

alternative cars

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MERLIN REVISITED

Chris Horton drives
the latest Merlin



It was just a year ago that we last paid a visit to Thoroughbred Cars in Southend—the occasion was to drive and gain some impressions of the then new Merlin TF, and we vowed at the time that as soon as the car was more fully sorted and road legal we would be back. Well, we have just been back for another look, and have to admit to being impressed by what we saw. The car has undergone a number of important changes, making it a much more practical and attractive vehicle, and even more of a contender for the title of "best Morgan-beater".

But the Merlin is an important car in its own right; it has those classic thirties looks yet is based on modern Ford running gear; it should give its owner a lot of pleasurable driving yet it will be cheap to run and maintain. In fact it is based on suspension and engine components from the Mark 3 and 4 Cortina, these being attached to a factory assembled body and chassis unit; Thoroughbred Cars take the view that they can get a better fit than most would-be builders and this typifies their attitude to the whole project. While the Merlin is quite obviously a component car, they shy away from the idea of its being simply a 'kit car' and feel it is best to leave the customer to deal only with the less critical areas. Certainly the Merlin is a high quality vehicle, as befits its price of nearly £1000 for a basic body and chassis kit, and indeed it is the sort of car on which you could spend a great deal of money, but the fact that it is available in component form does allow one to cut one's cloth according to one's means. To quote a few examples, we felt that £75 for a pair of chromed headlamp shells and lamps is an expense that could be avoided by careful shopping around. Again, to pay £50 for a pair of front indicators and £39 for a pair of torpedo type lamps to mount on the front wings seems a little excessive. Obviously one has to have the appropriate hardware for a car of this type or it will simply look ridiculous, but we felt that there are alternatives if you look around hard enough!

OBVIOUS CHANGES

The most obvious change in the car since our last visit is the addition of running boards and the consequent deletion of the side mounted exhaust, neither of which were features this writer was particularly keen on. The front wings now flow smoothly back into the rears a la Morgan, although unlike that car they are in unit and consequently look much neater. The sidescreen arrangement has also been much improved on current cars, although the one we drove still had the less than satisfactory old type. Obviously we cannot comment on the sealing qualities of the new type, but we do hope that they are better than the old! But that apart the Merlin is a pleasant car to drive, and we can see its typical owner getting a lot of satisfaction from it.

In general the detail finishing of the car is superb; it is fitted with all the right hardware, although we weren't too keen on the proliferation of louvres on the bonnet.

Getting in and out is reasonably easy, although the fact that the sidescreen, when fitted, is hinged separately can make things a little awkward. The car we drove was fitted with a pair of Corbeau seats which were certainly very comfortable, but their high squab edges were a slight obstruction to easy access; this could be solved by fitting some slightly different seats. Once in the car the driving position is excellent; the gearlever, although tucked away under the fascia is ideally positioned in practice, and our only criticism would be of the proximity of the steering wheel to the driver's chest. This means that one's elbows tend to fly in all directions on the twisty bits, and as there really isn't that



much room anyway, the passenger tends to suffer GBH to the right arm and the driver's own right arm can come violently into contact with the flat top of the door . . .

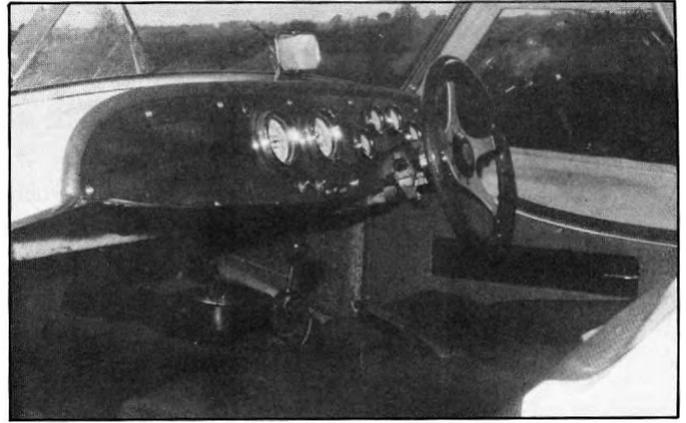
In fact on a purely aesthetic level we felt that the doors would have looked better without the arm-rest; that, and their general shape makes them look not dissimilar to the partitions that the drivers of one-man buses use to seal themselves off from the public . . .

ADAPT INSTRUMENTS?

