

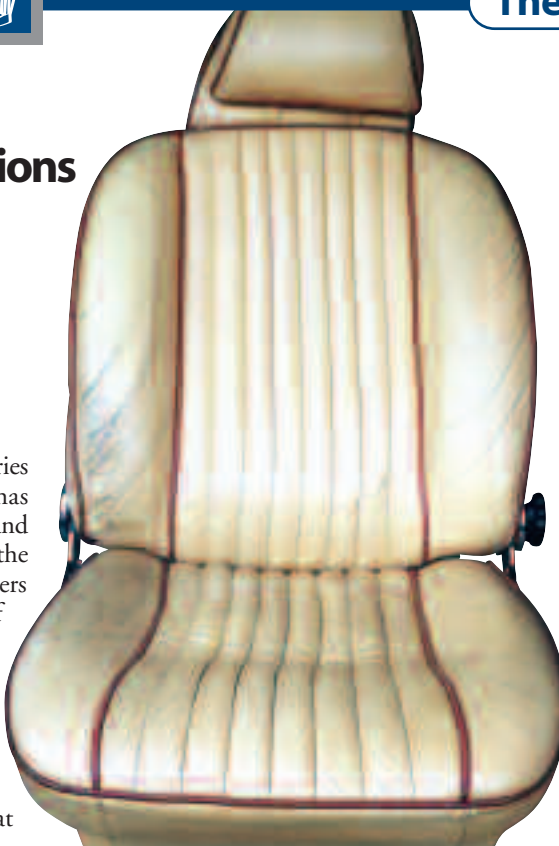
Buyer's View: Leathercare Renovations

During the preparation of this series of articles, *World Leather* has visited a wide range of users and consumers of the main product of the industry i.e. the leather itself. The buyers have been involved with the majority of leather types produced by the tanning industry, from the heaviest hides to the lightest of skins for a bewildering range of end uses and products.

One of the more frequently posed questions to the various buyers is whether they believe that the leather producers actively market the leather to the final consumer or even see the need to do so. With only very few exceptions the answer up to now has been a definite negative and it would appear that the tanning industry does not see the need for, nor the benefit, of marketing its product or its brand. There are, of course, very good reasons for this. The main buyer is very rarely the final consumer, the leather is sometimes only a minor part of the product and cost of marketing is often seen as not bringing as much value as technical or process development.

One of the results of this is that those few tanners who have marketed their brand become instantly recognised and remembered in the mind of the general public. One of these names remains Connolly, which will always be associated with luxury car interiors and is possibly one of the very few leather makers' names to be quoted by the man in the street.

The fact that Connolly is so well known even after the demise of the company is an indication of its unique place in the leather industry. The company has long been synonymous with luxury and elegance, supplying famous marques such as Rolls Royce, Bentley, Aston Martin, Jaguar and Ferrari. After more than 127 years of trading Connolly finally closed its doors to tanning but the name



...from ruin to restoration



*Aston Martin Vantage Volante:
before (top) and after restoration.*

lives on in the motor industry where it was best known.

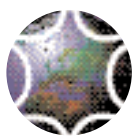
During its long association with exotic cars Connolly established a department devoted to restoration and repair of leather car interiors. This department was originally intended to deal rapidly and discreetly with any complaints about the interior trimming arising from the buyers of new cars. It soon became evident, however, that there was a rapid build-up of knowledge and expertise in dealing with a wide range of upholstery repairs and this, in

turn, led to a widening of the remit of the department. Instead of merely being involved with the repair of newly supplied vehicles, it also received ever growing numbers of enquiries to repair and restore older cars which were long out of guarantee. The work was originally carried out by specialists who travelled to supplier's premises and homes to work on the cars. This eventually led to the establishment of a service known as "Connollising", the restoration and repair of car interiors from many origins based in a dedicated department at the Wimbledon site.

Two of the technicians responsible for the "Connollising" processes were Stephen Merrett and Stephen Nash who worked for its renovation department for many years, restoring leather upholstery in prestigious projects such as the British House of Commons, House of Lords, The British Museum and the QE2 to name but a few.

In 1988 these two experienced leather restorers decided to start up their own leather renovation business, far away from Connolly Leather's main customer base around the South of England, and moved to Cheshire.

Two of Connolly's main renovation department members leaving together did not go unnoticed. A meeting was arranged and an exclusive license to use the Connolly name and products as a renovation service was offered. The only ▶



Making the best of a bad job.

condition was that they would agree not to resell the lacquer in “kit” form, as Connolly Leather already had an established market and customer base for leather renovation kits. These conditions were readily accepted and the new company Leathercare Renovations rapidly established a reputation amongst the prestige car suppliers of the North West of England. It was an arrangement that worked well for nearly 14 years during which time the company expanded into furniture, boats and aircraft, as well as car restoration. In 2002, to everyone’s shock, Connolly Leather Ltd. was no more and Leathercare Renovations is now proud to carry on the tradition of “Connollising” leather interiors.

...more a problem of the finish

Steve Merrett described the problems encountered in the restoration of leather in cars, boats and furniture to *World Leather*. Contrary to popular belief, it is very rarely the actual leather which needs repair or restoration but the thin film of coloured finish on the surface. The move away from solvent finishes to the more environmentally friendly water-based finishing systems has been of benefit to Leathercare as these finishes have proved not to be as durable as the systems they replaced. The limits on usage of solvent finishes apply only to the larger manufacturers due to the volumes employed but companies such as Leathercare are still able to use solvent top lacquers with tiny volumes applied.

