

Special Willys and Aston Martin restoration Supplement

During the production of the September-October issue of Top Gear, two excellent articles were submitted. They were too good to leave out but formatting difficulties (for me, that is) meant they couldn't be integrated with the main body of the magazine.

The first is a report by Jeremy Braithwaite on the amazing Willys Roundup organised by Les Johnson and family at Orange on 14th-19th October. It was the largest gathering of 100 year old Willys Overland cars in the world.



The second is a heart-warming, hand-ringing, long-term story of the epic restoration of an Aston Martin DB4. It was published in four parts in 'Running AMOC', the journal of the Aston Martin Owners' Club and is repeated here with the permission of the club and the car's enthusiastic and committed owner, Greg Bruce. Read it and weep!



(This article came to me as a series of pdfs which I was not able to alter, so the page numbers are irrelevant and you may need to zoom in on the text to read it. It's worth the effort. Ed)



EARLY WILLYS ROUNDUP AT ORANGE

By Jeremy Braithwaite



A couple of years ago Les Johnson asked me to help him with some artwork for a Roundup of very early Willys Overland vehicles which he planned to hold at Orange on 14th – 19th October 2018. I was only too happy to help and asked Les if we could join them for the event and photograph it.

It was to represent the largest gathering of 100 year old Willys Overland vehicles anywhere in the world with 25 cars making it to Orange and a further 5 entered.

The event marked the Centenary of the Sydney to Brisbane record of 19 hours 38 ½ minutes set by Fred Eager and Wally Webb on 19th & 20th October 1918 in Old Whitey, a Willys Overland Model 61T. This reduced the previous record by 6 ½ hours.

Graham and Marjorie Crittenden from Kingaroy had restored Old Whitey and brought her to the Roundup. Also present was David Crisp from Crookwell with his Model 8-88 fitted with the experimental V8 racing engine that had been developed for Indianapolis and once been fitted to Old Whitey. This engine had not run for 100 years and was successfully started on the anniversary, Friday 19th October, by Rick Johnson and visiting American owner and Willys expert Greg Guntow.



David Crisp (l) and Graham Crittenden on Old Whitey (r)

Les organised a full week of activities for the group including:

- Line-up of all the vehicles and their owners at Orange Showground and a welcome by the Mayor of Orange, Reg Kidd
- Run to Millthorpe and lunch at the museum where Les & Rick Johnson and daughters Emily and Sophie and visiting Americans Duane & Rebecca Perrin were interviewed by Win News
- Run to Manildra via Cumnock. At Manildra Tom's Overland Garage was decorated with Overland signs made especially for the day. Lunch was served in the Museum and some old movies were shown in the Amusu picture theatre, home of Tom Allen the Picture Show Man
- Morning tea and photo opportunity at historic Duntryleague in Orange followed by a run to Banjo Patterson Park and the Botanical Gardens which also offered lunch
- Run to Abercrombie House at Bathurst where lunch was served followed by a visit to Mt Panorama. The hills encountered on this trip were a real challenge both on the way up and more so on the descent where rear drum brakes were the sole form of retardation
- A leisurely lap or two of the Gnoo Blas Circuit at Orange, home of the first FIA sanctioned event in Australia won by Jack Brabham. A picnic lunch was served at Lake Canobolas
- Dinner at Duntryleague where many of the members came in period dress and Graham Crittenden showed some photos of the restoration of Old Whitey

Astonishingly a large number of the vehicles were still running at the end of this arduous week!

Julie and I took over 3,000 photos of the event which can be found on this link:

<https://braithwaite.smugmug.com/MotorsportHistorics/Willys-Overland-Roundup>

We've also put together a Souvenir Book which will be printed by the Willys Overland Club of Victoria for its members.

I'll leave the pictures to tell the story of the week and all the fun we had. I've also included below an account of the Old Whitey Story and the Indianapolis racing V8.

The real story of the event was the incredible effort that Les put in to building a complete register of all the Willys Overland vehicles in Australia and then harrying all the owners to make sure they got to the Roundup. One owner told me they had had more than 250 emails from Les!

In addition to the yellow car that many members would be familiar with, Les also purchased another couple of cars from America and shipped them to Australia.

On arrival the guests were presented with a leather compendium full of memorabilia and goodies. This included a replica of the letter opener that Fred Eager had on his desk inscribed with the details of the Sydney to Brisbane record run. There were Overland stickers, reproduction brochures from the period, cuff links and a lapel badge and even a compass to help get you home.

The effort was not just from Les. The ENTIRE family joined in the fun and it was just wonderful to see three generations of Johnsons enjoying grandpa's toys!

