

SOUTHERN CLASSICS

A gem worth searching for



Above: Proud Owner of Southern Classics, Steve Berry, stands outside the door to his new premises at Twickenham with one of the many cars he has prepared.

Opposite: Steve Berry (left) with Southern Classics' office manager, Laurie Moore – something of a new boy – he has only been with the company for seventeen years.

Below: The main workshop area at Southern Classics. The XK and Series 3 E Type are in for servicing, whilst the Series 1 E Type is having a brake and suspension upgrade.



You may have read in Club News recently that one of the companies that regularly advertises in Jaguar Driver, Southern Classics, has moved to new premises in Twickenham. What a good reason, I thought, to go and have a look at them next time I am in the area.



Following a weekend in March, spent in Reading with my son and his family, I arranged to pay Southern Classics a visit. I put the post code in my trusty sat-nav and set off eastwards along the M4 towards Twickenham. In conversation with the proprietor Steve Berry, beforehand, he had

told me that I would find Southern Classics easily enough as they were right next to Twickenham stadium. Well he was half right ... Twickenham Stadium is hard to miss ... Southern Classics on the other hand is at the far end of a small industrial estate which contains some interest-

ing, but distracting businesses, one of which services and repairs all the local buses. I did, however, find Steve and his team tucked away in a quiet corner and can only say that I was glad I made the effort. It was a delight to find such an Aladdin's Cave of various classic cars undergoing a range of service and restoration activities.

Southern Classics has been around for many years. The company was set up in the late 1970s and was originally based in Chertsey. Suffering more than one compulsory purchase order for building development work on the site where their premises was situated they were forced to move firstly to Sunbury and more recently to their super new workshops in Twickenham.

Current owner, Steve Berry, began working for the company in 1980 as a panel beater, which is the trade he learnt from an ex-Aston Martin bodywork expert as a young man some years back – it is worth remembering here that until the late 1950s Aston Martin still built cars at Feltham in Middlesex, which is only five minutes away from where Southern Classics now reside. Steve was promoted to workshop manager in 1989 and in 1992 when the company went into receivership he joined forces with John Crow to buy the company. Ten years later Steve was able to buy-out John Crow and has been the sole owner ever since.

He has been a Jaguar fan all of his life and, although his transport these days is a large Japanese 4 x 4 pick-up, he has owned a number of Jaguars over the years. The problem with the Jaguars he has had himself is that they are so well put together and maintained, that people always want to buy them from him at prices he finds difficult to resist.

I had not previously made the connection, but Southern Classics undertook most of the background activity for the well known TV series "A Car is Reborn". It was shown in 2001 over something like 16 weeks and covered the total restoration of a rather well used and abused Series 1 E Type Roadster. It was filmed on sixteen separate days over a seven month period. I have had a quick look at my copy of the video today and, sure enough, there is a slightly younger

Steve Berry and other members of the Southern Classics crew giving various restoration tips and assistance to the show's presenter, Mark Evans. Fame indeed, and great testimony for the high quality and thoroughness of the work that they do.

Speaking to Steve, and his office manager, Laurie Moore, I started to comprehend that there was something special about their organisation. Being aware that similar restoration companies struggle to find the skills they need I asked them about attracting and then keeping the highly skilled craftsmen required to run such a competent operation. Including himself, Steve has eight staff working in the business and it seems that most of them have been with the company for many years and turnover is very low – the longest serving member has been with Southern Classics for more than 31 years. That means Laurie, who has only been with the company for about 17 years, is something of a new boy. Steve said that the success of the company is down to the skills and loyalty of the work force and mentioned by name, Kevin and Phil who do the painting, Rory and Tony who are the panel beaters and Keith who looks after things mechanical. The Company Secretary is Steve's wife Wendy, who gets involved in various activities.

Whilst in the office area Steve showed me the filing cabinets that contain full documentation of all work carried out on every car. A photographic record is kept of restoration work and all bills and receipts are filed – it means that a comprehensive history is available of all work done and, when required, customers can have access to the history of their cars.

Steve took me on a tour of the premises – having started with an empty shell it cost something in the region of £110,000 to fit out the industrial unit to create the various workshops required. The first area is the bay where all the mechanical work is undertaken. A great deal of their day-to-day work is servicing customer's cars. A large percentage of their turnover is routine maintenance of cars that they have previously restored. Although their forte is almost certainly bodywork, undertaking anything from removal of scratches through accident repair to full restorations, they are also frequently asked to provide modifications to bring classic cars up to modern standards. Most often the requirement is for upgraded brakes, improved suspension, five speed gearboxes and minor styling tweaks (e.g. flared wheel arches to accommodate larger wheels and tyres).

Perhaps it is not surprising that although Southern Classics specialise in Jaguars, a number of their customers own a variety of classic cars and naturally, given their outstanding reputation, ask Southern Classics to maintain



them. Thus, on the day I visited, the workshop contained an Aston Martin and two Lamborghinis alongside a couple of E Types and an XK120. One the E Types, a metallic blue Series 3 2+2, was particularly interesting, having been fully upgraded more than 20 years ago it still looks as good as new, despite being used regularly by its owner. It was a magnificent and interesting car and deserves an article in its own right. Included among the modifications are a 6.1 litre fuel injected engine, five-speed gearbox, electric steel sunroof, walnut dashboard, lattice alloy wheels and external bodywork tweaks. It looks quite sleek and with an upgraded exhaust system sounds wonderful.

