



# SEEING GHOSTS

City centres were once full of prestige car dealers. Hard to picture? Not so, thanks to one enthusiast in 1980s Edinburgh. Richard Webber joins him down memory lane

PHOTOGRAPHY MAX EDLESTON

**W**e're staring at the fire escape of a Mexican restaurant, wondering how the bulging hips of a 930-generation Porsche 911 Turbo could squeeze through it. It's May 2022 and we're on George Street, central Edinburgh's smartest strip, but our minds are 40 years behind, when this site was the Glen Henderson Porsche showroom.

Before being uprooted miles out of town, prestige car dealers like Glen Henderson were dotted all around the heart of the city, peacocking on grand streets and tucked away in hidden mews. Perhaps excepting London, this is a story repeated across the UK.

But thanks to David Whitton, an amateur photographer from West Lothian, we needn't only imagine

those lost treasures. As a teenager in the 1980s, inspired by car magazine snappers of the day, Whitton and his 35mm Canon AE1 went on "lurking safaris" about town, inveigling their way into showrooms and service centres to capture the kind of automotive exotica that has since become legend.



Once spicy Porsches, now spicy tacos

With his scrapbook for a wormhole, Whitton is here with me and Autocar staff photographer Max Edleston to retrace his steps.

In 1982, Porsche was deep in transaxle territory with the 924, 928 and 944. The 'basic' 911 was the SC (Super Carrera), the 930's whale

tail had deepened into a tea tray and Derek Bell and Jacky Ickx led all three 956s onto the podium at Le Mans.

After the pinstriped salesman on George Street's cosy three-car showroom turned Whitton away, he found a far greater cache down the hill on Belford Road at Glen

Henderson's service centre.

Where a pallid, high-rise block of flats now stands, the modestly sized workshop was packed with Stuttgart's finest. Whitton's enthusiasm opened the door and a pack of digestive biscuits gained him entry inside.

Service manager Brian Miller and his team ran a tight operation.

"The place was really small, but they were doing big jobs in



Brian Miller (right) with racer Derek Bell



## HIGH-STREET HONEYS

David Whitton didn't just snap cars at dealerships – he also roamed the streets, hunting the finest kit that central Edinburgh's residents, workers and shoppers could muster. Of his finds, an Audi Quattro, an E12 BMW M535i and an impossibly sleek Lotus Turbo Esprit are highlights, as is a local hairdressing magnate's Ferrari 308 GTB, apparently impervious to parking tickets. Glory days indeed.



Imagine seeing these on road today



Henderson workshop (above) is rather more inconspicuous today



there – engines out,” recalls Whitton. “Yet the workshop was spotless. They would show me what they were working on and talk me through it.”

Some of Whitton's photos confirm this fastidiousness, while others show cars parked outside. Business was booming, and that wasn't unusual.

Miller tells me over the phone that cars always spilled out onto the street ahead of 1 August new registrations. “The traffic wardens came in minibuses,” he jokes.

In fact, Miller occasionally let Whitton shuffle cars about – as good as the keys to the kingdom for an octane-high youth. Whitton even recalls moving specific cars and the unmistakable smell inside the unregistered ones.

“The cars were very much of the period,” he says. “Brown 911s, houndstooth fabrics and leatherette. These were red-braces times.”

By 1986, Glen Henderson Porsche had deserted the city centre for a bigger site on Edinburgh's margin.

But around the corner, on quaint Belford Mews, Ian Cunningham's Bentley garage would survive until 2001. It had stopped selling new Bentleys in the 1960s but continued

in servicing and restoration.

In fact, the frontage is still intact, while the interior is being converted into a private home. The owner (who promises that he's keeping the signage) kindly lets us inside.

“In comparison to Henderson's, Cunningham's was spit and sawdust,” says Whitton. “The inspection pit had water in the bottom. There was no heating, just a wood burner they used in winter. The workbenches were ingrained with oil and brake fluid. The garage runabout was a Morris Traveller.”

That's not to say the work was anything but top-class, though. Like his father, Cunningham had trained at Bentley, and by the time of Whitton's visits, he was charged with maintaining the Queen's Holyrood-based Rolls-Royce Phantoms. →

## TRADING PLACES

The first Edinburgh dealer to relocate out of the city was Tommy Gilroy, who used to sell for Citroën, Fiat, Simca, Standard and more while also running a hire car fleet. In 1963, he moved from East London Street to a substantial patch of waste ground by



a chicken plant nine miles west.

“People thought he was mad,” says his grandson Peter Gilroy, who still works in the motor trade. “There were no garages outside Edinburgh. But he was offered a reasonable amount for East London Street, and his thinking was that if someone wanted to buy a car, they would come to him. He was right, I suppose.”

He certainly was. A Mercedes-Benz dealer took over the site in 1975 and has since been joined in Newbridge by BMW, Jaguar, Kia, Land Rover, Lexus, Mazda, Nissan, Tesla, VW and more.



