



**Lindsay Porter** has discovered how leather trim can be repaired, improved and recoloured in an almost magical way – and he’s ‘dyeing’ to tell you all about it ...

**H**enry Ford, the American behind the World’s first mass-produced cars, is said to have coined the phrase “Any colour you like – as long as it’s black.” But obviously, things have moved on considerably since the days of the Model T Ford and even classic MGs have enough colour options to have given ol’ Henry nightmares.

At the opposite end of the scale from the Model T are the custom car guys: the ones who are outraged if their cars aren’t being outrageous. They tend to want every colour under the sun and, on the basis that if they leave me alone I’ll leave them alone, I don’t have a problem with that. But that’s not what this article is about.

We’re going to look at how it’s possible to recolour and re-treat leather so that it’s as good as new, using advice and materials from a company called Furniture Clinic, based near Newcastle Upon Tyne. It’s important to point out that recolouring leather is absolutely not the same as painting it. Upholstery paint wears off, cracks when it becomes brittle and destroys both the appearance and the smell of original leather. The Furniture Clinic approach leaves you with leather that’s every bit as good as it was before – or even considerably better – but just a different colour, if that’s what you want.

Recolouring leather is not only useful if you want to change the colour of your MG’s interior; it’s also invaluable if you have leather that has become discoloured for any reason or if you’ve only been able to

purchase a new or second-hand piece of replacement trim in the wrong colour. One example would be OE gearchange or handbrake gaiters for the MGF or TF. Understandably, XPart don’t have every one of the wide range of leather colours that were originally available still in stock. But now, that won’t matter because you can celebrate the fact that you can still buy an OE part and recolour it to suit your MG’s trim.

#### **But First, Is It Leather?**

Sometimes, you may come across a piece of trim and not know whether it’s plastic or leather. If it’s not leather, you can’t use leather dye. The dye supplied by Furniture Clinic enters the grain of the leather rather than sitting on top of it and, since plastic is relatively impermeable, leather dye just won’t work on it. But if leather has been over-treated by a manufacturer it can be made to look rather like plastic. Or, if very high quality vinyl has been used, it can often fool you into thinking it’s leather. The answer is to look at the edges and the back. Since leather is skin, the back of leather will have the texture and softness of suede. And that’s because it is suede! Vinyl, on the other hand, could conceivably be raw in which case the back will look much like the front or, more likely, it will have a fabric backing which looks nothing like suede at all. The differences are just as obvious, if not even more so, along the cut edges where the natural layers of the leather or the manufactured edges of the plastic are normally clearly visible.



## Matching the Colour

The first step is for Furniture Clinic to colour match your trim for you. Usually, you can look underneath a seat or other item of trim and, where the leather has been clipped or stapled down, there will usually be a surplus margin of leather beyond the clips or staples. All you have to do is carefully snip a bit off – from the other side of the clips or staples, of course! – and you can then send that off to Furniture Clinic to have it colour matched. In my case, I wasn't able to find a suitable part of my MG TF's grenadine and black leather seats so, after calling Furniture Clinic's extremely helpful Anita, we decided the best plan would be to send one of the seat headrests. The grenadine dye that came back is an incredibly good match and, even where I have touched up existing grenadine leather panels, the colour match is perfect.



**1.** These seats are what started it all off. I was buying some used parts to help make my MGF "bombproof" when I came across these good, used TF seats in my favourite colour combination. I was then on a mission to colour coordinate the rest of the all-black interior.



**2.** These are the parts that I wanted to recolour grenadine: black leather armrests and MGF gear knob, plus TF door card inserts and a pair of gaiters in a brighter red.



**3.** This was the complete kit as it arrived from Furniture Clinic. It includes a small airbrush and aerosol propellant and, includes dye and leather treatment. There's also a leather repair kit which is not required here. It all costs just under £100.

