

JUNE 1989 £1.50

kit car

7'S HEAVEN



WIN A JBA FALCON SPORTS
WORTH £2000 **LAST CHANCE!**

**TO FIT SIZE 40-42 DAX 40
DRIVEN**



If you wish to satisfy yourself as to the quality and buildability of a particular kit, there is no finer place to seek the answers to your questions than in the owner's club enclosures at the major kit car shows. Take almost any model and you will see superb examples as well as not so exemplary specimens of which the owners may be equally proud but the latter will usually show up the problem areas except, that is, in the case of the Merlin since I can honestly say I have never seen a dud one. It seems that every customer for this Cortina based roadster has a wealth of talent and imagination which, combined with a well developed kit, conspires to produce a superb example of the marque at the end of the day.

The Merlin is available as either a two seater or a 2 + 2 while both body shapes are identical, the alterations to allow the extra seating capacity being to the chassis and rear suspension. The chassis itself is a twin rail ladder frame of 50 x 70 x 3 mm box section main rails which, in two seater form, accept the standard running gear from the ever popular Ford Cortina Mk 3, 4 or 5 while the front springs are downrated to 165 lbs to suit the lesser weight of the car, the weight on the axle being further reduced by moving the engine back.

With the 2 + 2 version, the Cortina trailing arms are discarded in favour of the Merlin bracketry which is welded to the standard axle to provide the location points for the Merlin replacement trailing arms which are mounted at 90 degrees to the axle at the outer extremes and which are fitted with harder bushes. The arms pick up on the chassis main rails while the extra space created by this modification allows the fitting of the rear seats. In addition, to compensate for the reduced lateral location due to the resiting of the upper Cortina arms, the Merlin 2 + 2 uses a panhard rod to give effective five point location to the axle. Replacement coilover dampers are also employed and these are mounted vertically rather than being inclined as on the donor. The standard units are non adjustable while the front dampers are from the donor car but there is an optional ad-

SPELLING TEST

With a name like 'Merlin', one would expect to see a magician or a bird of prey adopted as the car's emblem. Instead you find a hermit crab! Why? Read on as Ian Hyne supplies the answer to that and every other question in respect of a very refined roadster.



justable rear damper which I think you would be well advised to select.

The anti roll bars can be fitted but, if you elect to retain them, they must be fitted both fore and aft to avoid the handling deficiencies that result from the use of one only. However, the car is quite alright without them while, for the handling seeker, the standard ones are too stiff and Peter Gowing, the car's designer, is currently at work on more suitable items as one of a number of measures that constitute the continuous

development programme which will soon produce a handling package specifically aimed at the sports car enthusiast.

The car is designed to use the Cortina OHC, four in line engine and, with a standard 105 bhp, 2 litre unit, there is ample scope for tuning to give the desired levels of performance. However, there are those who wish to fit alternative engines, chiefly the Ford V6, and, while it will go, builders will require special manifolds to fit within the con-



finer of the engine bay and will need to effect a few body alterations. To Peter's mind, the extra power is rather negated by the effort required to fit the heavier engine and he advises his customers to stick to the OHC but the choice is yours.

The body of the car is a one piece moulding with a separate bonnet, boot, doors and scuttle while their accuracy and quality obviously contributes much to the builder's ability to turn out a very professional looking job. The main tub is a

very strong unit which imparts a great deal of additional strength to the chassis when it is bolted down while the fit of the remaining panels is first class and the underbonnet treatment particularly worthy of note. The surface quality of the GRP is also of the highest order.

To achieve the correct stance and look, the Merlin employs 14" wheels which increase the gearing a little but with Ford axles, there are enough differential ratios available to enable you to

redress the balance should you wish to do so. Wheels are either 5 1/2 or 6 1/2 J while tyres range from 185 to the biggest being 195/70.

When complete, there is no doubt that the Merlin is a very handsome creation with beautifully flowing lines which are ideal for two tone paintwork but it has more than its looks to commend it as you discover immediately you slip behind the wheel.

Open two seater of this type are not usually noted for their generous interior space but

clever design has made this the most notable feature of the Merlin's very comfortable cockpit. The first thing you notice is the seat. Specially made for the car, it is a far cry from the usual diminutive, figure hugging bucket that just fits within the confines of the passenger well. Instead it is fairly large with bags of upholstery while the contours hold you firmly without being restrictive for larger or broad backed drivers. It is also infinitely adjustable for both rake and distance while, in

deference to the popularity of the car with the ladies, the demonstrator has them mounted on an inclined floor which raises the seats as it comes closer to the wheel.

