Re-Veneering a TR6 Dash

My TR6 cam with the standard Teak dash veneer which as you can see in the picture below is a fairly plain and mundane item. My aspirations were for a Burr Walnut dash that exuded a bit of class, these aspirations were quickly dashed (forgive the pun!) by the astronomical price of nearly £300 for an off the shelf item. These off the shelf products also had the disadvantage of being almost too good in their finish and some of them did not look like real wood at all but more like a high gloss perfect reproduction.

The original also had some pretty nasty splits across the veneer on the glove box so something had to be done as split veneers was too much patina even for me, so what was to be done?

I looked around for a while before deciding to re-veneer the dash myself so what follows is a blow by blow account of the process that I went through and some pictures to support the story.

Sourcing the veneers was easy, using my contacts from a former life as a design technology teacher I was able to locate a company quite near to where I live that were prepared to let me sift through their pile of veneers until I found the pattern that I wanted.

The company in question is:

Craft Supplies Ltd
Newburgh Works
Bradwell
Derbyshire
S33 9JL
Their very helpful staff gave me the run of the storeroom where I selected a book matched pair of leaves of burr walnut which in their raw form you can see below.

As you can probably just make out the raw material is wrinkled and somewhat pock marked, this is quite normal for burr type veneers given that they are created by a whole host of small twigs and branches sprouting from the parent tree and it is the source of the twigs that gives rise to the burr effect.

In the picture above you can just see where I have laid the veneers end to end to decide where to cut them to make the match line which is towards the left hand end of the picture in the area that is most heavily marked.

The next job is to get rid of the ripples and undulations in the surface of the veneer, not this can only be done temporarily as the veneer will absorb moisture over a period of time and the wrinkles will reappear so once flattened the rest of the process should be executed fairly quickly. So wait until the boss has gone out for a while and run a warm shallow bath, lay the veneers in the water for about 15 minutes until they are soft and pliable (take care not to rip them in your eagerness to test for suppleness) The veneers will not only become pliable but they will darken slightly as they take on water, take note of this colour as this will give you some idea of the finished colour of the dash if you just varnish it without adding more colour.

Note in this picture the slightly darker colour and the plug in the bath.
So now you have to get a move on, the damp and pliable veneers have to be squashed flat until they dry and this is done between two pieces of chipboard with G Cramps around the edge, the chipboard will help to absorb some of the moisture and the clamping ensures that the sheets are flat, if you want to you can insert a few sheets of newspaper on one side only of the veneers but be prepared for them to stick to the surface of the veneer, I just relied on the chipboard to absorb the moisture and was prepared to leave them in the clamp for several days if necessary until they were properly dry.

Note here the nicely carpeted garage floor (not really it was the dining room where the temperature was high and the moisture level low, it is a very clean process after all)

Once the veneers are dry and nice and flat a perfect joint line has to be achieved to mate the two halves together. A very sharp craft knife and a steel rule as well as good quality masking tape are the order of the day here along with a wooden backing board on which to make the cuts. Tape the two ends of the veneers to prevent them splintering as you cut their ends straight and square, then bring the two cut ends together and if the joint is good then tape them carefully together. Remember to only put tape on one side (the side that will be the finished surface) as the other side will be plain and tape free to glue down to the dash.

Another job that needs doing whilst the veneers were in the press drying is to carefully plane the old veneer off the dash, I used a short Smoothing Plane but a Jack Plane would do just as well, be sure to sharpen the blade first and set the cut to as fine a cut as you can manage and take your time removing the old veneer. Be careful to not damage the base material of the dash as this forms the basis of your new dash finish. You may get some small tears or splinters in the surface of the plywood dash and if you do just fill them with body filler and sand them flat when cured, this surface will not be seen once the veneer is applied but it is vital to have a good surface on which to glue the veneer.

Before you apply the veneer to the dash you should paint the instrument hole sides with a dark brown paint as very small amounts of these holes can be seen down the sides of the instrument once they are refitted.

Now you are ready to go, get all you materials ready beforehand and have them laid out where you can get at them as you will only have about 10 minutes to complete the gluing process, before I
describe the process I will run through the list of things you will need and explain why you need them if it is not obvious.

- Matched and flattened veneer, mark the centre line of the veneer on the top/upper side so that you can centre it when applying it to the dash.
- Prepared dash with old veneer removed and surface filled and flattened. Mark the centre line of the dash on its surface and also down the top and bottom edge so you can match it up to the centre line of the veneer.
- Glue bottle. The glue should be a Polyurethane Glue such as a Gorilla Glue (yes really) you can get this off eBay quite cheaply at about £7.00 for 250ml. You need to know a little about this glue because it is vicious stuff. Polyurethane glue is activated by moisture and once activated sets in about 10 minutes and is cured in about 2 hours so it is very rapid stuff. Once activated it foams or effervesces, a property that allows it to fill small gaps, in our case it forces the glue to permeate the veneer and totally bond it to its backing surface. The final property of this glue is the fact that once it has foamed the foam tends to shrink back a little which has the advantage of dragging the veneer down onto the backing material, in our case the dash. Oh and of course it is totally waterproof, and I mean totally, as the boat builders for whom this glue was developed in the first place.
- Two sheets of fairly thick polythene to lay over and under the dash before it is clamped in the press, these prevent the glue that passes through the veneer (and it will surprisingly) from permanently sticking the dash, the veneer and the chipboard clamping pieces together producing a useless timber sandwich with your precious dash in the middle.
- At least 8 G Cramps to apply pressure to the sandwich of boards.
- A spreader to evenly spread the glue on the surface of the dash, be prepared to throw this away when you have finished (remember this glue is nasty stuff)
- A spray bottle with clean water in it, this is to damp the side of the veneer that will be in contact with the glue immediately before you bring the two part together. Remember the water activates the glue.
- Some kitchen roll to mop up any spills.
- Someone else to help, it really is a four handed job. You will also have someone else to blame if it goes wrong!

