

Driving Comfort, Concours, Travelling Back in Time, or Social Events

What Flavor of Restoration Suits You for Your Healey?

By: Roger Moment

Every year I receive a number of phone calls from owners with questions about fixing up their Healey. The conversations usually start like this: 1) "I have a 19xx Healey that I'm restoring and would like to know about?"; or 2) I'm looking for a Healey to buy --- can you help me find one?

For those looking to work (or farm out the work) on their car, questions typically are on topics such as chassis/body repair, paint colors, mechanical issues, 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."

I offer the same questions to prospective new Healey owners, plus one additional question: "Who is going to be doing routine maintenance on your car?" My point here is that a superb restoration, which is accurate down to the smallest detail, will quickly deteriorate to the more-commonly seen examples (with many of the original bits lost and replaced by "functional" American substitutes) unless owners learn about their car and truly appreciate what they have. If they want to preserve the state of excellence that their car represents, they will need to find a mechanic with the interest and capability of doing careful work that is above the standard of most shops.

So let's assume you already own a Healey and take a look at what various levels of restoration entail and what considerations you will be making when deciding on how to proceed with your car.

How true to when it was new do you want your car to be?

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.

I believe a very common misconception about concours and concours cars is that concours are restored to be accurate, but non-concours ones 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 and 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.

If you're looking to buy a Healey, the more complete and accurate a car is, the more likely you will be to want to own it (and also the higher the price you'd be willing to pay). 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.

Once you own a Healey, keeping it close to original has a dollar value, also 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.

So I'm a firm believer that originality really is of some importance. It may not seem so at first, but you are likely to find that to be true later when you need servicing or want to sell your Healey.

Yes, there are improvements you can make to a car's performance and comfort, but in doing so it is important to consider their 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 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.

Along this line, I fully recognize many of the common modifications (such as extra heat insulation, or brighter tail/brake lights) can improve comfort and safety, but most often the car can be easily changed back to its as-new configuration. However, I feel it is important to avoid carving up the metalwork (or doing irreversible machining to mechanical components) so that major disassembly and/or panel repair would be required should you wish to return the car to a truly original state.

Making your decisions

There can be good reasons for restoring a car accurately that are totally unrelated to whether, or not you intend to enter it in concours. I would even add that keeping a collectable car original, with all its quirks (yes, even including that persistent oil drip on the garage floor), also adds to the uniqueness of the classic car experience and can serve as a pleasant reminder of what the motoring industry was like in the 1950's and 60's (and don't forget that American cars also had their drips and foibles).

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 can (or should) be one that is driven and enjoyed and also entered 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 aspects of a restoration can be very difficult to sort out later without major cost and effort. Often this can entail taking much, or all, of the car apart and doing the repair all over again. Fixing things "right" at the beginning will always pay off in added value in the end (or duplicating cost from re-work). For example, the heart and soul of a Healey is in its chassis. Rust glossed over and hidden will inevitably show up again, so repairing this thoroughly and correctly is most important. Rust repair sometimes can be done without complete disassembly, but often once started many other areas requiring correction become apparent and these are best taken care of "now" rather than coming back to at a later date. It is not uncommon for a local repair to grow into major (or complete) disassembly so that proper fixes to the core structure can be made.

You and your Healey



A proverbial "garage find", purchased in 1980 for \$600. Because this car had never been disassembled, had only moderate rust, and was 95% complete, it was seriously considered for a meticulously-accurate restoration. However, the Florida green color was not appealing at all. On the other hand the owner had picked up some NOS Kar-Vel carpet, which made a strong case for restoring for Concours. Decisions, decisions!!!!

Correctly fitting and repairing body panels requires time, and finding a craftsman with the proper knowledge and skills is critical. And here it is crucial that whoever does these repairs really understands Healeys, how the entire car goes together, and that many of the bits assembled afterwards will not fit properly if they haven't been fitted and planned for when the steel work was done. If they have excellent "hands-on" skills, but lack Healey-specific knowledge, yet are willing to work with you, if you provide the detailed "how it is supposed to go/look" information, it is still possible to end up with excellent results. Careful planning up front during the planning stage cannot be overemphasized.

