

Steve Berry in his
Twickenham workshop

Special Treatment

Southern Classics is one the oldest Jaguar specialists in the country. We talk to its owner, Steve Berry, about the company's history, his philosophies and the huge new workshop it now occupies

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A GOOD CLASSIC car specialist is like a good dentist. They should be knowledgeable, have a great bedside manner and more importantly, the ability to make things as painless as possible. Spend a few minutes with Steve Berry from Southern Classics and it's clear that in another life, he could have easily had a career poking around in other people's mouths.

With most of his working life spent around old Jaguars, there's very little Steve doesn't know or that his company can't offer in regards to servicing, maintaining or restoring these classic cars. And like a dentist, Steve is more than aware of the responsibility he's entrusted with when asked to undertake any work. "You've

got to be very passionate in this job. When the customers drop their cars off you've got to build trust up that you'll treat their car as one of your own."

Early Focus

Steve began his career in 1975 as an apprentice panel beater for a coachbuilder that specialised in commercial vehicles. "I was taught by a couple of ex-Aston Martin employees who used to work at the old Feltham factory where they made the DB2/4s and so they taught me traditional methods." When the company moved location, Steve didn't want go with it and transferred to the crash repair business. But being a classic car enthusiast – he restored

his first, a split-screen Morris Minor, when he was just 14 – it wasn't a job he enjoyed. And so after only a few months, in 1981 he joined Southern Classics as a skilled panel beater.

Founded in 1979, the company quickly established itself as a leading specialist in the burgeoning classic Jaguar movement. Steve was made workshop manager in 1989 but three years later the company went into receivership. It was when Steve was working for the receiver that he had a call from a customer, John Crow. "He asked why didn't we go into partnership and buy the company together," remembers Steve. And so that's what they did, with John being a silent partner. Over the next decade, Steve continued to build up the company.

And then in 2001, John became ill and, as Steve remembers, "He said: 'This has knocked me for six and I'm looking at selling some of my bits and pieces. You are the business, you get first crack at it.' And so he sold his shares to me."

Ten years on and thanks to Steve's dedication and knowledge, Southern Classics remains one of the UK's leading classic car experts. "Our forte is still Jaguar," he says. "When we work on them, we don't have to pick up a workshop manual. We do everything for the cars, including servicing, full nut and bolt rebuilds and modifications. Power steering and handling kits are just two of the improvements we offer."

However, after witnessing the other marques in his workshop on the day of my visit – including two Lamborghini Countaches, four Aston Martins, an Austin Healey 3000 MK3 BJ8 and a Mini – it's clear the company has the knowledge to look after other makes as well. "Metal is metal," says Steve. "If you've got the skills and eye for the shape, you can work on any car."



Above: Southern Classics' new workshop has a large area for preparing cars for painting and its own booth (below right)

Expansion

Thanks to his background in panel beating, the company has always been a specialist in bodywork, something that continues today. Steve employs two panel beaters who use traditional methods to shape metal plus two sprayers and Southern Classics has its own spraying booth. But after moving to newer, larger premises in Twickenham last year (7,000 sq ft of workshop space) the company can now offer more mechanical work. "We've always done panel beating and painting," he says, "but the more of these cars that are restored and put onto the road, the more of a market there is for servicing, maintenance, mechanical breakdowns and MoTs."

With these new premises having three distinct areas – panel, paint and

engineering – it makes it much easier for his team of six to carry out full restorations.

"When a car comes in to be restored," says Steve, "it's stripped, goes into the panel shop where the body is finished, then into the paint shop and then mechanical to be built up." The only parts of the process Steve can't offer on-site are engine and axle rebuilds plus trimming but he outsources these to local companies he's worked with for years.

Customer Service

And in addition to the high level of craftsmanship, Steve's old-fashioned views on customer service are another reason Southern Classics continues to thrive.

"I have an old saying," he says "'Treat someone how you want to be treated.' You've got to be able to look someone in the eye and say, 'This is what we're going to do and this is what it's going to cost.' Communication is very important in this job. I regularly pick the phone up and tell the customers what we're doing and keep a full photographic report."

It's because of Steve's rapport with people that he has some customers who go back from before he took over the company. In the highly competitive market of classic car specialists, that's quite an achievement. And so for the countless people he has helped with a restoration or simple servicing of their beloved classic, it's no doubt a relief that the only drill Steve has ever picked up is used to repair bodywork. **EW**



One of Southern Classics' body specialists works on an Austin Healey in the panel shop



An Aston Martin DB4/2 in the body shop



At 7,000 sq m, the new workshop has enough room for all of Southern Classics' needs



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