

# DREAM WEAVERS

What began as a way of Wouter van der Meer replacing his 911's worn out carpets has blossomed into a burgeoning business. We visit his Belgium-based company, Lakewell, to see what it takes to revitalise a classic Porsche cockpit...

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In an age where everything seems to move at breakneck speed, the pursuit of the new has become almost ritualistic. Phones are outdated within a year, software updates arrive before we've mastered the last, and cars — once considered treasured possessions — now risk being reduced to appliances, bought, used and replaced on a cycle as relentless as it is soulless. Innovation is everywhere, and while it brings undeniable benefits, it also risks losing something hugely important to the sports car driving experience: character.

Not everyone is content to follow this forward-only march. For some, progress is best served when tempered with a deep respect for what came before. Quiet rebellion exists among those who champion heritage. There are people who see value in the past and insist on weaving it into the fabric of today. You see it in the thoughtful renovation of historic buildings, where stone walls and timber beams coexist with modern glass and steel. You see it in cafés housed in old banks, and in creative agencies occupying nineteenth-century textile mills.

These aren't throwbacks or gimmicks. They're reminders the past has something important to say. When done right, blending old and new isn't compromise. It's harmony. It's where engineering can meet emotion. It's where yesterday and tomorrow live side-by-side. And in this delicate balance, something truly timeless is born. Living proof of the benefits of this unique union of tradition and technology is Lakewell, a world renowned automotive interior specialist founded by passionate Porscheophile, Wouter van der Meer.

Shunning a soulless industrial estate, Lakewell is situated in the Castle of Veulen, which dates back to the mid-fourteenth century. This extensively restored former fortress is situated in the Hesbaye region of Belgium. Lakewell's immaculate workshops and offices are housed in the vaulted hall of the South Wing, while Wouter and his family live in the adjacent quarter. "We spent seven years restoring the building," he tells us. "We wanted to combine heritage with what we do here. Customers come from all over the world. For them, visiting this venue is a bit like going on holiday. Our

surroundings are hugely important to the process." While the company's current premises gives it a somewhat regal edge, the firm's origins are much more humble, beginning with one man's quest for knowledge and a desire to do things right.

"One of my earliest memories is from when I was ten years old," remembers the now fifty-six-year-old Wouter. "My father was having a Citroen DS restored. We would visit the car every weekend in order to check on project progress. At first, the condition of the car seemed to be getting worse, but then it all started to come together and we could see the amazing transformation happen in front of our eyes. It was a true 'phoenix from the ashes experience' and really stuck with me."

Eager to affect a motoring metamorphosis of his own, Wouter bought a 2CV not long after his fifteenth

birthday and set about restoring it on the driveway of his family home. The project began with tidying of paintwork and getting the engine running correctly, but

## THE SUCCESS OF THE CARPET SETS CONTINUED, SO MUCH SO DEMAND WAS PUTTING STRESS ON WOUTER'S WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Wouter found himself learning more with every turn of the wrench. "A colleague of my father's saw the car and bought it from me. The sale funded the purchase of a Volkswagen Beetle cabriolet and I started the process all over again. It wasn't about making money, more a way to finance my hobby and teach myself the different facets of automotive restoration."

### HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The Beetle took two years to complete, but was the tip of the iceberg, evidenced by Wouter continuing to pursue his passion with ever more exotic machinery, including a Chevrolet Corvette and a Jaguar E-Type, both cars benefiting from his skill with spanners. The acquisition of a 911 SC Targa bought in 1995 (when Wouter was twenty-six years old), however, became a crucial junction for the budding mechanic — this was the first time he would delve into the then relatively untouched arena of interior rejuvenation.

"I completed a full body-off restoration of the car," he recalls. "Things were going well, until I struggled to find suitable replacement parts for the car's interior. I reasoned, if I couldn't find a kit to buy, I'd have to make one myself." He promptly secured a second-hand sewing

**Facing page** The Lakewell team in its natural habitat, namely a dedicated wing of a converted Belgian castle









machine, along with basic sewing lessons from the issuing dealer. Once Wouter had a handle on the techniques involved, he set about constructing a set of carpets for the Porsche. "I was working in my home garage. The project took me close to three days, start to finish. These carpets weren't made using the correct materials, primarily because they weren't available on the aftermarket at the time, but the finished parts looked pretty good and did the job asked of them."

Having learned much from this project, Wouter was keen to not let his new skills go to waste and identified a potential gap in the market to serve Porsche owners struggling with a lack of options for replacement interiors. "This was in the early days of online auction websites," he explains. "I advertised the availability of carpet sets on eBay and ended up with orders for six sets straightaway. It was obvious I'd hit on something, but in addition to a positive market opportunity, I now had the problem of creating six more carpet sets to fulfil my online orders."

Creating carpets wasn't Wouter's full-time job, merely a hobby threatening to get out of hand. His main career was working as a management consultant for Price Waterhouse, which saw him undertake a lot of foreign travel, meaning the task of restoring cars and making Porsche carpets was relegated to spare evening and weekends. Even so, the success of the carpet sets continued, so much so demand was putting serious stress on Wouter's work-life balance — his ever-supportive wife, Patricia, and their children Sebastiaan, Charlotte and Emanuelle, were eager to spend time with him. With this in mind, in 1997, he enlisted the assistance of family friend, Robin Gualotuna.

