





Air-cooled engine in the back of the car, a marque that developed a concept against all the odds, and a mechanic with the wrong skin colour in Singapore...We speak with Porsche specialist Andy Tatlow about his hobby turned business.

He has been here for sixteen years. If you have owned an air-cooled Porsche, chances are that you will know of him. But it has taken him a long time to get here because, as a foreigner in a foreign land, penetrating a market dominated by locals was never going to be easy regardless of how much experience one brings. Until recently, the workshop scene, outside of distributor support, consisted mainly of those schooled in the usage of the hammer and the crowbar. There were just a handful that could do a proper job on a performance car without maiming it.

How does a non-Asian end up in our neck of the woods doing what we customarily associate with blue-collar work? For this we need to address the fallacy here that the workshop mechanic is nothing but a fitter. This may ring true when it comes to the routine requirements of servicing a car, but certainly not when it comes to au fait work requiring first principles where the prerequisites are totally different, and entirely alien to workshops where the tool-chest is the floor.

Andy Tatlow is what we now call foreign talent.

IN A 12-FOOT WORKSHOP

Tatlow has worked around the world. His introduction to the car industry came after he left school. "I was forced to get a job because I was asked to leave school before I completed my A-Levels. I took a job with an engineering

IN FROM THE REAR

Words by **Eli Solomon** Photos by **Albert Tan**



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firm learning how to use lathes and milling machines... tedious and boring.” He subsequently joined Barrie Price, owner of Lea Francis Cars and President of the Bugatti Owner’s Club, for eight years.

Realising he was not getting very far and bitten by the travel bug, he joined a Rolls Royce importer in Saudi Arabia. Tatlow was back in UK after three months where he joined Autofarm, one of Britain’s top Porsche specialists. “I had no interest in Porsches then but was interested in any form of racing. I must have been 28 or 29. I got the job and stayed there for over three years.” Between stints as engineering support crew for the 1990 London to Peking Rally and a London to Saigon drive, and with a Swiss collector in Switzerland, he returned to Autofarm “because they were still keen to have me.” By this time he had gained a name and a following among Porsche owners.

CHANCE MEETINGS

A chance meeting at Autofarm brought him out in 1994. “I was working on an early 911 with an engine upgrade and Porsche World wanted to do an article on it. Dr Ian Kuah

came over to do the story. We got to talking and Ian set me up with Dr. S.K. Djeng and Derek McCully in Singapore. Within two weeks I had been offered a job here.” RUF’s brand new workshop at Tuas was still bare but not for long. In a proper workshop environment complete with clean room for engine work and space for a rolling-road dyno, Tatlow and the small team of workers were soon working on performance cars from straight-six Astons to full rebuilds of V8 Lamborghinis, and of course RUF conversions for Porsches. At that time, it may have been unusual for an “Ang Moh” to show up as a “motor mechanic”, even so, there was already evidence that the industry was being pried open and specialists from afar sought for their ability to sort out difficult engineering problems.

Tatlow moved when he was approached by Stuttgart Auto in mid-1997. “Given the pay rise, why the heck not? Instead of Singapore, I ended up working for them in Brunei...until it all went pear-shaped.” He returned to Singapore to start Flat Six in mid-2000 and shared a workshop in Pandan Loop, then moved to Lower Pierce Reservoir. “Just 1,000 sq. ft. but with great atmosphere.



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You could breathe clean air and the customers loved the extensive parking.” They were there for three years before the owners leased it out to a furniture shop. “Then we moved to our present location in Sin Ming. We are still looking for a more suitable place for what we do.”

BREAKING FREE

Being a non-Asian breaking into the local market has been a challenge. “It was something I didn’t think through very thoroughly. I wanted to stay in Singapore. I had enough interest from people who thought I could do it on my own. Sell the sailing boats, borrow some money from a mate of mine and start a shop.”

“Quite a few people probably hate me but that’s because I’m probably an English boy with an English sense of humour...They [fellow workshop operators] just shout at me face to face. They don’t come looking for me but if they think I’m in their way...I know a few Hokkien words, not just ‘Go Back Home’...I don’t understand what I did to upset one of the workshops nearby. This workshop environment [within Sin Ming Autocare] creates a lot of stress and tension. What are the red lines outside my shop for? It’s to say ‘Don’t Park Here’. It’s for my customers. You remember the old workshop? That was wonderful. When you look around rent-wise nowadays, Sin Ming is still cheap so I bite my lip and look around for something with more space.”

Most customers appreciate the expertise Tatlow brings to the job, but a select few do not. “This particular type would be internet shoppers. They like to find out the cost of parts and bring them in themselves, always complaining that

everything’s too expensive, forgetting what they actually asked you to do and they don’t want to pay.”

