

Why is an RV8 Elm Burr gear knob so desirable?

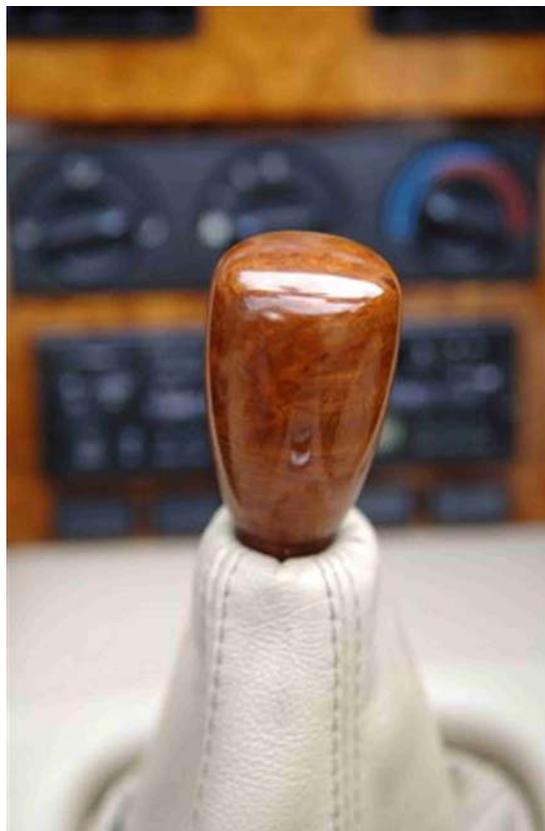
Recent advertisements for RV8s for sale have mentioned a Terry Starkey gear knob among the special features that make the car offer even more attractive. Angus Munro feels it is quite right that a Terry Starkey gear knob is mentioned as a desirable item, but why? The prospective purchaser might well ask and, partly for that reason, Angus would like owners and prospective owners to know a little more about these beautiful items and the charming story behind the thought that went into producing them in the first place. Angus explains.

To set the scene I quote the following text from the original sales brochure: "The exclusive, craftsman-built nature of the RV8 is nowhere more evident than in the interior, where the use of fine quality veneers and lavish leather trim creates a unique ambience of sporting luxury. The richness of Elm Burr veneer adorns the fascia, door cappings and driver's console and has been selected and tailored by craftsmen with decades of experience. The Burr grows at the bole of the Elm tree, an interwoven, gnarled mass of dense wood, which produces the swirling grain and clusters of knots so characteristic of burr veneers. After careful preparation, the burr is cut into leaves, which are always kept in the sequential order in which they were cut; so that when the veneers are used, the grain of each leaf is almost a duplicate of the one laid next to it, creating the sought after 'mirror image' effect. In the MGRV8, two matching leaves are used for the fascia and four matching leaves, laid as two pairs, for each of the door cappings." For Terry to have found a very limited supply of Elm Burr, and further, to have located a master craftsman capable of extracting gear knobs from this "gnarled mass of dense wood" is a story worth telling and I will attempt to do so, as follows.

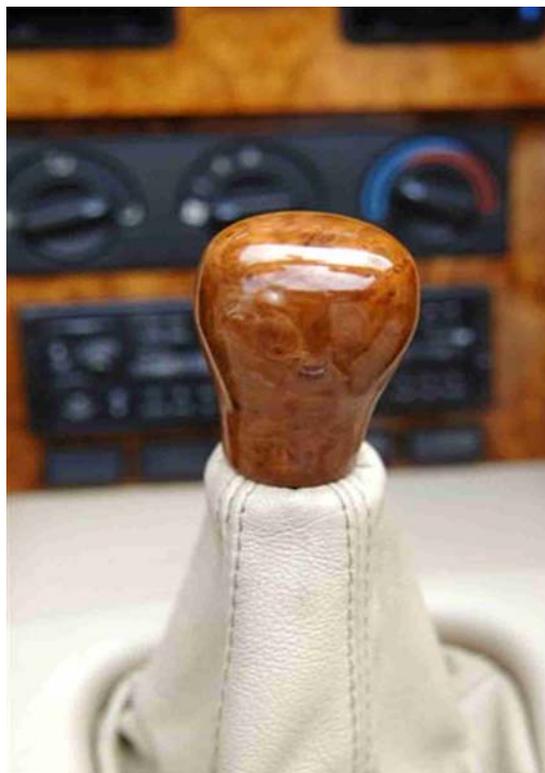
Several years ago Terry noted that with time and use the finish on the original leather gear knob quickly deteriorated and spoiled the overall ambience of the cockpit. So he searched, albeit in vain, for a matching Burr Elm gear knob but as the available wooden knobs on offer were never going to match the original car, he decided to get one made. Considerable thought went into the design of his knobs. He thought he should replicate the original knob shape but later decided to craft the 'new' shape which is loosely based on a Morgan design and, in his opinion - but not mine - looks and works better than the original. With the help of a highly skilled engineering colleague the insert was designed and made to secure the knob to the gearstick and support the leather gaiter.

