

Austin Healey

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*If you think
this looks nice...
Wait until you see
the rest of
the shop!*





Jeff's immaculate restorations have won top awards at Pebble Beach and Amelia Island

The Restoration Professionals Series – Foreign Car Specialties

An Interview with Jeff Lock of Foreign Car Specialties

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By Dave Ketchen

Foreign Car Specialties is the perfect name for Jeff Lock's restoration business. There is no flashiness, no clever plays on words, and no complex imagery. Just straightforwardness, like Jeff himself.

Jeff's restoration work has won first place honors at a variety of national shows, including Pebble Beach and Amelia Island. This success has been driven in part by Jeff's "old school" philosophy – get the job done correctly the first time through a relentless and tenacious pursuit of perfection. Jeff also possesses artistic skills that enhance his car restoration work. Jeff is an accomplished sculptor. He is also a sought-after restorer of antique survey instruments and is routinely consulted by museum curators in that field.

Jeff has four decades of experience in the restoration and repair of British cars. Jeff's fascination with working on British cars began in the early 1970s when he was in college. Like many students, Jeff's funds were limited so paying a mechanic to fix his British car was out of the question. It was up to Jeff to learn how to perform repairs. This necessity became a hobby and soon evolved into a business.

Get It Fixed and Restored

Jeff and his team of craftsmen restore a variety of marques, including Bentley, Jaguar, Land Rover, Mercedes, MG, Mini Cooper, Morgan, and Triumph. Jeff is most passionate about Austin-Healeys, however, and his daily driver is a 1967 BJ8. We asked Jeff to talk about his restoration business, his love of Austin-Healeys, and the classic car hobby.

Q What distinguishes Foreign Car Specialties from other restoration shops?

Craftsmanship. My team and I never take shortcuts, and we strive to produce restorations that families can enjoy for decades. The first step on every job is to focus on effectively controlling corrosion. No matter how good the bodywork and paint is, the underlying integrity of the metal is the deciding factor on longevity. We never dip cars — it is my experience that there is no way to completely guarantee all the chemicals have been totally flushed from the hidden enclosures that British cars contain.

Q What is the biggest challenge you face in trying to find parts for restoration projects?

In the last ten to fifteen years, large parts suppliers have been swayed by the complaints of their customers about the expense of parts. To meet these lower price demands, both quality and longevity have been negatively impacted. For example, I recently installed a push-button solenoid on my 1967 Healey 3000 and encountered a problem that I had never heard of before in my forty years of experience. An internal component of the solenoid failed causing it to engage the starter on the expressway; I was not aware of this until I got home and parked the car. When I turned off the key, the engine stopped running, but the engaged solenoid kept the starter motor running. Thankfully it did not happen long enough to melt the solder on the starter motor's armature. More importantly, I was lucky that it didn't damage the flywheel ring gear. When I called the supplier to express my concerns, they checked the number of units sold versus the number of units returned and stated that the ratio was not high enough to be an issue by their standards.

Q What are some questions a Healey owner should ask a restoration shop beyond the obvious ones such as experience level and labor rate?

Talk is cheap; don't listen to their words, inspect their work in the shop environment. To really understand a Big Healey, one must appreciate that corrosion needs the most attention. The frame rails, outriggers, and B-posts are most commonly affected by varying levels of corrosion. The quality of welding on these replacement pieces is the most important area to consider for a long-term restoration. Ask them if they overlap the joints of the new panels; this is to be avoided at all costs. An overlapped joint will allow moisture to wick into the overlapped metal and become trapped, providing a perfect environment for moisture to begin the rusting process. The accuracy of alignment of the replacement pieces is very important as well as the quality



Jeff Lock built this Bentley for his own enjoyment

of the welding. Brazing with brass should be avoided, as should spot-welding or riveting. None of these techniques will hold up to the structural movements to which the car will be subjected. It is important for a client to inspect the quality of a welding bead and understand what he is looking at — a smooth, shiny, flowing bead is the sign of a good welder, while an irregular, dull bead with fissures or small volcanic popping is the sign of one inexperienced in welding.

