

# THE COLONEL'S SPECIAL RECIPE

In the 1950s globetrotting former Coldstream Guard Rixon Bucknall used military precision to create an amazing Vintage-style tourer with state-of-the-art Jaguar bits, as **Martin Port** explains

PHOTOGRAPHY TONY BAKER





Clockwise, from top: In '57 Bucknall drove the car on an Alpine passes tour taking in the Stelvio among others. Here he loads it on to the deck of *Dinard* at Boulogne; lunch stop near Meaux; vents from the engine bay direct hot air to aid windscreen demisting; modified SS radiator carries Colonel's moniker



Time travel is traditionally best embarked on by those of an eccentric nature. Arguably the most famous fictional exponent, timelord *Doctor Who*, travelled the solar system and beyond in a master-stroke of deception: a shabby, dated police box fitted with mechanicals capable of the most astonishing speed – leaping aeons in one swoop. But had the good Doctor been limited to 1950s nuts and bolts, there's a strong chance that his existence would have borne a more than passing resemblance to one Colonel Rixon Bucknall, formerly of the Coldstream Guards. This intrepid individual decided to create an automobile capable of spanning generations with a unique blend of cutting-edge mechanicals clad in an exterior from a past life.

Bucknall was born to parents whose idea of horsepower was 12 of them in the stables, yet no car. Fortunately for Bucknall, his uncles Ernest and Leslie (both founder members of the RAC) had embraced the motoring new age and provided Rixon with his first experiences of horseless carriages in the early 1900s. At the age of 13, the motorcycle provided him with youthful thrills – often riding his cousin's 1912 Douglas or 1914 TT Rudge among others on the mile-long drive of Langley Court, Beckenham. In 1923 he could be seen taking part in the Camberley and District MCC speed hillclimb on Chobham Ridges, but his first motor car came in

the form of a 1925 Morris Cowley two-seater. It was replaced by an Anzani-engined Crouch built to order by the Coventry factory that was probably Bucknall's first foray into 'specials': the body was to be a boat-tail coupé with the headlights mounted lower than normal and painted in pale cream with cherry red wings. This was followed by a brace of Riley Nines, an Avon Standard Coupé, two Wolseley Hornet Eustace Watkins tourers, a Singer Big Six Continental and then Bucknall's first Jaguar: a 1½-litre SS saloon.

Fast forward to 1955 and, having enjoyed and often endured an impressive list of vehicles, Bucknall was driven by the desire to build something rather special that fulfilled a personal brief. He found that 'modern' cars lacked the charm and allure of their predecessors, but equally that Vintage machinery clearly lacked the performance of '50s sports cars. So the single-minded Colonel set out on a journey that would realise his ambition to build a Vintage tourer in appearance, but with mechanicals and performance to match its younger rivals.

First up was the chassis. After ideas including a Bentley Continental (too bulky to tackle the steep mountain passes on his planned foreign excursions), Frazer Nash (it didn't offer more than 2 litres) and Aston Martin (18-month wait), it was left to Jaguar. The firm recalled that Bucknall was one of William Lyons' oldest customers,





Below: 3.4-litre XK140 unit, modified to C-type spec with straight-port head. At one stage, Bucknall fitted carb trumpets which meant cutting a flap into the side of the bonnet; tailor-made stowage for boot polish kit; twin fuel tanks gave a two-gallon reserve. Bottom: badge of Coldstream Guards



having ordered a Swallow sidecar in 1922, agreed to co-operate and provide the basis for Bucknall's unique project. In January 1956, Jaguar issued an XK140 chassis – reportedly the sole chassis-only sale permitted by the Browns Lane firm – and a 3.4-litre power unit modified to C-type specification, and capable of 130mph.

Next up was the body. Bucknall again approached various coachbuilders. Initially Hoopers agreed, but two days later wrote to the Colonel and informed him that it had changed its mind – odd seeing as Bucknall made no secret of the fact that he had an 'open' chequebook for this work of heart. He approached 39 firms in all and eventually the boss of Hastings Motor Sheet Metal Works, Lesley Tye, signed up and agreed to see the project through.

The Colonel came to Tye with just a handful of photographs showing what appears to be an MG 18/80 with body by Carbodies, registration MG 469, and several sheets of A4 paper containing copious notes explaining specific details that he wanted included in the design. One of Tye's then employees was Alan Jenner who had joined the company after leaving the army to help fabricate the bodies for the last six HRGs. Jenner recalls Bucknall and his car with great fondness: "The first job that the Colonel insisted upon was that the chassis had to have two coats of battle-ship grey paint – nothing else would suffice.