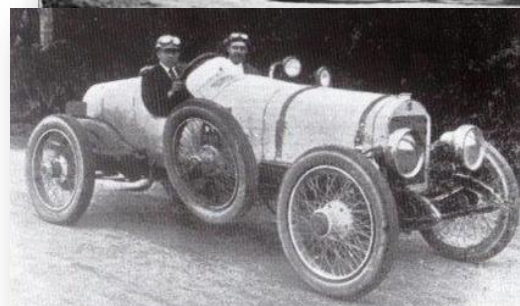
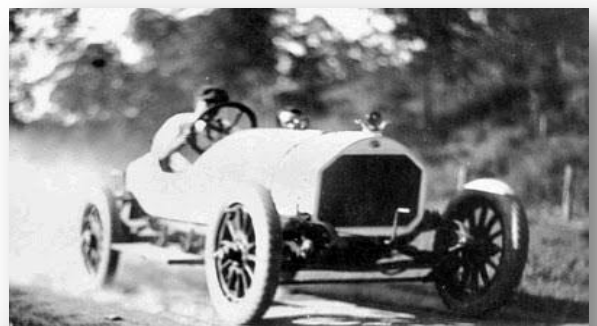


THE OLD WHITEY STORY

The 2018 Orange Roundup marked the centenary of the Sydney to Brisbane record set by Fred Eager and mechanic Wally Webb in Old Whitey, a 1912 model 61 Overland.

The car was the promotional vehicle for AP Eagers Ltd, a company started by Fred's father Edward and the Southern Hemisphere distributor for Willys vehicles.

There were few made roads in those days and Old Whitey made ascents of Mount Glorious, Mount Gravatt and Tamborine Mountain; this often involved pioneering the road.



The car at that time had wooden wheels and was a 45hp Overland Speedster.

In 1916 the car ran at 81.8 mph on Perdriau 3 rib tyres at Southport Beach and later set a new record of 2 hours and 7.5 minutes for the journey from Brisbane to Toowoomba. The time was recorded by a watch in a sealed packet carried by the driver and opened on arrival.

On October 19th and 20th 1918 Fred Eager and Wallace Webb took 6 and a half hours off the record for Sydney to Brisbane.

They started at 10pm from the GPO in Sydney and made it to Wisemans Ferry in 1 hour 35 minutes. This was 25 minutes ahead of the schedule. 18 minutes was immediately lost by the next 6 railway gates being closed; they lost 5 minutes at Murrurundi changing a spark plug and another 10 minutes at Wallabadah changing the entire set.

There were no further troubles encountered and they got to the Central Northern Garage at Tamworth at 6.05, on schedule. A quick breakfast was followed by a departure at 6.30 and arrival at Armidale at 8.15, again on time.

They then lost 8 minutes to Glen Innes and a further 4 minutes to Tenterfield but had made up 6 minutes by the Queensland border and a further 12 minutes by Warwick.

The run to Brisbane in 3 hours 17 ½ minutes included a 10 minute stop for some fruit and a cup of tea and the arrival time in Brisbane was 5.38 ½ pm. The drive took just 19 hours and 38 ½ minutes and represented an average of just over 35 mph.

The fastest train time between the two cities was 27 hours and 10 minutes which rather puts Old Whitey's time in perspective.

The car used two front tyres which had previously been used to win the Mt Cootha Hill Climb and two new rears.

They were Goodyear No Hook Straight Wall Cord Tyres and they did not need to be replaced on the route.

They chose a full moon for the run and had fine weather as well.

A further factor had been the Eager distribution network that had paid farmers and railway staff to have gates open at the time the car was due. They also had ferries waiting on the right side of the crossings irrespective of the number of cars waiting on the other side to cross.

It's not clear what happened to old Whitey after 1918 but Joe Wilson 'found' the car in 1959 in an old garage and told the Guthrie family who eventually acquired the car in 1962 for 150 pounds and used it in club events.

Graham Crittenden acquired the car in 1966 for \$2,000 and was fortunate that Wally Webb was still alive and working at Eagers and was able to help with the restoration.

At one stage the car had had a tray back fitted and had been used for stump pulling on a property. Graham recalls that the axles were twisted through 45 degrees. They had to be replaced. It also took 15 years to find the correct number 6 Houk wire spoke wheels.

Graham shared a number of photos with us of the restoration:

<https://jbraithwaite.smugmug.com/MotorsportHistorics/Willys-Overland-Roundup/Graham-Crittendens-Photos-of-Old-Whitey/>

There is also a video of Graham talking about Old Whitey:

<https://jbraithwaite.smugmug.com/MotorsportHistorics/Willys-Overland-Roundup/Whitey-Videos/i-8hgDJ3d/A>





Old Whitey on the Roundup at Millthorpe

WILLYS INDIANAPOLIS V8 STARTS AFTER 100 YEARS

Around 1915 Willys made a number of experimental SR4-8 racing engines with a view to competing at Indianapolis. One of these engines was imported by Fred Eager of A.P. Eager Ltd in 1916 and he arranged for his racing mechanic Wally Webb to fit it to the firm's promotional vehicle, Old Whitey.

The current owner of Old Whitey, Graham Crittenden, discussed the end result with Wally, the man who sat beside Fred Eager on all his record runs, and he refused to get into the car. Fred proceeded solo and returned in less than 20 minutes after a few gyrations. Wally's assessment had been correct and the engine was not suited to that chassis.

