

November 1987 £1.35

# kit car

**WESTFIELD SEVEN**  
**SEEING IS BELIEVING**



**4 SEAT FUGITIVE**

Escape with your friends

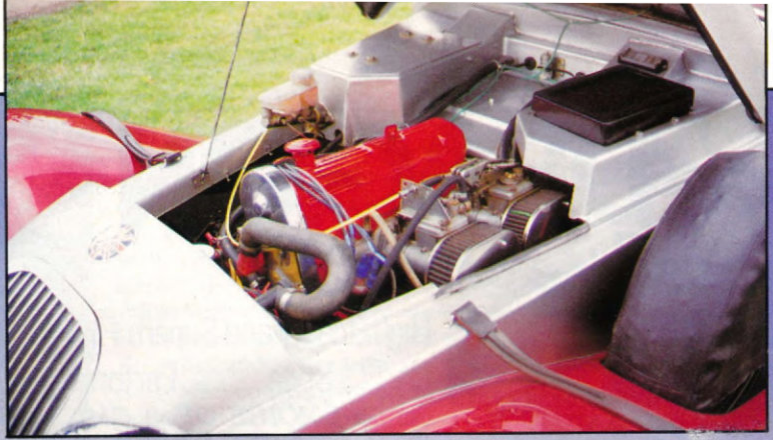
**SNAKE PIE**

Must have been something V8

**HEAD UP DISPLAY**

Top end overhaul





# The Ford in the Clone





As the sub heading mentions, the Merlin didn't do too well first time around. Eventually the car's manufacturers went to the wall to later emerge as Paris Cars Ltd. They represented the car with a redesigned chassis and have teamed up with the Alternative Vehicle Centre who now run the Midland agency from their premises in Redditch. Two distinct opinions were published initially, one praiseworthy and one quite the reverse! As far as I am concerned the then tester's opinion of what was essentially a different car, is as much past history as the reasons for, and the circumstances of, the company's previous demise. In view of this, I made a particular point of not reading anybody else's opinion of the car so as to give an untainted appraisal.

### Special Agents

The Alternative Vehicle Centre, or AMC, as it is more conveniently known, was started by its owner some three years ago. Roy Field had been a coach trimmer since the age of fifteen and set up the business as a trimming concern. Since diversification is the watchword of the present, shall we say, alternative car industry, Roy soon found himself entering into the kit car business. Apart from being an agent for and builder of Paris Cars, Roy also handles the Apollo VW cabriolet conversion, as well as producing his own seats. Additionally, bespoke trimming is carried out, to a very high standard, I might add; the company also makes the interior trim for John Hill's MGB Centre and has just taken on the agency in the area for the Top Hat people, who will undertake to make a convertible of just about any car. Add to that a fast moving line in tailored hoods and tonneaux and you can see that the guys at A.V.C. are not short of work. Having researched thus far, I took a trip down to A.V.C. to meet Roy and his sidekick, trimmer/builder Peter Lane. On arriving at the modern premises I was shown round and gained an immediate impression of a well run outfit which was running well. The Merlin demonstrator was sitting outside under a canopy of lowering cloud. Without further ado, bearing in mind

the desirability of getting the photos safely in the can, I set off with Peter Lane to find a suitable location.

### The Wheeled Wizard

The Merlin demonstrator was the 2 + 2 TF and was resplendent in a two tone finish of VW Tinzairion red wings and BL Silverleaf bodywork. A swift glance around confirmed the initial impression that an expert sprayer had been at work and the panels were commendably free from ripples. In keeping with the image it generated, the application of chrome plating had not been stinted. The front end of the car was decorated with a sizeable flat blade bumper topped by a pair

# The Ford in the Clone

***In the early part of this decade the success of the Merlin TF was marred somewhat by a bad press. After this false start the Merlin is back. David Hill reports.***



of neat motorcycle indicators which, by my reckoning, were originally destined for a Suzuki Intruder. Further up, the chromed grille was flanked by a brace of similarly plated headlamp shells, which were further complimented by a pair of torpedo sidelights at the apex of the front wings. A shire horse sized leather bonnet strap added to the period atmosphere. Further aft, a simple, flat alloy framed windscreen, wiped courtesy

of MG Midget, protruded with a pleasing rake. The low, cut away doors with their period handles swept back into a kick-up, surmounted by a neat alloy hood frame with stainless fittings, around the rear bench seat. Between the Imp rear lights was a simple, flat bootlid and the boot compartment was topped by a Triumph flip-top cap. A pair of chrome quarter bumpers completed the picture. The car sat on 5. 1/2 " x 14" Compomotive alloys. I was less than pleased

to see that these were shod with 185 section Lee Conquest radials; one of these once gave me distinct cause for concern by falling to pieces on my Herald. The tyres had apparently been chosen for their full profile. The beautifully trimmed interior was in discreet red, set off nicely by red piped grey carpet. A further nice touch was the inclusion of a sill step plate bearing the A.V.C. and Merlin logos. The large doors opened wide on their

*The drop down boot lid reveals a usefully sized boot.*



enormous brass cabinet hinges making entry particularly easy, and the descending posterior was immediately impressed by the luxurious recliners. Having settled into the cockpit I was confronted by a 13" Mountney wheel which protruded from the red, vinyl trimmed dash. Triumph 2000 instruments have been used and were easy to read by virtue of their mounting position, the major instruments having been centrally placed, allowing the minor ones to be grouped close around the column and consequently visible through the wheel. To accommodate me, it was necessary to move the seat quite a way forward. The Merlin pedal box was mounted rather too far forward and the positioning of the seat made exiting the car tricky. This is apparently not a problem in itself for the simple reason that the pedal position can be set up to taste during the build.