Fortunately we had a young apprentice – it's a job that he still thinks about today!"

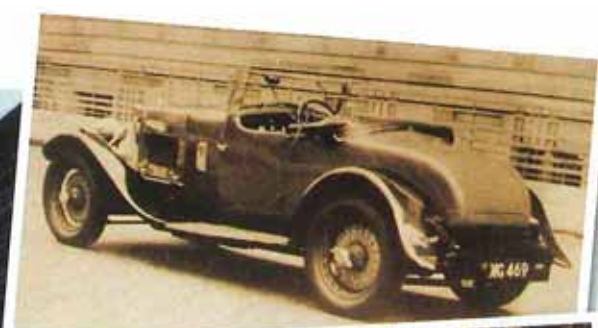
Using cardboard and wire templates to mock up the specifics of the body design, Tye, Jenner and Bucknall began a process of negotiation that resulted in the initial coachwork. "Bucknall was very open to most of our suggestions," Jenner confirms. "Neither of us was afraid to say if we saw something we didn't like, which I think is why the finished result was so successful." With the basics agreed, Hastings Motor Sheet Metal Works (which later bodied the Ford GT70), set to building the frame out of 1in, 16 gauge mild-steel angle sections. The body itself was formed from 16 gauge aluminium and, within the space of several months and with regular visits from the Colonel, the car was ready for painting and trimming. Bucknall was specific about the colour scheme: it had to match the red and black of his beloved Coldstream Guards uniform – this was a man proud of his military record.

Trimming was done by another local firm, Uptons, but the design was hardly straightforward – Bucknall's requirements for the practicality of this one-off were exacting if nothing else. The list is impressive: behind the front seats there's a leather-clad tube housing a spare halfshaft; in front of that is a third seat for a sideways passenger; and underneath is a locker for a spare inner tube, fan belt, hose connections and

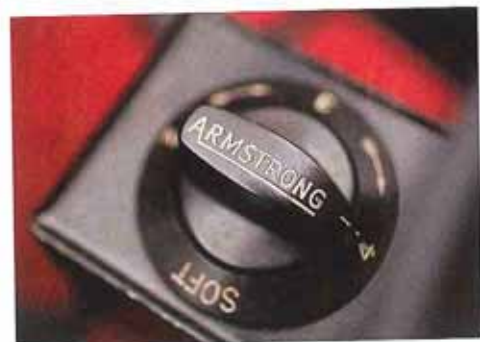


cleaning materials. In the boot there is tailor-made storage for the Colonel's service-issue shoe polishing kit and umbrella. Spare gaskets lie beneath the rubber mat and there's another locker for spares – thermostat, bulbs and black lead for the tyres. Bucknall's desire for everything on the car to be just so was insatiable, but purpose-driven – that he chose the Pyrénées for its maiden trip comes as little surprise.

During the final stages of the car's construction Bucknall became friends with Bill Slack, workshop manager at nearby Caffyns. They clicked from the off. Slack was passionate about Jaguars and took an immediate interest in Bucknall's project. After the shakedown, it was Slack who suggested a handful of modifications. These



Above: Carbodies MG 18/80 inspired much of body shape. Left: Passo di Sella in Dolomites, on 1 Sept '57. Below: third seat and spare halfshaft case; numberplate and reversing lamps conceal spare wheel; adjustable Armstrong Selectaride lever-arm dampers



several other projects, including an MG 1800 with Downton-tuned engine developing 112bhp and a remarkable four-seater MGB roadster, registration UDY 606. Does it still exist?

A fresh restoration of Bucknall's bespoke tourer, registration RB 1903, was completed this year. Current owner Michael Hughes has been fortunate enough to own the car twice: this time around he was determined to bring it back to its former glory with the help of CMC in Bridgnorth, Shropshire. As we walk into the workshop, the car comes into view – poised centre stage, commanding attention despite the considerable number of cars surrounding it. The startling scarlet and highly polished black of the paintwork draws you in like a magnet, as does Bucknall's obsession with detail and provision. There is something new to see from almost any angle – it doesn't just command attention, it absorbs it. Every corner has a story to tell.

