

I can see clearly now

{ of windscreens and immutable laws... }

Keith Faulkner

Economists don't restore old cars. After all, they know a thing or two about the *Law of Diminishing Returns* and will quickly tell you that, at some point, the time, effort and money you put in will not result in a proportional improvement in outcome.

Yes, the two-thousand dollars you initially spend on getting the rust cut out of the boot and bonnet will be well worth it. But later on, spending two grand to track down those rare sequentially-numbered grease-nipples fitted as factory options probably won't make much difference if you decide to put your car on eBay.

Especially as only you and the rather eccentric fellow from whom you purchased the aforementioned grease-nipples will actually know they are fitted.

This possibly explains why I never used my Economics degree but went into Information Technology instead.

You see, computer programmers don't bother too much about diminishing returns. The really good ones – the nerds' nerds – will pore for hours over thousands of lines of already-working code to optimise programmatic logic and semantic flow, simply to achieve a millisecond of

improved performance and the satisfaction of having elegant code. They know that probably no-one will even see their handiwork, but they are driven by the need for things to be as close to perfect as humanly possible. Programmers call this "refactoring".

Normal people call it barmy - especially as normal people know that the tall blond at the cocktail party isn't likely to be impressed with an explanation of how concatenating the sql-statements made three for-next loops redundant.

Normal people also buy white Toyota Corollas.

Economics graduates who go into IT, on the other hand, buy old Alfas – in my case a 1972 Spider Veloce – then they start to consider the "refactoring" possibilities.

Of course, everyone who owns and maintains a classic car already understands this. Once the initial restoration is complete, tiny little things that were accepted during the restoration phase now assume gargantuan proportions. That scuff mark on a badge didn't seem important when there were panels rotten with rust that had to be resurrected. One indicator lens

slightly more faded than the other seemed inconsequential when the entire gearbox needed rebuilding.

Owners of the most fastidiously-restored cars seem to suffer from this malady the most. I have talked to Club members whose cars leave me speechless with admiration, yet they will candidly point out “flaws” that would be completely invisible except to the eyes of a trained concourse judge.

My own Spider has had, thankfully, most of the “big stuff” done – and done reasonably well – by previous owners. The car scrubs up nicely for general use and the occasional Show ‘n Shine display. By taking second, third and fourth mortgages on my house and selling my first-born into servitude with a drug-baron living in an Orkney Islands tax-haven, I could probably bring it up to genuine Pebble Beach standard.

I can see they row of trophies lining my living room shelves now.

Alas, such a dream may have to wait until I have retired on the millions I will undoubtedly make from a lifetime of shrewd investments.

In the meantime, I am not immune to having that annoying voice in my head nagging me about the “little things” on my car that other Alfisti must surely notice every time I take the car out. They *must* see

