Left to right: the dashboard was covered in non-orignal gaugues and switches before restoration; the seized engine had the wrong camshafts; the stripped body is transported to the paint shop

ME AND MY classic

It takes a brave man to restore one of Alfa's pretty-but-rare 1900 coupés. Marine engineer Robbie Webb had to face jungle snakes, a spiralling budget and eight years' hard work to save this one

WORDS: GRAEME HURST PHOTOGRAPHY: LYNDON MCNEIL

YOU NEED some serious mettle to restore a car. And I don't mean your ability to weld or spray paint. I'm talking about more critical stuff: personal traits that will help you see the job through (and vaguely within budget). Traits like resourcefulness, tenacity and being most persuasive. Oh, and being ready to tackle poisonous snakes in the jungle. You need to expect the unexpected.

That's what Marine engineer Robbie Webb learned when he restored his Alfa 1900 coupé. 'I was digging through a pile of parts in a garage in a small town in northern Malaysia and the owner told me to watch out for snakes: "Last week we found a deadly Taipan behind a pile of clutch plates," he said.' Not exactly a familiar experience for your average MGB restorer in Birmingham.

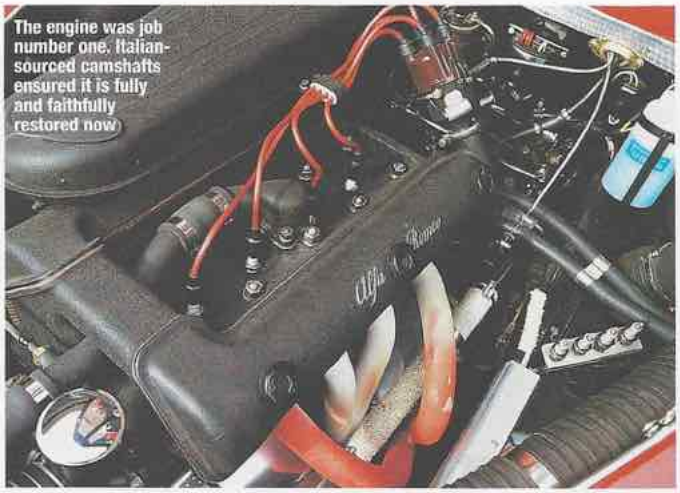
Webb's jungle antics were the result of a chance discovery in the Far East. 'While on business at a Malaysian foundry, I stumbled across this place with loads of original Alfa parts.' A rather surprising location for spares for a coachbuilt Italian car, but the stash was a hangover from the region's more prosperous past. 'The area had a lot of wealthy rubber tree farmers back in the Fifties and there was a market for expensive European cars.'

The find was a windfall for a restoration that required tenacity before it even began, after the deal on the first 1900 coupé Webb found fell through. 'The car was in Portugal and, after going through the hassle to see it and agreeing a price, the owner suddenly demanded more money.' Webb reluctantly agreed, only to discover, as he prepared to haul the car back to England, that he was in for another £500. 'I thought: This is never going to bloody well end.'

'LAST WEEK, WE FOUND A DEADLY TAIPAN SNAKE BEHIND A PILE OF CLUTCH PLATES'

Robbie Webb is proud of his work, and rightly so

Webb used an original factory diagram to recreate an authentic period dashboard



The engine was job number one. Italian-sourced camshafts ensured it is fully and faithfully restored now

1954 ALFA 1900C SUPER SPRINT BY TOURING OF MILAN

Engine 1975cc, dohc, four-cylinder in-line, two inverted twin-barrel carburettors **Power and torque** 112bhp @ 5900rpm; 108lb ft @ 3600rpm **Transmission** Five-speed column shift, rear-wheel drive **Steering** Worm and roller **Suspension** Front: independent, transverse arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar, telescopic dampers. Rear: rigid axle, trailing beams and Panhard rod, coil springs, telescopic dampers **Brakes** Drums front and rear, finned at front **Weight** 1050kg (2310lb) **Performance** Top speed: 118mph; 0-60: 14sec **Cost new** £3542 **Value now** £50,000

