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kit cars



**TIMELY TARRAGON:
FULL REPORT**

ANALYSED: MERLIN TF ROADSTER

Analysis: Merlin



Objective: to consider every aspect of this excitingly styled and superbly made sports roadster, from the purchase of a kit through to the finished car's blend of fun and practicality, and looking at the attention to detail that makes it such good value for money.

With the tremendous expansion of the kit car market one is confronted with an ever-growing range of exciting and inexpensive vehicles from which to choose. And thanks (in part) to the demise of the mass-produced open sports car the buyer who wants the wind in his hair now has an impressive array of alternatives. The convertible is certainly making a tremendous comeback, for after years of thrilling to the cocoon-like environments of moulded black plastic which passed for sporting style, drivers are rediscovering the open air. A new generation of enthusiasts have found that little else compares with the pleasure of hood-down motoring and the enlightened sectors of the specialist car industry are riding high on the wave of this rejuvenated sector of the market.

Yet even within the context of the rebirth of the convertible it is clear that some broad categories of cars are benefitting more than others from the interest of buyers. One of the most lively of the subspecies is of course the traditionally styled open roadster, the genus which even in the gloomy days of the seventies was kept alive by Caterham Cars, Panther and (perhaps most famous of all) Morgan. It was the success of the Worcestershire company with its waiting list longer than a Fiat's lifetime which has attracted the smaller manufacturers who seek if not actually to copy the Morgan, then at least to borrow some of its features in an effort to attract customers who seek the pleasures of the traditional roadster without having either to part with large sums of money or twiddle their thumbs for several years.

Having taken that into consideration one should not regard the Merlin TF as a copy or in any sense a replica of the Morgan, for it is a car worthy of evaluation in its own right, and one that has its very own appeal. Originally designed in London by Leonard Witton, the two-seater first appeared in the USA where the Witton Tiger (as it was known) was offered in two forms. Builders could use a rear-mounted VW Beetle engine with a specially designed twin-tube chassis, or they could opt to instal a water-cooled Ford Pinto unit at the front. When Peter Gowing of Thoroughbred Cars subsequently brought the car to the UK it was with the intention of offering both options, but experience has shown that the VW-powered version was a dead duck in commercial terms and production of the rear-engined variant in this country amounts to a big fat zero.

Notwithstanding this conclusive thumbs down for the air-cooled Merlin, its otherwise similar Ford-powered brother has proved to be increasingly popular and the seven-strong workforce at the Southend factory are currently producing two per week. The story is rather less happy, however, in the USA, where

Leonard Witton has had to take legal action to prevent the Tiger's distributors from illegally *manufacturing* his cars without so much as a nod — let alone a royalty payment — in his direction. But in this country the Merlin looks poised for success with a potent formula of classic looks, modern practicality and a price which will make Morgan owners weep.

APPEARANCE

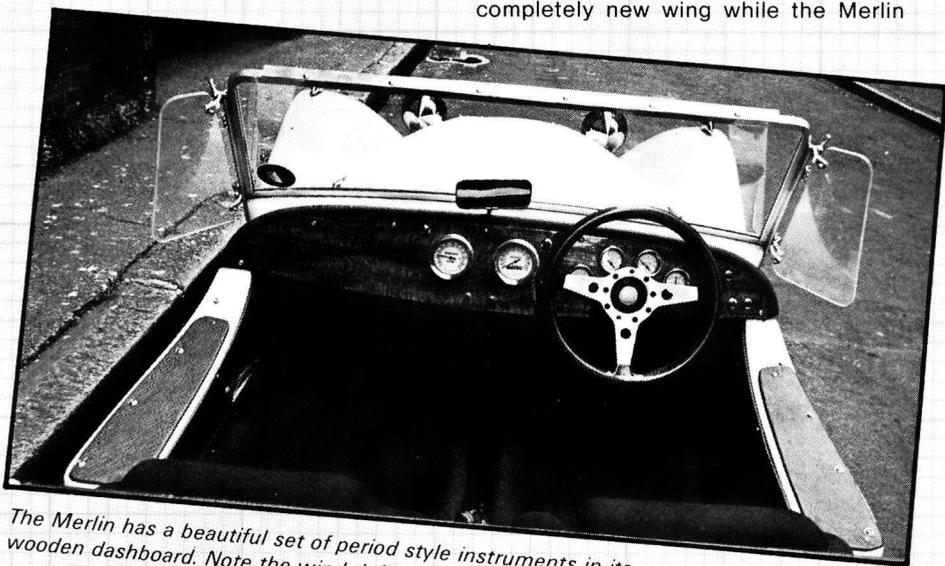
Perhaps because of the similarity between the Morgan and Merlin concepts, one initially sees the fibreglass newcomer through eyes which have been overaccustomed to the former car. One's automatic reaction is to recoil from the unexpected shape of the long, sloping *square-cornered* grille. With an image of the long-familiar Morgan grille in one's mind, the Merlin item with its narrow, vertical bars looks somehow *wrong*. With familiarity, however, this negative reaction is turned pretty well upside down and one starts to draw parallels between the (no longer strange) Merlin grille and the