One important area to note in evaluating a restorer's ability is the "equality" of the door gaps. When properly completed, door gaps should be equal in width, front and rear, at about 3/16" and the gap should be totally parallel, not tapered. When inspecting bodywork, get down to a low angle and look at the reflection as it goes along the rear fender, door and front fender as a unit. The reflection should be straight, free of undulations; you know you're in trouble if you feel the need to take some Dramamine.

Q Your shop is better kept than many homes and it is probably cleaner than some operating rooms. Why do you keep your shop so clean?

Whether we are doing bodywork, paint work, or engine work, it is imperative to have no contaminants in the environment. Over the years we have found that the best way to accomplish this is having a regular cleaning schedule to keep the shop as pristine as possible. We have large work areas with wooden tabletops, as well as a massive 16' x 4' stainless steel workbench. The shop is equipped with internal cabinets by the same manufacturer who supplied them to the Smithsonian Institution. The efficiency of all our metal working equipment — shrinkers, stretchers, English wheel, and louvering machinery — will leave the best finish when the steel mandrels, wheels, and jaws are in the cleanest condition.

Q What made you choose an Austin Healey as your daily driver?

After being in the business for over forty years, I've had the pleasure of driving most of the important British sports cars. I've owned many including Jaguar XK 120, 140, 150, and E-Types. I've owned several Healey 3000s, as well as TR-3s and TR-4s. I always gravitated back to the Big Healey because of its no-nonsense approach to power and design.

Get It Fixed and Restored



Jeff's artistic background is reflected in this magnificent Jaguar engine restoration

Q Tell us about your Healey. Where did you buy it? What customization work did you do? How long did the work take?

I bought the car as a low mileage survivor that had recently come out of 15 years in storage. Because of the originality, I decided not to go the 'restoration route' and turn it into a show car. I always admired the Healey production race cars and decided it would be enjoyable to turn this one into my personal version of that iconic vehicle. I know the importance of originality and every modification I made had to be reversible, to be able, if desired, to return the car back to its original state. For example, I obtained another hood and front fenders to use for the installation of louvers, leaving the originals alone. I also removed the original carburetors, intake and exhaust manifolds as a unit, then custom-built a 2" SU tri-carb set-up with a high-flow tubular header system and driver's side exhaust. I worked on the modifications off and on for a couple of years.

Q Are there any cars that you have never worked on but are yearning to restore?

I've always admired the Aston Martins and Invictas from the early to mid-thirties and a very rare car called the Daimler Double 6.



Jeff's daily driver [right] started out as a stock 1967 BJ8 like the one shown on the left

Q There is a sense among some folks that few people in their 20s today are interested in classic cars. How optimistic are you about the future of the classic car hobby?

The term "classic car" is defined by each generation. The Model T was the favorite of our grandfathers' generation, and the classic Bentleys, Rolls Royces, Bugattis, and Dusenbergs were often the cars of choice of our fathers' generation. Those of us enamored with the '50s and '60s classic British cars, like most generations, grew up admiring them during our youth. I do find instances where fathers have passed along this passion for British cars to their sons and daughters, and my daughter is looking forward to the day when the Healey will be sitting in her garage.

Q What steps can groups like Austin Healey Club USA take to get more young people interested in Healeys and their colorful history?

They should consider having car shows on college campuses during the school year to initiate the current generation to this art form.

Q You are something of a Renaissance man given your interests in antique instruments, publishing, and sculpture. In what ways do these other interests help you in your auto restorations?

Craftsmanship is craftsmanship, regardless of the field. The level of craftsmanship that I strive for has unquestionably been motivated by studying the works of true craftsmen in various fields who have gone before me. To quote my mission statement at Colonial Instruments [Jeff's antique survey instruments restoration business – <http://www.colonialinstruments.com>], "All good restoration is time consuming. It is our intention to honor the colonial craftsman by making replacement items commensurate with the standards to which they adhered. We feel that we are carrying on the tradition of their work as if we had apprenticed with them. However, instead of having the luxury of their personal instruction, we have the privilege of studying the mute testimony of their craftsmanship. And we enjoy every minute of it."