

BUILDS TOURING CAR ASTRAS

OWNER

STEFFAN IRMLER

AGE 48

JOB Owner of Irmeler High Performance Machining & Testing
FIRST VAUXHALL/OPEL

Kissling Motorsport Kadett D (Mk1 Astra) 1300

FAVOURITE VAUXHALL/OPEL
Kadett E (Mk2 Astra)

BEST THING ABOUT YOUR ASTRAS

To have been able to buy sister cars and to have contact with their original drivers

LEAST FAVOURITE THING ABOUT YOUR ASTRAS

The amount of work involved in restoring the McCleery car

What's better than owning an example of your favourite classic touring car? Owning two, that's what!

WORDS Dan Furr PHOTOS Adrian Brannan



Steffan Irmeler is a lucky guy. Not only has the German Vauxhall/Opel enthusiast realised his dream of owning and racing a classic touring car that originally competed during the Super Touring era (and was at one point driven by two-time British Touring Car Championship winner, John Cleland), he's managed to get hold of his pride and joy's sister car too!

The pair of UK-built Mk3 Astra touring cars you'll see displayed across the following pages are less well-known than the BTCC Cavaliers that were doing battle at the same time. For the most part, this is because the Astras were attacking the asphalt in South Africa. Furthermore, whereas most season-old works cars end up being sold to independent teams competing in the same championship, Steffan's Mk3s were taken out of service and shipped to the Balkan Peninsula.

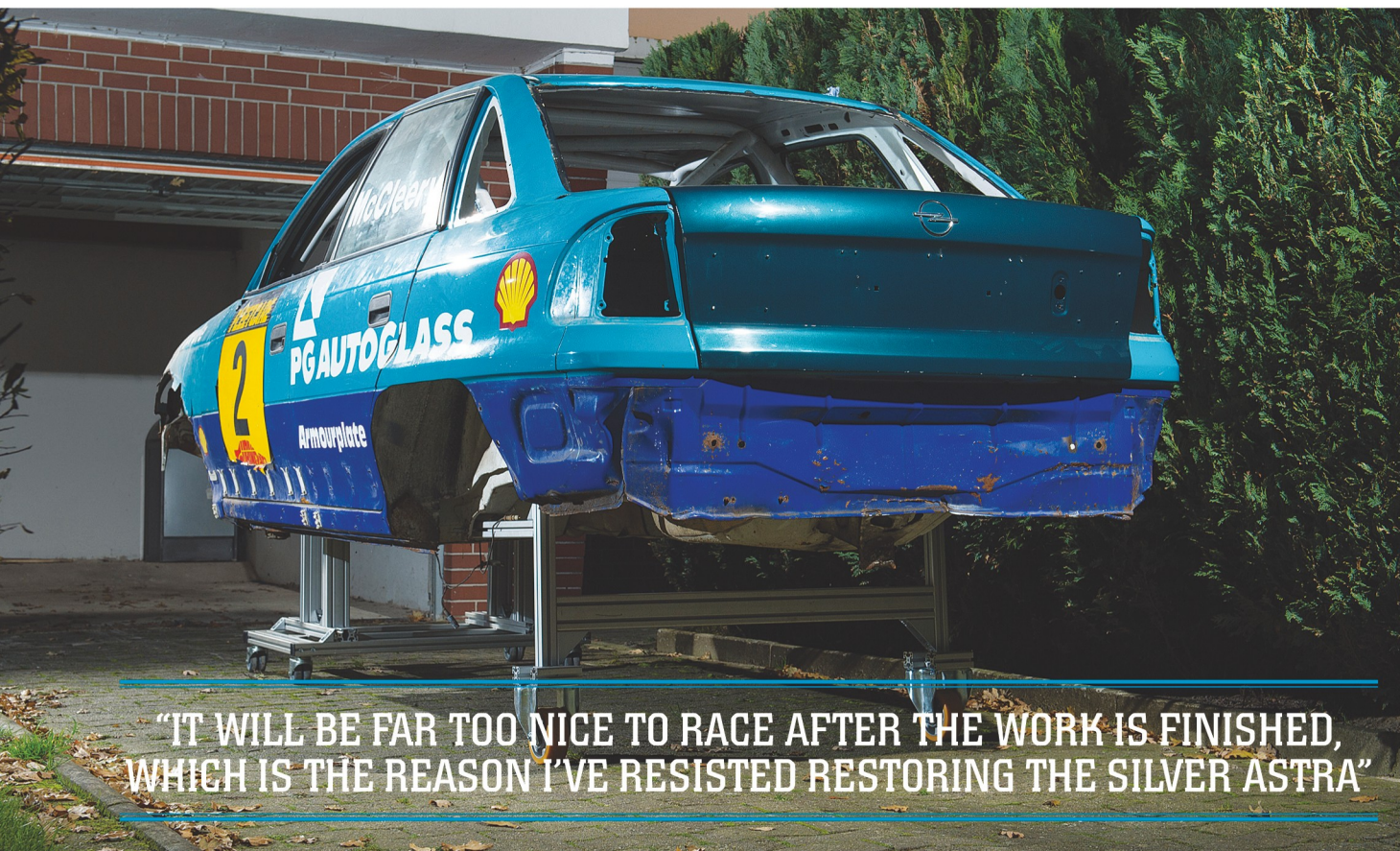
Fast-forward to the present day, and the cars tell two very different stories. One of them is more or less complete and being put to good use in regular historic touring car competitions at circuits including the Nürburgring, the other hasn't seen a track since it finished its debut season of racing in 1994. It's missing an engine, transmission and its period-correct electronic fuel management. And it's covered in rust. A lot of rust.