running board. Because of the width of these curvaceous arches and the limited ground clearance the Merlin manages to combine grace and style with a squat and purposeful disposition that can hardly fail to please.

Looking around the Merlin in more detail one notes the bulge and the profusion of dummy louvres which Peter Gowing was dissuaded from removing by the outcry of those on the waiting list whom he consulted. They do add something, we suppose, but 86 louvres is perhaps too much of a good thing ... well, that's up to you.

Another design detail about which Peter consulted his customers was the unusual armrest ledge on top of the low door, and in this case we can happily concur with their verdict for not only does the flared ledge blend in with the styling, but also proved comfortable in use. A less agreeable feature was the use of chromed bumper tubes, for whilst we share the belief that safety is important, it must be said that the bumpers' starkly utilitarian form is in direct contrast with the stylish appearance of the rest of the vehicle.

On a more positive note, it is clear that the well-used prototype/demonstration car has stood up well to two years of fairly brutal use which included a recent crash with an errant Escort. Peter is justifiably proud of the fact that Ford required a completely new wing while the Merlin



The Merlin has a beautiful set of period style instruments in its wooden dashboard. Note the wind deflectors.

similarly styled early Allard and AC 2 litre items. In fact, having grown familiar with the Southend car over several days we started to look at Morgans and thought how strange and (dare we say it) ugly their grilles looked. It just goes to show how easily we are all indoctrinated into thinking that established ways are best.

Grille apart, there is little to disturb one's instant appreciation of the Merlin's flowing lines, complimented by the two-tone colour scheme. The car looks long, low and stylish, with a far more purposeful air about it than any road-going Morgan could ever have. The rakishness of the traditional lines is accentuated by the graceful wings, which flare upwards and out from the narrow body and are linked (unlike those of the Tiger) by a full length

merely needed minor work to put right the damage, speaking volumes for the quality of the cars' construction. So although the Merlin was starting to look a trifle tatty it was clear that the bodywork was not deteriorating in the structural sense. In fact it is hard not to be impressed with the Merlin's appearance, and a pleasant surprise to discover that the roadster's looks are in no way spoilt when the hood and sidescreens are in use.

NUTS AND BOLTS

Thoroughbred Cars offer the Merlin TF in essentially one specification only, ►

though various extras can of course be added onto the shopping list. Perhaps most important of the options is that of special gelcoat colours (at an extra cost of £200) instead of the white in which the body, doors, bonnet and boot are normally finished. Inspecting the small factory in which all the work is done it was clear that most customers opt for the standard bodyshell, which gives nothing away in terms of quality to its coloured counterparts. The quality of the hand laid fibreglass was as high as we have come to expect from the 'New Wave' of alternative car manufacturers — in other words, strong, smooth and well-finished.