Today we have been granted guardianship of this one-off: an opportunity that's hard to resist. There is a brisk wind, so the pinstripe jacket is buttoned-up and the scarf tucked into my open-necked shirt. No tee-shirt and trainers in this car out of respect: it just wouldn't seem fitting to the Colonel's memory. You swing open the suicide door and climb in – more across than down as in most sports cars. The floorpan sits higher off the deck than you expect, but it's clearly a bonus

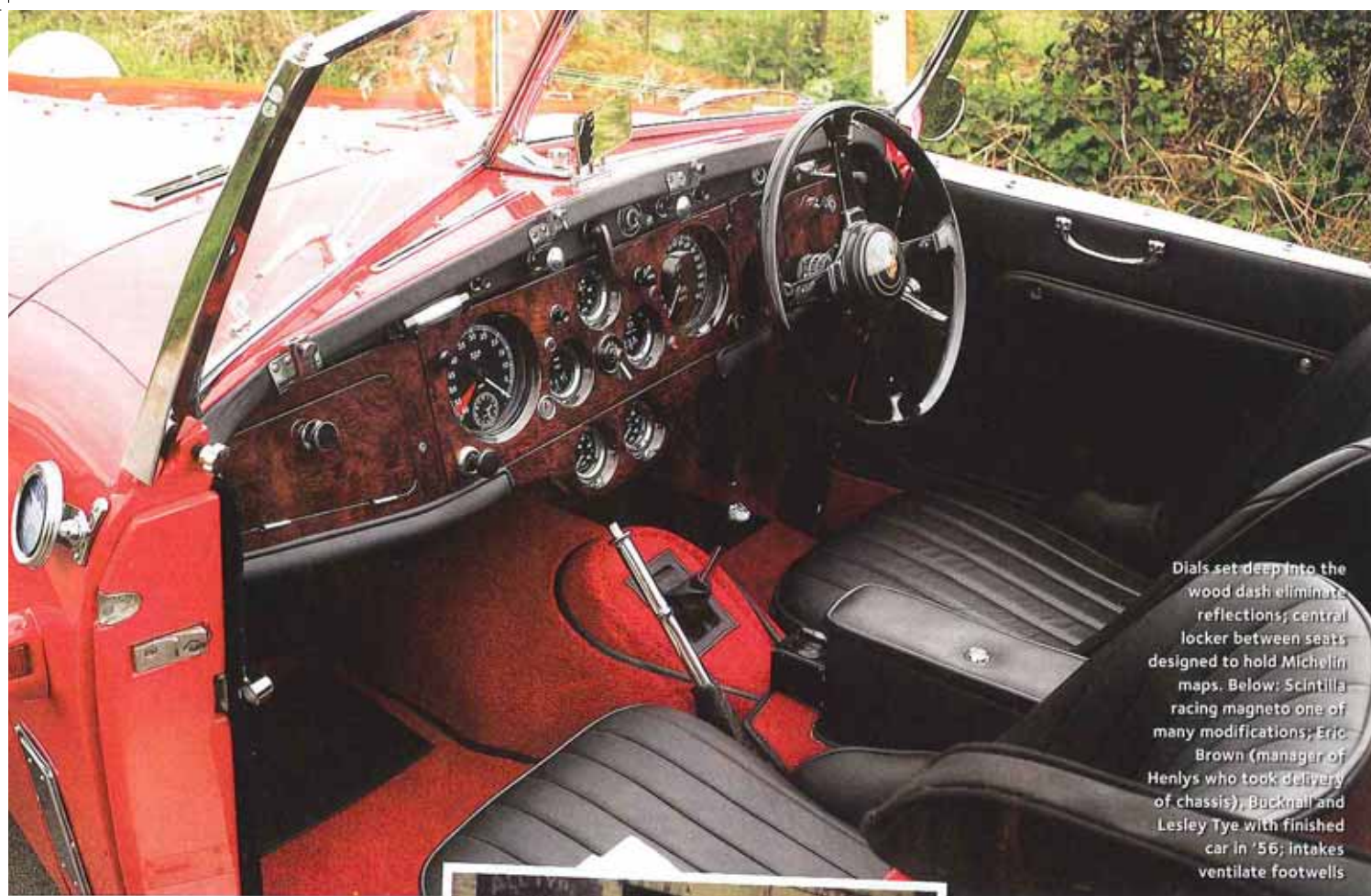
down hedged country lanes – or in the case of the car's intended purpose, the stone-walled hairpin bends of the Stelvio pass.

Pull the switch to power-up to the magneto, turn the key in the ignition and prod the dash-mounted starter button to hear the 3.4-litre engine roar into life before settling down to a familiar idle – the sound alone confirms that this is a car with pedigree.

Manhandle the large four-spoked steering wheel, dip the firm clutch and guide the lever into reverse and you instantly notice just how smooth, precise and relatively light the 'change is. This stubby selector encourages instinctive changes with the close-ratio Moss 'box. Already you are at home – everything feels intentionally right: at the right height or in the right place and just where you'd like it to be. The layout is clearly not an accident. By his own admission, Bucknall insisted that all measurements, gaps, instrument positioning and so on received considerable attention. He had ergonomics sussed before anyone else even knew what it meant.

