

Austin 7 - my folly

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I retired in April 2014 and my project was to own an Austin 7.

The most obvious choice for me to acquire one. At that time was on a well-known online auction site.

After seeing one which looked very attractive, I decided to bid for it. The seller assured me that it was in good running order – in fact he said that he would start it up whilst I was on the phone - I heard a car start up.

After winning the auction he agreed a price to deliver it to me from along the south coast.

When it arrived it looked good and I was slightly overwhelmed. I was given a demonstration. It indeed did start up. I specifically asked him if it was sound and roadworthy – he assured me it was, “...go for short journeys until you get confident with it – then go further afield.” I took him at his word.

I had to wait a few days until my insurance details were settled and took my partner for a short “Spin”. Knowing that this was an old car and it was bound to have its idiosyncrasies I prepared myself for an unusual ride. We got going down the road when the car started wobbling around. I managed to get to the end of the road and pressed the brakes – almost nothing! Carefully we managed to get back home, by this time the cab was full of smoke and parts started falling off. I anticipated that the car would be totally different to modern cars – but not this different!

I then had to do some research which should have been done initially. Firstly I jacked up the car and checked the front wheels. The nearside one had excessive play on the kingpin, a job that was undertaken straight away. A relatively simple job turned out to quite difficult as the front axle had to be removed and worked on elsewhere.

I then looked at the rest of the car carefully and to my horror it was a complete bodge up – then realised that I had bought a complete mess – what an Idiot I had been!

The engine needed a re-bore.

The petrol pump was not the correct one for this model.

The tyres were mismatched and down to the canvas in parts and with oversize inner tubes – folded in two inside.

The cab carried a vast quantity of filler – chicken wire bits of everything imaginable.

The bottom of the doors were rotten.

The driver's door had ordinary 6 mm glass which burst into fragments when I tried to removed it. This should have been hardened!

The roof was static which should have been a sliding sunshine roof, which consisted of a large piece of plywood covered with black vinyl stuck down and sealed with a horrible black goo. This soon warped in the sun and looked very unsightly.

Having discovered that the battery which was fixed on the front bulkhead should have been below the driver's seat, a new special container had to be made – correct to the original pattern.

The car tilted to one side – both rear springs were miss-matched. I had to buy two new sets.

The wiring was a complete shambles – a new loom had to be obtained and fitted.

The list went on.....

I then decided that I had to fully restore it.

I removed the cab and after extracting the mess that held it together. The remainder was sent away to be welded and restored – this took a year – not the two months originally stated – but a good job was done.

In the meantime the engine was removed stripped, cleaned and re-bored.

The chassis was stripped sandblasted and powder coated. This was done by a local company.

When I removed the rear differential axle and drained the oil from drain plug many pieces of broken metal poured out. The crown and pinion were rebuilt and reset by a professional specialist on Austin Sevens.

The doors had to be completely rebuilt. The bottom 6" of both doors had to have new sections and new wood. The metal retaining tabs tend to come off and new tabs had to be welded on. Owners of Austin 7s will know how difficult it is to reset these doors as they tend to drop after many years of use (people leaning on them) leaving a gap at the top and the moulding strip not to be lined up.

I replaced most of the wood framing on the body work – this was made by a specialist using the correct ash wood. There was a vast list of parts that were required for the restoration. The advantage of such a popular car is that many parts are made for it and this is increasing and a complete industry has developed – I would have wanted parts to be made in stainless steel but the purists out there prefer uncoated mild steel – I can understand that. The spare part dealers are often very helpful.

At Beaulie there are several car auto-jumbles and I took some parts up there. As the car was going to be restored new headlights were necessary. Many of the ‘Original’ serviceable parts I thought had a value and could be sold to offset the mounting bills. The old headlights were in reasonable condition so I took them there and tried to sell them – many dealers asked me in where I got them from, I said from my Austin 7, much amused they said that they have never seen circa 1952 spotlights put on an Austin 7! I sold the pair for under £10 and ordered a pair of expensive new reproductions.

I had to go to several places to pick up various ‘hard to find’ original parts – this was an expensive business, but in doing so I met some very interesting and eccentric characters!

A fundamental problem were the brakes. These I relined and set up. The front brake system had been converted. I found out that generally Austin 7 brakes were notably poor but I decided to be authentic and resort to the original front brake system and try and set them up properly.

When the cab was returned I set about working on removing the remaining paint and filling and priming it. This turned out to be a labour of love as many corrections had to be made.

To find the correct person to respray the car was to prove difficult as the several people that came to view it stated that it required a rework of all my previous efforts and a two-pack paint used – each one quoted a higher figure which was unacceptable. I wanted cellulose, the original choice of Austin. It was decided that we would deviate from the original colour of green and black, to a more striking cream and black. This entailed changing the logbook.

The ‘sliding sun roof’ had to be completely rebuilt. This required two elements: the wood-work and the metal-work. Not been able to copy the original from the car I had to rely on a friend to assist me. He specialised in metal work and from original parts reproduced all the parts necessary. I had many problems as the two basic components, the metal work and the wood frame did not want to go together! I am not a sheet metal worker, nor a carpenter but slowly I managed – which both looks good and works well..

As I had a knowledge of electroplating in the past which put me in good stead to achieve the best results. I hand-finished and polished many of the chrome parts – the front radiator cover was a challenge. To

retain the sharp Austin logo shape, I had to strip it and polish it myself as I knew that the general practice of plating companies is just to put a polishing mop over it and remove much of the original details. This proved wise as the results are fairly crisp.

New glass was cut and fitted all round using original windows as templates. Hardened glass for the side winding windows and laminated for the rest. A company in Arundel who did a very good job. I had to take templates in.

As the original number plates were rusty and bent, new ones were bought new and had them professionally painted by a sign-writer using the correct font. The results were rewarding.

Having to remove several very rusty nuts and bolts. I decided to go stainless. The problem with this is that many different threads were used on this car. Where I could I bought the available nuts and bolts – the others I made myself. To be practicable many of the body securing bolts I used metric threads.

I decided to change the old colour scheme of dark green and black to a more dynamic cream and black. This was resprayed very well by Total Paintworks – a company that really cares about its work. Painting was a real saga as it required many tradesmen looking at it and shaking their heads and drawing air between their teeth. Each quoting me more money. However, I made a reasonable deal and the end results were stunning.

In conclusion, having all this hassle after buying a “fully running and roadworthy car” was very expensive but I have to admit – I enjoyed it as it kept me busy during my retirement and it was creative. This car in my opinion was saved and stands well against any restored Austin 7. In retrospect I would rather have bought an honest unrestored car than what was to be a veneer of one – I spent more money and time trying to rectify the mess that I had bought. My advice to all you prospective vintage car buyers is to completely check out your potential purchase and take along someone who knows about the subject or you could be frustrated and out of pocket. The dealers who “restore” these cars and sell them on should take more care in their work and have more of a conscience. It is also bad for the car’s reputation.

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I wrote this article several years ago intended for a classic car magazine, but retrieved it – as now I reluctantly intend to sell it. This car has been a passion and I hope the new owner examines it carefully before buying it as it is now ‘sold as seen’.

Leo 7/5/21

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