The tubular steel chassis (designed by Peter Gowing himself) is pre-bolted to the body before the kit leaves the factory to ensure a precise fit, and is set up specifically to accept unaltered componentry from the Mk III and Mk IV Cortinas. The basic kit, which costs £1750 plus VAT, also includes the windscreen frame, grille, bumpers and brackets, front and rear coil springs, a steering shaft extension and column bracket as well as a pedal mounting yoke. There are lots of other bits and pieces included which fill out the specification, such as seats and runners, steering wheel and boss, headlamps, torpedo lamps, bonnet and door hinges, catches and handles. And to top off the list there's also the hood and side curtains in brown, black or white, complete with frame and fittings, which makes the Merlin TF '82 Pack' look quite a bargain.

There are various extras available from Thoroughbred Cars such as the attractive Compomotive Modular wheels (£35 each) and a complete, tuned exhaust system to fit any of the appropriate four cylinder Ford engines. If you really want to go the whole hog you can even specify luxury items like a special German fabric for the hood or (where have you seen these before?) a pair of Union Jack badges.

But while the Merlin kit does include a great many of the necessary components (even little things like brackets, bolts and washers) the customer still has to do a bit of digging around for parts. Not *too* much though, for the TF was redesigned specifically with the Ford Cortina in mind as the base car, so there shouldn't be too much aggravation in locating a suitable Mk III or IV. The only non-Ford parts needed are a fuel tank, wiper motor and rear lights from the VW Beetle. From the sales-rep special one needs a complete front suspension beam including the rack and pinion, wishbone and shock absorbers and hub and caliper assemblies. In addition the complete steering column, pedal assembly, battery, handbrake, radiator and brake master cylinder (non-servo type) will be required. Oh, an engine and gearbox would be useful . . .

There is a certain degree of flexibility in the choice of engines. Basically, a 1600cc Cortina lump will be fairly economical, while the 2000 OHC unit will probably be the best compromise between performance and economy. And if you're really after some fun and can persuade your insurance company of your responsible and upright nature then

a 3000 V6 can be installed — albeit with a bit of a squeeze. Whatever the choice you will also require the matching rear axle (complete with brake assembly), gearbox and propshaft — at least, if you want to drive anywhere, that is!

OWNER'S EXPERIENCE

Whilst the demonstrator car was a little the worse for wear, having been used for over two years as a mobile test-bed, the gleaming white 3-litre Merlin of customer Bernard Stripp dispelled any doubts about how good the car *can* look. A 35 year old civil servant from Benfleet in Essex, Bernard had been attracted to the Merlin by the combination of traditional open motoring and affordability and feels that his prior lack of kit-building experience has not proved too big a handicap.

To build his immaculate TF took Bernard six months of evening and weekend work. The biggest problems he encountered were related to his choice of the largest capacity engine which necessitated a number of time-consuming modifications for which he enlisted the help of Peter Gowing. Peter has since incorporated the alterations in the revised Merlin which evolved through experiences with the prototype and with early customers' cars.

And while Bernard candidly admits to have taken rather longer than the claimed 200 hour build-up time, he suggests that the estimate is fairly realistic for a typical 2-litre Merlin and expresses no regrets whatever with his choice of car. No wonder — his Merlin is an absolute beauty, with a sophisticated boot opening system, a thoroughly taut and rattle-free body and an interior that would put many more expensive cars to shame. It really shifts, too . . . zero to sixty times are pretty well in the super-car league and the car's handling is more than adequate, cornering flat and fast, though perhaps in too taut a manner for some people's liking. One group of people who did take a liking to it though

were the judges at Autofair '82 in June this year where the beautiful roadster won first prize in the concours event.

Perhaps most impressive of all, apart from the attention to detail on Bernard's car (which incidentally *is* in everyday use) is the cost. For despite all the quality touches about his Merlin, Bernard's creation cost a mere £2,900 to put on the road — Good Heavens, that's less than a Renault 4 and less than *half* the price of the cheapest Morgan!

