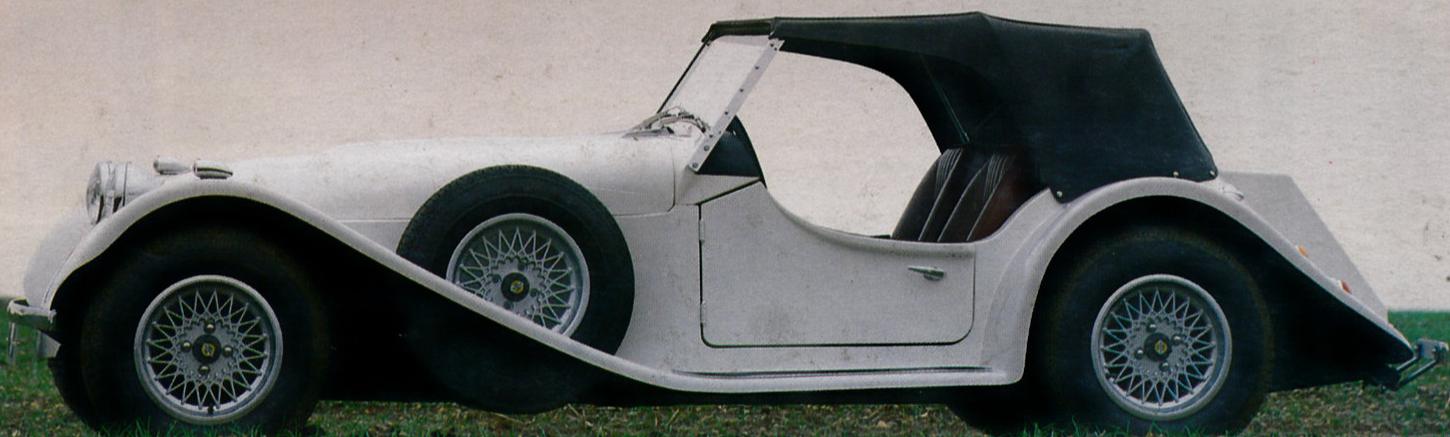


kit car

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MERLIN'S MARVELLOUS NEW 2+2 MONRO
Britain's sports car industry can hardly be termed dead when specialist companies are producing exciting new machines like the Merlin Monro. Look no further than page 14!



factory fresh:

MERLIN MONRO



Like most kit car manufacturers, Southend's Thoroughbred Cars Ltd. have realised there is a strong need for a 2+2, family version of their excellent Merlin sports car. But whilst making room for two extra seats in their new Merlin Monroe, these progressive manufacturers have also taken the opportunity to engineer-in further significant and worthwhile changes. Chris Rees reports.

"IF only ... pines the potential customer as he regards the object of his dreams: a pristine demonstrator with that long tapering bonnet, those luscious sweeping wings and that beautifully shiny exhaust pipe.

If only it had two extra seats for the kiddies, maybe the wife would say yes." A problem for the customer, perhaps, but for the manufacturer the succession of tales of woe like this is desperately infuriating. Peter Gowing of Thoroughbred Cars knew the feeling well, as buyers who would otherwise have bought Merlins turned elsewhere because of the absence of children's seating. Despite the success of the Merlin TF, it was obvious that the self-indulgence of a strict two-seater was turning custom away. And so the Monroe was born.

In fact, work on the Plus 2 version of the Merlin began early in 1983 and a 2+2 car was shown at the kit car shows under that designation last year. But the decision was taken to go one better and redesign the car from top to bottom as a "top of the range" sports car: Peter Gowing calls it "a production car in bits". Customers and onlookers have compared the Monroe with the Morgan and Panther, and although the manufacturers in no way hide the fact that it is a kit car, they do regard it as a car engineered to the same standards as the above-mentioned marques but which can quickly be built at half the cost.

The family likeness is clearly visible in the Monroe but the similarity of its

appearance belies the fact that it has been totally restyled by an ex-Ford pattern maker. The most striking change is in the nose section, where the bonnet, scuttle and nose cone have been substantially reshaped. The Allard-esque squared-off grille of the TF is replaced by a more upright and rounded item which is easier on the eye and evokes the air of the thirties far more effectively, as do the new chrome bumpers and rear light arrangement. The spare wheel now sits in the nearside front wing and the wings have also been widened by one inch all round, but it is at the rear that the most significant improvements are to be found.

