Restoration HARDWARE

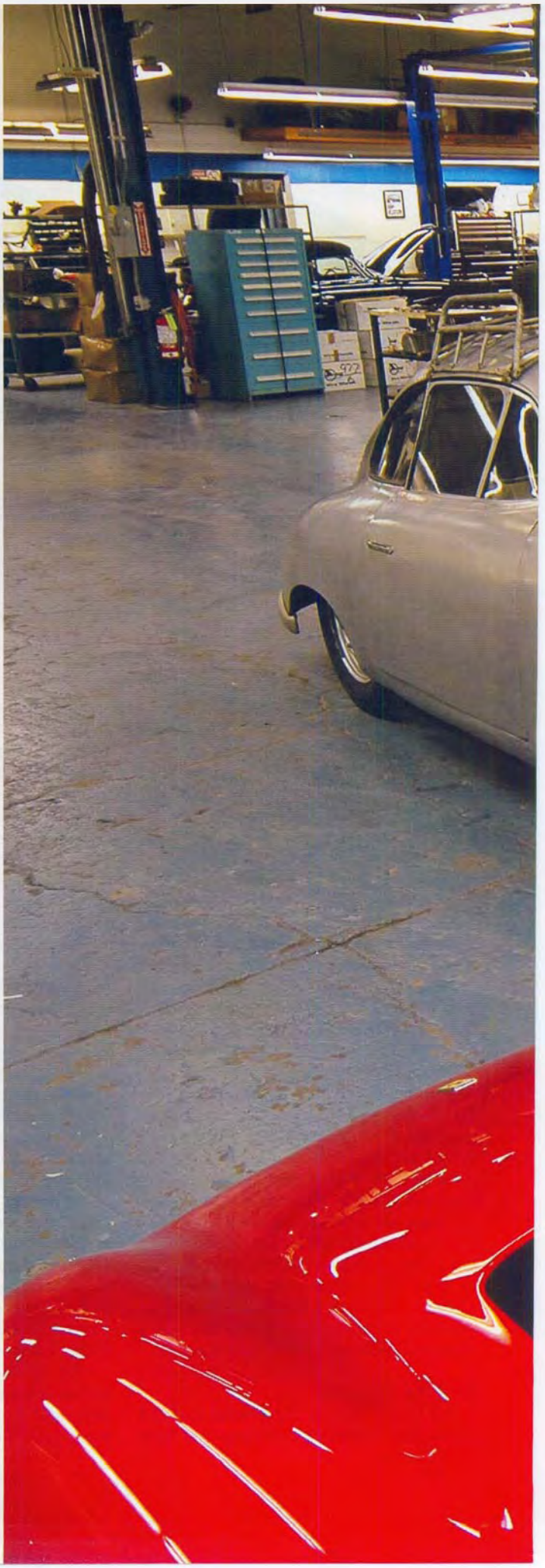
You often see the end results of major restorations at concours events, but rarely do you see the shops in which the work was carried out. We take you to Boston's Paul Russell and Company, and show you the tools of the trade.

