



Tom (left) and Gary Robinson

Starting over

After building up a successful specialist Jaguar business in West London, in the early 2000s Gary Robinson moved 150 miles west and started again. We visit his Bristol premises to discover why

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IT'S SAID that a business is only as good as its client base. Gary Robinson started his company in the mid-Eighties – one of the first Jaguar specialists in the UK – and had a good one. Yet a decade-and-a-half later, he decided to relocate his company due to a change in circumstances: he moved from West London to a farm near Bristol that he had bought a few years previously.

Gary's career started at a London-based Jaguar specialist in the Eighties. "It was where my interest in the brand began," he tells me. He set up Swallows Independent Jaguar Specialist with a business partner when he was just 21. Based in Ruislip, West London, they specialised in the servicing and maintenance of then-current Jaguars. "I was weaned on the XJ-S, the XJ saloons and the V12," he adds. They later expanded into spares, building up a huge selection of parts to cover most models.

In 1995, Gary bought Acacia Farm, near Bristol, with a plan to work from home and only occasionally commute the 154 miles to

Ruislip. The farm came with plenty of barns and at first just the company's parts selection were stored there. "I would buy a damaged car, take it to the workshop in Ruislip where we had a team of guys who would strip it, and then I'd bring all the parts here."

The majority of these spares – a vast collection of panels, exterior lights and interior items plus engine and suspension parts – are still on the farm, and Gary and his son, Tom (who joined the business five years ago) are the first to admit they don't do enough with them, mainly only using this extensive stock to repair customers' cars.

In 2000, Gary's business partner wanted to change direction and the pair sold the business to an employee. Gary kept the Swallows name, however, and started afresh at Acacia Farm, turning one of the barns into a well-specified workshop. It was a big step to start in a new location, and leave his loyal customer base behind. He took with him a couple of Swallows' existing technicians, who he says, "came down for a trial and 15 years later are still



Swallows' comprehensive workshop

here!" Together with a local mechanic who has experience in prestige cars, they are the backbone of Swallows' repairs service because Gary has since hung up his spanners. "It's because I'm getting out of date," he explains with a laugh. "I leave that to the younger guys who have the right skills and knowledge to deal with a modern car's electrical systems."

That's not to say Gary sits back, as over the past five years he has concentrated on building the sales side of the business, travelling all over the UK for the right cars. "I've been at this a long, long time so I know most people in the trade," he tells me.

Today, what was once the farm's muddy yard is now full of beautiful Jaguars for sale, mainly from the previous generation, such as X100 XK8s, X350 XJs and S-TYPES. "Sales wise, we mainly cover from the XJ-S onwards," says Gary. "There are a couple of classic car specialists in the area and we leave E-types and Mk 2s to them. We've got enough customers in this market."

Indeed, many people fly into Bristol

airport, a mere half an hour away from the farm, to see Swallows' selection of cars, many of which are housed in a new, well-lit showroom. "Tom emails detailed photos of the cars and then we meet customers at the airport. If the car isn't as described, we pay for the plane ticket," says Gary.

Every car comes with Swallows' own warranty, but Gary likes to keep it as simple as possible. "If there's a problem," he explains, "I'll know someone in the area who can sort it on our behalf."

Only wanting to sell the very best cars, he has recently turned to an unlikely source. "I kept seeing low-mileage cars in mint condition," he explains, "and eventually discovered they were mainly from Japan." After a lot of investigating (and a few expensive mishaps along the way), Gary now has a well-connected buyer in Japan who supplies Swallows with good-quality cars, sending at least five a month.

The cars are usually in better condition than a comparable UK model, for several reasons: the climate is better and not as damp; roads are tolled and public transport is cheap, so mileage is often lower than UK cars of the same age; and the Japanese equivalent of the MOT, the 'shaken', is much stricter than here. "Even if there's minimal movement of the suspension, all the bushes need to be changed," Tom explains.

And finally, the Japanese often see cars, British marques especially, as status symbols and are willing to go to extreme lengths to keep them in first-class condition. Tom puts a mint 2003 X308 XJR on the ramp to show me the underside. There is no rust on the metal, or much discolouration, and it looks as if it could have just left the factory. For it to be in this remarkable condition, Tom reckons the previous owner must have cleaned it after every journey, an almost incomprehensible thought. "They really pride themselves in looking after their cars," he explains.

Of course, it's not as simple as reregistering the cars (which Swallows organises before sale) since they may require work to make them ready for the UK market. To begin with, like every car Swallows sells, the imports receive a thorough inspection and service, and any perished items – such as brake pads and



A pair of X100-generation XKs for sale



Above: A variety of new and classic Jaguars in Swallows' new showroom



Left: These XJ rear lights form just a tiny part of Swallows' huge selection of used parts

the negative image that some cars can have that weren't officially sold here."

Another important service Swallows offers is race and track car preparation, including trackside support. Gary and Tom currently look after a variety of cars, such as Richard Knott's XJ-S, which competes in the JEC Saloon & GT Championship, and the track-ready XKR we featured in our January 2016 issue.

It may have been a huge decision to move the company 150 miles west, but with the farm offering room to expand into new markets, and a loyal customer base willing to support Swallows no matter the location, it was obviously the right one.

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