"Robin is a passionate petrolhead and shared my ambition to make the Porsche parts business a success. It's a great partnership," Wouter explains. "I taught Robin everything I knew about interior trimming and he took to it instantly.

He's still with the company today, serving as our head of production. He's also a much more accomplished upholsterer than I ever was." The extra help eased the growing workflow for 911 carpets and allowed Wouter to experiment with branching out into producing other interior trim parts for his beloved SC Targa, a bold step leading to the business moving away from car restorations to focus solely on the provision of interior componentry. "We began offering retrim kits for the Targa's roof, door panels and seats. This offering proved equally as popular as our replacement carpets, but we could

**Above** Wouter's business boasts a worldwide client base, but has its roots in a desire to find replacement floor mats for a 911 he used to own







**Above and below**  
The company's dedication to reintroducing classic Porsche fabrics to market has ensured countless independent trimmers are able to reupholster classic Porsche interiors

see the scene was moving to a place where originality was key. We knew we would need to alter our production methods to cater for this more demanding market."

Growing demand for Robin and Wouter's sewing skills saw the pair soon outgrow the confines of Wouter's home garage, necessitating a move to a farmhouse fifteen minutes outside Brussels, where the dynamic duo worked out of a large barn they converted into a workshop. Although, in terms of the direction the fledgling firm should take, the writing was on the wall, a commission from Porsche Centre Brussels tipped the scales and forced Wouter's hand.

"The Centre's technicians were restoring a 911 SC and had seen our carpets on eBay," he says. "They asked us to produce a set for the SC, but specified it had to be made to exacting original manufacturer specification, not only in terms of fit and finish, but also the materials used." This posed a problem – Porsche had outsourced the manufacturing of the material used in period and the company in question had since gone bust. To get around the issue, Wouter researched the original machines used to make the carpet material and contacted the manufacturer directly, outlining particulars of the type of fabric needed.

"All 911s made between 1974 and 1998 make use of a specific type of fabric named Sliverknit," Wouter explains. "This is a unique knitted velour not abundantly produced. Luckily, the loom makers were able to identify companies still operating the machines used to produce the material. This triggered our quest to reboot production of Sliverknit."

The carpet set for Porsche Centre Brussels took around ten weeks to make, but was warmly received, resulting in Wouter and Robin being asked to make more of the same for future restorations. In addition to carpets, requests came for retrimming of seats and door cards. This required a similarly forensic approach insofar as Wouter needed to identify specialist tanneries capable of supplying OEM-grade leather hides to the requisite period specification. Fast-forward to 2005, and with a growing range of products on offer, he sought a selection of highly regarded Porsche parts retailers to stock his wares, including Design 911, Parts-Wise and Sierra Madre Collection.

Amazingly, it wasn't until 2009 Wouter finally put a name on his business and created a website. "Lakewell is a portmanteau of English translations of my name and that of my friend, Alexander van der Putte," Wouter explains. "Meer is Dutch for *lake*, Putte is Dutch for *well*, hence Lakewell." The company and domain names were registered years before







— Wouter and Alexander considered they'd work together at some point in the future, but this wasn't to be. Nevertheless, with Alexander's blessing, Wouter adopted the name for his business and, with the website, opened its doors to a global audience. In 2012, he made the decision to quit his consulting job in order to focus on Lakewell full-time.

Specialising in Porsche (and, to a lesser degree, Jaguar, Ferrari, Mercedes and TVR) interior makeovers, Lakewell has spent the past two

decades refining its practices.

It continues to supply Porsche Classic with products, not limited to dash

tops, carpets and

door cappings, and is a key supplier to the aftermarket, either by providing third-party trimmers with OEM-specification fabrics and other materials, or by reaching the end user via the aforementioned independent parts retailers.

"Our product range caters to all Porsche models from 356 to 993, covering everything on a car's interior, from knobs, switches and handles, to door panels, seats and carpet sets," Wouter tells us. "All are made with the highest standards of contemporary craftsmanship. While we are obviously committed to authenticity, we also make sure modern materials are used where it improves functionality and

durability, always without compromising period-correct looks."

This synergy between manufacturing operations and restoration not only guarantees a perfect fit for interior parts, it also permits a level of flexibility to accommodate custom adaptations. "The rise of the restomod scene has prompted us to deliver custom work alongside our more traditional offerings. Customers can add a personal touch to their interiors by mixing and matching products from different

models, time periods or colour schemes within the Porsche parts bin," Wouter asserts. "This ensures a level of quality upon which we refuse

to compromise, but with countless combinations to provide a truly unique look remaining elegant and tasteful, thereby not adversely affecting the car's future value or desirability."

As well as producing custom interiors for its direct clients, Lakewell also makes custom interiors for several well-known Porsche restoration specialists. Although choosing the right colour and trim combination is always key, the finished quality of the work also plays a big part in retaining the host vehicle's worth. In other words, the work can't be rushed. Restoring a classic car interior requires patience, with much of the effort consisting of work never visible to the naked eye.

