



# THE REAL MEANING OF TLC

Robert Gant started specialising in Porsches over 35 years ago, and rumour says he's never removed his hat since!

**Total loving care for your Porsche, by the man in the flat cap**

Words: Paul Davies Photos: Michael Ward, John Colley, Gantspeed

From what you read and see, you'd be excused if you thought there are quite a few people dotted around the UK who restore older Porsches. But Robert Gant doesn't agree. The man in the flat cap is of the opinion that there are many Porsche specialists who'll refurbish a Porsche, but very few capable of carrying out full-on restoration projects.

That flat cap is well known in Porscheworld. You'll see it at shows and rallies, and even in the man's office in Mareham le Fen in deepest Lincolnshire. He never takes it off. It's his trademark. Does he sleep in it, I wonder?

Got a 356 or early g11 that needs a lot of tender loving care? Go and talk to the chap over there, the one in the flat cap. He's the one with years of experience restoring Porsches, the chassis jigs, the fabrication shop that makes its own body panels, the machine shop, the engine and transmission building room, and the workshop so clean you could eat your breakfast off the floor.

Gantspeed has been around Porsches for over 35 years. Back in the eighties, I remember, he fettled the g11 that

Richard Hudson Evans used to win one of the earliest Historic Rally championships, and sometime around '95 he gave the g12 I was about to buy a critical once-over.

I bought the car and enjoyed it, so when a lady driver ran into the front outside Tesco, I got Robert to cart it away (discreetly in a covered trailer) for repair. More recently, just a few years ago, he carried out a full-on service of my Carrera 3.2.

I've come to respect Robert and his four-man team. And so have many others who have bothered to make the pilgrimage to the flat (we're talking geographically here, not sartorially) county in eastern England. Gantspeed carries on repair and service jobs on any age of Porsche, but there's little doubt the real mission in life is to care for older cars. Complete restoration projects, refurbishments, engine and transmission re-builds, competition preparation, development... they do the lot.

Robert came to Porsches via the rally route. As an engineer at Ford's engineering facility at Dunton, Essex, he took to self-prepping Anglias and Escorts in his spare time



**Gantspeed-prepared 'Mollie' 356 (top) completed the Peking-Paris Rally in 2007, and is soon to return under new ownership for more work**

**The g16 recreation (above) was a long-term project and fitted with Gantspeed-prepared Carrera 2.7 RS power unit**

**Paul Croves (above right) gets to work on a g28 engine rebuild. He ended up in Russia rebuilding Mollie's power unit during the Peking-Paris**

to throw around country lanes at night and attack trees on special stages. He began fixing cars for other people, starting up his own business working from his father's garage at home. Gantspeed moved into its current premises in 1978.

Early on Robert fettled cars of many makes, although usually they were of the sporting kind. Then a g11 came in with a noisy engine. 'I was so excited, I was going to work on a Porsche', says Robert. 'We took it to pieces and found it had been run with no oil and was completely knackered. The owner didn't like the cost of a rebuild, so he took it away in a box.'

That was the start of things, explains Robert. 'After that first g11 someone brought a 2.4 E along for a service, later I bought it and then sold it. We began to get known as people who did things to Porsches.'

An advert was placed, and more work arrived in the Lincolnshire fens. At the same time Robert was getting frustrated with attempts to obtain the required technical information and parts for some of the other specialist

marques that came in the workshop. 'I came into work one morning, looked around and the Porsches outnumbered the other makes. I said to Paul Croves – who still works for me – we're going to become Porsche specialist.'

Specialise they have done, to very good effect. I've visited Gantspeed when there's been nine 356 models on the premises in various stages of work in progress. At the same time there's been at least a couple of early g11s, a g28 or two, and even the odd g14.

What seemed almost a permanent fixture at Mareham le Fen was one particular g14, skulking in a corner, slowly growing square-shape wheel arches and air dams, and a roll cage, over some five years or more. Alongside was a long-completed Carrera 2.7RS engine. Ultimately it all came together as a g16 recreation.

The 'g16' was one of Robert's total projects, although it wasn't a simple customer car job. It started as such, but as the bodyshell was reduced to its basic bits, and mission creep set in with the mechanical specification, the owner got cold feet. Robert took over to complete



the work. Driving it was a real experience, and it's no wonder the silver car was rapidly snapped up when it came on the open market.

Taking a 356, early 911, or 914, to the man with the flat cap and saying, 'please restore this,' is likely to need a degree of courage. Robert believes in explaining in detail what may be required to complete a project. He'll show the owner photographs of just what may lurk underneath when the body has been low-density media blasted, and what will be required to put things right. He'll then pose the question, 'if the body is restored, will you be happy with tatty trim and tired mechanics?'

