

ALTERNATIVE CARS

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* HAPPY BIRTHDAY - 21 MINIS IN FANCY DRESS *

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Morgan legend is not the car's uncompromisingly traditional construction or indeed the aged cobwebs networked across its chassis/suspension design; it's the time people are prepared to wait to take delivery of their car. And that time seems to be getting longer and longer. Rumours abound that the waiting list now stretches over anything from five to seven years, but can you honestly imagine paying a reasonable cash deposit and waiting even *two* years for your car? Morgans certainly do have a crazy situation around their necks, and that's what makes us wonder if the new Merlin sports car can't very nimbly step in there and grab a nifty chunk of the action? O.K., so not many Morgan enthusiasts



MERLIN MAGIC

**Introducing a new
contender for the Morgan
crown.**

fairly high (in fact, probably too high, as it was quite a struggle to squeeze the left leg between the large low-set steering wheel and Corbeau seat) and enjoy a truly commanding view down the lovely long bonnet, past the large headlamps and on to the road ahead. Moulded into the door is a handy arm rest, behind the high quality woodrim wheel is an equally high quality and fully instrumented polished wood dashboard and nestling down under the scuttle is a conveniently placed gearshift. No doubt about it, there's an image of craftsmanship and a great 'feel' about the whole thing.

Fired up and bellowing through the side-mounted exhaust, the 2-litre Ford Cortina OHC motor felt good, too. We obviously can't give



would be prepared to do all the dirty work themselves, but then considering that time is short for all of us and that a substantial cash saving would be made, you'd have to bve a mug *not* to consider the Merlin.

Well, that's the case for the defence. If one was ever needed. Now let's have a closer look at the car. Its background is unusual in that it was designed by an Englishman, one Leonard Witton, who waited until he reached the United States before he put his ideas into practice. Called the Witton Tiger, and based on a VW rear engine or Ford Pinto front engine, the car not surprisingly was an instant success. That soon left more knowledgeable British enthusiasts feeling a bit deprived, and late in 1979 it was Southend engineer Peter Gowing who finally decided to do something about the situation. Two Witton bodysells then arrived here last February, a company was formed in

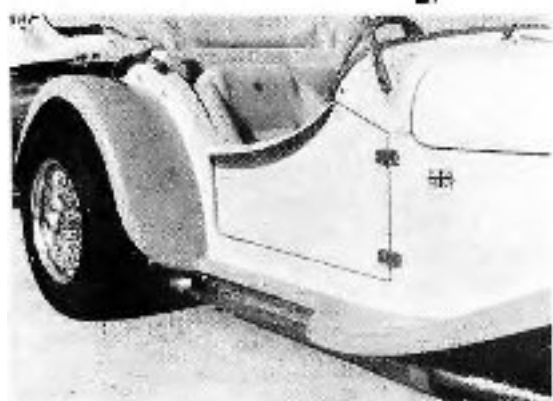
partnership with another engineer, Colin Hanna, and the heat was on to develop a chassis and get the new Merlin rolling as soon as possible. And that, quite comfortably, has required virtually all the lads' time, effort and patience ever since!

In fact, when we arrived down at the Thoroughbred Cars (UK) workshops in Sutton Road, Southend, the car wasn't rolling quite as legally as we'd hoped. So it was straight down to the very friendly aircraft service and repair area of Southend airport for our exclusive first drive of what is surely a most significant newcomer to the ranks of British sports cars. Even then we were perhaps acting a little in haste, with the car's springing not fully sorted and its propshaft angrily lashing against the structure down below the seats, but we were at least able to get the feel of it. And what we felt, we liked.

First impression was of the fabulous driving position. You sit

driving impressions, but we can say that this engine undoubtedly gives the kind of performance you'd expect from the Merlin — spirited and businesslike. Nor will the handling be anything less than you'd expect, though it was difficult to prove this fully on an aircraft service road when helicopters were landing just ahead and turbo-prop engines roaring just a few feet away! Anyway, we're not fools; we want plenty of excuses to get back to Southend as soon as possible and try the Merlin at length.

Right, now for some details. Developed entirely in Southend, the chassis for the Ford-based Merlin is a strong twin-rail assembly fabricated from 3" X 2" box-section steel with big sub-assemblies front and rear for the suspension. Though many Ford engines can no doubt be squeezed in, car number one has the 2-litre OHC unit and complete set of running gear from the Cortina Mk. 3/4. Suspension-wise, that's



1: Spare wheel sits neatly in the tail above the sprung chrome bumper. Rear lights are VW

2: Rolling chassis shows complete Cortina suspension set-up front and rear.

3: The view ahead over the high quality veneered dashboard. Indicator stalks are Cortina.

4: The armrest moulded into the door is a neat touch. Side exhaust should be less vulnerable with suspension raised on production cars.

what all Merlins will use — the Cortina wishbone/coilspring set-up at the front (it fits straight in on four bolts) and matching trailing arm/coilspring/axle arrangement at the rear (this too fits via four bolts). Only big change from the standard Ford pattern is that, due to the engine being mounted much further back, the propshaft requires shortening by some 3ft. Other than that, there will also be a special set of springs on offer. Both steering and radiator come straight from the base car.

As you might expect, the Merlin is initially available in kit form — indeed, as a very complete kit selling for around £3000 plus VAT (the exact price was still to be finalised at the time of writing). This means that you receive virtually everything in the kit bar all the Cortina running gear — and bar the windscreen wiper system and petrol tank, which happen to be VW Beetle. The chassis is already fitted with

engine, radiator and body mounting points, while tubular steel bumpers are supplied with brackets ready to be bolted on. All necessary hinges and locks are included for the fitting of the bonnet and the doors. Other items supplied are the polished aluminium windscreen frame, glass, chromed steel grille, headlamps, steering wheel, carpets, all trim, seats and 6X14 wire wheels complete with tyres (probably Firestone Cavallinos). Though a full set of U.S.-made Classic Instruments gauges will be included, the veneered wood dashboard will be left blank to allow the customer to choose his own layout. Just about the only real option, and it's rather a major one, will be a body/chassis kit based on the VW Beetle (engine and suspension only) and this was something Thoroughbred Cars were working on at the time of our visit.

Obviously, at £3000 the Merlin has to be a level or two above most kit cars. And that it certainly is, with a beautifully made chassis, an exceptionally thick and well-moulded fibreglass body, excellent attention to detail and a whole air of fine craftsmanship. Indeed, it's very much a 'real' car which has to be sold in kit form simply because that's the only way it can escape Type Approval. As such, it deserves to be taken seriously and compared carefully with the Morgan (current prices from around £6000). It must compare *more* than favourably, too.

On reflection, we were most impressed with the Merlin, not just with what was really an untried prototype but also with the thought and effort that has gone into it and the potential behind the whole project. For unlike the Panther Lima, the Merlin *looks* the part of a contender for the Morgan crown; it has the right ingredients of strength and uncompromising masculinity. Squirring around amongst the aeroplanes and helicopters, it also promised a great deal of pleasure for the time when we can get back for a full test. Yes, we left Southend that day happy and trying keenly to predict just what effect the Merlin will have on the car with which it will surely be most often compared . . .