The engine was removed and remained at A.P.Eagers Ltd for 65 years until David Crisp of Crookwell in NSW made them an offer which they accepted on 7th April 1981. It then sat in David's huge pile of bits for another 30 years before the project began to put the motor into a chassis and built a suitable body for it.

David selected a 1917 Willys Knight Model 8-88 Chassis and did all the mechanical work in his own workshops. There had been no exhaust manifolds on the engine and simple stub exhausts were fitted.

The original V8 radiator had stayed in Old Whitey and obtaining a suitable one proved quite difficult.



A body was now required and Robert McLachlan at Gosford was approached to build this. Les Johnson picked the car up in his covered trailer in March 2018 and took it there, in the hope that it could be completed in time for the October Roundup at Orange. It was completed in July and Les picked it up and took it back to Crookwell.

It was in this state that the car arrived (on Les's trailer) at Orange. It had fluids in it but had not started. American Willys expert Greg Gumtow was also at Orange and he had a rare V8 production model and was thus quite familiar with the type of engine.

Greg, and Les Johnson's son Rick, tried to start the engine between rain storms on Thursday 18th October and it just wouldn't go. The next day was the centenary of Old Whitey's record and after a few coughs and splutters the V8 burst into life for the first time in more than 100 years.

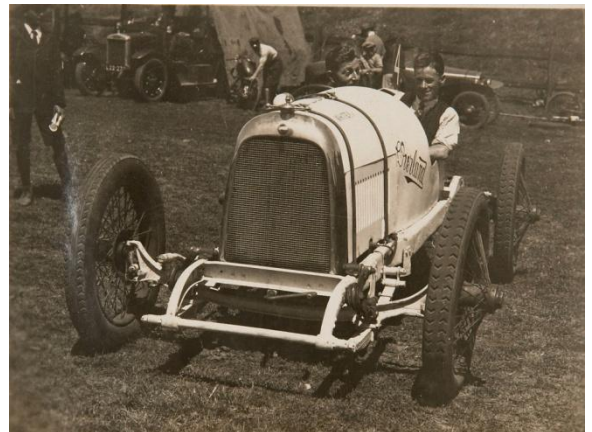
The video is here: <https://jbraithwaite.smugmug.com/MotorsportHistorics/Willys-Overland-Roundup/Whitey-Videos/i-TGbNMBr/A>

After the Roundup was over Greg went down to Crookwell to spend some more time with David and the car and it is hoped that it will be a regular at Veteran runs in the future.



HISTORICAL NOTE

I'd wondered before the event what was the connection between Old Whitey and Don Harkness' Old Whitey II. Well they were both Willys Overlands but Don Harkness' car had no connection to the original. Old Whitey II ran very successfully at Maroubra Speedway and there is a lot of really good information in Bill Boldeston's excellent book on the subject, including the 24 hour speed record set at Maroubra of 1,236 miles at an average 51.5 mph. This was 9 years after Old Whitey's record and done on a banked track – as opposed to unmade roads and ferries.



MY ASTON STORY

Part 1 cont.

I was shocked at the amount of coolant required and feared that it was going straight through a fractured block and into the sump. However it was simply the huge amount of coolant required for the futile attempt to prevent over-heating.

We returned to Australia a few days later in January 1980. The car was driven off by an agent who took it to Southampton, on the south coast of England, with the expectation that it would arrive in Sydney by ship some indefinite time in the future. We arrived in Sydney and were fed many horror stories about the likely fate of the car. It had most likely broken down and was lying abandoned on the side of the road somewhere between London and Southampton. It had been insecurely lashed on the deck of the ship and had fallen overboard during bad weather. The wharfies would use a forklift to unload it and it would break in two as they lifted it.

Against all predictions, it arrived a few months later and I collected it from Kings Wharf at the current site of Barangaroo. It was undamaged except for a dent under the front apron that had some weird sheets of white substance protruding and breaking away. Amazingly it started second or third attempt and I drove back to Randwick through Sydney traffic on a hot autumn day. I had my first of many experiences of the temperature gauge measuring 100°C but the car not boiling.

The first administrative steps were to confirm its importation at the Maritime Services Board, which is now the NSW Museum of Modern Art, and pay duty at Customs House in Circular Quay, now a restaurant and other things. The next miracle was the car passing inspection over the pits and gaining NSW registration. This must have been a very stressful event because my brain has switched into protective repression of the memory and I cannot recall anything about it.