For most people it's an education process that all too often can be painful on the pocket. In extreme cases (not 'often', most, if it's a 356) he'll be talking of a 12-months job, and a six-figure bill. The end result will be worthwhile, but it's no surprise that sometimes owners start projects and take a breather half way through while they re-group their funds.

Which is where we get to this business of restoration or refurbishment. 'There's a huge misconception about what is a restoration. I get people saying they want a car restored, but when I ask exactly what they require they think all that is needed is a little bit of trim work, some paint and, perhaps, repairs to the brakes. That's just cosmetics and minor mechanical work; that's refurbishment,' says Robert.

He is particularly scathing about cars he sees advertised as fully restored, 'when really all that's happened has been a re-spray and the use of a lot of underseal over the cracks.' Much of the restoration work done at Gantspeed is putting right what has been done before, badly, he says.

Current projects at Gantspeed include a '59 Cabriolet 356. As an original right-hand drive car it's pretty rare and so, presumably, considered by the owner worthy of a year-long restoration. As often, rust was rampant. A complete new front section came direct from Porsche while new door skins and a front (luggage) lid were obtained from other sources, and the whole rear end had to be cut away. The original steel was so perforated with rust holes it has been suggested this car should be nicknamed 'Tetley'. As in tea bag, if you follow the thinking.

Although many original panels are still available for the 356, the stock is – understandably – diminishing. Replicas of some sections (of varying quality – it's important to be able to tell the good from the bad, says Robert) are manufactured, but more often nowadays Gantspeed makes its own replacements.

What else was ongoing at Mareham le Fen when we visited? In addition to cars in for general repair and service, was a 928 in for a complete engine rebuild, and a 914 being prepared for road/rally use. The immaculate and shiny Mercedes 190SL you may spot in our pictures; that

*Top left: the Gantspeed team, from the left: Dave Reynolds, Michael Boseley, David Cook, Paul Croves, Robert Gant*

*Right hand drive 356 Cabriolet (above) under-goes a full restoration. Gantspeed fabricates many panels in-house*

*911T bodyshell (top) has been stripped - now waiting for someone to commission a project as a road or competition car*

**CONTACTS**  
Gantspeed Engineering,  
Chapel Lane, Mareham le Fen,  
Lincolnshire PE22 7PZ  
Tel: 01507 568474  
Website:  
[www.gantspeed.co.uk](http://www.gantspeed.co.uk)

was a non-Porsche restoration of some 25 years ago.

There's also an early, right-hand drive, 911T reduced to its component parts and just waiting to be a project. 'Someone had found the car in what seemed to be bad condition, and thought it would only be of use for spares. But in reality it turned out to be too good to break up, so I bought it. We've dismantled the car and carried out the necessary repairs to the body – it's waiting for a customer to come along and we'll build it into whatever they want, race, rally or just a road car.'

Other recently completed projects included a 356 Speedster, now departed to its owner, and a 911S Targa that was waiting for collection when photographer Michael Ward was doing his rounds. On the oily side of things (although the last thing you're likely to find on the workshop floor is a spot of oil) a recent 3.0 RSR engine build for Steve Perez was reported to be performing well in historic rallying. Oh yes, a four-cam 356 Carrera unit now sits patiently on a stand following a complete rebuild waiting for a bodyshell. You won't see one of those in many Porsche specialist's workshops.

Apart from paintwork, which is carried out by a trusted associate nearby, almost everything is done on site at Gantspeed. All the technicians are multi-skilled, and Robert himself is also very much hands on – cap firmly in place, of course.

Whilst Paul Croves, the man present when Robert made

the seminal decision to be a Porsche specialist, has been with Gantspeed for over 25 years, a more recent addition is Dave Reynolds, who fills the post of business manager. He worked at Ford Engineering at the same time as Robert and also cut his teeth rallying, this time with a Hillman Imp.

Dave's experience means that customers have a technically-minded person as their first port of call, and he also has the ability to take control of projects. Like the ongoing development of Tim Bryan's club racing 928, which has included conversion to throttle body induction and a free-flow exhaust manifold.

They see the world at Gantspeed, as Dave Reynolds and Paul Croves will tell you. 'Mollie' (another nickname, this time a 356 that earned its moniker because of the number of Mole wrenches – or vice-grips – that held the panels together during restoration) tackled the 2007 Peking-Paris rally, but suffered engine failure after a marshal unwisely advised the crew to remove the carburettor air filters in the Gobi Desert. A satellite phone call had Dave and Paul flying out to Russia with a suitcase of spares to rebuild the engine in the workshop of the Porsche dealer in Yekaterinburg!

Mollie finished the 35-day, 12,642kms (8300 miles), marathon. In fact she's been sold, and is soon to return for an overhaul so that her new owner can take her rallying. Obviously, someone must have recommended the man in the flat cap... **CP**