The owner of this E Type also owns the XK120, which has a 4.7 litre engine, five-speed gearbox and uprated brakes.

Southern Classics have the facilities to undertake most activities required in car restoration but tend to sub-contract some of the more demanding engine rebuilding activities and upholstery work to specialist companies that they have developed close relationships with over the years. Suspension, steering and brake upgrades are normally undertaken in house. To support servicing work Southern Classics keep a stock of the most commonly used items e.g. plugs, filters oil, brake pads, etc, such that there are no delays in obtaining parts.

I asked Steve if he carried out much work on concours cars and he told me, that although he had prepared a number of cars for concours entry in the past, the emphasis these days seemed more focussed on upgrading cars to improve their usability rather than maintaining originality to show standards.

The second workshop contained the paint shop and was where cars are prepared for painting. An extensive set of many thousand colour swatches, coupled with a range of paints for mixing, ensures that almost every colour

imaginable can be matched and mixed on site. Steve explained to me how using their spray booth and low bake oven he was able to apply almost any type of paint. Cars could be finished in original cellulose or acrylic coats, or painted with one of the more modern coverings such as two-pack paint. In this bay there were three E Types, a classic Mini Cooper and a Ferrari, all at various stages of preparation in the paint cycle. I instantly recognised one of the E Types as it had been raced by its owner, Per Jonsson, in most rounds of the E Type Challenge race series in 2011.

The final workshop contained just two cars – an Aston Martin DBS and a Series 3 E Type. This



Roger Kemp

Below: People who own Jaguars tend to have other exotic cars in their collection and ask Southern Classics to maintain them – these two Lamborghinis were in for servicing (the one on the ramps is actually a replica).



Above: Southern Classics restored this lovely XK120 many years ago and now carry out routine maintenance – it has a 4.7 litre engine, 5-speed gearbox and uprated brakes and suspension.

Opposite: Another of Southern Classics creations is this V12 E Type roadster, which includes among its many modifications, a walnut dashboard.



Above: A before and after shot of a customer's car that was involved in a collision less than 24 hours after leaving Southern Classics, following a full restoration.
Photos: Southern Classics.

is the area where bodywork repairs are carried out. The E Type was having a new floor and sills fitted and showed signs of some fairly poor earlier work, which seemed to have entailed loading it with huge amounts of filler.

The Aston Martin was, quite surprisingly, just very rusty and needed significant amounts of new metal to be welded into its lower regions.

All in all, there is sufficient space to work on around sixteen cars at any time, with further

storage areas available to double this number with cars waiting for work.

There is a final bay within the unit that Steve uses for providing storage space for customer cars. A rich assortment of modern and classic vehicles kept in this area included a beautiful Daimler DS420 limousine, a Mark V that had been used for classic rallying and a lovely Mark V Drophead.

I was impressed with the whole operation at Southern Classics – everything was clean and tidy and it was obvious that work was being carried out to a high standard. The fact that so many customers return their cars to Southern Classics for maintenance and repairs, suggests that they deliver a more than just satisfactory service. I think I would have no qualms about taking my cars along should they need work, being confident in the knowledge that I would receive an honest and affordable service. If you are in the West London area and need a reliable garage to maintain your classic car, then do go and have a word with the nice people at Southern Classics.

Southern Classics can be found at:

Southern Classics Ltd, Unit 5, Twickenham Trading Estate, Rugby Road, TWICKENHAM Middlesex, TW1 1DQ.

Tel: +44 (0)1932 787636 (Mon-Fri 0830-1800)

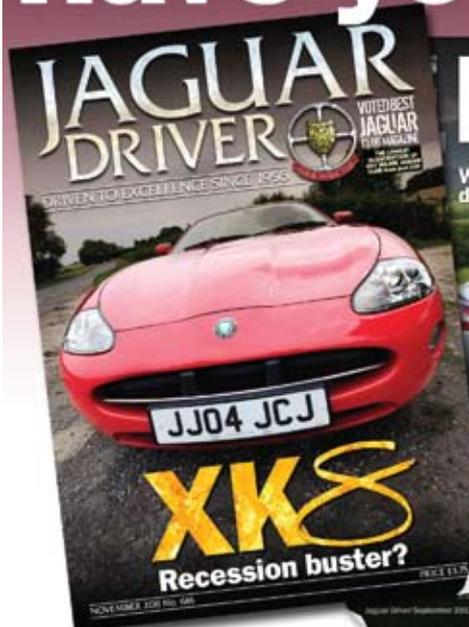
www.southernclassics.co.uk www.sccstorage.com

Below: An overhead view of the area where cars are prepared for painting. In the foreground is a Ferrari. The blue E Type Roadster took part in the E Type Challenge Race Series



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