

A series on Concours
Part II
Choosing a Level of Restoration
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Let's start by forgetting about Concours. Forget about car shows too. Think about what you desire in your Healey. My guess is it would include: a) a car that looks nice enough to receive compliments, b) one that runs fairly trouble-free, c) one that you can get out of after a trip and say the ride was reasonably comfortable, d) one that you can easily maintain or which doesn't cost a fortune to have a good mechanic work on when problems arise, and e) one which you can sell for a fairly decent price if or when the time comes for you to part with it. Let me get your mental "gearbox" churning with some ideas and examples to illustrate how one might get "there" from "here". Please keep in mind that the starting point for all that you will do to your car is **knowledge**. The more you know about the cars, the better the result will be and the happier you will be too.

Every year I receive a number of phone calls from owners with questions about fixing up their Healey. The conversation usually starts like this: "I have a 19xx Healey that I'm restoring and would like to know about" The questions typically are about chassis/body repair, paint colors, or interior stuff. My response back to them usually is a question, along the lines of: "What do you want the car to be....?", to which the response is often: "Oh, it's to be a driver, not for concours."

This illustrates a very common misconception about concours and concours cars – that *they* are restored to be accurate, but non-concours cars aren't, or don't need to be. Let me use an example to illustrate my problem with this thinking. Many folks, when they start out to buy their first Healey (or even later on when they "upgrade" to a better one) will have someone who knows the cars examine prospective candidates for them, either because the car is located far away or because they are insecure about their own knowledge in evaluating a car's condition. A car in good repair that looks like it is correct suggests a greater level of care and attention than one that obviously has had many items changed. Though not always the case, if the readily visible bits are original or correct, it's more likely that the less visible ones will have been cared for or restored with equal concern.

Thus, the more complete and accurate a car is, the more likely you will be to want it (and also the higher the price it will receive in the market place). For those subsequently interested in considering entering their car in shows or even Concours, starting with one that has the basics done right means that they can focus on upgrading the details at their leisure, often being able to continue driving it as they go. So originality really *is* of some importance. It may not seem so at first, but you are likely to find that to be true later.

A second aspect of originality also has an associated dollar value, but with a more practical bent. Cars that have been changed or incorrectly repaired take longer to fix when they go into a shop because one cannot just refer to the shop manual (or parts book)

when diagnosing a problem, and often much work has to be “undone” to get down to the root of problems. Imagine what it is like for a mechanic to trouble-shoot an electrical problem when the wire color coding doesn’t match that shown in the wiring diagram, or some wires even have different color codes at their opposite ends because a replacement piece was spliced in to repair a burned segment years ago. Sorting out variances takes time, and what ought to be a 15 minute job can often take ten times as long. So the shop hourly rate can quickly add up to a much larger bill than you would expect.

Yes, there are improvements you can make to a car’s performance and comfort, but in doing so it is important to consider implications in the future when service is required. Just remember that what looks “spiffy” or seems to make your Healey “better”, could end up costing you a much more when the car goes in for repair, either to the component that was upgraded, or for some other malady that the upgrade now hides from easy access.

There can be good reasons for restoring a car accurately that go well beyond whether you intend to enter it in concours or not. I would even add that keeping a collectable car original, with all its quirks, also adds to the uniqueness of the classic car experience and can serve as a pleasant reminder (if the service and/or restoration work was done with quality) of what the English motoring industry was like in the 1950’s and 60’s.

Indeed, I would state that folks should think about fixing their car up with a number of goals in mind, and that a “concours” car is merely one that someone enters in concours. I know of many excellently restored examples (perhaps even of Gold level accuracy and quality) that owners never bother to put under the judges’ scrutiny because they merely consider them to be nice “drivers”.

