

Renewing Cracker's dashboard:

I'm not very keen on real wood dashboards in an open top car and although I never noticed it for about a year I realised one day that Cracker's dashboard had been cracked and repaired by glueing a block of wood on the reverse side. Another failing, as far as I was concerned was the location of switches and gauges. This was particularly noticeable when driving solo with half the tonneau cover fitted as neither the speedo nor tacho was visible. Yet another failing was the hideous shape along the bottom of the dashboard where it was cut away for knees and gear changing. Additionally looking under the dashboard when fitting windscreen wipers revealed a rats nest of wiring which needed sorting.



Crackers original wooden dashboard.

Having determined that a new dashboard was desirable the first question was what type. My preferred choice would have been a Formica/plastic imitation wood dashboard, as made for Rufus the TA (photo).



The dashboard made for Rufus the TA.

The problem with this type of dashboard is that the plastic wood is laminated onto MDF (Medium Density Fibreboard) which as we all know absorbs moisture; the cure is to varnish the raw edges. Now comes the second problem, to protect the newly varnished edges the dashboard needs to be fitted behind the turned over edge at the front of the cockpit. Unfortunately on Cracker this was not possible without a lot of extra work as the turned over edge had been cut away to allow the speedo and tacho to be fitted higher up in the dashboard. Therefore the new dashboard needed to fit over the top of the cockpit edge as per the original dashboard. There is one big advantage to fitting the dashboard on top of the cockpit edge; 'you can remove and replace the dashboard without removing or lowering the steering column.' This left me with four main choices of dashboard material.

1. An engine turned aluminium panel.
2. A painted aluminium or steel panel.
3. A fabric covered aluminium or steel panel; or
4. A faux wood plastic panel with aluminium backing, the aluminium edge being disguised with some suitable moulding/piping/beading.

I chose option number three, choosing aluminium because it was easier to work with. The chosen covering was black faux leather lightly padded.

Modus Operandi:

The winter overhaul of 2025/6 seemed to be a good time to start, especially as I had drained the cooling system and removed the thermostat housing. Probably the worst part of a dashboard replacement is removing the combined oil pressure and water temperature gauge, mainly because of the difficulties that can be experienced removing the temperature sender bulb from the thermostat housing. Removal of the thermostat top housing enables you to work both sides giving plenty of opportunity for some gentle heat and an application of penetrating fluid. With the temperature bulb removed from the cylinder head continue as follows.

1. Disconnect the battery.
2. Sit in the car and make a note of where the bottom of the dashboard protrudes into the leg area, mark it ready to re-profile (if necessary) the bottom edge.
3. Mark where the dashboard can be extended downwards without interfering with access, egress or gear lever movement.
4. Take a photograph (from the drivers eye position) to indicate which parts of the dashboard are covered by the steering wheel.
5. Remove the steering wheel.
6. Remove or lower the steering column.
7. Remove the fixings that hold the dashboard in place.
8. Manipulate the dashboard sufficiently to enable you to take several photos of the wiring behind the dashboard.
9. Mark the wiring with small labels etc. use a separate label for each switch, warning light and gauge. Remove all the switches, warning lights and gauges etc.
10. Offer up the old dashboard over your new blank panel and mark the hole positions for the securing screws, drill the holes.
11. Screw the new dashboard to the cockpit edge.
12. Mark round the cockpit edge to confirm the dashboard edges that need cutting away.
13. Remove the dashboard and cut out the profile.
14. Mark the positions on the new dashboard that are obscured by the steering wheel.
15. You need to consider what gauges, switches, warning lights and misc. items you are going to fit.
I decided on the following.

Gauges.

- Speedo.
- Tacho.
- Combined oil pressure and water temperature (dual gauge).
- Voltmeter (I dumped the ammeter).
- Fuel level.
- Engine oil temperature (Cracker has one fitted so I kept it).

Warning Lights.

- Ignition (in tacho).
- Main beam (in speedo).
- Indicate left.
- Indicate right.
- Overdrive engaged.
- Oil low pressure warning.

Switches.

- Ignition.
- Lights.
- Instrument illumination.
- Map reading.
- USB socket.
- Headlamp flash.
- Overdrive.
- Indicators.

- Heater.
- Wipers.
- Washers.
- Fuel cut-off (anti theft device).**
- CB points earthing switch (anti theft device).##
- Horn.
- Dip.
- Starter button.

Note.

**/## These two switches were mounted on a bespoke bracket on the steering column.

Misc.

- Passenger grab handle.
- Choke control.
- USB socket.

