

RESTORATION OF A BARN FIND

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What do you call a person who gets excited with anticipation over every old barn they happen to drive by? You know what I mean. Rubber-necking on country roads. Peering into every old barn, scanning every pasture, searching for something, something special.

I guess I've been this way for a while, but it really took hold about eight years ago after a friend of mine finished the restoration of a 1969 Nova. I've always had one project or another underway – just ask my wife Nancy – but after seeing the nice job and the effort it took to finish the Nova, it got me thinking and I thought that it was time I tackled car restoration.



But what kind of car should I restore? Being a practical person and highly motivated to finish whatever I start, I thought, "Maybe something small." The first thing that came to mind was an MG or a Triumph. I really liked the style of those imports, and you know there's not much surface area and I remember all the effort my friend had to go through to complete the body work on the Nova. To simplify things even further, I thought I would concentrate my search on cars that were kind of old. Something from the fifties or sixties, and that would have simple mechanics. I guess most people would say I'm better than average when it comes to mechanical things, but I knew I was in foreign territory. I'd done plenty of wood-working projects and electronic projects, but car restoration would encompass many new challenges, so keeping it simple in as many aspects as possible was probably a good idea.

My primary resources for the search were the Internet and eBay®. I found eBay to be a great source for determining what was out there. There were lots of photos and, more importantly, what a project car was likely to cost. While perusing the offerings on eBay one day, I remembered a car that my dad spoke of back when I was a kid. My dad is gone now, but his memory enters my consciousness on a daily basis, especially when it comes to the quality of my work; more on that later.

That car was the Austin-Healey. I'm kind of ashamed to admit it, but I really don't think I had any idea of

what the big Healey looked like until I started doing searches on eBay. I'm going to buck the trend of people who say that "I instantly fell in love with the styling." Instead, for me it was the legacy of Donald Healey that mostly peaked my interest. The idea that he was a racer, an engineer, and an innovator, and that these gems came out of a small car company that he started are what clinched it for me. I was going to restore an Austin-Healey and the inspiration was from my dad.

Further research on the web brought me to Larry Varley's Restoration Site on the Internet (www.acme-fluid.com.au/larry). I can't describe how much this site motivated me to do this project. I think Larry was in the middle of his BN1 restoration when I started the research on mine. I visited his website often to see the latest progress and techniques

that he employed, and each visit spurred me onward. The Austin-Healey Club USA's site had a nice breakdown on the various models of the big Healey, authored by Reid Trummel. I think this helped to decide which model I preferred

the most, but as with most things, the choice had more to do with what's available. Happily, this was not the case for me.

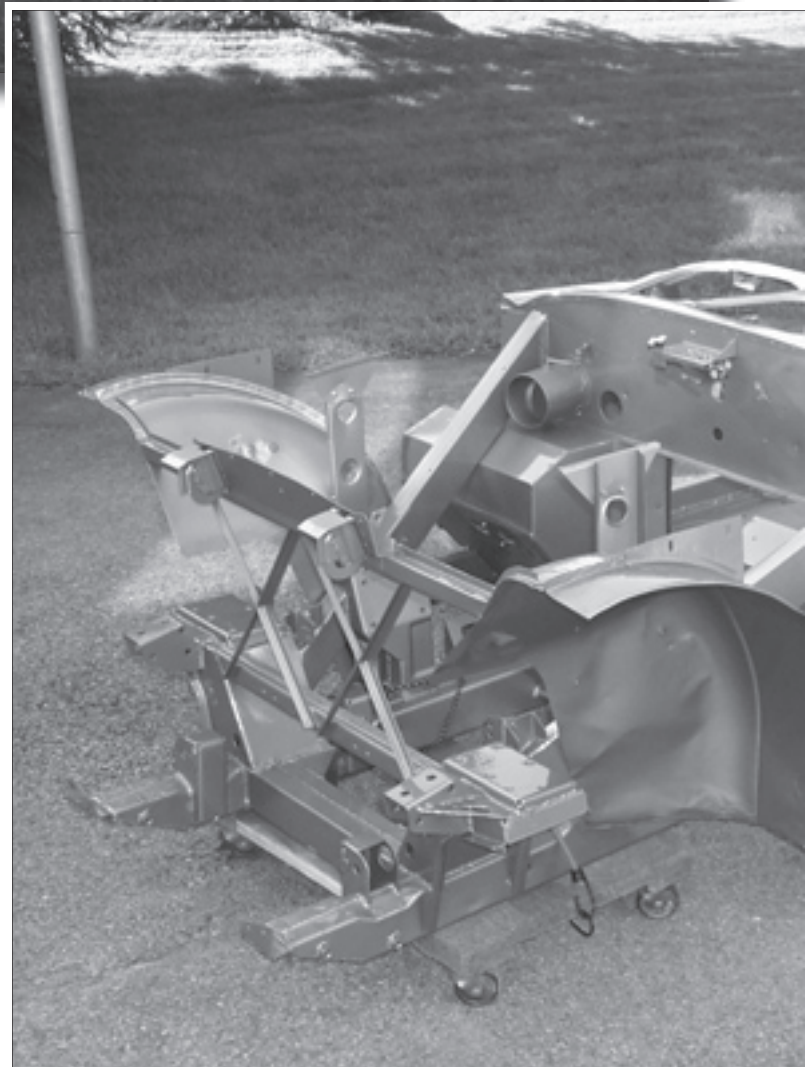
I think I spent so much time staring at Healeys on the Internet that its silhouette had been burned into my retinas. I was driving to a customer's site one morning and I thought I'd spotted a Healey in a snow-filled field. Like I said, the image was so burned into my mind that initially I thought I'd just imagined it.

