WHAT PRICE ORIGINALITY?

As I periodically meet my old Standard-Triumph friends for a 'jar' and a chat - the conversation often turns to the latest round of phone calls and letters we have received from enthusiasts.

Inevitably, these approaches are of a semi or full technical nature and focus on the 'grey' areas of why something ‘was done that way?’

Let me say at the very outset, we welcome these questions and are always more than willing to assist if we can. Often, one person can provide the definitive answer, sometimes it comes through consensus, but whatever the outcome, the reply usually seems to keep everyone happy - including the person who raised the matter in the first place.

There are, however, questions that periodically hurtle towards us for which there is no answer - or if an answer is proffered, the recipient rejects it. He or she is perfectly entitled to do that - we do (mostly) live in democracies, but this difficulty is not limited purely to Standard Triumph enthusiasts. It's seemingly endemic in the UK classic club scene and, I suspect, not just alive and well exclusively within our own shores.

While in no way wishing to be unhelpful or critical of any of these enquirers, I do have to say that some of the more earnest enquirers do find themselves being classified under the somewhat uncomplimentary heading of "anoraks." That’s a term we Brits use for what the Americans would refer to as ‘anally retentive’.

A Standard Nine of about the same period.

The other day, I had a phone call.

The caller himself spoke in a monotone, redolent of a Peter Cook and Dudley Moore sketch (two now moribund comedians with several examples of their humour on YouTube), that within less than a minute, had me almost at screaming pitch.

"Oh, hallo? My name is Septimus Gruntfuttock (or something equally unmemorable.) *“I am the very fortunate owner of a 1933 Standard Nine and I wondered if you could answer this question?"*

"I'll try, Septimus. What is it?"

"I would like to know why the timing chain cover on my 1933 Standard Nine is not the same as the timing chain cover on my 1960 Triumph Herald?"

"I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid I don't know. The Nine would obviously have sidevalve engine and the Herald is overhead”.

“You are correct. The Nine is a sidevalve engine.”

“Okay. Post war, the company did dally with modifying the old sidevalve unit and basically, all they did was to extend the valve pushrods up the former valve guides and, of course, they needed a new head.”

"Why would they do that?"

"I don’t think the company would have had much option."

Odd mutters from the other end. *"I'm afraid I don't agree with you. It's not the same engine because the oil filler on my 1933 Standard Nine is on the right hand*

side of the cylinder block, whereas that on the Herald is on top of the cylinder head. It occurs to me that this was done because the 'pourability' of engine oil had improved so much in the intervening years."

"No, I'm sorry. Most, if not all overhead valve engines usually have a topside oil filler. Oil 'pourability' had little, if anything at all to do with it. In any case, the Herald engine was a new post-war design and appeared in the early fifties".

"Not exactly true. The Jaguar 3.4 XK engine has an oil filler to one side of the cylinder head."

"That's because the Jaguar XK engine is a twin cam power unit and the oil is poured in through one of the two cam covers."

"Yes, but it's origins were the Standard two and a half litre six cylinder sidevalve and that also had the oil filler on the right hand side …"

"Because that engine was a side valve as well."

"Don't interrupt me, please."

We never did get to the end of it.

"There's another thing I need to ask you?"

"And that is?"

"It's now becoming quite difficult to find genuine original gasket sets for my 1933 Standard Nine."

"That's probably got much to do with the fact the car has been out of production for nearly seventy eight years."

"You don't understand what I'm driving at."

"Please tell me."

"My car is a 'new' original - and to achieve such status in the concours events in which I enter it, I have to use components that are either original or as close to original as possible. My interpretation of originality is such that if the original spares had a number stamped on them, the ones I use now should have the same number. If they are not present, I cannot offer my 1933 Standard Nine as an original motor car."

"I greatly doubt a concours judge is likely to insist you remove manifolds or a cylinder head to satisfy his or her curiosity during the judging programme."

"That's not the point. Can you tell me why the company did not ensure there were adequate stocks of parts available into the future so that these important judging criteria could not be accommodated?"

"No!"

It went on - and on - and on.

And all this brings me to the title of this article, "What price originality?"

