Glass action

Have you always wanted to upgrade your early Boxster's plastic rear window to a proper glass windscreen like the one below? Well, now you can. And even with a brand-new hood it will cost little more than £1000 – or less still if you do the work yourself

Story by Gordon Wingrove Photos by Peter Robain

By way of comparison a 1999 Boxster with the Jasmine after-market top complete with glass rear window (left) stands alongside a 2001 model with the standard plastic-windowed factory hood of the period

Nothing – or so we're often told – is perfect. And that may, indeed, be true. But the truth is that the original 986-model Porsche Boxster was remarkably close to flawless straight out of the box. For a company that just a few years earlier had been on the brink of financial collapse it was an impressive achievement.

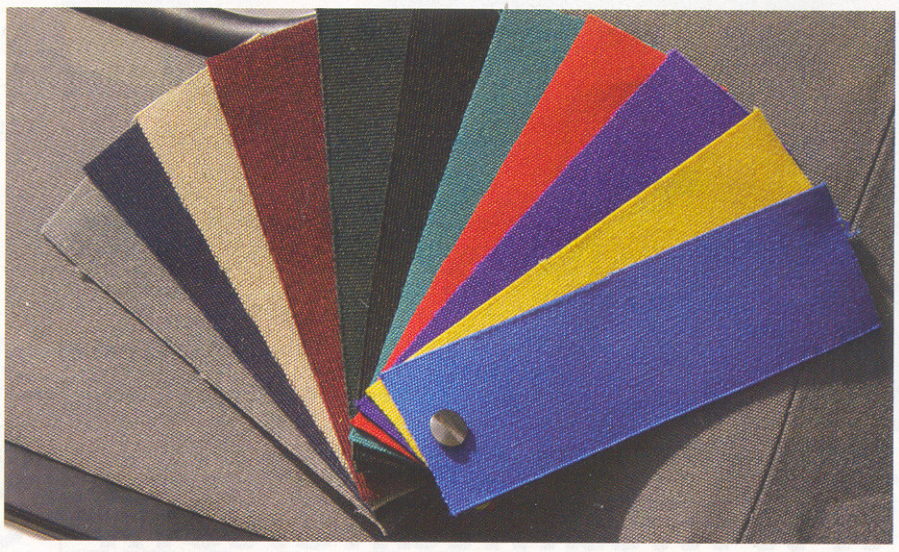
Certainly press and public alike felt that the first 2.5-litre models weren't as sprightly as perhaps they should have been, and some – us included – felt they sometimes sounded more like domestic washing machines than red-blooded sports cars. Even so, they simply flew out of the showrooms. Such was the huge demand that by 1998 Porsche was forced to contract additional assembly work to the Valmet company in Uusikaupunki, Finland.

In 1999 Porsche addressed the increasingly controversial performance issues with a slightly more powerful 2.7-litre engine for the base model – top speed went up by only around 6mph, but mid-range acceleration was significantly improved – and, more notably still, a 252bhp 3.2-litre Boxster 'S'. Offering 0–62mph in 5.9 seconds, and a maximum speed of 161mph, this was close to 911 Carrera territory.

So far so good. But the Boxster retained one major shortcoming – or so claimed those owners affected by it. The electrically operated folding hood – which famously opens or closes in a mere 12 seconds from start to finish of the process – was fantastic, a real breakthrough in a car of this relatively modest price, but with a plastic rear 'window' it was in detail little better than that of, say, a 1960s' MGB.

Inevitably the plastic would become cloudy and opaque, complained many owners, and worse still frequently needed easing into a smooth curve with gentle hand pressure as the roof was lowered. That meant stopping the lowering process and, if you were on your own, climbing out of the car (or else persuading your passenger to clamber out). Fail to observe this precaution, they said, especially in cold weather when the plastic would be more brittle, and soon your Boxster's rear window would have an ugly crease across it.

Not surprisingly Porsche itself never really admitted to this problem. And, to be fair, it was hardly the most serious drawback ever to afflict an otherwise superb machine.