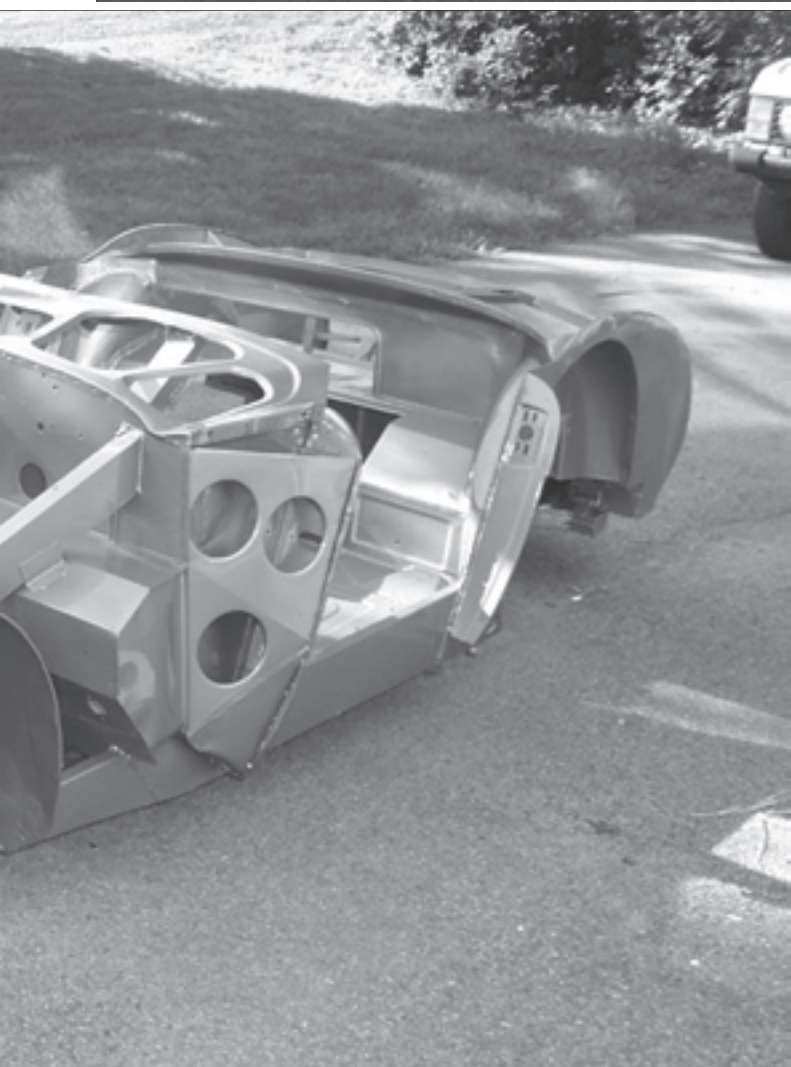
