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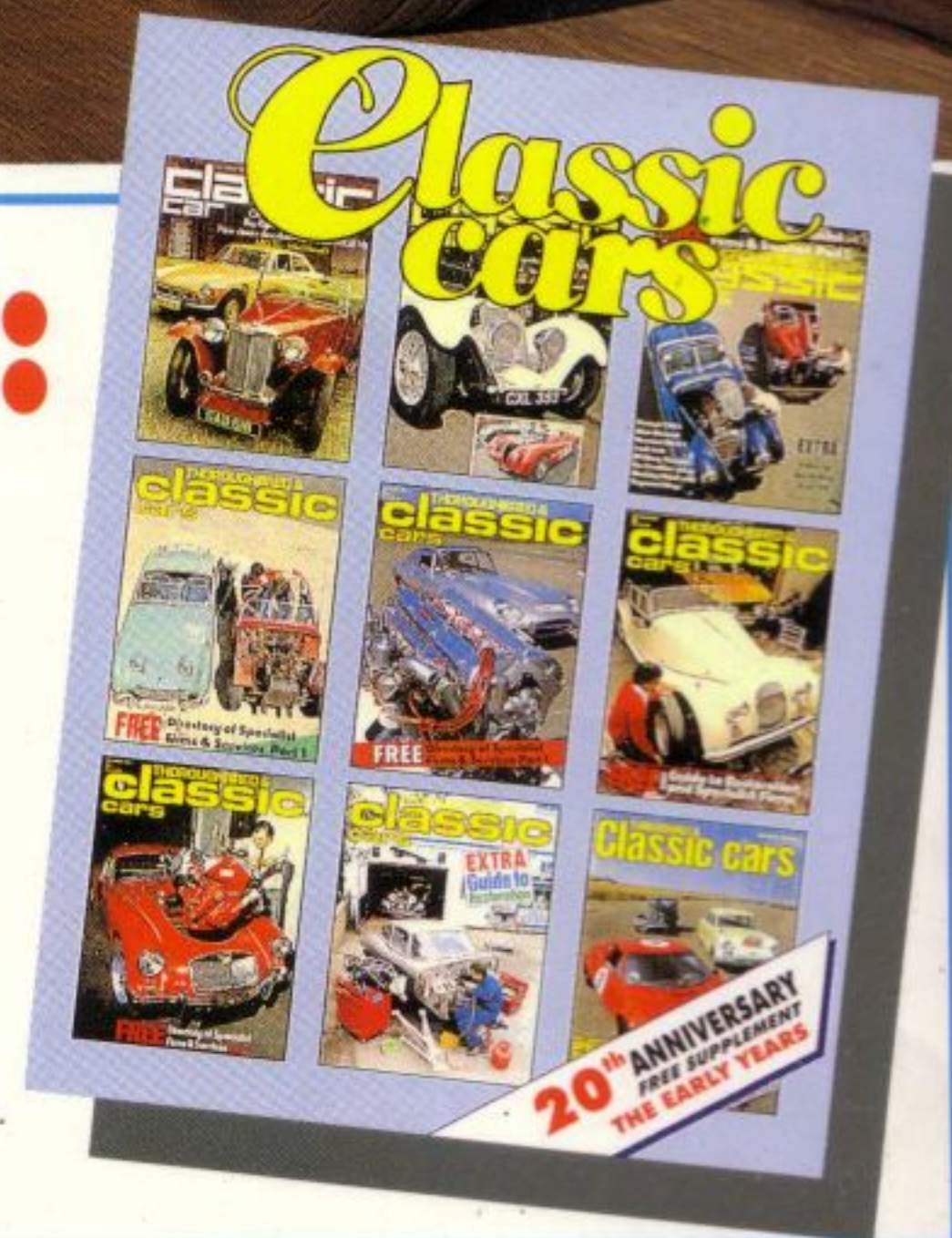


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## KARMANN YEARS

*Three years ago this VW Karmann Ghia was riddled with rust and full of filler. Zoë Harrison reports*



**Karmann transformation:** *The restoration from 'total wreck', above, to first class Classic, right, was a dream fulfilled for the owners*

**W**HEN Mark and Lin Earl called in a local bodyshop to come and give them a quote for the repair work on their 1961 Volkswagen Karmann Ghia coupé, the man who arrived was less than complimentary. "When he'd stopped laughing," Mark recalls, "he advised us to take it straight down to the scrapyard."