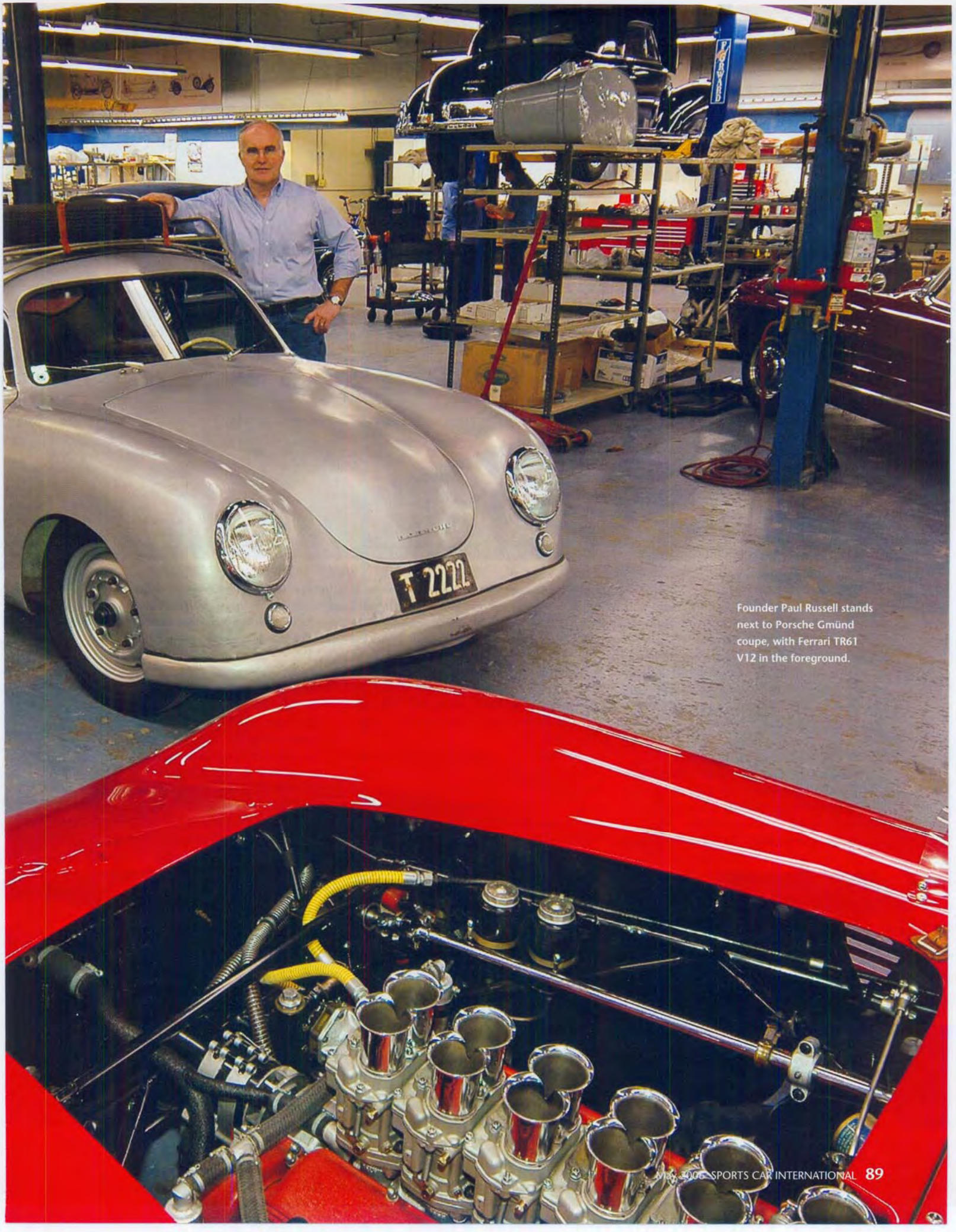
by KLAUS SCHNITZER
photography by THE AUTHOR

North of Boston is the lovely Cape Ann peninsula, where you'll find plenty of New England charm, lots of history and some great driving roads. It's the home of the spectacular Crane Estate, historic Gloucester (setting of *The Perfect Storm*) and Rockport. You'll also find, tucked away in a nondescript former heavy-equipment factory in Essex, MA, one of the top automotive restoration shops in the U.S.

Welcome to Paul Russell and Company. This is the place where an enthusiastic and dedicated staff of artisans tends to the world's finest cars—Mercedes Gullwings, C- and D-Type Jaguars, one-off Bugattis—often preparing them for the elite concours competition found at Pebble Beach, Amelia Island or Villa d'Este.

To be able to spend a few days wandering around this 30,000 square-foot shop —to look, touch, photograph and engage in conversations with a talented crew—was a very special treat for a garage junkie like me. Every corner has something interesting, from massive prewar Mercedes fenders to a bare frame on a rotisserie for sandblasting to exquisite, shiny mechanical parts in the clean room. The atmosphere is very relaxed, with the experts going about their precise tasks in an unhurried fashion.





Founder Paul Russell stands next to Porsche Gmünd coupe, with Ferrari TR61 V12 in the foreground.

One reaches the shop through a plain entrance into a small reception area, and then *bang*, one is faced with one of the most spectacular cars ever made—the 1938 Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic Coupe. Opposite this gleaming black jewel resides another Bugatti from the Ralph Lauren collection—a 1933 Type 59 Grand Prix car. I envy the receptionist her daily view.

Timeline

Paul Russell started out as a mechanic for an independent shop, repairing Mercedes-Benz automobiles. Eventually, he focused more on restoring vintage Mercedes, particularly 300SLs, founding the Gullwing Service Company in 1978. The first facility was a 2,500 square-foot stone garage in Marblehead, MA. The company then moved to a three-bay shop in Topsfield, MA.

In 1983, the current facility was purchased, increasing the space to 15,000 square feet. It was doubled in size in 1988 to allow for a new body and metal workshop and a new painting booth, as well as sandblasting and woodworking areas. The company's name was changed to Paul Russell and Company in 1991.

