



Skinner's Trim

James Page visits John Skinner (Manufacturing) Ltd

Skinner's Cheltenham premises are a pleasing mix of old and new. In one part of the building stands a gleaming CNC machine; in another, a 1940s Singer sewing machine is still going strong. All around is reference material that enables them to produce trim for a variety of marques – folders, books, patterns, plus a 'library' of old seats and panels.

It's all been built up over the course of more than 35 years. John Skinner began trading in spare parts as a hobby, which stepped up a gear when he helped with an 'Aladdin's Cave' of Jaguar, Triumph and MG spares that had been bought by Steve Barrett. The tooling cost to reproduce most of those items was prohibitively expensive – apart from those for interior trim.

Skinner began with Triumph trim, forming a relationship with Peter Gould's British Auto Interiors in the USA. At that time, no one could produce Jaguar Mk2 door panels with the original-type high-frequency welded patterns, but it was a process with which Skinner had experience thanks to his TR work. That led to him producing Mk2 tooling, before Gould asked him to do the same for the E-type so that Skinner could supply him with panel blanks. From there, John's company expanded into the XK range, S-type, MkX, XJ and XJS, and can now supply everything from sunvisors and individual panels to carpets, seat coverings and complete trim kits.

The day-to-day running of the business is handled by John's son, Jonathon, who has acquired an encyclopaedic knowledge of trim colours, types and patterns. This proves vital when dealing with classic cars that feature myriad detail differences.

"With the E-type, we're happy that we've seen pretty much everything that came out of the Jaguar factory," he says, "although I say that with a pinch of salt because they were so inconsistent. For the Series I½ and Series II, we send out a little questionnaire. We ask if the trim is original, as far as they're aware. A lot of owners think it is but it's not, so we ask what the material is in a particular area: Series I 4.2 roadsters use moquette on the back of the seat and the wheelarches; for the Series II, they mainly switched to vinyl – or Rexine, as they referred to it. On the



- Jonathon Skinner has taken on the daily running of his dad's company, and boasts vast knowledge of classic trim
- Skinner Snr started the business after initially catering for the Triumph market

Series I½, it's whatever they felt like on that day!

"On E-type fixed-heads, they had three different types of quarter-panel behind the B-posts. Depending on what the quarter-panel was, they then had two different types of the bit connecting that to the side casing. A lot of people don't realise all these changes that happened, so we ask them to send photos."

Jonathon is fastidious about getting every detail correct, and will go to great lengths working with owners to ensure that the results are spot-on: "We do everything to original spec in terms of

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materials and colours, but if someone wants something slightly bespoke we can cater for it. The main thing we do is change colours – either the whole thing or piping. That's very popular.”

The issue of matching colours can cause its own headaches: “Vinyls, leathercloths and leathers all need to be a good match to each other because a lot of seats are what we call leather-faced – vinyl surrounds with leather face. From batch to batch, the colour changes slightly. Also, ‘original colour’ can be a very loose term. We had a guy with a Mk2 that had its original trim. He took off the left-rear door and the front-right door, put them on the table and you wouldn't have believed the difference. So he had a conundrum – what do you match it to?”

Over the years, however, various non-original solutions have presented themselves. Jonathon unpacks an E-type headliner with the cloth pre-bonded onto a thin foam; originally these two elements would have been separate. “We can supply that,” he says, “but you're doubling the time – you have to glue up the foam, then glue up the union cloth, which is so thin that you have to use a proper contact paste adhesive. One, you're there all day. And two, if you put on too much adhesive, it blotches through. This is lovely and smooth, it stays up there for ever and it takes two seconds.”

Then there's the question of seat material, Jonathon laying out grained and smooth leather: “The majority of E-types left the factory with smooth leather seats, and we can offer both. Nine times out of 10, people go for grained. Smooth is natural, whereas grain is something that's added, but it's cheaper. Automotive companies began to realise that if there's grain, you can get away with using more leather because it covers things – creases, scuffs, etc.

“We explain the pros and cons. Until it gets used, smooth looks beautiful – and it's original. But practicality-wise, after five or 10 years the driver's seat looks terrible and the others look hardly used. With grained leather, that happens too but it's nowhere near as obvious.”



Prices vary, with carpet sets starting at £210, seats from around £625 for a pair of covers, and complete trim kits ranging from £1800-3500 depending on model and spec (all prices exc-VAT). Jonathon points out that it's cheaper to buy a kit than all of the items individually. Firstly, though, it's important to establish exactly what it is you're working with, which is where that expertise and careful questioning comes in useful. “E-type

- *Headlining with bonded foam backing makes installation a lot easier*
- *Jonathon with rear quarter-panels for E-type – he works closely with owners to ensure they're ordering the correct parts*
- *Jonathon shows how the firm produces genuine pleats in its seats*



3.8-litre roadster 'bucket' seats are a different shape because they had to contend with the hood coming over," he says. "A fixed-head seat will not fit into a roadster because you'll hit it with the hood frame. But you can do the opposite – a roadster seat will go into a fixed-head, and Jaguar sent out quite a few like that."

