



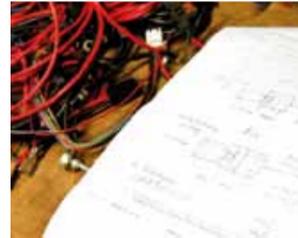
A lighter touch

You can now have your classic car converted to electric power steering. We put it to the ultimate test – a Countach

WORDS Harry Metcalfe // PHOTOGRAPHY Dean Smith and Mark Dixon

POWER STEERING CONVERSION

Right
EZ founders Ruud Jong and Roger Reijngoud will fit power steering to virtually any classic. Their technicians can usually do so in a few hours – and you don't have to go to Holland.



‘Y

OU'RE DOING WHAT?!

was the universal response fired back at me when I mentioned

I was thinking about getting power-steering fitted to my Lamborghini Countach. Interestingly, the answer was rather different when I told anyone who had actually driven a Countach; then the idea received a far more positive reaction and genuine interest in the outcome.

The eagle-eyed among you will already have spotted that the scarlet Countach QV featured here is the same one that *Octane* drove back in issue 91. Then, we gathered together four examples in Italy so that Lamborghini legend Valentino Balboni could drive them all back-to-back and declare which was the greatest Countach of them all. At the end of the day, he loved the QV but commented how 'the steering on the Countach QV has always been quite heavy, yet still reasonable'.

I think he was just being kind to an idolising owner. In reality, even the simple act of steering a Countach is challenging. Drive one along a twisting Alpine route or, heaven forbid, try parking one, and the weighty steering reduces the driver to a bundle of quivering muscle, such is the effort needed to keep twirling the wheel. So I agree more with the sentiments of the article's writer, Keith Adams, who declared the Countach's steering to be 'set-in-concrete heavy' and who concluded that power-assistance would dramatically transform the car.

And that's where this all started. Thanks to the Dutch specialist company EZ Electric Power Steering, fitting such a system to any car – even one from a time when power-assistance wasn't widely available – is now an option. Having set up in business five years ago, EZ has already built an enviable reputation for being able to fit power steering to anything from pre-war limos, classic 1960s Ferraris and Jaguars, all the way through to Group B rally cars and race cars. So, when I rang the firm, it was well up to the challenge of transforming the Lambo.

The only fly in the ointment was that, because the company had never before fitted power steering to a Countach (although it had done Miuras, 400GTs and early Diablos), I'd have to leave the car there for a couple of weeks, while it worked out the best way to do the work. One



Eurotunnel trip and a couple of hours of dreary Belgian motorway later, I'm chatting to Roger Reijngoud (one of the founders of the company, alongside technical partner Ruud Jong) inside the firm's workshop about who exactly its typical customer is. Roger reckons there's actually no such thing as a typical customer, but the one thing they all share is that they love driving.

EZ electric power steering isn't about making the steering as light as possible (although this can be done if the customer so wishes); it's all about making the car more usable. EZ regularly gets messages from owners of converted vehicles saying they've found they drive their cars way more than they ever used to, as they hadn't realised the extent to which excessively heavy steering can suppress the driving experience.

EZ converts a much wider spread of cars than I'd expected, too, and when I arrive there's both an original race Ford GT40 and a regular 1987 Porsche 911 in for work. MGBs and 'Cs are also popular, as are Ferraris from the 1960s and Jaguar XK120-150 and E-type models. However, there →



POWER-STEERING CONVERSION

Right
Ingenious power-steering system is discreet, beautifully engineered and highly effective: EZ modifies the steering column so that changes are hidden beneath the dashboard.



are other surprise beneficiaries, including a Ferrari Mondial and even an original Mini-Cooper, which I can't see benefiting much from having such a system fitted. But, according to EZ, a new generation of drivers have been brought up driving only power-assisted cars, meaning when the time comes to buy a classic, their dream is shattered when they discover just how heavy the steering is on a non-power-assisted car (these set-ups became commonplace in the mid-1990s, so your average 30-year-old may never have experienced a car without it). Tellingly, EZ does a brisk trade converting entire classic car fleets owned by hire companies, as the people renting these often fall into this age group.

As soon as my car arrives, mechanics poke inside the footwell to check how much space they've got to play with. One thing EZ insists on is that you shouldn't be able to detect visually whether or not a car is fitted with one of its systems, so installing anything under the bonnet is a no-no. The aim is to fit the set-up in the space above your shins, behind the dash but before the steering column dives through the bulkhead. A further bonus of EZ electric power-steering is that, unlike with hydraulic power steering, the original rack remains untouched.

The assistance comes from a small electric motor powering a gear fitted to the steering column via a worm drive. The amount of boost given varies according to speed thanks to a small ECU tapped into the speedo drive, and it's amazing how compact the whole assembly actually is. Generally it replaces a section of steering column, meaning the whole process is easily reversible (on the Countach it means losing the ability to have reach adjustment, but I am able to set the wheel to my liking before it gets fixed in position). Fit an on-off switch and, with it turned off, the steering remains identical to the way it left the factory.

Two weeks later, my car is ready for collection (fitting a system normally takes four to five hours – and you don't need to go to Holland, either, as EZ has licensed fitting agents around the world). I clamber in and turn on the ignition. There's a slight pause as the ECU powers up and the electric motor engages. I'm impressed by the way the system is completely silent, but the real shock comes when I turn the steering wheel and feel it smoothly glide from one lock to the other; that's properly weird.

Yet it's nothing compared with the first time I venture out onto the road. The assistance is quite marked at speeds under 10mph, but from there on in it feels less and less so. However, you don't sense the assistance falling away, because the car feels remarkably normal. If you'd never driven a Countach before you'd never suspect anything had been done, but if you're used to the sort of



steering effort needed in cars such as the Daytona, Jag Mk2 and XK150, you'd be in disbelief.

On the way home I grab a coffee at the Eurotunnel and, as I do, the train I'm meant to be on gets called. I jump back into the Countach and drive out of the car park, with coffee in hand (cup-holders are another thing missing in the Lambo). At that moment, I realise I'm the first person in the world ever to un-park and drive a Countach one-handed. It sounds silly now, but that's real-life usability for you. Combine this with being able to enjoy a challenging road more, without your shoulders wilting, and still having the original levels of feedback coming through the wheel, and I'm amazed EZ isn't even busier than it already is.

Two months on and I reckon having EZ electric power steering is like driving on radial tyres after crossplies. Having power steering allows you to dig so much deeper into a car's abilities, meaning you get to enjoy the process of actually driving even more. In something as exciting as a Lamborghini Countach, that's hard to put a price on – yet EZ charges €2900 (£2465) fitted, before taxes. Prices for simpler cars, such as a Volvo P1800, start at €1495 installed. And if you love driving, that's a bargain. **End**

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