

A TALE OF THREE DATTOS.

If this gearbox could talk..

By Paul Matthews
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Datto Two & it's owner, 2015. *How did we get here? READ ON!*



Classic cars are all around us. We go to car shows to see them. We buy magazines and turn the pages with glassy eyes of good times gone by. We toil in workshops to bring them back to life. But rarely do we hear the *stories behind those cars*.

This is the story of one of those cars. In fact.. three. For clarity we'll start the obituary here:

Datto One : 1985 to 1998 :
Datsun 1200 4 door Sedan **B110-STUL, Stock.**

Datto Two : 1997 to 2022:
Datsun 1200 4 door Sedan **B110-SAUL, Stock.**

Datto Three : 2022 to Present:
Datsun 1200 4 door Sedan **B110-STUL, Modified.**

You see, it's been *forty years* since I first sat in a datto and let out the clutch. That's a long time. A lot of miles on the speedo. *And a lot of stories.*

As with most things in life like this, we have to go back. *WAY back*. Back to the 1980s, in St Marys – west of Sydney.

I was the only member of our family to learn to drive and do my test *in a manual*. That's because at the time, our family had two manuals in the driveway. Dad's old monster *Ford Cortina 4.1*, and my brother's tiny 890cc *Suzuki LJ80 soft top 4WD* (the fore runner to the Sierra). I learned to drive (and did my test) ironically in a *Datsun 200B*.

By 1985, the need for a car for junior took centre stage. *I liked small cars*. They were fun to drive, cheap to buy and run, easy to park and.. well..*I just liked them*. So initially, I went looking at Morris Minis.

I combed the trading post. I went to see a few private sales, taking a good mate from church with me who was "into cars". Good job I did! This particular Mini was everything I thought I wanted. It drove well, looked great. Then the bonnet came up and the oil filler cap came off – to reveal a cloudy white milky liquid under the cap.

"No thanks," suggested my church mate and we took off. On the way back, he explained that the frothy white liquid was a sure fire sign of trouble. Probably a blown head gasket.

Soon after, I got accepted into an engineering degree transfer course. This meant I needed to go get a job. This in turn meant *I needed a car. Fast*. Like.. *Today*. Armed with \$1200 bucks, off went dad and I down to that place everybody goes in Sydney when they need a used car fast: Parramatta Road!

We looked and looked. Yard after yard. Nothing. Either piles of junk, or way overpriced.

Five o'clock closing time approached. We stopped at just one more small yard near Granville: *"Starline Motors"*. The salesman looked forlorn and disappointed. Suddenly he remembered that only half an hour earlier, he had made a sale. That customer had traded in a small white car on a Skyline. The trade in was out the back. The engine was still warm. *"Let's go have a look"* he said.

And There it stood, waiting for greatness:
DATTO ONE. They hadn't even had time to clean it. I wasn't so sure. I had previously had my heart set on a Mini.



The original Datto One, photo taken around 1992.

“Go take it for a test drive”, the salesman baited us – so I did. *And that was all it took!*

That *wonderful gear shift*. That *feather light clutch*. Those firm brakes. That *rear wheel drive*. And.. *that motor!* It went straight to 5000rpm without so much as a slight shudder. And.. not a hint of white froth under the oil filler cap. Here it was. ***My perfect fit. I was in love.***

The deal was done. 1200 bucks for a 1200. And home it went. Never was I to know that this moment was the *beginning of something special*. A car I would cherish, enjoy and thrash to within an inch of it's very existence for the *next thirteen years!*

For you see, in all that time.. Over all those hundreds of thousands of kilometres.. Never – *ever* – have any of my dattos *ever let me down in traffic*. They never left me stranded on the side of the road. Never needed a tow.

Ever.

Things sometimes came close. But somehow my old girls *always got me home*.

The new car!

Straight away, Datto One was immediately pressed into service commuting between St Marys and North Ryde. However the cold wintry starts immediately revealed that all was not good with the stock A12 motor.

Morning cranks would diligently be followed by a yard full of blue smoke from leaky valve seats. Once the motor warmed up of course, all was fine. Regular oil and water checks were conducted daily (as they in fact should be, according to the manual!).

Having been completely cleaned out of funds buying it, I scraped up just enough cash to change the oil and filter and get a mechanic friend to change the plugs and give it a tune up. I then secured a bottle of *Wynn's Stop Smoke* – that venerable oil thickener, which still graces auto store shelves today. After emptying one bottle into the sump, it appeared that nothing had happened.

However after a few months' driving, the valve seat clogging effect finally kicked in. It worked so well that the original A12 motor in Datto One continued to give sterling service until around 1990.

It wasn't long before my thoughts turned to *improving the datto*. The first thing to go was that stock radio. Replaced by a more appropriately powered head unit, driving a set of four 8" speakers and separate tweeters on a custom cut wooden panel in the parcel shelf. This speaker configuration has remained with my three dattos until this very day. *I like my audio coming from the rear*.

As a youngster, I was one of those guys who always liked to *take things to the limit*. I wanted my Datto to be the cheapest ride possible and yet still do everything I wanted it to do. I liked it when people gasped and whispered “*I can't believe he did that with just that little car*”.

I owned a small Rock & Roll PA audio rig and gigged around town with bands. It was never good enough unless all the amplifiers ran maxed out. I also did lights. This was never good enough either.. unless all of the electrical power available in a venue was used to the max. *You get the general idea*.

Now.. we're NOT talking about making my datto the *fastest* ride out there. Oh no! I wasn't into racing or rallying at all! *Datto One was strictly a suburban ride*. A shopping trolley to have fun with. *To try and break it*. Problem was, each time *I tried* to break it.. *it wouldn't break!*

The first improvement was an Electronics Australia “*transistor assisted ignition*” kit. I had already gotten sick of the thing losing timing within a few weeks of it being tuned. The EA TAI was the answer. It used the standard set of points, but takes away the heavy current flowing through them to the coil. This meant that the point contacts stay more or less clean for several months at a time instead of just a few weeks. Home made kit, cost me about \$50 bucks and was still in use in Datto Two, in 2020.

The next “upgrade” was something most datto enthusiasts would never even dream of bolting to a 1200 Sedan: A **Towbar**.