Vintage Bentley workshop is being turned into a home



Whitton's photos revive Edinburgh's 1980s car scene



Sight of new V8 Vantage at Wilson's left young car-spotter speechless



Rumour has it Her Majesty borrowed a beige Morris Marina stored at Cunningham's when she wished to travel incognito.

Dignitaries, captains of industry and old money formed the clientele, bringing with them the ordinary (Whitton recalls a learned QC's cooking Vauxhall Chevette) to the exclusive: Bentleys and Rolls-Royces, of course, but also new Bristol 603s (including the preposterously understated Brigand 5.9 V8 turbo you saw on the previous page), Jaguar E-Types, Daimler DS420s and more.

Whitton was lucky enough to experience some of them on full-bore road tests towards the Forth bridges.

The garage has been cleared now, but the pit remains, still covered by the original railway sleepers. At around 80 square metres, the workshop was compact, and the business spread into lock-ups on all sides of the cobbled courtyard.

One formed Cunningham's office, with a mahogany desk and 1960s Formula 1 memorabilia. Some are now tiny Airbnb venues, others private garages. But it's nice to know that Cunningham's name will remain above number 13.

We wander up to Haymarket Terrace, near one of Edinburgh's two

central stations. At its western end, where a Tesco Express now occupies a wide stretch of the ground floor, was once the showroom of Aston Martin dealer Victor Wilson.

The salesman was friendly and suggested that Whitton take his camera to the service centre, discretely tucked up a nondescript lane a few doors down, hemmed in by six-storey tenements.

He did and was blown away by a hidden bonanza of Astons: "It was unbelievable. I was speechless. I remember seeing that spanking, unregistered Vantage for the first time, still warm from a road test. It sounded amazing, burbling around."

This was Victor Gauntlett-era Aston Martin, fighting back from reported sales of just 30 cars in 1982. All three current models were represented: the handsome V8, the bruising, 170mph V8 Vantage and the ludicrously daggerish four-door

Lagonda, complete with red LED gauges. Each was penned



Jaguar E-Type was common but still glamorous



ALFA: PETER SPEAKMAN



Sporty Alfas have been supplanted by comfy sofas





## SOLE SURVIVOR

Central Edinburgh's only remaining prestige dealership is the Rolls-Royce site operated by UK-wide group Grange Motors. From 1982, 1 Corstorphine Road was home to Eastern BMW, which in 2009 moved to a plot almost five times the size out at Newbridge. Grange took on the site two years ago. "It's a phenomenal space - the best showroom in Scotland, I think, by a country mile," says Rolls-Royce dealer principal Roddy McAllister.

The combination of a smart building, a main road location in an upmarket neighbourhood and arguably less need for space than higher-volume marques means that here, at least, the equation still adds up for a central pitch.



BMW moved out and Rolls moved in

by William Towns and powered by Tadek Marek's 5.3-litre V8.

"The guys hated the Lagonda, both to work on and to move around the yard," says Whitton. "It was so long that the nose was on the road before they could see out of the lane."

A few years later, both Victors sold up: Wilson to another dealer group and Gauntlett to Ford. The row of workshops has since been flattened, its footprint more valuable as parking space for Thrifty car hire.

Wilson also held concessions for Lotus and Alfa Romeo, but better known for the Italian marque were the workshops of Jack Fisher, a 10-minute walk away on Canning Street Lane. A friend of Lotus boss Colin Chapman and subject of the



Webber inspects old Bentley inspection bay

recent book *Special: Jack Fisher*, he built no fewer than 22 single-seat and GT specials and prepared production-based racers, including a 105-series Alfa GT Veloce 2000.

Despite Whitton's own Alfasud 5m being serviced at Fisher's back then, his pleas to photograph the place were denied, but we've managed to source some images from the period.

Like Cunningham's, Fisher's original mews garage had expanded

to fill the adjacent spaces and ultimately occupied 13 units flanking both sides of the lane.

The glazed frontage is now a shuttered cafe, while the bays that once rang with the rasp of the prolific Alfa twin-cam, the warble of little boxers and the song of soaring Busso V6s are now silent, other than for the hum of charging EVs, presumably owned by workers in the high-risers now towering above the lane.

It had been such a busy place that the flourishing sales department was rehoused in a big art-deco showroom a mile away on Angle Park Terrace.

A late-1970s image shows it emblazoned with Alfa script, a bevy of yesterday's heroes peeking out from within: Alfasuds Sprint, Ti and

Super ("We've made an Alfa you can't refuse"), Giulietta, 116-series GTV and Alfetta 2000 ("Luxury never lapped so fast"). And from 1983, there's an image of Fisher presenting one of three late Alfasuds donated in a draw for Hibernian Football Club, which Fisher's had sponsored.

Fisher's closed in the early 1990s, but the distinctive showroom survives as a furniture shop. Traces remain, such as the folding door to a lift that moved cars between the ground floor and the large basement. We're told that some sofa-buying customers still mention Fisher's all these years later.

Inexorable economics meant that dealerships of its kind were ultimately (and justifiably) doomed. But there's no harm in reminiscing, is there? **A**