

Power Play



Old Suzuki LJs lack a bit of power but fitting a 3.5-litre V8 could be viewed as overkill – Roger Cousins bet otherwise

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The Suzuki you see before you was built as a result of a £50 bet, made two years ago. At that time Roger Cousins was still using a little 800cc LJ80 as his daily transport and weekend toy. More than a trifle disappointed with its lack of horsepower, Roger was contemplating various different engine/gearbox combinations when a workmate bet him he couldn't fit a V8 into it. (What a mate.) The sum of £50 was mentioned, hands were shaken and the rest is, as they say, history.

Time now then for that history lesson starting first with the man himself. When Roger left school, he became a mechanic for a Skoda specialist which also looked after both trucks and buses. With several years experience under his belt he then took what many would consider to be a backward step career-wise and moved to the Co-Op. Here he worked on vehicles that produced a similar performance to the standard LJ80, namely milk floats. However, there was much method in this apparent madness as he was able to use the facilities at the Co-Op in his spare time to work on his new hobby of building rally cars. Following no small amount of success with rallying, he then decided on another change of employment and moved into the area most red-blooded school boys would give their eye teeth for.

The wanderer returns

No, he did not become a train driver but a race car mechanic. Roger worked all over the world for various teams in different formulas, before finally reaching the position of Number Two mechanic with the Spice Racing C1 endurance team. After taking a year off to travel around the world, the wanderer returned home and picked up where he left off by helping to build both Group A and Group N Sierra Cosworths before spending 18 months travelling all over the world again working in Formula 3. Back to the present day and 32-year-old Roger tired of travel, for the moment at least, works at Milner Conversions which is where I first met him late last year.

The start of the LJ80 project takes us back, as I said earlier, two years and Roger's first problem was – just as his mate had suggested – that the engine wasn't going to fit. Not only did it look as if it wouldn't fit under the bonnet, the V8 wasn't even going to fit between the chassis rails.



Wacky idea, but the actual installation is as neat as you'd expect from a racing wrench

At this point I think I'd have coughed up the £50 and said no more about it. But not our Roger – who is obviously made of sterner stuff or perhaps not as clever as my good self – who boldly carried on. First job was to lift off the bodyshell and then hook out the existing engine and box. But still the V8 refused to fit. Nothing else for it then, but to cut the chassis down the middle and widen it by nine inches. Why didn't I think of that? At least the engine could now fit between the chassis rails but the downside was that the axles were nine inches too narrow to go back underneath. Another problem concerned the gearbox. Nobody makes an adapter to mate the Rover V8 to the one found under the transmission tunnel on a standard LJ80, so a suitable box and adapter plate joined the growing list of required parts.

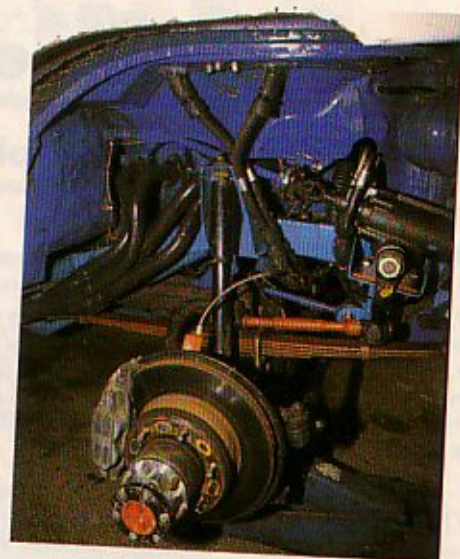
Two wheels for four

Short of money at this point, which may well be why he didn't feel up to losing the bet, he swapped his 600cc KTM enduro bike with Trevor Milner for a pair of Toyota Hilux axles, gearbox, adapter plate and a couple of propshafts. The engine bolted to the gearbox via the adapter plate easily enough but there was no way of using the original springs with the new axles. Once again, the incredibly benevolent Trevor came to the rescue, something he appears to have done throughout this project, this time with a pair of front springs from a Diahatsu F50. No suitable rears could be found and Roger ended up having to fork out to have a set specially made.