The offices of Russell and Alex Finigan, his right-hand man and head of classic car sales, resemble those of New England professors who happen to specialize in automotive history. An essential part of each of their jobs is advising clients about the most feasible course of action: Should the car be restored? To what level? Should it instead be preserved, allowing for the patina to

Above: The documentation process is underway, with (from left to right) Mark Freeman, Aaron Tufley and Alex Finigan analyzing stacks and stacks of photographs—getting the details right is what top-notch restoration is all about. Opposite top: Watching master metal craftsman Richard Docking work on this 1938 Alfa Romeo 8C 2900 Mille Miglia shows just how much artistry and skill can be involved in bending metal

remain? Is the car just not worth the effort? Should one buy it in the first place?

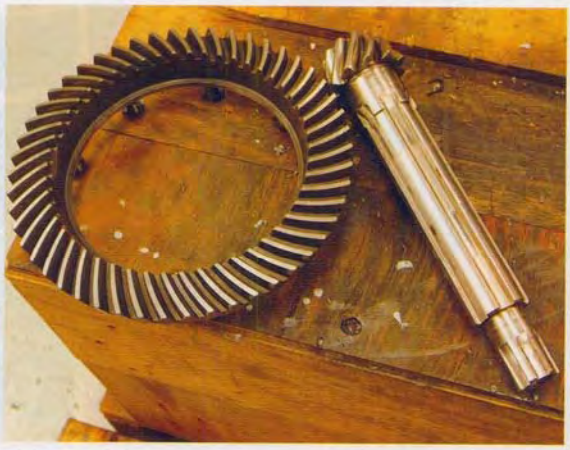
Bodywork

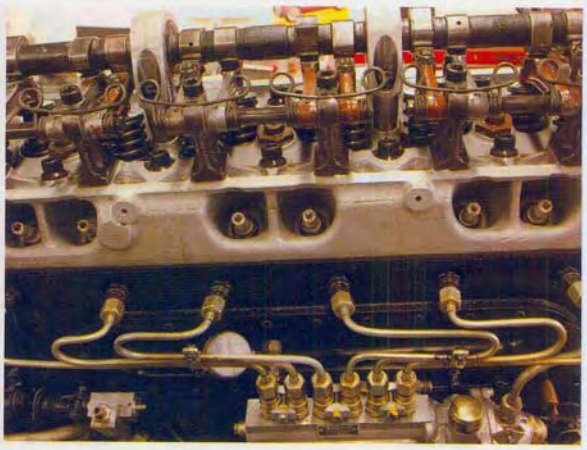
For a major restoration, the car is totally disassembled; the parts are carefully inventoried and photographed. The body is then stripped down to bare metal and turned over to Richard Docking, a maestro with the English wheel and hammers. This English-born-and-trained metal craftsman has been at Paul Russell's for five years. During my visit, he was tenderly attending to a 1938 Alfa Romeo 8C 2900 Mille Miglia. This very important car was almost ready for the paint booth, awaiting a stunning red coat.

Under Docking's careful hands, old dented panels can be made to look like new, and vice versa—the latter task being far more difficult, since he has to match the patina and the acquired marks and dents. A good example of this is the preservation of a 1959 Porsche Type 718 RSK (see *SCI*, September 2004), in which he had to use a mallet and wood block to get new aluminum panels to match old ones. Watching Docking work on the '38 Alfa was a delight, almost like getting a private performance by a concert pianist.

Docking feels that it takes almost ten years before one is really, really good at what he does. He stated that, unfortunately, there are not too many apprentices willing to go through long training programs. His favorite cars are pre- and postwar Aston Martins, and he finds the D-Type Jaguar the most difficult to work on, due to its aero-construction techniques. The BMW 507 is

Below, from opposite left: The tools of the metal crafter's trade; the metal shop is perhaps the most alluring part of the Russell facility, as cars are stripped to their very cores and pieced back together with loving care; Massimo Mondino prepares the '38 Alfa's differential; the 8C's ring and pinion gears—a staggering $6,000 in parts; 300SL's inline-6 features direct injection—Mercedes was 50 years ahead of its time.





a close second in difficulty, due to complex German engineering.

Under the Skin

While a body is in surgery, the mechanical parts are disassembled, rebuilt, remachined, replicated, remanufactured or, if need be, replaced.