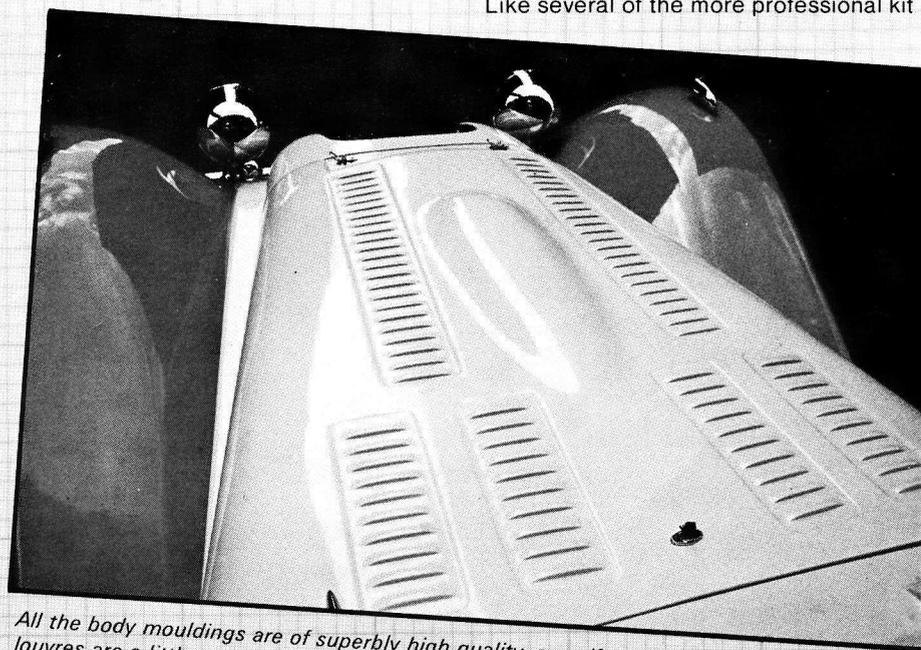
AFTER SALES SERVICE

For those who have never dealt with a specialist manufacturer, the emphasis of companies like Thoroughbred Cars will come as quite a shock. One can forget about luscious brochures filled with glossy photos and mindless twaddle. Similarly one can discard thoughts of dealing with a remote 'customer service department' or receptionists who don't know a track rod end from an exhaust bracket. Phone up with an enquiry about a Merlin and you'll find yourself talking to someone who spends every day actually working on the TF, who has participated in the design and development of it and (if you're speaking to factory manager Colin Hann) uses the Merlin as his own means of transport. It should prove quite a refreshing experience!

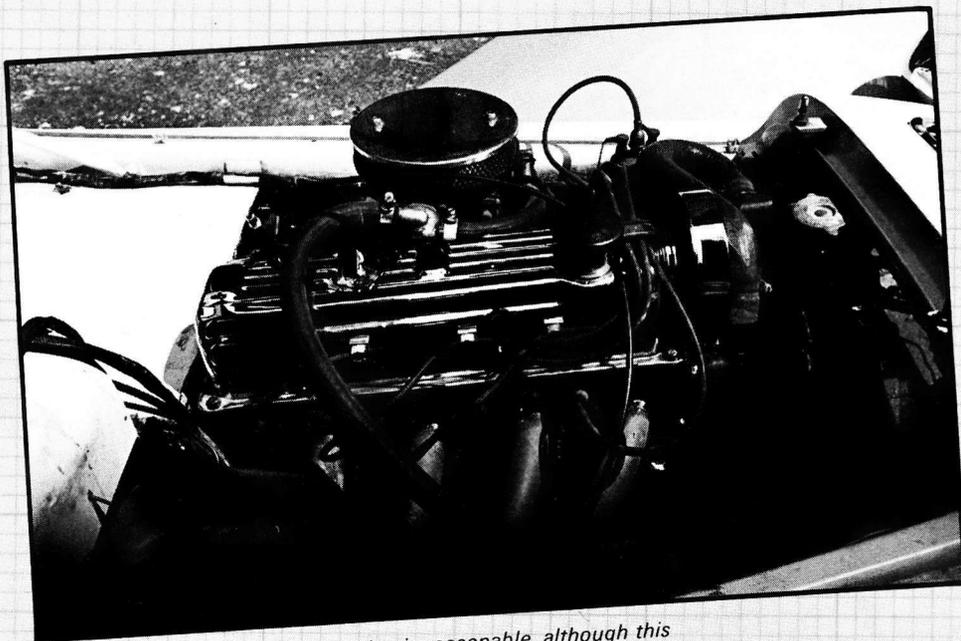
Of course one does have to suffer a certain amount of inconvenience in return for this sort of friendly and personal service. Brochures and order forms are less than exquisite (to tell the truth, the one we were given was out of date!) and the lack of large stocks of parts can lead to occasional frustrating delays. On the other hand, the giants of the motor industry have been known to keep customers waiting before now, and somehow one can't really imagine Sir Michael Edwardes popping round to your house at the weekend to sort out a problem the way Peter helped out Bernard Stripp . . .

