



# Restoring an **old friend** part one

**Jerry Watson** starts a three-part series covering the rebuild of an XK 150 that he's known since childhood

**H**aving been in the XK Club for over 10 years, I love to read members' restoration articles. The overriding emotions I feel are ones of envy of the skills of some of the restorers, and awareness of the limitations of my own skills. I also feel that these articles can put off as many home restorers as they inspire, simply because we mere mortals who have no prior engineering background think that because they can't do everything they actually do nothing, which is a shame.

I have had the pleasure of owning my XK 150 DHC – 68 ACF – for the past 30 years, yet it has been in my life since I was six years old. I clearly remember the day I first saw it, when I wandered into an outbuilding belonging to one of my father's friends and lifted the covers. As a six-year-old boy can you imagine how I felt? It was that day that I realised I was into cars. I would use any excuse to go back to the barn just to look at the car again. When I turned 17, the owner – who was a jazz musician playing at Ronnie Scott's – said he needed to sell the car and offered it to me for £650. Frankly that might as well have been £1 million because I could only afford £50. But my dad did persuade Jimmy not to sell the XK, and to part with his MGA Twin Cam instead.

Fast forward 20 years. Jimmy, who played golf with my dad twice a week, knew I was still mad about cars – I had bought a green 150 FHC by then – and asked me to come and look at the XK. He had just kept it locked up in a small asbestos garage.

I opened the garage door and was fairly horrified what I saw. The chrome was all black, the hood had mould on, the interior was mouldy, yet we put a battery on and it started straight away because Jimmy had had his gardener start it about once a month. I drove it out of the garage



- Left: the XK as it is today and (right) as it arrived. Pictured below left is the car's Heritage Certificate
- Below left and right: with the engine having been removed, the next job was to strip down the engine bay



and the exhaust pipes just fell off because they had rotted through. I explained that if the car was left, it would simply rot from the inside out, which would be a crying shame because it had never been restored.

Jimmy asked if I would like to take it on and I jumped at the chance. A deal was struck (not the £650!) and I sold the FHC to raise part of the money. On the way home I decided that I simply could not bring the car home and show it to my wife looking like it did, and having paid what I had, without cleaning it first. I stopped at a professional steam cleaners and I could not believe what emerged. All the black was, in fact, hard grease, under which was shiny original chrome. The paint was good, yet the hood was rotten.

I have replaced the hood and renovated the interior, keeping all the original leather, but have had to replace the carpets and some of the moquette. I have run the car for the past 30 years, always with a view of trying to maintain the originality, so under the bonnet it looks very used! Any part I have had to replace, I have kept the original. When I bought the car it had done 30,000 miles and it is just about to turn 100,000. I will have a party for it that day.

Owning a car that you are using regularly yet desperately trying to keep original has its own pressures, and I love the process of restoring a car and bringing it back to life. I have been lucky enough to have owned a plethora of cars: two TR3; two TR4s; a TR6; Aston Martin DBS/6; V12 E-type; 1938 Riley 12/4 Kestrel; XK 150 FHC; XK 150 roadster; two XK 120 DHCs and an Austin-Healey 3000. All have been run as everyday cars and were renovated or restored to various degrees. I have also been lucky to have been helped along the way by some experienced mechanics (ex-BRM) who have been very generous with their knowledge and expertise.

Following the very sad loss of my wife to cancer and my retirement from dentistry – you will notice all dentists that retire restore cars – I decided that I needed another project and looked for an XK 150 DHC. After all the cars I have owned, I still think the 150 DHC is the best all-rounder, and also I had the benefit of having a complete original car to use as a reference.

I located and purchased a 1960 XK 150 DHC 3.8 from a contact in America. It was reported to be a very original, unrestored, complete car that had been in dry storage (haven't they all) for 30 years because it was a non-runner. It's always a

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complete lottery when buying a car that you have seen only in pictures. Often your 'agent' has not seen it either, and I think you have to base any discussion on the worst-case scenario. Anything else is a complete bonus.

At this time my dear lifelong friend Nigel Kirkpatrick also retired from dentistry, so he decided that he also needed to restore a car! We decided that we would restore the XK together. We have spent our entire lives tinkering with each other's cars but never working on a jointly owned car.