It was not very encouraging news for the couple – especially Lin, who had wanted a Karmann Ghia ever since she first saw one at the age of 12. "I thought if this one had to be scrapped we might not get the chance of another," she explains. It was purely a coincidence that they found this car in 1985, when Lin mentioned her ambition to some friends. "They said they knew of one that had been on someone's front lawn for years," she recalls.

The Earls quickly made arrangements

to see the car, which was close to their home in Trowbridge; despite the grass growing up through the floor, they bought it. Unfortunately, the Volkswagen had not just been allowed to slide into graceful decline. "Someone had had a go at restoring it in about 1971," Mark explains. "It was full of filler and they'd taken most of the chrome off and filled in all the holes. It was a mess, a total wreck." The coupé had also received a poor respray in metallic blue, which had gone patchy, and at some point the 1,192cc engine had been replaced with a later 1,285cc unit.

There were 46,000 miles recorded on the odometer when they bought the Karmann Ghia, but they are undecided on whether this is the first or second time around. "It had only had three previous owners, and some things on it were hardly worn – they were just rotted. It had been



Photos: Zoë Harrison

# KARMANN YEARS

sitting there for six years when we first saw it."

However, before the couple could start work on the Volkswagen, they had to renovate their house and build a garage in which to carry out the restoration. With these domestic commitments, and probably the realisation of the enormity of the job facing them, it was not until January 1990 that they finally decided to make a start.

Mark began by completely removing everything from the coupé, labelling it where possible as he did so and leaving just the rolling shell to contend with. It was at this point that he called in the professional bodywork man already mentioned, although not with the results he expected. "We were slightly disheartened by it," he remarks.

