

Cars swapping vroom for volts in London garage

May 20 2022, by Sylvain Peuchmaurd and William Edwards



London Electric Cars converts classic cars to run on electric engines.

Tucked away in a workshop under a London Underground line, cars are undergoing a green metamorphosis as they shed their cylinders, spark plugs and pistons for electric engines.

"We don't create the associated CO₂ that comes from creating a new car and we're not scrapping a perfectly valid old car. It's win-win," said Matthew Quitter, founder of London Electric Cars.

London Electric Cars is one of the companies capitalising on the UK's flexible regulatory environment and special affection for cars to help grow the fledgling sector.

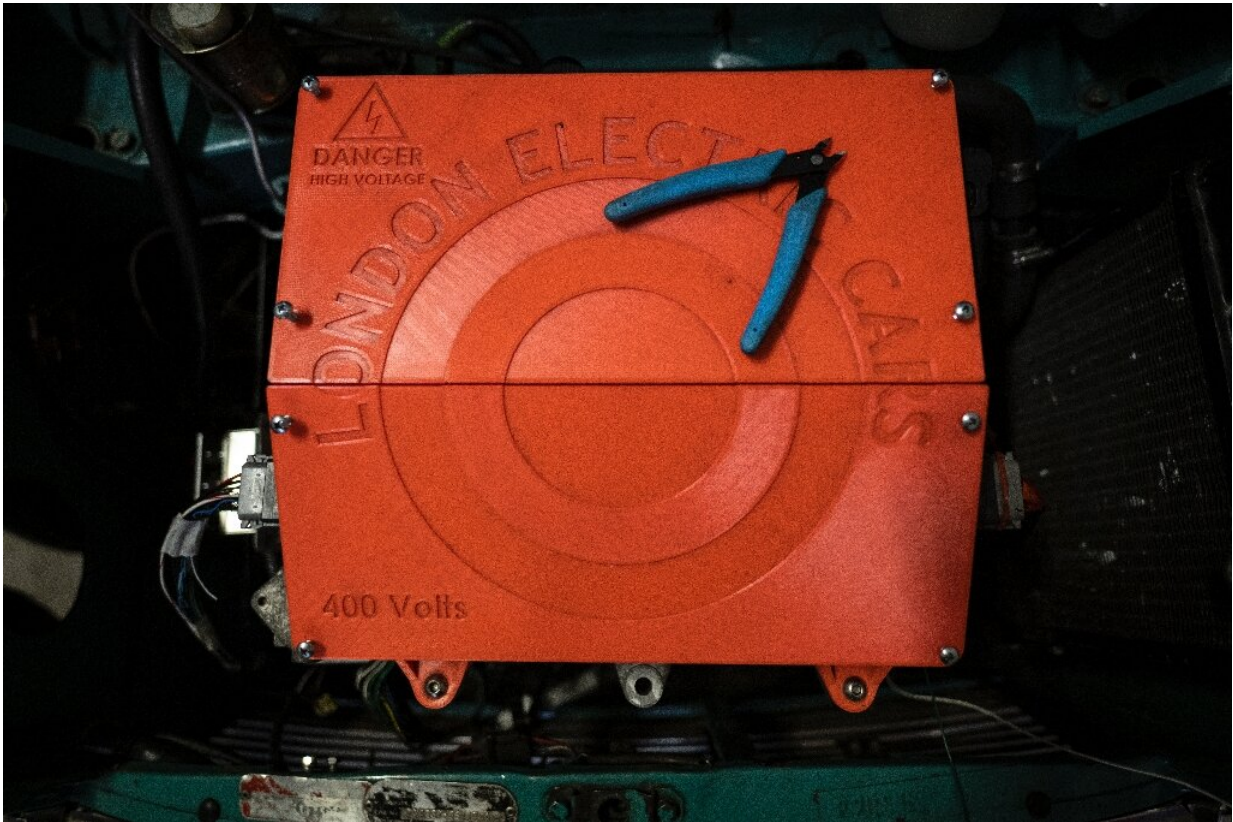
In the workshop, all kinds of cars have come to be reborn: Minis, Bentleys, old ones—such as a 20-year-old Volvo station wagon—and some not so old, including a platypus-like Fiat Multipla.

Some families are turning to Quitter to save their beloved vehicles from the crusher, with places such as London expanding road charges for older and more polluting vehicles.

"They're just keen that they don't scrap this car because they have an emotional attachment," he said.

"The kids grew up in it and instead want to see it reborn as an electric vehicle."

The cost of a conversion starts at £30,000 (\$37,500, 35,000 euros)—the equivalent of a new entry-level electric car.



Most of the cars are fitted with Nissan Leaf or Tesla engines, and aim to stick to the original car's performance.

The renovated vehicles have a range of between 80 and 300 kilometres (50 to 186 miles), depending on the batteries.

This is more than enough when "90 percent to 95 percent of journeys inside London are under six miles", said Quitter.

The old engines can be kept, resold or destroyed.

Stinking disaster

Most of the vehicles are fitted with Nissan Leaf or Tesla engines, with the aim to stick as close as possible to the car's original performance and helping to avoid having to adapt the brakes or transmission.

The garage has converted seven cars since it opened its doors in 2017, and hopes to convert 10 by 2022.

"People realise that [combustion engines](#) are a disaster, they stink, they're full of fumes, they make a lot noise and they're responsible partly for climate breakdown," said Quitting.

"I think... we will look back on classic car ownership with petrol engines as a sort of anachronism," he predicted.



Owners of older, more polluting cars are increasingly being charged to drive on the roads as part of clean air initiatives.

But the umbrella body for historic automobile clubs, the Federation Internationale des Vehicules Anciens (FIVA), argued in 2019 that such conversions take away from the character of older cars and called for reversible modifications instead.

For purists, the noise, vibrations and smell of petrol are all part of the pleasure of an old car.

But Quitter's clients "aren't interested in that at all", he said, adding they want the "reliability" of electric cars without the smell and exhaust fumes of a petrol vehicle.

He also dismissed objections of those who say such modifications of classic cars are a desecration, saying no one complains about old houses being fitted with modern comforts.

National heritage

"At the end of the day, it's a very personal question in terms of what cars, for you, would be sacrilegious to convert," he said, adding it would be unlikely he'd ever convert an Aston Martin.



Purists have complained that conversions should be reversible.

He is joined on this point by Garry Wilson, head of the Historic & Classic Vehicles Alliance (HCVA), which works to preserve vintage vehicles, who cited the Aston DB5, James Bond's famous car.

Changing engines is something that has been done almost since the beginning of automotive history, but classic cars must be treated with respect, said Wilson.

"There's an awful lot of vehicles out there where we should class them as part of our national heritage, and therefore should in theory be treated like a grade I listed building, and shouldn't be modified," he added.

"We'd be horrified if someone fitted new PVC windows in Blenheim Palace.

"Frankly, the Houses of Parliament would be better off being knocked down and rebuilt in modern materials. But it's got Big Ben attached to it, it's one of our national treasures."

Wilson is also sceptical about the environmental benefits of such conversions for collector cars that travel only a few hundred miles a year on average, compared with 7,200 miles a year for contemporary cars.



Some opponents believe classic and historic cars should be treated like listed buildings, and preserved for posterity.

This is especially true if parts for the batteries and engines come from the other side of the world, he said.

Instead, he thinks the solution rests with synthetic fuels, which emit CO₂ but are manufactured by absorbing it, and which he believes would enable the sector to achieve carbon neutrality in 2050.

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