Steve Merrett explained the importance of the company’s strong links with its chemical suppliers without whom the company would struggle to survive. Initially, during the Connolly era, there was a ready supply of materials but on its

closure the two Steves had to work hard to secure continuity of chemical supply. One of the most difficult problems was the very small volume of material required, this often being “sample size” for the majority of chemical suppliers. Fortunately, Leathercare has established links with companies such as Union Specialities and Bayer who are willing to maintain supplies and also offer some technical service.

This enables Leathercare to keep up to date with the latest product developments, leather trends and application techniques. The development of application methods would not, at first sight, seem relevant to Leathercare with its very strictly limited means of application on made-up articles and interiors. It is, however, a crucial part of chemical product development due to the strong relationship between the

different types of finishing machinery and their effects on the types and properties of finishing chemicals required.

There have also been noticeable changes in the styles and fashions in seating with a move away from firm springing, horsehair stuffing and tightly upholstered leather to soft foams with mellow, cushy, upholstery leather resulting in an increase in crease failures with finish cracking and abrasion damage. Another fashion influence has been the trend towards lighter colours in car interiors with pastel shades taking over from the classic blacks and dark browns of the past. This leads to more easily visible soiling of seats and to colour changes due to light fastness and heat migration effects. The incidence of migration problems seems also to be linked to the increasing use of non-chrome tannages in car upholstery and



Restored car interior.



Leathercare is now dealing with more of these types of repair than in the past. Another type of fault which seems to be occurring more frequently is the transfer of dye from clothing to the leather upholstery of the seat. Whether this is due to poor dye fixation in the textiles or greater sensitivity of the finished leather top-coats to migration is uncertain, but it is a problem which appears to be on the increase.

Achieving a well maintained look

The main work in any restoration project is the cleaning and preparation of the leather surface prior to finishing. The aim of the restorer is to achieve an interior which looks "well maintained" and not restored, so the more work that goes into cleaning the less will be the need to apply coloured finishes. As many as possible of the trimming panels should be removed from the car as this makes it easier to work and also reduces the chance of accidents and spills. Leathercare initially uses soaps followed by a concentrated soap cleaner with a cutting agent to remove heavy soiling and grease. At this stage it may be necessary to remove any 'foreign' lacquers from previous restoration attempts and the removal will depend on whether they are solvent- or water-based.

The next stages are preparation of the surface with a light buffing, sealing with a seal coat and crack filling with a stucco type paste filler. A pigment colour coat matched to the original is then applied, possibly with the addition of thickeners, and the final coat is a matt clear lacquer. After drying and ageing, the panels are refitted and given a light protective coating of a conditioning cream.

Merrett stressed that the restoration process is certainly not an exact science with the key to success being experience of the materials and versatility in application techniques. No single product will constantly work with every system which is encountered and the process has, therefore, become a more bespoke service than it ever used to be. In the words of Merrett, versatility is the key to success in this business.

Leathercare's business is quite seasonal, with car restoration being carried out mainly in the summer months, and its second main activity, furniture restoration, being a winter activity. It initially became involved in furniture restoration through its reputation in the



Fire damaged chair before and after.

car trade and this led to contracts with insurance companies to assess and deal with claims on leather covered suites. Some five years ago typical insurance claims were for cigarette burns and pet damage, such as cat scratches plus scuff marks etc., and the repair would normally take place in the customer's home or premises. With the growth of budget leather furniture it is now very often cheaper to replace or reupholster the whole item than to repair the fault itself and the Leathercare business has evolved into a repair consultancy service. The repairing side of the furniture business has become more of the bespoke restoration of unique items. For this service it employs a qualified furniture upholsterer in a small workshop situated next to its Warrington premises. The small quantities of upholstery leather required

are bought from merchants or local tanners who are usually able to supply from stock with very short delivery times.

An increase in grain fracture

The growth of disposable income has influenced Leathercare, as car interiors are not now considered as expensive as they once used to be, and are increasingly being offered as standard equipment. This has resulted in a significant growth in the numbers of cars with original leather trim, plus a growth in leather panel replacements. The trends towards embossing of upholstery leather have also been noted by Leathercare which has seen more cases of grain fracture and cracking in the heavily embossed finishes. This is very good for the company but, unfortunately, very bad for the leather industry.

Similarly, cheaper sourcing of leather furniture has also resulted in a big increase in ownership and a subsequent larger pool of repair work for the company. The use of inexpensive finished splits in furniture was also very profitable for Leathercare but again, unfortunately, very negative for the leather industry.

A growth area for the company is the increasing use of leather in pleasure boats and executive aircraft, often upholstered in very soft, lightly finished, pastel shades. We were shown a current restoration project of the complete seating of a large power boat that was being transformed from badly stained nubuck to pristine finished leather and, it not only looked good, but was also a much more practical solution for a seagoing boat.

The changes in car building techniques mean that there is an ever-decreasing need for car trimmers who are becoming an endangered breed. This has increased the value of the experience of Leathercare, as its operatives are trained trimmers who are also skilled finishers.

Leathercare Renovations is very positive about its future, and it is actively building links with selected car makers to offer touching in and repair kits for their in-house factory use. It sees many different applications for its kits and services with the growing use of leather as a trimming material. It remains justly proud of its long tradition and association with the respected name of Connolly and is looking forward to many more years of service to the leather using sectors. 