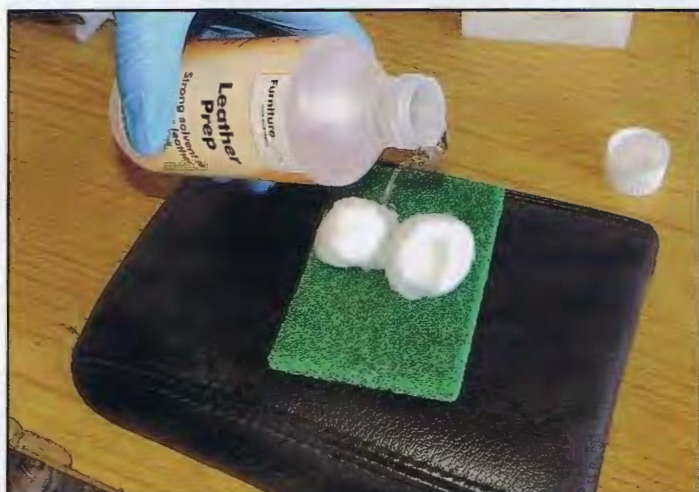
## First Things First

- Work in a well ventilated area.
- Make a note of the colour name in case you need to order more.
- If necessary, clean very dirty leather with leather cleaner or warm soapy water.
- Wear the gloves provided.
- Shake! Always shake well before using dyes.



**4.** Working with my MG-mad 16 year old neighbour Luke, who I've known since he was knee-high to a gnat, we started with the armrests, removing the hinges and interior plastic panels. To be honest, we really started with a spare leather armrest that the mice had got at over the winter, turning it into scrap and making it an ideal, first-time test-piece.





**5.** All leather is finished in a clear coat of sealant and this has to be removed with a special solvent which Furniture Clinic call Leather Prep. You place the cotton wool balls provided on top of the abrasive pad, soak the cotton wool in Leather Prep...



**6.** ...and, making a sandwich out of the cotton wool, the surface of the leather is scrubbed vigorously and methodically...



**7.** ...until the colourless finish has been removed and you start to see dye from the underlying colour appear on the abrasive pad. Work especially hard into any creases or sewn seams.



**8.** Next, dampen a cloth with Leather Prep...



**9.** ...and wipe the surface of the leather to remove all residues. Then do the same again with the alcohol provided in the kit to remove any traces of silicones.



**10.** On the right, you can see the surface stripped of finish while the scruffy, original finish on the left is still there. If the leather feels rough, sand with very fine, 1200 grit, dry abrasive paper. If any leather repairs are needed, now is the time! The Furniture Clinic leather repair kit shown earlier contains all you need.

Next month we will be dyeing the leather and applying a finishing coat that gives a very nice satin sheen.



## PART II LEATHER DYEING

Last month, **Lindsay Porter** explained how the preparation is so important when dyeing your leather. Now that we have the prepped piece of leather, it's time to move on to the tricky bit ...



**1.** It isn't in the instructions, but I found it beneficial to start by working dye into stitching and seams with a small paint brush rather than the recommended rag.



**2.** This is the airbrush supplied with the kit and excellent it is too! The aerosol propellant however, is a different matter. Air pressure is too variable and the can freezes up in no time, even occasionally spitting ice out of the airbrush. I tried it first on a piece of card.



**3.** Luke took the camera while I sprayed all the edges and 'tricky bits' first – always the right way to paint car parts of any sort...



**4.** ...followed by the main section of, on this occasion, the door card insert. Unlike with paint, the dye doesn't leave hard edges, though bad runs won't disappear when dry. Note the large plastic bag I placed over my left hand as I supported the panel while spraying.



**5.** Apply several thin coats, drying the surface with a hairdryer between coats. The difference between the underlying bright red of the gear stick gaiter and the black of the gear knob should be evident after the first couple of coats but there will be no visible difference at all after three, four or five thin coats have been applied.



## TOP TIP

If you do get a run in the dye, there's a couple of things you can do. If you've got a light touch, stroke the edges of the run with a finger or paintbrush to spread the thick dye. Then dry very thoroughly and, if there is a visible edge, rub down with wire wool or fine sandpaper until smooth. You shouldn't see anything untoward after more light coats of dye have been applied.



**6.** Gaiters are always crumpled which makes it difficult to get paint into the creases. I found that by pushing my hand inside the gaiter I could hold the creases out while spraying each part of the gaiter.



**7.** The instructions warned one to make certain that no traces of grease were left on the surface - and here's one I missed earlier. The dye just didn't take properly in the area around the pull tab so I went back to the base colour and even a bit beyond using alcohol cleaner and a bit of wire wool. After spraying several thin coats of grenadine dye, the backward step became completely invisible.



