

MARTIN GURDON

It's funny how cars can impact on people's lives



There's a whole generation of car owners who are missing out on an element of motoring culture – the backstreet expert.

Their modern tin boxes rarely go wrong and need nothing but replacing hard parts and keeping fluids topped up.

Older cars of the sort that will never trouble the pages of this magazine are much the same, and tend to be found outside vehicle accessory supermarkets. Somehow, being served by a gangling boy with a bobbing Adam's apple at a branch of such places doesn't quite fit the bill.

Today's classic car owners are often similarly deprived. Plenty of specialists supply all sorts of things, but the internet frequently makes the transactions remote and impersonal, which means the sometimes slightly batty encounters that were once features of old car ownership are missed.

Interviewing people for the back page of this magazine was the inspiration for this train of thought. Many had taken part in hairy-sounding rallies in what was once lazily called the 'third world'. They encountered artisans working in basic conditions British car owners of 40 or 50 years ago would have found familiar. They could fix or fabricate parts from stuff that over here would probably now be seen as junk.

Rewinding 25 years, I remember a workshop in Twickenham that rebuilt electric motors, which my dad had discovered during the Sixties. In the Eighties the place was still going strong. Operating from gloomy, connected Victorian brick archways, whose ancient pale green paint was layered with decades of muck and lit by gloomy strip lamps, the place was run by cheerful middle-aged-to-elderly men. It had a unique industrial

With classic car parts available online, is part of the charm of dealing with independent shops with 'independently minded' staff diminishing? Share your experiences at [Facebook.com/classiccarsmagazine](https://www.facebook.com/classiccarsmagazine)



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tang, a combination of swarf, grease, carbon and breath marinated by cups of hot, sweet tea.

When my 1966 Rover 2000's regulator died it was one of those tea drinkers who diagnosed the problem and sold me a replacement, and when the Rover 110 I owned briefly needed to have its starter motor completely rebuilt – it arrived there jammed and useless – it came back operating with a factory-fresh slickness.

I went back there recently, but it had closed – the workshops hidden behind heavily padlocked doors.

Located about a mile away, on a lane that led down to the River Thames and Eel Pie Island, there was a wonderful car spares shop.

Run by a small, cheerfully misanthropic biker with a round frame, large beard and an ironic, high-pitched voice, it was piled high with stuff. Stock control clearly didn't interest this man, who had bits of ancient British motorcycles, along with Triumph Herald headlamp cowls, hanging from lengths of string.

This was in the late Eighties, when the local roads were teeming with corporately thrusting types in Golf and Peugeot 205 GTIs, for whom car accessories were lumpy plastic bodykits and powerful aftermarket hi-fis.

But if you wanted something like an auxiliary switch or gaskets for an SU carburettor, the biker was the man to see, and his idea of customer service was straightforward. If people were okay, he'd bend over backwards to help, but if they were idiots, or he simply didn't like them, then they'd be treated with contempt.

A handwritten sign dangling over an incredibly cluttered counter, behind which he existed like a car spares alchemist, said it all: 'If you want to know the ins and outs of the cat's a*****e, ask a vet.'

Sadly, you can't ask him any more. The man, his sign and his precious stock are long gone too.