I had gigs to do. Trailer loads full of sound and lighting gear to move around. We had a covered box trailer, which would regularly be loaded to around 700kg for trips around Sydney. Initially I had



The original **Towbar**, fitted to Datto Two in 2015.

no intention to drop this load onto the Datto. However before long, I *discovered what Datto One could really do*. I found out that.. 700kg of trailer.. *really wasn't that much of a problem at all!*

Not bad for a car with a nameplate tare weight of 710kg! There were a few rules I had to follow though:

First was to make sure I loaded the car itself to the hilt first. All the heavy cables and stands went into the boot. The heavy amplifiers dropped into the back seat. Adding humans, this took the car up to just over 1200kg. Drop the trailer on and this topped the combo out at around 1.9 ton. Now *surely that would break it!* So I thought.

But... no! Datto One happily took this abuse! In it's stride. *Some times every weekend*. Often on *very steep roads*. With some skilled driving technique, low gears and lots of 5000+ rpm from the A12, Datto One could get into and out of just about anywhere. Places where larger vehicles would not fit!

All I had to do was *choose the right gear*. Well in advance! Gears that were selected on a 4 speed stock gearbox. We'll look at what happens to that *gearbox* later in our story.

Stopping: *That was the other problem!*

With it's four stock drums and non power assisted, single cylinder braking system, the Datto was definitely *not a truck*.

There were many times when stopping involved jamming both of my feet on the brake pedal. Pressing down so hard, one would be concerned the driver's seat would snap in half. Eventually it did. But that was nothing a bit of welding at the local steel shop couldn't fix.

Memories abound. Trips on sweltering Western Sydney summer days, on the way to gigs in the late '80s. Both car and trailer loaded to the max. All the windows wide open. Quarter windows reversed, directing the hot, dry breeze into the cab. 41 deg C in the shade.

Turning on to the freeway, I would just permanently plant my foot on the accelerator. Throttle wide open. Closed briefly, only for gear changes. Come to think of it, that's the way I always drove my dattos: *Two speeds*. "ON" and "OFF".

Picture Saturday: 80kph. Maybe down to 70 on the hills, in third gear at around 5k on the A12. Tearing past rows of far more modern and larger cars, pulled to the side with their hazard lights flashing, steam erupting from under their bonnets. Sydney sun belting down. Datto temperature gauge: Just below boiling. *"Now surely this should break it!"*

But.. *NO!* Again. Just.. *NO*. Datto One just *took this abuse*. Again and again, week after week. *"Now THIS is MY kinda car"* I thought to myself. The Datto and Me were *never* going to be separated.

Rebuild Number One

By 1988, I had quit that time waster called "university" and got myself an electrical apprenticeship with a local firm. Alas.. on the way home one unremarkable weekday, *it happened*. A careless van driver and a roundabout on Woodstock Avenue, not far from work.

The blame was put on the other driver. His insurance company offered me \$1500 to settle. *I could keep the car*.

The front left side had been belted in where the van had pulled out in front of me. The guard was a write off. The radiator had punched through the fan. With Datto One back home, I took a closer look.

Out came the radiator, down to the repairers for a recore. With the help of a strong rope tied to a tree and in reverse gear, I was able to pull the front of the car back out far enough to fit the radiator back in there with a few spacers. The headlight, air cleaner and guard were all tied up again with bits of wire.

Datto One was back on the road! It stayed in this "temporary repair" state for *over two months* before the time finally came to start *Rebuild Number One*. I can't see anyone getting away with that kind of stuff today.



The original Datto One Gearbox, now fitted to Datto two



Datto One—after the Woodstock Ave accident

A good mate who owned a vintage car panel making business took a look. He had been looking to add some Datto 1200 panels to his manufacturing catalogue. My datto represented a perfect test bed for him, to get the pattern measurements right.

On removal of the guards, we found Datto One had actually deteriorated quite badly. All the usual rust problem areas for 1200's were fairly well advanced. We would need to fold new floor pans, sills and front corners plus rear runners and weld them in with the Mig. Plus repair the accident damage, of course.

So armed with the \$1500 bucks from the insurance, we got to work. Once complete, a new set of Chinese guards, doors and bonnet were added. The whole lot was then enamel sprayed outdoors and then put back together. Mechanically, it *remained untouched*.

Datto One had been *reborn*. The "1988" rebuild. It gave the little car *another ten years*. Without any delay, it was back to daily driver for this little wonder car!

The finer points of '1200 Stock Exhausts

I'm not sure if it was the '88 accident, or something else. However over the next few years, the tail pipe fell off the exhaust manifold *no less than three times*. Each time, the little ring which held the tailpipe into the manifold would snap off, requiring a completely new tail pipe.

It would usually happen while we were coming home from a gig. The pipe would just suddenly fall out. Then the trip back home through the empty suburbs would leave every house light blinking on as we went past. It was *bloody loud!*

It was quite amazing to note the marked drop in performance of the little A12, with the loss of back pressure. So much for the theory that open exhausts mean more power!

Once home, the pipe would be tied back in again with some scrap copper wire and stay there until I had the time and money to replace it.

Sometimes that took several months. I got used to chuffing noisy exhausts and carbon monoxide fumes in the mean time.

After the third tailpipe drop, I had had enough. So had my trusty mechanic. Instead of replacing the pipe, this time he just welded it back onto the ring. He then welded another small bracket to the side of the pipe which could be separately bolted to the side of the motor to take the stress off the ring. (The datto stock exhaust only has two support points – the manifold on the motor and the rubber slings on the muffler under the car).

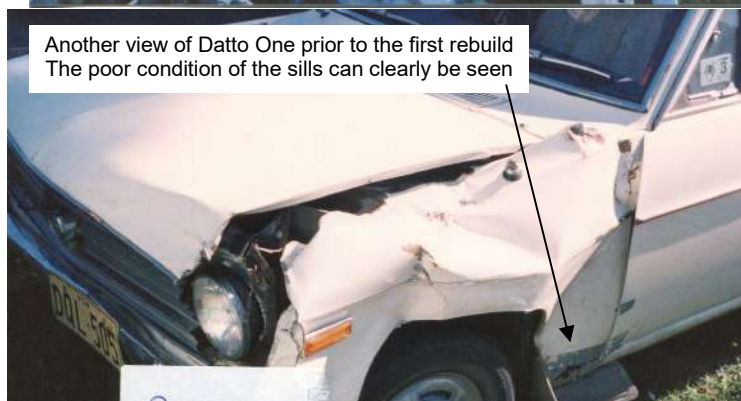
Another regular thing I would do back in those days was drive it without the rubber boot on the gearstick. It just sounded cooler. Grungier. More Datto like.

