



Wheels arrive at Lepsons in all kinds of states, but unless hosed down to bare alloy state. From here kerbing and

THE WHEEL DIFFERENCE

In the world of alloy wheel refurbishment if it ain't properly broke, you can probably fix it. We take a look at what's involved.

It's hard to put a finger on just what it is about wheels that gets us car enthusiasts so excited. Say the words 'split rim' to a Porsche aficionado and you can almost see the shock in their eyes as their heart skips a beat.

Yet no matter how much pride you take in your wheels or how careful you are, sooner or later chances are they will get damaged, be it through kerbing, buckling, or that other killer of alloys, oxidation (where a chemical reaction between air and water causes the alloy to pit and the lacquer to peel away).

To see what could be done to rectify such damage we paid a visit to Lepsons, one of the UK's leading alloy wheel refurbishment operations.

Set up in 1994 by Tony Leffingwell in what was effectively a 400-square-foot garage the company has grown to the stage where last year it purchased its fourth facility, taking the total capacity of its Gillingham-based 19-employee operation to 10,000sq ft. "We are now at the stage where we work on around 100 wheels per day, which just goes to show the size of the market," says Tony.

What of the process itself though? Or, more precisely, what happens to your wheel when it is refurbished?

Once back to their original condition in their bare alloy through a process involving a two-stage wash, before



Words: Chris Knapman Photography: Max Earey



there are big chunks missing or there is major buckling they can usually be repaired. Following an acid bath wheels are other damage can be rectified, before they are sanded down and put on the lathe, ensuring that they are true, or straight

Tony's brother and general manager of Lepsons, Andy Leppingwell, explains: "The first thing that has to be done is, obviously, remove the tyre. We then have a facility where up to 60 wheels are soaked in acid to strip their lacquer. After this the wheels are hosed down and moved to the preparation facility."

"Once the wheel is back to its pure alloy state we check to make sure it is true, or straight, and then any cracks are built up with metal. This is important to us because it ensures the wheel keeps its original strength. Once any new metal is in, the wheel is sanded down and then finished on the lathe," Tony adds.

There are of course some wheels that are simply beyond help. Generally speaking these have big chunks missing or are buckled from the centre. Otherwise, whether it is a light kerbing or a flat spot on the back of the rim, the wheel can be brought back to life.

Once back to its original shape the wheel is hung on a production line ready for painting. Up to 110 wheels can be hung from this line, each undergoing the same series of treatments. Firstly, they are cleaned twice more, once with a soap rinse and once with water. They are then warmed in a pre-heat oven before a powdercoat primer is applied. The wheels then return to the oven once again, emerging to be painted either in standard silver or one of the three kinds of silver sparkle offered by Lepsons. After another trip to the oven the lacquer is applied before the wheels are baked for a final time. When completed, the finished item looks brand new.

The story doesn't end there though: as well as having your wheels restored to their original glory there is the option of a customised finish. Tony's 996 Carrera 4 (pictured) wears the perfect example of such a job. "These wheels have a shadow chrome finish for the centre section and a polished lip. As well as this we

can highlight different parts in a separate colour, or even colour-code the whole thing," he explains.

Over the years Porsches have worn some pretty pioneering wheels, none more so than the hollow-spoke Technologie-Rad design first seen on the 993 Turbo, and later on the 996. Andy explains: "The inside of the spokes on these can fill up with the acid from the stripper so we put custom valves in them to prevent this from happening. They can then be refurbished just like any other wheel. We can also do two-piece split-rims without a problem, but we don't do the three-piece examples because they are difficult to reseal which can result in leaks. If we weren't so busy we could develop a proper solution, but we simply don't have the time at present!"

It's easy to see why Lepsons is so busy. Not only do the finished products speak for themselves, but the company can also turn around a set of wheels in one working day. To this end it has a storage facility on site where customers can leave their cars while the work takes place. Combine this with the five Lepsons vans that collect and deliver throughout London and the Southeast, plus the raft of mail order and trade work that the company does, and it becomes clear just how big the alloy wheel business is. And the cost of all this? Incredibly it averages just £50 a wheel, meaning that for less than a fifth of the price that a new set from Porsche would cost you it is possible to have your existing rims brought back to their original glory ●

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state the wheels enter the painting facility. Here a production line can hold up to 110 wheels at a time, each one passing application of primer, paint and lacquer. Giant ovens bake wheels between stages, while the finished product looks as new