So how might you plan your restoration? Some items are very hard to sort out later without major cost and effort. Doing these “right” at the beginning will always pay off in added value in the end. For example, the heart and soul of a Healey is in its chassis. Rust glossed over and hidden will inevitably show up again, so doing this part right is most important. Rust repair sometimes can be done without complete disassembly, but correctness in panel fit requires time, and having the proper knowledge and skilled craftsmanship is crucial. And here it is *crucial* that whoever does the welding and fitting of chassis and body panels really understands Healeys, how the rest of the car goes together, and knows that many of the bits assembled afterwards will not fit properly if they haven’t been considered and planned for when the steel work was done. If they have excellent “hands-on” skills, but lack Healey-specific knowledge, if *you* provide the detailed “how it is supposed to go” information, it is still possible to end up with excellent results. Careful planning up front at this stage cannot be overemphasized.

But if you cut corners on damage repair, then the money spent on paint will end up being wasted later on. While you’re at it, do the “asbestos” heat shields correctly. Some of these pieces are impossible to replace later without pulling the engine.

If you are taking a car completely down, then choice of paint color becomes the second key decision. Selecting a custom color that you like is fine, but choosing from among

those that were originally available for your particular model will improve your car's value if you later decide to sell. There is no way to properly change car color without complete disassembly, so this decision can have a lot of cost as well as value implications.

I'd like to digress a minute on the subject of paint. Typically people judge a restoration by the paint job. However, once the metal work is done, the cost and time involved with excellent quality painting will be on the order of only ten percent or so of the total time and cost of a full restoration. Yes, paint work *is* important, and to obtain truly top quality results you need 1) a painter with excellent skills (read long experience and a thorough understanding of how paint lays down and cures), 2) proper equipment and supplies (e.g. primers, sealers, the paint itself, spraying and polishing equipment), and 3) a clean, dust-free facility (good paint booths don't come cheap and thus aren't as common as you'd think). All the above are a big investment to a paint shop, so good results don't come cheap.

But then too, with the marvels of modern finishes and polishing compounds, a mediocre paint job can be "adjusted" to look really impressive at first, and short cuts taken in the preparation won't show up for perhaps a year or two, when it becomes all too apparent that it needs to be redone, and this time not just resprayed but taken down to bare metal. So you could end up paying twice for what should have only been done once, and at a higher total cost, even if the first paint shop gave you a "deal".

So my points are first to learn about what painting involves and select a shop that will do a proper job for you and, second, recognize that there is much more to doing a good renovation, restoration, or even just a "fix-up" than having a shiny paint finish. And don't fool yourself into thinking that you can splurge on the paint, but cut corners elsewhere, and end up with a quality restoration. It just doesn't work that way.

The next large expense is upholstery, so again choice of whether the color will be an original factory color or not, and whether or not the trim matches the paint color as originally specified, are both important considerations.

Also worthy of serious initial consideration is the quality of replacement wiring you choose, as it is much easier to install a harness when the car is partially assembled than after it is completed. Thus, if you are going to want an accurate harness eventually, it would be easier (not to mention cheaper than buying it twice) to take care of this detail properly the first time 'round.

Beyond making the above decisions, all remaining repair and upgrade details can be attended to later on without major disassembly, so your choices on how to treat them during the initial restoration are easier to reverse, should you decide to.

Regardless of the level of "fix-up" you choose, there are two key ingredients you will need –

- 1) Knowledge of how the cars were assembled
- 2) Skilled talent doing the work.

Most Healeys have been worked over extensively during their lifetimes so that much of their originality information is gone. This is where the Concours Guidelines can help (and many other reference books are available that contain valuable information as well) Having a resource to tell you how something was initially finished, or fitted makes it possible for you to get that detail of your car equally correct. You may be taking it back to original just so that the car will run and handle properly, or you want it will pass scrutiny in a Concours judging. And often it costs no more and takes very little additional time to do things right as to “make do”.

As for the talent, that is an entirely different topic. Suffice it to say the ideal situation is to have work done by someone who has extensive knowledge and experience with Healeys. As a second choice, if *you* can provide the Healey-specific knowledge/expertise and are able to find a skilled craftsman who is willing to work *with* your input and oversight, it is possible to also end up with excellent results. In any case, the more you learn about your car the better you will be able to keep it up and assess problems later on should they occur.

So please remember that much of what we Concours nuts research and report on can also be of value to those of you who just want to enjoy your cars without worrying about those picayune details. And if you are interested in the “nth degree” of accuracy, I’ll be talking about that in a future installment.