**9.** Spraying the finish coat is much more tricky than spraying dye. It's thinner, it runs more easily and it will show edges if you let them dry out before completing the section. I found it helped to hold the airbrush a touch further away than when spraying dye. Once again, you must apply several thin coats rather than fewer, heavier ones...



**10.** ...drying each coat before spraying on the next. It helps if you can have a light source behind the object you are spraying so that you can see the surface where the finish coat is landing. If you've never sprayed paint before you really need to practice on something scrap so that you don't make a mess of your beautiful leather.



**8.** The old finish coat that is removed in the beginning has to be replaced once the dye has thoroughly dried. Furniture Clinic supply matt and gloss finish coat and you need to mix it to match the degree of shine required. I found two thirds gloss and one third matt gave me the satin finish I was looking for. Make sure you measure the proportions so you can repeat the required gloss level.

There is a modicum of skill involved in using an airbrush. It's a lot like using an aerosol can accept that you've got adjustments (on some of them) of air volume and spray pattern. There's more flexibility but there's also more to go wrong

There are some useful starter instructions supplied with the Furniture Clinic kit as well as online videos and there are more amateur videos on YouTube than you could shake a paint stirring stick at. In my experience, the instructions supplied with the cheap airbrush kits sold online would be funny if they weren't so infuriatingly useless.

### Compressor

Though I just about managed with the airbrush aerosol propellant when spraying dye - it's not too demanding in terms of evenness of coverage - I know I couldn't have done a decent job of the finish coat using the same method. I spent another £100 buying a small compressor and airbrush set on Amazon. Frankly, the cheap airbrushes supplied with the compressor were a waste of money though the compressor itself, used with the airbrush supplied by Furniture Clinic, was a massive improvement over the aerosol cans. In the case of the kits I bought on Amazon, the instructions were appalling, the parts lists supplied with the airbrushes didn't correspond with the components in the boxes and there weren't even sufficient adapters to enable you to connect one of the airbrushes they supplied to the compressor. Grrrr!

However, the good news is that if you don't want to invest in your own mini compressor, you can hire one from Furniture Clinic for no more than the cost of two-way shipping. I strongly recommend it.





**11.** The final stage was to bring all the existing leather up to the standard of my newly dyed and repaired leather. My lovely grenadine and black TF seat was in really good condition but distinctly grubby and the leather itself was looking a little tired. So, once again, I followed the Furniture Clinic instructions to the letter with lots of added elbow grease. Although most of that was Luke's elbow grease, if I'm honest!



**12.** Luke wound the backrest backwards then forwards to reveal all covered areas and meticulously vacuum cleaned every scrap of grit and dust out of all the seams in the leather.



**13.** He then used the slightly coarse sponge supplied in the kit to apply Leather Ultra Clean, with a lot of scrubbing...



**14.** ...and extra attention in all the seams and perforations with a nail brush.



**15.** The soft cloth also supplied in the kit rapidly turned into a very grubby one as the lifted dirt was wiped off the leather. Don't be fooled into thinking one single cleaning will do the job. Repeat until no more dirt appears on your cloth.



**16.** Although this is actually the armrest shown being recoloured earlier, the principle is exactly the same with any leather. After it was 'finished' (ha!), I noticed a blemish on the side of the armrest that I hadn't seen before. In itself, this isn't surprising because once you get rid of all the minor faults, anything remaining will then stand out like a sore thumb. I lightly sanded the surface after wiping it with alcohol, applied a smear of leather filler (out of the repair kit and available separately in small pots of paste) and, once it had been dried with the hot air gun, I used very fine dry sanding paper to smooth the surface of the filler.



**17.** I could have sprayed colourant – i.e. the dye I had used earlier – but because the area was so small I simply dabbed on several coats, drying thoroughly between coats and then sprayed on another coating of finish. Here's why you need to keep a record of the mixing formula you used earlier so that this and subsequent coats of finish will perfectly match those used before.



**18.** One last item of magic in the kit is Leather Protection Cream. After a thorough cleaning, application of this cream restores the suppleness of the original leather, gives it a perfect new-leather shine and even recreates the original new-leather smell. Quite literally, bouquets all round!