Yet another memorable fail was the day one of the rubber engine mounts broke. The A12 would regularly begin to rotate when taking off in first gear, lifting up and hitting the bonnet with an almighty thud.

A bit of steel wire wrapped around the mount fixed that one for a few months until I could afford to get a replacement mount from the wreckers.



Datto One—temporary repairs before Rebuild One



Another view of Datto One prior to the first rebuild
The poor condition of the sills can clearly be seen



Datto One—after the first (1988) Rebuild

1990 - Time for a New Donk

By the turn of 1990, the odometer had already gone around past zero once. The original A12 was now consuming more than a litre of oil every few weeks. There was a noticeable blue haze from the tail pipe even when hot. *Something had to be done.*

In 1990 Australia was stuck in the middle of Paul Keating's "*recession we had to have*". I was out of work and out of cash! This was going to have to be an ultra low cost rebirth!

In the 1990s, cheap Japanese motor imports were all the rage. New cars would be sold in Japan. Then only 50,000km later, the motor would be ripped out and replaced with another new one. It was something to do with their pollution standards, apparently. *Something to do with propping their motor manufacturing industry up – more likely!*

Anyway. The result was a flood of cheap, perfectly good import Japanese second hand motors. Here in Australia, 50,000km.. for gawds' sake... that's "*just run in*" as far as we're concerned!

So I scraped up enough dole money to buy a cheap jap import A12 for \$300 bucks. It was delivered in immaculate condition and even came with a 12 month warranty!

Alas though, that was it as far as my piggy bank would stretch. Not enough to pay the mechanic to put it in for me.

I had been doing general mechanical work on the Datto for quite a few years now. Oil changes, filters, brake adjustments (which were required every month or two) and tuning. *Now I had to change a whole motor.*

In went Datto One to the garage at the back of the house.

I learned a lot about dattos over those two weeks! Much of it by trial and error. Sufficed to say, it's important to keep a stock of metric bolts handy of all sizes when working on dattos!

Quite a bit of work needed to be done. The "new" replacement motor was the newer style A12A. Same as the ones fitted into the 120Y and later Nissans. The engine mounts were further back from the original A12 ones, so I had to fabricate a few steel plates to make it fit.

The alternator was on the other side of the motor, up the top. "*thank gawd*" I thought, I used to hate it in the original A12 position down the bottom. So hard to work on when changing a fan belt. A wiring loom extension sorted that one out.

All the usual "pain in the neck" problems were there. Sheared off bolt heads. Or worse still, bolts that wouldn't move at all in the old clutch plate.

With the help of a good friend who had tried his own hand at changing the motor in his Mitsubishi Sigma a few years earlier, we finally got the thing running, working and timed.

The "new" A12A was a *raging success*. No more smoke. No more Wynn's. No more checking the oil every few days. *It just went like the clappers. I like A12A's!*

From First Car to Business Workhorse

By the early '90s and after trying for a year or two to land a job, I realised it just wasn't going to happen. Not in a time when every advertised place had 200 applicants lining up for it. I decided to go out and set up my own business instead, installing PA systems in schools, something I was already more than qualified to do at that time. There was a hole in the market. I filled it.

With a capital outlay of zero, the choice in mode of transport for my new business enterprise was simple. *It would be a Datsun 1200 Sedan*. With suitable signage applied to the doors, *PA Matthews Audio* was born.



So began another era. Datto One would now constantly carry heavy loads. Typically there would be a boot full of electrical cable rolls and tools. The back seat then had three plastic tubs full of contracting supplies. On top of those – generally whatever heavy equipment was travelling to or from a client that day. *And on top of the roof*—at least TWO ladders and bundles of conduit.

Datto One typically had well over 300kg in it wherever it went.

And that was generally *quite a long way*. 600km per week was common!

The first thing to break was the differential.

Possibly due to my rather rough driving style. Coupled with the constantly heavy load. The first diff centre just went bang in the driveway one morning as I was reversing out. It held together enough to roll it down to the mechanics' shop, where he dropped in a 1200 ute diff centre in it from the local wreckers to replace it.

The next thing to break was a *rear leaf spring*. Not surprising really, given it's age and how it was being treated. It was decided that while every other Datto enthusiast was into *lowering* their dattos, in my case I was actually going to *raise* it!

The springs were sent to a specialist shop, where they replaced the broken leaf and then added an extra leaf to each one. The "strengthened" rear suspension made a lot of difference with that extra weight on all those Sydney speed humps. It gave the bump stop rubbers at the rear a well earned rest.

The interior trim began to disintegrate on what was now a 20 year old car. The carpets were removed: never to be returned. The entire floor was then cleaned and given a coat of GMH black. And that was the way it stayed. The seats came out once again, to be welded up. Again. A second time.

By the mid 1990's my work had diversified into a career in the emerging Sydney big budget film industry. "*Electrician to the Stars*", or so I was called. This saw Datto One travelling even longer distances. Generally between St Marys and the Moore Park Showgrounds (now Disney Studios) daily, plus all around town and occasionally to country location shoots.

The little Datto really excelled at doing this job. It could go where most other cars couldn't fit, including through the swing doors and straight onto pavilion floors and sound stages at Disney - when everybody else had to leave their cars outside and trolley in with their tools. It could park on a postage stamp and turn on the diameter of a 20 cent coin. For all sense it was a tool trolley with a rego plate on it.

Amongst a bunch of eccentric, arty farty, inner city filmy types, me and my "industrialized" Datto fit in perfectly. They would take pictures of it in disbelief, that it *really was the main work vehicle of an electrician*. Some were even envious.

As time dragged on.. more stuff broke. But every time it happened, it never resulted in the car leaving me stranded.

The diff went bang. Again. This time it lost a tooth on the crown wheel. Alas I was too busy to do anything about it at the time, so it just stayed that way for several more days doing it's duty between St Marys and Moore Park with a "clunk, clunk, clunk" in the back before I had the chance to get it replaced.



Datto One—and its owner—on the set of the "Power Rangers Movie" Production in 1994. When only the most reliable motoring will do.



The rear window of Datto One in 1996 pretty much tells the story

Occasionally I would pull up at the lights, put it in first and let out the clutch to be greeted with a revving motor and no movement. The crown wheel had stopped where the tooth was missing and the pinion couldn't mesh with it.

