

Who's Making Our Parts?

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The first time I went to a British Motor Trade Association meeting, some ten years ago, much of the conversation centered around the poor quality of some of the aftermarket parts that were being produced for our beloved old cars. I have to confess, my initial reaction was bored skepticism. I figured it was just a bunch of business owners complaining about an influx of lower-priced competition, since the problem hadn't really affected me yet.

Since then, I have been left stranded on a rally in my TR6 with a bad master cylinder that was just six months old. On that same TR6, I installed a new mirror that lost its chrome in less than a year. And I have replaced strut rod bushings three times in 500 miles on my Shelby Mustang.

Most recently, I have just finished a Mini restoration and have been plagued with parts problems from a number of sources.

The Mini community is especially plagued by this problem, as the cars were produced by the millions, from 1959 to 2000. Perhaps more significant, the Mini community is notoriously thrifty, especially in world markets, so many of the owners are not restoring, but just trying to keep their economy cars on the road. Thus to stay competitive, manufacturers in this market have produced some truly horrendous stuff.

Another emerging problem is metric threads on parts that should have SAE components. Listen, I get that these parts are being made in China, but at least get the American hardware to copy, so they can be produced correctly. If you aren't going to do that, at least tell us when we are buying the part that the hardware has been changed to metric threads.

Frankly, this is not fair. We are paying our hard-earned money for crap.

We haven't even addressed the potential impact on values. Is a car restored with thousands of dollars' worth of inferior parts worth the same as one that is either original or done right with high-quality or NOS (New Old Stock) parts? Who among you could tell the difference? At auction, should I check the threads and make sure there are no metric bolts on the car I am buying?

I'm equally concerned about the poor guys trying to service or restore these cars. When I work on an MG or Mini, should I expect to need metric wrenches? When a customer pays a restoration shop \$100,000 to restore that Austin Healey or Jaguar, should he expect to break down on the side of a busy interstate within days of getting his car back from that restoration shop?

The failure might not be the fault of the shop, but it is the shop owner who will have to tow the car in and make things right. Sure, the guy who sold you the part will give you another one, but will he give you back your hours, or fix the damaged relationship with your customer? What if that inferior part resulted in a failure that caused someone to be injured?

And what does this do for the hobby as a whole? Will this problem drive people away from old cars? Many of them already have a mostly undeserved reputation for poor reliability. This won't help it.

What can a hobbyist or restorer do?

Awareness of the problem is the first step to solving it. Know who you are buying from, and make it clear that you are more concerned with quality than price. As I have mentioned before, National Parts Depot (Mustang and other parts) gives customers a choice between lower quality and concours quality parts whenever possible. Parts vendors need to know that people

will pay a little more for quality. These vendors are not totally to blame for the situation, as they have been conditioned by years of cheapskates to believe cost rules all. So ask if they offer a better choice. They might be surprised at how many of us will opt for more expensive, higher quality parts.

Second, we need to take a minute and be thankful that we have parts available for our antique cars. Without these vendors, we would have none at all and our cars would be nothing more than lawn art.

Third, actively reward quality. If you cherry-pick and shop the cheapest prices from a variety of suppliers, you force the compromises that make for inferior parts. Companies must compete or die.

The manufacturers and parts vendors need to step up as well. As a Triumph TR approaches or even passes the \$30,000 price point, they need to recognize that it's worth spending a few extra bucks to repair or restore with good parts. Vendors, please pressure your manufacturers for better quality. Some suppliers have already started doing this; I know that Moss has a guy who spends a large part of his job working to help get parts quality improved.

Don't forget that NOS parts are still an option, and the way we solved our TR6 master cylinder issue. This is not a fail-safe, however, since decades old "new" rubber parts are a recipe for potential disaster. These parts are not getting cheaper or easier to find, either.

Finally, support organizations—like the BMTA—that are devoted to bringing real solutions to our hobby. We have been active participants in the BMTA since day one, and believe they serve a very real purpose in bringing every one together to make our old car hobby more satisfying and safer. Let's make our voices heard.