

NEW LEATHER FOR A FEW HUNDRED DOLLARS? IMPOSSIBLE?

By Bruce Duncan

Of course new leather for a few hundred dollars is impossible BUT there is an alternative. I feel an issue with an old car is should one restore or refurbish? I rather lean to refurbishment rather than restoration as I like to maintain as much of the original vehicle as possible. New leather does look magnificent but it might make the rest of the car look a bit old and maybe even run down.

What to do?

For some years now I have used the Leatherique range of leather treatments to keep the seats soft and clean. I have never had the courage to use the full Leatherique treatment to restore the seats as I could not bring myself to use xylene (thinners) to clean the seats as they recommend. Rob Harrington – Johnson, owner of Permanent Painted Coatings the supplier of the Leatherique range of products, has always supplied me with good products, Leatherique and others, so I decided it was about time to listen to his advice.

Rob supplied me with the full range of products I would need to remove the old dye, prepare the leather and re-dye it matching the original colour. The dye was matched to a piece of the original leather from a position that is as clean as it can be in an old car.



THIS IS THE RANGE OF PRODUCTS ROB SUPPLIED SO I COULD ACHIEVE THE LOOK I WAS AFTER – THE FINAL STEP IS TO POLISH WITH MOTHERS CAR POLISH (SEE THE TEXT)

The hardest part of all this is to find somewhere to work as a car load of seats when out of the car take up a lot of space. I think there is some unexplained scientific rule that says seats out of the car are three times as large as seats in the car!!



YOU NEED PLENTY OF ROOM TO SPREAD THE SEATS OUT

The car I planned to attack was my 1963 P5 Drophead with bucket seats in the front and a bench seat in the back. The seats came out as six pieces however the folding arm-rests added another three items to the agenda. So much space needed.

First item is to remove the old dye. This was thick in some places and not so bad in others. Rob showed me how to use a rag dipped in the xylene to rub and rub until the old dye loosened and came away.

After about half a day of this I decided to try a different method. I used a piece of foam and applied plenty of xylene to a part of the leather. I then used a blunt kitchen knife to scrape the main part of the dye away. Soften by the xylene it came off surprisingly easily.

All I had to do was keep the blade at right angles to the leather and not let my hand slip sideways which would have ended up cutting the leather.



THE SOLVENT TOOK SOME COURAGE TO USE AT FIRST AND THEN I BECAME PROFICIENT AT REMOVING THE OLD DYE AND 50 YEARS OF CLEANING MATERIALS AND OTHER JUNK

I became fairly proficient at removing the dye using the soak and scrape method. It's a bit like using a cut throat razor. The folds, piping and pleating in the seats had to be handled carefully as I certainly didn't want to damage the stitching and yet it was necessary to get right into the folds to remove the old dye.



TOP AND BOTTOM - THE OLD DYE LOOSENS WITH THE AID OF THE SOLVENT WHICH MAKES IT EASY TO SCRAPE OFF

Each seat took about half a day to clean – it is not a job to be done in a rush.

After letting the leather dry I could see the bits I'd missed so they received another treatment until I was sure the old dye had gone. The seats were now virtually back to brown leather – in other words I had removed the almost 50 year old colour.



THE OLD DYE HAS ALMOST GONE

At this stage the leather is now fairly dry so several treatments with Leatherique oil was advised to re-nourish the leather and make certain it retained its softness. Again several coats were required and the seats need to stand to absorb this oil. This task can't be rushed. The oil takes time to soak in.



THE LEATHER GLISTENS AFTER THE APPLICATION OF REJUVENATOR OIL. THE OIL WILL SOAK INTO AND THUS SOFTEN AND PRESERVE THE LEATHER

I guess it would be a matter of opinion as to what is "patina" and what are "cracks" in the old leather. I had both. Patina I could live with but cracks were not something I admired. Now it was time to fill the cracks with flexible Leatherique Crack Filler. This product is

white so a good trick is to add a few drops of the colour planned for the seats as it makes the filler much easier to cover.

I used a piece of flat plastic cut from an ice-cream container lid as a spatula or trowel. The mixture sets fairly quickly so there is time to apply and smooth it quickly. Then leave it alone to dry. If it is a bit rough just sand it smooth after it has dried.



SMALL CRACKS DISAPPEAR AS THE LEATHER TAKES ON ITS ORIGINAL SHAPE – LARGER CRACKS LIKE THIS ONE NEED TO BE FILLED USING FLEXIBLE CRACK FILLER



CRACK FILLER BEING USED TO FILL AN UNWANTED HOLE

After a couple of days one uses a fine grade of wet and dry paper to sand the crack filler smooth and to give a “key” to the dye soon to be applied. Again sanding the seats had me concerned however it is not really too difficult. The aim is to smooth everything, but not sand the leather so much it becomes like suede.

Now comes the part where the change really becomes apparent – the dye application. It is wise to remember

the dye is just that – **dye**. It is not paint. It is as thin as water so a different technique needs to be used to apply it successfully.

As can be seen in the picture I used a new small brush to get into the stitching and piping. The brush will wash out in water as will your hands. I tried gloves but found them too awkward so stuck to bare hands – they do come clean (eventually). Under the nails is the hardest.

The main part of the dye can be applied using a brush if that suits however I found a better method was to use a small amount of lint free cloth, moistened, rolled to a padded ball and the dye “wiped” with long strokes. It tends to air dry quickly so if you have any marks just leave them. The next coat will tidy that up.

With one of my seats I was not happy with the finished job so I stripped it and did the process again. Better the second time.

When discussing this with Rob Harrington-Johnson he felt it may have been caused by some earlier product (let’s face it, the seats are almost 50 years old) that had been applied to the leather



USING A FINE BRUSH TO MAKE CERTAIN THE DYE PENETRATES THE STICHING IN THE PLEATS AND PIPING

A couple of applications and the seat does look almost brand new. If I was seeking a new leather finish then I would have had new leather done and spent another \$7,500 at least. The cracks have gone and the colour is pure and unworn.

There is still the patina of age but, as I keep saying, these seats are almost 50 years old.



FRESHLY RE-DONE SEAT READY TO BE FITTED TO THE CAR



THE SAME SEAT NOW IN THE CAR

The advice is not to clean the seats for a few months as this will ensure the dye and its components are dry. Leatherique suggest a light coating of canuba wax – I plan to use Mothers as there is no silicone or other bits and pieces. The wax will give a smooth sheen rather than a shine to the leather. In a year I will treat the leather with Leatherique Rejuvenator Oil as it soaks in and keeps the leather soft.

So the question is, **“WOULD I DO THIS AGAIN”**? The answer is an unqualified , **“YES”**. Remember I re-did the seats in their original colour, I did not change the colour. I would think to change the colour would be a much bigger job as one would have to consider the door trims, parcel shelf etc etc.

Mind you, if you were refurbishing a vehicle and had a replacement seat from another vehicle that was a different colour I do not think that would be any issue at all.

To see the seats now they have a freshness and “newness” about them but still have a few little wrinkles that can be classed as the patina of age.

If you are considering refurbishing your Rover’s leather my advice would be to **go for it**. You will experience a quick learning curve as you can see the results virtually immediately.



ALMOST LIKE NEW SEATS BUT WITH THE PATINA OF AGE



The quality of the end job, like all jobs, is in the preparation. Time is required to DO the various processes and time is required to let them dry. It will take several weeks to do all the seats. **But you WILL be pleased with the results when you have finished!**

If you are considering doing the same to your car as I did to mine then I suggest you contact Permanent Painted Coatings on (02) 999 0122 and talk to Rob about your car and what you are trying to achieve. He is always very helpful. ►