Fortunately, Steffan owns a precision engineering business and can see the potential in restoring the impotent Astra to its former glory. He's hoping to reunite both of his cars with their original drivers, and harbours ambitions of competing on UK soil this year. We boarded a ferry and set sail for mainland Europe to take a closer look at the Astras that have excited him so much.





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"IT WILL BE FAR TOO NICE TO RACE AFTER THE WORK IS FINISHED, WHICH IS THE REASON I'VE RESISTED RESTORING THE SILVER ASTRAS"

What's the history of the cars you've bought?

My Astras are sister cars that competed alongside one another in the 1994 South African Touring Car Championship. Back then, Delta Motor Corporation was the official importer of Opel in South Africa after General Motors ceased operating its subsidiary in the country for political reasons. The extremely successful Delta Motorsport was founded soon after, winning the Group N touring car class three times in a row. My cars were built by Vauxhall tuning partner, MSD, in the UK, shipped to South Africa and entered into competition life by Delta in 1994, by which time the country's touring car regulations looked very similar to those laid out in the BTCC Super Touring rulebook.

Two-litre powerplants?

Correct. The Astra engines were essentially the same two-litre Swindon Powertrain units being put through their paces by the BTCC Cavaliers of John Cleland and Jeff Allam, but I can assure you there's a lot less room to play with when you try to shoehorn the same equipment beneath the bonnet of a Mk3 Astra!

Who drove the cars in 1994?

The blue Astra was driven by South African racer, Grant McCleery, and later shared between McCleery and respected British Vauxhall pilot, Anthony Reid, for the end-of-season International Touring Car Challenge.



The silver car was driven by McCleery's fellow countryman, Mike Briggs, who shared driving duties with John Cleland for the same season-end competition. In 1996, Delta Motorsport sold the cars to a guy in Slovenia. Sadly, as is the case with many touring cars from the Super Touring era, the silver Astra's engine and gearbox were sold to somebody building a rallycross car. The blue Astra's engine and gearbox were then installed in the silver car, which raced in selected rounds of the Central European Super Touring Championship during the 1997 and 1998 seasons.