He walked away, but was smitten with these Touring-bodied coachbuilt Alfa coupés based on 1900 saloon chassis and mechanicals. 'I'd finished restoring an Alfa Montreal and was looking for a new project,' he recalls. 'I liked the look of the Touring 1900 and the fact it's rare.' That was back in 1985 and Webb put the word out in club circles that he was after one. Months later, the club register found one for sale: a 1954 Series 2 Super Sprint. Although complete, the body needed total restoration, following years of neglect and exposure to the elements, and the engine was seized. Just what Webb was after. Except it sold while he was on a voyage to the Far East. Determined not to lose out again, Webb persuaded the new owner to sell it.

Webb's coupé is the second of four from a series by the prestigious Milanese coachbuilder. And Touring wasn't the only design house to get its hands on Alfa's 1900 chassis. Pinin Farina produced elegant convertibles and Zagato made 40 curvaceously compact coupés. There were others too, including a rather staid version by Boneschi, a company better known for making Fifties coach bodies.

Webb's affinity for the mechanical bits meant the engine was the obvious place to start. 'I knew I'd be able to sort the parts easily and it was a way to see what I'd let myself in for, I guess.' The twin-cam engine, an all-new design for Alfa in the Fifties, needed the usual repertoire of new pistons, rings and bearings, but Webb's engineering skills helped identify less-obvious problems, such as incorrect camshafts. 'Super Sprints had special high-performance camshafts that gave an extra 12bhp. The ones on my car had standard profiles.' Correct items were sourced in Italy.

With his engine running and confidence boosted, Webb started stripping the body, which is built using the Superleggera (lightweight) principle of aluminium panelling over a light, tubular steel frame attached to a semi-unitary chassis. It's this construction method that allows for the 1900's pretty, almost sculptural shape reminiscent of Alfa's elegant 2500 6C.

Pretty or not, the shape hid some horrors on Webb's car: the sills and bases to the A- and B-pillars were rotten and, by the time he'd cut away the bad metal, little of the original areas remained. Webb fabricated repair sections, which he had professionally welded in place, although only after he'd drawn up detailed instructions. 'Each section had a drawing showing where, and where not, to weld.' The guys at the panel shop must have loved him.

Fortunately, the Superleggera tubing was sound, with the exception of the edges of the wheelarches, where the aluminium bodywork is rolled over a steel rod to give it strength – unlike the rest of the body, where tubing and bodywork are separated by felt pads. With moisture easily trapped between the two notoriously incompatible metals, electrolytic corrosion is common here. Getting the arches right was a challenge and Webb ended up cutting them out and welding in new stainless steel rods, before letting in new metal around the edges.

Top: the brake ducts were missing, but resourceful Webb fabricated his own
Middle: a time machine set for 1954...
Bottom: the door of a perfect replica of the period two-tone interior

He had the body finished in Rosso Matador, an original 1900 colour, for which he tracked down the recipe. 'I managed to get the actual paint code from the supplier.' It's not the car's original colour – he's subsequently discovered his 1900 may have been blue over grey – but it suits the car's sporting image.

A bonus of Webb's trawl through the Malaysian treasure trove was an original 1900 parts manual, which came in handy when he heard of other Alfa parts sources on his travels: 'I could give them a list of numbers for the parts I needed and ask them to see what they had.' The manual also helped resolve a suspension oddity. 'I couldn't understand why the track rods wouldn't adjust correctly, until I spotted two versions in the manual,' says Webb, who pulled rank at work to get the correct items made up. 'That was the great thing about my job. You could just drop the instructions off in the machine shop and the next morning, bang, the part's on your desk.'

The coupé's pretty two-tone interior was one area where the parts manual and Webb's professional role couldn't help, although a fellow 1900 owner on the continent did.

'The dashboard was full of holes for extra gauges and switches and I had no idea what was meant to be where.' His European contact lent him an original factory drawing of the dashboard, although wiring it up was a

HE ENDED UP SCOURING THE WORLD FOR PARTS

headache. 'The wiring was a right bloody mess and no one had a wiring diagram. In the end, I designed my own loom from scratch.' Webb's got a bit of a reputation in club circles for that sort of problem-solving ability, having deciphered the circuit diagram for the fuel injection on his Montreal, an area complex enough to terrify most enthusiastic restorers.

