



# SKINNER

## the Trimmer

by James Page

Even after 35 years, John Skinner (Manufacturing) Ltd is still very much a family business. John's son Jonathon now takes care of its day-to-day running, but Skinner Snr acts as "technical advisor" and his wife Judy helps with the accounts. Jonathon's sister Joanna lends her administrative skills, and his fiancée Lucy is currently working on a process of digitisation, of which more anon. In their hands, it's grown to the extent that it sends kits all over the world – the US, Canada, Germany, Japan; one XK kit has even been delivered to an owner in Lebanon.

Not bad for something that started as a hobby. John Skinner began trading in spare parts alongside his day job, but 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 costs 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 XJ-S, and can now supply everything from sunvisors and individual panels to carpets, seat coverings and complete trim kits.

Via his father and his own hard work, Jonathon has acquired an encyclopaedic knowledge of trim colours, types and patterns. This proves vital when dealing with classic cars that feature myriad detail differences.

- Jonathon shows how the firm produces genuine pleats in its seats
- A front seat cover kit for an XK 140 OTS, in Matador Red, using leather, moquette and vinyl



“With the XK kits, it’s like Jaguar were finding their feet,” he says, “so there are a lot more inconsistencies with them. It wasn’t so much that they changed materials, it was shapes. By the time they got to the XK 150s, they weren’t too bad, but the XK 120s can be a nightmare, especially the ones that there aren’t many of, such as the fixed-head.

“Then there’s the fact that, part way through XK 140 production, they switched from the XK 120-style ‘square front’ centre cushion armrests to the XK 150’s ‘round front’ version. And on the XK 150, they changed from round heaters to square midway through. This drastically altered the shape of the carpet set clutch-housing area, as well the under-dash panels. Even the shape of the seats changed. For fronts, it could be tubular or flat; for rears, they could use flat or round front edges.”

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 had a chap in Denmark with a fixed-head XK 120, and we sent a Biscuit kit to him. He said that it was great but the door panels didn’t seem to fit. The best thing was for him to make us some templates – the driver’s side fitted perfectly, but the other one didn’t. The templates were a mirror image, but one side of his car was different from the other! These are the inconsistencies that we come across.

The issue of matching colours can cause its own headaches, too: “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 surround 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 front-right door panels, put them on the table and you wouldn’t have believed the difference. So he had a conundrum – what do you match to?”

The firm does everything to original spec in terms of materials and colours, but it can cater for people who’d like something a little



- *Smooth leather vs grained: the former is original, the latter more forgiving – and cheaper*
- *Precision work is carried out by one of Skinner’s four skilled machinists*



bespoke: “The main thing we do is change colours – either the whole thing or piping. That’s very popular. We’ve done an XK 150 kit in white but, even though we didn’t at the time, from now on we’ll have to add a surcharge! Firstly, we use white chinagraph pencils to mark everything out. Black pencils smudge everywhere, so we had to mark everything on the back of the leather, which makes it hard to see faults on the other side. You were checking everything first, turning it over, then you had to remember to turn the patterns upside-down – the levels of concentration to double-check everything! It looked stunning when it was done, though. It was a fixed-head with a British Racing Green exterior, and the interior had green piping.”

Then there’s the question of seat material, Jonathon laying out grained and smooth leather next to each other: “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.”

Price-wise, XK front seats will cost from £685 (for a pair of covers),





with carpets starting at £315 and complete trim kits from £2200.

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."

The equipment is 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,

## From left

- Digitising the patterns should make the process more efficient than the current system of hand-written notes
- Library of reference material includes original material for the entire XK range
- Jonathon with some of the hardboard blanks that are created on the CNC machine

books, patterns, plus a 'library' of old seats and panels. After moving premises a couple of years ago, though, Jonathon set about digitising the company's patterns to make use of that CNC machine.

