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Octane

FUELLING THE PASSION

MERCEDES-BENZ

PAGODA SL

How Mercedes created a design and engineering icon



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A NEW PAGODA, SIR?

It could be the perfect usable classic - especially if it's been restored like new

Words Glen Waddington Photography Shawn Eastman/Hemmels

TOUGH. BRISK. USABLE in modern traffic. Yet so much more stylish than anything on sale new. Is a Pagoda the perfect classic for modern-day use? Could be. Of course, you'd be brave to rely daily on something that, at its youngest, is approaching 50 years old. If only the clock could be turned back, somehow.

Restoration is nothing novel, we know that. But sometimes it goes further, so it's an improvement on new. That's the philosophy at Mercedes-Benz specialist Hemmels, based in Cardiff and established in 2016 by four entrepreneurs and technical director Joseph Sullivan, who was steeped in Pagoda restoration. Enthusiast Richard Butterfield

bought the company in 2018 and Joseph rose to become MD.

'I followed in the footsteps of my father and grandfather with an interest in all things mechanical. When I was seven, I helped dad tear down motorcycle engines on the kitchen table, then in my teens progressed to helping restore Mercedes-Benz and other classics; he says. At 16 he began training with the Ministry of Defence as an aeronautical technician, during which he developed an ethos for 'perfection through procedure' — an approach he now applies to every car Hemmels restores. 'We've named it the Neugeboren Process. That's German for "newborn"; he explains.

There is a workforce of 52, all busy on a range of cars, each of which, by completion, will have been through a 52-week programme that starts with a strip-down, with each part catalogued before (where necessary) being replaced. And all replacement parts come direct from Mercedes-Benz itself.

As a matter of course, those replacements include body panels, floorpans, brakes, brake lines, fuel lines, all glass, springs, dampers, a specially designed and sourced stainless steel exhaust, all rubber seals, bushings and so on. Even new brightwork is rechromed. Engine and transmission rebuilds are carried out in-house, as are trim and paint.

We used to subcontract trim and paint, but now I can control the standard we work to; says Joseph. As an example, Hemmels has developed its own leather-wrapped sunvisors, which are far more visually appealing than the moulded foam ones of the standard car.

The parts shop's computers are connected directly to Mercedes-Benz's own warehouse database, to guarantee supply, and each car is built to client specification, which could be as factory-original or with a choice of non-standard colours and trim options, to more radical changes such as moving the scat back to accommodate a taller client. 'That means changes to the chassis and rear bulkhead,' says Joseph.

Improved drainage channels and metal coating make for superior corrosion protection than was available in 1960s Stuttgart, and Hemmels has designed and developed its own oil seals for the engine. 'Ours don't leak oil; says Joseph. 'The standard rope seals are good only for so long.

The cars don't differ radically in spec from standard, though. After trying different suspension settings and brake upgrades, it was found that original is actually best — so long as

everything is set-up exactly right. But there is an improvement available for the engine.

'Our HEC engine upgrade brings additional horsepower with electronic fuel injection and ignition. It's sympathetically added, so the aesthetics of the engine are maintained as the electronic fuel injection is discreetly housed within the original mechanical unit, while the electronic ignition is located inside the distributor cap; says Joseph. For accuracy, timing is taken from the crankshaft pulley. The aim is not wild performance, but stronger mid-range urge and cleaner running.

The company specialises only in the 190SL, 280SL and 300S1.4 Gullwing, though the majority of its throughput is Pagodas — 32 will have left Hemmels during the 12 months up to the end of 2019. The price is fixed at the beginning according to options and bespoke work, and averages £300,000 for a reborn 280SL. Not cheap, but Hemmels sees its rivals as Brabus, Kienle and Mercedes-Benz itself.

From the workshop I'm shown into a 1969 280SL, back for its shakedown service and warranty check after a summer spent being driven 5000 miles around Europe. It's resplendent in still-flawless china blue, the chrome deep and lustrous, shutlines still tight,

the doors clicking shut just right, switch actions crisp. It starts on the button and settles to an assertive idle.

Manoeuvring and pulling away, I notice how the gearshift wand lines up exactly with the positional letters, and that the straight-six just wants to rev. Sure, it feels period, with that buoyant ride, light, low-geared steering, and the swishing soundtrack, but it feels taut and easy too. No vagueness. No rattles. No wandering. Acceptable roll, especially given the comfort of the ride. Brakes that feel progressive and pull you up in lurch-free fashion, easily able to haul you back from a brisk cruise. As you'd imagine a 280SL would have kit as you drove it from the showroom 50 years ago.

Newborn, indeed. □

Clockwise from below Engines are rebuilt in-house by a dedicated team of two and will spend eight hours on a test bed; post-paint finishing is meticulous; leather is supplied with correct perforated pattern but all trim is finished in-house; MD Joseph Sullivan compares sun visors, and points out details to Octane's Glen Waddington (with notebook) - who then enjoys a drive in the SL in perfect weather.