But if you cut corners on damage repair, then the money you spend will likely end up being wasted later on. This advice also applies to choosing the quality of parts that you buy. Keep in mind that you're going to end up with a car that can be worth from \$50,000 to well over \$100,000 (in today's market), so saving \$50 here, or even \$150 there can seem like a poor decision in retrospect.

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 should 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 are expensive 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.

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 re-sprayed 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".

Another consideration is the type of paint to use. Powder coating (often considered for durability on suspension and other mechanical component restoration) can be applied so thickly that it looks like a plastic coating, completely hiding surface details (e.g. fabrication marks such as metal flow-stress lines) that typically showed on original chasses. It is possible to have thin powder coating done, but this requires special request and a shop that is skilled in creating finishes that closely mimic originally-painted ones.



British Racing Green ended up the color of choice for the car in Photo 1. However, that is not an original color offered for 3000 Mk Is. Also, at the time the owner was not aware of an accurate shade of trim materials for the original Grey interior. Therefore, the decision was made to restore the car accurately, down to the minutest detail (since 95% of all the original bits were still on the car), but use it as a driver (with vinyl instead of leather for the seats), rather than as a Concours car. Subsequently (a few years later) a source for spot-on grey trim materials was found (both shade and texture pattern), as well as information that the very last production 3000 Mk I BT7 was indeed painted BRG and had Grey-Green trim. This car was then upgraded to a Concours candidate by replacing all the interior (except for the Kar-Vel carpet), a moderately easy task to do. It scored Concours Gold in 1991 (the car was driven 2300 miles to and from the meet) and again in 1997 (a 1300 mile round trip), even with the sizeable deduction for non-standard-offered paint color.

As for the exterior paint, original lacquer materials are sometimes hard to find, but also won't hold up nearly as well as modern urethane paints. However, base coat-clear coat systems can be polished out to a much higher shine than original paints, and while extremely pleasing to look at, also can have the appearance of over-restoration. And beware that often modern metallic paints will have much coarser metal particle size than that used in paints back in the 1950s and 60s. However, it is possible to find paint suppliers capable of mixing with extremely fine particles that result in a sheen very close to what Healeys painted in metallic colors originally had.

So my points are first to learn about what painting involves and select a shop that will do a proper job for you (you will need to critically examine examples of the shop's work); and, second, to 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. If you have chosen a factory-original paint scheme for your car, then choosing factory-original colors for your upholstery and trim tend to maintain the highest value of the finished product.

Another important 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 and patience in performing 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 resources 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 to maximize its value for later sale, or because you want it to pass scrutiny in a Concours judging. Often it costs only a bit more, and takes very little additional time, to do things right, as opposed to "making do".

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, such as the "nth degree" of accuracy. The important thing is to have a car that you are pleased with. If you can preserve more originality than you might have initially considered important, you will likely realize the benefits of this decision down the road, but also feel additional pride about your car.

Car Shows – Concours & Popularity

Now it's time to shift gears and get into what car shows are about and how all this might relate to your car. An underlying theme is still information.

Everyone likes their car to be admired. Shiny paint and

chrome are the most obvious attention-getters, and any older car will garnish attention from passers-by wherever it shows up. But at an Austin-Healey club event the primary audience is other owners like yourself, and these folks are more sophisticated (to varying degrees) than the normal pedestrian off the street, so their "approval" means even more to you.

Car show activities at Austin-Healey events receive a lot of attention and a high degree of participation. Unfortunately many Healey owners don't fully understand the nature of these shows and become discouraged when they don't win an award.

Two types of display venues have been used for decades: Popular Choice and Concours. Popular Choice is just what its name says – people vote for the car they like best. Quality of workmanship will certainly be one factor in the voter's selection, but accuracy or originality will not necessarily matter that much. Also, some colors, such as Red, Healey Blue, or the darker shade of British Racing Green are more numerous so they don't stand out as much as less common colors such as Pacific, Florida, or Spruce Green, the early more yellow shade of British Racing Green, Primrose, or Golden Beige Metallic (not to mention Coronet Cream on some 100s). And Healeys also look stunning in other paint colors such as Aston Martin light metallic green (also used on the four pre-production development 100s that ran in the 1953 Le Mans race and other European rallies), Golden Beige Metallic (a late BJ8 color that was not available on earlier Healey models), and many other colors used on foreign and domestic autos over the decades. Non-silver painted wire wheels (used on Jaguars and other British marques, including Healey 100S models) can also have a very positive visual effect.