There was no further track action for the McCleery machine?

None. It became a parts car. It was stored in an old farm building and gradually robbed of its components in order to keep

This page: Despite being relieved of many key mechanical components, the currently-stripped blue Astra has been kept with much of its original racing chassis equipment

the silver car alive. As you can see, the blue Astra is very rusty! There's going to be a huge amount of work involved in the restoration.

You intend to bring the blue car back to life, then?

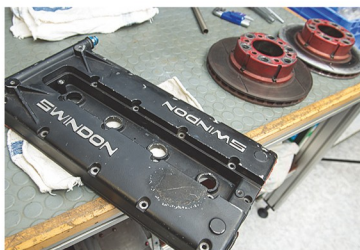
Absolutely! My hope is to restore it to original specification. Of course, it will be far too nice to race after the work is finished, which is the reason I've resisted the temptation to restore the silver Astra.

The Mike Briggs car continues to compete?

I've entered it into 24 Hours Nürburgring, as well as various German historic touring car tournaments held at the same circuit. I'm hoping to put Mike Briggs back in the car for this year's Silverstone Classic. I might even participate in the UK's Super Touring Car Championship.

Do you intend to keep both cars?

Yes. The silver Astra is a brilliant racing machine, which I want to keep using in anger. I'd be far too worried about compromising its condition and value if I carried out a restoration and then used the finished car to jostle for position on the track. My intention is to keep on top of the car's excellent mechanical and cosmetic



order while restoring the blue Astra, which will more than likely be used exclusively for show and presentation purposes.

When do you anticipate completing restoration work on the blue car?

I've given myself a deadline of Christmas 2018. In many respects, it'll be a lot easier for me to carry out the restoration than it would for many other owners of historic race cars, primarily due to the work my company performs in the field of high performance precision engineering and testing. The nature of the business means that I can make parts that prove difficult to get hold of, such as the

Left: **Steffan's** Astras were built in the UK by MSD to specification mirroring that of the BTCC's Super Touring regulations



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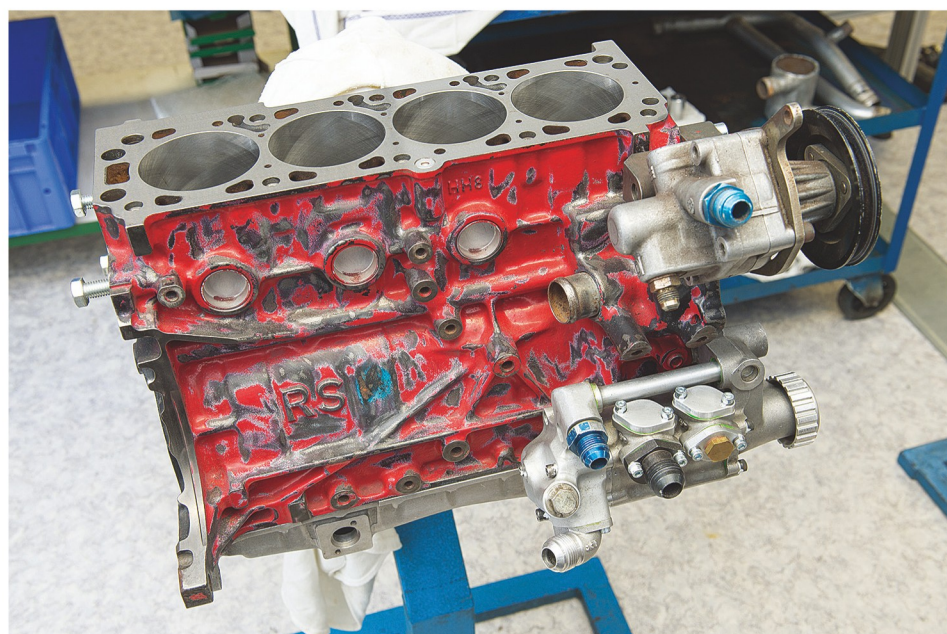
Xtrac transmission equipment I'm in the process of reproducing. Additionally, I have great contacts at touring car specialists, including Swindon Powertrain. These ties are useful when it comes to acquiring parts and technical advice. Thankfully, the blue car retains its original Pilbeam suspension, struts and brakes, which would be tricky to replicate.