The rewiring was an opportunity to include a few safety upgrades, such as the rear indicators. 'They're not original, but Touring did include them on some cars.' Webb made his, which use Ferrari 250 lenses. 'That's probably what Touring did,' he jokes.

The vents in the rear side windows, a popular Touring trademark, are original. 'I saw a photo taken in the Seventies showing my car with them.' The resourceful Webb used the photo to estimate the size and position of the slits before making his own by heating a sheet of Perspex over a plywood mould.

Also missing were the car's aluminium brake ducts. 'They're designed to feed air on to the finned brake drums.' Webb borrowed a set and fabricated replicas from sheet aluminium.

He couldn't replicate all the missing bits, for example the spare Borrani wire wheel. That he found at a wheel specialist in Italy, although his fixation for detail meant it wasn't straightforward: 'I discovered that Borrani wheels are date-stamped, and ended up searching through hundreds of wheels to find one made in the same month as the car.'

External trim on coachbuilt cars is usually tricky to replace and Webb spent ages searching for bumpers. A badly rusted and dented set turned up in Sweden, although the £500 price tag (remember, this was the late Eighties) would make a MGB restorer seek medication.

Webb knew the set was his only chance to get the car looking right and a local chroming company put him in touch with a retired panel beater who refurbished bumpers in his garden shed.

After his wallet damage from the bumpers, Webb took no chances with the refurbishment of the bits he did have. 'I drew up detailed, exploded diagrams of all the parts for things like door locks,' he recalls. 'That way, there could be no dispute if any pieces of brightwork went missing while being re-chromed.' It was a no-nonsense engineer's approach to an area notoriously fraught with disaster.

Reassembly highlighted another frustration with coachbuilt cars: window and door seals, all rotten beyond use, were unique. Again, Webb's job on the high seas led to a solution. 'While out in Singapore, I heard about a rubber specialist who made that sort of stuff to order,' he recalls. Webb drew profiles of the rubbers he needed and the company extruded new seals. 'Including the tooling, I think it was around £1.50 per metre.' Try getting it done in the UK for even a hundred times that today.

There's a price to pay for such perfection, in this case, eight years of Webb's time. He reckons it was worth it. Twelve years on, his flawless 1900 coupé is a signature of an engineer's attention to detail, and proof that you can mix business with pleasure.

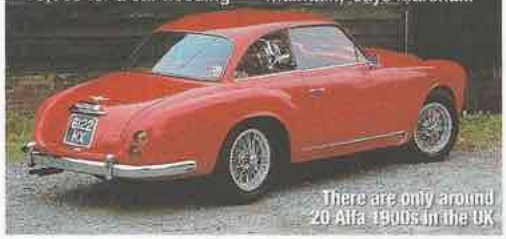
BUYING AND OWNING AN ALFA 1900 COUPÉ

ALFA 1900 coupés are rare. Although more than 1500 Touring-bodied 1900s were built, 'there are only around 20 in the UK today,' says Peter Marshall of the Alfa Romeo Owners' Club.

Auctions, particularly on the continent, are the best bet for restored cars, which typically sell for £40,000-50,000. The highly desirable Zagato-bodied versions go for £100,000 and more.

Clubs and websites are good sources for project cars, particularly in the USA, where the majority were exported new. Expect to pay £10,000-15,000 for a car needing total restoration. 'How complete the car is, is critical,' says Marshall. 'Things like instruments and chrome trim are unique to the coupés and very difficult to source.' The model's high value makes it feasible, if expensive, to have certain items fabricated. For example, a bumper costs £3000.

Mechanically, the cars are based on the straightforward 1900 saloon and, once set-up correctly, shouldn't cost any more than a Giulietta to run. Regular use helps. 'The more you use them, the less they cost to maintain,' says Marshall.



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Thanks to *Peter Marshall of the Alfa Romeo Owners' Club (www.aroc-uk.com)*