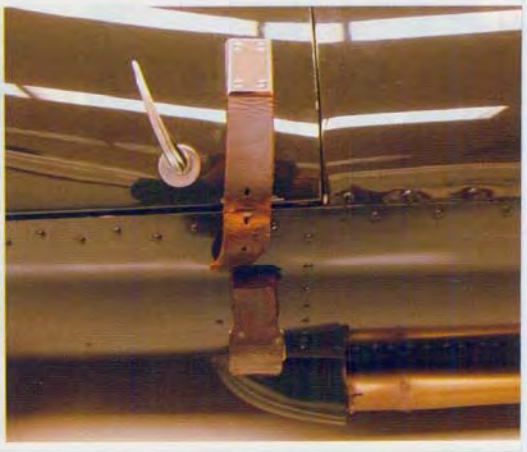
Massimo Mondino, a Ferrari specialist from Italy, was working on the 8C 2900's drivetrain during my visit. His job was to take apart the complex supercharged 8-cylinder engine and make it run like it did for the 1938 Mille Miglia, where it finished second after losing first place by two seconds as a result of brake problems. Mondino showed me an elegant solution to setting valve clearance; the precise adjustment wheels on top of the valve stem could be part of a fine watch.

Mondino's favorite task is to make a V12 Ferrari "run like it is supposed to." He loves experiencing the "chill in your spine from the sound." Unfortunately, Russell has since lost this talented mechanic to Northeastern weather; Massimo moved to Florida.

In the trim shop, Derrick Dunbar from Kingston, Jamaica was patiently working on a pair of 1962 Mercedes 300SL roadster seats. The quality of his workmanship was stunning. He proudly showed me a 1930-vintage leather-splitting machine that can slice leather to the thinness of prosciutto.

Dunbar trained with Rolls-Royce in London during a four-year apprenticeship, but he shares his shop's passion for Mercedes-Benz. He finds low-production Ferraris the most difficult cars to work on.

Above: Derrick Dunbar, who completed a four-year apprenticeship with Rolls-Royce London before coming to Paul Russell, is in the trim shop working on 1962 Mercedes-Benz 300SL roadster seats. Opposite top: Clad in protective gear, Sean O'Shea stands in the downdraft paint booth with Ferrari panels; his work can only begin after painstaking research to determine the historical accuracy of the paint color to be used.

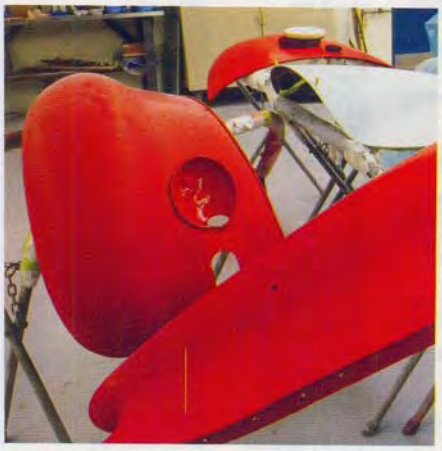


Sean O'Shea is the senior man in the painting department. During my visit, he was patiently waiting for parts that required a historically correct coat of paint. Extensive research is often required as to the right color and quality of paint, fabric and upholstery materials used. This is the domain of Russell and Finigan, and once this is accomplished, it's O'Shea's responsibility to give the cars the deep, rich, lustrous paint jobs the shop has become known for.

The Tally

A complete body-off restoration may take around 2,500 hours. At $85 an hour, that's mortgage territory for most of us. One of the longest restorations took 4,000 hours, as accident damage required intensive metalwork and fabrication. Ralph Lauren's Bugatti Atlantic coupe holds the record at 9,600 hours. You do the math.

The most represented car here remains the Mercedes 300SL, in both Gullwing and roadster form. So far, Paul Russell and Company has restored over 50 examples. Its founder admits that it is still his favorite car to work on. Russell says he would love to own an aluminum-bodied version; he currently owns a 1973 911S coupe and a 1958 Lancia Aurelia B20S. He finds Lancias the most difficult cars to restore—perhaps he keeps one as a reminder of this.

Russell's favorite tool is a Starrett Vernier Micrometer. Like him, it is about precision. It is in this way that he conducts his orchestra of highly skilled craftsmen to bring back to life some of the most interesting vehicles ever created. ●

Below, from opposite left: High-grade leather stained to period-correct color is ready to be installed in 300SL; fully trimmed Ferrari Barchetta seats display Dunbar's handiwork and attention to detail; wherever possible original details such as the leather tie-downs on this Jaguar D-Type are retained in the restoration process; '38 Alfa panels ready for wet sanding; Ferrari Barchetta; truly eclectic collection of cars on showroom floor.