

# Questions & Answers

## Oliver Fuke, Anthony Tovey & Keith Harrison



Above A40–50 Cambridge Clay Models at Austin Works, Longbridge.  
Below Rover Radio

OF

Anthony, how and when did you come to work here at Longbridge car plant?

AT

I came here in September 1962 to do an apprenticeship as a carpenter. However, I didn't really want to do that and finished as an apprentice pattern maker. I did a five-year apprenticeship. I then continued on here until 1978 as a pattern maker working in the foundry, working with metal, woodwork and undertaking general engineering training.

OF

Keith, could you say something about your relationship to Longbridge car plant? Who did you know that worked here?

KH

On my mum's side, my whole family worked at Longbridge, without exception: my mum, aunts, uncle, nan and grandad. That was my initial connection. They did a variety of jobs within what was a huge enterprise: my mum worked as a secretary at 'the Austin', my grandfather worked in the offices, and my nan worked in the canteen.

OF

How do you think this site has changed since then?  
How has your relation to it changed?

AT

Well, because I still live locally, I have seen how it has gradually diminished. Houses have popped up on the different sites. There's been a lot of retail development, which is, of course, dramatically different to what was here before. Many of my friends lost their employment and some took a number of years to find employment again. Some didn't find employment again. There is a sadness there because a lot of skills were no longer required, just lost. There was some bitterness at the time but the area has moved on now. Although it is not exactly the same as it was, there is still a feeling of the plant being here, although not physically, there is still a feeling of togetherness.

KH

As I have returned here over the years, the changes have been dramatic. As Rover closed in 2005, I started to see empty buildings; there was a general feeling of absence. Then, on my next visit, everything had been flattened and it was gone. That was a huge shock, just the amount of space that was around here. It took my breath away.

OF

Anthony, what was the role of the clay sculptor in the design studio when you worked here?

AT

It was to work as part of the design team which, in the days before computers, was very involved. You had to work as a team and perhaps your contribution was greater than it is now, before CAD. If you were working on a car, there would be about six of you: two on either side, one on either end. You worked with the designer in creating the model, perhaps starting with the centreline sections and plan sections and then working the model through that phase. This would take a minimum of six weeks. It was quite arduous really. You had to take the model outside, so you could get a perspective on the car.

OF

How has digitization changed this line of work?

AT

I think it has changed it dramatically. There is no longer the team aspect; the team is less together really. Now you have paperless studios without drawings. By doing this, as a model maker, you have no access to the computers. So, this means you can't see what's happened with the engineering and, as such, you have no influence on it. This is a retrograde step for the model maker.

OF

I've heard your models were often destroyed after they were made. Why was this?

AT

This was for practical purposes. There were a lot of models made and, although some might be kept, there wasn't enough space to keep them. As such, there were a lot that were destroyed. The clay would definitely be taken off but the armature could be kept and used again for future projects.

OF

Do you see any parallels between what you do?

KH

As we have worked together on the car, we have had numerous conversations about the similarities: the tools we use to work with clay, whether it is wax-derived, or whether it is dug out of the ground, as is the case with the materials we are using today. But also, in terms of negotiation and working with a number of people to get work done – dialogue to establish how the work progresses. In terms of performance, for me this work literally revolves around where the car goes to after. It doesn't end with the production of the clay vehicle. We then put it through the next stage, which is to launch it. The term 'launch', of course, is also used in the car industry. Here, I am using it to describe taking the car into the forest and releasing it from a 10 metre ramp.

AT

Of course, a lot of the personnel in the design studios were all from different backgrounds: silver-smiths, stonemasons, sculptors from the pottery industries and a lot of the tools being used here have been adapted from that original industry. There is also an element of theatre within the design studios. For example, the way the cars are presented and displayed with all the razzmatazz of the theatre. The work was also destroyed, as I said, due to restrictions on space. I have worked on models that have occasionally gone right through to production but not always. I suppose I have spent the majority of my life working without any fruition at all.

OF

Keith, why did you choose to make a model of the Rover 75? What is it about this car that specifically interested you?

KH

I was always interested in the Rover 75. From a personal perspective, I thought it was the best car of the later era of production here at Longbridge. I think at the early stages of putting together the proposal for Jerwood Open Forest it was in my mind that it had a certain grandeur and that, if we were going to launch a car, that would be an appropriate vehicle to launch. Then, through further research and investigation, it transpired that it was the last car to come off the production line and that cemented its position for me. Not only did it have aesthetic appeal but it had this additional weight; everything was right with the car but it was produced at the wrong moment.

OF

Would you say that this car stood at a transitional moment between the height of production and the demise of that industry here at Longbridge?

KH

Yes, the Reverend Collin Corke told me a telling story about this. There is a tradition [in the automotive industry] that all the workers would sign the last car that would be produced (and there are numerous examples of this in the British Motor Museum.) I thought it was strange that there were no signatures on the Rover 75 there, given what an important vehicle it was. However, it turned out that it had been signed but by this point the work force had become so small that they had just signed where the bumpers were. The signatures just weren't visible any more. That, for me, was such a telling sign that the workforce had just gone. For me, there is a lot in and around that.

OF

Do you see what you're doing as a celebration of the car manufacturing industry or commemoration of its passing, here at Longbridge?

KH

I think it is a recognition of the ultimately unrealised hopes invested in the vehicle itself but it is perhaps more of an elegy for a passing of a particular time, a commemoration of that manufacturing period. I think all of those things are wrapped up in this project, the personal connection and history as well as the social impact that the demise has had in this area.

OF

What do you think, Anthony?

AT

I initially thought it was absolutely crazy. I now think it's great. It has been very interesting for me to be involved. I think it is an excellent project, and a very thoughtful one. I see it as a commemoration of a lot of skilled people throughout the years.

