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PHOTOS KARIN LINZ/CLASSICTHROTTLESHOP.COM

POWER UP and park as you please

If you love your big old classic but almost dislocate a shoulder every time you try to turn the wheel, it could be time to retrofit power steering

One big drawback of driving a classic car on today's crowded roads is heavy steering. Very few European cars of the 1950s and '60s were available with power steering, which is now standard in most new cars, even the smallest ones.

When you do find that elusive parking spot close to David Jones, it's bound to be tight – and heaving an MkII Jag into the space, with its 4.5 unassisted turns lock to lock, can be enough to pull a few muscles and take the pleasure out of classic car ownership.

This problem has been addressed in various ways over the years. Most quality manufacturers offered some type of power-assisted steering as an option by the mid 1960s. However, most of these systems were designed with the American market in mind – too light and lacking in feel. This is why it was slow to catch on in the UK and other right-hand drive markets.

All these period power steering systems were hydraulic

and therefore complex. A belt from the crankshaft pulley on the engine drove the hydraulic pump. Hydraulic oil would be drawn from a reservoir and pumped under pressure through pipes to a special steering box, steering ram, or later, a steering rack. All to the whooshing sound of fluid under high pressure.

CUSTOMISED CAUTION

Over the years many people have come up with solutions to help you convert your non-power-steered car. If the type of car you own was available with power steering as an option in its day, theoretically all you have to do is collect the necessary parts, overhaul them, and then convert your car. However it will be an expensive and time consuming process. You may also find that cars originally fitted with this option have fundamental differences from seemingly identical cars not so equipped. If you do go down this route you will have the limitations and complexities that early power steering systems are known for.

STIFF STUFF

The original steering column from the Aston Martin DB6. Using it to move the big Britisher took some muscle.

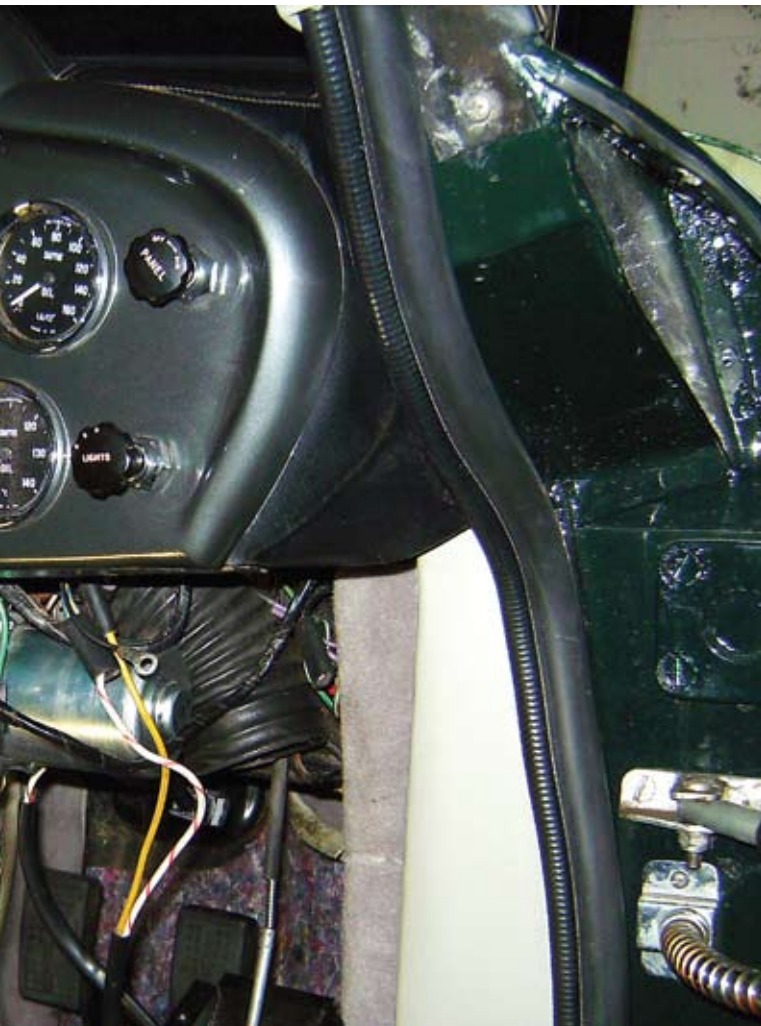


TIGHT SQUEEZE

There wasn't much room under the Aston Martin's dash, but Jeremy still achieved a factory finish.

HELPING HAND

The EZ Electric Power Steering system is simple to install and does what it's supposed to – quietly.



Some specialists have used parts from later-model cars and adapted them to fit older models, even using parts from different makes to get the desired effect. This type of conversion can have many shortcomings – not only in operation but also in future maintenance (when you need a part and no one can identify what make or model it originally came from). Besides, none of these conversions would have been developed as highly as the original car manufacturer's version. The alignment and geometry will always be a compromise; brackets and hardware often look home made. What if this collection of parts is incompatible, and after

design and simple wiring instructions. To fit the unit we had to first remove the driver's seat from the DB6, followed by the under-dash panels, steering wheel and indicator stalk.

Aston Martin kindly provided a removable access panel in the driver's wheel arch that allows good access to the lower steering column joint. Once loosened, the old column can be removed from the vehicle and installation of EZ Electric Power Steering's system can begin. It's tight in this area and there's not much space to work in. However, the unit fits very neatly and the original under-dash panels can be refitted for a factory finish. The only external clue is a small silver knob,

“What if this collection of parts is incompatible and something breaks? No steering, that's what”

two or three years and 20,000 or 30,000 miles (which it would never have been tested over), something breaks? No steering, that's what.

WIRING UP A DB6

I wanted to convert an Aston Martin DB6 to power-assisted steering. In period, the Mk1 DB6 was available with power steering as an option and it was standard on the Mk2 DB6. It would be difficult to find the original parts to retro fit, and it was a clumsy system anyway, with a power ram bolted to the standard steering rack.

While I was researching various options I came across a company in Holland called EZ Electric Power Steering. It offers a clever system that is integrated into the original steering column and wired up through a load sensing 'electronic control unit' or ECU. I bit the bullet and ordered one.

When it arrived I was impressed with its compact

which when turned varies the initial level of assistance.

PUT TO THE TEST

So far so good – all had gone well and there were no unforeseen installation issues. Time to give it a try. When the ignition is off, the steering feels as it always did: reliable but very heavy. Switch on the ignition and hey presto, power steering – you can turn the steering from lock to lock with ease. The biggest surprise was the system's lack of noise... complete silence.

On the road, the car steers with the precision Aston Martin engineered into it, but with a newfound lightness. And should this system ever stop working, the car will just revert to the standard steering.

Now I am going to order a kit for my Jaguar 3.8 MkII – that should make it nicer to drive.

Cummins Classic Cars – www.cumminscars.com, (02) 9743 4479. ACC