Simple. Open door. Right leg out. Push car back a foot or so. Then try again. Off I go, clunk clunk clunk clunk clunk down the road.

On another occasion, "Bang, Clunk" at the front. Suddenly the steering handles like a dog. Even a slight turn sends the car way over to the left or right, cornering more like a HQ Holden than a zippy '1200. There is a noticeable lean to the left.

I had broken the stock sway bar. Clean in the middle.

Once again, a few days' travelling later, it was replaced with a new and much fatter K-Mac aftermarket one.

Datto Two is Born

By 1997, it was becoming obvious that 'ole Datto One was *reaching the end of it's viable service life*. The mph speedo had just gone through zero again. Many of the panels replaced in 1998, were now turning into rusty dinner plates. Other sections of the sills (which had not been worked on in '88) were becoming so bad, you could stab a screwdriver through it.



This time, *a rebuild would be out of the question*. The car had simply been bashed too heavily, showing the beaten scars of nearly 10 heavy years heavy work since the last rebuild. Much of it as a tradesman's work vehicle. That "1990 vintage" A12A, while still going strong, was starting to gobble oil.

There was nothing for it. *This time, Datto One would have to be replaced.*

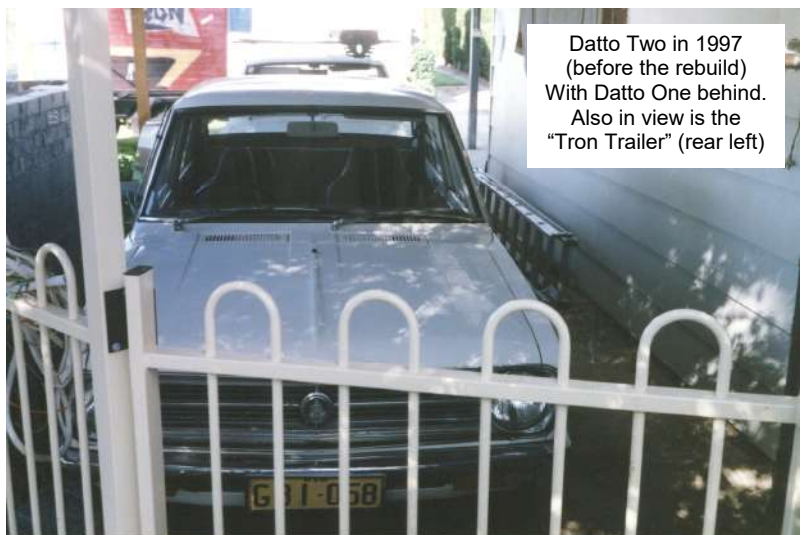
After a short experiment with a different model car (the model of which will not be revealed), I decided that I would only truly be happy with *another Datsun 1200*.

In this case, fortune favoured the foolish. An old employer called one day, saying that a family a few doors' down from his place, was selling a car. He thought I might be interested. It was a *White Datsun 1200 Sedan*. You bet!!

I was around there like lightning within hours. And *there it stood*. **DATTO TWO.**

It was in virtually immaculate, original, stock condition. Not a speck of rust anywhere. Kept garaged for most of its life. Used occasionally by granny for the weekly shopping. The *absolute perfect specimen*. However.. it was ***an Automatic!***

"That will never do" I thought to myself.
"That will have to change".



So now I had Two Dattos. And the plan was clear.

All the while still using Datto One for work, I would strip Datto Two and have the body renovated and resprayed. I would then get another "new Jap Import" A12A and a gearbox from somewhere and rebuild Datto Two as a manual. It was planned that I would pick a date, take Datto One off the road, remove everything from it that I thought was useful (particularly the strengthened suspension components) and then fit those to Datto Two.

I would then have an essentially *brand new, rebuilt* (for the *second time*) Datsun 1200.

After using both Datto 1 and Datto 2 together for a while, in early 1998 I removed the automatic box and original A12 from Datto 2 and delivered the car empty to a local body shop. They took their time with it, but I was happy with the 2 pack white respray and the fact that they did all of it without me having to do too much of the work myself.

Now I had a renovated, but motor-less, *Datto Two* back at home. And the very, very tired looking original *Datto One* standing next to it, only three months out from rego. An inspection which it would *certainly not pass*.

The end of Datto One (sob..)

One very normal day in February 1998, I was returning from Disney to St Marys in the late afternoon. I had gone South to avoid the usual jam on the M4 and was travelling west on Elizabeth Drive, ready to cut up through Mamre Rd back towards St Marys.

As usual, Datto One was absolutely jam packed with tools and materials in the boot and back seat. A full set of ladders was on the roof racks above.

It was fortuitous. But on that particular day, I had been thinking to myself.

"How would I end it?" I thought. How would I set the date when Datto One would retire? What would I do with it when it was *all over*? I was so emotionally attached to it. I just didn't know what to do. It felt like I was going to cut a part of my own body off and throw it away.

Then, *it Happened*.

I had been following a motor cycle on Elizabeth Drive. Keeping my distance, as usual. Suddenly, the bike just *slammed on the brakes*. Nothing in front of him. No reason to stop in the middle of the road. He just *stopped cold*.

I had milliseconds to do something, or this guy was dead under the Datto. My reaction to hit the brake unfortunately was misguided. My foot slipped and got caught under the pedal. Precious milliseconds were lost. So in a split second, I put the car to the left to miss him.

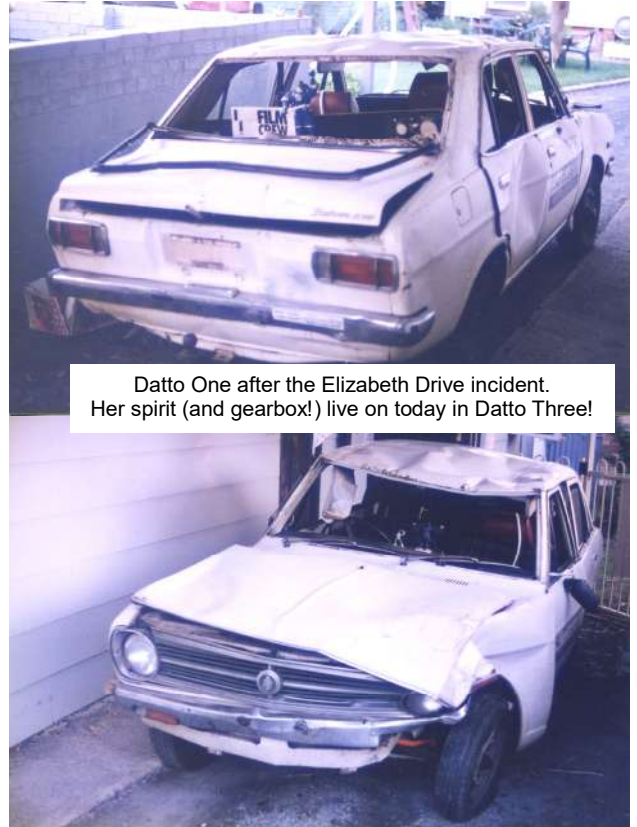
As Datto One careered off the road, I caught in the instant of my right eye the bike accelerating off again. He probably didn't even know one of his nine lives had just been used up.