GETTING IT ON THE ROAD

Like several of the more professional kit



All the body mouldings are of superbly high quality, even if all those louvres are a little over the top!



Access to the two-litre Pinto engine is reasonable, although this shot was taken with the bonnet removed.

car manufacturers, Peter has recognised that the problems of getting such a car on the road often appear more daunting to the potential customer than does the actual building of it. So sensibly he invited local car insurance technical inspectors to evaluate the structural integrity of the cars with the result that Merlins with engines of 2 litres or less are classified as Group Six by 'mainstream' insurers. Kit car specialists Osborne and Sons, on the other hand, quote £171 for comprehensive cover on a 3-litre Merlin belonging to an individual over 23 with a maximum no claims bonus. At the other end of the scale, a 17 year old in a rural area would pay £272 for third party cover on a 1600cc engined version while a 23 year old in a town like Reigate with two years NCB would pay £144 for comprehensive or a mere £54 for third party cover on the same car.

Unfortunately, on top of insurance and road tax costs there is also car tax to be paid. This subject has of course been covered in depth by KC at various times, (most recently in May 1982) but essentially the picture is this: since the Merlin is regarded as a new vehicle rather than a rebodied one it qualifies for a brand new registration number and 10% car tax payable on the pre-VAT value of the car's components (so keep all the bills) and the Customs and Excise officer's assessment of the value of the work the builder has put into it. It sounds daunting, but in fact is less complicated than many people fear and really shouldn't put anyone off the car of their choice, as A.G. explained in 'Rear View' in the May issue.

BEHIND THE WHEEL

Getting into the Merlin presents one with a choice between retaining a modicum of dignity and using the doors or of cutting a dash by vaulting from the sturdy running-board over the low door and slotting oneself into position. The door opens very wide indeed, but it has to be said that when the hood is up one tends to tumble in and out of the car because of the high

sides of the otherwise pleasant bucket seats, so access can be a bit of a fiddle. No complaints, however — at least for anyone of less than extraordinary dimensions!

The seating position is far lower than that to which one might be accustomed, and one finds oneself looking up at Volvo drivers (in the literal, rather than the symbolic sense) in the way one generally stares up at the occupants of Range Rovers and the like. Yet this should not be taken to imply that one is set so low that one is left peering over the dashboard à la Ronnie Corbett in his Rolls, for the entire vehicle is low and visibility is well-nigh faultless — at least when the hood is stored away, though a door mirror would have been a useful addition. Such a mirror takes on a crucial importance when the hood is up, because rear three-quarter vision is otherwise virtually non-existent. The hood was otherwise impressive and appeared to fulfill its role adequately (though weatherproofing is still not 100%). The two-piece frame is erected separately from the hood which itself is fixed in place with press-studs on the rear scuttle and a bar which fits into a special lip along the top edge of the horrendous placing of the indicator and light stalks (*behind* the wooden dashboard!) are hardly relevant since the builder will obviously take time to plan the dashboard in accordance with his wishes and will hopefully site the handbrake in a more accessible location than behind the bulkhead too! Certainly great things are possible — the dash on Bernard's car, for instance, would not have disgraced a car costing several times as much. But one could not help speculating about the favourable impression a test car of *that* standard would make. It seems clear that those kit-car manufacturers who are really heading for success will deem such an investment worthwhile, for there is no better advertisement than an absolutely immaculate example of their product.