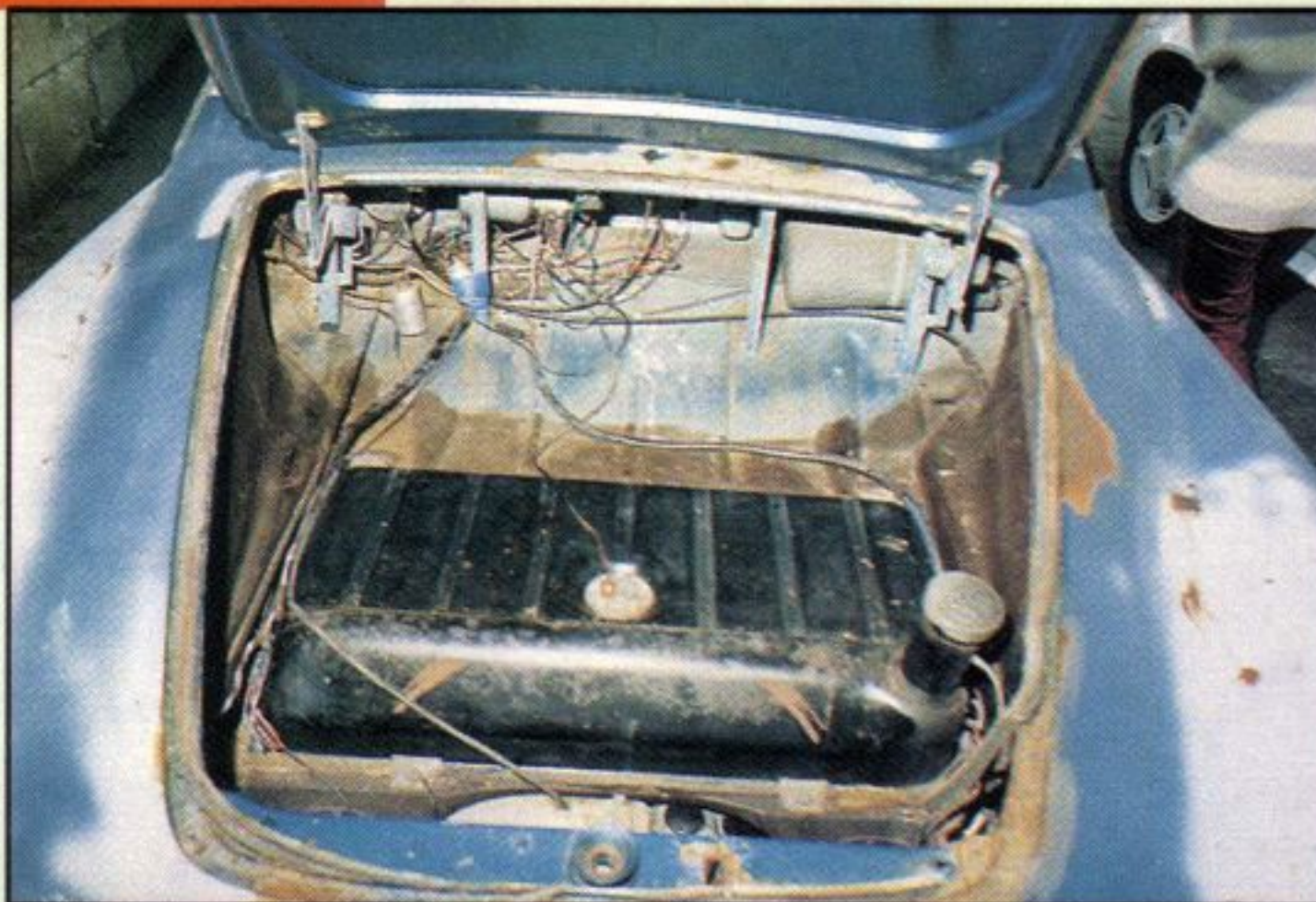
Eventually, Mark contacted Richard King at Karmann Konnection in Hadleigh, near Southend-on-Sea, Essex. A price for the job was agreed and the stripped shell was transported to Richard's High Street premises. Despite the fact that Karmann Konnection has been specialising in the cars – along with VW Beetles, cabriolets and Porsche 356s – for the past eight years or so, even it rather underestimated the work needed on the Earl's coupé.

Nearly all of the major panels were replaced, including the bonnet, engine lid, front wings, front panel, nose cone, doors and both inner and outer sills, as well as various box sections, which were probably the most badly affected areas. "The rear quarters, the front heater vents and part of the floorpan were all very bad," he recalls.