But as for Datto One.. it was *all over*. It finished upside down, held up valiantly in the ditch by the ladders on the roof. As I hung in the seat belt, a million bits of work scattered from the back seat throughout the car behind me. Then silence.

"OK. So.. THIS is how it ends", I thought to myself as I hung there.

How appropriate. In it's last moment of service, *Datto One* had saved not one life..

but two.



Datto Two takes Centre stage – Rebuild Number Two!

With the wreck dragged home on a tilt tray, the job of stripping began immediately. I no longer needed to find a gearbox: my four speed stocker from Datto One would do nicely!

The remainder of the strengthened suspension came off, as did the original towbar and anything else of use. The body was then dragged down to Simsmetal to be recycled into vacuum cleaners.

With a bit of money now saved up for the project, I had my mechanic take care of building the rest of Datto Two. The new A12A import motor was different this time. It had a different bolt pattern on the inlet manifold and appeared to have been removed from a van. While this made no difference when installed into Datto Two, this unique bolt arrangement would ultimately end up being very significant a few years later. It is this same motor that remains operational in Datto three today.

Bolted to back of the A12A, would go my original 4 speed manual stock transmission from Datto One. This gearbox has *never been opened in it's life*. It had only had it's oil changed twice – in 1990 and then in 2013. We've already read here about how much abuse this box had already suffered through. It must have collectively done more than half a million kilometres.. *before* it was even installed in Datto two.

Once all back together, rebuilt Datto Two entered service only two weeks after the final demise of Datto One.



Wheel Changes

Up until early 1999, both my dattos had always run original stock 12" wheels with 155SR12 Radial tyres, either Firestone or Pirelli. However by the turn of the century these were starting to get harder to find and becoming a "special order" item.

So in a gamble to improve handling and perhaps take the freeway RPM down a bit, I went in search of some 13" wheels for Datto Two. They came in the form of a set of wheels removed from a Datsun Stanza at Blacktown Pick & Payless, with 175/70/R13 Pirelli rubber and plenty of tread left on them. From the wreck, I'd say it was likely they were around 10 years old at the time.

They fit Datto Two pretty much perfectly, although with *very little margin to spare* between the edge of the tyre and the front struts (less than 2mm). This is the configuration Datto Two retained until 2015. Although it was definitely better on the open road, the car didn't handle cornering as well as the original 12" wheels did.

The Moulin Rouge Incident

Work in film can be tiring. And so it was that I found myself very tired late one Friday night at Disney working on Baz Luhrmann's Moulin Rouge.

I had the weekend off, so I was racing to try and get the dozens of jobs done that needed to be done before I disappeared. As can happen with these things, fatigue and stress can be bad bedfellows.



As usual the Datto was being used as a tool trolley around the lot between stages. And so it was that in one fleeting frustrated momentary lapse of reason, I reversed at speed around a corner and lost control of the car. It ended up smacked into the tailgate loader on the back of the standby props truck.

A big horizontal smack in the Datto Two's rear right side quarter was the result.

You should have seen the cast and crew bolt out of the stage when they heard it! Safety officers, First aid, Producers, they came out of the building cracks like cockroaches. Some of them were the same people who had been loading me up with last minute "aww can you just do this before you go" tasks only minutes earlier.

Once they realised nobody was hurt, things settled down again and they turned back to what was going on in front of the camera. It was a wake up call though, to both myself and some other people on the production, as to what had been going on with me fatigue wise.

It left Datto Two superficially wounded, but still driveable.

Datto Two Takes a Long Break

Not soon after this incident, the *days of me driving Datto Two as my daily driver would come to a end.*

Back in 1999, there had been a fuel substitution racket running around Sydney. Corrupt tanker drivers and service stations owners would take their tankers to a chemical plant and get their tanks half filled with Ethanol.

They would then drive on to the Caltex refinery at Kurnell and have them "filled" the rest of the way with Unleaded. However the amount they filled – and paid for – was only half of what the tanker could hold. Because the other half had already been filled – with Ethanol – at half the price of the petrol (because Ethanol at the time didn't attract the 38c per litre Federal fuel tax that Petrol did). The corrupt service station would then sell this concoction as Unleaded Petrol and pocket the difference.

For a while, there was no way of telling what you were filling up with at the bowser. And so it was, that one day shortly after Christmas, I was cruising down to Canberra for my annual family junket at my brothers' place in early 2000.

With the A12 motor at around 6000rpm and overtaking some bastard in third gear going up hill somewhere outside the back of Queanbeyan, the inevitable BANG came. Followed by an immediate loss of power. Just enough momentum to get the thing off the road.

Finally.. my unblemished datto 1200 traffic reliability record had been broken. *But we won't record this incident as a breakdown* - because later it was proven that the fuel mix in the tank that day was more than 60% Ethanol – not Petrol!

The resulting mixture had vapourised and pre ignited inside the inlet manifold. The result? A seismic crack in the alloy manifold in the middle.

With virtually no manifold vacuum as a result, the car would still start but as soon as the accelerator was pressed it would stall. After a while thinking over the situation, I was able to adjust the mixture on the carby so rich that it compensated for the lack of vacuum and got the car going well enough to get it the rest of the way to Canberra.