Authors like Bill Piggott and John Thomason provide considerable information on the originality of post-war Triumphs - and more power to their elbows for doing this. However, it's pretty clear to me from the post I receive, that quite a large number of people are having sleepless nights. They are worried to the point of distraction about whether their Dzus fasteners were painted or plated from one model year to the next, or whether the fan belts of October built engines had Ferodo or Mintex stamped on them. Then, we move into the mountings for Aero screens and what pantone colour of engine paint was used?

Was it gloss black, semi gloss black, semi matt matt black or semi semi matt black - or was it red?

For heavens sake - these concours people are beginning to have a lot to answer for!

So what's the view of many of us former factory 'bods' on what is clearly a very emotive issue for many?

It's this.

A REAL Mini. This one's a Clubman

Firstly, we're delighted so many cars are still around to provide their current custodians with pleasure and enjoyment. That's the whole crux of the matter. The car was made to provide fun and pleasure.

Secondly, if a part isn't available that exactly meets original factory pattern, what the hell? So long as the available alternative is doing the job it's supposed to do, that's all that matters and while it's great to see an original restored car, this isn't necessarily always going to be the winner - in our book anyway.

Well, it might be - but for us, this is not a pre-requisite and it probably goes some way to explaining why we don't often find ourselves being asked to judge cars at club events.

Maybe it's because Club Organisers feel we might interpret our findings too literally and its clear from those I dealt with over the years that 'originality' falls into two distinct categories.

CATEGORY 1 cars

At the risk of being seen as unkind, Category 1 cars are usually owned by what we former employees refer to as 'the manic obsessives.' Simply, the car has to look exactly as the owner usually ***thinks*** it did as it came off the line. This means absolutely no modifications of any sort and this goes right down to using those ghastly wire hose clamps that knackered the average hose in a matter of months.

CATEGORY 2 cars

Are seemingly in the majority. They are generally cars that reflect a degree of 'personalisation' aimed primarily at making the cars more enjoyable to drive, more reliable when being driven (i.e. electronic ignition) and making use of later developments to enhance reliability (spin-on oil filter adaptors, enlarged brake discs and heftier callipers are usually at the top of the list). Then there are the audio-visual aspects of modified exhaust systems that sometimes include fabricated exhaust manifolds for improved scavenging and small power increases.

CATEGORY 3 cars

Are vehicles where owners slavishly endeavour to follow what they think the cars looked like when they left the factory. Too often, those same owners entirely fail in their resolves, with the result that their cars look totally over-restored and with a standard of paint finish that could only be replicated by a car on the factory stand at one of the international motor shows such as London, Paris, Frankfurt, Geneva or New York. None of those show cars was ever representative of the standard of finish of a normal production version.

In summary, all they have is yet another ‘ordinary’ Triumph that has very little to commend it in terms of interest because it is so plain, unadorned and just like thousands of others.

A few years ago, a former colleague, by the name of Arthur Simmings from the former Inspection Department, was asked to attend a local and fairly high-key club meeting. As Guest of Honour, he metaphorically ‘sang for his supper’ by being the definitive judge of all the cars that came to the event.

It was a lovely day, the sun shone, the cars came in their tens. Some were on trailers, many came under their own power (often at no more than 30mph) and one even arrived in a covered wagon. Before that was unloaded, Arthur said they all but vacuumed the field of sheep droppings in case the tyres were dirtied with the unmentionable.

After a great deal of puffing and panting on the part of various committee members, extensive use of cell-phones and highly confidential meetings behind closed tent flaps, Arthur was then given a clip board. On it, were various sheets of paper with all sorts of headings needing his undivided attention. After one trip down the line of awaiting cars, peering here and there under raised bonnets he burst out laughing when he found one owner using cotton buds to clean round push rod tubes, while another was wax polishing the spare wheel well. By the time he reached the end of the line, a club official asked him*, "do you want to go back now and eliminate the not-quite-so-successfuls?"*

"No, I'll not bother," came the reply*. "That blue Herald, halfway down is the winner."*

