

REINVENTING THE WHEEL

The combined expense of sourcing a set of well-worn wheels and then having them refurbished, can be a very cost effective alternative to buying new.

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Talk to anyone who's been modifying cars for a while and they'll tell you there are two decisions involved in the transformation of any project that are guaranteed to make or break it. The first is the colour. If you've been there you know how crucial making the right choice is, and how long it can take to decide. The second thing is finding the right set of wheels. Of course it's really all down to personal taste, but there's still some universal advice that we can give you: you don't have to (and nor should you) fork out 850 quid for a set of gappily-spoked, maximum diameter multi-fits, with Christmas cracker ultra low-profile tyres.

Internet auction sites and car owner forums are rife with sets of used alloys for sensible money, in need of little more than a spot of spit and polish to make them shine again. If you want to go super low budget and get your mitts grubby, you could try the polishing kits available on the same e-auctions.

With patience and a bit of elbow grease you can get a decent end result for the cost of a kit (around £40) and a few tins of aerosol paint and lacquer (about £20) but you've got to be realistic. You'll need the tyres removed to do the work, and then refitted and balanced afterwards (£20 a wheel if you don't know a fitter well enough to



get him to do you a favour), and you won't be able to repair any deep scuffs or gouges. Also, getting the right amount of polish on the right polishing head without turning the alloys black is harder than you might think. The paint finish won't be that durable either.

Undoubtedly the better option is to invest in getting them professionally refurbished by an outfit such as Lepsons in Kent. These boys know what they are doing, have got all the right gear and can give you guaranteed long-lasting results. If you go down this route, you're also likely to get a much better range of options on polishing, painting or powder coating



Set of AC Schnitzers for €160. They're going on the Manta, somehow.



(for which the choice of colours is far greater nowadays) to give a unique look to an otherwise relatively common wheel design.

Take the trip down to Lepson's Kent HQ and the first thing to strike you is just how big an operation the company has, and how similar it looks to an alloy wheel production line. We're not talking Fred in his shed here: the facility occupies 12,500 sq ft, with five separate workshops and storage units, plus offices, churning out an average of 560 wheels a week. With that kind of output, chances are they've seen your style of wheels before and there just isn't room for any inconsistency with quality of finish – you just know they're going to come out right at the other end.

That's because of the carefully structured and precise way in which wheels are processed with each stage having its own separate area. First the wheels are chemically stripped to bare alloy in a tank of benzyl alcohol overnight, removing all traces of previous finishes. To do this Lepsons use vat tanks of the stuff into which cages filled with wheels are lowered on a crane. The following morning, they're jet washed off to remove the chemicals and any loose surface debris.

From here they move into a separate workshop where the wheels go through a series of checks. They range from looking out for corrosion and kerb



A cage full of mucky scufflers [background] ready for the acid bath.

Pressure washing off the acid solution while still in the cage.





TECH NOTE

damage to ensuring the wheels are straight (true) and determining whether they have any cracks. Any holes, scuffs, gouges or deep imperfections are then welded up and machined back to a smooth finish. Once the preparation work has gone this far, the wheel is shot-blasted to give it a good key for the primers to get hold of.

With the wheels now fully prepped, it's down to the customer to decide where

they go from here, as Lepsons offer the option of paint, polish or powder coated finish. Despite the common misconception, Lepsons don't see any significant difference between the durability of a painted or powder coated finish. If they've done right they both last well. The advantage with going for the painted option is that you have a far greater choice of colour. Either way, the wheels are

primed, cured, painted (or powder coated) and stoved off (baked) in an oven, then lacquered.

For those wanting a polished finish, this is done on a dedicated machine. Working from templates, the diamond head shaves off small slivers of alloy to give it that shiny effect that really sets off a wheel.

The process of refurbishing and the sheer volume of units coming

through, means that the guys at Lepsons get to see how every type of wheel stands the test of time, and there's no big surprise as to the ones they rate highest. "OEM wheels are generally the best quality," says Andy Leppinwell, General Manager. "Some alloy is softer and wheels constructed from that material will damage more easily, and those wheels are usually after-market items."



