

Surrey-top SPITFIRE

Nigel Cox's Spitfire restoration was complete, but lockdown gave him an idea...

I first restored this Spitfire when I was 16. My parents bought it for me as an unfinished project, and with help from my dad and my brother, I restored it to a high standard. All of the underside, including the arches, was body colour (it was blue then), sitting on a white chassis. It really was a head turner.

Some 28 years later, in 2013, the car was starting to look a little tatty. I knew underneath the flaky paint and surface rust that it was a good car, but I had a decision to make – whether to restore it or to sell it. That really wasn't a difficult choice.

Having just started a family and with limited space, I tackled the project in stages, working from the bottom up. I spent one full summer cleaning and painting the underside, then stripping, cleaning, painting and rebushing all of the suspension components and replacing the universal joints and brakes for good measure.

The following summer it was time to get stuck in on the bodywork. I stripped the car bare in order to prep and prime between my driveway and garage, before transporting the car to my parent's house where I could spray the top coats in their garden.

I also took the opportunity to swap the MkIII bonnet for a MkI unit that I had obtained in good order. That meant fabricating double skinned steel brackets to allow the earlier bonnet to mount to the later chassis, but with early overriders and round lights, it's a look I prefer and was well worth the effort. A previous owner had cut holes in the bonnet, so I opted to fit a pair of vents that, along with a Dolomite Sprint radiator and homemade cowl, help to keep the engine cool in the height of summer.

Once the car was painted, I spent all winter slowly and methodically reassembling it, replacing rubbers, tidying up the wiring loom and re-trimming the boot. I pulled the engine top end apart, and overhauled the carbs. I also re-fitted a cam belt conversion kit that I'd designed and manufactured as part of my undergraduate dissertation at university.

While refitting the cam belt, I noticed rather too much end float in the crankshaft for my liking. I dropped the sump and



changed the thrust washers with the engine in situ. It was a somewhat fiddly job, made worse by the fact that two of the threads in the aluminium sealing block stripped and required helicoiling before the sump could be refitted. Not the most enjoyable job to undertake on your back with minimal room... or light.

Keeping busy

With the car finished, MOTed and running well, I was thoroughly enjoying using it – then came 2020. As the first lockdown hit, I knew that I would need a project to keep me busy while the world ground to a halt.

For a long time, I'd wanted to create a 'Surrey' top for the car in the style of those fitted to the TRs. A spare, tatty, hard top in the corner of the garage was to make the perfect basis. I'd seen other attempts at Surrey tops on Spitfire MkIVs, but never an early roundtail. Having studied the TR Surrey top extensively, I recognised that the rear section would need to be no higher than the top of the windscreen frame, and I should retain a curved profile with extended gutters in keeping with the era.

Fortunately, I'd fitted MkIV door to my car, so re-fitting them with the square cornered MkIV windows was a straightforward way of ensuring the door windows would meet the Surrey top sections neatly. I created several cardboard/metal templates before committing to the final profile, using a wooden jig to assist with welding. I brought the roofline back towards the rear window as far as I dared in order to keep the finished height below that of the windscreen.

Although it's not quite finished, I'm delighted with the overall look as well as the execution, and think that it hits the brief of looking as if it was a factory option. I just hope that PC readers will agree! ■

AS FOUND



Nigel's Spitfire had suffered from 28 years of use, so a second restoration, facelift and colour change beckoned.



Smart

Cosmic alloys look the part while MkIV doors and a MkI bonnet combine not to make a 'bitsa', but a greatest hits album of which Nigel can be proud.

Surrey top

The removable roof panel won't fit in the car, so Nigel fashioned a folding mid section from a MkIV convertible hood and frame that folds neatly into the boot ready for, well, a rainy day.

Cam belt mod

This cam belt kit was designed for Nigel's university dissertation. The first attempt, as he pushed for the dissertation deadline, was a couple of degrees out, an issue he resolved by having the holes redrilled to ensure perfect valve timing when it was refitted.

TIME TAKEN

(YRS)
4

EST. COST

(£)
2k

BEST TIP

'Break tasks down into bite sized chunks and try not to start to many at once to avoid being overwhelmed.'

Practical Classics Restorer of the Year

Nigel is entered into the Restorer of the Year competition. You can vote for your favourite restorer in a future issue of Practical Classics magazine.