The outer layer of the Jasmine soft-top is made from hard-wearing acrylic fibre which is both scuff- and UV-resistant – and available in these 11 colours. Take your pick!

But the fact was that the not dissimilar (if rather more expensive) 996-model 911 Cabriolet had a proper glass rear window from the middle of 2001, and in retrospect it was probably only a matter of time before the Boxster would gain one, too.

That moment came for us during the summer of 2002, when we were introduced to the visually updated 2003-model cars in northern Italy (see *Great expectations* on pages 14–20 of the August 2002 edition; back issues are available at www.chpltd.com, or else see pages 92–93 of this edition). And now, even if you still own one of the earlier cars with a plastic rear windscreen, it can come for you, too.

Thank Barrowford, Lancashire-based Jasmine Porschalink, whose proprietor, Brian Goff, has long offered styling upgrades of all kinds for the popular Porsche roadster. We featured his kit of body panels and front and rear lights to make a pre-facelift car look like one of the later models in the June 2003 issue (*Forever young*, pages 18–23), but notably that package didn't include the later hood.

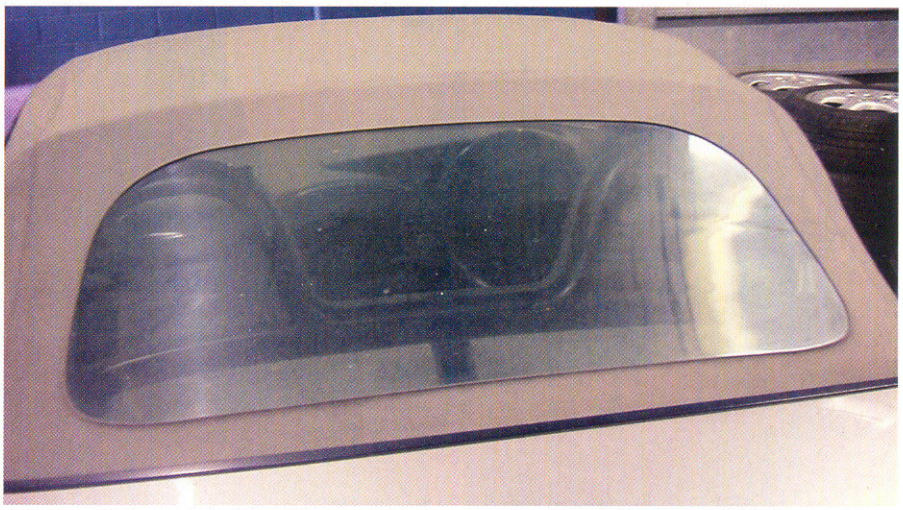
'At the time we just didn't think it was worth going to the trouble and expense,' says Goff today. 'Technically it has always been possible to fit the later hood to earlier cars, but you would need not only the fabric section itself, but also the frame. Even two years ago that would have made the conversion we were offering much more expensive, and we doubted that anyone would be prepared to go that far.'

Now, though, and working in conjunction with a UK-based specialist hood manufacturer (and whose identity he naturally prefers not to disclose), Goff has developed what is believed to be the world's first after-market soft-top for the Boxster with a heat-bonded glass window.

Available in 11 exterior colours (see left), the flexible top consists of three layers. The outer cover is woven from so-called dope-dyed acrylic fibres, which means that the colour goes right through the fabric, and thus reduces the visibility of any abrasions. The colour is also more stable and resistant to sunlight, claims Goff. Beneath that cover is a rubberised waterproofing membrane, and beneath that a black-cloth inner lining.

So far so unremarkable. The really clever bit comes in the precise shape and position of the glass rear window, which like that of the later Porsche hood is of necessity slightly smaller than the plastic sheet to allow it to fold down into the space behind the seats, and without requiring any changes to the operating mechanism. All the existing trim can be reused, we're told, and (provided they're in good condition) the same applies to the rubber seals, too.

