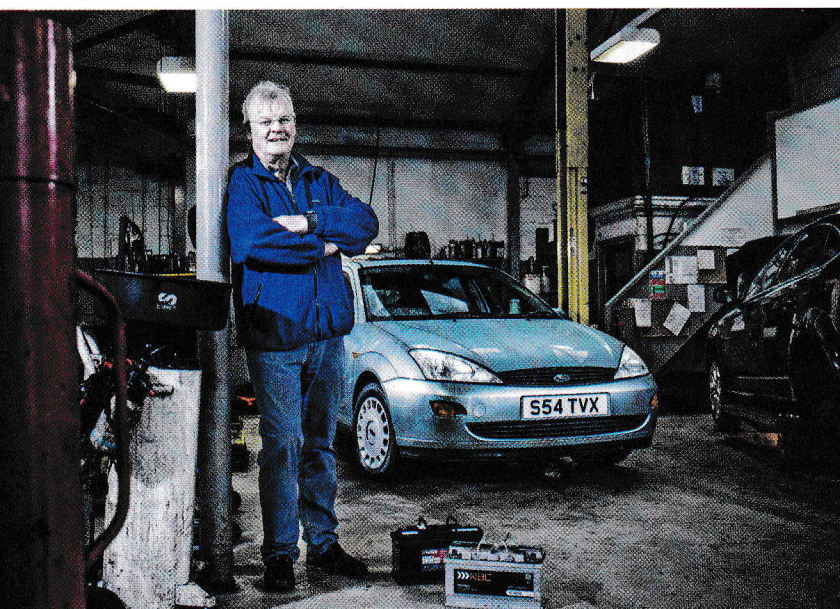
Its frosty reception truly shocked Ford senior management. Worse still, its critical Sierra replacement, the Mondeo 'world car', was in trouble too. 'It was just a bit mishandled,' says Richard. 'I found that many targets for stiffness and so on had been set, but not enforced. I began to ask what was needed to fix it.'

Richard never accepts the answer that it can't be done. 'The only question is how can we do it? It might take too much time, or too much money, or it might take both. But give me some options – don't say it can't be done, show me how it can be done,' he says. 'This approach is quite refreshing for engineers. It's amazing how, once you start that conversation, how inventive people can become. Then they actually start having fun!'

It still took time – there were plenty of six-hour meetings to sit through. 'I was chief engineer and I knew I couldn't really do this – but I had to. I had to train and teach them the skills, and set standards they'd lost or forgotten over many years.'

He quickly sought to change the





There are still two Ford Focuses in the Jones family.

Most family cars used twist-beam rear suspension – the multi-link Control Blade system in the Focus was novel.

company's entire philosophy. 'We needed to make these cars appealing to ordinary retail buyers, not just fleets. They must be something people desired and then really enjoyed owning – a fundamental change. I had a lot of people fighting me, but there were also a lot of people hurting from the Escort launch and wanted a change.'

With RPJ steering it, the Mondeo turned into a great success. And this, along with the successful launches of the Puma and Ka gave him the clout he needed to make the Focus the way he wanted.

The critical part of the Focus, and the chief reason why it handles so well, is the Control Blade rear suspension. However, its inclusion wasn't all plain sailing. 'If you're convinced about something, you have to fight for it. I had all the data, and I was sure we could deliver ride comfort, good NVH (noise, vibration and harshness), steering and handling that no other manufacturer with twist beam suspension could do. Even so, it cost an extra 50 dollars per car.' That might not be a problem for a premium brand, but for Ford, and its public perception, it was a tricky sell.

'Will people pay extra for that? No, they won't – not immediately. But they might buy the car and recommend it to their friends,' he explains. 'It's an investment, really. When it came to the crunch, the management backed me, and for that I'm grateful. More importantly, I think all the customers were grateful too.'

Richard believes it's much easier to build an exotic car than a mainstream one. 'In a mass-market car you have so many cost constraints – you have to be innovative without using exotic parts. All the special bits in the Focus are mild stamped steel – nothing fancy. It's all about trying to find the performance you want, using physics to analyse carefully and to synthesise a simple solution.'

That plays into Richard's wider philosophy. 'The simplest design is the best design. You have to factor in a certain amount of feeling, of soul, of taste – you can't do everything by the numbers,' Richard admits. 'But if you get the numbers right first to avoid making basic mistakes in



Good ride comfort and NVH were essential.

the design, you buy yourself the freedom to perfect the product, not spend all your time fixing problems.'

Getting the Focus design right was the biggest early challenge. Design trends pointed towards family cars imbued with sporty styling – Richard cites the Mazda 323F. There was another trend appearing – taller cars, such as the Fiat Panda. 'People are getting taller and heavier, and they need more space,' Richard says.

Most of the early sketches were low-slung, Mazda-style designs. One, from a UK stylist, caused him to stop and think – it added around 60mm to the height of the car. 'It was taller, but not by much,' he says. 'For the same length, we got a lot more interior space. I asked the designers to do a study based on this.'

At the time there was a big push within Ford for a bustle-back design, something the Escort was famous for. 'Even the 323F is a bustle-back,' says Richard. But when the designers returned with their work, Richard wasn't pleased. 'It looked like a Mazda 121! It looked like a Noddy Car. We had to go to a hatchback.'

Still Richard wasn't happy. 'It all looked predictable. I wanted to go into the studio each week and be wowed, and it wasn't happening. We were running out of time.'