Does your firm reproduce many historic race car parts?

I've found myself selling a high number of Irmmler-branded aluminium wheels that replicate the design of classic Ronal racing magnesium three-piece split rims, which are getting on a bit now. Put it this way, if you're lucky enough to find old magnesium competition wheels, it can be difficult to know what condition they're in without an X-ray, plus you have the difficulty of finding someone who can properly restore such a volatile material. Modern aluminium replica parts look just as good, and they take the headache out of shelling out for parts that might be in need of expensive restoration.

What encouraged you to buy your Astras in the first place?

To my mind, Super Touring regulations encouraged the very best racing. It was exciting, bumper-to-bumper stuff. I established my company in 1995, the year Cleland finally won the BTCC with a Cavalier. I spent a lot of time travelling to



the UK from Germany on business. I'd extend my visits so that I could watch BTCC races! I was mad about the Vauxhall and Opel brands. I still am! I'm always looking at what classic touring cars are coming to market, and I couldn't resist buying the Astras when they were offered for sale in 2015. Similarly, I was unable to resist buying the Ascom-liveried BTCC Cavalier

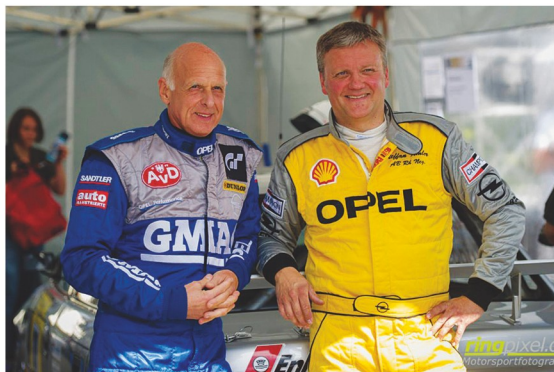
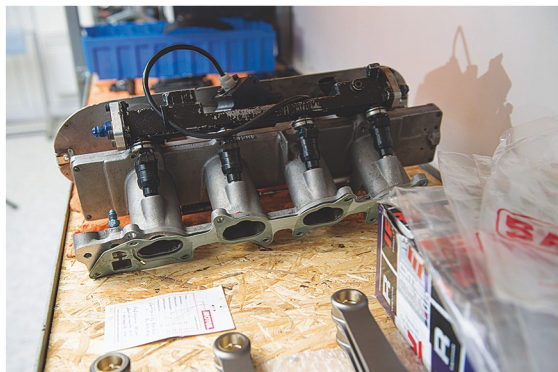
Chris Goodwin raced in 1994. That's a project I'm hoping to get stuck into in 2019.

It sounds as though you've got a lot to keep you busy, Steffan!

I think you're right! Please do come back and see the cars when they're finished. Until then, you can follow project progress on my Facebook page, bit.ly/irmmler

Above: Two-litre Swindon XE is a legendary touring car powerplant

Left and below: Steffan regularly shares *Tourenwagen Classics* driving duties in the silver Astra with DTM legend and current Vauxhall/Opel director of Performance Cars and Motorsport, Volker Strycek



WE WANT TO SEE YOUR BUILDS!

Are you partway into an extensive restomod project that promises to end with the unveiling of a spectacular modified Vauxhall? Be it retro or VXR-badged, we want to know about it! Send pics and spec to dan.furr@kelseymedia.co.uk, Tweet to @DanFurr or message us through the Performance Vauxhall Facebook page. Go!

THANKS

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