Perhaps not surprisingly given this level of attention to detail, the new window comes as standard with a demisting element (as, of course, does the glass-windowed Porsche hood). Via a special cable and connector this can be plugged in to the matching supply socket in the cabin. (All Boxsters have this socket, together with an operating switch on the fascia, for when the optional hard-top is installed.)



This original plastic window has become noticeably opaque, and after six years' use shows a definite crease that is visible on the driver's side (see reflection)

All this means that, if you're moderately handy with some basic hand tools, and can follow a set of clear and simple instructions, you can fit the hood yourself. Alternatively you could leave the car with Jasmine for a few hours – allow a working day, suggests Brian Goff – and have the company's technicians do the entire job for you.

Prices start at £750 plus VAT for supply only, and £950 plus VAT supplied and fitted. A similar product to suit the early 996-model 911 Cabriolet (which, like the early Boxster, had a plastic rear window) will be available in the near future, we understand.

Removal: what's involved?

The 1999 Boxster that had been delivered to Jasmine by its owner was an ideal candidate for the upgrade. The grey hood material had some discoloured areas, while the rear window had both a rather matt finish and a definite lateral crease.

In order to remove the existing top the roof is partially raised. The process then starts from the front and works toward the rear. Once the screws and trim holding the cloth to the front bar are removed, care is taken not to damage the two black-plastic mouldings that sit above each door glass, while the eight plastic plugs securing the hood material in place are prised out.

The original factory soft-top has within its leading edge a cable that runs from the top of the front windscreen down to the frame behind each doorjamb. When the roof is raised the tension in the cable pulls the roof edges down so that they fit closely over the top and side of each door glass. The screws holding the ends of these cables to the frame have to be removed.

The cloth is removed from the rear frame by carefully releasing a wedge-shaped plastic trim that jams the glued fabric in place. The two ball-jointed cables are unclipped at the rear corners, and the complete top is then free to slide sideways and out of the bars of the frame to reveal the complexity of the moving parts.

The hood frame after the old soft-top was removed. It may look complex, but it's a reasonably straightforward job to fit the new cover if the instructions are followed

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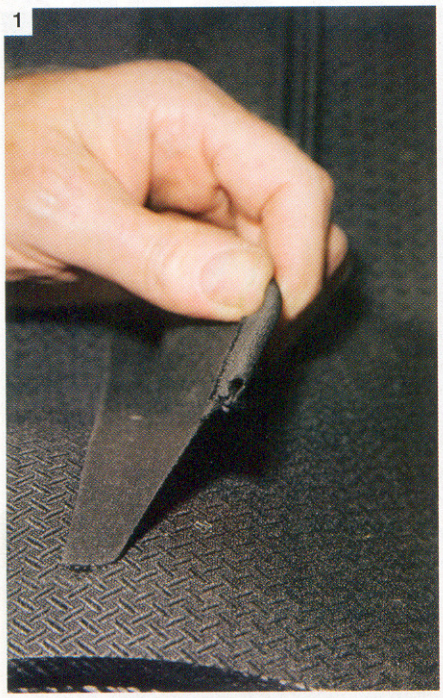

Wire within a flap on the inside of the new hood 'keys' the top to a frame bar to preserve the necessary tension

2

Double-sided tape bonds hood material to the rear frame as strongly as the original – if rather messy – liquid glue

3

A wooden wedge prevents damage when fitting plastic trim to firmly lock the glued top fabric to the inner frame

And the refitting?

Reassembly begins by sliding the top on from the side of the car while engaging the hood 'key' (a wire within a seam of material attached to the inside of the hood) into the matching slot in the second-from-rearmost frame bar. The original soft-top would have had a similar key for the rear bar, but this isn't used now because crucially its absence allows the rigid rear window to fold neatly underneath the rearmost support bar.

The top is then centred on the front section of the frame and securely attached with the original trim and seals. Working toward the rear, the hood is attached to the pair of plastic trims over each door.

The rearmost edge of the soft-top has two separate layers of material. Double-sided tape is used to secure the inner layer to the frame once the soft-top is adjusted to be absolutely central over the body shell.