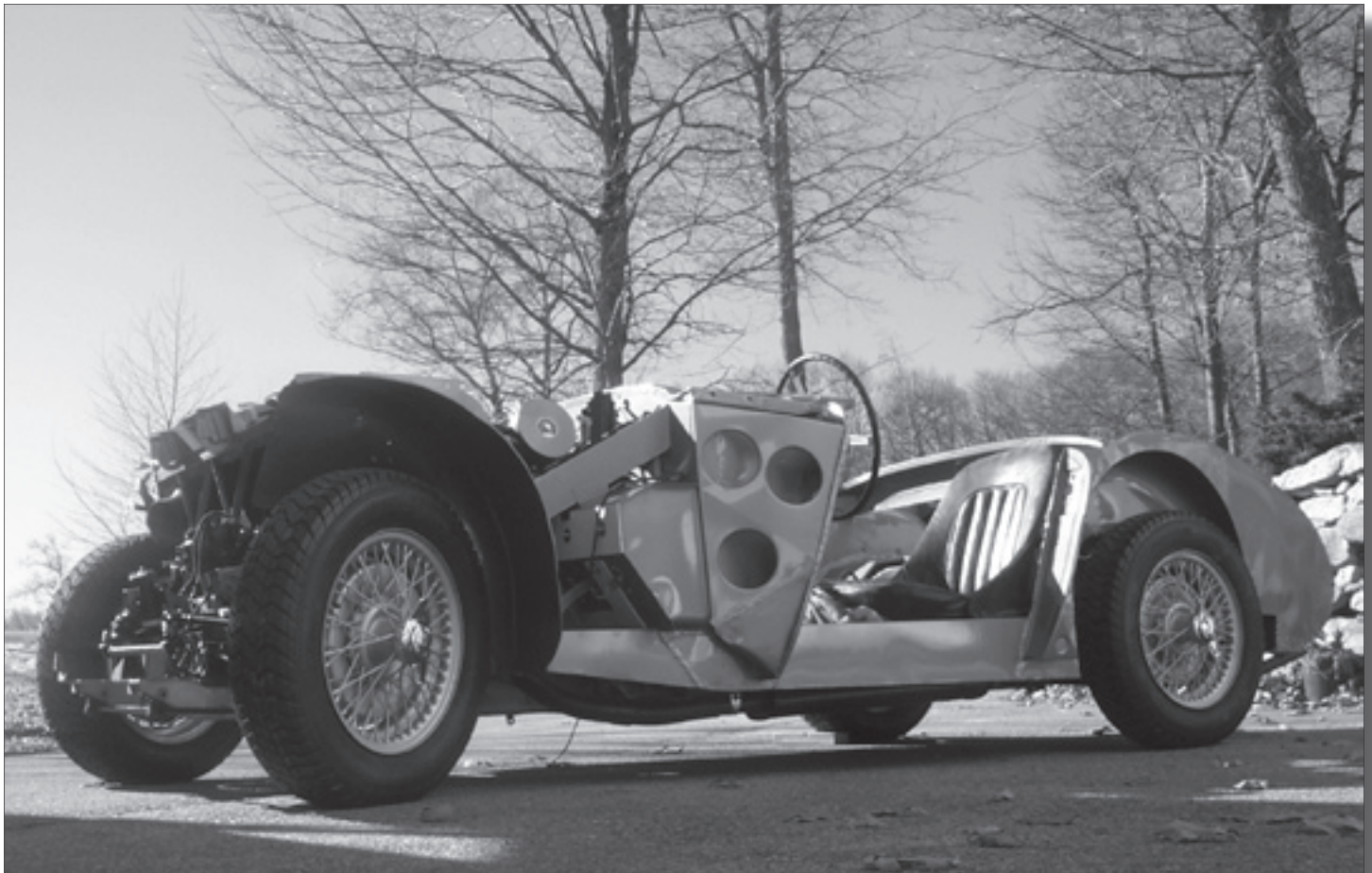