My next step was to join the AMOC in the UK and its NSW section. I phoned the legendary Aston Martin identity, Bob Rusk, who was wonderfully friendly and helpful and asked me to bring the car to him at a garage so that he could have a look at my DB4. I found him there under the bonnet of one of his multitude of Aston Martins. It was a V8 that had had some body work done and the panel beaters had left some innocuous looking marks in the engine bay. Bob was removing these and was furious. If all expletives had been deleted there would have been total silence. He looked at my car, immediately saw the DB6 front and said "Oh beautiful. It's a Vantage." In my ignorance I did not know such a thing as a DB4 Vantage existed and that it had recessed headlights. I had vague knowledge that there were convertible Aston Martins that had a name starting with a "V" and so I told Bob that "No. It is not a convertible". Bob looked a bit puzzled, probably considered treating me to a few expletives but discreetly changed the subject to a recommendation that I take the car to the body shop that had initiated his fury. I did so and told the gentleman that I had been sent by Bob Rusk. He quivered like a jelly and said "Bob's a bit of a perfectionist". He looked at the weird bits of white material falling out from behind the paintwork and I heard the word "bog" for the first of many times. He sorted out the body problems and the car was on the road.

It remained drivable for the next few years with occasional hiccups and odd events. Jim Corrie did some good engine and other mechanical work, such as correcting the brake servo that had a habit of not releasing the brakes after they had been applied. It was never practical day to day transport but it was a lot of fun to take it out and give it a blast. At that time they were building or extending the container port at Botany and they had built this huge six lane highway along the foreshore as a preliminary to building the port. It was about two kilometres long, went nowhere and was never used at that time. I used to go there at about five or six on Sunday morning and go flat out down the road from one end to the other, do a U-turn and then go back the other way. It could reach 125mph by the end of the road followed by hard braking. Later I paled when I saw the mounting for the brake pedal was teetering on the brink of falling off because of rust and the splines on the wire wheel hubs were so worn the wheels were at risk of falling off. More sedate runs down south to Waterfall and back were also very enjoyable.

The four speed David Brown gearbox has a very high bottom gear and is more like the top four speeds of a five speed box. The high bottom gear makes moving off from a standing start a bit tricky. There are two methods, give it a lot of revs and let the clutch out quickly or give it low revs and release the clutch slowly. Either method shortens the life expectancy of the clutch and by 1984 it inevitably started slipping. At the same time we bought a new house in Beecroft that had a very steep drive. I drove the car down the drive and realised that it would never get back up again with its slipping clutch and so I decided it was time to pull it apart for its restoration. I started stripping paint off areas of the body that looked a bit suspicious and found all sorts of interesting things such as sheets of galvanised iron pop-riveted over the aluminium body and covered with "bog" and rotting junctions between aluminium skin and steel chassis that had been mutilated and filled with "bog". I kept dismantling the car but at this stage it was obvious that the job was beyond me and I had to call in the professionals.



The DB4 in course of being stripped for renovation

To be continued in subsequent issues...

MY ASTON STORY

Part 2

Greg Bruce continues the story of his DB4

At the end of Part 1 of this saga, Aston Martin DB4/125R was safe in my garage in Beecroft and restoration had commenced. I had quickly concluded that I was capable of pulling it apart but was not capable of fixing it and putting it back together and so the search commenced for a professional restorer.

Meanwhile I continued the dismantling. I stripped the paint down to bare metal and this revealed all sorts of evil such as "bog" that was about one to two centimetres thick in some areas, particularly in areas of the rear mudguards that had multiple holes drilled like a colander so that the "bog" would not fall off. The steel chassis platform could be seen to be rusted away at its junction with the aluminium body, which was also corroding in sympathy. The factory had used felt as an insulator between the two dissimilar metals but constant water and dirt had converted it to a conductor and had increased the electrolytic effect, presumably as some sort of satanic plot between themselves and restorers looking for work.

An early step was to remove the amateurish looking bits of trim screwed to the door surrounds and to the free end of the door itself. These were bits of aluminium sheet that had alternate stamped rows of horizontal and vertical dashed lines. They looked as though they had been cut with tin snips from a discarded sheet lying in the backyard of the previous owner. My intention was to remove them and replace them with something more resembling the original fitting. The first bit that I removed had the number "125" stamped on the back of it and so did all of the rest. I realised that these were the original fittings and later found out that they were typical of hand-made cars of the 1950s, including Ferraris and Maseratis. The Aston Martin artisans had cut each bit of trim individually to fit in my car and then stamped it with the chassis number. I diligently photographed the bits in and out of position, labelled them and stored them with their screws and other bits and pieces. There were an amazing number of bits of trim around the doors, windows, boot and interior. All were a unique fitting and all stamped "125". The car seats and leather trim had all been marked "125" with a pencil on the wooden backing.

I was advised not to remove the dash under any circumstances because it was impossible to re-fit it.

Meanwhile I had taken steps to correct the Wrong Front of the Car Problem. It seemed simple enough. I had a Spare Parts Manual with a diagram of a DB4 front identified as "Front End Panel-Complete" with a part number of 030-03-0043 and so it was just a matter of ordering a new part. I did not expect Aston Martin Lagonda to have the part but I thought that it would be courtesy to ask them first and of course they referred me directly to Aston Service Dorset, who had the rights for spare parts for DB4s. I made contact and Capt. Ivan Forshaw replied in his inimitable writing style. Key segments were:

"very difficult area"

"many years since new panels were available for the DB4"

"Aston Martin had destroyed the formers before we got the rights to the parts"

"Only DB6 still available for £1850" (I assumed this was the reason my car ended up with a DB6 front end.)