## Road Behaviour

This particular car had been equipped with the components of a 2 litre Cortina, the motor of which had been treated to stage 2 tuning. This amounted to a pair of 45 DCOE's on a gas flowed, high compression head carrying a spritely but not over radical camshaft. Turning the key produced encouraging induction noises from beneath the bonnet, accompanied by a remarkably civilized exhaust note from the side mounted system. I had been warned about the poor state of the Mexico gearbox but this proved perfectly useable in practice, merely requiring sufficient time to do the business during changes. Moving off, I was immediately struck by the smoothness of the ride, the 2" shorter replacement front springs seeming to be the perfect choice at 160 lbs/in. The tuned engine delivered respectable amounts of power without being in the least peaky and, although the induction roar was pronounced, it was not intrusive with the hood down. There is no mistaking the fact that the Merlin is a big car, an attribute which accounts for the roominess of the cockpit and its pleasing proportions. In consequence, rapid progress through the bends requires a firm and committed input from the driver. Having established this,

it is possible to make rapid progress and no nasty surprises lie in wait. Taking the Merlin swiftly through a series of medium bends produced a certain amount of body roll; indeed, the anti roll bar from the donor is dispensed with. It was, however, possible to balance the weight of the car against the steering force applied, gently adding a little more lock to counteract the mild understeer. An unexpected tightening of the curve had the rear Conquests chirping gently but no signs of the rear end going awry were apparent. In all, the handling and road holding were perfectly competent. The Merlin was not as nimble as some of the kits on offer but this was adequately compensated for by the quality of the ride. There is no reason at all for the car to be criticised for the market at which it is aimed.

Coupled with this behaviour was a reassuring solidity with no evidence of scuttle shake and a commendable absence of rattles, squeaks and clonks. Also, encouragingly, all the instruments worked, as did the horn, lights and wipers. This may seem to be an obvious point until you remember that the demonstrator is the manufacturer's mouthpiece — some other manufacturers would be well advised to take note of this.

During the photography I kept noticing pleasant details such as the wing mounted spare wheel with its neat cover and the useful door pockets. I was also pleased to note that the reclining seats (a kit option at £105 apiece) were equipped with head restraints, whiplash is not pleasant. Opening the boot revealed a space not only useful for its size but for its shape as well. Up at the sharp end the extreme rake of the grille, which has caused adverse comment in the past, was an aspect that I found pleasing. As is usual in these instances the necessity of convincing interested bystanders that the car really hadn't been built in 1930 odd, served to verify the authenticity of its lines.

## The Rude Mechanicals

The Merlin comes in two forms, two seat or two plus two. The former uses standard Cortina trailing arms to locate the rear axle whereas the latter is supplied with special trailing arms and a Panhard rod, the



*The simple, sturdy chassis supplied in primer. The wheels and bracket enable the kit to be towed home.*

brackets for which must be welded to the axle. This creates a useable rear bench area, despite its being split by the tunnel moulding. Apart from that the cars are based firmly on the Cortina Mk3, 4 or 5. The only non Cortina parts required are a Spitfire heater and a BL wiper set up. The brake master cylinder, owing to reasons of space, must be of the non servo variety and the test car exhibited a heavy pedal as a result. Since all our right legs have been spoiled by the universal use of servos the options are to fit a remote device further down the line, or simply get used to it. The Cortina parts are carried by a perimeter framed chassis made of 75mm x 50mm x 3mm RHS. The chassis has five substantial cross members and kicks up front and rear to accommodate the suspension. In addition to accepting the Cortina engines the Ford V6 in either 2.8 or 3 litre guise can be fitted. The power unit drives through a shortened prop shaft (S.65 exchange). Apart from this the only other modifications to the Cortina parts are the inclusion of an extended shaft in the steering column and the similar employment of an extended brake push rod. Also included in the kit is a 7½ gallon mild steel fuel tank as well as the downrated front springs, the pedal box and the handbrake cable and brackets. The kit is equally comprehensive in terms of the upper works in that the door hinges, latches and handles are included. The bumpers are also included in an unchromed state and the front grille is supplied in primer for painting or plating as desired. The inclusion of bumpers does not apply to the two seater.

The substantial, one piece body is supplied in white gel coat and the minimum lay up

density is 8 oz. The construction of both the body and chassis exhibit the kind of over engineering often found in the kit car world but since this has proved itself sufficiently good to gain TUV approval, then it's good enough for me. Space precludes my detailing the list of options and parts available for the Merlin. Suffice to say that it runs to 4 pages of A4. I could find nothing missing.

## The Money Side

So, we have in the Merlin a charismatic car of sound construction and above average quality. In terms of the market I can see it being an ideal project for the family man. The inclusion of a realistic boot and the sober nature of the Merlin make it an attractive proposition in this area. The shape and concept of the Merlin are such, that the application of a little taste in the choosing and fitting of period accessories, would reap considerable benefits in the end.

Having established the nature of the beast, the pricing structure is, I believe, exactly as expected. The two seater works out at £1725 and the 2 + 2 with its included suspension and brightwork extras, comes out at £1985. In both instances VAT is applicable. It is possible to view the car in both the Midlands and the South East. For further details contact **A.V.C., Unit 10, Townsend Thoreson Auto Centre, Lakeside, Redditch, Worcestershire, Tel: 0527 501895 or Paris Cars Ltd., 1 Florence Villas, Barling Road, Great Wakering, Southend on Sea, Essex. SS3 0NF. Tel: 0702 219145.**