

Marketplace

Castle Classic Cars

Wadhurst Castle, an impressive 19th century manor house located just outside the East Sussex village that lends it its name, is not the first place you would expect to find a thriving business dealing in old cars. It is here, however, in a unit on land leased from the castle, that we find Andrew Collins, a young enthusiast who has been trading as Castle Classic Cars from here for the past four years. The castle's current owners, the Fitzgerald family, are clearly excellent landlords; they even allow Collins to use the long, sweeping drive of the house for impromptu testing should a customer want to get a feel for a car before venturing out onto the open road.

Collins has had the old-car bug from a young age. He inherited it, he tells us, from his father, who ran a 1930s Talbot (amongst others) when Andrew was a boy. The first car he ever bought was a Bristol 403 which he spotted aged 14 in *Exchange & Mart* and convinced his father to purchase. "He paid £3250 for it, and he's still got it today." That Andrew remembers the exact figure is no surprise, given his first choice of career in the financial sector. His own involvement in old cars started with a Triumph Herald in which he passed his driving test, though once he could afford to do so he soon expanded his horizons to more exotic fare, amassing a small collection over the next few years. In 2008, faced with a lack of storage at home, he rented a nearby barn and, almost by mistake, turned his hobby into a business. "I thought that if I could sell cars on the side it would pay for the barn, and it's just gone from there."

Although he still works part-time as a broker, he has been focussing increasingly on the business of buying and selling old

cars. "It's been a steep learning curve" he admits, but today he is in the enviable position of running a successful business which supports his hobby. His main problem, he says, is not finding the right stock, or attracting buyers, but deciding to let go of the cars in the first place. "I only buy cars that I like, and often I like them so much I don't want to sell them," he says, gesturing towards the handsome AC Greyhound saloon parked in the showroom. Taking in the beautifully preserved original interior and flattering metallic blue coachwork, we agree they must surely be destined for great things, especially given the recent upturn in value of their smaller Aecceca brethren. This point is reinforced when the telephone rings three times in succession – all potential customers eager to learn about the car, which looks to us like a fine example of these often-overlooked grand tourers. Andrew's appreciation of the Greyhound reflects his own tastes: he has a love of all Bristols and Bristol-engined cars. Like any dealer worth his salt, however, he says would part with anything if the price is right. In this case, that equates to around £60,000.

Still a small company, Castle Classic Cars has benefited greatly from the rise of the internet as a sales tool. Most of the firm's enquiries come via their website, with some cars selling mere hours after they have been advertised online. This is a double-edged sword, of course, and Andrew says it has made sourcing good cars much harder. Despite the web's global nature, which has removed much of the parochialism from sourcing a car, he believes enthusiasts still prefer not to travel to the ends of the earth to find the right example. Aside from the Bristols, his other love is Austin Sevens. He hopes to build a



Andrew Collins of Castle Classic Cars has a passion for unusual Austin Sevens

reputation as a specialist in these cars, seeing a gap in the market locally: "A lot of the existing Seven specialists are based in the north of the country. I'm the only one in the south-east doing it." His current roster reflects his personal interest in Herbert Austin's baby, but the choice of models he is offering swings away from the mainstream. "There are so many Box saloons and specials around, I'm trying to offer something different." He has made a conscious effort to source the type of car which might not be the first choice for other dealers: lined up in the showroom are examples of Top Hat, Swallow and RK saloon. This last car in particular caught our eye, being a

very well conserved example of this lesser spotted fabric-bodied Seven in a fetching shade of red. An older restoration with just the right amount of patina, it looked a good buy at a shade under £12,000.

Alongside car sales, commissions and car-sourcing, Collins offers servicing and repairs, though currently these jobs are undertaken by trusted outside firms. This is something he hopes to change in the future. The eventual plan is to bring local craftsmen in-house to offer a restoration service alongside the car sales, but he admits this is some way off. First he wants to expand his showroom so he can offer an even wider range of cars for sale at any one time. His brother will be joining the firm soon, thereby doubling the number of employees. Together, he hopes they can raise the profile of this still young business, and continue to offer well-chosen and keenly priced pre- and post-war cars for sale whilst maintaining a genuine, wide-eyed enthusiasm for all things on four wheels. Just so long as he can bear to part with his stock...

Castle Classic Cars is located in Wadhurst, East Sussex, and can be reached on 01892 785277 or via their website at www.castleclassiccars.co.uk

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Left The 1961 Bristol-powered AC Greyhound. Repainted 10 years ago, it retains its original interior **Right** 1929 Austin Seven RK fabric-bodied saloon, restored in the 1980s, is now nicely patinated

