

THAT SOMETHING EXTRA • No.

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DERRINGTON

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In this series of articles Peter Garnier talks to the men behind the performance and conversion business

SO far, the previous nine instalments in this series have dealt with tuning establishments that have come into being in the last 20 years or so, to meet what most of us regard as an essentially post-war demand. In fact, the bloods of the 'twenties were just as anxious as today's to imbue with "that something extra" their 10/23 Talbots, Amilcars, Salmsons, Austin 7s, Bentleys even, and later, their various M.G.s starting with the M and J2 Midgets. As often as not they would take them along to a Mr. Derrington's premises at Kingston-upon-Thames, either there or to Thomson and Taylor's at Byfleet; there wasn't much choice apart from these two. Derrington would raise the compression ratio from around 5 to 1 perhaps to a dashing 6 or even 6.5, which was all the 68-octane pump fuel could countenance. He would also match and polish the ports, polish the cylinder heads and valves and smooth away casting marks, much in the way they do nowadays, though perhaps not quite with the same degree of science.

Vic Derrington started in the motor cycle business at New Malden, back in April of 1919, tuning bikes for his racing customers and racing them himself at Brooklands. So far as the "bolt-on goody" trade was concerned, he was more or less pitchforked into it when the inhabitants of Weybridge were granted a High Court injunction against the use of unsilenced vehicles on the Brooklands track in 1922. To meet the demands of his motor cycle customers he began producing the regulation Brooklands silencer, first in sheet metal, then (because it split) as an aluminium casting (he still has the patterns). By the time the old track closed once and for all at the outbreak of the 1939 war, Derrington had produced something like 90 per cent of the Brooklands silencers in existence, a matter of thousands.

By August of 1926 the combination of the motor cycle business and the quickly increasing numbers of customers on four wheels was becoming a bit too much for the New

Malden premises, so Derrington upped sticks and established himself at Kingston. He, too, soon advanced from two wheels to racing a San Sebastian Salmson (which is still preserved at Kingston), via the inevitable three-wheeled stepping stone provided by Morgan. Apart from the Bentleys and other machinery in which customers used to engage in competitive motoring at weekends, there began to appear for tuning in his workshops some very unsporting family saloons belonging, in exactly the same way as do most of the modified family saloons of the present time, to doctors and other reliable citizens in search of added performance. There's nothing new, is there?

By 1928 the business was in full swing, producing two-carburettor conversions for cars with one, downdraught conversions for cars—notably Armstrong Siddeleys—with updraughts. By now a brisk trade was developing in bolt-on extras of a type very different from those sold today, things which one regards nowadays as a bit phoney, though in their time they were all the rage... bonnet straps, wire mesh headlamp and radiator grilles, dummy knock-off hub caps, quick-action fuel filler caps, aero-screens and so on. All of these had their place legitimately enough on the competition cars of the day, but not perhaps on the Morris Cunards and Hillman Aero Minxes that used to lug them around the roads by the hundredweight! Never mind, it was good for trade; and aero-screens continue to be a good "line" right up to the present time. Derrington have sold around 80,000 of them and still they go at the rate of 50 a week, 24 of which are exported to the States. At Kingston they even have the catalogues for all these fittings—Geoffrey Taylor's "Alta" cylinder heads and remote control gear-change conversions, Ashby "Brooklands" equipment which included the much-sought-after Ashby steering wheel with its sprung spokes and moulded rubber rim.

Derrington still, to this day, receive requests from owners



for information on tuning—even supercharging—such museum pieces as M-type, J2, and P-type M.G. Midgets and Wolseley Hornets. To these they reply that the best treatment for such cars is to strip and rebuild them with loving care and restore them as nearly as possible to their original state. M.G. J2 Midget crankshafts, notably a weak point with their two main bearings, are much in demand even now, and Vic Derrington tells the story of a rag-and-bone merchant who called a few years ago at his premises. "Got some crankshafts 'ere," the man said. "Oh," said Derrington, "well, I don't want them."

It turned out that they were J2 Midget crankshafts, all 24 of them, and brand new; so they were snapped up. More recently, the firm received a request from a customer for assistance and advice in building a special based on a 1935 Austin Ten. He was aiming, he went on to explain, at a cruising speed of 90 and a top speed in excess of 110, from

what must have been one of the woolliest and least tunable engines ever produced! You see life in this tuning game!

Since the war, of course, as with every other firm in the business, the making and purveying of tuning equipment has advanced apace, and grown to very sizeable proportions since it had a well established stepping-off point from the pre-war days. Their job is to supply parts all over the world, multi-carburettor conversions of many types, exhaust manifolds, light alloy cylinder heads, anti-roll bars, and goodness knows what else for most British makes and several Continental. They supply exhaust manifolds to Carroll Shelby in California for his A.C. Cobras and Cooper-based King Cobras; they also supply them to Mickey Thompson, and for the Ford Falcon engines used in the Sunbeam Tiger . . . and, with the single exception of Ferrari, to almost every racing car manufacturer. Each year Derrington himself spends two or three months in the States, 75 per cent of the total business being overseas and 50 per cent of it in America.

As well as the San Sebastian Salmson, and a one-owner A.B.C. horizontal air-cooled twin, cars in the Kingston workshops include one from Hongkong and another from Portugal, both sent along for rebuilds. Then there is the mobile workshop, an Austin motor coach, suitably modified, and fitted with the big 4½-litre Austin transport engine also used in the Princess and Jensen at one time. This is no standard chore-horse, but tuned like everything else in the place; three-sixteenths off the head, light alloy pistons in place of the cast iron, three S.U. carburettors in place of the single Zenith, and a straight-through exhaust system. Originally it did 8 to 9 m.p.g.; now it does 12, and in a much more agreeable manner.

Like all such firms, it is not the more glamorous racing preparation that earns the bread-and-butter but the steady sales of modified cylinder heads on an exchange basis, the stacks of grey, metal-sprayed exhaust manifolds for almost any car you care to mention, the anti-roll bars, the twin-carburettor conversions and so on . . . and the polished aluminium, wood-rimmed steering wheels that take the place of the old Ashbys and which have so far sold to the States to the tune of £5,000.