Spinning the wheel up to see how true (out of round) it is.



Preparing for powder coating.



Tyre changing bay for those weather punter...



...who want to take advantage of the full-on 'drive in drive out' service.



Diamond cutting on the lathe.



Barton's wheels part way through the mill.



Priming prior to powder coating.



Between stages of the baking cycle.



TECH NOTE



Quality control immediately after the water-based painting process.



Water-based paint spraying machinery.



Weld added to repair curb damage.



Some damage though....

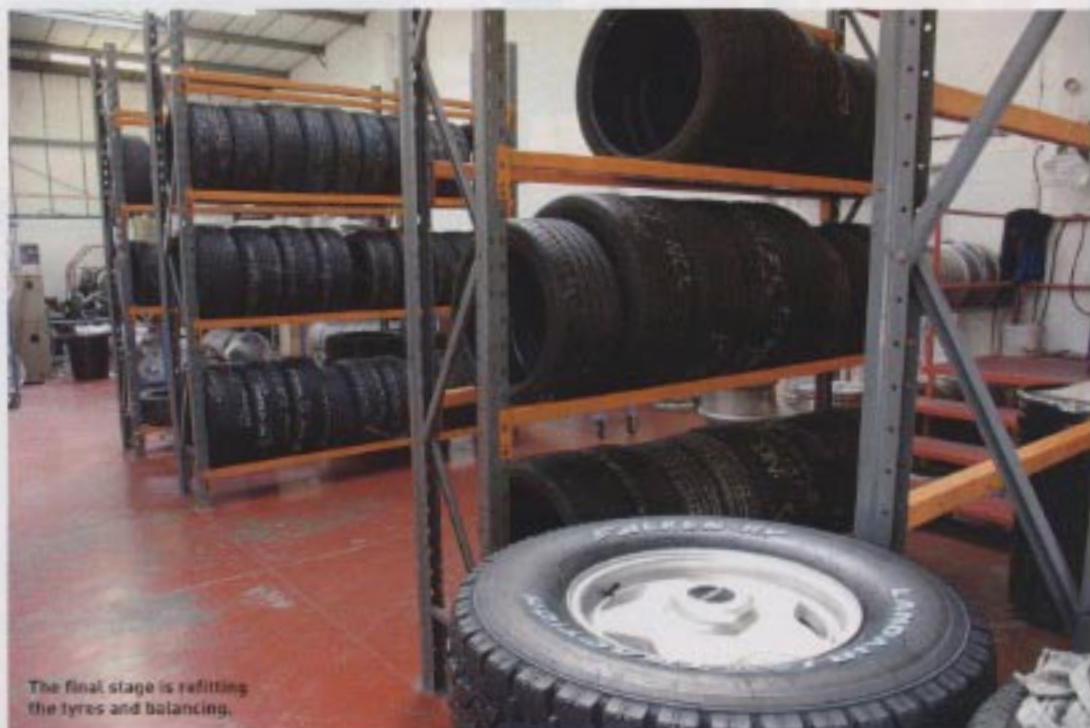


...is just beyond repair.

2 While Lepsons can handle most jobs, that doesn't mean to say a wheel can be brought back from the dead – some are just too far gone. 'We wouldn't take on anything too badly damaged for safety reasons, once a wheel is bent from the centre hub you cannot straighten it,' explains Andy.

Magnesium wheels also present more of a challenge, although they are not insurmountable. They're trickier because they can't be dipped in acid as they will melt, so the process of stripping them is far more painstaking and laborious. 'All types of wheels in their own way can be difficult to do, but if you have the correct equipment you can overcome most things.'

Having seen the results for ourselves on our glorious leader's own set of wheels (Bartoo got these AC Schnitzer copies off ebay for the Mania, pending the sourcing of suitable 5/120 to 4/100 hub adaptors) we're convinced that refurbishing is an option that shouldn't be overlooked.



The final stage is refitting the tyres and balancing.



Andy Lepsonwell: main man at Lepsons.

CONTACTS

Prices per rim vary from £35.75 to £226.90 (depending on size and design complexity, eg: 30 inch split rim with cross spokes). Average price is about £65.00.

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