Anyway, who would leave a Healey outside to get buried in snow? I decided that I would investigate this Healey sighting more on the return trip. Well, on my way back home I was staring into every field I passed along the area where I'd thought I'd spotted it, and then, there it was. I slowed down and took a long look. It was in the side yard of a small ranch house and it was positioned so that the passenger's side was facing the street. It had no top and was filled with freshly fallen snow. I traveled this way often to my customer's site. How had I not noticed this before now?

It would take me a week or so of traveling back and forth, rubber necking on each pass, before I got up the nerve and actually stopped. When I finally did stop, I knocked on the door and met the women who lived in the ranch. She told me that the car belonged to her husband's friend and that it was in her barn. Oh, did I mention there was a barn? She said it was in the barn with a bunch of other old cars and that she needed some space in the barn to store some camping gear so she just pushed the car into the yard and, well, that's how it got covered in snow. She gave me the guy's number and invited me to take a closer look.





It was a 1959 100-Six. It was painted silver over black. I lifted the boot and in place of a gas tank I found a one-gallon tin can. I guess they used that just to move it around the yard. The floor boards were bad, as well as all the outriggers, but mostly what I remember was that I could not determine the condition of the car because it was all together and still partly imbedded in the snow. I couldn't see underneath. This was my first look at a Healey "in the flesh." I popped the bonnet and wrote the VIN on a scrap of paper and stuffed it into my copy of the *Austin-Healey 100/100-6/3000 Restoration Guide*. I called the owner, but in the end I decided to pass on this one. I think one of the reasons was that the Austin-Healey Club USA's web site refers to the 100-Six as "the least desirable big Healey." I was still very uneducated about Healeys at this time and the fact that this was a two-seater 100-Six with disk wheels, making it a somewhat rare find, didn't occur to me at the time.

The following summer Nancy and I took a vacation out to Lake Tahoe. Yes, she knew there was a Healey meet out there and she was excited to see one up close. She had become accustomed to my latest obsession and she has always appreciated art in all its forms and the Healey certainly qualifies. Our first



few hours in Lake Tahoe were spent outside a little café watching those little cars buzz up and down the main street. What a treat. Later, we were both blown away when we traveled up to the high school football field to see several hundred Healeys.

I had hoped to find a nice project car that week, but in the end, the trip motivated me to take this project to the next step. I went back to the guy with the 100-Six, cash in hand. He had moved it out of the snow and had it garaged by then, and when I finally got

a look at the undercarriage in more detail, I again cringed and put the money back into my pocket. I guess that there was much that was unknown about the condition of the car. From a “project management standpoint” there was just too much risk for me.

Several months passed by as I continued my research and obsession about Healeys, when one night I guess that Nancy had reached the end of her patience with me. She blurted out that I “was not going to find a Healey in a barn” - that they had all been found, but



large cardboard boxes that were going to be painted and used for a display at a local fair. The boxes spent several days in our driveway and garage. I wasn't too happy about these monstrosities being where they were, and when I got the opportunity to have them moved to another location, I took it. Apparently, our local town official has a big barn. Yeah, OK, you see where this is going.

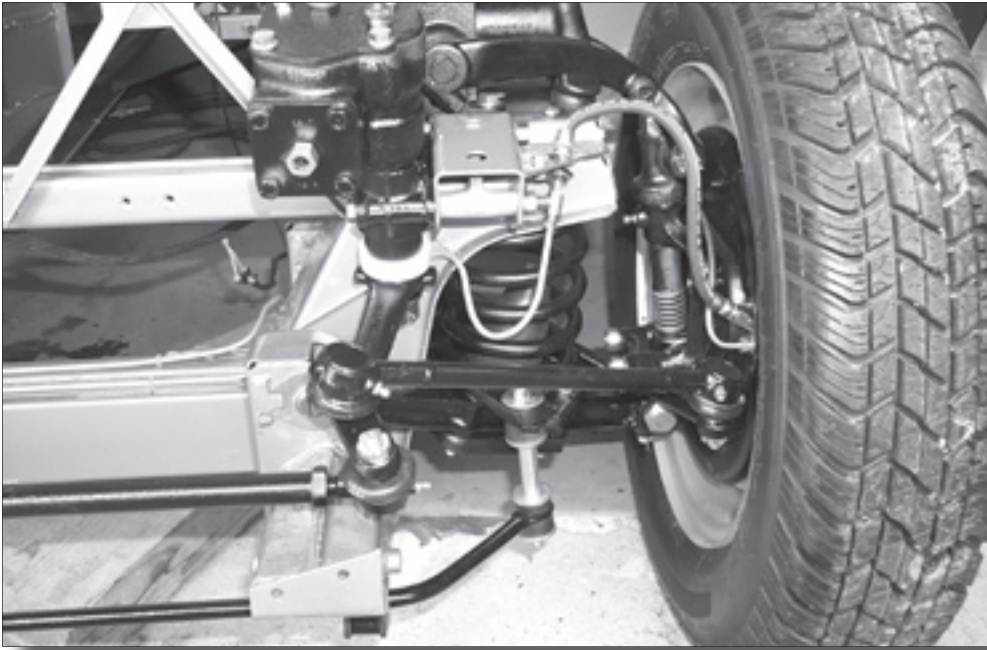
We borrowed a couple of trucks and moved the boxes into the barn. I guess a lot of people use Jeff's barn to store all kinds of things. I was only interested in one thing though, and after storing the boxes there, I looked across the barn and I noticed an old car. I commented to Nancy, "Hey there's a car over there" and proceeded to check it out. There was no body, no engine, and no front suspension – just a frame and rear axle. The things that I noticed were the curve of the rear inner fender and the double X's ahead of where the radiator should have been. I yelled over to Nancy, "Hey I think this is a Healey!" All she said was, "No way." I also noticed that Jeff had a couple of intact MG Midgets, and initially thought that this was possibly the frame to another MG, but in retrospect I thought, "Not with those hips."