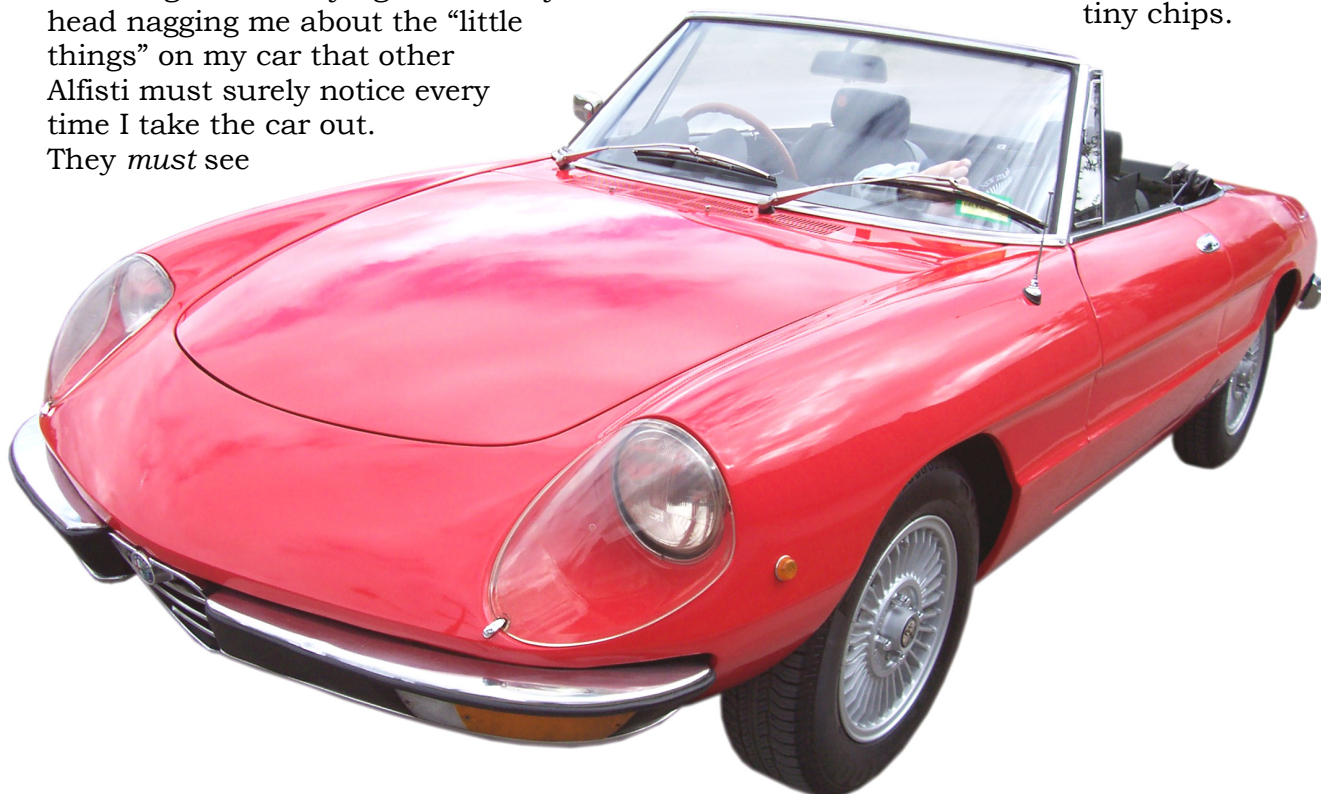
the slight discolouration of the backing silver on the rear-vision mirror? Or the worn chrome on the hand-brake lever? Or the slight crazing on the grill badge? They are probably just too polite to say anything.

Or equally paranoid about self-imagined flaws on their own cars.

Unlike friends and family, of course, who lack such discretion. Especially the children. An eight year old will happily point out a perished rubber on a bumper-bar mount to a crowd of adults. Loudly.

Which brings me – finally – to the topic of this article. One of the many items on my “little things” list for my Spider has been the windscreen. The original glass had been replaced in June 1992 by the first owner. The second owner had a large scratch removed in March 2000, leaving, as these things do, a slight visual imperfection in the area of repair.

Undeniably, the windscreen was still serving its primary purpose, that of keeping the wind, rain and bugs on the outside of the car separated from the occupants on the inside of the car, but it had also continued to collect its fair share of scratches and tiny chips.



Particularly annoying was an arc of a scratch about eight inches long on the driver's side where at some time in the past a wiper rubber had parted company with the wiper arm during operation, leaving the subsequent gouge in the glass surface.

Most of the small scratches and chips were normally not noticeable, except when driving at sunset, during the night or during rain – precisely the times when you need the best visibility.

So, the old windscreen had to go. As the car's new annual registration sticker had just arrived in the mail, I thought it an opportune time to have the windscreen replaced before applying the new label.

Despite the Spider being close to forty years old, I didn't really think it would be too difficult to have a replacement screen fitted. Glass, even laminated glass, is a relatively simple affair and the Spider's windscreen is devoid of modern complexities such as inbuilt aerials, rain sensors and tinted bands. At the worst, I thought I would need to wait a couple of weeks until a custom screen was cut.

When I was editor of the Club magazine, many years back, a small business approached me regarding advertising in the magazine. Their specialty was custom auto glass – the proprietor advised me that it was no problem to form and cut just about any windscreen for any classic car. If he didn't already have the template, he could make one from the car.