The new knob soon attracted the attention of fellow RV8 owners and within a few weeks a number of them, mainly made to the new shape, were ordered. His wood turner told him that Burr Elm was now hard to get hold of, tricky to work with and that he only had enough wood to make two knobs. A problem indeed!

A week or so later the wife of a neighbour sadly died. Terry delivered a condolences card and later met the old man at his home to talk about the tragic event. His house and garden are very beautiful and they talked about how the area and gardens around Tasburgh in Norfolk had changed over the years. Momentarily, the man's mind was taken off his very obvious grief as they talked more about the garden and the changes. The valley in which they live used to boast a considerable number of Elm trees, many of which have now died and been felled. His neighbour then told Terry about a big one he'd felled some 25 years ago - one which had seen an owl family nesting in it each year - but that's another story! Continuing with the distraction, Terry told him about the cars and the gear knobs and asked him if he knew the whereabouts of any Burr Elm. "Come round the back Terry", said the man with a glint in his eye, and led him to a wood store which contained several large blocks of what turned out to be beautiful Burr Elm! "Take some", he said. At a later date



Original shape of the elm burr gear knob has a smooth look and is a delight in the hand. (Photo: Terry Starkey)



New shape is now available as an alternative and is proving very popular. (Photo: Terry Starkey)

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The author's own gear knob in the original shape. Only six exist. Photo: Angus Munro

Terry returned to collect the newly discovered treasure and while thanking him asked why he was being so generous. "My wife and I did our courting in an MG TC, so I've always had a soft spot for MGs" he replied tearfully.

Some weeks later Terry took his neighbour out for a spin in his RV8 and, once again, helped to put a smile on his face. Ah, the magic of MG. At the time of writing some 88 knobs have been made from his wonderful Burr Elm and sent to RV8 owners all over the World. Recently, the neighbour let Terry have some more Elm Burr, enough for, say, 30 or 40 knobs. And that will probably be that as far as the supply is concerned.

Terry's master craftsman, Aubrey, cuts the wood into suitably sized blocks and then carefully turns them into the beautifully shaped knobs. There is quite a high rejection rate because he never

knows where the 'pithy' bits are inside the wood. These often fly off making the block unusable. Aubrey also manages to match the colour of the knob to the colour of the dashboard. Quite remarkable.

After-market accessories and "originality" changes will always generate discussion, especially in the case of a car such as an RV8 which was, in its very concept and limited production, always intended to be unique. From my point of view I have the wish only to make those minor changes that I feel the factory would have loved to have offered, had they had the opportunity. Certainly the cost of a factory supplied Elm Burr gear lever knob, even as an optional extra, would have probably been far too expensive. I do know that Terry does not make any money from these items, happy only to pay his craftsmen for their time and then pass on the product at cost to fellow RV8 enthusiasts. Such is the nature of his love for all things MG and his generosity toward the fellow caretakers who look after the cars.

I have always enjoyed the story of the garden at Tasburgh in Norfolk that began the life of the tree more than one hundred years ago. I like to think of the owls that returned each year and of the man who courted his much loved wife in a TC all those years ago. He must have many happy memories to which the name MG has contributed so very much. I have always wondered why Terry has never made the charming little story more public, why he did not issue a written story with each gear knob sold? He explains that he is a professional marketing man and has made a good living from what he does. He has however no interest in hard marketing an item which forms such a part of his hobby and that has led to friendships all over the World. I do understand that, I really do, but I still feel that the story is worth telling and, with Terry's kind permission, have attempted to do that here.

For those of you who are fortunate enough to own one of these gear knobs, when you finish a run in your car and you switch off and hear the engine sigh its little sigh of disappointment that another run is over, stay for a while. Put your hand on the gear knob and reflect that you are holding a little piece of English history. You are holding something from a finite source that can never be replicated. When the material is used up there will never be another Tasburgh Elm Burr gear knob. With approximately eighty eight gear knobs produced, at the time of writing number one hundred is in sight. Terry intends to auction that one with the proceeds being given to a well known charity.

My closing thought is that Terry's own gear knob, the prototype as it were, did not come from the Tasburgh garden tree. That's a little sad don't you think?



Last remaining block of elm – you can see an exposed area of 'pith'. Photo: Terry Starkey