

## MX-5 dentistry ...

■ Words & photos: Ron Macdonald

I must start by saying that this article refers only to the NB8A model. I have not been under an NA or NB8B so cannot say if the information is relevant to those models, although it may be.

Since buying *Gracie* I have had only two problems with the basic design of the MX-5.

The first is the pathetic exhaust note for a car of this class (will leave that for another day) and the second is the lack of protection for the radiator. I will say that I very much like the look of the open "mouth" design of the 5, very reminiscent of several of the '50s and '60s roadsters, however it does present a radiator issue. Knowing my luck, it was only a matter of time before a dirty great goulie found its way into *Gracie's* mouth and punched a hole in one of the cooling tubes, so a grille of some kind was in order.

My search for a grille started with the commercial offerings. Unfortunately however, I could not find anything that

took my fancy. My criterion was that the grille needed to provide reasonable protection for the radiator without straying too far from the basic design of the NB8A (with its open mouth). That pretty much removed anything shiny from the list, plus anything that fitted to the outer edge of her mouth. Failing in my quest the only alternative was to make something myself.




Baby teeth in place

Once I had decided to manufacture something I needed to consider *Gracie's* "baby teeth" (the two metal hooks in the MX-5 mouth). Removal of these would definitely make getting a good fit so much easier so I hit the online forums.

There are two camps when it comes to baby teeth: one group swears blind that they were simply fitted to tie the vehicle down during transit (and should have been removed pre-delivery); the other swears blind they were fitted as towing hooks. Hmm, time to check the NB8A handbook that came with the car. As usual, the truth is somewhere in between. The handbook says these *tow hooks* (how they refer to them) are designed for an emergency straight line pull to remove the vehicle from a bog or ditch. They do not however recommend they be used for long-distance flat towing or for pulling at any kind of angle. OK, if *Gracie* was ever required to be towed (on the road) it would be on a flat bed, and I don't (at this time) do motor sport, so that wouldn't be an issue either. So I decided for ease of fitment and aesthetic reasons the baby teeth were to go.

Back on the forums, I read some pretty horrific accounts from people who had been down this path with many claiming to have taken two or three hours to



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complete the job, which included the removal of several pounds of flesh from their fingers! The next post I read claimed it was a piece of cake and took 10 minutes each side. These two conflicting reports were about as handy as a hip pocket in a singlet so I decided just to wing it.



Access through the mouth

A quick inspection showed that one bolt either side was fairly easily accessible through the mouth with a 15mm ring spanner. That left four bolts to remove (two per side). Oh, as an aside, have you ever had a good look in an NB8A mouth? *The internal shape is very Aston Martin!*



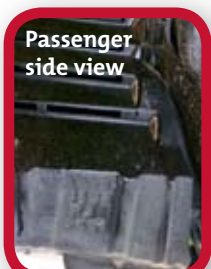
The access hole

Anyhow, crawling under the driver's side I had a pleasant surprise: there is an access hole in the plastic splash panel sited perfectly for access to the two remaining bolts on that side. It was fairly easy to remove these two bolts with a 15mm socket, short extension and ratchet. Total time for the driver's side was 15 minutes, including procrastination.



Driver's side tooth removed

With a spring in my step I crawled under the passenger side, only to be confronted with no access at all. *Bugger!*



Passenger side view

The plastic splash guard is made of a pliable plastic (polycarbonate?) and is held in place by 8mm bolts. I figured that if I removed four of the bolts

I could pull the guard aside enough to have good access to the heads of the baby teeth bolts, so decided to try that tack.



Bolts securing passenger-side splash panel



Passenger-side view with panel pulled back

Having removed the four splash guard bolts it was indeed easy to pull the guard to one side and remove the second tooth, although I must admit I found the bolts on this side a little more awkward. Oh, and I did shed a couple of drops of blood (there are some sharp panels in there).



Removal of bolts used to secure the grille

The second tooth now removed, I replaced the splash panel bolts; total time for the driver's side was 20-25 minutes including head scratching.

So in a little over half an hour both teeth were lying on the driveway. Unless you were stopping for a smoke after every bolt I really can't see how it could take two hours!

Teeth successfully removed, now came the time to look at the new grille. A drive down to *Supercheap Auto* saw me procure a sheet of light weight black expanded mesh which, together with two metres of a small U-channel rubber from *Clark Rubber*, was all I required. I wanted the mesh to sit right back in the mouth so as to still give the illusion of the original design. To that end I found two bolts (that seem to do nothing) along the top edge of the mouth which I would use to secure the grille in place. Taking some rough measurements I traced the shape of the mouth (slightly oversize) on to a piece of cardboard, and then cut it out. I slowly reduced the size of the cardboard template (testing in between each cut) until I had a nice firm fit. The reason for a tight fit is, although the grille was to be held in place by two bolts and not likely to drop out, I didn't want the bottom half

to rattle (that stuff drives me insane). Transferring the shape to the mesh (looks like you could get two grilles out of one pack of mesh) I placed the rubber around the outside (both to neaten it up and reduce rattles) and fitted it to the car. As I said earlier I did make it a tight fit so it took a little bit of mucking around to get it right to the back of the mouth, however it was not what one would call a major drama. One last job to do: using a screwdriver I cleared the top bolt holes of any mesh (just bent it out of the way), replaced the two top bolts and **job done!**



Job done!

I have to admit I am not totally sure how long this took but it would not have been more than two hours from start to finish (teeth included). Total cost was \$43.85 – mesh \$29.95, rubber \$13.90 – which is a pretty cheap grille. I have to admit I am not 100% happy with the end result; yes, I made the grille a tight fit but in reality it is a little too tight, resulting in the rubber along the bottom of the passenger side deforming a little. I did consider pulling it back out again but decided bugger it, it is well back and unless you get on your hands and knees it is unlikely anyone will notice. Maybe one day when I am feeling keen I might put things right.

The upshot of this article is that so long as you have a basic understanding of hand tools this is a very easy job that anyone can tackle. If you do decide to have a go, might I suggest like me you take your time; this will make it a pleasurable interaction with your shiny friend, not an exercise in trying to remember all expletives you can. At the end of the day it doesn't matter if you get the job done in an hour or three – take two days if you want too; far better to take your time and be happy with the result than try to break all records and stuff the whole thing up!

PS: As Gracie's grille was fitted over the Christmas break, I have since found that not only does it do what I wanted, it also works as a pretty good locust catcher! ■