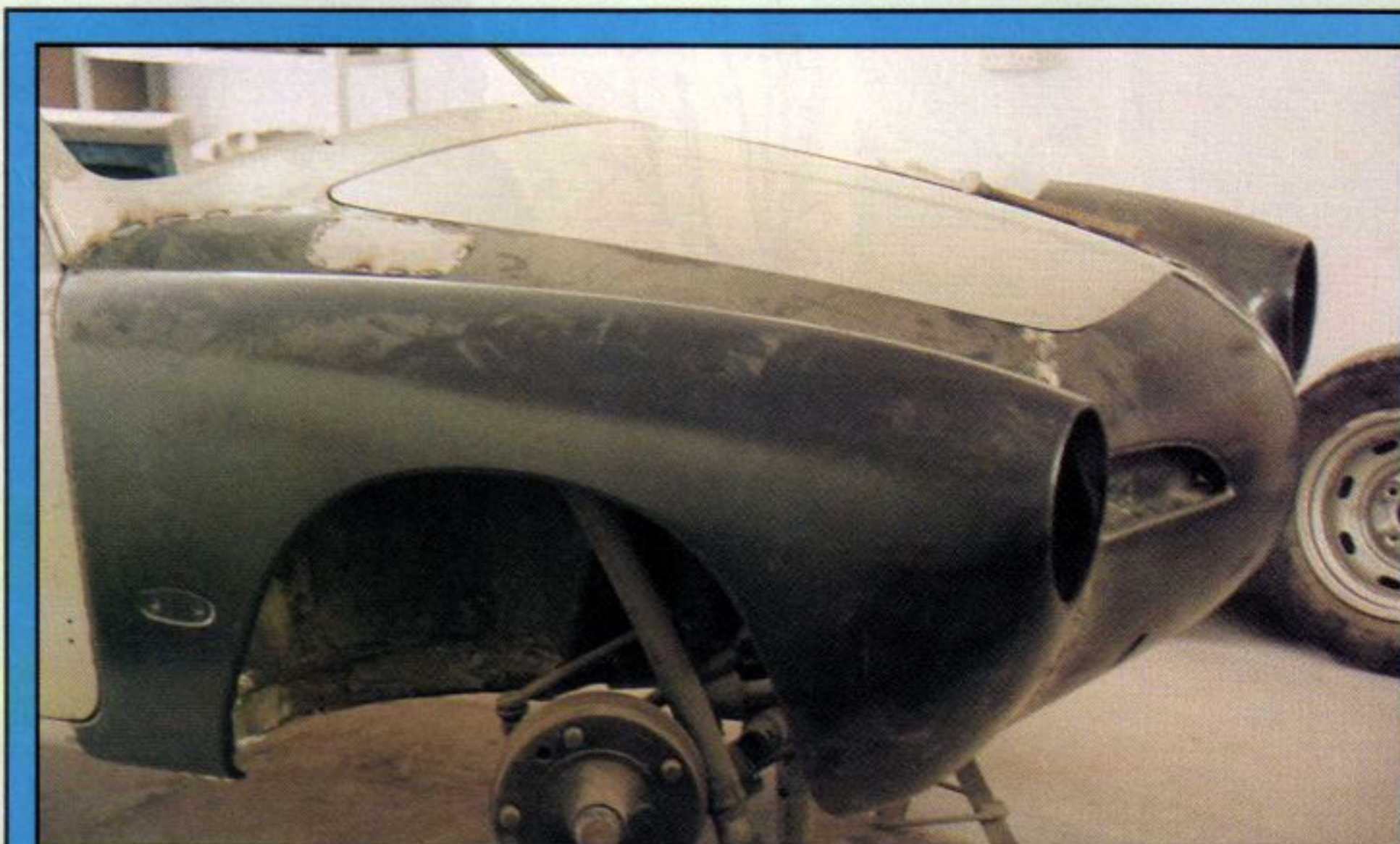
Karmann Konnection had most parts in stock but getting hold of some spares is getting more difficult. "Things like the nose cones aren't available any more, so they got it done at just the right time," Richard reports. His main source for parts is the United States, where original panels have survived. Indeed, the bonnet, engine lid and doors on this car were all Californian imports.

Richard says that there is some difficulty in fitting the Karmann Ghia panels. "They are all butt-welded so that's relatively easy, but it is quite involved because the car is coachbuilt rather than mass-produced," he adds. Panels are pricey too, with a replacement door costing anything from £150 to £500 and a front wing £400.