CULTURAL CHANGE

“There’s a big resistance from customers not used to spending the kind of money on cars. I still find that the cars go into another workshop, it’ll be a case of...‘Oh my brakes feel funny’. They’ll look at the pads and discs, do the job, whatever it is, car goes out. If it’s got water leaks, if it’s got oil leaks, if it’s got wheel bearings falling off, if there’s no rubber on the tyres, they don’t even see it. They’re looking for one particular thing. So I thought... let’s start to try to maintain the cars properly so that in-between servicing, they’ll be more reliable. Ok, the servicing itself will cost more because we’re looking for areas that may need attention. That’s what my core base of customers appreciate. That’s what was expected of me wherever I worked.”

Tatlow has put his feet down in Singapore. “The weather, the girls, the food...safety in Singapore, I don’t see myself going back to England. The Singapore government makes it easy and painless to set up a business. They seem to make it very easy to get to a certain level to live relatively comfortably but getting to the next step...which is making substantial money...it’s not easy at all... What I was doing for the first 6-7 years was carrying out my hobby, I never looked at this as a business. Time to change.”

With a wry laugh, he recalls, “My intention was to work for two years in Singapore, buy myself a motorbike and eventually ride back home to England. I didn’t get down to buying the bike and I’m still here 16 years later.”







RW: WHAT ARE THE OLDER PORSCHEs LIKE TO WORK ON?

AT: You do need to have specialist knowledge of them. Any competent technician can rebuild one. It might be easy for me to say that because I know them inside out. They are interesting engines. The crankcase is split in two halves, the crank in the middle of the two, and they have individual cylinders and cylinder heads. We've got an old 2-litre engine that we've sectioned. I want to have a nice office with a nice glass coffee table with this sectioned engine on display underneath it for our customers to appreciate.

RW: AND THE NEWER PORSCHEs?

AT: They don't hang around like the older cars because there's less work to do on them. We get a few who want performance clutches, for example.

RW: WHAT DON'T YOU LIKE ABOUT PORSCHEs OVER THE YEARS?

AT: I don't like the standard cars – the exceptions are the RSs - the 2.7 RS and 2.8 RSR and the 3-litre RS and RSR. The standard 930 Turbo has a lot of lag. You put it into a corner and it rolls around like an old boat. It's no wonder it tried to kill most people who tried to drive it.

RW: THE MOST DIFFICULT PORSCHEs YOU'VE WORKED ON?

AT: An engine that worried me quite a lot was the 3½ -litre RSR with titanium rods, slide-throttles and straight cut intermediate shaft gears; a proper race engine that would see 8,500 rpm regularly. It's the most mentally difficult engine. What used to worry me was that you'd done everything absolutely 100% perfectly so the damn thing doesn't blow up first time out on the track...The first few that you build are always quite worrying.

RW: ANY DIFFICULT JOBS?

AT: Normally it's the electronics and the ones that were fairly new...the 928s gave some nightmare problems. 928s - I don't mind if I don't work on them. They are difficult, no space, no access, everything's so expensive. No component substitution. But mainly because they cost money – so much time is used working on the car that you can't charge for.

RW: YOU MUST HAVE A FEW FAVOURITES...

AT: When I first joined Autofarm I was more interested in racing. I figured I could get involved without participating. I had no passion for the 911, thinking they were overgrown Beetles. I had the opportunity to test a 2.7 RS. At the time they weren't worth much money. I thought... hey, bloody hell; this is all right...I like this. And then I drove a road-legal 2.8 RSR with 280 bhp, more than all right; this is absolutely the dog's bollocks! Then you realise that 911s have a broad range of abilities, from a 1970 2-litre shopping car to a 935 that was killing everything around at the time. I was hooked.

RW: YOU LIKE THE CLASSIC PORSCHEs. DO YOU DETECT ANY TRENDS AMONGST BUYERS TODAY?

AT: I find that there are less Porsche enthusiasts owning the newer cars. The older cars are owned by enthusiasts and there is an increasingly enthusiastic following for anything air-cooled. A number of 964s are already going to enthusiasts. The earlier 3.2 Carreras and the SCs are already held by the enthusiasts. Some are even being converted back to the original impact-bumper look which I must admit I never thought would happen. In Singapore a few years ago, you'd have a job to give away a car on a Classic Car plate. Now values have gone through the roof. They're no longer worried that it's on a Classic Car plate.

I know a lot of enthusiasts complain that Porsche have lost their direction with their newer cars. Maybe they've gone to such an extreme to survive, but the genes are still the same. They are still very good cars. It's the owners who are now more different than the cars themselves.

RW: IF NOT PORSCHEs?

AT: If I weren't specifically working on Porsches, I'd be working on historic cars. I'd still be working on cars, I can't imagine what I'd be doing if I weren't in this industry. Probably cars from the early 1900s, chain-driven cars... up to the mid-1930s. Very interesting to me. Otherwise I really don't know what I'd be doing because I didn't know what I wanted to do when I left school.