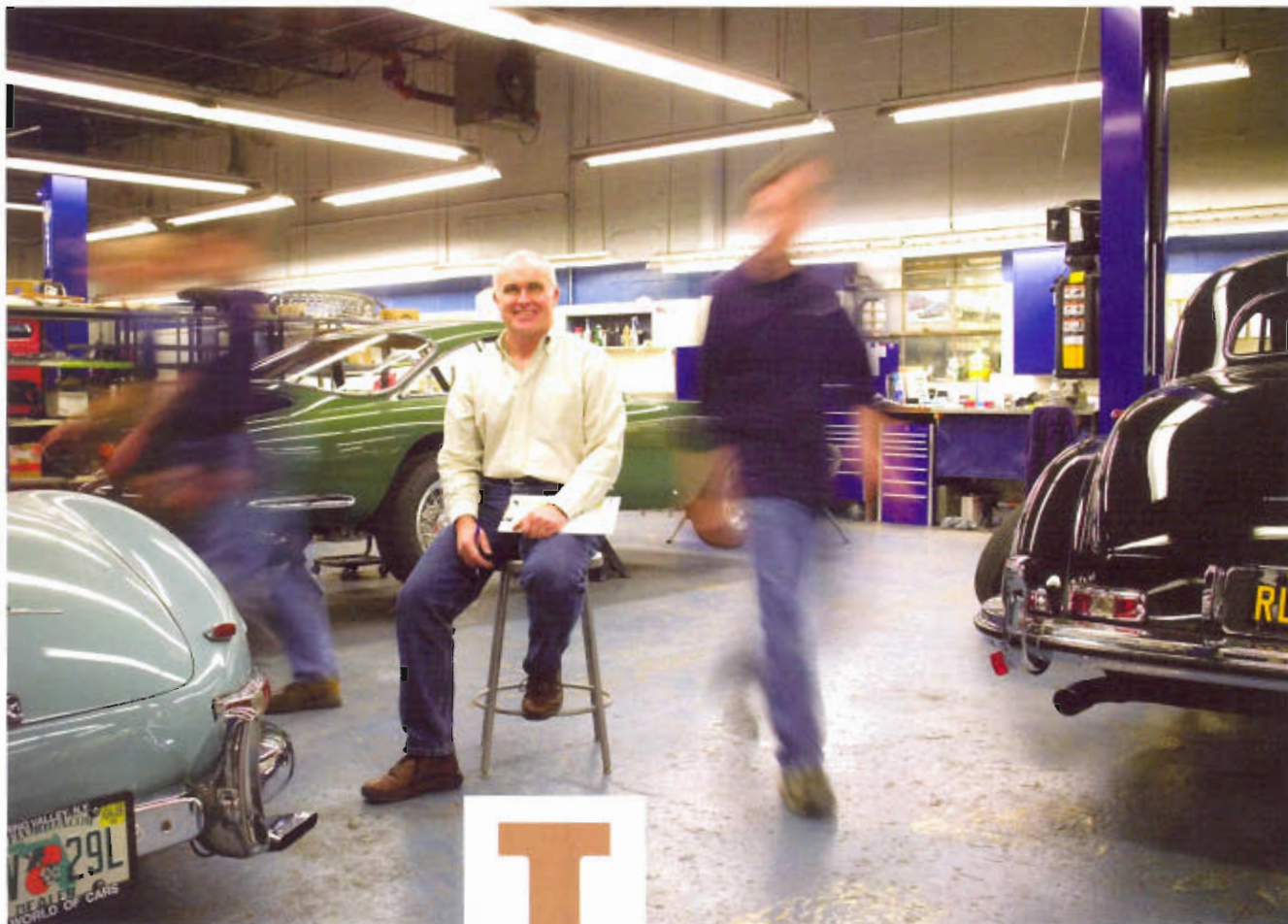




*Time with...*  
**PAUL RUSSELL**  
AND COMPANY





**Octane visits Ralph Lauren's restorer of choice, the builder of concours winners from Pebble Beach to Villa d'Este**

Words: Dale Drinnon  
Photography: Martyn Goddard

**I**

ESSEX, MASSACHUSETTS, were perched beside the Atlantic an hour away on the Cape Cod side of Boston on this lovely late-autumn Sunday morning, it would be swarming with day-trippers enjoying an impromptu getaway. Instead, here on the less-populated northern side, the summer residents gone and chilly winds creeping onto the beaches, Essex is simply another peaceful, well-kept small New England community. With the empty streets and dark shop windows, it's hard to believe anyone is even awake this early.

'Are you sure somebody will be there?' I ask photographer Martyn Goddard again, and again he replies, 'Yeah, yeah, Paul said there's no point in us wasting a whole day if we're already in the country; come on by, he'll be there.' And when I drive past the converted Victorian trolley barn that fronts the property and the discreet sign reading 'Paul Russell and Company', there's a surprising number of vehicles about. Through the side door, the workshop looks huge, at least as big as the Buick dealership garage where I once worked, and considerably better appointed.

The young man who greets us is friendly and courteous to a fault. 'You must be the *Octane* guys,' he says. 'Come in, we're expecting you.' There are maybe a half-dozen others visible, and I nod towards one fellow plunged shoulder-deep under a Mercedes bonnet and ask our guide if they're all here because of some desperate rush job. >>



He looks a little puzzled, as though unplanned emergencies were an alien concept. Oh no, he tells me, no rush, it's just a good time to get some work done.

