

Refinishing a BJ8 Wood Dash

When it came time to refinish the dash in my BJ8 I researched the web and my 20 year collection of Healey Magazines for advice. All the sources reported that Healey dashes are very difficult to refinish. The coating is next to impossible to remove and requires many hours of chemical strippers and scraping. New ones cost about \$400.

It seemed so simple I had to try doing it myself but in a different way. The original plan was to build a new dash and swap out dashes at my leisure. I had a spare water damaged dash as a template, the dash in the car with the driver's side damaged, no knowledge of veneer work or fine finishing, so it was so challenging I had to do it. As I went along I kept a record of my activities. Here is the story of what I learned in an honest way including a few misguided steps.

Healey dashes are veneer over plywood. Some replacement dashes advertise "solid wood" as being better. Plywood is chosen since it is more dimensionally stable and will not check or crack. I purchased a 12"x4'x1/2" piece of birch veneer furniture grade plywood at Furrows. The plywood is made of one veneer piece, not sectioned veneers, and this is important. Over the birch veneer I intended to apply another veneer and if the base is sectioned it will show through.

I started with the glove box side. Using a table mounted power Scroll Saw I gave it two unsuccessful attempts to make. I could not get the glove door to fit to my satisfaction, it's all curves with a 7 degree backcut. you can get it in time but I said enough with it and yanked the one out of the car. The drivers side is easy. to make. I cut the circles for the gauges out on the scroll saw leaving the line. I then placed a sanding drum in the drill press and sanded out to the line. The smaller holes were made with a brad point bit on the drill press and the backside requires mortises and I did this on the drill press also using spade bits. because I don't own Forstner bits)

Everyone says it's next to impossible to remove the finish on the dash. That's true. But it is because they are trying to save the veneer underneath. If you don't care it's easy. I used a Linoleum knife with a hooked blade and got under the veneer and popped it off in about twenty minutes. I then hit it with the belt sander to remove the rest and used a Finish Sander and Detail Sander to clean it up.

So now I had a stripped glove box side and a new drivers side in raw wood. I purchased Burl Walnut Veneer from Bob Morgan Woodworking, 1121 Bardstown Road. About \$25. Concours standards say Healeys used walnut dashes and that is what the replacement firms are offering. Some say they are actually Elm dashes. I like the look of the burl walnut so it was my choice to use it.

Burl Walnut veneer will have flaws in it. Lay out your dash pieces on the full sheet to avoid the flaws and plan your cuts. I used a single edge razor to make my cuts cutting

one inch oversize. Be careful when handling, burl veneer is very fragile. One source reported that dashes are bookmatched, meaning the two sides are mirror images of each other by using two successive veneer cuts. Frankly with all the gauges in the drivers side I don't think you could tell so I didn't worry about it. I did place the glovebox door in its opening and secured it from the backside with duct tape. By doing this I was able to veneer it as one piece and the grain pattern flows from door to surround.

At this point I was in the garage workshop. Somewhat dusty from all that sanding I decided to go to my basement workshop which was cleaner and cooler. Use a paint brush or stick and coat both the veneer and the plywood with two coats of Weldwood Contac Cement. I used a new can to be sure that the glue had no contaminants which might raise the surface. Position the veneer carefully and place on the wood, no repositioning is allowed with this glue. At this point I realized I should have stayed out in the garage because the fumes were making my head spin! I then used a J-Roller to roll out the veneer to eliminate any air bubbles. (Self Stick Veneers are available but I like the old fashioned way because I think it is stronger)

Next I built a press. On a sheet of MDO Board I placed wax paper, my veneered piece, a sheet of wax paper and MDO board on top. Placed a Case of books on top for weight and left it alone for three days to dry. Meanwhile I took all my scraps of veneer, glued them to a scrap of plywood and repeated the process. This is important, this will be your test board at finishing time.

Following the instructions of Wood Magazine I purchased a veneer saw at Woodcraft to trim the veneer. For your reference a veneer saw turned out to be totally worthless for this application, so it got tossed aside quickly. (you can skip that step) Instead I trimmed the veneer with a razor blade, Exacto knife and a small set of jewelers files. Divided it into two nights since it really tested my patience. After trimming I took it outside my paint area (to avoid dust) and gave it a light sanding with 600

The edges of the glovebox door and surround reveal the layers of plywood. These are painted as original a dark brown to match the veneer. I used oil based (flows better) Rustoleum Leather Brown and added Gloss Black to create the shade I wanted and applied with an artists brush.