We walk between rows and rows of patterns and blanks, and at the far end of the building Jay Evans is fitting material to a hardboard blank that's been cut on the CNC machine. This is one of those jobs that is made to look deceptively easy by someone who truly knows what they're doing.

"It's like tuning a drum," says Jay as he operates the air-fed staple machine, regularly swapping sides rather than simply working his way around. "You work out from the middle – it starts to twist if you just go around one edge. It's all about getting the tension. Anchor it in place and get really good tension on it, then you don't get bagginess, even when you run your hand up it."

In no time at all, he's done, the finished article looking immaculate front and back – an important consideration for Jonathon and something that was drummed into him by his father. "If we fitted them to the car, you could get away with so much – it wouldn't matter what the back of the panel looked like because people wouldn't see it. But because we're making kits, we don't want someone to take it out of the bag and for it to look messy. Even if it takes us 30% more time, it sets a standard."

That ethos is applied everywhere, including the time-consuming business of pleats: "Some companies just sew a line down the material. We make a genuine pleat, so you cut the foam down, then score along the leather, then sew into that slit so it creates a groove. For every pleat, you have to factor that in."



Clockwise from top left

- *Smooth leather vs grained: the former is original, the latter more forgiving – and cheaper*
- *Jonathon with Series 3 carpets, complete with correct Velcro strips on the backing*
- *Precision work is carried out by one of Skinner's four skilled machinists*
- *Jay Evans working his magic with the staple gun, keeping the material as taut as possible*



It's an attention to detail that has served the company well as the classic market continues to remain strong: "Across E-type roadsters, fixed-heads and 2+2s, we did 50 kits a year a few years ago – last year we must have been close to doubling that. During the 50th anniversary in 2011, we sold more kits in the first two months than in the whole of the previous year!"

But Jonathon is by no means resting on his laurels. After moving premises a couple of years ago, he set about digitising the company's patterns to make use of that CNC machine: "We wanted to update our tooling and our patterns, and the CNC machine has brought huge efficiency improvements," he says. "All of our hardboard blanks are now cut on CNC. You can go four deep on them. Before, a guy would be on an old press and to do five pairs of doors – cutting them out, tidying them up – would probably take four hours. Now, in 13 minutes, I've got 20 pairs and they're



- Jonathon with some of the hardboard blanks that are created on the CNC machine
- Digitising the patterns should make the process more efficient than the current system of hand-written notes

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- *Jonathon operating the CNC machine, an acquisition that is transforming Skinner's business*
- *If the CNC machine represents the future, this 1940s Singer maintains a link with the past*

millimetre-perfect. It's incredible what this machine has done for us."

Having digitised the panel blanks, the same process is being applied to the material patterns. For the time being, these remain resolutely old-school, with hand-written notes plastered across them.

"All the material stuff is still hand-cut," says Skinner. "The patterns that we trace round and cut out, basically me and my father are the only ones who truly understand what's written on them! As soon as someone tells us something and we look into it, a note goes on there. And now there's 35 years of different notes - 'From June '63, it was this...' and so on."

All of which has worked well in the past, but it means that, if someone has a question, they have to ask either Jonathon or his dad. So, Jonathon's fiancée Lucy is in the process of digitising each pattern and its notes. "It means that everyone will have a guide that they can refer to," says Jonathon. "I'm getting everything that I've learnt down, plus everything that's on the patterns, and I'm draining my father of everything he knows so that we can put it into work manuals. It means that they can just get on with it."

With Skinner Snr still acting as 'technical advisor', his wife Judy helping with the accounts and Jonathon's sister Joanna lending her administrative skills, not to mention Lucy's efforts, this is still very much a family business - but it's one that's grown to an extent that it sends kits all over the world. Not bad for something that started as a hobby.



• A huge range of samples is kept to give owners an idea of colours and materials



ABOUT US

- Over 35 years experience
- Original specification patterns & tooling
- Informative new website
- Quality materials
- Full interior kits & individual parts
- Custom specifications available
- Samples on request

MODELS

- Open Two-Seater (OTS)
- Fixed Head Coupe (FHC)
- Two-plus-Two Coupe (2+2)
- Jaguar XK & Saloon models catered for

As recommended in The E-Type Club Magazine feature articles

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