Now, this is one of the things I find fascinating about restoring and maintaining old cars. I call it the *Law of Inverse Simplicity*. Parts or work you would think should be a simple task to find or have done turn out to be not so. And things you think will be soul-shatteringly difficult to

acquire can be bought for tuppence at the local Woolworths.

For instance, enquiries at a specialist supplier about the chance of obtaining a couple of M6 fine threaded bolts might be met with pursed lips and sharp intake of breath:

"Ooo.. err.. M6 eh? That's a tough one. Don't get much call for those around here."

"Not much call? It's probably the single most common bolt used in the civilised world!"

"Not round here it ain't, Guv."

Whereas, having almost given up trying to find a couple of small zed-shaped clips to hold an obscure electrical connector in place, the bloke who comes to fix your photocopier suddenly pulls a box of them from his toolbox.

"These things? Yeah, they're a standard item in every printer and photocopier on the planet. How many dozen do you want?"

So, because I knew that replacing the Spider's windscreen should be

simple, I also knew that it probably wouldn't be. I was sort of right.

My first thought was to call one of the most well-known auto glass replacement firms. O, you probably can guess which one I mean. They seemed helpful at first, but it soon transpired that their process wasn't going to get any results. Unless you count frustration.

Basically, it goes something like this: they need to get the original manufacturer's part number for your car so they can cross-reference it to their own part number for the appropriate screen they fabricate themselves. They get the OEM part number from the manufacturer by providing them with the VIN number of your car. Apparently, no other information will do.

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Now, it seems the VIN number of my car doesn't match what Alfa Romeo Australia has on file. Uncommon, but not unknown, as most Alfisti will understand; there is more than one Alfa that doesn't exist, according to official records. What did surprise me, however, was the auto glass company's insistence that Alfa Romeo Australia, without the VIN, had no idea what the windscreen part number was for a 105 Series Alfa Spider – one of the longest-running models in Alfa's history!

"Not round here it ain't, Guv."



Above: No VIN, no help!

After a couple of days of trying to sort this out with the auto glass company, it all seemed rather silly, so I gave it up as a bad joke.

I decided to contact another Spider owner in the Club, Laurie Jones, to find out how he had arranged for the recent replacement of his windscreen. Laurie and Mary-Alice had returned from their adventures in the African Rally with a slightly bent Spider and a cracked windscreen. An email to Laurie confirmed that his car's glass had been replaced without too much fuss and drama by an auto glass firm at Redland Bay.

While doing a quick internet search for this company, I came across listings for RACQ Auto Glass. Now, although I am a RACQ Gold member, and have all my insurance with them, for some reason it didn't cross my mind to consider whether they offered

windscreen replacement as a service! The insurance cover I have chosen for the Spider doesn't cover "free" windscreen replacement, so I hadn't phoned RACQ to make a claim – if I had they would have no doubt steered me in the direction of one of their auto glass franchises. Live and learn.

My experience with RACQ Auto Glass turned out to be the exact opposite of the debacle with the first "expert" company. A call to the RACQ Call Centre had me switched to a fitting centre closest to where I live. The chap there took the details of my car – make, model, year – and rang me back fifteen minutes later to confirm price and availability.

Interestingly, he didn't seem to need the car's VIN number, the address of my dentist, my blood type, nor the number of shelves in my refrigerator.

Admittedly, he did ask whether the car had recessed or protruding door handles. Of all the features and specifications that distinguish a blunt Kamm-tail Spider from the original round-tail model, I wouldn't have picked the door handles as the most notable item, but his source of information obviously knew that the two models took different windscreens, so I wasn't complaining.

The quoted price for supply and fitting, including my RACQ member discount, was reasonable I thought – under \$300 – so I booked the car in for the following Friday.

Naturally, the following Friday turned out to be rainy, just the sort of weather for driving an old convertible through peak-hour traffic to have its windscreen ripped out! I pulled into the RACQ Auto Glass fitting centre at Paisley Drive, Lawnton at 8am and was directed into the fitting bay.