An easy fix one might think. Replace the inlet manifold. However that turned out to be *much harder than I thought it would be.*

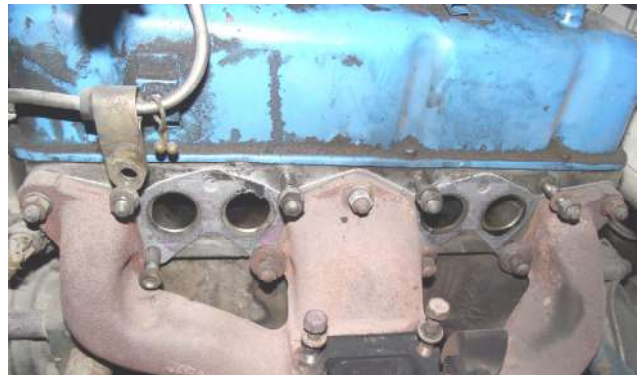
The Jap Import A12A motor (as you may remember) had an unusual (for Australia) head bolt pattern and shape. Completely different to the A12's we normally find in Australia. No matter how hard I tried, no matter how many wreckers I combed, finding a replacement quickly became impossible.

Admitting defeat, I bought a big tube of Silicon Sealer from the local hardware store and gunked most of the tube all over the crack on the old manifold and then reassembled it onto the motor. It sealed the manifold enough to get the car back home to St Marys, albeit a very slow trip!

Again in Sydney – same problem. A replacement manifold was *impossible to find*. Now at this stage I was still very busy working on Moulin Rouge. *I needed a working car. I needed it. RIGHT NOW.*

And unlike in my previous times of desperation, long stretches of overtime had left me with quite a lot of cash in the bank. Enough to go out and buy a replacement car, which ended up being a '97 Toyota Hilux Dual cab ute.

In all fairness, I took a few moments to consider my situation: *In the fifteen years I had owned both of my Dattos, the '1200 in Australia had now passed from being a "cheap ride" to being a "classic car". As a model, the Datsun 1200 was now over 25 years old in the marketplace.*



Inlet manifold bolt pattern on the A12A. You can see the small dimple marks where the bolts would normally go for a "normal" manifold.



Datto Two, just before it was put "on ice" after being transferred To Tennyson in 2005. Note the 13" wheels.

Parts were becoming ever harder to find. Repairs therefore took weeks instead of hours and cost considerably more. The Datto also really didn't carry as much payload as I often needed to carry as a tradie. Running a classic car as a daily driver was no way to run a time critical business.

The days of the Datto workhorse had finally come to an end.

Datto Two was shunted down the back of the PA Matthews Audio factory unit. Under cover and safe.

"One day", I thought to myself. One day.

But in the end, it would be *eleven more years* before that day finally came.

Datto Rebuild Number Three

Soon after putting Datto Two on mothballs, I finally got on with all those other things guys have to do before they let themselves get too old. Things like get a girl, get married, build a house, have kids etc. It was time for Datto Two to enter the time machine.

Datto Two was relocated under its own power to a different factory unit in St Marys in early 2002. It stayed there until 2005, when it was moved by car trailer to our new home in Tennyson. There it would remain, buried deep up the back of a barn shed on blocks.. until December 2010.

Finally, the time had come.

In the mean time, PA Matthews Audio had grown into a sizeable small business with two Toyota utes on the road. Problem was, occasionally one of those utes would invariably find itself in the service shop for whatever reason, leaving me down one vehicle. What I needed was a standby car which could sit there otherwise unused and not take up much space - but then suddenly be suitable for a few day's heavy use in the event that one of the other trucks was off the road.

I had the choice of either buying another vehicle, or restoring Datto Two.

In the end, the restoration of Datto Two cost as much as a new small car would have cost. However I think I was infinitely more satisfied with the result!



Datto Two undergoes its second body restoration at JBK in 2013.

A three year budget was drawn. The project was underway. Slowly but surely, Datto Two would again rise and take its rightful place.

It was decided that a mechanical restoration would be conducted first. This would be possible because the engine bay had already been resprayed and restored in 1998 and was in good condition. It would assist if the car was driveable, so at least it could be moved around yards and easily on and off trailers.

The car still ran in 2005. *There was no such luck in 2011.* Investigation revealed the entire fuel system had collapsed. What was left of the contaminated fuel had turned to a gunky paste. It blocked everything and rendered even the fuel tank itself useless – as was the entire carburettor, fuel pump and lines.

The brake system had also completely collapsed. Most cylinders had seized and at least one hose had failed. Then there was the matter of the cracked inlet manifold to consider. Fortunately an Ebay search revealed an old A12 for sale in the Southern Highlands. And in the photo – *Bingo! This particular motor had attached to it.. the correct inlet manifold!*



The A12A as restored in Datto two. Datsun purists will be able to notice two distinct changes to the otherwise stock arrangement.

The mechanical restoration was performed by **Hi Comp Performance Engines** in Minchinbury (Sydney). Upon test, it was found the existing A12A had excellent compression and was in very good condition, so we decided to keep the motor in the car. Most of the wiring had deteriorated badly and become hard, so a partial wiring loom replacement was carried out.

The original "Electronics Australia" electronic ignition unit was also tested and retained. All the usual ignition components were replaced, points, plugs, leads etc and the distributor dismantled, cleaned and serviced.

A new "Chinese Hitachi copy" stock carburettor was secured off Ebay. This turned out to work perfectly – except for the accelerator pump. In the end, we removed the pump from the old carby and slotted it into the new one. Problem solved.

The gummed up fuel tank was restored by a specialist service shop, who declared it was "one of the worst cases they had ever seen". The fuel lines were thoroughly flushed and all hoses replaced, as was the fuel pump diaphragm. Once all these problems had been overcome, we had the A12A humming like new.

Next we tackled the brakes. These were completely dismantled and de rusted. New shoes, cylinders and hoses were then fitted. A new master cylinder was also fitted however no matter how hard we tried, it was impossible to get the system bled and get the pedal up.

In the end we discovered that the replacement master cylinder was of a slightly different type from a different manufacturer with the original no longer available. The only difference was a sub millimetre shortness in shaft length. To correct this problem a special adjustment jig was fabricated on a lathe to allow the difference in length to be corrected to the level of accuracy required at the pedal.

Initially the rusty muffler was replaced with a small hot dog in the tail pipe. This would prove too noisy for highway driving and thus was later restored back to a fully stock exhaust system. Steering ball joints were also replaced as were the rear shocks, however the original front struts proved more than satisfactory.

A stint on the dyno for tuning and it wasn't long before we were getting around 68hp (6000rpm) at the rear wheels – a good result for essentially a stock setup. Total bill for mechanicals, around the \$4k mark. Next, it was time for the bodywork.

It took a while to find a local shop with enough time and experience to take on the heritage project.