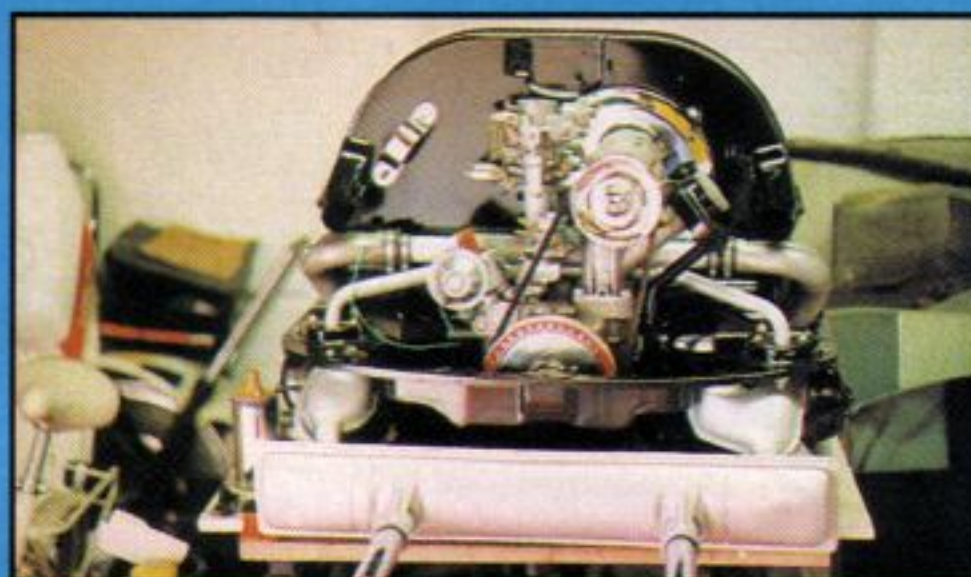
One of the most notable problem areas



Left, front-end before the car was stripped. The bonnet would eventually be replaced with a panel from the USA. Right, there were extensive body repairs: sills, doors and the floorpan were all in bad condition. Far right, restoration underway at Karmann Konnection



Above, further down the track and an almost entirely new front, but panels can be costly and difficult to find



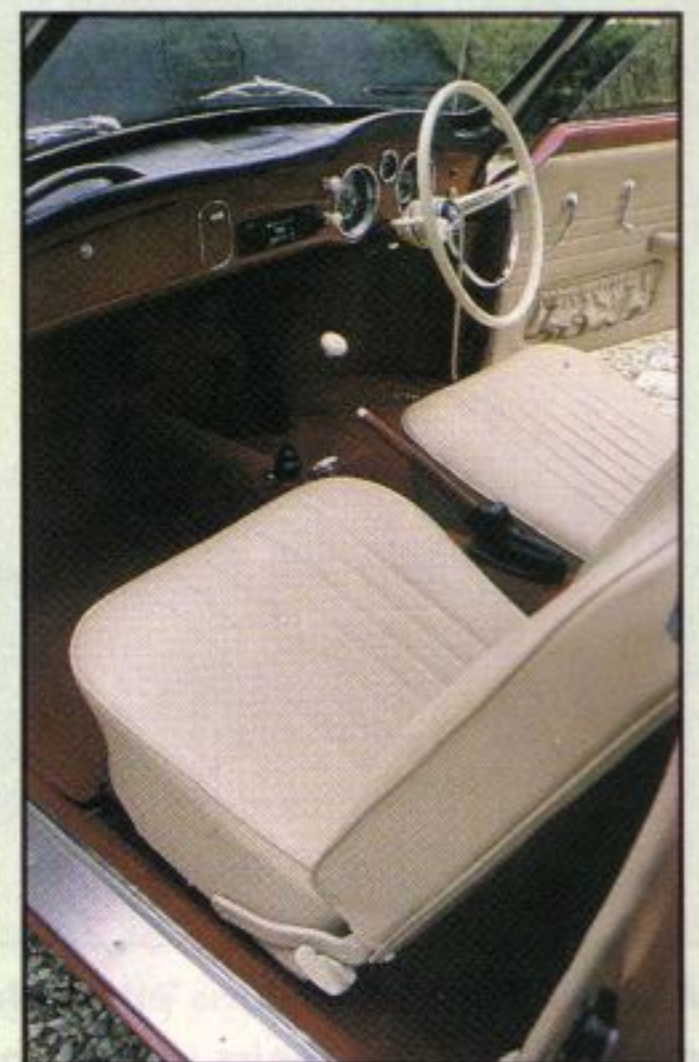
Left, non-original 1,285cc engine was stripped and rebuilt. Below, the 'original' blue colour scheme was dropped in favour of VW Ruby red





**Above, dream machine: the finished Karmann Ghia three years later.**

**Left and right, it can now boast good quality mechanics and a beautifully finished interior and, of course, plenty of style**



## KARMANN YEARS

on Karmann Ghias is caused by the car's rear-mounted engine configuration. "With it hanging out of the back, it pulls the rear end down," Richard explains. "If the sills become weak the car can banana a bit and the door gaps open up at the top, especially on the cabriolets." This is obviously a recognised fault, since the factory workshop manual carefully explains how to unbolt the rear body-mounting points and pack them up to flex the body straight again. It actually advises the owner to use pieces of metal left over from the addition of a sunroof.

