Introduction to the Book: The Enthusiast's Guide to Vintage Specials; John Bateman;ISBN 0854297944

There are probably as many reasons for building a special as the number of cars themselves, although the equation of function and money, or more precisely the lack of it, must come high on the list. Arguably the start of the special building era was the years after the First World War. In Britain motor racing was effectively split into two camps. At the one extreme was Brooklands with all the glamour and spectacle of its awe-inspiring banked circuit and its celebrity drivers. In contrast to this there were the sprint and hillclimb enthusiasts who existed in their thousands all over the country. Their meetings by comparison could often be very low-key affairs where the amateur had a real chance against the more professional entrants. The two styles of racing demanded very different types of racing cars. For outer circuit racing the trend was for large cars with massive engines that could endure the harsh conditions of the concrete track. A sprint car by contrast was typically small and light, and ran at venues where a "good little 'un" had a chance of beating its larger and more powerful counterpart.

The end of hostilities in 1918 brought a lot of war surplus equipment on to the market at very reasonable prices; and included on this massive military white elephant stall were a great number of aircraft engines. These huge, slow-revving units proved ideal for Brooklands specials. The first such creations used the chassis and running gear from a suitably big Edwardian touring car, usually lengthened to take the new engine. However, as the art evolved special chassis incorporating later technological advances came into use. The ultimate Brooklands machine boasted an engine capacity of 20+ litres, lapped the circuit at over 140 mph, and set numerous world speed and endurance records into the bargain.

The sprint special, however, would typically have started life as a cyclecar or lightcar (the GN was by far the most popular choice), which was then stripped of all unnecessary encumbrances and propelled at seemingly impossible speeds by what appeared to be a large motorcycle engine.

Between these two extremes there were of course all manner of other concoctions, especially when in the 1930s "road racing" at the newly opened Crystal Palace and Donington Park circuits added to the variety of motor sport activities. Here the special builder's aim was to mix a particularly good engine with an equally good chassis, typically from a different manufacturer. Of course while the project was taking shape the temptation to fit, say, axles from yet another source could not be resisted, and to finish off the car the local scrapyard would usually supply a whole heap of smaller parts. The reasons for selecting one part in preference to another were many and varied. In some instances there was a genuine perceived advantage: a side valve engine might be replaced by one with overhead valves; a three-speed gearbox might give way to a version that had four ratios; an axle might be chosen because the size of the brake drums was a couple of inches bigger. Sometimes, however, the choice would be influenced by availability and cost. Many a special has been built around parts that just happened to be there at the right time, or because they were a couple of shillings less than the part the "designer" had originally intended to use! Finally, the whole plot was clothed in some form of bodywork, sometimes the work of the builder or sometimes, when the design was more complex, this would be subcontracted to the local "tin basher".

As the type of vehicle varied, so did the skill of these amateur engineers. Some attempts would be crudely executed and feature the most appalling welding, paintwork that looked as if it had been applied with a yard brush, and all held together with a variety of ill-fitting nuts and bolts. In other cases the finished vehicle would be meticulous in its construction, to the extent that several days would have been spent filing and polishing a particular component to achieve that perfect finish. Similarly, the amount of design work varied considerably. Although it is rumoured that several specials were actually drawn out in some detail before construction began, the more accepted

method involved the use of old envelopes and beer mats as sketch pads. More than one car has started with the driver sitting on the ground, while his willing helper chalked the position of the chassis, axles and other elements on the garage floor around him.

After the Second World War special building was greatly influenced by the introduction of the 500 cc formula that eventually became Formula 3. As before, weight and financial outlay were kept as low as possible, and the engine had to be from a motorcycle because of the capacity limit. Until the advent of the factory-made racers in the 1950s, the amateur special builder's art enjoyed something of a renaissance before the likes of Cooper and Kieft dominated the formula. Another formula, for want of a better word, that appealed to the builder of specials was CAPA. This sport, based in the West of England, was a sort of first generation form of grass-track racing, which had all but vanished by the time the 500 cc formula had arrived on the scene. Most of the vehicles that participated were simply pensioned-off road cars that had been stripped of trim, wings, bodywork, in fact just about everything! In among them there were, however, many specials where the familiar mixing of engines, axles, chassis had taken place as a token gesture to improve such esoteric parameters as weight distribution, handling and performance. Perhaps not surprisingly few CAPA cars still exist; the ones that remain fortunately fall into the specials category.

Most of the special building that took place in the 1950s and 1960s centred on the Austin Seven and Ford Popular, because of the ready availability of parts and the encouragement of clubs like the 750 MC. Indeed, the popularity of this activity was sufficient to create a plethora of small manufacturers who existed specifically to provide the necessary tuning parts for these side valve sports cars. However, as most specials of this time were based on one particular vehicle or another, they are somewhat alien to the special builder's ideal of trying to incorporate parts from as many sources as possible into one vehicle, and thus are outside the scope of this book.

So, too, are the present-day kit cars because of their use of modern components – although this scene with over 100 manufacturers trying to produce vehicles that are somewhat different has its attractions.

Vintage specials, however, are still being created by those vintage car enthusiasts who do not want to drive a machine that has been seen before. To them the challenge is to re-create the vintage era by producing a special that could have been built in that period. The old rules still hold true: an engine from here, a chassis from there and a tour of the autojumbles to find the smaller parts, these latter markets taking over the function of the pre-war "scrappie". To some extent lack of money is still a valid reason for building a special; in today's world where telephone number money is being asked for vintage sports cars, there is some sense in building your own for an infinitely more modest outlay. Also, the result may be more rewarding to the builder than simply restoring an existing car, and the end product is guaranteed to be unique!

With all this in mind, it is not surprising that *Vintage Specials* contains such a mish-mash of cars. In these pages 27-litre aero-engined monsters rub shoulders with tiny sprint cars of less than 750 cc capacity; famous record-breaking cars of the 1920s and 1930s cohabit with little-known machines built in more recent years; and vehicles that boast such technical advances as four-wheel drive and monocoque construction feature alongside primitives with exposed drive chains and no front brakes.

However, they all have one thing in common: they are all "one-offs" in their own way, extensions of man's desire to be an individual.