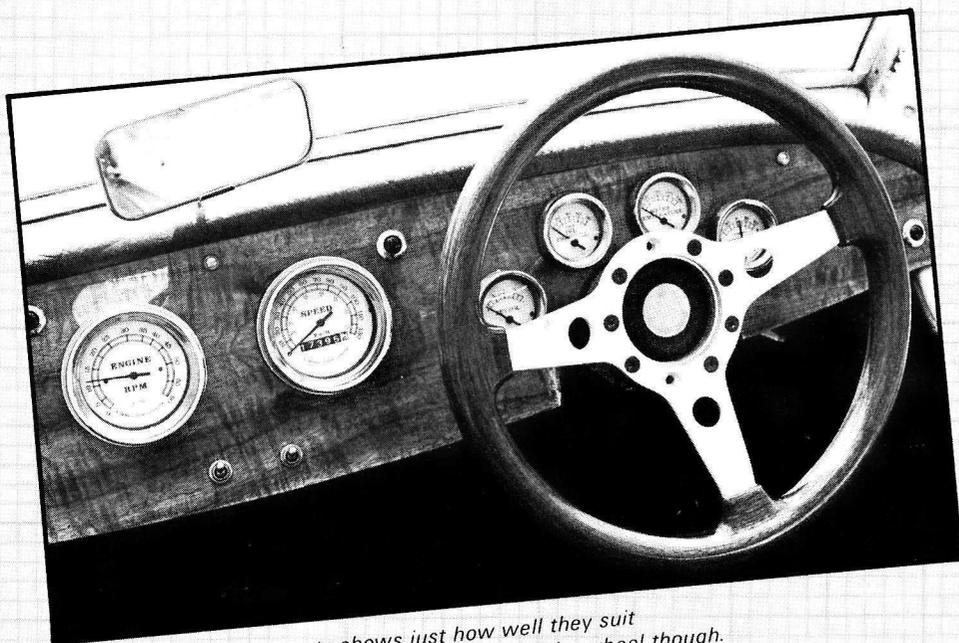
On a less admonitory note, the Merlin's instruments were of a lovely white-faced classic design (though confusingly the speedo was marked in kilometers rather

than miles per hour) and the interior upholstery was of a high standard — except for the unsecured gaiter around the well-placed gearlever. And that brings us back to the previous point, for without wanting to single out Thoroughbred Cars (who are by no means the worst offender) one must, in all honesty, give voice to a final niggle about the preparation of the Merlin test car. This regards the luggage compartment, which (to the credit of the designer) is a surprisingly capacious area and which on Bernard's car was accessible by a cunning and stylish arrangement involving the side-ways hingeing of the rear panel to which the spare tyre is secured. On the test car, by contrast, the only way to get into what is after all the sole facility for storage (apart from the door pockets) was by whipping out the screwdriver and unfastening the padded horizontal top panel. Had another example of the Merlin *not* been present it would have been all too easy to leave with impressions that would fail to give due credit to the Merlin.

ON THE ROAD

Whatever complaints might be levelled at the preparation of the test car are soon forgotten out on the open road where the 2000 OHC-powered Merlin really came into its own. With fourteen inch wheels rather than the Cortina's thirteen inch units the overall gearing is somewhat higher, but standing start acceleration runs show that this is more than compensated for by the 5 cwt reduction in weight. In terms of ultimate top speed the roadster has to come second best, (drag coefficients being no respectors of traditional styling charm) but for motorway cruising the Merlin sounds unfussed at speeds in excess of the legal maximum. In truth though, the Merlin, like most other convertibles, is not built for the ultimate in performance but rather for the experience of open air motoring, which has got to be worth the sacrifice of illegal top speeds. In any case, all but the hardest of customers will discover that the Merlin is capable of sustaining far greater speeds than *they* are! For although the windscreen and side screens deflect most of the oncoming rush of air, only the most masochistic of individuals will relish sitting in a semi-gale for any length of time, and it is at low and medium speeds that such a vehicle really comes into its own.