I went over to the house and talked with Jani, Jeff's wife. Jani said that it was a Healey, a 100, in fact. Later, Jeff would tell me that he was surprised that Jani actually knew what model it was. But I definitely remember that Jani said it was a 100. This was an important point, because I was secretly hoping to find a 100 and particularly a BN2. But, I was also telling myself that if I found anything "project-worthy" I

she turned out to be wrong.

Nancy is very civic-minded. She spends a lot of time improving the quality of life around our little town. On one occasion she was responsible for acquiring some extremely





would go for it. I left Jani my business card and told her I was interested in the Healey and to have Jeff give me a call. She said she would definitely give him the card and encourage him to call because she had long wanted to get rid of it. She added, "Jeff never gets rid of anything." Apparently, most of the stuff in the barn is Jeff's. I've come to know that Jeff is a bit of a pack rat. I went back into the barn and found the 4-banger tucked under an old printing press. I jotted down the engine number on a scrap of paper, 1B233396M. I later tucked it into my copy of Anders Clausager's book at page 47.

Nancy and I jumped back into truck where I wasted little time before saying, "See, they haven't all been found!" She reluctantly but happily agreed, but quickly followed up with, "You heard her, Jeff never sells anything."

For the next few days I spent doing a little "recon" regarding Jeff. I spoke with a couple of the neighbors who knew Jeff and they all said, "Yeah, Jeff never sells anything." I asked if they would do me a favor and encourage Jeff, in any way, to part with the Healey and to tell him I was a good guy. After a week, Jeff called me and told me about the Healey and how he had wanted to restore it himself for the past thirty years. He said that he started the restoration in the 1970's and that he had hoped that his kids would like to pick up the project. But, he admitted, that at this point, that prospect seemed unlikely. Jeff said he would think about it some more. I guess he did a little "recon" on me and he later admitted that

he was impressed that I knew it was a Healey considering its condition at the time and that I was possibly the guy to finish the project. Apparently, Jani had told him that I knew it was a Healey before she told me it was a 100. In the end, nobody can ever again say that, "Jeff doesn't sell anything," because Jeff sold me that Healey.

The Healey was almost completely in pieces and because of that fact I had a complete view of what I was up against. Jeff had that Healey stuffed in every corner of the big barn. He even had extra body panels, but I decided to restore

the original ones. I spent the next year just moving little bits back and forth from my garage to his barn. I couldn't fit the entire project at my place so there was a hidden benefit to buying Jeff's Healey. He let me use his barn for storage.

