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Long-haul Healey

With patience and determination, a novice restorer creates an award-winning BJ8



BY DAVID LaCHANCE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID TRAVER ADOLPHUS
RESTORATION PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF PETER ARMY

The door gaps on Peter Army's Austin-Healey had been giving him fits, and now that the seven-year restoration process was finally at an end, they were keeping him awake at night. "I couldn't sleep thinking about it, that's how obsessed I was with trying to get those gaps the best I could," he says. He tried gently forcing the sheetmetal into alignment, to no avail. "You can only tug and push on a painted car so much, before you run into problems."

And so Peter realized there was just one thing to be done: He had to take a grinder to his freshly painted car. "On the B-pillar, the rear fender, on both sides, I ground them out and re-shaped them. I brought them back up to primer, and

then brought them to a friend of mine who resprayed them," he says. "My friend Ronnie, I thought he was going to pass out when he saw it. 'What are you doing? What, are you nuts!?' he recalls, laughing. But leave the door gaps as they were? 'I just couldn't do it.'"

Those gaps are perfect now, as is the rest of Peter's 1967 Austin-Healey 3000 BJ8. The quality of the work is a testament to Peter's refusal to settle for anything that was merely good enough. A first-time restorer, he spent seven years bringing his car to better-than-new condition, doing the majority of the mechanical and cosmetic work in his 24-by-24-foot two-car garage.

Several years ago, Peter, whose introduction to the world of little British cars came

12 years ago with the purchase of an MGB, developed a passion for the Healey 3000 Mk III, the final version of Donald Healey's evergreen roadster. "I really like the lines—it's just a classy looking car," he says. The Mk III he especially liked, because of its burled walnut dashboard.

He considered a 1965 car located in New Mexico, and then later made the acquaintance of a Vermont farmer who owned three of the cars. Finally, late in 2005, he located a car in Delaware listed on an online auction site. He was outbid, but got a second chance when the winning bidder reneged. The seller, with whom Peter had already corresponded, asked if he might like to buy the car.

"He said, 'It's going to need a restora-



Removing all of the bolted-on body panels, interior and drivetrain gave Peter a good look at the car's condition. After beginning repairs, he decided not to try to reuse the original frame.



Jule Enterprises welded the car's original front and rear bulkheads to a stronger, reproduction frame, and applied the Opaline Metallic Green finish Peter had chosen. The work was done in seven weeks.



Hammer-and-dolly work was one of the skills Peter taught himself during the restoration. Here, the front edge of the hood is shaped, so that it will perfectly line up with the opening in the front shroud.



Peter cut away the corroded lower quarters of the rear fenders, and welded in patch panels he had fabricated. He rolled the lip of the panel around a piece of brazing rod, recreating the original look.

tion. You're not going to be able to take this car and drive it every day. But the car is complete," Peter says. A short drive and an examination on a lift satisfied Peter. "We negotiated a price, and I bought it." He had it transported to his home in Sutton, Massachusetts, just south of Worcester.

He flirted with the idea of putting the brakes in order and driving the car as it was for a while, but in the end realized that that would only have delayed its eventual restoration. And so he began the process of disassembling the Healey.

Off came the top, doors, fenders, hood, trunklid and front and rear shrouds, the large, horizontal, aluminum body panels that bolt in between the fenders. He removed the seats, carpeting, dash pad,

windshield and trunk lining, all of which gave him a better look at the car's condition.

He broke few fasteners during the strip-down process. "One thing I've learned about this whole process is that grease is good, rust is bad. When it's grease, it comes apart. When it's rust, it breaks," he says. He knew from the beginning that he wanted to reuse as many of the original nuts, bolts and other fasteners as he could, and so he applied patience and PB Blaster.

Large parts removed from the car were stored on shelves; smaller parts and their associated fasteners were tagged and sealed in Ziploc bags, which Peter put into storage containers. On the lid of each container, he taped a sheet of yellow lined paper, on





Lower door skins from Kilmartin Automotive Sheetmetal were welded into position, using a 110-volt Miller 125 MIG welder. A series of initial tack welds kept the panel from overheating and warping.



In addition to the door gaps, there were many, many elements between the door and the fenders that had to meet up perfectly. This was one of the most time-consuming, but vital, parts of the restoration.



The bolt-on body panels were lightly assembled onto the frame/bulkhead unit countless times as Peter adjusted the fit. He began at the back of the car, and worked his way to the front.



The aluminum front shroud had to be carefully shaped to create a perfectly even gap with the reproduction steel splash panel. The openings for the grille and headlamps required similar attention.



When Peter was satisfied with the fit of the panels, he sanded and degreased each panel and sprayed it with PPG DP40 epoxy primer. He then reassembled the body and trailered the car to the paint shop.



The body panels were sprayed with three coats of PPG Deltron 2000 basecoat and three coats of PPG 2021 clearcoat. The panels were oriented as they would be on the car.



While Peter was doing the bodywork, Mike's Motor Services was rebuilding the straight-six, which needed a slight overbore. Peter finished the engine in the correct color, with paint from Moss Motors.



All of the suspension components were sandblasted, primed and finished in black Shop-Line two-part urethane. Original fasteners were cleaned and given new zinc plating, using a kit from Caswell.



which he recorded what parts went inside.

