

1955 Sunbeam Mk III Drophead Coupé

A garage barely bigger than his car made Ted Cawthorne's Sunbeam restoration a bit of a pain

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READER'S
RESTORED
CAR OF 2009
/2010

No 3

1955 SUNBEAM
MK III DHC

I bought my first Sunbeam when I was an apprentice and got through a succession of the cars, along with the odd Riley or two. They were cheap to buy, powerful, stylish, and generally quite rusty.

In 1994 I'd finished restoring a Healey Abbott in my small garage, less than nine feet wide. I decided I'd like another Sunbeam so I bought a 90 saloon. I owned it for four years but never felt affection for it, probably because I hadn't restored it myself.

However in 1997 the perfect car came up in the Club magazine in the form of a rare Sunbeam Mk III Drophead Coupé. This was more like it, and soon I was the proud owner of a dishevelled heap of two-tone rust. I stripped it down straight away, but with hindsight this was a mistake.

The car hadn't run for at least ten years and now I feel I should have got it going first. I can remember saying: 'Actually it looks much worse than it is, I'm sure I can get it on the road quite soon.' How wrong I was. It needed new floors and

THE OWNER

Ted Cawthorne, who served an apprenticeship in the Royal Navy and wound up working on ship-to-air guided missile systems, is a retired technology teacher from Derbyshire. He has rebuilt several vehicles including two Land Rovers, a 1953 Healey Abbott, and a 1956 Triumph TR3 – the latter in a polytunnel. He has just begun the restoration of a 1936 Riley Kestrel.

sills, and the bulkhead was past repairing as it had rusted out along the box section.

Because my garage was slim and barely as long as the car, I had to lift the body on to trestles and lower the chassis to the floor beneath it. The sills, floor and boot were so rotten that I had to brace the shell extensively. Working on the underside of the body required lying on top of the chassis, which was far from comfortable.

Cramped up on that sharp, pointy chunk of metal wearing a headtorch and getting all sorts of rubbish in my eyes was one of the low points. I felt more like a caver than a restorer.

At the time, I was head of technology at a local school – which was great for access to fancy equipment, but rather time-consuming. Working on the house, family commitments and a serious neck injury also conspired against me, and my quick restoration turned into anything but.

When my children had finished university, I began work in earnest again, and to get me ahead, I employed a local welder for a few days.

READER'S RESTO TIP

by Ted Cawthorne

Always try to get the engine going before tearing the car to bits. Not only will this highlight any possible mechanical problems, it's always brilliant for morale to hear that motor running.

LAK 743



The Haynes *Classic Car Trim Restoration Manual*, by Kim Henson, was rather handy.

Ted wasn't keen on the colour initially, but it's grown on him.



If you've got a project that has been dormant for a year or two, seeing some instant progress is a great encouragement and well worth the investment.

With the new floors and sills in place, I tackled the spare wheel well. This is a notorious rust trap on the dropheads, as water runs down the rear windows and pools there. Apparently, Rootes forgot to include any drain holes, leading to inevitable consequences.

I rebuilt the suspension and braking components but I'd stripped the suspension years before. I'd forgotten how many shims were used and completely lost the camber, so I made a large equilateral triangle of wood and used a plumb line and a spirit level to set it. I managed to get within a quarter of a degree and also reduced the camber angles slightly while I was at it to allow for radial tyres.

Finishing a rolling chassis with all the ancillaries was great encouragement, but I began to regret not having fired up the engine first to judge its health. It might have saved me some time had I done that, but I completely rebuilt it anyway, using spares acquired through the club. The block had to go off for machining, but I did everything else mechanical myself.

I borrowed a set of sensitive scales from school and balanced all the pistons and conrods to within one gramme. This, coupled with an original Rootes special tuning kit, transformed the engine. The kit comprised a larger carburettor and an improved inlet manifold: the result, over 10bhp more than the standard engine. The head was ported and polished to match – it ran sweetly and sounded great.