The test car was fitted with a superb, but again expensive, set of American classic style gauges. These can be supplied by Thoroughbred at prices starting from £20



The engine bay is remarkably uncluttered and access should present no problems. The test car wasn't equipped with a heater as the Cortina item won't fit in.



plus VAT, but we would be tempted to find an old Jaguar saloon in the local scrapyards and adapt the instruments from that, especially as one tends to be saddled anyway with the naturally fairly modern looking Cortina switchgear. We found the steering to be very light, even with the wide tyres that are necessary to fill out the wheelarches, but we would think that if your base Cortina has seen better days then money spent on a new or reconditioned rack would be a good investment; there was an unmistakable deadness to the test car's steering which is just one trait that tends to remind the driver that he is at the wheel of a kit car.

The brakes too, were less than perfect, but a servo would soon put that right, although we suspect that it would be a big mistake simply to bolt on the unit from a current Cortina and hope for the best; on any car that is substantially lighter than its basis there would be a tendency for it to be over-braked with the consequent danger of premature wheel locking. Nevertheless, once one was accustomed to the brakes they were acceptable, and combined with the generally excellent roadholding meant that the car could be pushed along fairly rapidly if need be, its two litre OHC engine never having to work too hard for its living. We did find that the suspension was rather hard though and on one or two occasions some bump steer was evident, but set against that was the virtual absence of body roll; our drive was hardly long enough or on sufficiently good roads to establish what the handling was like on the limit, but suffice it to say that the car has no peculiar vices.

SLIGHT ADJUSTMENT

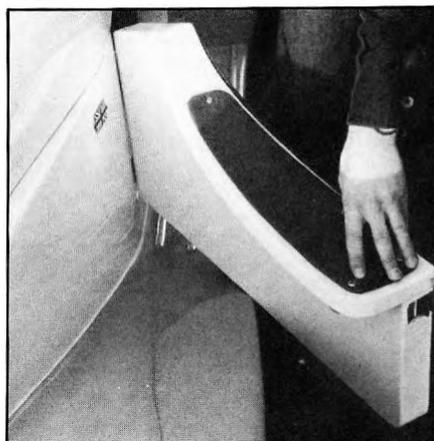
As far as the quality of the body is concerned, that too was virtually flawless; both the doors and the bonnet fitted their respective apertures very well, although the passenger's door was in need of a slight adjustment to the lock mechanism. Removing the two bonnet pins and then lifting the lid revealed just how thick the GRP is, although we felt that the edges could have been trimmed slightly more carefully. Combined with the sturdy hinges though, it was a very rigid unit, and surprisingly heavy. We did notice one or two very slight ripples in the surface of the bonnet (but nowhere else on the car) and on a purely personal

level we were not too keen on the proliferation of dummy louvres on the panel.

Also in evidence on some of the suspension smashing 'roads' in this country was a degree of body flexing that we found rather surprising in a structure that appears to be so strong and rigid; it was most noticeable by watching the corners of the front wings. There were also several irritating rattles in the test car and we have to admit that it didn't feel as taut as it might; this was probably due to the age of the running gear as much as anything, but does serve to show how important is the choice of a good donor car. It would be unrealistic to expect that the components from your rotting Mark 3 Cortina could be transformed overnight into a beautiful sports car without quite a bit of time and money being spent on them. In many respects, the best way of approaching the problem would be to accept that this is just not the sort of car that can be built on a shoestring and to go out and buy something like a late model Mark 4 with severe accident damage.

But as a yardstick by which to judge the Merlin's appeal, certainly to us, suffice it to say that we thoroughly enjoyed our day out with it. Despite the cold we really had the weather on our side, and driving down some of the lanes with which Essex abounds it was all too

The doors could do with check straps to stop them folding too far forward and bashing the wings; and we weren't too keen on that wide armrest on the top edge.



The instruments looked good for the type of car, but once again are quite expensive. Note typical Ford hardware like the oddments tray, gearlever and handbrake.

easy to forget one's everyday problems and even to imagine oneself back in the thirties, such was the character and quality of the car. One was always aware of driving something just that bit special by the number of heads that turned, but equally one had the satisfaction of knowing that most people did not realise just what the Merlin was, and the thought that it might have been a kit car was clearly far from their minds—and surely that has to be the ultimate accolade?

The sidescreens on the test car were a little primitive; hinges on the forward edge were taken care of by these two small pins, but there were no other securing devices on the remaining three edges; it could be a little draughty!

