If you own an obscure British car in the U.S., there’s a good chance Kip Motor Company made one of the parts on it. If you bought that car in the Dallas area, they probably restored it. And if the car is new to you, all that means is you haven’t ordered their parts yet.

KMC started out as a small restoration shop, and not one that was doing unusual cars: It was mostly Studebaker, Ford and Chevrolet. It was Kip Lankenau’s wife, Debra, who unintentionally changed their course. “She was a salesperson with a large territory when the company she was with decided they would no longer supply cars, but would instead pay mileage,” said Kip. “Debra soon realized a new car would be totally worn out long before it was paid for. After reviewing several options, she decided an antique convertible was the solution, a 1961 AMC Metropolitan.” Austin in England built and powered the car under contract.

Debra’s decision was not quite as loony as it sounds. Debra thought, correctly, that the car would be an excellent icebreaker; but for KMC, it meant a lot of work keeping it on the road for 30,000 or more miles a year (we wouldn’t be surprised if there was a Met record in there somewhere). “We worked on her car many evenings and most weekends keeping it roadworthy,” said Kip, and it turned out there was pent-up demand for Metropolitan work in the greater Dallas area. We would not have suspected that, either, but perhaps that perception was responsible for the backlog of work in the first place.

Those weird-car owning people turned out to have other weird cars, many of them English, and KMC was willing to pick up the torch for the Humbers, Vauxhalls,
Morrises and English Fords of the world. The big names—Austin-Healey, MG, Jaguar, Triumph—were all well served, but the true orphans—cars which were not only abandoned by the manufacturer, but also after market as well—had none. “For years, there were lots of mom and pop parts businesses,” said Kip. He says big parts stores were only interested in high-volume parts; mom and pops could sell higher-margin, rare parts. But as the small independents were squeezed out of existence on volume business, the supply chain dried up: first new production, then old inventory. “By that point, we had thousands and thousands of customers,” said Kip, and he gradually had to decide whether to abandon them or take a leap into becoming a manufacturer.

It quickly became apparent that the model that had supplied the market in the past would not work for KMC’s small volume. They could not justify the thousands of dollars of set-up costs to produce a 1,000-part run; many items sell only a handful a year. “You can’t amortize it,” Kip said. “We had to figure out how to make high-quality parts in very tiny quantities.”

It required a radical re-thinking of what was practical and a return to a pre-mass production philosophy. There was really no secret, just a willingness to have a certain flexibility of outlook. “At our level, we’re more concerned with the knowledge and experience of our people,” he said.

KMC makes almost everything they sell, right down to some raw materials; for instance, they developed their own castable phenolic resin for an ignition cap. The process almost always starts with an original part, and that’s the reason for the 100 or so unrestored English cars kept at the shop—they’re the pattern cars for developing reproduction parts. Extensive parts commonality means that a relatively unlikely model might contribute a pattern for something much more common. Plus, when someday, someone needs a heater grommet for a Series II Hillman Minx, they’ll be ready.

“Most of our processes have been perfected in house,” said Kip. Their production includes metal parts, textiles and rubber. They don’t weave their own fabrics and they don’t make tires, and they may not make every single part for a given car, but you could probably put together a complete British bitsa from the catalog.

Our question, then, was if KMC can produce literally 10,000 different parts in their shop, for the love of God, how? How do they do it without setting up the machines; how can you not only make complex parts economically, but make them to the highest possible standard? The answer is simple: by hand.

Tooling costs can be kept low because much of the work that would be done by machines in mass production is here turned over to craftsmen. We said the decision to go into Victorian-style manufacturing required a specific mindset. Fundamentally it’s just remembering that “hand-crafted” can mean high quality: “Our new one comes out identical to the original,” said Kip. In the same hour or two over 100 important cars are stored at indoor locations, with many less-needed makes out back, including MG, Austin, Rover, Vanden Plas, Triumph, Ford, Metropolitan and Commer.
A technician painstakingly hand-assembles a distributor, cast in-house, below. Bottom: The upholstery shop has its own pattern library.

that an automated line might punch out thousands, a single craftsman will sand off flashing and chase threads. So instead of paying for tooling, you're paying for labor, a much more gratifying proposition. In fact, they've found that when they make parts truly identical to those from the factory, people are sometimes disappointed in factory-style quality, so they tend to err on the side of "just a little bit better." "I tell them, 'Remember, it's not a Packard,'" said Kip.

While that's the bulk of their work, KMC still restores cars, mostly for long-term customers. As with some other similar shops, that also provides an opportunity to test out parts before they go on retail sale. Between restorations and service work, they still see 40-50 cars a year.

"We're interested in making things for the challenge," said Kip. "Our parts are hand-built, but very consistent, and you can't discriminate between ours and the original.... We liken ourselves to a Victorian-era engineering shop. People have forgotten how to do batch production in quality—we've mastered it in economical high quality."

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Patterns, molds and inventory are all kept together for handy reference. Molds such as these can be used a limited number of times, but it's far more cost-effective than machine tooling.

Restorations are no longer a big portion of Kip Motor's business, but any given day still sees eight to 10 British cars in for restoration or service, such as this Metropolitan.