This was a car I wanted to use for foreign trips, so I replaced the original gearbox with a Hunter GLS unit from a scrapyard. This is a common upgrade as the original gearbox is a known weak-spot. The Hunter 'box also has a better J-type overdrive and it has synchromesh on first. I carefully fitted the chassis and body to create a rolling shell, the first time they had been together for eight years.

The car had been repainted in a horrid sludgy green, but I managed to find some traces of the original Crystal Green under some trim. Using this as a sample, I got the subtle metallic colour matched. I'll admit I don't much care for green but I wanted to keep the car original. Hundreds of hours were spent prepping the body for paint. I filled, sanded and primed until I thought I had the perfect body, if you'll excuse the narcissistic expression.

By now I was on a high. With the bodywork ready and all the mechanicals connected, I prepared myself for the first drive. OK, so it had no interior, no glass and only one door fitted, but the Sunbeam went, steered and stopped for the first time in 20 years.

The paintshop, however, was less than impressed, and decided to strip it back to bare metal. Although I was a bit put out, it was the right move. The paint finish is now



The hood was a pain to get right – but patience and swearing won through.

TECH SPEC

- **ENGINE** 2267cc/4-cyl/OHV
- **POWER** 92bhp@4600rpm
- **TORQUE** 130lb ft@2800rpm
- **GEARBOX** 4-spd man O/D
- **TOP SPEED** 95mph
- **0-60MPH** 16sec (est)
- **MPG** 24 (est)
- **LENGTH** 168.5in (4280m)
- **WIDTH** 62.5in (1587m)
- **WEIGHT** 1750lb (1372kg)
- **PRICE NEW** £1198.4s.6d
- **VALUE NOW (C1)** £9500



flawless, and although I hadn't initially been a fan of the colour, it looked stunning.

Back in my little garage I faced a new challenge – the inevitability of damaging the paint. Despite care in moving the car out of the garage every time I worked on it, a depressing number of tiny nicks and irritating scratches started to appear. I left the hanging of the doors to the last moment to avoid banging them against the garage walls.

A completely new loom was next – I customised it to accept extras like flashing indicators. An extra instrument binnacle was added under the dashboard by making a former out of aluminium. This housed additional warning lights for the fog lights, plus a manual override switch for the electric fan. This was a car I'd built to use, after all.

Determined to do as much work as I could myself, I bought an industrial sewing machine and a trimming book written by PC contributor Kim Henson. I thought it would be a bit of a waste of time, to be honest, but it's brilliant. I got two hides of leather and set to work.

Then I discovered the folly that is buying the last of a roll. If you do run out of material or piping, as I did regularly, it may not be possible to match the colour properly. I also completely underestimated every aspect of the amounts needed. I ran out of glue, leather, piping and thread several times over. It took three more visits to the trim shop to get everything.

The seats were not easy to fathom, either. Although I had the old seats as patterns, they had stretched and sagged over the years. The patterns I took from them can best be described as approximate. It was also a puzzle to guess the best sequence to make and assemble the seat facings, and much stitch removal was required.

RECORD OF EVENTS



1 It looked better than it was...



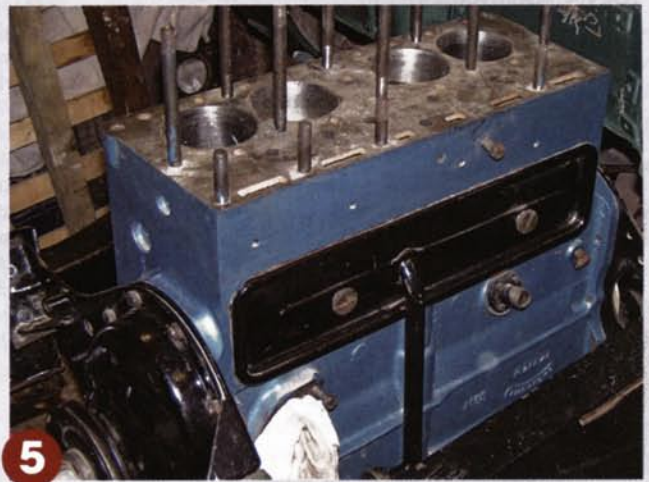
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Here's how Ted did it