When it came to choosing the car's colour, Mark and Lin were torn. They did consider putting it back to its original blue, but eventually decided to go their own way. "We weren't sure what was the original colour anyway, so we looked at other colours for that year, but they didn't seem right either," Lin explains. Eventually they chose a genuine Volkswagen Ruby Red, which was offered on 1963 cars, combined with a white roof.

Mark decided to tackle the mechanical aspects of the car himself as he was once a mobile mechanic; the couple originally met when he was trying to resurrect Lin's battered Mini. He went right through the Karmann Ghia's suspension and braking

system, replacing worn items where it was necessary.

When the car had been dismantled originally, Mark had removed most of the wiring loom apart from those sections which ran inside the sills. The loom, basically from a standard VW Beetle, had not been hacked about and was in reasonable condition, give or take a few terminals, but Mark confesses he was surprised at the general untidiness of it for a German car.

The 1,285cc engine was stripped and checked, but it required little more than new piston rings and bearing shells. The way the replacement power unit had been plumbed in gave more cause for concern, however. "They had modified a Beetle air filter in such a way that it wasn't filtering any air at all," Mark explains. The heat exchanger from the later engine was also different and had to be modified to fit the existing pipework on the car.

"When they changed the engine they must have changed the gearbox at the same time", Mark continues, "and put 1971 driveshafts in, which are 1.5in different in length and have a four-stud hub rather than five. Fortunately I managed to get hold of some driveshafts from a 1962 car and they slotted straight in with no problem."

Like the bodywork, the interior also needed major surgery. The seats and carpets had simply rotted away from standing for so long, but it was also all light blue, so not particularly suitable for the Karmann Ghia's new exterior paint scheme. To begin with Mark and Lin took the seat frames and what was left to a

local trimmer, but without success. "He wanted a fortune to do it – if he wanted to do it at all." Eventually they went to Bernard Newbury in Southend, who came highly recommended by Richard King.


Bernard made up complete seat covers from scratch, including new ones for the rear bench seat, which originally was rather plain. New backs for the side trim panels had to be made up where water seepage had caused the old hardboard panels to buckle and swell. The Earls could not find new door armrests of the right size, so had to re-cover the originals using offcuts from the rest of the interior.

The carpets were a modified version of an American set and were not entirely satisfactory, as the left- and right-hand-drive models are not mirror images of each other. "The pedal layout on the right-hand-drive cars isn't the same, and the 1961 cars are different again," Mark explains.

One of the most frustrating areas was fitting the new headlining, which Mark and Lin secured into place with bulldog clips so the positioning could be corrected before they finally glued it in. "There always seemed to be one wrinkle you couldn't get out," Lin reports. "We'd go away and leave it for another night, then come back again and think no, it's not right and start all over again."

Some of the interior instruments had suffered, but fortunately the main pieces, like the speedometer, are almost identical to the Beetle of the same year. Although not exact, one would have to be a real fanatic to notice it. Otherwise the only parts Mark and Lin have had trouble getting are some of the chrome trims. They managed to get all the exterior chrome they required, including one rear quarter bumper; these are becoming increasingly rare and expensive. The large Karmann Ghia badge on the engine lid had survived intact. "They're like hen's teeth," Mark comments. "The later ones were reduced in size by two inches and you can get those, but these earlier badges are non-existent."

The Karmann Ghia was finally returned to the road in October 1991 – its first time back on tarmac for ten years. The only problem since then has been with some five-to-four stud converters which the Earls bought to fit a different set of wheels to the car. These had to be machined down to fit under the rear wheelarches and were not done straight so that a violent rear wheel wobble resulted.

Mark and Lin are justifiably proud of the end result of their labours. Their Volkswagen Karmann Ghia coupé is on the road all the year round, although they avoid taking it out during the worst of the winter weather – that fate is reserved for Lin's old orange Beetle. 



**Above, Karmann Ghias enjoy similar cult status to their Beetle cousins; owners Mark and Lin Earl use theirs throughout the year**