

# CLASSIC CARS FOR SALE

## SPECIALIST



### SURFACE PROCESSING LTD

**A**nybody who has ever completely restored a car will know that preparation is all – and it's also the most soul-destroying task of the lot. For days on end you spread paint stripper all over the bodywork, then try to remove every last trace of filler, paint, primer, underseal and anything else that's stuck to the panelling. If you're lucky you'll also neutralise everything before applying a fresh coat of primer and paint – but how can you be sure? Even if you get the bodyshell blasted, the outer panels will be left untouched for fear of distortion, while the inside of the box sections will also remain untreated – so you'll still have to go through many tedious hours of stripping by hand. That's where Dudley-based Surface Processing (SPL) comes in.

Established since 1994, Surface Processing has developed a chemical dip system where a complete bodyshell can be submerged into a range of vats, stripping it of absolutely everything in the process. It's not just about removing all the paint and rubbish that have been added to the panelwork over time though; the process also dissolves any corrosion. Sadly, it doesn't repair the bodywork for you, but it does leave you with nothing hidden from view, so you know exactly what work needs doing.

After this initial stage, it's time to do any bodywork repairs. This can mean fitting new panels or simply welding in fresh metal, making everything strong again – but it doesn't mean applying any filler yet. Once those repairs have been made Surface Processing recommends taking the bodyshell through the latter parts of the cleaning stage again. This will make sure the metal is completely free of grease, rust or any other contaminants, so that the final coating stage can be undertaken with confidence.

This final stage is just as impressive as the initial one, in that it effectively rustproofs your classic to the same level as most modern cars. Sure, it won't get rid of the double seams and ledges that act as perfect rust traps, but it does treat the metal to the same level as a modern, so the panels are less likely to dissolve if you take your car out in the rain.

This final stage is called e-coating, or electrophoretic painting, which involves dipping the car again. Once through the pre-treatment where

it's washed and zinc phosphated it's into a vat of very thin primer, which seeps into every pore of the bodyshell. Bonded to every bit of metal it touches, thanks to the use of an electric current, this coating reaches places that other primers just cannot reach. Once out of the paint it's drained and oven baked at 180 degrees C, curing the paint and driving out any moisture that's picked up on the way.

When we paid a visit to Surface Processing, there was a whole yard full of classics just waiting to be treated, ranging from a Ford Escort Mk1 and Lotus Cortina Mk1 to a couple of Porsche 911s and even an Austin Metropolitan, alongside which was an NSU Prinz.

Emerging pristine from the workshops were a TR6 and a split-screen VW Camper; fully primed and waiting to be collected by their owners, the cars looked amazing. Indeed, it's hard to see how they could suffer from corrosion ever again, so complete is the treatment.

Because of the strength of the chemicals used, only mild steel can be treated, so aluminium must be separated and treated through a different system. If you're assuming that such an involved process must be horribly expensive, it isn't.

The two key stages are typically around £1600 depending on the size of vehicle; small cars cost less, big cars a little more. Also, if you opt for the first stage to be re-run after repairs but before e-coating, that'll be another £400. Hardly peanuts to be fair, but just think of the alternative – which is having to strip your classic car's bodyshell yet again in the future, when the dreaded corrosion attacks once more.

Suddenly, compared with the cost of yet more welding, fresh panels and another coat of paint, it all seems such a bargain.

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## Risky Business



**I**n the melee that is classic car values at the moment, the only thing that seems to be constant is inconsistency itself. Not a lot of stock is actually moving while everyone waits for the market to bottom out, which means that to actually sell a car right now, it has to be priced right. But there's at least one marque bucking the trend – values of Big Healeys show no sign of faltering, well not at the moment anyway.

I'm not entirely sure why this is, but of the considerable number of Healeys that I see going on the books each week, many values outstrip those of comparable E-types. Whilst merely 'good' cars still fetch £15-20k, excellent examples are still changing hands at £30-35k, with concours examples nudging £40k.

I've even started seeing them insured for over £70k (admittedly concours), so, just what is the appeal of the Healey that keeps prices on the boil in a time of recession? Those in the know point to the sheer simplicity of the construction and the relative ease of maintenance, neither of which can be denied. Then there is the heritage; few cars have such a genuinely pure lineage, conceived by a sporting legend such as Donald Healey. The competition successes came thick and fast and the big Healey was especially useful on the rallying scene in the 1960s.

Even today, many are still being retrospectively converted to period rally spec both to race and simply admire and such cars do attract strong money on the open market, original or not. Now in contrast, strangely the Jaguar was never a great success on the sporting front, so that may hand the Healey an advantage.

I'm in no doubt though, which is the better car; it's hard not to argue the Jaguar rides and handles in a different league. On the performance front, even the 3.8 E-type will whip the Healey's posterior, while the creamy V12 scores on both performance and smoothness.

Then there are the looks; to most eyes, the E-type is timelessly beautiful – even in bloated series III form, and the shape of the pure 1961 car can only be described as art. The Healey? Well, there's no doubting its rugged appeal, but frankly I wouldn't like to go as far as calling it a stunner. Still, the 'real man' driving experience is confirmed by the weighty clutch and non-assisted steering, not to mention the heat soaking through into the cockpit from that big six pot up front. Add to that a determinedly upright driving position that finds your nose centimetres from the short piece of glass that doubles for a windscreen and you'd think you'd have a recipe for an unhappy time out on the open road. But oddly that's the paradox; these old Healey's have raffish charm by the bucket and that's the point.

And that's why, even with the same 3-litre six and similar performance and handy size, the car that was supposed to replace the Austin Healey 3000 – the ill-gotten but misunderstood MGC – is still two-thirds cheaper to buy today.

**Jeff Bailey**