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For Sale: '55 Benz, Famous Ex-Owner, Runs OK, Needs Work

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How Alfred Barbour Entered
World of Extreme Repair;
Measuring the Paint Flecks

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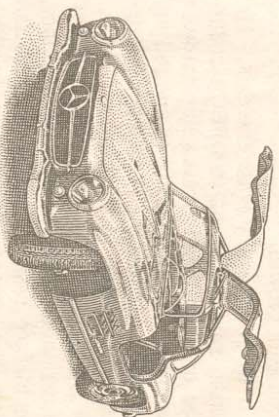
Thumbing through an antique-car magazine four years ago, Alfred Barbour found just what he was looking for, a 1955 Mercedes 300 SL—a car he had admired since he was a boy.

The coupe has an unusual design: The doors open vertically, earning it the nickname Gullwing. And this one has a story: It was ordered from the factory by Adrian Conan Doyle, son of Sir Arthur, the creator of Sherlock Holmes. Best of all, it came in a one-of-a-kind color: a “silver-violet” paint job dreamed up just for Mr. Conan Doyle.

When Mr. Barbour first saw the car, it took a bit of imagination for him to picture it on its first journey through the English countryside. It had a dull white paint job, a musty interior and patches of body rust. Mr. Barbour, 45 years old, bought it anyway for \$165,000, with a simple goal in mind: “I just wanted it restored to its original color.”

Little did he know that he was embarking on a journey into the world of extreme car restoration, where a tiny number of people go to almost any lengths to get their cars back to their original glory. For Mr. Barbour's Gullwing, the trip involved two years in the shop, 3,000 hours of labor and an estimated bill of \$300,000.

Today, the car sports the one-of-a-kind metallic finish it wore when it first rolled out of the factory gate. Tiny



Alfred Barbour's 1955 Mercedes 300 SL

stripes appear on the tops of key nuts. And hand-built Baltic birch suitcases—with specially loomed linings—have replaced the ones originally stowed behind the seats.

Mr. Barbour, president of privately held Concast Metal Products Co. of Mars, Pa., won't say exactly how much he paid for the restoration. But he thinks it was worth every penny. “Some people have beautiful paintings or sculptures, and they have no trouble justifying it,” he says. “My work of art just happens to be in the garage.”

The whole process started with a bit of Holmesian reconstruction. Many of the ingredients in the original 1955 Gullwing paint were toxic and are now illegal, so recreating the color was anything but elementary. Restorers at the shop where Mr. Barbour took his car, Paul Russell & Co. in Essex, Mass., needed a sample of the original paint, now buried beneath subsequent coats. So they took apart the car's interior and found, hidden underneath part of the dashboard, a swatch of untouched paint. Combining company records with his trained eye, body-shop manager Frank

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Dream Car Carries Man Into World of Extreme Repair

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Price recreated the color, matching even the concentration and size of the tiny aluminum flecks (11 microns to 12 microns wide) that give the violet hue its metallic sheen.

Before the paint could go on, the body needed reconstructive surgery. Mr. Price declared the Conan Doyle car "pretty solid," meaning no fenders, doors or pieces of its tubular frame would have to be recreated.

But there was plenty of other damage, some hidden. The rear roof supports, called "C-pillars," were rotten. Stuffed with foam at the factory to keep gas fumes from waiting into the cabin, they eventually absorbed moisture and rusted. Rust had also claimed the Gullwing's original "eyebrows," the long, hollow metal arches on each fender, just above the wheels. Restoring these pieces required hours of shaping, welding and smoothing.

"No matter what you expect, a project like this always ends up being a little larger," says Mr. Barbour.

Mr. Barbour says he didn't plan to have the engine compartment restored to fresh-from-the-factory condition. But during visits to the tidy, 30,000-square-foot shop to

check on his car's progress, he says he saw other cars that were redone under the hood and liked the look.

Thousands of Blows

Following the initial surgery, it took thousands of hammer blows by panel beater Richard Docking to remove dents and straighten each body panel. Mr. Docking, a wiry man in dark blue coveralls, learned his trade back home in England. Using a collection of hammers and a crown wheeling machine—an ancient shaping device a bit taller than he is—he can slowly bend and stretch a raw sheet of steel into a fender, complete with compound curves.

After Mr. Docking finished hammering, other workers filled seams and irregularities with a lead compound. They then filed the compound until no ripples or waves remained along the flanks, across the bubble-shaped roof or on the long, sloping hood. But the underside of body panels and inside the wheel arches were left rough. Why? The restorers weren't after a flawless car. Instead, they sought a reproduction of Mercedes' craftsmanship, circa 1955.

"The factory did very good work," Mr. Russell says. "But it wasn't perfect." Some

rivals, he says, "tend to over-restore these cars."

After countless strokes of sandpaper, it was time to paint. Mr. Price started with a surfacer that accumulated to an eighth inch in some places. Much of that was removed through a long sanding process, starting with rough 80-grit sandpaper and working up to a finer 220. Then came a layer of polyester primer. Then another primer, in a thinner coat, sanded with super-fine 600- to 800-grit sandpaper dipped in water. Finally the paint was sprayed on in three coats.

To keep things authentic, the shop made sure to get some paint on the underside, inside the wheel wells and on the exhaust system. Next came three more coats of clear polyurethane, another sanding (this time with 2,500-grit paper), then polishing. In all, about 1,000 hours of labor went into bodywork and painting. The final effect: "You look at the car and say, 'Ah! That's just how metallic paint looked in the '50s,'" says Mr. Price.

Under the Hood

The labor continued under the hood, where restorers repainted tiny yellow and red hash marks on many nuts and bolts, marks originally put on by factory inspectors after making sure each one was tight.

On the car's underside, the big "belly pans" that make the car more aerodynamic were recreated from scratch. Other surfaces were given an authentic undercoating—rough, black tar-based "schutz," rather than the rubbery urethane coating used in new cars. In a way, Mercedes-Benz gave restorers a break. Its factory records, dating back to before World War I, include detailed information about parts, paint and even *schutz*.

Old company information also helped Derrick Dunbar recreate the two fitted suitcases that nestle behind the Gullwing's seats. Leather covering, dyed to match the car's indigo interior, was shrunk to fit. The shop couldn't find the fabric that was used to line the original cases, so it hired a husband-and-wife team based in North Windham, Maine, to weave the pattern to the exact Mercedes factory specifications.

The Gullwing isn't the fanciest model on the antique-car lot. Mr. Barbour's would probably fetch less than \$500,000, compared with several million for a few rare models.

But Mr. Barbour isn't planning to let his Gullwing out of his garage any time soon. "Sometimes I'll come down alone, pull up a chair and just sit and look at it," he says.