In order to provide tension on the top when it's raised the material is then literally locked into the rear frame with a solid plastic trim strip that's carefully hammered into position using a wooden wedge.

The outer layer of hood material is also glued and rolled around the back of the frame, working outward from the middle.

The final black-silicone seal is then run into the groove and with a flat blade forced down against the material to provide the moisture barrier between top and car body.

The cable loops that tension the soft-top around the doors are then screwed to the frame itself. These are manufactured to the correct length and need no adjustment.

One of the simplest jobs is to couple the heater plug from the new window to the white connector near the left-hand rear corner of the frame. The dashboard switch and wiring are already present, because

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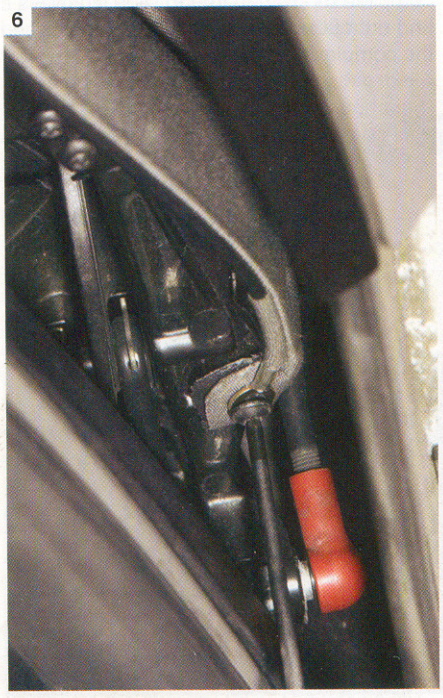

Cables to stretch soft-top material over the door glasses are reattached to frame

7

Simply plug in the connector for the rear-window demister element. Switch and wiring are conveniently fitted already, in case you ever fit a hard-top to your Boxster

4

After the application of the double-sided tape the outer hood is carefully rolled around the rearmost bar. Getting the material correctly centred here is vital. If you don't then the uneven tension will cause a poor fit at the sides

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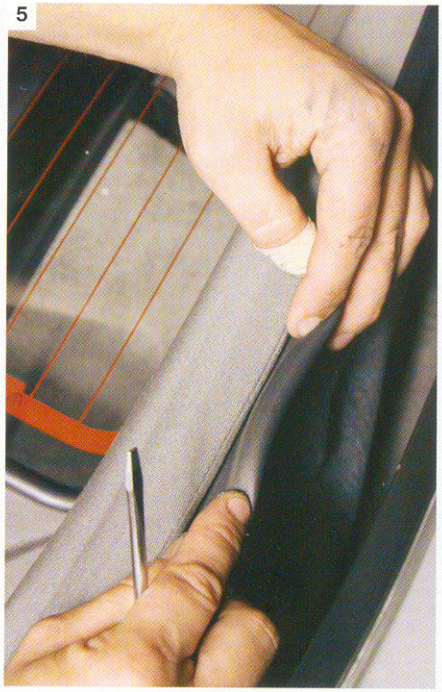

The final step is to fit the water seal to the rearmost hood bar. A flat blade is used to seat this correctly

they're necessary if a hard-top is ever fitted.

The soft-top started life as a set of flat sheets, so it takes time to adjust and settle to the smooth shape it should assume when raised. A hot-air blower can be used to get this process under way – especially on wrinkles that have been caused during storage – but this needs some care.

When we took our subject car out into the sunshine for some photographs it was already looking great. The new soft-top is more practical, and really brings the car up to date, and makes it a worthwhile investment in terms of resale value.

So no more having to leap out to pat the rear window down – and you could even modify your Boxster's electrics to raise or lower your new top while on the move. More on this in *Blue-sky thinking* on pages 66–69 in the June 2005 issue. ■

Contacts book

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8

A carefully used hot-air blower softens fabric enough to take out any wrinkles

9

Finished job shows an already excellent fit, and smartens the car up considerably. After a couple of weeks the material will have settled to an even smoother shape