In 2013, **JBK Smash repairs** in Windsor stepped up to the plate. The body was chrome and accessory stripped by myself and then delivered to JBK.

The main body problems were (of course) the 1999 collision damage, sections of rust around the petrol filler, the rear sills and one small section of one front sill and problems with the drivers' door where spot welds had become detached.

Any attempts to secure a "chop" section of rear guard for the '1200 were quickly dismissed. All of the samples found were all in far worse condition than the one on Datto two. As a result the collision damage was repaired "the old fashioned way" with a lot of hammer, bash and mig welding.

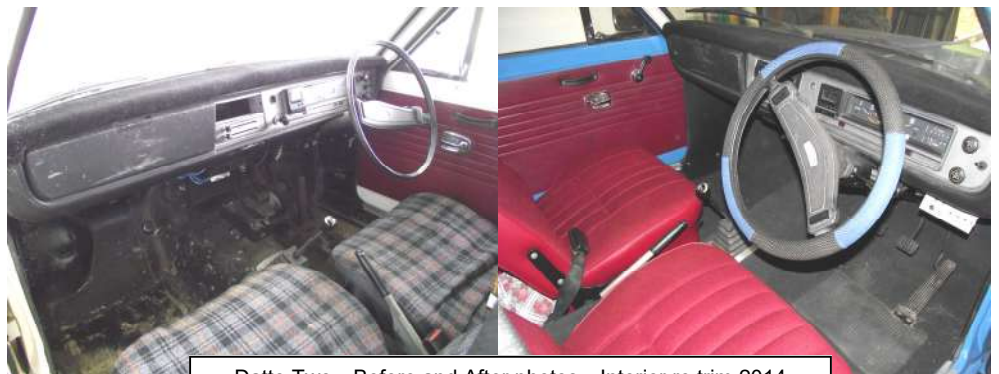
The only panel to be replaced was the bonnet, which was found to be bent. All other panels were repaired and re used. Once re assembled, the body was then taken back to undercoat and prepared for an oven bake spray in two pack enamel.

At this point it was decided to depart from returning the car to stock white. It was felt that a blue would more appropriately suit the new corporate use of the vehicle and yet still maintain a "retro" look. The ultimate theme would be a red and blue combo with the existing chrome moulds resprayed in flame red. Bodywork came in at around the \$10k mark.

With the body work complete, it was back home to reassemble the chrome, lights and accessories in preparation for blue slip. Some door rubbers were also replaced, although many were retained as these had previously been replaced in the 1998 rebuild. Once again it was Ebay to the rescue with quite a lot of classic datto parts being ordered online. With only a few minor issues resolved, Datto Two passed it's bluey and was re registered in NSW in *October 2013*.

The interior was then completely re trimmed by **Hawkesbury Auto & Marine Upholstery** in 2014.

Colours were chosen to compliment the stock and retro look but with a "livened up" feel to reflect the history of the car. The stock seat frames were retained as they were in surprisingly good (i.e. not falling apart) condition. Cost coming in around the \$3.5k mark.



Last of all, the audio system was restored to it's former glory employing a re built version of the three way, rear parcel shelf mounted arrangement which had featured in both Datto One and Datto Two since the mid '80s. This time driven by a modern Pioneer USB Super tuner head unit.

Once complete, "Datto Two MkII" regularly got out on the road, although it was more of a "weekly driver" than a daily one. *Except for when one of the PAMAC work trucks was off the road.* Then.. Datto 2 to stepped up to the plate and performed just like in the "good ole' days"! Datto Two even starred in a few street parades and carnivals.



Back to Stock Wheels

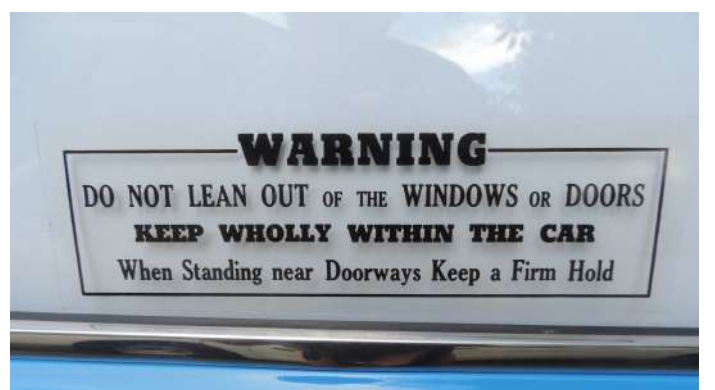
In 2014, I took the Datto Two down to Eastern Creek for the Ian Luff driving course. Whilst the datto performed faultlessly, the same couldn't be said for the 13" wheels. Now at least *25 years old*. The rubber has significantly hardened, affecting steering and stopping ability especially in the wet on the slalom course.

In early 2015 one of them began to develop a bulge in the sidewall—broken steel belts. Definitely time for a change.

After considerable thought, it was decided to return Datto Two to *stock 12" wheels*. It was felt that since this is the configuration both of my dattos were driven under for most of their lives, it would be the most appropriate for this restoration. A set of original rims were obtained, cleaned and resprayed in hammertone grey. New Hankook 155/80/R12 rubber completed the picture.



Datto Two Picture Parade



Above : "Ninjur" has been with all my Dattos since the early 1990s. A character from the original "Power Rangers" TV show, it drew a lot of attention to the car when I was working on the Power Rangers movie back in 1994, where the Datto was regularly set side. Ninjur remains watching over Datto 3 today.



And that might be the end of the story.

However fate can play its hand at any time. And it just so happens it did, seven years later, when my Datto would, once again, sacrifice itself in the protection of humans. *We'll get to that in a bit.*

Before that time, the car gave our family many happy moments, including the chance for my daughter Kimberley to "learn to drive" in it. *Both my kids learned in manuals.* It also came with some close shaves, like the time I took Kimberley to her year 12 formal in it, way up the mountains in Berambing. On the way back, I noticed the brake pedal getting closer and closer to the floor. Not what you want happening.. as you descent Bluebird Hill on Bells Line of Road!