"But that's not even a restored car!" came the adamant reply*. "haven't you examined all the others whose owners have invested so much time and money to bring them back to Condition 1?"*

"No, I don't need to" said Arthur *"and I wasn't looking for a restoration. What I was searching out was a car that's been used, continues to be used and which obviously gives the owner pleasure. What's more, it's clear that very little work has been done to the car I've chosen since it was made - because it doesn't need it. Whoever owned it in the past looked after it. You people seem to forget that we didn't make them all those years ago to be dragged round the country on trailers, cossetted like premature babies in incubators and generally pampered. They were made to be driven."*

"But that Herald hasn't even had its front suspension cleaned up. It's filthy. Even the rear exhaust box tailpipe isn't pointing out horizontally!"

"Argh - I can see that," Arthur replied rather testily. *"Many of them that came off the line with exhausts like that. As for the dirt on the front suspenders, when yer drive through a cowpat, what you drive through has a habit of going into places you'd rather it didn't. But the car's genuine, the cowpat's genuine and where they come together is genuine as well. It's the winner in my book."*

Rumour has it that the family who had allegedly re-mortgaged their home to restore an alleged ex-London Motor Show TR to original show condition, was none too happy. Someone had tipped them the wink they'd be the winners and Arthur adamantly maintained no car ever looked like that TR as it passed through inspection.

As he later said, *"we never painted cars at the Standard where the paint finish looked two feet thick."*

And of course, he was right.

Is there a moral to this story?

Most certainly!

Give serious consideration before you ask any ex Standard-Triumph employee to judge your cars at a local, club, national or even international event. For us, originality within reasonable limits is fine but we don't argue the toss between concours and the many descending levels to ‘grot’. We don't get high blood pressure if the boot lid handle is fitted upside down or if the tool-roll has a non-standard jack or a pair of Walmart type pliers is contained within it. Equally, there's nothing wrong with a period radio that doesn't work and why hide a modern FM unit in AM clothes in the hopes that it won't get noticed. We'd much prefer to see a car walk off with the prize that has done 200 miles plus to an event, dents, scratches and all - rather than a better than showroom finish on a restoration.

What's more, if it came to a tie-break between the "1,000 miler, warts and all" and the "resto," we'd probably want to take both of them out on the road. If that sort of treatment sends the temperature gauge beyond normal limits or deposits unthinkable brake friction dust on highly polished wire wheels, tough!

So why all the fuss?

Try to remember the following two points if you’re the kind of person who likes to submit their cars as Concours eligible.

POINT 1. All those years ago, the car was made to be DRIVEN until it wore out. If it was junked at that point, so be it. However, many have been restored and that's great. But wasn't the original objective of the restoration to drive them again, rather than to let them be admired after tottering off a trailer and then later in the day, to return home to a warm cocoon and another fine day when they could once more be let out?

POINT 2. Certainly, in the United States, the term ‘Concours d’Elegance’ has been completely misinterpreted and in my humble opinion is a total misnomer and waste of time because it effectively ignores the original rules. At the very beginning of the twentieth century, international motoring events such as the Monte Carlo Rally, The Alpine Trial, the Liege Rome Liege and RAC Rally in the UK had a compulsory concours at the end, into which all participating cars were entered. The emphasis therefore was to (a) ensure you at least got a meaningful place behind the winner, and (b) you as the driver – or one of them, ensured the car in your care suffered minimal and ideally zero damage by taking part in the event just concluded. Clearly, the emphasis here was to fully participate in the event with a view to winning it if you could, but you at least did everything in your power to care for the car. Against that background, my thoughts are if you truly wish to participate in a Concours with your Triumph, or whatever car you drive, you drive the damned thing to the event – regardless of distance and don’t stuff it in a covered trailer, wrapped in cotton wool.

It seems to me that the "anoraks" on the classic car scene are now not just to be found at member level; some of them are now highly respected judges.

If that really is the case, God help us!

And all this probably explains why you rarely, if ever, see former factory people at club events in an official capacity.

It's clear the vast majority of UK clubs don't want them around because they apply different standards, upset the 'politics' and tread on too many very sensitive toes - and I know that I'm one of them!