It sounded discouraging but they then told me that there was a second hand complete front section available but it was in poor condition because of corrosion in the lower areas. They had no information about why it was available. Presumably it had been discarded during a restoration. The asking price was £850 but they marked it down to £600 because of its poor condition. I knew that I was extremely lucky to have anything available and so I immediately bought it and had it shipped to Australia. It was cut in two before delivery but still needed a huge box for transport. I opened it with some foreboding but it was in better condition than I expected. The lower area, where it had been attached to the platform chassis, had severely corroded but the upper areas where good. My luck was holding.



MY ASTON STORY

Part 2 cont.

All of this had taken a considerable amount of time and meanwhile we had built a new home in West Pennant Hills and it was time to move. The car had to be manhandled out of the garage and the tow truck driver had to run a long cable down the length of the steep drive and winch it out before he could load it and take it to the much better garage in the new home.

It would now be much easier to remove the engine and gearbox and fortunately my father was staying with us at that time and was champing at the bit to have a go at the beast. Dad was a motor mechanic who started his own business before World War II and there was a bit of a bush improviser about his methods. He never walked on the footpath but always walked along the gutter so that he could pick up discarded nuts, screws, bolts and washers and put them in Vegemite jars and jam tins because "you never know when you might need them". We eventually found out that, in fact, they would never be needed. He slowly accumulated so many tins of nuts, etc, that he could scarcely get his Datsun 180B into the garage. We had to throw them all out when his health required him and Mum to shift to a retirement village.

I have described my meticulous documentation while I dismantled the car. Dad always took things apart in a frenetic shower of bits and pieces all directions and then enjoyed the puzzle of getting it all back together. No problem if there were bits missing, he had plenty of jars and tins with bits and pieces to be used. No problem if there were bits left over, he had plenty of jars and tins waiting to be filled.

I came home from work one night in the late 1980s and found engine fittings scattered all over the place because Dad had not been able to resist temptation. We hired an engine hoist and followed the detailed instructions in the Workshop Manual carefully. We hoisted out the engine with gearbox and placed it on a stand in the garage where it remained for years. We gathered the debris and placed it in a box next to the engine and I hoped desperately that we would be able to work out where they all came from when it was going to be replaced in the distant future.

Meanwhile I was trying to find someone to restore the car. The obvious choice was Steve Sulis of Classic Autocraft whose work was outstanding. I offered him the job but he was so busy that he would not accept it. He was known to be expensive and perhaps he could sniff my impoverishment. It was also said that it took a long time for the car to return once he had it in his possession but that was not a problem because I expected it to be a long process.

I was then told about owners of a panel beating and repair shop who wanted to get into restoration work. I think they may have been brothers. They had restored a DB5 belonging to an AMOC member and superficially it looked pretty good but I had lost faith in my own ability to judge body workmanship because of the vast quantities of "bog" in my car that I had not detected. I was also a bit dubious at the way they drove the DB5 as though it was their car and not the owner's. They then restored an E-type Jaguar for an AMOC member and again, superficially it looked OK. I asked the member if he was happy with their work and his response was an ambiguous "you can see it as well as I can tell you". I was not sure whether this response was positive or negative but there were no other options and so I offered them the job and they accepted.

The tow truck arrived, loaded the car plus the second hand front end and disappeared. Fortunately I kept the engine and gearbox at home. Then, as quick as a flash, nothing happened. I am not sure how long they had the car but it must have been several years. I can recall trying to make arrangements to have a look at it in their workshop but there was always a reason that it was inconvenient for me to visit. I have vague memories of driving somewhere between Blacktown and Penrith (possibly Wetherill Park) but not being able to actually see the car. I am not even sure whether I found their workshop. I seem to remember there was more than one workshop and there was some uncertainty as to the location of the car.

One day I was excited to get a phone call from them and at last there was going to be some action. They had decided that the restoration business was not for them and they were too busy doing ordinary crash repairs. There was a hint of possible disagreement between the partners or brothers. I was told that the car was going to be returned to me. The tow truck came back. The car was unloaded and pushed back into the garage, exactly the same as when it had left some years previously except that it was dirtier.

To be continued in the next issue of Running AMOC



MY ASTON STORY

Part 3

Greg Bruce continues the story of his DB4 restoration

Restoration of DB4/125/R headed in the right direction when I was pointed to towards Gil Skidmore of Sydney Vintage Car Restoration who had just commenced business at Rouse Hill in north west Sydney. It was conveniently close to our home in West Pennant Hills and so my very long relationship with Gil started in the early 1990s when I visited his workshop. It looked fresh and new but did not smell all that fresh because of the nearby Dynamic Lifter factory where garden fertiliser was made from chook manure. The old ruined hotel in the next-door paddock was more interesting because it had been used as a staging post by Cobb and Co stage coaches during the nineteenth century.