With the hood down, visibility is almost flawless due to the flat deck. Even hood stowage doesn't interfere with your line-of-sight across the rear of the body, making manoeuvres relatively simple. The turning circle isn't fantastic by current standards, but at the time – and for a car of this size – it was more than acceptable.

included shortening the rear of the car by 3in, removing the running boards in favour of shortened cycle wings (supposedly to combat front-end lift at speed), fitting disc brakes plus uprating the engine with a straight-port head and triple carburettors. One of the main changes was to increase the rake of the front windscreen for a sportier look. It comprised two flat glass sections for easy replacement and the fixings were also swapped so that the whole unit could be removed if necessary. Bucknall's demands for as much storage as possible meant that the wind-up sidescreens were removed, introducing considerable pockets into the doors – cunningly large enough to hold the two windscreen sections when removed. Slack later helped Bucknall with



Dials set deep into the wood dash eliminate reflections; central locker between seats designed to hold Michelin maps. Below: Scintilla racing magneto one of many modifications; Eric Brown (manager of Henlys who took delivery of chassis), Bucknall and Lesley Tye with finished car in '56; intakes ventilate footwells



We're soon out of the workshop and heading in the right direction. Pulling away in first brings with it a noticeable Vintage-style whine as the earbox and rear axle wind themselves up. But as the revs rise this is soon overtaken by the incredible burble of the engine – twin exhausts sing along as you surge on before double-declutching and easing the 'box into second.

Out on quiet B-roads the illusion is complete: push the throttle towards the floor and only those familiar with the car would fail to be pleasantly surprised by just how much torque and acceleration are on tap. Push harder still, watch the rev counter rise before slipping into third and then resume the urgency. The car holds the road well, floating around corners with a well-timed ride thanks to the uprated XK140 suspension: torsion bars, Koni telescopic dampers with anti-roll bar up front and a live axle with multi-leaf springs and Armstrong Seleccide lever-arms at the back. The flat seat squab means that you need to reposition yourself a bit every now and again – not helped by the lack of seatbelts – but it is comfortable and you can well imagine touring for considerable distances, just the Colonel intended.

Instinctively, thanks to another of Bucknall's precise measurements, you extend your elbow to rest on the door capping once you are straggling along a decent straight of Tarmac, and

**'Bucknall hears a bang and, with a quick rearward glance, sees the hot Zephyr, stranded, with smoke pouring from its blown engine'**

finger-tip adjustments are all that need to be made to the steering wheel (another modified XK140 item) with your left digits. All too soon the wind is flicking your hair back, a stroke of the dash-mounted overdrive eases the revs down and you are propelled into a different time. You're overcome by the strong urge to smooth a palmful of Brylcreem through your hair, dig out your best tweed and polish your brogues. This is what the Colonel wanted: the romance and feeling that only comes with a vehicle of the Vintage era, but his genius was managing so successfully to combine it with what was then the advantage and performance of modern motor engineering.

Approach a junction and the brakes pull up sharply. The conversion from drums to discs naturally brings benefits and, although they need a heavy foot to stop this mighty monster (it weighs about 350lb more than an XK140), it's not long before confidence levels are riding high and braking happens progressively later. The rasp of the exhausts, the car's imposing presence and the astounding performance of the race-spec

Jaguar twin-cam make driving Rixon Bucknall's masterpiece probably as close as you can get to feeling like a boy-racer in a Vintage car.

And there's one story that backs up those suspicions and confirms exactly what the Colonel was aiming for. A young blade in a hot Zephyr pulls up alongside RB 1903 at traffic lights and naturally thinks of this as an opportunity to demonstrate his car's ability. As the lights go green, the two cars pull away side-by-side but, as Bucknall's beast refuses to disappear into the Ford's rear-view mirror, the young man's confidence slips. As the Colonel slips the car into fourth, he's already in the mid-90s and, with foot to the floor, pulls away into the distance. Behind him, Bucknall hears a bang and, with a quick rearward glance, sees the Zephyr, stranded, with smoke pouring from its blown engine. Fact or fiction? No one seems sure, yet it feels perfectly plausible and achievable from this rather special act of automotive deception.

Back in 2006 and a gap in the traffic is approaching. With a couple of hours' driving under your belt, you know exactly what this car is capable of. So you seize the opportunity, release the clutch and press hard on the accelerator. Roaring across on to another smooth B-road, it is impossible not to glance towards the clearing sky and give a grinning salute to the Colonel and his odd, yet strangely impressive, legacy. ■