1 The Sunbeam didn't look too bad when it was delivered.

2 The bulkhead was replaced with a better one from a scrap car.

3 The chassis was also in a state and Ted had to lie on it to repair the floors and underbody.

4 Floors, sills and rear tub needed extensive welding.

5 The engine was rebuilt and balanced and the head ported.

6 Repairing and priming was done outside.

7 First drive after prepping the body for paint. It would all have to be redone.

8 The hood frame was rotten. Ted made a new one.

9 All he had left to do now was retrim the interior and put it all together.

10 The windscreen was a struggle. Violence, sash clamps and mallets sorted it.

11 Ted cut, sewed, pleated and piped the leather - a DIY job he loved.

12 Almost there - the doors were last to go on.



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The leather door pulls also required a great deal of reworking and foul language to get right. The carpets however, were simple by comparison. I used more than 50m of piping, 1.6sq m of material and over 40m of cord, but it was worth it.

Learning new skills is part of the fun of restoring old cars, and I enjoyed the trimming aspect immensely: new door trims, glove box, sun visors, armrests, steering wheel muff and hood cover were all my own work.

Everyone who's seen it reckons I did a good job, so much so that several club members have asked me to trim their cars. Perhaps I missed my calling.

Finally, I got to the hood. Fortunately the Sunbeam still had one. Unfortunately, it was shocking. Just fixing the frame was bad enough. It seemed to have been attacked by wet rot, dry rot and woodworm all at the same time. It had also snapped in three places, so I sculpted new wood to fit. It also took ages freeing off all the joints and hinges.

I bought a load of green mohair and fired up the CAD machine at school. Using a computer design program and measurements taken from the old hood,

I generated a paper pattern but this turned out to be a poor strategy. Like the seats, the old hood had stretched and distorted and fitting new hood sticks made it worse. However, I'd already cut out the expensive material, leaving a good margin for error.

I made it fit. Just. I should have installed the hood frame hoops after adjusting the rear wind-up windows. I did mine with the windows out so it didn't quite align as it should, but a spot of brute force rectified the problem.

The trim around the rear of the hood had also mysteriously changed shape since being taken off ten years before. It didn't fit at all and had to be bent to match the curve. The screen frame had also managed a similar trick – this fitted snugly along the top and bottom rails of the bulkhead, but was standing proud of the screen pillars, possibly because of the new screen rubbers.

USEFUL CONTACTS

■ **DS West Autos, Derbyshire:** 01298 22541 (respray)

■ **Haynes Classic Car Trim Restoration Manual, by Kim Henson:** 01963 442030, www.haynes.co.uk

■ **John Noble Motorsport, Chesterfield:** 01246 453867 (machining, crank balancing)

■ **Macclesfield Paints, Cheshire:** 01260 298822 (paint mixing)

■ **Martrim, Cheshire:** 01270 767771, www.martrim.co.uk (trim)

■ **Sunbeam Talbot Alpine Register:** www.star dust.uk.com (club)

■ **Woolies, Market Deeping, Lincs:** 01778 347347, www.woolies-trim.co.uk (trim)

I had no idea that a strip of rubber could be so intransigent. To squeeze the frame back over the glass and rubber I had to use escalating levels of violence. This culminated in the use of two sash clamps, a mallet and a rubber hammer. I'm still surprised I didn't break the glass. The Furflex trim down the side of the A-post didn't quite match the carpet so I dyed it. By this point I'd started to think that I should get out more often.

Several more nicks and blemishes were added to my precious paint while getting even panel gaps for the doors and wings. It took some time but was child's play compared to fitting the bonnet. At one stage I was convinced that it didn't belong to the car, but after many cups of coffee and much profanity it fitted. It was now ready for the first MoT in more than two decades. I'd finished the car I'd always wanted but by the time you read this, it will be with a new owner. After years of trying, I managed to get planning permission for a larger garage – always tricky when you live in a National Park area.

It seemed a shame not to take advantage of the extra space, so the new garage is now filled with a 1936 ex-works competition Riley Kestrel. Requiring full restoration, of course... ■



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