Hold your head up

By Theo Kyriacou

"Hold your head up", the song by Argent in the early 70's, was one of those very popular songs that I hated. It is strange how tastes normally can make us hate something millions of people like and on the other hand taste can make us like something millions of people hate. Which brings me to Lancia Gammas, I love them. Even though I wouldn't say millions of people hate them, they are not one of the world's most popular cars. Nobody drives a Gamma these days because they have to or because they have little other choice. The only reason anyone drives a Gamma is because they want to. I, and I suspect most other Gamma drivers, get a certain feeling of pride when driving a Gamma. With this feeling of pride comes the desire to sit up straight with the head held high. And here the problems begin as Lancia Gammas have the obtrusive desire to sag their headlining and thus force their drivers to sink even further into the already very low seats in an attempt to drive without the constant head massage and abundant creation of static electricity produced by the rubbing effect of the headlining vinyl on the driver's (and passenger's) head.

I do like things other than Lancia Gammas and one of my favourite pastimes is caves. There is something I can't quite explain, a bit like my love of Gammas, that attracts me to caves. Until a recent visit to Wookey Hole Caves in Somerset, I was one of those naive people who believed that paper was made from wood. Which, of course, is what paper is made from but apparently it wasn't always so. As a matter of fact, my dictionary defines paper as *"a material made of cellulose pulp, derived mainly from wood, rags, and certain grasses, processed into flexible sheets or rolls by deposit from an aqueous suspension, and used chiefly for writing, printing, drawing, wrapping, and covering walls".* If you ever visit Wookey Hole Caves, I suggest you don't skip the tour through the paper mill as most other visitors seemed to be doing when I was there. It is the last hand-made paper mill in the United Kingdom. At the start of the tour there was a short movie illustrating the history of the mill and paper in general. Instead of showing vast numbers of trees being chopped and pulped, the narrator was going on about American cotton and denim. He explained how old rags were collected and left to decompose on large heaps so that cotton-paper could be manufactured. Apparently lots of used bandages from various battlefields were collected and left to naturally decompose so that paper could be created. This bacteria ridden paper was used all over Europe and was one of the main causes of the plague. "Rag and Bone" men collected rags so they could sell them to paper mills (I don't know what they did with the bones!). Large ovens were later created to decompose the rags quickly and kill any bacteria. Cotton paper is still made today but not from old rags. New denim is imported from the USA and the very expensive cotton paper is used for special occasions, certificates, contracts etc. My daughter greatly enjoyed making her own sheet of cotton paper complete with watermark.

Making paper from rags

By now you must be thinking you are reading the latest edition of “Newspapers Monthly” and not the Gamma Consortium Newsletter. What does all this paper story have to do with Lancia Gammas and their headlining in particular? Well, if paper was made from rags, the panel used in the Lancia Gamma coupes to hold up the headlining is the cardboard equivalent of such rag-paper. It is a strange material about half a centimeter thick made obviously from rags with some quite large pieces blended into it. Mine had a lovely red piece which looked as if it had come from the scarf of a very elegant Italian lady. I don’t know exactly why such a material was used by Lancia. It is obviously very eco-friendly. Ford are now making quite a point of the fact that the sound insulating material in their new Focus is made from old jeans. Sorry Ford, you are about 20 years late! The material is obviously quite good for sound insulation, and I suppose it is also quite resistant to the absorption of moisture. The problem with sagging headlining has nothing to do with the headlining panel. It is caused by the foam-rubber that is put between the panel and the vinyl headlining material. This synthetic sponge is put there to give the headlining a soft and padded feel to it. Foam rubber has the nasty habit of drying up though and after about 10 years it starts to disintegrate and turn to powder with the result that the vinyl headlining attached to it begins to sag. If the headlining in your Gamma is only just starting to sag around the edges, you can do a reasonable repair by carefully peeling back the edges and using some spray glue to stick it back in place. Frankly, I don’t think that is worth the bother as it will soon become a regular hobby and a usual weekend job to stick different parts of the headlining back in place. Once it starts to come down it will simply carry on and it will do so quite quickly. The best way to do the job is to remove the whole headlining panel from the car and replace its vinyl covering. The first time I removed the headlining panel I simply attempted to re-stick the original material. Don’t even try it, it is not worth the time and energy and you won’t be saving any money either, vinyl is quite cheap and you will end up replacing it. The problem with trying to reuse the existing material is that to do the job properly you need to remove it from the panel first so you can clean off any remaining foam-rubber. Once you do that, it is practically impossible to get the old material in exactly the same place as before. The edges will look very tatty. Going back to stage 1 though, the first thing to do is to remove the headlining panel. I think it is obvious by now that all this refers to Gamma Coupes and not the Berlinas. I don’t know if the Berlinas suffer from the same problem, I believe they don’t (different headlining design?). When you come to remove the headlining panel in a Gamma Coupe it will be very useful if you have an assistant but it can be done without, I did it. Proceed as follows:

1. Remove the four screws on each of the sunvisors and remove the sunvisors.
2. Remove the rear seat belt top anchorages where they are bolted to the rear quarter-panels. Make a careful note of the washers and spacers that are fitted to the anchorages, it is important they go back in the same order. I find it useful to put the bolt and all its fittings back through the seatbelt anchorage and then using some sellotape or electrician’s tape to hold the assembly in place so I don’t forget the order it all goes back in.
3. Remove the two screws on each of the air-vent grills on the rear quarter-panels and remove the grills.
4. Remove the rear quarter panels by carefully pulling them off. These are made from a very malleable metal and are held in place by plastic push-on trim clips plus the seat belt bolt and the air-vent grill screws. Try not to distort the shape too much as you remove them although it is quite easy to bend them back in shape.
5. Once the rear quarter panels are removed, you will find two screws on each side which hold the headlining panel. Remove these four screws.
6. Remove the rear interior light by levering it off and remove the wires from it. The wires are already marked and it is quite clear which way they should go back but if your are not sure, mark the wires and their positions before removing them. Remove the single screw in the middle of the chrome bezel fitted to the hole in the headlining for the interior light.
7. Remove the lens of the front interior light and remove the 3 screws that hold it in place. Once again the wires are marked but if not sure, mark them before removing them.
8. Lever off the small panel that sits between the front interior light and the rear-view mirror.
9. Remove the rear-view mirror by giving it a determined backwards pull. It is simply held in its base by a quite strong spring. That is in case a head hits it in an accident. It will simply come off rather than break the head that hit it.
10. Remove the 3 screws that hold the rear-view mirror base. Here is where the assistant comes handy. You need to hold the headlining panel up against the roof of the car while you remove the mirror base. You shouldn’t let the panel tilt down into the car as that may crack the panel.
11. With the panel still held up against the roof, remove the screws that hold the two rear roller blind catches into the roof.
12. The panel can now be eased off the roof and into the car. Recline both front seats fully and open both the doors.

13. From outside the car (and with your assistant's help if you have one) rotate the panel through 90 degrees so the front of the panel is pointing at the passenger door.
14. Tilt the panel down by 45 degrees and feed the rear side of it under the steering wheel.
15. Carefully maneuver the panel out of the passenger door. It just about fits through the opening at an angle. Try not to force it in any way or bend it as the rag material doesn't feel too strong and I suspect it can crack quite easily.

Once the panel is out of the car, carefully peel off the headlining vinyl. If it is anything like mine, it would be more or less off anyway. Now comes the laborious task of cleaning off the remaining foam rubber from the panel. The first time I removed the panel out of my car I didn't bother to clean the spongy material very well. I simply applied lots of glue to the panel and then reused the original material. Even though the vinyl stayed up which meant I could then drive with my head held high, the headlining looked awful. The original vinyl looked very tatty and a different colour round the edges. Even worse, because I had not fully removed the old foam rubber, its remains mixed with the new glue and formed a number of little balls which showed through the vinyl like a very bad case of acne. So once you have the vinyl off the panel spend some time (and it takes quite a bit of it) and remove all traces of the old foam rubber. I used a coarse sanding disk which did a good job of it. When it comes to covering the panel, obviously the 'proper' way is to cover it with a sheet of spongy material first and then put the vinyl covering on top of that. I decided there were a few problems with that method. First it required more work and that doesn't agree with me. Secondly, and more importantly, it means that the glue to be used should be sprayed on. Even though you will be able to brush apply glue to the panel before covering it with the sheet of sponge, it will be impossible to apply glue to the sponge using a brush. If you favour the 'original' way, then I suggest that you apply glue to the panel first, cover the panel with a dense synthetic sponge sheet (not more than about a centimeter thickness) and allow that to dry and stick very well. Then use a spray-on adhesive to stick the vinyl to the sponge sheet. I saw a Gamma Coupe that had its headlining replaced with black leather and sponge was used between the leather and the panel. Even though it looked OK, it seemed to me as if it was about to start sagging again. Also, because the sponge used was too thick and not dense enough, it didn't follow the contours of the panel very well so the sculptured effect was lost. The little recesses in front of the sunvisors were not there anymore (in fact the sunvisors were not there) and the bump running down the length of the headlining in the middle of it hardly showed. I decided that I didn't need to have the sponge at all and went for vinyl stuck straight onto the panel. Because of that I used a fairly thick vinyl (3-4 mm) which had a soft backing on it already. I bought it from East Kent Vintage Trim Supplies. They are based in Deal, Kent (tel: 01304-611681 fax: 01304—612769) and they seem to be at most Classic car shows with a good selection of different trim materials. As my Gamma has the beige L-cloth interior, I decided to go for an off-white beige colour vinyl which I thought would match the interior better that the white original. The problem of using a different colour than the original is the sunvisors (hence the Gamma trimmed in black leather had no sunvisors). Retrimming the sunvisors is not an easy task so if you can keep them as they are it is a good idea. I now have white sunvisors and a not so white (beige) headlining but the result doesn't look too bad. Maybe one day I will get round to retrimming the sunvisors in the same material as the headlining.