When we picked it up from Felixstowe, we knew the engine was seized, but most importantly the body looked very straight and with minimal rust evident. On further investigation we assessed the general condition of the body, paint and chrome. It was almost good enough to keep the car as it was, but evidence of rotten woodwork around the rear of the hood, some very bad scratches, and evidence of one 'drive through' repaint – where I am sure they simply fill a car wash with paint and drive the car through – made this impossible.

The hood was rotten and the interior had been replaced by some simply appalling metallic green vinyl. Mechanically the engine was seized, and it was evident that this would need to be removed. It was also evident that every mechanical element would need attention. We decided to refurbish the car, keeping it as original as possible and rebuilding parts rather than replacing them.

In dentistry, a good clinician will know that treatment outcomes are based on good diagnosis, and knowing what treatments you are capable of doing and what to refer to a specialist. We decided that we would go through the car and decide what we would do and what we would refer.

As mentioned above, I have had quite a bit of experience of restoration and so there were more tasks that we decided to do than perhaps a novice restorer. We also decided that we needed to find specialist partners we could work with that would allow us to do some of the work under their guidance, and they would do things we could not complete.

We were lucky that local to us was a restoration company, Project Heaven. We formed a relationship with them that would allow us to do tasks under their guidance and they would do the specialist work. Crucially we had a discussion with Aldridge Trimming, who were more than happy for us to work with them on a similar basis.

The great benefit of doing the stripdown ourselves meant that we could see what went where, and we could store and label all the parts. This is where Kirk and I worked well as a team. He is methodical in the extreme and also had the benefit

of never having stripped an XK before, so he was much more concerned about identifying components; he insisted on bagging everything and labelling it.

I, on the other hand, am much more impatient so bits were flying off at a very fast rate. I have the benefit of being very dyslexic so can think in pictures and remember which part goes where – but this does not help in finding that part three years later. Every article you read says take loads of photos. Well, I thought we had done that but probably not enough. We did at least have the benefit of my XK for reference.



- Top left: two more shots of the engine bay. The order of the day was to refurbish rather than replace where possible
- Left: cleaning the rear axle and other components
- Right: Jerry was impressed with the POR-15 system. Above is a photo of the underside before it was applied...



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- Left and below: POR-15 applied. The underside of the car was thankfully in surprisingly good condition, although a cracked rear spring was discovered during the disassembly process



While the engine was out we were able to thoroughly inspect the chassis and all the inner wing areas, including the battery boxes. To our delight, the chassis was in incredible condition and we had to make the decision about removing the body or leaving it on.

There seem to be advantages and disadvantages for each. The obvious advantage of keeping it on is lack of disturbance of the body and maintaining the alignment, which on this car was excellent. The obvious disadvantage is one of access and the inability to clean and paint some areas of the chassis.

Having cleaned the chassis first with an industrial steam cleaner, and then mechanically with wire brushes on drills, we took it back to shiny metal and found literally no rust. The chassis and underside had been extensively coated with a rubberised body seal, which had undoubtedly

helped the preservation. There may also have actually been a vestige of truth about the dry storage! After much discussion we decided not to remove the body.

The use of the outside lift was invaluable because the steam-cleaning and chassis paint removal was a filthy job. While we were cleaning the chassis at the rear of the car, we discovered a broken spring, so we removed the springs and the axle. Inspection of the axle showed the limited-slip differential to require a rebuild. Project Heaven did this for us and replaced the bearings and seals of the axle.

The engine was removed by Project Heaven. It was completely dismantled, the block was acid-cleaned and re-machined, while new pistons, valves and bearings were fitted, plus a modified rear oil seal.

We repainted the chassis using the POR-15 paint system. I had seen reports on it and I must say I am incredibly impressed. It is a bit more complicated to apply than other systems and is certainly more expensive, but the results are spectacular. Other suspension parts we painted with this look like they have been powder-coated, and you can really hit it without it chipping off.

However, the downside is it's really a four-stage system. First you use the degreaser and wash that off, then you use an acid primer liquid and wash that off and dry the surface, then you apply the paint. If the area is not subject to sunlight you can leave it at that, but if it is, you need to use the additional top coat to retain the shiny black appearance. 🏆

*Continued next month. Jerry is offering the finished car for sale to make way for his next project! Call 07860 879242 for details*