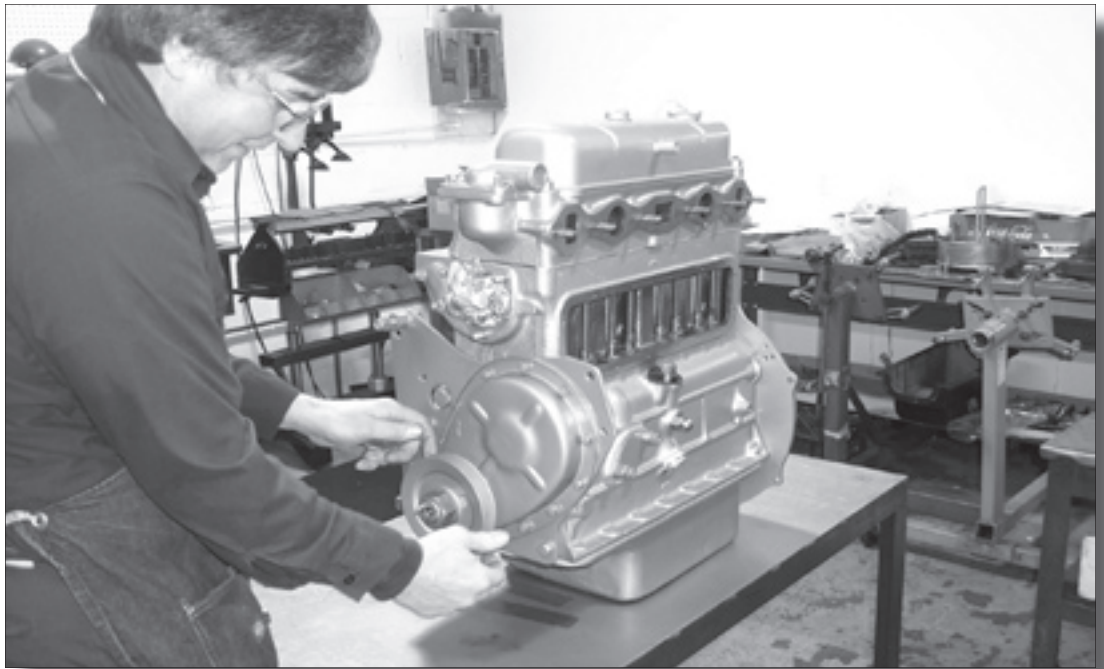
The quarter panels were badly deteriorated, too much so for me to fix with a repair panel. I located Everett Smith in California and convinced him to repair the original panels. By all accounts he was the best man for the job. It wasn't easy to convince him to fix the panels. However, he admitted that more and more people were asking for their original panels to be fixed even when they were in really bad shape. You see, Healeys were made almost like a custom car and nothing fits as well as the original panels. I sent him the two panels in a bike box. He repaired the rear bowl areas as well as the doglegs. I remarked at how the welds looked like they were stitched by miniature people.



The rear shroud was in the worse shape of all the panels. Being made out of aluminum, it had corroded wherever it made contact with steel. When aluminum corrodes it just turns to dust. This left big gaps along where the shroud bolted up to the quarter panels. I considered sending the rear shroud to Everett, but it was too big for any box and too fragile. I spent many an hour on the phone with Everett as he described the best way to repair the shroud. He sent me repair segments of specially formulated aluminum. Everett described to me the process of aluminum gas welding – the method he preferred – and in particular the qualities of a carburizing flame. He even emailed me photos. With many attempts, I managed to do a descent job and repaired the shroud myself. Sadly, Everett passed away last year. His extensive knowledge of Healeys and expertise in welding are a great loss to our community. I will miss him.

Returning to the question of how Jeff acquired the car, the story goes that his dad had bought the Healey for him some time in the sixties as part of a reward that he

had earned. Jeff had his choice of anything reasonable and the first time he saw the Healey at the dealership, he said, "That's the one." His mom later told Jeff that his dad almost didn't get it for him be-



cause he wanted it for himself. Jeff used the Healey to go back and forth to UMass Amherst. Jeff has some great memories with that car, driving it in the heat of the summer and the cold of winter. That probably explains why the rear wheel wells were completely rusted out. Jeff spent some time in the army and, upon his return, disassembled the car in preparation for the restoration. That's when life happened. A marriage, three kids, a job... you know the rest. I always like to tell people that Jeff started this restoration and that it didn't take three years, it took thirty-three years.

I spent the next three years working on the Healey. I learned to weld steel. I learned to weld aluminum. I spent months on the frame and panels to get them aligned just right. Panel alignment is so important on a Healey, especially with the swage line and the door gaps. I welded on and cut off that inner rear fender so many times I lost count. But in the end, I think I got it right. I have my dad to thank for that. I heard his voice many times urging me that "it could be better." The extra effort paid off. I learned to sandblast and to do body work and prime. No, they wouldn't let me paint her. They say I'm a primer not a painter, at least not yet!

Some of my lifelong friends helped me all the way through this project and I've met some people during this project who have become lifelong friends. There's a bit of every one of them in this car and that is a something that I think about whenever I take the Healey out on the back roads. You know, the country roads – the roads with all those barns. 