Now I was ready to refinish. I had been thinking about doing this for years and had looked at a lot of dashboards for ideas. Healey dashboards are finished with a thick looking finish. Fine woodworkers would use French polish or laquer. Most do-it-yourselfers will use a polyurethane. While I wanted a Healey type dash, appropriate for the car, I really liked the woodwork in Jaguars and Rolls Royce's that I had seen. That wood work is a darker burl walnut with a glass like finish so I needed a finish other than one of the above. I also wanted assurances that all this work would not be in vain because the finish would discolor or crack in a automotive application. It had to look like an original finish, but most of all it had to be a tested method.

Found a web site for the Austin-Healey Club of British Columbia with an excellent article on dash refinishing at <http://www.intergate.bc.ca/business/healeys/ah-tech4.html>. The author recommended a two part reactive polymer compound epoxy called Envirotex. Posted a message to the Internet Healey group and had responses including Steve Byers who had used it years ago and it has held up great. Steve gave me some great application tips also. My Bodyman had recommended something from H&S Hardware that he had used when he restored several Rolls Royces and that turned out to be Envirotex also. At that point we had a consensus, all conditions had been met and EnviroTex was chosen.

I bought the 32 oz kit (\$16) which was more than enough. You will also need a box of 5 oz Dixie Cups, wax paper, aluminum foil, a large number of paint stir sticks, tack clothes, acetone, paint brushes and a handful of soft artist brushes. I found my walnut to be blotchy in color shades when I applied the finish over bare wood so I experimented using about 5 stains I had on hand looking for the perfect color on my test board. No luck so off to the paint store. Found Zar oil base wood stain in English Walnut to be the right color and the name was appropriate. Applied a coat of stain and let sit overnight.

Next came the sealer coat. Burl Veneer Walnut tends to be porous with small air traps. For that reason I applied by brush a thin sealer coat first. The trapped air rises to the surface ruining the finish. That's OK, this is our sacrificial coat. After it dries for 72 hours sand out the flaws with 600 and the problem will not reoccur. The finish will look like milk but will clear on the second coat.

Envirotex is a two part finish that is poured on and self leveling. It is time consuming to apply so each piece of the dash is done individually. First prepare the section to be finished. I placed a small scrap of MDO board on a level work bench over wax paper so that I was able to spin 360 degrees easily. On top of the board I placed another piece of wax paper. two paint sticks to support and elevate the dash piece, then the dash piece.

Now it's time to mix the Envirotex. This is a thick product that must be perfectly mixed or you could end up with spots that will not harden so my directions sound like overkill but they are not. In two five oz. Dixie cups pour two ounces of hardener in one and two ounces of resin in the other. Combine the two cups. Use a paint stir stick to stir the material together scrapping the sides and bottom as you go, then pour back into the other cup, scrapping and stirring also. After two minutes pour into a third clean cup and give a final stir.

Pour the mixture on the dash evenly. The paint stick can be used to help move the product around and I also used a small artists brush to help drag it into corners. Too much is better than not enough. Too much product will flow out smoothly and the overage will spill over the edges which is fine. Too little product and it will not flow and have trouble seeking it's own level. I tilted the board by lifting 1/2 inch to help it flow. Cover with the aluminum foil tent and wait five minutes.

After five minutes remove the tent and pull up a chair next to your work piece. Now comes the strange part. The finish will be rough with air bubbles trapped within. You need to exhale on the finish. The carbon dioxide from your breathe makes the bubbles burst. The chair is required because you will be dizzy by the time you are done with this! Turn your head away from the fumes and inhale, face the piece and gently exhale over it. Not blow on it, that disturbs the finish, but exhale. Imagine exhaling on a mirror. Too close and you generate condensation, same principle applies so keep enough distance. It is important to have bright light on the surface so you can see flaws in the finish which you will catch by noticing the reflective light over the surface.

I had a spot of dust in the finish which I was able to remove with the tip of the Exacto knife. After doing so it left a small depression so I tilted the board to make the finish level itself out again. Keep exhaling, it's amazing how it works. Turn the board 360 degrees and view it from all angles to make sure you have all the bubbles out. Next take an artists brush and clean up the edges where the product has run over. Pay particular attention to the hinge areas, you don't want any paint buildup there. When you are satisfied with the finish cover with the tent and let it sit for 72 hours, preferably five days. Repeat for all three pieces.

Two sections went great the first time, one required three attempts. If the finish is not to your liking just sand it down with 400 and recoat. The glovebox door requires a finish on both sides. For the second side I placed masking tape on the edge as a dam which I removed after degassing then brushed out the edges. Drying time is 72 hours but I found that it still is soft after that, five days is better. The gauge holes required cleaning up to fit the gauges and I used a Dremel tool with a drum sander attachment Before assembling I applied a coat of Johnson's paste wax for protection.

Was it worth it? I think so. Total cost was about \$50 versus \$400. The finished product was better than most commercially available replacement dashes. Actual working time was about fifteen hours, spread over a six week time span. But more important there is a lot more pride in doing it yourself.