

A day in the life of...

PAUL RUSSELL

The owner of award-winning restoration business Paul Russell and Company, of Massachusetts, USA, talks Octane through his long and rewarding day

Interview and photography: Phil Llewellyn



'CURRENT PROJECTS INCLUDE A WONDERFULLY ORIGINAL 1949 PORSCHE. THE OWNER HOPES WE CAN RETAIN THE MUSTY SMELL'

My parents weren't pleased when I dropped out of college to work for a guy whose small garage specialised in restoring Mercedes. He was a superb technician, but his shortcomings in other areas encouraged me to study business administration in my spare time before taking the plunge in 1978. I bought the Gullwing Service Company and later changed the name to Paul Russell and Company.

One of the biggest challenges we've faced was Ralph Lauren's Bugatti 57SC Atlantic. It was the first time we'd restored a coachbuilt pre-war car, so winning Best of Show at Pebble Beach in 1990 was a huge thrill. We won again in 1993, with Mr Lauren's Mercedes SSK, and this year I was proud to be invited to help judge the Bugattis.

Home is 11 miles away and I'm generally here at 8am. We employ 18 people. I'm involved in day-to-day decisions about what's happening in the shop, because everything we do reflects my personal interests. We employ excellent craftsmen, including several from England, and my main role is to liaise with clients. I miss the hands-on side, but when we're committed to a deadline, often dictated by a major event, we know the dates aren't going to be changed for our benefit. When I ask my guys to go into the 24/7 mode I have to be there with them.

Gullwings and other Mercedes still account for a significant percentage of our business, but we also do a lot of work on

Porsches, Ferraris, Bugattis and other great cars. We've even restored a Stanley steamer. Current projects include a wonderfully original 1949 Porsche. The owner hopes we can retain the musty smell...

Few projects have pleased me more than restoring the Ferrari 166 MM Barchetta that won prizes at Villa d'Este in 1949 and in 2000. Getting everything absolutely right took me to Italy to meet Carlo Felice Anderloni, who designed the car for Carrozzeria Touring. Another favourite is the Gullwing that came from South America in a container. It was held together by baling wire. I explained to the owner that for half the cost of a restoration we could find him a nice car to drive straight away. But he wanted the car restored, because it had belonged to his best friend's father. He had watched him racing on the streets of Bogota and was there when he hit a church.

I became hooked on cars at 16, when a friend's father came to our house in a 'bugeye' Sprite. It was the first car I'd ever been in where you sat so close to the road and it went more or less where you pointed it. Ralph Lauren came into the picture when he bought a 300SL that needed some work. We get on well, because he knows what he wants and has high standards. What makes a good restorer? At the top of a long list I would put a passion for the work and the cars.

Lunch is rarely anything fancier than a sandwich and often provides an opportunity to talk with my partner, Alex Finigan, who specialises in finding exceptional cars for our clients.

I generally leave around 7.15pm. My regular car is a VW Passat, but I also run a 1973 Porsche 911S while my Lancia Aurelia GT project car gathers dust.

