

WHAT'S INVOLVED...?



Tony Leppenwell with a beautifully refurbished E46 M3 alloy



Lepsons even offer a collection and delivery service



Imperfections are removed using a lathe



Wheels emerging from the stripper



After stripping wheels are cleaned prior to painting



Powder coat primer being applied



Wet finishing of a restored wheel



Spin Doctors

Sorting scruffy alloys will transform a car, but what's involved with wheel refurbishing, and why should you have it done?

According to car traders the world over 'wheels and windows,' are what sells cars. And it's true – sparkling glass and immaculate alloys will instantly make a car look good. The windows are easy to sort, the wheels less so – especially if the lacquer's shot, there's corrosion and the rims are hideously disfigured as a result of kerb damage.

So what can be done, apart from paying top dollar for new replacements? And even that's not so easy, with some older wheels now impossible to get hold of. Well, the answer – according to wheel specialists Lepsons in Gillingham (01634 580582) – is pretty much anything from replicating original finishes, to polishing, custom paint finishes and even repairing cracks, straightening buckles and fixing blemished rims. The company has been refurbishing wheels for 11 years and reckon it gets to work on a staggering 25,000 wheels every year at its 10,000sq ft workshop. Director Tony Leppenwell and his brother Andy showed us around and explained some of the techniques used to bring new life to even the most ugly alloy.

Looks count

Andy told us that on the whole BMW wheels are pretty robust, and that 85-90 per cent of the wheels he sees are bought in for cosmetic work. "Most are simply beginning to look a little tired – either the

rims are badly graunched as a result of kerbing, or water's got under the lacquer and started to corrode the alloy underneath. All of this can be easily remedied. Having said that, we've seen cars as new as three days old – where the owner's hit a kerb. We get a lot of work via BMW main dealers, too."

Polished wheels, says Andy, present problems, because typically the metal reacts with the lacquer. There's little that can be done to prevent it and the best remedy is to re-polish them or offer customers the option of painting them instead. "Nine times out of ten that's what they will do," he says.

The only type of wheel that presents real problems is the two-piece BBS cross-spokes fitted to some older BMWs. These have polished rims with bolts running through the rim which are tightened on the back. Typically, this splits the lacquer and the only way round it is to either not lacquer them or paint them again.

As for repairs, there's little Lepsons can't do, from filling cracks to removing buckles and adding weld to the outer rim then re-finishing on a lathe to make those unsightly kerb scars disappear. The only buckle the company can't cure is when it's from the centre – where possibly a car's gone into a slide and hit the kerb side-on. Andy tells us he sees a lot of these where customers have bought them from an on-line auction without getting them checked out first. Here, a visit to a local skip is the only solution.

While you wait

A common worry, and indeed a reason why many owners shy away from having their wheels refurbished is the issue of how to get all four (or five) wheels worked on at the same time. At Lepsons, it isn't a problem because there's a special bay for cars on axle stands so you can have your wheels sorted while you wait. "As long as people get here very first thing, and are prepared to leave their cars with us all day – then we can turn them around in that time," says Andy. However, he admits that it's better if they can get there last thing the previous day so the wheels can be loaded into the stripper for an overnight soaking. Lepsons even sell tyres, making them truly a 'one-stop-shop'.

Eco-friendly stripper

So far so good, so let's talk more about the actual process itself. Once the tyres have been removed, the wheels are loaded into a hot stripper to remove all the dirt, paint and any lacquer. With the latest EU regulations, it's not like an old-fashioned acid-bath, but instead an eco-friendly benzol alcohol system. The wheels are then jetwashed.

This, of course, is where this kind of refurbishing differs from the mobile-type outfit who, by tackling only localised repairs and missing out on the baking process apply a quick fix, instead of stripping back and virtually starting again.



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THANKS TO:
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WHAT CAN AND CAN'T BE DONE

Can

- Straighten side-to-side buckles in the rim
- Re-weld cracks
- Smoothen graunched rim edges
- Re-finish steel wheels as well

Can't

- Fix wheels buckled from the centre
- Repair early BBS split-rim wheels

Taking care of your alloys

As well as fitting ribbed-edge tyres to prevent kerbing, there are other precautions you can take to preserve the appearance of your alloys. The best tip, says Tony, is to wash your wheels frequently with soapy water to remove brake dust, and to stay clear of products which employ strong acids which can flatten and eventually soften the lacquer. He specifically recommends Autoglym's Clean Wheels. He also likes Autoglym's Wheel Seal. You spray it on after you have thoroughly washed your wheels, so the brake dust clings to the product instead of the wheel surface itself and is therefore easier to wash off.

Once stripped every wheel is checked for trueness, distortion and any cracks or damage to the rims, welded up and skillfully refinished on a lathe.

The wheels go through a two-stage pre-treatment to clean them off before the surface is keyed. They then pass through a pre-heat oven before receiving a powder-coat primer. They are then cured again in a 200-degree Fahrenheit oven before being wet sprayed silver. After another spell in the oven, they are lacquered before returning for a final visit to the oven to be baked. As for those polished alloys, these are powder coated, the inserts are lathed off and then they are finished and lacquered.

Astonishingly, despite the time and huge attention to detail afforded to each individual wheel – the average cost of refurbishment is just £50. Obviously, the bigger the wheels and the more work involved, the more it costs.

Choosing the finish

Lepsons has a showroom of wheels displaying the variety of different finishes available, and while some

customers who are fanatical about originality will want the exact finish of their wheels replicated, others are more open to suggestion. "Most BMW wheels are flat silver, but we have got to know what every type of wheel should look like," confirms Andy. "We know, for instance, that an M5 ten U-spoke wheel should have a black chrome finish. There's not a wheel we can't do."

A popular finish at the moment, says Andy, is 'shadow chrome' – a stylish and somewhat understated smoked chrome effect. The company can also paint sections of the wheel in the exact colour swatch of the car's body colour – and this too can be particularly effective.

There's no doubt that having invested a lot of money in a car, it's worth paying a little more attention to the wheels. And, as Andy readily admits, it really can affect a car's value – and that's why a lot of customers get their alloys smartened up prior to selling. Just be sure not to cut corners, and get the job done properly. You know it makes sense ●