One thing he quickly learned is how much space a car, even a relatively small car like a Healey, occupies when it's in pieces. Fortunately, his property has a couple of outbuildings that could be used, and his basement has high ceilings.

When the car was down to a frame and its welded-on front and rear bulkheads, Peter sent it out to be sandblasted. When it came back, he could see that the floors and the rocker panels needed replacement, and so he welded in reproduction pieces. "I had everything set nice. What I hadn't realized was that the frame was actually sagging," he says. "I knew that a lot of guys fix them. They cut out sections, put in rebar inside, or angle iron, and they weld up the

patch on the frame.

"What concerned me most is, after seeing the rust, I realized that the frame was rusting from the inside out," he continues. "And I'm going to put all this money into the car, and maybe in two or three years it's going to start sagging. It would be heartbreaking. I thought, I'm going to bite the bullet, I'm going to take a step backwards; when it's done, the car is going to be sound, and above all it's going to be safe." He contacted Martin Jansen at Jule Enterprises of Rockwood, Ontario, Canada, a company that makes new frames for Big Healeys.

Seven weeks after shipping his frame and body panels off to Ontario, they returned. The bulkheads were now welded to a new

frame that was not only rust-free, but made of steel twice the thickness of the 1/16-inch original. Jule had painted the frame and bulkheads, too, using the PPG Deltron 2000 basecoat/clearcoat paint that Peter had ordered.

Early on, Peter had decided what color he wanted his Healey to be. It was a hard decision, one that involved looking at countless numbers of cars online and at shows. "There were plenty of reds, there were plenty of whites, there were plenty of British Racing Greens, and there were certainly plenty of Healey blues. I wanted something different, and that's what my quest was, to find something different and not be sorry that I did it."

He found what he wanted in Opaline

Metallic Green, the pearlescent silver-green that Donald Healey had chosen for the Westland roadster that he and his son Geoff drove across the United States in 1948. Peter got the formula through the Vintage Paint Company in the U.K.

The next step was to strip the old paint—the original BRG, and a white respray—off the body panels with a DA sander, and to loosely reattach the body panels to the frame so that they could be brought into alignment. Peter started at the back of the car, attaching the rear fenders, the rear shroud and the doors. He took careful measurements of how much the gaps needed to be widened or closed up, and wrote them onto blue masking tape that he placed on the body.





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With the drivetrain and suspension in place, the freshly painted body panels could be bolted on. The front shroud had been safely hung from the roof of the garage until the time came for its installation.



The floors, transmission tunnel and firewall were all covered with Dynatex to keep heat and noise out of the cabin. Healey Wood supplied a new dashboard; Peter reupholstered the center section in leather.



The new interior required a bit of fitting. This rear panel stood too tall to allow the top to be folded; Peter pulled up a corner of the leather and trimmed the backing panel where it fits over the sill.



With the car nearly complete, Peter decided he could not live with the fit between the doors and back fenders. He ground off the new paint and reshaped the edge, then had the fenders painted again.



He replaced the rusted-out doglegs of the rear fenders with patch panels, and welded in new lower door skins that came from Kilmartin Automotive Sheetmetal in Australia. MIG welding was new to him; he bought a 110-volt Miller 135, and got guidance from his friend Bill Curley, who is an old hand at building Midget racers. Countless hours of hammer-and-dolly work, cutting, welding and grinding were spent getting everything to line up properly. It was a frustrating process, Peter freely admits. "I'd get it right, and I'd take the door off and spray it with PPG two-part epoxy primer. And then I'd put it back on. And you think you could get it back on the same way you took it off?" He laughs. "It's not an exact science. Everything moves."

When he was satisfied with the fit, Peter applied PPG DP40 epoxy primer to every panel, inside and out. "What I couldn't reach with a spray gun, I put on with a brush," he says. The car then went by trailer to the Rochester, New Hampshire, shop of Shawn Libby and Bill Marshall, whose work Peter had seen and admired on other cars. A skim coat of filler and applications of PPG high-build primer were each followed by much block-sanding with progressively finer paper, until the body was perfectly smooth and free of sanding marks. Three coats of PPG Deltron 2000 basecoat went on, followed by three coats of PPG 2021 clearcoat. Shawn and Bill removed all of the bolt-on panels and suspended them from the ceiling of their shop by bungee

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Trim in Blaine, Washington, for the new upholstery. After looking over samples Heritage had sent, he and his wife chose a Biscuit leather interior with dark green piping, and a dark green top and carpeting to match. His seat pans, back seat squab and console came back reupholstered, and ready to install; the door panels and rear side panels required minor surgery to line up properly. He bought a reproduction dashboard from Austin Healey Wood of Oxford, Massachusetts, and had the instruments rebuilt by Palo Alto Speedometer of Palo Alto, California. He added a custom-made mirror riser with a clock, and

installed a compass in the console. Peter chose not to have the odometer zeroed out, but it's had to do very little work so far; when David Traver Adolphus photographed the Healey, it had covered 1.1 miles, mostly going on and off a trailer. One of its few trips was to our seventh annual Sports & Exotic Car Show in Saratoga Springs, New York, where Peter's car took our Best of Show trophy. What lies in the future? "I'm going to show it as much as I can, because I enjoy going to shows. Then I'm going to start driving it," Peter says. "Yes, I am. Let's see what it'll do."