With the widened chassis now resting on its new springs and axles, and the engine and gearbox in place, it was time for the rusty body to be dropped back on, briefly, for a trial fit. Needless to say, it didn't. The inner wings hit the engine, at least they would have done if the bulkhead and transmission hadn't fouled on the gearbox first. Both would have to go. Another problem had materialised in that the body was nowhere near wide enough to cover the wheels and tyres that now poked out over four inches on both sides of the vehicle. Still, as luck would have it, the bottom 12 inches of the shell, all four wings and a large part of the floor were fairly rusty so needed replacing, which meant room could be made for all the mechanical bits during the body rebuild.

New wings were ordered and, on arrival, cut in half and widened five inches while the £120 front panel was chopped into three bits before receiving the same treatment. The inner wings were cut off and thrown away while the transmission tunnel was fabricated from scratch as was the replacement fuel tank. This time, when the shell was dropped back on, it landed on the chassis rather than the running gear and the whole project looked dangerously like it might be possible.





Creator, Roger Cousins, and creation. Without looking too closely you can see that the LJ80 is something special

The plumber

With the reconditioned bodyshell now bolted back on to the widened chassis, a task that simply involved the re-drilling of the existing outriggers, it was time to start on wiring, plumbing and a host of other time-consuming jobs necessary to get the Suzuki back on the road. One of the most pressing jobs now was sorting out the steering and pedal layout. The steering is a combination of Hilux

power box joined to the Suzuki column with an early Land Cruiser shaft. Brakes and clutch are a combination of Toyota and Daihatsu parts with the brakes having the benefit of an adjustable bias valve but no servo. Inside the cab, two Corbeau bucket seats were fitted along with three-point harnesses and, as an added safety feature just in case it all goes horribly wrong, there's a full roll-cage. Even when this little lot was completed, Roger insisted that he finish the job off properly and spray it himself. After all, with the exception of bending up the exhaust headers, he'd already done everything else.

On seeing the Suzuki for the first time, I must admit to being rather impressed. The build quality is extremely good with plumbing and wiring being particularly neat and well thought out. All too often these two jobs are rushed in an effort to get on the road and they not only look messy, but end up making the vehicle unreliable.

If looking at the car impressed, then that was nothing compared to actually going for a quick drive in it, a very quick drive in it to be precise. Although the engine has been rebuilt, it is still standard with the exception of the exhaust manifolds and air-filters and so is probably developing around 165bhp. The difference is that it's doing that in a 4x4 that weighs two thirds of not a lot.

Crash coming

Roger let me have first go but after just a few minutes behind the wheel, it became fairly apparent to all involved that if I tried driving it quickly I was almost certainly going to crash. This is something we strive to avoid on road tests, especially when accompanied by the

owner. The steering wheel was too close and banged on my knees while, with my size nine boots, it was impossible to press only one of the pedals at a time. The problem, if you can call it that, was one of fit and I didn't. Most people who build one-off vehicles, myself included, tend to make their vehicles to fit themselves and, as a result, anybody who has different vital statistics will find them almost impossible to drive, and so it was with Roger's new toy.

With a more confident driver at the helm the LJ80, or should that now be LJ350, really came alive. I'd contented myself that the machine was capable of delivering, no matter what gear you found yourself in or at which point of the dial the rev counter needle was pointing. Roger was intent on demonstrating just how much power was on tap between 4000 and 5500rpm and the effect it had on the handling of a vehicle only seven and a half inches narrower in track than its wheelbase.

In the lower gears, sideways motoring is just a stab on the throttle pedal away and that's when it's dry. In the wet, the Suzuki must be almost undriveable. On hard cornering it'll smoke the inside rear wheel in the first three gears and either lift it off the ground or slide sideways in the other two. The problem here is guessing which one is about to happen and by this point road speeds are quite high. The springing and damping are on the firm side of very stiff and if it hadn't have been we'd have definitely rolled it. I didn't get the chance to drive the beast off-road, but we did get very close to the ditch on a couple of occasions although presumably we could have selected four-wheel drive and driven off.

There's no doubting the build quality or engineering skill that's gone into this project. But make no mistake, you could hurt yourself quite easily in this particular 4x4 if you were at all careless in the amount of throttle used. In previous tests, Roger found it would easily out-accelerate a Vauxhall Calibra, and when the Vauxhall speedo was reading a healthy 115mph, the diminutive Suzuki was still pulling away.

If it's possible for a machine to have too much power for its own good, then this one has, and I loved it. As so often happens, now that the project is complete the vehicle's for sale to raise the cash needed for the next piece of motoring lunacy. If you think you could tame this 4x4 or fancy having something equally foolish built, then give Roger a call on 01332 873961.