**Above** Lakewell offers a huge variety of Porsche fabrics, which can be ordered via the company's website, although customers can have their car's cabin furniture trimmed and shipped by Wouter's team

## LAKEWELL USES FOUR DIFFERENT KINDS OF GLUE TO SUIT THE MATERIALS IT USES, AS WELL AS TO SUIT THE THERMAL EXPOSURE OF INSTALLED PARTS





**Above** Away from the part of the castle Lakewell inhabits, Wouter's family enjoys living on site

"When we restore an interior, all support materials are inspected, repaired, aligned and repainted before trimming works starts," Wouter explains. "Seats, for instance, are built from the frame up. Foams are corrected, filled and reshaped to the point leather seat covers can be evenly tensioned without creases and without overstretching the hides.

Convertible tops are stripped down to the frame. Good functional operation of the top frame and mechanism is inspected and corrected where necessary. Then, after repainting, the soft-top is constructed from tensioning materials, insulation, headliner and, finally, the outer canvas. Where required, we use the thermoplastic characteristics of the material to ensure a taut fit. Finally, weatherstrips are

inspected and, if necessary, replaced to make sure wind noise is kept to a minimum."

This attention to detail ensures years of trouble-free use and durability. After all, nothing is more frustrating than a seemingly perfect interior coming apart at the seams after a hot summer. The robustness of an interior depends largely on use of the correct fasteners, fittings and adhesives. To exemplify, Lakewell uses four different kinds of glue to suit the materials it uses, as well as to suit the thermal exposure of installed parts. This belt and braces approach applies to the firm's re-engineered parts, too.

"We noticed many cars were suffering with cracked dashboards, which we would repair and retrim, but it was a lot of work, and the results were not always optimum, mainly because the dashboard material was too porous, causing it to disintegrate," Wouter explains. "To solve this issue, we now have our own dashboards manufactured. These are injection-moulded polyurethane parts with a steel frame inside and produce a much more robust and longer lasting solution, which can be trimmed beautifully."

## **PARTS OF THE PROCESS**

Although Lakewell's business remains biased toward trimming, there has been a calculated shift to produce more of these re-engineered parts, accelerated by Wouter's son, Sebastiaan, joining the firm in 2018 on a part-time basis after completing an engineering degree. "The 911 Targa's standard semi-open-top roof panel has always been open to criticism, certainly in view of its fit and finish," Wouter muses. "Its design is really starting to show its age. To address the problem, we designed new arms, which are identical to the OEM items, yet three hundred percent stronger, thereby firmly clamping the roof panel in place. The result is a panel noticeably quieter and leak-free. It's also much more cost-effective than a replacement Targa roof panel from Porsche,







which attracts a retail price of close to fifteen thousand pounds right now."

In addition to manufacturing interior components for your classic Porsche, Lakewell also offers a fitting service for most sets and kits. "We typically need between four and six weeks for complete interior restoration of a classic Porsche on-site," Wouter confirms. "We usually have a full order book, which is why it's important to contact us well in advance of when you need the work to be finished. We recommend getting in touch between nine and twelve months before the start of your project. We will then review our planning and schedule a date for delivery of the car to our workshops."

If it's not practical to deliver your car to Lakewell for the work to be carried out, you are invited to send your car's interior components by mail. Remove the interior, carefully pack it in a secure crate and ship it to Belgium. The Lakewell team will handle the restoration process and ship the parts back to you, fully restored, ready for re-installation and with a detailed fitting guide. This service allows customers to receive Lakewell's expert craftsmanship anywhere in the world. What about the castle? It's the cherry on the cake.

Wouter bought the site in 2016 and set about converting it into its current form, comprising a three-story workshop and a small private dwelling. Of course, being a Belgian heritage site (and as such, being protected by royal decree since 1960), making these alterations has been a slow and meticulous process, requiring Wouter to work closely with local authorities to ensure the building loses none of its original character or period features during restructuring. "We finally moved into the site in 2023," he grins. "It's a stunning place to both live and work. As well as offering space for my home and business, the grounds are perfect for hosting classic car shows and rallies. In fact, this year is the inaugural running of the Hesbaye Historic Festival, which is a sort of small-scale

Goodwood Revival, where history comes alive through thrilling rally stages, live music, and hands-on activities."

As you walk through the arched halls of the Castle of Veulen, it's clear Lakewell is more than just a business. It's a philosophy. Wouter has created a sanctuary where passion, precision and preservation converge, producing interiors serving to do more than simply restoring a car. They revive its soul. Whether it's a concours-correct 911 or a subtly reimagined restomod, every stitch and surface tells a story of reverence for the past and an uncompromising eye on quality. In an industry often obsessed with speed, Lakewell reminds us true craftsmanship takes time, and how the most enduring journeys are those honouring where we've come from, as much as where we're going. **CP**

**Above and below** Lakewell's products and services have been in constant demand in recent years, not just from independent owners, but also specialist trimmers and Porsche Centres