Whereas the TF can only just take six footers, the new Monroe has been so designed that people of up to six foot, six inches can sit comfortably in the front seats with enough room in the back for a couple of 11 or 12 year old children. The interior has also been widened by two inches which, in conjunction with the specially-designed seats offered with the Merlin, provides plenty of lateral space. The main reason why two extra seats and all that extra room has been found (without impinging upon either boot space or fuel tank capacity) is the repositioning of the rear axle linkage and the chassis redesign in general. None other than Lotus Cars showed an interest in this area and supplied some ideas on the chassis' redevelopment. The result is a thoroughly engineered chassis and a well-sorted suspension set-up.

The basic Monro kit weighs in at £1595 + VAT and, with the various items of hardware that the customer is encouraged to purchase as part and parcel of the kit, the car obviously represents a rather up-market choice, but then the buyer is assured of the excellent quality shared by the TF, solid engineering, a fast build-up (around 50 hours) and a 'proper' sports car at the end of it. Included in the base kit are the main bodyshell, doors, boot, bonnet, complete chassis, front springs, hand brake cable set, assembly pack (nuts

and bolts etc), steering shaft extension, pedal mounting yoke, badges and the ever-essential assembly manual. Like the TF, the Monro is based around Cortina mechanicals. The only job that needs doing as concerns modification of components is the shortening of the prop shaft which, although by no means a complex task, can be undertaken by Thoroughbred Cars if required.

A few rather necessary options should be purchased from the manufacturer and indeed they do recommend that you buy their optional

packs, if only to maintain the image that the Monro is a proper production car with a standardised specification — the only difference being that you put it together yourself. As much of the hardware as possible is, therefore, manufactured by Thoroughbred Cars themselves and facilities to this end are now very well developed. The only noteworthy exceptions to this practice are the specially designed instruments (complete with company logo) and Lucas-made triple wipers, but these items are purpose-made in any case. The hardware pack at £299 + VAT must be the highest on any customer's list of priorities. This comprises the aluminium windscreen frame, grille, front and rear bumpers, door handles, hinges and catches, fuel tank and so on; in other words, pretty indispensable!

The electrical components listed and priced separately include the rather becoming headlamps, indicators, torpedo sidelights, wash/wipe set, heater assembly, number plate lamp and wiring loom. This last item connects up neatly with the terminals on the Cortina steering column and Peter Gowing reckons the whole wiring job is a simple matter of a few hours' work. Also rather desirable is the new Monro weather equipment, available in a selection of materials from vinyl (£185 + VAT) to German lined cloth (£245 + VAT). The side curtains are included in the price. Merlins have always had extremely attractive trim and Thoroughbred's trim kit is a worthwhile investment.

Since the seats supplied for the Monro are specifically designed for the car, it is unlikely that the builder will find anything better, so once again it would seem only logical to stretch your budget to the seating; although most will probably be satisfied with vinyl, if your bank balance can bear it you could even have Connolly leather inside your Monro. The only other miscellaneous items available are the complete set of gauges and a rocker switch panel.

It has taken a couple of years for this variant to appear and how many potential Merlin owners, I wonder, were dissuaded in that time from buying a TF because it lacked the space to carry the family? At least the gap has now been plugged; but the Monro is much more than a gap-filler, or even an extension of the TF. It is an entirely new car in its own right and, indeed, a move up-market. But the decision to sell it as a kit-built alternative to a Morgan, for example, and placing an emphasis on practicality, engineering integrity and quality of materials, must surely be a move in the right direction.

Thoroughbred Cars have also moved site, so if you are interested in the Merlin Monro, simply send a large SAE or 'phone the manufacturers for details at their new address: **Thoroughbred Cars Ltd. (KC), Pullman Buildings, Campfield Road, Shoeburyness, Essex SS3 9BX. Tel: 03708 6363.**



The original Merlin's good looks have been further improved with the Monro and it even looks attractive with hood up. The boot is lockable and useful.



As ever, the Monro's cockpit is well finished and beautifully trimmed. Walnut dashboard adds lots of class and rear seats add two children!



Proof of the pudding — family sports car with flair. There really is plenty of room in the back seats for children of most ages.