Gil is originally from Somerset, UK, and he has an accent to match. Over the years I have learnt more of his background and training which had been in coach building with major manufacturers of cars in England. He is a great source of motoring stories, all of which have some basis of fact. In the early stages I learnt that I should avoid initiating the stories because they were a time-consuming diversion from getting work done on the Aston. It has been a privilege to have a friendly and trusting commercial and personal friendship with Gil, Sara and their family ever since. I have watched his sons, Shannon and Tim, develop from pre-schoolers up to the level of apprentices with Gil and now doing most of the high quality work which has allowed more time for stories from Gil. My car has followed Gil's shifting premises from Rouse Hill to Riverstone, even further north and west of Sydney, and finally to Crookwell which is in Australian pastoral country about three hours south of Sydney. His kelpie dogs have inspired my wife and I to get our own amazing kelpies. He now has my Triumph TR3a in its final stages of restoration.

There were a number of factors in our first meeting that convinced me to trust the restoration of my car with Gil. He had an English coach building wheel which had become very rare after most had been scrapped as redundant because modern crash repairs simply require bolting on replacement panels. He was a coach builder trained in making panels. He had a number of vehicles on site that required aluminium panels and so it was apparent that he was accustomed to working with this unforgiving metal. He impressed me when he ran his hands over one car, almost like a massage, and located bumps and imperfections on a body that looked smooth to my eye. He expressed a horror of "bog" and declared the body should always be good enough to accept paint directly onto metal. My first impression was of honesty and a love of his chosen career. This impression has been confirmed with the passage of time.

There are a number of detailed descriptions of prolonged restoration of basket case Aston Martin DBs and I am not going to add another saga. I will simply recall some specifics that have stuck in my memory.

Gil described himself as a "Xerox Copier" of cars because he could copy any panel if he had one available, no matter how distressed its condition, or if he had photos or images that could be used for taking measurements. He confirmed this by using the debris of my rotting panels to make new panels that looked so nice in bare metal that it was a pity to paint them.

Very early I passed on the message from the previous "experts" that he should not remove the dashboard as he would never be able to refit it (see Article 2). One week later I was horrified to find that it had been removed because "it is impossible to do the job with it still in place".

The body and chassis were sand blasted, the car was put on a rotating spit and the corroded segments were cut out. This included the light alloy body work below the wheel arches and most of the steel platform chassis between the rails of the outer frames. More of the car had disappeared each time that I visited the workshop. Gil and I had a running joke that one day I would visit and all that would be left would be a smear of rust on the floor and then I would know that it was time to start reassembling the car.



MY ASTON STORY

Part 3 Cont.

It was at this stage that Gil complained that all of his best work is hidden out of sight. He was right. By the time that he had removed structures such as the floor pan, the spare wheel well and the various appendages of the chassis and then constructed and fitted new bits and pieces, the chassis looked like a gleaming work of art that was straight out of the factory. It is now hidden from admiration under the aluminium body and the upholstery.

The "new" DB4 front (see Article 2) was cut to size and perfectly fitted to the main body of the car. Replacement aluminium panels were made and fitted for the bottom parts that had corroded where they attached to the steel chassis. A rough estimate is that about 30% of the aluminium body work was manufactured by Gil on his English wheel. The body was reassembled onto the chassis. The bare metal car looked beautiful and it seemed a shame to paint it.

The old DB6 front end is still in Gil's workshop if anyone is interested.

I picked up a new wiring loom from a "factory" in western Sydney. It was the lounge room of a suburban house full of boards that had wiring pinned out and then packaged for all sorts of boats and cars. It was a backyard business that had blossomed from small beginnings and the products were being sent all over the world.

The dashboard crisis disappeared very quickly. One day it was back in with no problems at all. Gil looked very smug at my amazement.

Some new headlights and trim were ordered to match the new DB4 front. We were lucky to get the original styled Lucas "Le Mans" headlights.

Gil and I discussed the dilemma as to what the policy should be for the bits of trim that attached to the doors, windows, sills and boot. They were not perfect and Gil warned that they could look out of place on the rest of the fully restored and perfect body. I had an obsession to retain everything that was original because an imperfect original part is preferable to a perfect looking reproduction and so we kept the old bits of trim that had been cut with tin snips in the Aston Martin factory in 1959 and had been stamped with the chassis number 125. The tail lights are the same as a 3 Litre Alvis and new replacements are available but I still opted to keep the imperfect original frames and lenses.

I wished to restore the car back to its original colour which was "Regal Red ICI 2642" if your pretensions tended to the English monarchy or "Dubonnet Rosso ICI 2642" if they tended to a foreign language plus Italian fortified wine. Gil stated the original cellulose or "Duco" was no longer available and the closest to the original appearance was a lacquer such as "Dulon". He said the best paint is modern "two pack" but it looks wrong on a restored classic car because it is so sparkling and shiny that it appears over-restored for an old car that did not have sparkling paint at the time of production. He said that "two pack" has very slight "orange peel" to give it the sparkle and he advised to paint the car with "two pack" but buff it back to get rid of the orange peel and it would look authentic 1950s. That is what we did and the end result looks just right.