I find it quite typical that driving an old car into a place even remotely associated with the automotive industry usually generates some genuine interest. Unless the staff is made up of frustrated home cooks

waiting for their big break on Master Chef, most of the people are probably working with, or around, cars because they have at least a passing interest in things automotive. Driving an old classic Ford into even the most biased Holden dealer will likely have a mechanic or two wander out to have a curious poke under the bonnet.

So, capitalising on the fact that a pretty little 1970s red Italian convertible probably made a pleasant change from the usual bleak stream of silver/grey/black moderns, I politely enquired of the Business Manager, John Wilson, if I could take a few photos of the work in progress.

While I have often been allowed into workshops for such a purpose, I still don't take it for granted. With huge public liability insurance premiums and an increasingly litigious social culture, it is only normal that a business wants to keep the Public as far away as possible from tools, machines and sharp objects.

Luckily, after John decided I wasn't a Workplace Health and Safety Inspector in disguise, he generously agreed I could make some quick trips into the fitting bay with my camera.

In the workshop, the first order of business for one of John's expert fitters was to place protective covers over the bonnet and seats. Next, the wiper arms were carefully removed, then the stainless-steel windscreen trim.



Above: Car prepped and stainless steel windscreen trim removed.

The twelve retaining screws were backed-out to release the four individual sections making up the surround. The trim was laid out on a table, inspected and cleaned of any windscreen sealant and crud adhering to it. John wandered back into the workshop to check on things and noticed that a piece of the trim had some barely-noticeable paint overspray remaining in an inconspicuous area from when the car was previously restored. He returned with a piece of fine steel wool and carefully buffed off the overspray.

Now that's service!



Above: Windscreen trim cleaned up ready for eventual refitting

Meanwhile, the fitter had removed the old windscreen and was carefully separating the rubber perimeter seal from the glass. The seal itself was in good condition, but copious amounts of sealant had been used previously, making it a laborious task to separate them and clean up the seal for reuse.



Above: Retrieving the original seal

Once the seal had been prepared and safely set aside, the fitter turned his attention to the windscreen frame. Old sealant was again carefully and laboriously cleaned away from the frame channel. The ten trim clips in the bottom channel were also removed and given the cleanup treatment before being refitted.



Above: Windscreen frame cleaned and ready for the new glass. The bottom clips hold the stainless-steel trim in place



Above: Close-up of driver's side bottom corner, showing original paint and scars from a previous windscreen replacement

With the Spider now fully prepared, it was finally time for it to be introduced to its new windscreen.

My dear old dad, a professional Master Painter-Decorator, often told me that preparation was the most important part of any job. The *Painter's Law of Preparation* stated that that if you thought you had done enough scraping, sanding and cleaning, then you were probably about half-way there! Good prep

makes for a final finish that can hide a multitude of sins. Dad reckoned his job was primarily to make the architects and builders look good by covering up all their mistakes with the final topcoat! He had learnt his trade just after the end of World War II, at a time when a good painter could still *brush-paint* a car by hand using layer after layer of slow-drying lacquer and end up with a smooth, glossy finish comparable with today's spray jobs.

That took preparation and patience.

I think my dad would have been impressed with the job being done on my Spider so far. With the care and attention to detail in the preparation, the fitting of the new windscreen proceeded smoothly and quickly.

In the space of another ten minutes, new sealant had been applied, the rubber seal refitted and the new glass bedded securely into the frame.

The trim was then reattached and the windscreen wipers reinstalled.

Unlike modern cars, with high-tech bonded screens requiring curing time, the Spider was ready to go as soon as the last piece of trim was in place.

I settled payment, thanked John and his team for their service and backed the Spider out of the fitting bay. It was still raining, which at least served to confirm on the trip home that the new screen was watertight!

With the car safely back in my dry garage, I polished the new screen inside and out and applied the new registration label. As an aside, I don't know how your rego labels fare, but mine seem to start peeling off about after about ten-months exposure in the Queensland sun!

The finishing touch was to fit a fresh set of standard 8mm wiper rubbers, and I could finally tick another item off my "little things" list.

Hmmm – speaking of the list, I really must do something about that boot lid retaining mechanism...