Paul Russell turns out to be the one carrying the clipboard. He greets us with a quiet, soft 'Hello, glad to have you here', a firm handshake and a warm but completely unassuming smile, and within 30 seconds of polite chit-chat one thing is obvious. No-one would ever accuse him of being the clichéd American high-pressure businessman.

His voice is muted, measured, and he is unfailingly gracious. When asked a question he frequently pauses for thought, as though he is actually giving due consideration and attempting the best possible answer; conversely he gives equal consideration to answers provided to him in return. He reminds me very much of my friend the university research scientist. There is no bombast in the man; there is, however, a great deal of intelligence, intellectual curiosity and empathy.

The scientist analogy is appropriate. Since he and Alex Finigan, who now handles the growing sales division, founded the business in 1978 as The Gullwing Service Company, the firm has developed a reputation as a restoration facility run to laboratory standards.

Evidence of that is everywhere apparent as Paul shows us the premises. Laptops and digital cameras abound (the guys photograph everything during the tear-down and any computer

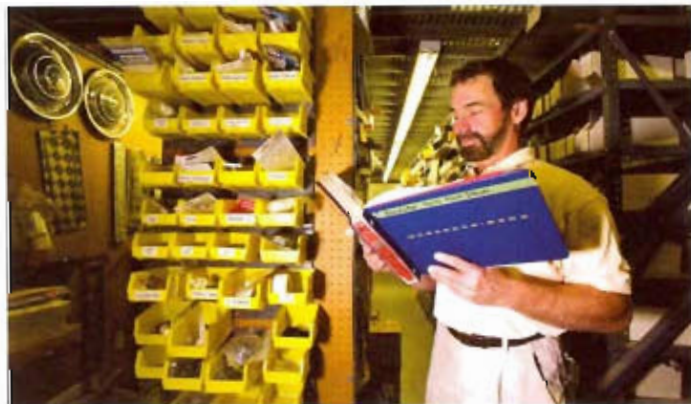
in the shop can access the pictures'), and every restoration is organised as a team effort ('we have a stand-up meeting around the car with all the members before we start, so we will all understand the customer's priorities...'). The painting, machining and environmental equipment are naturally all state-of-the-art; about the only job not regularly handled in-house is rechroming.

The attention to detail borders on Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and extends to function as well as cosmetics - Paul loves to test drive finished cars in the rain, just to make sure they're ready for real driving; the resto side of the business, however, is booked far in advance, so you can't fault the methodology. 'Some shops don't pay much attention to the mechanicals on a show-car restoration,' Paul says, pointing to a stunning Ferrari on axle stands, its brakes neatly disassembled on a workbench - and, for a moment, damn me if he doesn't sound, well, a bit sad, really.

'We see a lot of them when they're retired, or change owners, and now people want to drive them, and we sort out the hydraulics and electrics and so on... We take pride here in doing that sort of thing the first time around... Another thing we take pride in, though, is the number of repeat customers we have, and we hope that's one of the reasons why.'

Historical research is also a key element in the Russell method, important enough that special projects manager Janet

THE GUYS PHOTOGRAPH EVERYTHING AND ANY COMPUTER IN THE SHOP CAN ACCESS THE PICTURES'



**Above and right**  
Parts manager Jack Styles has been with Paul Russell & Co 22 years; the business began in 1978 as The Gullwing Service Co.



**Above and left**  
Panel beater Richard Docking misses his cricket; Nick Wellman learned painting skills in Californian Harley bike shop.





Oliver, another team member since the founding days, is currently up to her ears in building an electronic research database. The history is well worth the effort: Mark Reinwald, curator of long-term customer Ralph Lauren's collection, credits the Russell team with recovering details that made Lauren's Pebble Beach Best in Class 1938 Alfa 8C-2900 come alive. 'They found photos that probably hadn't been seen since '38,' Mark later told me. 'We could document every decision we took.'

'We're not necessarily here to make these cars perfect,' Paul says when we're through the working garages and examining finished vehicles. 'We're here to make them exactly as the original builders first made them,' and sure enough, sighting along the Lauren Alfa's alloy bodywork, I can see subtle ripples in the bonnet, the slightly asymmetrical rear profile, dimples around the wing fasteners, all left because the original Touring craftsmen put them there.

Then Paul does one of those long, contemplative pauses. 'You know, since we knew you were coming, we've all given a lot of consideration to our philosophy as a company. And basically we hope that if someone should have reason to take off this paint 50 or 100 years from now, they won't be able to differentiate between what we did and what the Touring artisans did; we would hope they couldn't tell we did anything at all.'

A couple of days later I am talking with master panel beater and transplanted Brit Richard Docking, and after we have a good old bitch about the deplorable lack of quality cricket in America he is showing me the fascinating if vaguely inexplicable intricacies of 1930s Carrozzeria Castagna bodywork. 'I don't understand why they did some things that way,' Richard tells me, 'but it's all going back together exactly the same, and in 100 years' time...'

And I knew that both Paul and Richard, and everyone at Paul Russell and Company, meant exactly what they said.

Thanks to Paul Russell and Co, Essex, Massachusetts, USA. [www.paulrussell.com](http://www.paulrussell.com).

**'WE'RE NOT NECESSARILY HERE TO MAKE THESE CARS PERFECT. WE'RE HERE TO MAKE THEM EXACTLY AS THE ORIGINAL BUILDERS FIRST MADE THEM'**



*Time with...*  
**IN ASSOCIATION WITH**  
*Chopard*