

Repairing the wood on your dash

by Bob Higgs

The feature I have most identified with fine British automobiles besides the leather, was the beauty of the woodwork in these cars and the craftsmanship that went into producing it. Ever since I was a young boy I had always harbored the desire to own a Jaguar and in 1996, I managed to realize that dream. My prized possession was now a 1986 Cranberry Red Series III Sovereign.



My 86 Cranberry Red Sovereign.

My Sovereign Restoration Project



After enjoying this car for 3 years, I decided it needed a new coat of paint. Unfortunately I made the fateful mistake of purchasing a compressor along with an air wrench to make the task of removing the bright work less arduous. However it also made it far too easy to remove other parts and before long the car was completely embroiled in a full restoration. My friends and family thought I had lost my mind, they believed the car to be in pristine condition before I started pulling it all apart and no matter how intensely they looked at the car they could not see the flaws the same way I could.

I have a tendency of being a perfectionist when it comes to projects that I engage in, this one being no exception. Anything showing the slightest mark or blemish had to be replaced. So for the next 2 years I spent hours behind closed doors in my home office working on the computer scanning the pages on E-bay looking for all NOS parts that I would need for my car. The major requirement was that they had to be original equipment.

I don't possess any woodworking skills beyond the norm so there was one job that I kept putting off because the thought of doing it myself made me very nervous. That was the dashboard, and mine, as all others had turned the usual dull cloudy orange yellow colour. In addition, I had allowed other people to condition my mind to believe it was the actual wood veneer that was discoloured and bleached by years of standing in the sun. My solution to this problem was to suck it up, spend the money and purchase a completely new replacement set of wood for my car. That decision made a huge dent in my wallet but I thought that would be more than made up for with the satisfaction I would derive from owning new wood.

I had my mind already set on what type of dash I wanted for this car and gave a very specific description to the supplier as to the type and colour I was looking for. I eagerly awaited delivery and as I unpacked it my heart sank. To no fault of the supplier, it was nowhere near what I expected and certainly did not fit the picture I had in my mind. I trundled off with dashboard in hand to get other Jaguar owners opinions. It did not help when they all told me how fantastic it looked and how nice it will go in my car. No matter how I tried, I could not share their enthusiasm. I finally put it to one side with the thought that it would possibly grow on me as I progressed along with the other parts of the car.



The dash I don't like very much

A short while later I was working in my shop with a very hot iron, I had set it down having just finished using it. After a short while, a rather unpleasant odor began wafting in my direction and upon investigation found that the iron had fallen over onto an old dashboard. I had discarded this particular board because of the severe cracking and fading of the finish. The iron was now laying flat on this dash and had heated up the old finish which had begun turning a milky white colour and had formed bubbles. By running a wood chisel over this surface, I discovered that the finish just separated away from the walnut veneer very easily.

Totally engrossed in the fact I had just learnt something new I continued with this process and within fifteen minutes had the old finish completely stripped off. Contrary to what I had always believed, the veneer was still in extremely good condition, the cracks and discoloration were confined to the old finish only and had not penetrated through into the veneer. In reality the walnut veneer was well preserved and only showed slight traces of bleaching but otherwise was undamaged.

This minor bleaching was easily repaired after a light sanding with 400 grit paper by applying a Minwax stain called #224 Special walnut. This was applied sparingly by putting a little on a lint free rag and dabbing it in the places that required darkening. Time was allowed for this to thoroughly dry and then the whole dash was given another light sanding again using 400 grit paper. I found I had to resist over doing the sanding, (although this veneer is very robust it is a little on the thin side and can easily be sanded right through).

The finish that I personally used with the most success is the Minwax fast drying Polyurethane clear gloss. This is available in spray cans which is the type I have used on the dash boards. There is another version of the same product that I have used very successfully on steering wheels and gear shift knobs and this one you apply by using a lint free cloth. I will acknowledge there are alternative finishes that are available that will possibly do as good a job. However, this is the one that I have found that most closely duplicates the finish found on the new replacement dashes. Whichever one is chosen, the finish is best applied utilizing long smooth strokes.

The first couple of coats made me wish I had never started this job. They took a long time to dry and looked terrible. The amount the wood absorbed took me by surprise. I guess, thinking about it, with the years of drying that this dash has been subjected too, I really should have expected it. With the subsequent dashes that I have tackled, I have learned to resist sanding between these first 2 coats. Maintaining a coverage on the veneer is all important at this stage. Determined to persevere, I continued to apply coats of the Polyurethane giving the wood a light sanding between each coating using well worn 400 grit paper. With successive coverings even dings and minor gouges gradually became invisible. This process was continued until I had achieved a completely smooth flat finish devoid of all blemishes.



The tools that are required



The Products of Choice



My 87 V-12 VDP

Thankfully this is a very forgiving process, which is one of the nice features about doing this job. When I made a mistake, it did not dampen my enthusiasm because I was already fully aware that with careful use of the sander I could easily correct any of my errors. The caution word with this process is "patience". □ you have to have patience if you want to achieve the perfect job.



My 86 XJ6 VDP

Just as I was about ready to start applying the first of the 2 final coats. I created a virtual dust free environment in which to work. I constructed a tent using plastic sheeting. This proved to be inexpensive and adequate for the job. At this stage, I had to take extra precaution against allowing dust to settle on the finish. In order to accomplish this everything was wiped down thoroughly with tack cloths before being placed inside the tent. The slightest piece of dust in the finish would have spoiled the entire job. Leading up to this moment I had tried to use every coat that I had applied as a learning process, practicing laying the finish on in uniform strokes and experimenting to discover how much to apply to get that just perfect finish.



My plastic tent

Right from the start of removing the old discolored finish from the dash, you can never be quite sure what the grain pattern will finish like. Easily the biggest reward for engaging in this work, comes as each successive coat is applied and you see the grain and the colours come alive and become more defined.

After my final coat was applied, I allowed five days of drying time and then using a product called 3M Finesse-it finishing polish, I polished out all the minor blemishes. This particular Polyurethane takes five weeks to fully cure after which time I applied a good coat of Carnauba wax polish. If this polish is applied before the Polyurethane is totally cured it only serves to prolong the curing time.



It is absolutely amazing when you realise how little work this takes, time wise and how inexpensive it is to complete but it makes a such a tremendous improvement to the look of the inside of the car

Word of caution. The computer panel cannot be treated using this same method, The veneer used on this piece is wafer thin, much like paper and can be damaged very easily. I have found that the old finish can be removed by using a mild paint and varnish remover but extreme care must be taken so as not to damage this very fragile veneer.



Mike O'Brien's 88 V-12 VDP



Please note that the colours of the dash boards shown in these pictures is a lot darker in real life.

For more information contact Peddlarbob@gmail.ca