A quick note about the glue, this material is hydroscopic (absorbs moisture from the atmosphere) and because it uses water to activate it, it stands to reason that once opened the remainder of the glue in the bottle will slowly go off so don’t buy huge quantities of it, a 250 ml bottle will do three or four dashes!

So this is what you do.

1. Lay out all your materials where you can get at them and have room to work.
2. Have a trial cramp up of the dash and veneer so you know what you are doing.
3. Spread the glue evenly on the surface of the prepared dash, not too thick and not too thin and make sure you get right up to the edges of the instrument holes and the outer edge of the dash.
4. Spray a small amount of water on the underside of the veneer so that it just wets the surface but not so much that it starts to run off the veneer when you pick it up, damp is the correct term for what you should now have!

5. Quickly apply the veneer to the dash and line up the centre marks that you put on earlier, gently press the veneer into contact with the dash all over trying not to drag the veneer across the dash otherwise you may split the veneer.

6. Put a sheet of polythene on the top of the veneer and also under the dash.

7. Put the clamping boards in place on top of the veneer and under the dash.

8. Start to put the cramps on by starting near the centre and working your way towards the ends and edges, this will squeeze the excess glue out of the sandwich.

9. Make sure the dash is flat and straight, if it is slightly bent or twisted it is likely that it will come out of the press with a permanent bend in it.

10. Now wipe away any spilled glue, you should see the excess glue starting to foam by this point.

11. Leave the whole thing for 5 to 6 hours to ensure that it is completely cured and remove the cramps.

12. Be warned as you remove the polythene protective sheets they will tear and reveal the most unholy mess with the surface of your veneer pock marked with pools of dried glue that has permeated through the veneer and set up against the polythene. Don’t worry as this will be sanded away to reveal the veneer beneath.

13. Now start sanding the veneer surface with a medium glass paper to remove the excess glue and clean up the veneer. Use a sanding block never just your fingers as this puts localised pressure on your work and will culminate in you sanding right through the veneer and revealing the backing board which is your dash. A degree of finesse is required at this point as you have to sand until the surface is cleaned up then use fine glass paper to give a smooth blemish free surface, then stop!

14. You now have to make a decision, is the veneer going to be the right colour when varnished? The one I did for myself I darkened by using a thin coat of Rustins Light Walnut Stain, and I emphasise a light coat. You have the potential here to make the whole thing too dark and once darkened it is almost impossible to lighten it again. If you have stained it then leave it for 5 or 6 hours to dry and be absorbed.

15. The finish that I recommend is a PLASTICOTEC that can be obtained from the Craft Supplies mentioned at the top of this article or from ebay it is made by RUSTINS and is a two pack plastic finish that is super durable and ultra-waterproof, it is also resistant to UV rays which makes it perfect for dashboards (not that we see much sun in the UK) So a glass jar with a sealable lid, I used a jam jar, a decent one inch brush (that’s 25mm to younger) a dust free area and a sheet to cover the dining table (that was my least dusty area) WARNING, this two pack mixture gives off the most awful vapour which will taint the atmosphere in your home for days and has been known to induce divorce or at the very least migraine standard headaches so try to pick a little used area or clean up the garage and go in there. Cold temperatures don’t stop the curing process they just slow it down so if you use the garage in winter then allow extra time for the finish to harden, indoors it will be hard within the hour.

16. So, mix the two pack finish in the jam jar, a little goes a long way do don’t make too much, I started with about half an inch (13mm for younger more modern readers) and this provided some 6 coats for my dash so it really does go a long way.
17. Brush the finish generously on to the dash/veneer, don’t try working it in, brush it on and leave it, don’t worry about runs and streaks or even small dust particles that settle on the surface. Once covered leave it to harden, clean the brush or just stand it in thinners, you will need it again in an hour or so.

18. Apply about 6 or 8 coats of the finish, building up a thick layer, don’t worry if it looks a bit naff, leave an hour or two between coats.

19. When you have a decently thick finish on the dash leave it to cure for a day or two then sand it down with 800 wet and dry paper on a soft faced block, try not to exert too much pressure near the edges of the dash or the instrument holes as these will rub through more easily than the flat areas. Keep sanding until you get an evenly mat surface then stop. Dry the dash thoroughly.

20. Apply at least three more coats then once cured again wet sand with 1200 wet and dry until you get an evenly mat surface with no blemishes.

21. Now buff the surface with Farecla G 10 and a soft cloth, use a little water to dampen the cloth and avoid heat building up on the surface. In this way you will be able to create a glass like surface on the dash, the more you polish the glassier it will get, stop when you have achieved the level of gloss that suits you. Personally I stopped short of a full gloss as I think it looks a little warmer and a more timber like presentation than the high gloss that some commercial finishers put on them.

Et Voila one re-veneered dash have a look at mine and see what you think!

My dash at the end of the polishing process, note the residue from the polish in the instrument holes. Dining table in evidence again, what a great work surface it is!

The finished article back in the car where it belongs and very satisfying it was too.

Total cost for the dash was about £55 but I have enough materials left over to glue and varnish three more dashes so the real cost was nearer to £45 plus a bit of elbow grease of course!