16. Cut out some paper templates for all the gauges and fix them in the best position, to suit you.
17. Mark the position of the warning lights.
18. Decide what extra switches you need on the dashboard. I decided to dump the floor mounted dipswitch and replace it with a dashboard mounted one; the indicator switch was also moved from the steering column to the dashboard. When I fitted the windscreen wipers and washers (following fitment of the windscreen) there wasn't enough room in the dashboard to fit the switches and they were mounted under the dashboard, they are now incorporated into the new dashboard.
19. I decided to fit the following additional switches; CB points cut-off - fuel pump cut-off switch - headlamp flash - horn button (to replace the one in the centre of the steering column).

Note.

Fortunately Cracker has a dashboard mounted overdrive switch, if he had the gear knob mounted one that would also be moved to a position in the dashboard.

1. Decide on the most important switches; in my case, overdrive - indicator - horn - headlamp dip – and headlamp flash and position them in easily accessible positions in the dashboard.
2. Decide on the position of the remaining switches in the new dash.
3. Cut out the holes for the switches warning lights and gauges, allowing clearance for the faux leather covering to be positively secured.
4. Fit the dashboard in the car and make a bespoke bracket running from the bulkhead to behind the dashboard, position it to enable you to operate the choke without flexing the dashboard. (It can also be utilised to support any excess cable once the new dashboard is in position.
5. Remove the dashboard, carry out any final fettling and cover it in thin padding and faux leather cloth.
6. Fit all the gauges, warning lights and switches.

Note.

While the dashboard was out it gave better access for fitting the new heater so I fitted it.

7. Offer up the new dashboard. Decide what cables need alteration to suit the revised position of switches, warning lights and gauges etc. lengthen or shorten them as necessary. At the same time redo any suspect wiring connections.
8. Secure the dashboard to the cockpit edge and connect any bracing strut(s).
9. Carry out a full electrical test.
10. Carry out a road test.



Final layout.

On left side.

Grab handle – map light- USB socket.

Warning lights left to right.

Oil pressure – overdrive – indicate left – indicate right.
(main beam in speedo – Ignition in tacho).

Gauges left to right.

Fuel – voltmeter – engine oil temp – speedo – dual gauge - tacho.

Top row of switches left to right.

Map light – USB socket – starter button – heater – instrument illumination.

Bottom row of switches left to right.

Chock – wipers – lights – ignition – washers – horn – headlamp flash.

Top left of speedo.

Toggle indicator switch (behind steering wheel).

Bottom left of speedo.

Dip/main beam (behind steering wheel).

Right of tacho.

Overdrive (behind steering wheel).



Photo taken from behind the car.

The large gauges look more obscured than they really are.



View of the speedo and tacho from the driver's seat.

The two large gauges are not fully visible but everything you need to see is in view. Note the toggle indicator switch at 10 o'clock and the overdrive switch at 3 o'clock behind the steering wheel.

Summary:

I'm pleased with the new dashboard. Although part of the large gauges are restricted by the steering wheel spokes I can still see what I need to see whereas before I couldn't see anything with a half tonneau fitted. This article is not concerned with the actual wiring of the dashboard (which is covered elsewhere) but below are some additional photos for inspiration.



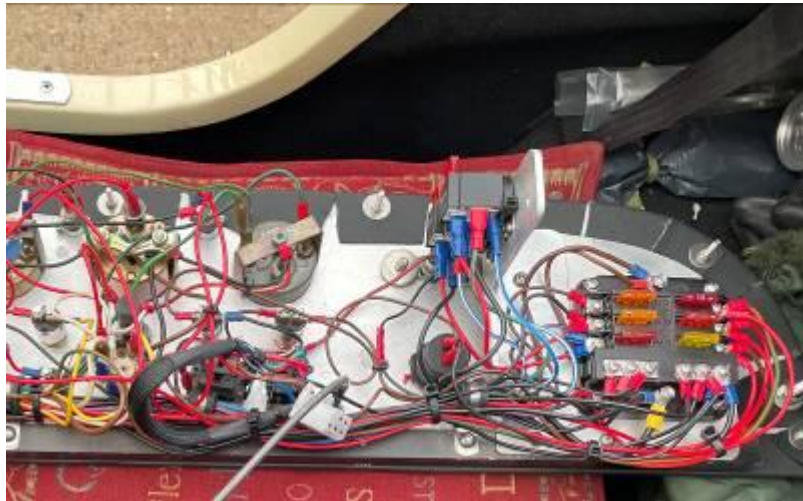
The dashboard blank all cut out.



The faux leather covering, foam padding and edge piping were provided by the chap who trimmed Cracker's cockpit seats.



Wiring in progress. The main leads were left long enough to enable the dashboard to be wired up in comfort before placing it in position.



I incorporated additional fuses and a couple of relays for dip and main beam which were needed as the heavy duty floor mounted dipswitch was changed for a dashboard mounted Lucas toggle switch.