We did as little mechanical work as was required. The gearbox was stripped and damaged cogs replaced, notably second gear as predicted by the previous owner (see Article 1). The slipping clutch and damaged flywheel were replaced. The flywheel had lumps of metal missing and very weird looking fencing wire looped through it, presumably done by the English equivalent of an Australian "bush mechanic". The timing chain was replaced. The differential was stripped and damaged parts replaced. Front and rear suspensions were totally rebuilt but not modified except for the use of Koni shock absorbers on the front painted blue to look like the original Armstrongs. The rear lever action shock absorbers were rebuilt and retained. All bushes, seals and springs were replaced.

We agonised over how far to go with the engine while it was out of the car. Should we do a total rebuild? Should we remove the head for restoration and lead-free conversion? The engine had been performing well before its removal and so we decided to let sleeping dogs lie. I believe this was the right decision as the engine lasted eight years after the restoration until the car ended up in its current location in a workshop in the throes of a head restoration after a broken valve spring.

The restoration reached a stage that all the major work had been completed and the remaining work was superficial details. It was apparent that these details would be fiddly and time consuming and would significantly delay completion. Meanwhile the near-completed car would sit in the workshop, unused and deteriorating. I was very keen to get driving it again and had even bought a Triumph TR3a and a BMW M3 convertible as substitution therapy while I was waiting for the Aston Martin to be completed. I asked Gil to reassemble the car so that it was running and could be road registered. I would then enjoy driving it and the bits and pieces listed below could be completed in the fullness of time:

- The steering wheel needed total restoration because the paint had been previously stripped from the spokes and the woodwork was separating.
- The original egg-crate mesh in the grille had been ruined and so we used similar mesh from the grille of an Austin 1800. It looked almost the same but the horizontal strips were slightly closer and so there were thirteen cross pieces instead of eleven.
- The rear-view mirror was incorrect.
- The turn indicators and their compartments were incorrect.
- The clock and the fuel gauge were not working.
- The air filters for the carburetors looked like something out of a wrecker's backyard.
- The distributor cap was incorrect.
- The camshaft covers were unpainted.

Continues opposite

MY ASTON STORY

Part 3 Cont.

- The bumper bars were DB5 bumpers that were not rusty but scratched and damaged. The front bumper was attached upside down so that it looked more authentic.
- The wheels were original but were showing their age.

The dates that Gil had the car are hazy. I think that he started some time in 1992 and he returned the car in May 2009 after seventeen years. The main reason that it took so long is that I was a young husband and father with the usual financial woes of mortgage and children's expenses and so restoration of the Aston was a low financial priority. I trickled money to Gil as it became available and Gil then did the work. We were both happy with the arrangement because Gil had accepted so much other work on exotic cars that he could not commit a lot of time to mine.

And so ends the stage of major restoration. I had the car and was driving it but there was still work to do.

The final part of the story will be in the next issue of Running AMOC

MY ASTON STORY

Part 4

Greg Bruce completes the story of his DB4 restoration (for now!)

My 1959 Aston Martin DB4 has been back on the road for the past eight years and has behaved itself over that time except for a few lapses. The first of these occurred soon after the restoration when I was driving it back to Gil Skidmore at Crookwell for its first service. There were about 20km left, the road was deserted and so I gave it the gun. It passed 100mph and then the engine stopped and I pulled to the side of the road. Gil's theory was that the car sensed that it was on the way back to the place where it was imprisoned and tormented for about seventeen years and, like a frightened dog, it had dug in its feet and refused to go any further. The reality was that it had broken the rotor on the distributor and was easily fixed.

Meanwhile we kept chipping away at the various imperfections on the car.

The steering wheel was removed, the wood repaired and polished, the spokes painted and it was re-fitted. This cost about the same as a new wheel but it was my preference to maintain originality.

Gil expressed concern about the quality of the splines on the wheel hubs. I did a Google search on wire wheel failures and my hair stood on end. We replaced all five wheels, the four hubs and the spinners for about A\$250 for each wheel. This was half the price of replacing the wheel on my Nissan Patrol when it fell off. I wanted grey enamelled wheels but Gil and his sons were horrified. They advised chrome and I was persuaded. They look nice but the enamel looked original and appropriate for a DB4.

The car had Avon Turbospeed cross-ply tyres that had passed their use-by date and so were replaced with radial ply Vredestein tyres. They certainly hold the road better but the car has lost some of its enjoyable handling character. Previously it slid slowly and predictably which was great fun but now it stays fixed to the road.

I kept a constant eye on EBay for a new mesh for the grille and eventually got one from a dismantled DB4 in the USA. It is possible to get a new one as a replacement part but it was good to get an original. The Austin 1800 mesh was removed and the new mesh fitted.