As always, the Datto *got me home safely.* Where I discovered.. the brake fluid reservoir was empty and I had been surviving on whatever fluid had been left in the system! *I took a note of that,* deciding that in heritage service, it might be time to consider upgrading the original single cylinder, non power assisted brakes to something a little more modern and with a bit more redundancy. *But I wouldn't get the chance.*

On 16th May 2022, at the end of a fairly routine "run check" down to Richmond and back, an unfortunate driver in a work ute decided to suddenly pull out on to Tennyson Road and just sit there, in order to get a better view. *At 80kph on a wet road, Datto Two didn't stand a chance.* The choice was either to end the guy's life and probably put me in a wheelchair, or swerve and put the car into a ditch where there was scrub that could stop it. I chose the latter.

The result was a significantly bent front end. Too bent to even consider repairs this time.



The Birth of Datto Three

In all fairness, my insurer (Shannons) were *excellent*. I can't recommend them highly enough. They paid out the agreed value of Datto Two (\$20k) *AND* I got to keep the car. My only decision now, would be to work out if I should "call it quits" at that point, or move on to my next chapter of Datto life.

With my daughter having learned to drive in Datto Two, both of us somewhat emotionally attached to the car and my younger son looking forward to driving, it wasn't much of a choice: *there WOULD be a "Datto Three"*. So with insurance cash in hand, the search began. The plan would be to find a new shell and transfer as much as possible from Datto Two into Datto Three.



With good, original Datsun 1200 sedans now well and truly in that 40+ year old "vintage car" category and becoming as rare as hens teeth, my choices were very limited. Searches revealed a few options for unrestored cars in far flung corners of the country such as Adelaide and far North Queensland. To get one though, I'd be looking at costs to travel and inspect, then more \$ to get the car back to Sydney, then a whole lot more to put the shell through the body shop, cut out any rust and make repairs before giving the car a total respray. *\$20k wasn't going to cover all that.*

So it was with excitement that I did eventually discover a *fully restored shell* near Campbelltown, which had already been painted in a colour I really liked and largely restored internally, just waiting for an injection of parts from a donor car such as Datto Two to complete the picture. The owner even offered to deliver it to my front gate.

Now I'll admit that this guy probably "fleeced me," walking away with \$20k for a car that was not even on the road. However I didn't care. *I had what I wanted.* He got what he wanted. Any of the other "far flung" options I was exploring at the time would have cost me way more than \$20k by the time the shouting was done. So it was a "win win" on both sides. The right car in the right place. "Datto Three" now stood in my shed. Datto Two was out the back under cover, waiting for the dismantling to begin. So far.. I hadn't spent one cent of my own money.

However this time there would be a few design changes. The new shell came with a good pair of fairly new aftermarket front struts, on which were fitted a set of Stanza disc calipers and discs. Under the bonnet, someone had done a "hack job" at trying to fit a Stanza master cylinder assembly to the firewall of the car. That would probably have to be re done from scratch. However the prospect of doing away with those single cylinder, non power assisted original '1200 brakes with drums on all four wheels that Datto Two had used, was very attractive.

There were a few other important things missing, such as a battery bracket (which I could steal from Datto two) and for some unknown reason the original gearbox mounts had been removed from the tunnel (I assume because the previous owner originally had plans to install something other than an original drivetrain into the shell). Readers might recall that Datto two had originally been an automatic and had been converted to a manual in the late 1990s. This meant the brackets being used for the gearbox in Datto two would not fit into Datto Three. *An aftermarket solution would be required.*

Below : Stanza calipers on Aftermarket struts on Datto 3.

Apart from this, the original drivetrain from Datto two including the 1997 Jap Import A12 engine, the original gearbox from Datto One and the original rear axle and components (remember those "extra leaf" springs from Datto One?) would now go into Datto three. The only other new component would be a new *1.5" stainless exhaust system with extractors*. This would be designed to be as quiet as a stock system, keeping in with my preferred "silent sleeper" approach.

Progress was slow. Mostly because I was giving it about one day per month. However by late 2023, I had finished all of the body and internal fitting, including the seats and dash from Datto two. In went the motor and gearbox, supported by a temporary lump of wood until we could get an aftermarket gearbox bracket fitted. Even the windscreen wiper system was transposed, the existing one that came with the shell proving to be broken. The car ended up literally being Datto two under a new shell.



In January 2024, Datto three took a flat top ride to **Hi Comp Performance Engines** in Minchinbury, where the remainder of work would be completed in preparation for blue slip over the following three months.



*Above : Engine removed and ready for fitment into the new shell. Above Right : Transposed battery bracket
Below : With the supplied one proving completely unsuitable, a new "MadDat" brake booster was fitted complete with dual circuit brakes and new brake lines, with custom made bracket for the firewall.*



Above : The complete fuel system was also transposed from Datto two. However we were unable to get the original mechanical fuel pump on the engine to work and parts were not available, so an electric fuel pump was retrofitted.

Other work done at Hi Comp included complete overhaul of the front calipers and disks, fitting of the gearbox mount, replacement of the brake booster, replacement of the original 1987 vintage "Electronics Australia" ignition kit with a new hall effect electronic ignition and shortening and rebalancing of the main tail shaft, together of course with all of the exhaust work.

In its now 100% heritage role, Datto three would no longer be used as part of the business when another truck was off the road. Therefore arrangements were made for it to be road registered under the NSW "Classic Vehicle Scheme" together with a membership of the "**Kar Nutz**" car club, members of which have been very supportive and helpful with getting the car registered and keeping it on the road.

In May 2024 after many trips around the car park at Minchinbury and satisfactory performance on the Hi Comp dyno, Datto three was finally registered in nearby St Marys and made its way back home to Tennyson, after a stop at **Richmond Tyres & More** to have the front end set up correctly and wheel alignment completed.

However we weren't done yet. During trials, a number of sub standard welds had been discovered under the back of the vehicle, testament to crash repair work that had obviously been done on the shell in a past life.

It was decided that this would be rectified by **JBK Smash** at Windsor. This process kept the car variously off the road most of the remaining time during 2024 and part of 2025, with it finally getting the nod of approval in late 2025 for full road use.

Above Right : The completed engine bay of Datto three today. There's been talk of fuel injection... But not yet :-)



Right : Under the new, the old peeks through. The heritage of Datto three reveals its true roots of Datto two underneath.



Below : Complete car, 2026.



Right : Rear of Datto three.

Middle Left : Internal shot

Middle Right : Original instrument cluster from Datto two now mounted in Datto three.

Lower : Ninjor still keeps a watch over the Datto more than 30 years later.

Bottom : Original gearbox from Datto one, now in use under Datto three, more than 40 years later—and never opened. Shows also the aftermarket mount and the new exhaust setup.