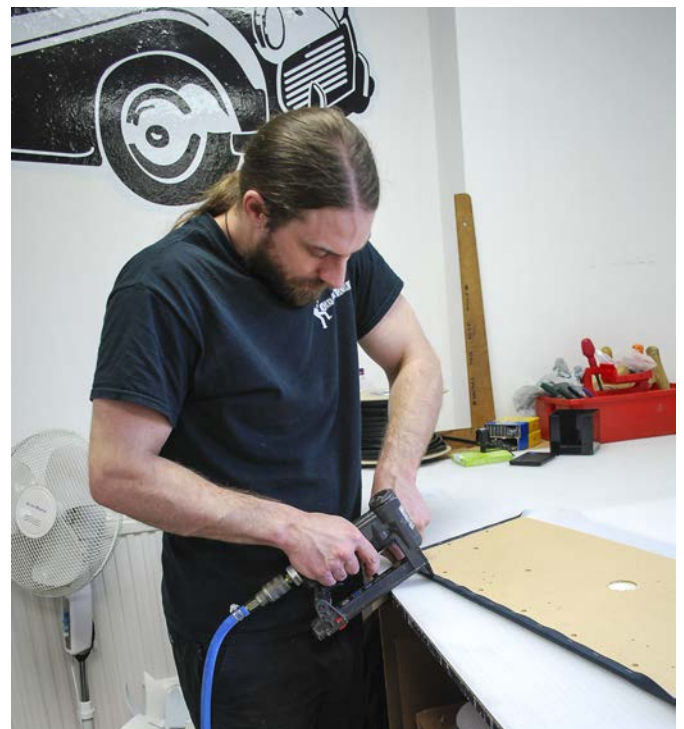
"We wanted to update our tooling and our patterns, and the CNC machine has brought huge efficiency improvements," he says. "All of our hardboard blanks are now cut on CNC. You can go four deep on them. Before, a guy would be on an old press and to do five pairs of doors – cutting them out, tidying them up – would probably take four hours. Now, in 13 minutes I've got 20 pairs and they're 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. And what the patterns are made out of depends on how often they're used. Those for fixed-head XK 120s, for example, are still paper because they do so few of them. "As they get more recent," says Jonathon, "they get better and better because we do so many of them! This is what we're all digitising."

"All the material stuff is still hand-cut," he continues. "The patterns



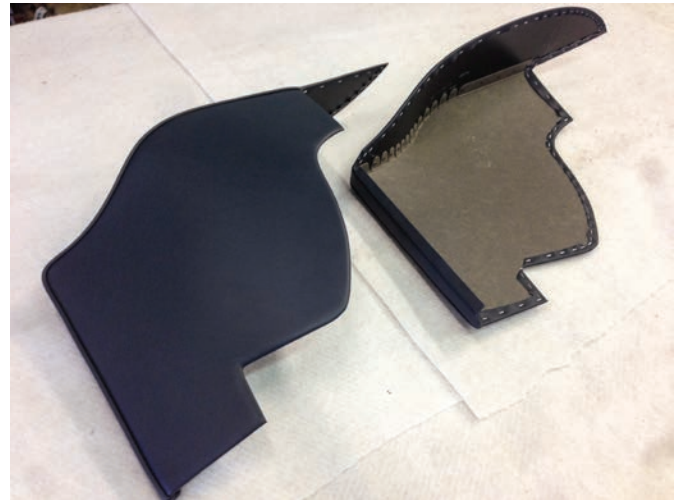
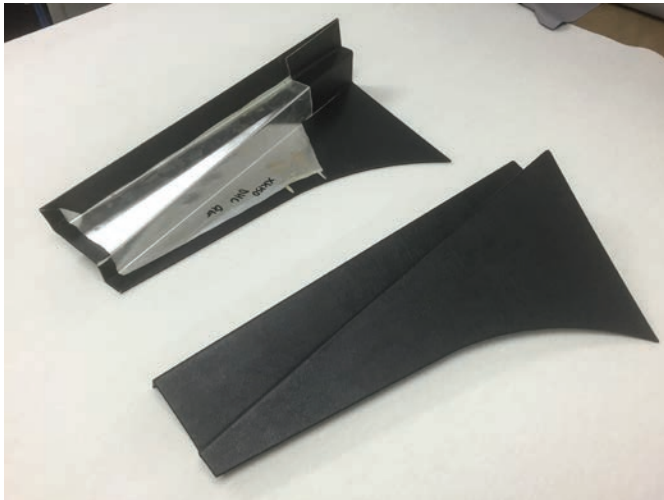
- Jonathon operating the CNC machine, an acquisition that is transforming Skinner's business
- If the CNC machine represents the future, this 1940s Singer maintains a link with the past



- Jay Evans working his magic with the staple gun, keeping the material as taut as possible



# SKINNER the Trimmer



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."

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, 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."

That blend of traditional know-how and modern efficiency should ensure that the company will comfortably chalk up another 35 years doing what it does best.

## Clockwise from top

- Downstairs at the two-storey premises serves as the storeroom, with many different types of material ready to go
- A huge range of samples is kept to give owners an idea of colours and materials
- B-post wheelarch quarter-panels for the XK 150 FHC are vinyl-trimmed millboard
- Jonathon Skinner has taken on the daily running of his dad's company, and boasts vast knowledge of classic trim
- Quarter-panels for the XK 150 DHC B-post – the metal panels are trimmed in vinyl