And if cars in these more unusual colors (but still original, on certain Healey models) also have well done trim, they create an even stronger attraction for receiving votes. In fact, at the extreme, a carefully-done car in an eye-catching combination of non-standard colors of paint and trim can easily stand out, to its benefit.

Thus, you could have the most accurately and perfectly restored car entered in Popular Choice and not even come up with third or fourth place, depending on how many other really nicely done cars are entered in your class, and the color combinations they are finished in.

Concours, on the other hand, focuses attention on originality as well as quality of restoration. However, even this venue for judging comes in at least two "flavors". Throughout America, car shows are held throughout the summer, and many of these include a Concours judging. These shows typically are multi-marque -- some may be all-British, some including only foreign marques, and some for anything with wheels that often have a contingent of custom hot rods as well as a few antiques from the early days of motoring (1900 through 1930s).

It is extremely difficult for judges to know much about details of such a wide array of vehicles. Even at just British marque shows, you can recognize a wide range of variation among how Jaguar, MG, Triumph, Morgan, AC, Aston Martin, and Austin-Healey cars were engineered and constructed.



A few of the big Healeys on display at the Popularity Show at Rendezvous, held near Jackson, CA in 2010.

And if you limit your class of cars to consist of ONLY Austin-Healeys, when you consider the differences between BN1s, BN2s, BN4s, BN6s, 3000 Mk Is (BN7 and BT7), Mk IIs (roadsters/tri-carbs and convertibles), and Mk IIIs (which entail both Phase I and Phase II BJ8s), there are few people who are expert enough to appreciate and recognize correctness of the various details they could be judging.

This situation can only be more challenging with cars built in France, Sweden, Germany, Italy when compared with those from England and the USA.

The result is that judging in multi-marque shows cannot be expected to be either thorough or accurate and, depending on the show, judging may evolve to become more of a white-glove inspection, with the results likely not a true reflection of how accurately a car was restored.

The Healey Concours program, which is independent of any Austin-Healey Club and run by a committee comprised of knowledgeable Healey enthusiasts from across North America, has been established with these objectives:

- 1) create a common standard by which the cars are judged.
- 2) provide some reference information for owners and judges to use when evaluating the correctness of a given item.
- 3) establish deduction amounts that are weighed 60% for correctness and 40% for condition of an item.
- 4) establish award levels of Gold, Silver, and Bronze for cars scoring 95, 90, or 85 points out of a maximum of 100, instead of 1st, 2nd, etc. place. This award format was selected to recognize that multiple cars may all be restored to a very similar level where it is really not fair to recognize just one with the first place.

We encourage owners to drive their cars (for example, a credit is allowed to replace the point deduction for having radial tires if the owner has driven a certain amount within a time period prior to the judging), and overlook incidental dust and paint dings on a car driven to the event.

Typically, there will be different teams that judge 100s,

6-cylinder roadsters, and convertibles, because of the recognized significant differences between these models.

This Concours program has been in existence since 1990, when the first judging using the current system was conducted. Because of the need for sufficient qualified people to serve as judges, Concours evaluations whose results qualify for Gold, Silver, or Bronze certificates are often held only at major Healey events such as Rendezvous or the AHCA Conclave.

What all This Means

To summarize, Popular Choice show selections are really subjective, reflecting what catches the viewer's eye (though winning cars do also reflect excellence in workmanship). Concours, on the other hand, is more objective with focus on originality (to the way the cars were produced and sold when new) as well as quality and craftsmanship in the restoration.

For those who don't achieve Gold in Concours judging, receiving Silver or Bronze can still be quite valuable. First, you usually will also receive a list of items to address if you wish to improve your score in the future. And second, while you may receive significant deductions for deviations from originality, after reviewing what each deduction was taken for, you will still be able to assess your restoration from a quality perspective and might well discover that it is indeed to very high standards.

On the other hand, it is important to realize that Popularity shows reflect subjective preferences, and owners of cars that have invested much effort in restoring them accurately as possible may not (and this is often the case) receive the recognition they would like to expect. Putting the nature of different types of car shows in the proper perspective can allow you to enjoy participation much more and minimize any disappointment you might feel afterwards when all you return home with is your beautiful car.

Finally, the more originality that you can preserve, the more ownership becomes a time-machine experience!

