

A DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

A classic car is like a precious stone, says automobile enthusiast Francois Graff. Restoring it is about recognising beauty, then polishing it till shines, as the story of this Aston Martin shows

WORDS SIMON DE BURTON PHOTOGRAPHY DK ENGINEERING



Above: Francois Graff with his Gullwing Mercedes
Opposite: His Aston Martin DB5 GT, undergoing a 'body-off job' and ground-up rebuild

Francois Graff shares a love of high-performance automobiles with his father, Laurence. But it was relatively recently that Graff's CEO became hooked on classics, following a chance encounter with a 1960s Ferrari on a London street.

"I'd never thought classic cars were worth collecting until nine years ago, when I first set eyes on a Ferrari 275 GTB. I stopped to look at it and, about 10 minutes later, I realised I was still looking at it. Something just clicked, and I understood why people want to own these amazing pieces of art," says Francois.

Having realised there was no going back, he began to research the Ferrari marque and the 275 GTB in particular, before purchasing an exceptional concours-standard example in the United States – a move that established a collecting passion that has since led to an interest in other blue-chip makes, notably Aston Martin.

Like many Aston enthusiasts, Francois's holy grail was at first the DB5 – the car made famous as 007's wheels. He managed to acquire an excellent example but, while studying its history, learnt of its exotic predecessor, the even more rare and valuable DB4 GT. Based on the DB4, which was produced between 1958 and 1963, the GT went on sale in 1959 as a high-performance version with a more powerful engine, a shorter chassis and a lightweight aluminium bodywork. Just 75 were made, with the standard body having been styled by the coachbuilders Touring of Milan, 19 more having been modified by Zagato and one by Bertone – the celebrated Jet coupé auctioned by Bonhams for £3.2m in 2013.

"The DB4 GT is the most beautiful Aston," says Francois. "It's shorter, lighter and subtler than the DB5, yet it was a serious competition car and fast in its day. I'd describe it as a delicate brute."

He began his quest for a DB4 GT in 2012, when he says the market for such rarities was "on fire". "I saw one advertised, called to enquire and made an offer I thought fair. But the man selling it was so disgusted, he put the phone down!" he recalls.

In 2015, however, James Cottingham of respected classic-car restorers DK Engineering, managed to track down what proved to be the ideal DB4 GT – in Australia. "We found it through our





1



2

“I like cars to be as they were intended.
A restoration such as this is like transforming
a diamond from rough to D Flawless”



3



4



5

network of contacts and, from the description we’d been given, it seemed the perfect fit for Francois,” says James. “He didn’t want a car that had been fully restored, but it did have to be genuine. This one had never been ‘got at’ and, despite having been used for competition, had gone on to lead an easy life as a road car, which is rare – many DB4 GTs were raced hard.

“As with many of the best classic cars, this DB4GT has an interesting history, which included three years in the ownership of the celebrated former Jaguar and Ferrari racing driver Peter Sutcliffe, who bought it for £1,200 in 1964 after seeing it advertised in *Motorsport*. He used it for the next three years as his means of getting to race meetings all over Europe and reported that it was superbly reliable. It went to Australia in 1971 and changed hands in 1978, remaining with that owner for 25 years before being sold to a racehorse breeder, who sold it to us.”

It did not appear to have been damaged, but after 60 years, was in need of thorough restoration. Francois commissioned DK Engineering to carry out a ‘body-off job’ and ground-up rebuild.

“These cars were expected to last no more than 20 years,” says James. “Taking everything back to the bare bones meant we could carry out the type of rebuild François wanted and return the car to its correct Desert White colour scheme. We also upgraded the engine from 3.7 to 4.7 litres to make it more suitable for modern driving. Other than that, and changing the colour of the upholstery from black to Suede Green, it’s absolutely standard.”

The best restorations are, in a sense, unobtrusive. They bring a classic car back to the state in which it left the factory, only perhaps subtly enhanced or invisibly improved. But this involves painstaking, highly skilled work. Every component is removed before the body is stripped back to bare metal and the rebuild commences from scratch, using as many original parts as possible or, where necessary, replacement factory items or exact, hand-made replicas. That sounds like a straightforward process, but clearly engineering authentic replicas of components made decades ago can present unique technical challenges that must be overcome. In this case, the engine and gearbox were rebuilt from the ground up to better-than-new specification and the interior was re-trimmed to Francois’s chosen colour scheme using period-correct hides and carpets.

Francois admits that white is “not the most obvious colour” for a DB4 GT, but he believes it separates this car from the rest. “It was how it left the factory and, for me, originality is key. I don’t mind if a sensible modification is hidden or if a change is made that complies with the original specification but, otherwise, I like cars to be as they were intended. A restoration such as this is like transforming a diamond from rough to D Flawless.”

Now, after around 2,500 hours of meticulous work, Francois is ready to enjoy driving his Desert White DB4 GT, which, as these photographs show, is a “delicate brute” that any classic-car fan would surely love to befriend.

1. The leather seats after restoration. 2. The DB4 GT’s vast wood-rimmed steering wheel and seven-dial dashboard. 3. The enhanced engine after restoration. 4. The boot space, filled completely with a spare wheel and an aluminium fuel tank with a massive capacity for long-distance racing. 5. The car, after its thorough and sympathetic restoration