Correct air filters have now been fitted and the incorrect distributor cap and plug leads have been replaced.

Two insoluble problems have been the TEX rear vision mirror and the twin stalks and cowl for the turn indicators and the headlight flasher. The search continues for the mirror but I doubt that there are any loose on the market. The only hope for the indicators is if someone decides to manufacture them and this seems unlikely. The present indicator is said to be off a DB6 though I have seen a similar indicator on a Porsche 356.

One problem that I thought was going to be insoluble appears to have been fixed. Mine is one of the early "series 1" DB4s that had slimline bumpers but these are now only found on DB4s that have been carefully preserved since manufacture. Most have been scrapped because of rust or damage or "surplus to needs". The dimensions of the slimline bumpers were thinner in height and depth than later bumpers and look particularly elegant on the original DB4 shape. They were made of thin steel sheet with poor corrosion protection and so the steel disappeared leaving chrome plate on top of rust. Some went even sooner because the light metal was vulnerable to minor front end and rear end shunts. Later bumpers were made of thicker gauge steel and were the preferred replacement. DB4s produced in 1959 were in high demand during the 1970s and 1980s because they qualified for 1950s historic racing. They were bought for low prices, stripped down, modified and raced successfully. I doubt any bumpers survived this process.



DB4 125 looking good but still a work in progress (above) and early on in the restoration process (below)



MY ASTON STORY

Part 4 cont.

It is possible to purchase new DB4 bumpers but these are the later type and there is 18mm or 5/8 inch difference in depth and height. I optimistically advertised for slimline bumpers in AM News in mid-2016 and miraculously got a response from a gentleman who had restored a Series 1 DB4 but had not used the corroded rear bumper and it was still hanging in his shed. We came to an arrangement and he kindly packed it beautifully and shipped it to Australia. Gil says that it is not salvageable but it is suitable to use as a pattern to manufacture a new one and we can use measurements and photographs to make a reproduction front bumper. Gil's sons, Shannon and Tim, have run for cover from the project and Gil is not too enthusiastic. It is much more complicated than meets the eye because of the complex shape of the bumpers and the need for it to be fitted perfectly so that there is an equal gap between the body and bumper at front, back and along the sides of all four mudguards. It will be made in sections from heavier gauge steel and then welded and polished to the correct thickness. It will be chrome plated and not polished stainless steel.



It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good. I was taking the car to John Robinson of WJR Automotive, Bowral, for a quick check before the combined NSW/Victoria trip to Merimbula when there was a loud bang under the bonnet followed by a small amount of smoke. I was able to coast the few hundred metres to John's workshop with a little assistance from the damaged engine. A broken valve spring was the speculated diagnosis and this was confirmed when the cam covers were removed. The damage was on the exhaust side and included a chipped cam on the exhaust camshaft and a broken camshaft bearing cap. This was the "ill wind". The good was that the head could now have its overdue lead-free conversion and some cosmetic work to the exterior.



Excellent advice was provided by JMB Motors and Andy Chapman via AMOC. Andy has been particularly interested and helpful and it has been good to tap into his experience.

The cam was repaired, valve seats replaced, new guides inserted and new valves and springs fitted. The biggest issue was the bearing cap because none were available and the only option was a basic casting from JMB Motors that required line boring. There was considerable delay while we searched for the appropriate combination of expertise, technology and courage to carry out this delicate operation. The issue was that there are no bearing shells and the camshaft bearing is the light alloy head and bearing caps and so the undamaged bearings could not be altered. The bearing size for the new cap had to be line bored to exactly fit the old size without any interference with the old bearings. The head spent months in one workshop until the proprietor lost interest and the job was then handed to Peninsular Engine Services in Brookvale, NSW. The reconditioned head was returned to John, refitted and the car is now going like a rocket.



Concurrent beautification work consisted of painting the camshaft covers and the timing chain covers, ceramic coating the exhaust manifold and re-chroming the head and camshaft nuts. The nuts were in good condition and my preference was to restore and keep the originals rather than replacing them.

Rear bumper to become pattern (top)
Restored cylinder head (middle)
camshaft bearing cap (below)

Should we have removed the whole engine for reconditioning? We tossed this back and forth and decided to leave sleeping dogs lie. The engine was running well before it broke the valve spring and there were no apparent issues with the block or bottom ends. The task of removing the engine is not much different with or without the head. It is the work after the engine is removed that is the issue.

I doubt that the restoration will ever be completed. Some of the work was done so long ago that it may need to be repeated. This does not concern me because having the car off the road and being worked on can be just as interesting and enjoyable as driving the car which has become more nerve-wracking as it has increased in value. My wife values the car as the number of new kitchens she could install if I ever sold the car. The value has now increased from half a kitchen to about five kitchens.

This is my final article on the restoration of Aston Martin DB4/125R but I doubt that it is the end of the story.

Greg Bruce