Front view of headlining complete with ‘dimples’ to lower the sunvisors

The glue to be used for the job is quite important. Halfords (and lots of other places) sell spray-on trim adhesive in cans. That will be quite good for small jobs but not for the headlining. A very strong glue and quite a lot of it will be needed to hold the vinyl in place. Contact adhesives also have temperature ratings. The glue even after it has cured will start to melt as a certain temperature is reached. Next time you park your Gamma in the sun on a summer’s day, feel the roof after a couple of hours. It will be very hot to the touch, but it will be even hotter inside the car. The glue used must have a high temperature rating. When you buy your vinyl material, your suppliers will be able to advise you and sell you the necessary glue. Follow the instructions that come with the glue. Cover the headlining panel with glue and ensure that you get it in all the corners, nooks and crannies. It is in the corners where the vinyl material is stretched that it will start to come away if not stuck properly so get plenty of glue in there. Remember to leave some glue for sticking the edges of the vinyl behind the panel. Don’t try to do the job in one go either. If you try and glue the vinyl to the panel and then proceed to fold it round the edges and trim it to shape it will start coming off at the edges. Once the panel is covered with glue and you have waited the recommended 5 to 10 minutes for the glue to become ‘tacky’, put the vinyl on the panel loosely and then quickly smooth it in place from the middle outwards ensuring you push out any air bubbles. It is very much like sticking wall paper. I found it made my life much easier to give the vinyl a light dusting of talcum powder and then use a cotton cloth to rub the vinyl onto its panel ensuring that it stuck well in all the corners. The warmer the vinyl is the easier it will be to push it into shape. I did mine outside on a warm summer’s day and had left the vinyl soaking up the sun for a couple of hours before I started. Get the vinyl nice and warm on a radiator if you have to before you start and it will make the job much easier. Once the vinyl is in place and all air bubbles are removed, stop and wait. Don’t just put it somewhere and walk away as you may find it will start to come away in the areas where it is stretched. Pamper it for a while making sure that if it starts to pull away from somewhere you are there ready to give it a little helping hand and push it back into place. How much pampering you will need to do (if any) largely depends on the type of glue you use. An ‘instant’ adhesive will not need any pampering but you better get it right first time! Once you are satisfied with the gluing of the vinyl I suggest you put the whole thing away for a couple of days to make sure the glue has cured properly before trimming the vinyl and folding all the edges. For the trimming you will need a sharp Stanley knife. For the interior light holes, start from the middle of the hole and cut four diagonals from the middle to the four corners of the hole. Fold the vinyl through the hole and stick it to the underside of the panel. A similar principle is used for the corners of the panel. Cut a diagonal from the corner of the vinyl to the corner of the panel stopping just a few millimeters before the panel. Fold the vinyl behind the panel ensuring the corner of the panel is covered and stick the vinyl behind the panel. Duck tape or any other kind of adhesive tape can be used on the underside

of the panel to hold the folded vinyl in place. Clothes' pegs can be used to hold the vinyl in place at the corners of the panel. The corners will need to be held tightly in place while the glue sets to get a good finish.

Headlining panel being warmed over radiator

With a bit of patience and some attention to the finer details a very good result can be achieved. Spend some time on it and you will be able to drive your Gamma with an abundance of pride holding your head up. As the Heynes manuals always say "reassembly is by reversal of the dismantling procedure". Ensure the panel is not adversely bent as you are putting it back in the car as that not only could crack the panel but it can start to unstick the vinyl. The assistant will once again come handy when putting the panel back in but it can be done without an assistant (I didn't have one). Even though re-covering the sunvisors properly is a major task in itself, the rear quarter panels are very easy to cover and will greatly enhance the look inside the car. I covered mine with the new material without removing the old vinyl. As the panels sit vertically inside the car, it doesn't matter if the old material is not stuck well to the panels. By covering the panels over the old vinyl, I have extra-soft and padded panels. I even went a step further and covered the rear parcel shelf in the same material. I know that distracts from originality since the rear shelves are normally covered in carpet but I think having the parcel shelf, rear panels and headlining in the same colour and material is visually better. The vinyl material, which was enough to cover the headlining, rear quarter panels, rear shelf and I still have some left over for the sunvisors cost £16. The glue (Dunlop high temperature contact adhesive + Loctite – Auto Contact Adhesive in a spray can) cost £15. If you add the cost of the Duck tape and the Super-Glue used for some 'touch-ups' in the corners then the cost of the adhesives was more than the material. Time

taken to complete the job, 3 weeks! I work slowly sometimes, but the awful summer we had in 1998 meant that I had to wait for a very long time before I could get another warm and dry day to complete the job. In the

end, I had to resort to heating the panel complete with vinyl on a radiator before I could finish the job. Now all I have to do is sort out 1,357 other things and then I will have the perfect Gamma Coupe!

Rear of the headlining and retrimmed side panel