Around town the Merlin proved surprisingly docile and easily manageable thanks to the flexibility of the power unit and the respect which other road users afford to such a conspicuous vehicle. Continual use of the clutch does highlight, though, the lack of a resting place for the left foot in the narrow footwell. The ability to see all the extremities of the car reaps great benefits in terms of manoeuvrability and makes up for the rather large turning circle. When one is taken by the urge to substantiate the Merlin's aggressive demeanour the car totally changes character, however, and with a raucous crackle from the exhaust and a sudden shove in the back the low-slung convertible leaps forward in a manner guaranteed to start the adrenalin ►



Close-up of the instruments shows just how well they suit the car; the smaller ones are obscured a little by the wheel though.

PRICES AND OPTIONS

'82 Pack' as described	£1750
Gel Coat colour finish	£ 200
Tuned Exhaust (4 cyl.)	£ 150
German Fabric hood	£ 70

All prices are exclusive of VAT.
For full details of the Merlin TF write to
**Thoroughbred Cars Ltd., 285 Sutton
Road, Southend-on-Sea, Essex.
Telephone 0702 67642.**

pumping. Straight line stability could not be faulted, but the relative simplicity of the chassis design is betrayed by the ease with which the car can be caught out on tight corners. Handling is not the Merlin's strongest card, for although its cornering is extremely flat, the length of the wheelbase results in noticeable understeer accentuated by the rather loose feel of the steering rack. Taking one's foot off the throttle in mid-corner will provoke a fairly rapid transition to oversteer and a certain amount of tyre scrub. Having said that, for most people's purposes these are not likely to represent any great drawback since the Merlin is otherwise very controllable and will only disappoint those in search of the very last word in handling.

The test car also suffered from certain deficiencies in ride as a result of minimal ground clearance and a correspondingly harsh suspension set-up. Production cars, however, have benefitted from the experimental work conducted on this car and now have both greater ground clearance and a much improved ride quality. Certainly Bernard Stripp's V6 Merlin appeared both to handle and ride in a far more refined manner, so the continuing development work is clearly paying off, and future customers should have little difficulty in building a Merlin which offers performance far in excess of that normally found at the price.

CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that the Merlin is a car for which the future holds great promise. The existence of cars such as the Morgan and Panther demonstrates beyond any possible doubt that there is a steady demand for traditionally styled open roadsters offering two seats, flowing lines and potential for terrific fun. By offering a well built and now properly developed car of this idiom, Peter Gowing has presented the motoring world with a thoroughly viable alternative.

Attractively styled and based on components familiar to virtually every

DIY mechanic, the Merlin must represent a very appealing proposition to anyone of ordinary means who seeks the thrill of open air motoring as well as extending still further the range of base vehicles for which kits are now available. The Southend convertible combines comfort, good looks, reasonable practicality and a great deal of style. Not only does it afford a cheap and serviceable mechanical basis but also a decent level of performance and handling. But of all the many elements which point towards a rosy future for the Merlin, two stand out, namely *character* and *value*. For the Merlin TF is a car which is more than just an alternative to a Morgan — it has a character all its own and a capacity to please which is much greater. And perhaps most pleasing of all must be the Merlin's affordability, for at £1,750 the TF kit is well within the grasp of many people to whom such a glorious experience has previously been out of reach. All we can suggest is that you get in touch with Thoroughbred Cars *now*, because as soon as the news gets out the waiting list for the Merlin could well be longer than that for the Morgan. And we know which queue we'd be standing in!



The TF bears a strong resemblance to the SS100 from the rear; note the use of VW rear lights!