UNDER  
THE  
FOCUS



**1 CONTROL BLADE**  
'When you have total decoupling of lateral and longitudinal compliance, you can have stiffness for handling, without compromising NVH.'

**2 LATERAL ARMS**  
'Springs are integrated into the lateral arms, as is the ARB, to control toe. Without it you have to play around with bush resistance.'

**3 DAMPERS**  
'The placement of the damper is very advantageous, almost 1:1. They're on the outside of the arm, and close to the centre line of the wheel.'

**4 'L' ARM**  
'Centred on the wheel, it reacts to lateral force. The bush only deals with vertical & longitudinal forces. The steering angle is unaffected by bumps.'

**5 DROPLINKS**  
'Without a droplink on the ARB you get inputs on the strut. The droplinks aren't neutral they want some feedback. Not too much, just a smidge.'

The pressure was on. The team knew they had a good package. The aero was looking very good, too. 'But the design looked ordinary. Then a young designer showed me a sketch that was interesting, and two weeks later I came back to a clay model. This was the first time we'd put the headlamp high, and we blended it with the window line. It was new and dynamic. I said: "Wow – you've found a way

## 'YOU CAN ALWAYS FIND SOMETHING TO IMPROVE, BUT I'M PRAGMATIC'

of making the car not look tall." I thought, my God, I like this. Then we sent it out to research.'

Richard knew the Focus would be polarising – but that was a good thing. 'The winner is not the car that scores the best. You have to look behind the data, look at people's propensity to adopt change,' he explains. 'You show them other non-car items so you can map them to see if they're leaders or followers in design. Find the people who'll lead opinion, and favour those answers.'

Richard also spent a lot of time at customer clinics. 'The finished design caused more than a third of respondents to stop and go "wow". That's when I knew it was the one.'

The interior was almost very different. 'We had two themes in the final run-off. One was more symmetrical, more rectilinear, and the one in the finished car. What we have now matches the exterior's swagger,' Richard explains. 'I think we got the broad brushstrokes OK, but I don't think we got the calm cohesion of the German manufacturers. The interior might have been better if I hadn't spent 50 dollars on the rear suspension...'

There were still challenges, however. During development, Volkswagen started offering 12-year corrosion guarantees – a big value enhancer. Ford needed to follow suit. 'We found it wasn't hard to implement, even though it came late in the car's development.'

But every project has to end. 'You can always find something to improve. In that way I'm a perfectionist,' he says. 'I'm also a pragmatist. I knew we had a car we could be proud of. So I said: "Let's finish – it's time to make sure not just the prototypes are great, but every car."'

The team knew the car was good, but they weren't prepared for the accolades it received. 'We didn't realise

the journalist, the public and the competitors would say: "The game's changed!" I'm told the Focus changed the way the entire industry engineered all cars for dynamics. Less so for NVH, but the framework where you had to have good dynamics OR good NVH was largely abandoned. That's very satisfying.'

Making the project satisfying to work on was paramount. 'Most of the people had helped design the Escort. The skill and passion was there, we just needed to harness it. The key was to use everybody's knowledge and make them feel they were making a difference.'

The car was received well, and is the only car to win Car of The Year titles in North America and Europe. But what about sporty models? Magazines raved about the Focus in a way few mainstream cars had ever enjoyed before, but a sporty model was sorely missed. The ST170 finally reached showrooms in 2002. This might seem at odds with Richard's history. After all, he was inspired to become an engineer by watching the RAC Rally, and his favourite company car was the Sierra RS500 Cosworth. He's only recently given up rallying a Fiesta. So why the delay? 'I had to make all the base cars really good, rather than settle for "that'll do", and let the hobbyist in me focus on the sporty models. I didn't want to fall into the same trap my predecessors had done.'

The lack of suitable powertrains was also an issue. 'Even with the ST170, we knew it didn't have enough power, but it was the best we could do at the time.'

Despite that, Richard still has a fondness for the ST170. 'It's a lovely car to hustle along a great road. You can carry speed through every corner; you don't need a lot of power as the handling and grip is so good, and the steering is uncorrupted.' Richard was less involved in the RS – he'd



**Richard explains his three pillars of wisdom.**

**THANKS**  
Richard-Parry Jones and Jenny Hibbert, all at Gwyndaf Evans Motors, plus Paul Harding and Charlotte Ward at Ford Heritage.

moved on to America by then, but he concedes that it came to the product cycle far too late.

Nearly 25 years on since the project started, and 20 years since its launch, Richard looks back on that time fondly. 'I was only 40 at the time, and to have the chance to do a car like that, and be trusted by the senior board and investors to spend about \$3 billion was just amazing.'

Looking at the transformative effect the car had on the brand and market, that 50 bucks spent on extra pressed steel was well worth the investment. But it took persuasion to make it happen. And that's the biggest part of how the Focus came to be so great.

'There are three key pillars for persuasion. Do you have a compelling business framework? Do you have the scientific evidence, the data, which will support your argument? Then you have to show them how you'll do it,' he says. And the third pillar? 'The boss may be looking at you and saying everything looks good on paper, but can I trust this person to deliver? You have to convince them you can do it,' says Richard. **MC**

## 'IT TOOK PERSUASION. YOU HAVE TO CONVINCE PEOPLE YOU CAN DELIVER'



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