

## **Auto-motivated: Native of England, Woods Bay man passionate about British vehicles**

*By VINCE DEVLIN of the Missoulian*

*Photographed by Vince Devlin of the Missoulian*



**Mallory Sunderland** leans against a 1958 Hillman Minx convertible in Woods Bay. VINCE DEVLIN?Missoulian

WOODS BAY - They are everywhere, as if they've bred like rabbits - Jaguars, Hillmans, Triumphs, Austin Healeys, MGs, even a Morris Minor pickup, for heaven's sake - and the obvious question is, where does a guy in Woods Bay find all these vintage British vehicles?

"I don't," 46-year-old Mallory Sunderland says. "They find me."

There are Saabs and VWs too, plus motorcycles, not to mention plenty of Fords and Chevys as well as one Dodge pickup, one Willys Jeep truck, one Studebaker pickup and a Chrysler 300.

How many altogether?

"I really don't know," Sunderland says. "More than one and less than 200. But I'm not addicted to any breed. If you're a car nut, you're a car nut, and a true car nut does not segregate - he just loves vehicles."

As if to prove the point, Sunderland reveals that he has just acquired not one, but two of the long-defunct American Motors Pacers.

"My missus (Maggie, a Bigfork Realtor) thinks I'm stupid," Sunderland says with a laugh. "I know I am."

Still, he grew up with the British makes. A Yorkshireman from Todmorden, England, Sunderland owns Flathead Customs, and he'll rebuild and restore most any kind of vehicle. Indeed, one of his current projects is a 1940 Ford Deluxe Coupe convertible.

But he specializes in British vehicles.

"An Englishman working on American cars?" he says. "There are plenty of good people out here doing restoration work. I was brought up with the English stuff."

And so his business has gravitated somewhat toward the cars he's known since he was a child, when his father taught him to operate a crane and stack cars in the breaker's yard George Sunderland owned.

A breaker's yard?



"You call them wrecking yards," Sunderland says. "I was the apple of me father's eye, because I was always into cars, and they were his thing, too. It's because of him that I was introduced to American cars. They were very scarce where we lived, but he always had an American car."

Now that Sunderland is in America, he can't get enough of the British brands.

Some belong to customers, of course. Others are cars Sunderland has acquired to restore and sell.

But there are plenty that aren't going anywhere without Sunderland behind the wheel, either, such as his 1967 E-Type 2+2 Jaguar.

"No respectable Englishman would be caught without one," Sunderland says with a smile. "Over here you know them as the XKE, but in England they're called the E-Type."

The 2+2 indicates this Jag has a back seat, and it's useable "if you have no legs, I guess," Sunderland says.

He's also hard at work on an Austin Healey Frog-Eyed Sprite he'd like to race in classic car races in Seattle.

It all begs two questions.

How did all these British cars find their way to Woods Bay?

And how did Sunderland find his way to the same place?

**Let's start with what brought Sunderland to America.**

"I suppose the clever answer would be a plane," he says. "I'd been doing business in the states for a long time, and I was looking to relocate here. I wanted to find someplace where - is freedom the right word? - anyway, a place that was not so controlled."

Sunderland had acquired property in the Great Falls area that he had never seen, and so, while on a business trip to Florida, he flew to Montana to look at it.

"While I was in Great Falls I met a couple who asked me if I'd ever been to Bigfork," he says. "They actually told me about a marina that was for sale, so I came, looked, saw it and bought it."

There was no speed limit in Montana at the time, other than the vague "reasonable and prudent" statute. No motorcycle helmet laws, no open-container laws.

"It was a lot freer than other places," Sunderland says, "but that's changing. When things progress a little too fast is when you get into the realm of controls, and that's the downside to progress."

Flathead Lake was a "massive attraction" for him, and the rural setting was a plus as well.

"The reason I'm here, rather than in Florida or California, is basically that Florida and California are just versions of England on steroids," he says.

He took over the Bigfork Marina in 2001.

On Sept. 9 of that year, he was riding one of his motorcycles - a V-8 powered Kannon - into the village.

(Which begs another question - how fast can a bike with a V-8 go? "As fast as you want it to," Sunderland says. "It goes faster than anybody needs to.")

Anyway, he was riding into Bigfork when a car pulled out in front of him.

The next thing Sunderland knew, he was trying to run a marina from a wheelchair.

The same day Sunderland was in his wreck, his 16-year-old nephew was killed in a motorcycle accident back in England. Two days later, terrorists flew planes into the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

"It was a harsh introduction to Montana," Sunderland says.

His own wreck "did several-months' damage to me," he says, and it took him a year and a half after his recovery to rebuild the Kannon.

But even as he operated the marina, Sunderland kept his hand in the car-restoration business. After three boating seasons at the marina, he decided to concentrate solely on the custom-car side of things and opened his Woods Bay business.

"It's not really a business," he says. "It's a passion. I don't run it. It runs me."

**And the British cars?** Sunderland says American servicemen stationed in England often fall in love with them, and ship their British vehicles back to the U.S. when they come home. The cars are imported to eastern Canada as well, and make their way across that nation and occasionally filter over the border.

Sunderland's found many of his British cars in the Eureka area, hard on the Canadian line.

"It seems like every day something new turns up," he says. "I met up with a guy in Kalispell who told me that back in the '60s, a team of guys from California came into this area specifically to find and buy British bikes and classic cars. What's left is what they didn't find, I guess."

That includes, much to Sunderland's surprise, an aluminum-bodied Austin A40 Sports convertible briefly manufactured by Jensen Motors of West Bromwich, England, in the early 1950s.

They didn't make many - just 3,000 to 4,000, according to Web sites - and Sunderland says he'd never actually seen one until he stumbled on this one.

"Not in my life," he says. "Not in 46 years in England, or here. If you're lucky, you can get one up to 58, 60 mph, but that's downhill with a good tailwind."

Now there's one in his shop, being rebuilt and restored.

Nearby, a 1968 MGB Roadster. Next to it, a 1958 Hillman Minx convertible.

Outside, everything from the '62 Morris Minor pickup to an old Saab Sonnet.

"Maggie likes the Saabs," Sunderland says. "To me they're ugly little critters, but she loves them."

Up on the hill behind Flathead Customs and the Sunderland's home, many more Triumphs, Hillmans, Jags - and the 1976 American-made Chevy El Camino his 76-year-old mother prefers driving when she visits from England.

"We couldn't get her out of it," Sunderland says. "When I talk to her on the phone, she always asks, 'How's my car?' "

His wife took a shine to an old Willys Jeep pickup Sunderland found in Kalispell, and he plans to rebuild it for her.

"Of all the cars I have, this is the one my wife fell in love with?" he says.

Of course, he's the guy who just bought two Pacers.

Most cars we drive end up as a bucket of scrap metal, Sunderland says, but even 20 years after they hit the wrecking yard, some of our fondest memories can relate back to the vehicles we have driven over the years.

Keeping some of those cars running is a way to keep memories alive, and here's the last thing you need to know about Mallory Sunderland:

When he said his father always managed to find an American automobile to drive in England?

One of them was a Pacer.