

# CLASSIC DRIVER

## A quirky afternoon with Jamie Burnett, the King of Carbs

**Lead**

A second-generation director of Burlen Ltd, the only company in the world that manufactures S.U, Amal, and Zenith carburettors, Jamie Burnett is an eccentric, an artist, and a creator with a taste for 1930s and '40s cars and Victorian style. We spent an afternoon with the King of Carbs...



Jamie Burnett has come a long way since his boy-racer days. Since joining his father's business, Burlen Ltd, aged just 18, he's become a master craftsman of the carburettor and helped to transform this once functional automotive part into a genuine work of art. His car collection is as diverse as it is fascinating, with hot-rods and 1940s American coupes mixing it with British Fords and Morris Vans, and his office could genuinely be used as the set for a gentlemen's club in a Victorian crime series. But while he has one eye very much in the past, the other is most certainly fixed on the future...



**What are your earliest automotive memories?**

I remember being in the back of my father's Jensen with my two brothers. He used to go around corners with the wheels screaming and we'd all be jumping around for joy. We were always around classic cars but the Jensen sticks out in my memory. That was one of my father's first sports cars and he has kept it and still drives it now.

**Was it expected that you would go into the family business?**

No, not really. I used to work here in my summer holidays and as kids, my brothers and I used to scoot around the offices on swivel chairs and dig through the parts in the stock room, not really understanding what they were or what they did. The place was our playground.





At school, I chose art and went on to do an art course at college – I was always interested in sculpture and making things. But after college, when I was pottering around and trying to find something to do, I got a kick up the arse and dad told me to come and work for him so I could earn some money and he wouldn't have to pay for me anymore! So that's what happened.

**How did you find it?**

As I said, I love making stuff, so it was quite natural for me to work on the production line and make all the bits and pieces. I've done pretty much every job there is to do and built every piece there is to build here. I ended up getting more and more interested in and involved with the carburettors. When you build a carburettor, it's like building a model kit – you get a box of parts and you have to put it all together. I thought it was brilliant and, twenty years later, I'm still here!

**Did the work increase your passion for cars?**

Growing up, I was always into cars. But back in those days, it was modern cars with alloy wheels and wide body kits. Dad was always taking us to shows and auto-jumbles, so there's always been an interest in classic cars as well. My first classic was a Ford Pilot, which was a car I'd always admired because it had a mighty V8. I've still got it and it's still my favourite – I used to drive it everywhere, all the time, and it's never missed a beat!



**Why did you become known as the 'King of Carbs'?**

I guess because I showed a passion for and got my head around them at an early age. I also helped to raise the quality of our carburettors to where they are now and to train the people who are building them now to ensure they leave us as good as they can be.

**With the classic car and historic motorsport worlds booming, have you seen a renewed interest in and demand for high-quality carburettors?**

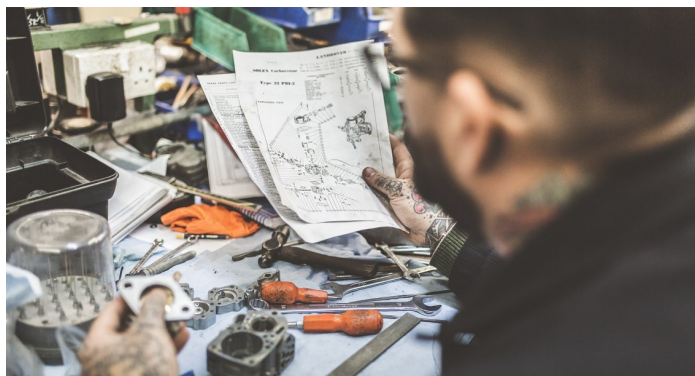
Absolutely – people just love British manufacturing and craftsmanship. When carburettors were first invented, they were just parts of an engine that were thrown together and they certainly didn't look like they do now. The suction chambers were never polished, for example. Now, they're considered to be works of art and when people open their bonnets, they're the first things you see, so they need to look lovely. They're now so much more than functional objects.



**From where does your love of American V8s and hot-rods stem?**

I think it's the modification – I've always liked to change things and make cars my own. The Ford Pilot is fairly American looking and I haven't actually changed too much on that car because it is so nice. I always had a passion for the big Chevy pickups and coupes from the 1930s and '40s and my first one was a 1941 Plymouth business coupe you can see on the lift. It came up at auction and I decided I had to have it.

One of the reasons for messing around with American V8s is because the hot-rod scene in the USA doesn't really use S.U carburettors, so I saw it as a possible gap in the market and an opportunity to show them how beautiful they are. When I bought my hot-rod, it was a really rusty and badly built car. But I had too much hard-earned money in my pocket and got way too excited about owning my first hot-rod, so I bought it anyway. That needed some work, which was good because there was nothing original left on it. I didn't feel so bad about chopping it up because I was really resurrecting it.

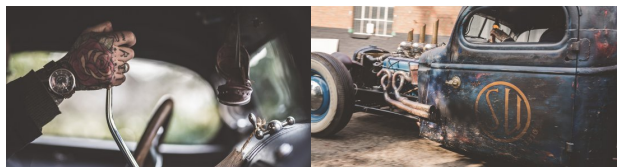


**Your office looks like a cross between the Purdey store in London and a gentlemen's club...**

My taste in cars errs towards the 1930s and '40s, but my taste in décor is Victorian. I always say I'm a Victorian at heart – I just love the taxidermy and the old smoking rooms and gentlemen's clubs.

**How does it make you feel to be the sole manufacturer of S.U, Zenith, and Amal carburettors?**

I think it's amazing and I love it here. It's such a great thing to be a part of and the history behind the company amazes me every day – I've just been looking at old photos of the Skinner family because we're starting a new clothing company, Skinners Union Clothing Co.. I'd have loved to have been around back then when industrial progress was rapid and things were constantly being invented. I love going to Goodwood and talking to people about Buren – there are still far too many people who don't know we exist.



**What does the future look like for Buren?**

The clothing is something we've wanted to do for a long time. A few years ago, we developed a vintage range of coats and three-piece suits and the like, and we got a really positive reaction when we showed it at Goodwood. But shortly after, we needed to re-concentrate on the main business. Last year, we decided to revive the project and we started off with handmade tweed caps. Hopefully, we'll start expanding the range – again, *I'm* developing that because I just love vintage clothing and style.



We're also developing a fuel injection system that is hidden in carburettors for the Jaguar E-type. It's been done before by others, but not to this level of quality and ingenuity. We're looking to expand by using modern technology – we're moving with the times but still keeping it old school.

**What would be your dream car, regardless of budget?**

I'd have the Beast of Turin!

*Photos: Robert Cooper for Classic Driver © 2018*

**Gallery**















































































































