

# The Personal Touch

By Jane Attard. Photos by Craig Wetjen and Jane Attard.

Dedicated to my late father, Joe Attard, who taught and encouraged me to work on cars.



Jane says the final result is worth it all.

Jane Attard gives a personal account of what is involved with a major restoration..

In 1964 I entered a virtual sales brochure featuring a beach backdrop, summer sunshine and a new MGB parked just so. 'I want it, I want it', I cried and clenched the car by the boot rack.

My parents couldn't prise my hands off, so Dad pledged he would buy me one when I was old enough to drive. Reluctantly, I walked, head turned, eyes on the car.

From that day, MG stood for 'My God' and over the years, every MGB was tailed with Dad being reminded of his promise. Then, one day, it wasn't the moment: "Who do you think I am, Harold Holt? Your father's a truck driver not the Prime Minister." I never asked again, but every time an MGB whirled past Dad would say; "don't worry, one day, somehow, you'll get one."

Four decades on I still admired the MGB and that 'must have it' desire didn't dim, but, an original MGB in perfect condition proved impossible. Price guides listed top MGBs at \$25,000 but the condition of \$30,000 MGBs disappointed. Many 'fully restored' MGB's were worn-out cars wearing glossy



Jane felt the only way to get the MGB she'd always dreamed of was to restore it herself.

paint and new carpet. My own restoration was the solution.

Initially, I aimed to create a 'new car' rather than a 'show car', but I was soon addicted to the 'before' and 'after' transformations. You do ask yourself if you lost the plot when you produce a grand-piano's gloss finish on a bracket that goes under the car. Who is going to know it exists let alone admire the finish? Truth is; it's the detail that makes a fine restoration. Otherwise, it's just another old car with glossy paint.

My years of DIY prepared me for the challenges but I still dug deep for commitment and persistence. These qualities need to be on the top of your list, as the many advertised unfinished restorations testify.

Next on your list should be money; a few boot loads should do.

Some brag about making a fortune restoring cars, just like those spruiked seminars; "make millions at home, in spare time, no effort, no skills, no expenditure". It's rubbish! Restore a car for the love of it.

When restoring a car, you do spend enough money to make the world go around so it mystifies me why Governments overlook car restoration. Every budget promises money for families and pensioners but never for car restorers.

To stimulate the economy give everyone a car to restore. You'll have a revolution of the cottage industry with real work for locals.

Restorations would also keep everyone on the straight and narrow. No one would have energy for nightclub violence, and who'll protest at the G20 with sleepless nights over panel gaps?

Still, some disagree. My nephew declared; "Restoring cars is stupid. All that hard work, for what?" I refer to his rock climbing pastime and he argues it's the challenge and sense of achievement. Say no more.

Fourth on your list is time; and where does it go? Initially there's the illusion; you don't just 'work on the car'. I built a storage shed, a carport, made stands for panels and an engine platform.



I knew it would be a challenge.

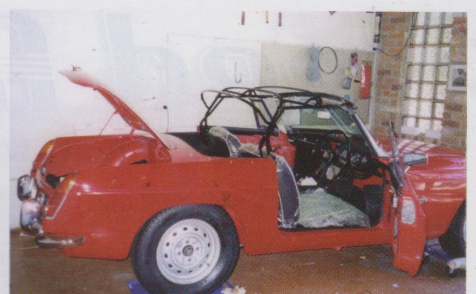


Dad helps remove the dead engine.



Lead-loading the rear seams.





Major milestones include the final coat of paint, the new disc brakes and fitting all the new trim.

Then there's the infuriating time consumer: shopping. The blood pressure rises as you wait for jaded staff to serve you; though, use the 'restoration' word and proprietors rush to your service with dollar signs glowing in their eyes. Days disappear as you hunt the elusive and the out-of-stock. I gave new meaning to the expression 'seeing red' as I went back and forth sampling red paint; too orange, too brown, too maroon...

Progress is never as scheduled. Some jobs appear minor but are irritatingly difficult. I'm fitting a new weather seal to a vent window, the unyielding rubber seal needs to stretch twice its size. I heave, pull, heave; risking a stroke or haemorrhoids....now; that's a fitting salute to British Leyland.

Some days you go to do one job and find six other jobs: stripped threads, missing parts, seized parts, wrong parts or worse, other people's 'repairs'. These are jobs that call for innovation and render workshop manuals as nothing more than parts and specification lists.

Restoration is about problems. To quote my Dad: "car work is all about struggle". The framed windscreen refuses to fit; standing over the car with the windscreen assembly in one arm, I try to unfurl the new rubber seal without dropping the windscreen on the restored car, glinting back. Eventually the windscreen frame slots in and lines up with the doors.

I thought that was the hard part but the real fun hadn't even begun. Head down in the leg tunnel, face between the foot pedal and

work light, I try to bolt the windscreen frame to the body. I persist but the flanges fight back, refusing to line up.

Eight crippling hours later, the job's finally complete. I'm disappointed it took so long and wallow until I hear a fellow enthusiast object to the cost and damage done to his MGB by a professional windscreen fitter, who in turn complained: "It took three men all day to fit the friggin thing". I raise a glass to my solo effort.

On rare occasions, progress surprises you. Using G-clamps and a homemade spring compressor, I assemble the front end with apparent ease - just like those television advertisements for DIY magazines chanting: "It's easy, week by week we show how".

Assembling is landmarked with momentous and motivating developments: the first spray of paint, the fitting of chrome features and the excitement of functioning lights. There's the satisfaction of a perfectly opening and closing door. Taken for granted by most people, but for you, opening and closing that door will always be something to celebrate.

The most momentous has to be fitting the front grille, but crowning the Queen B is not easy. More honestly, it's like fitting a square peg in a round hole, as the new grille is wider than the opening it's meant to sit in. I prise, pull and push to reshape the grille.

Then, one day, the petrol tank is no longer in the hallway. Nor is the windscreen in the bedroom. There's so much room in my home it's as if someone has moved out. My hands are clean and injury free.

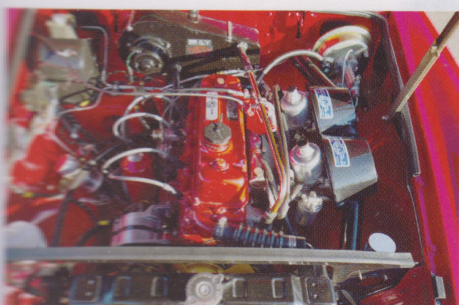
The project is a car. A shining, beautiful MGB mimicking the period photographs of new MGBs that I drooled over for years, wishing for a time machine.

This is not a car full of other people's modifications, repairs, decisions, smells and history. This car is new. Upon a twist of the simple brass key the exhaust booms, gauge needles race to their position and adrenalin charges forth, reinstating my youth.

I've forgotten the cost, tears and heartache. The MG returns such pleasure I am ready to sacrifice anything for it. Threading it through a winding, scenic road, I am surrounded by a living montage of sounds, sights and sensations. The mellow note of the exhaust responds to each gear change and dab of the pedal and sunlight playfully alternates with dappled shade.

Who cares about cup holders, heated seats and outright speed? I hunger for each road bend and savour each manoeuvre. Both car and elation accelerate as the autumn landscape rushes past in a blur.

The experience is euphoria and cannot be measured on a graph. It's 1964 again and the MGB is here. Who needs the Dalai Lama?



The gleaming engine is a joy to behold.



Showroom fresh - or better.



Ultimate driving pleasure.