The next surprise is the amount of elbow room available courtesy of the elbow rests built into the upper edge of the robust doors. These are features unique to the Merlin and the hood attaches to the outer edges of these supports to maintain the space when the hood goes up. The double duck hood also provides excellent headroom for tall drivers giving an easy 2' of clearance for my head which is 6' 1" above the soles of my feet. The hood line also provides generous headroom for rear seat passengers. Speaking of feet, space is not restricted to elbows since the feet are well catered for too with bags of room between the clutch and the tunnel and equal amounts behind the pedals to allow total comfort on long journeys.

As well as being spacious, the interior is also very well finished, the well fitting carpets and leather covered seats complementing the wood veneer dashboard with its full complement of instruments. The four ancillary instruments are grouped ahead of the driver and are all easily visible through the wheel while the speedometer and rev counter are centrally mounted. The dashboard is very neat while attention to detail is reflected in the way the underside is all panelled in. True, you can't reach up to fiddle with loose wires but if you've done the job right in the first place, you shouldn't need to while the smooth underside prevents you catching your knees on sharp brackets.

The passenger is confronted by a glovebox while additional storage space is provided in the doors. Larger items can either go behind the seats or in the boot the lid of which hinges at the bottom and opens to reveal a very useful space, the spare wheel being carried on the nearside front wing. The actual boot panel is flat and being double skinned and about an inch thick, Peters says it is crying out for a tool tray but so far, he hasn't got round to it. A good idea for builders though!

I couldn't have picked a worse day to drive the Merlin if I had tried. The trip down from Leeds encountered snow,

SPELLING TEST



The dashboard is well laid out with all instruments easily visible. Heater controls are under the centre dash.



The elbow rests built into the doors are a major plus and contribute to the spacious nature of the cabin.



The hood fits extremely well and maintains the interior space with a high roof line and by fixing outside the elbow rests.

sleet, very low temperatures and incessant rain but, though not the conditions that make you want to break the drophead out of the garage, they did confirm the car's ability to be more than a fairweather friend.

As I said, slipping behind the wheel and closing the door found me in a comfortable and civilised office while the large clear areas in the side screens and rear window made it light and airy too. Cold, wet weather usually brings out the worst in soft tops with misting and leaking conspiring to make any journey a bit of an ordeal but in the Merlin, the heater worked well to warm the cabin, the demist plumbing was effective in keeping the screen clear on the inside, the three wiper system was similarly effective outside, the hood fitted to perfection to prevent any water getting in through the top and the one piece tub prevented it getting in through the panel joints. My only slight annoyance was caused by my inability to see anything via the external mirror but this is set for Peter's wife Angela who covers most mileage in the car while if it stuck out any further, the car wouldn't fit through the very narrow drive at the side of their house. As it is, it is a very delicate task so I craned my head when necessary and made greater use of the internal mirror.

Leaving the village of Great Waking, I set off through the lanes into Southend, down the A 127, onto the M 25 and up the M 11 to Harlow where any activity with the Dax 40 was also sidelined by the weather but the route comprised a good cross section of roads over which the car performed faultlessly.

Days such as this are not ideal for gaining the best from a car with a sporting nature so initially, I kept the speeds sensible and got the feel of it as I threaded my way through the dense traffic to the even denser traffic on the M 25. Throughout this time, the Merlin behaved marvellously being adequately quick without caning the revs, easy to place, easy to see out of, comfortable and easy to drive. The only thing that initially caused a little surprise was the



The underbonnet area is tailored specifically for the OHC engine. Note the way the pedal box is hidden and the battery stored above the passenger footwell.

effort needed to work the non servoed brake pedal as I was used to the light touch required for the servo assisted pedal on the Sierra Sapphire that brought me down from Leeds. However, this was soon mastered and as familiarity grew, I found the brakes effective and confidence inspiring.

On the open road, the Merlin cruised easily at 70 mph while the slightly longer legs courtesy of 14" wheels and 195/70 tyres added to the relaxed nature of my passage but there was plenty in hand and a little squeeze on the throttle was all that was needed to summon the extra power for overtakes. On smooth surfaces the car also rode very comfortably but, come the bumpier sections, the poise was easily upset and mentioning this aspect to Peter on my return to the ranch, he cited the old problems of getting a good ride from a fairly light car. In truth, the suspension makes the necessary allowance for three extra passengers, their luggage and a full tank of fuel and thus loaded, the bumps are easily ironed out so clearly, the car will be more lively with only the driver to carry while the dampers on the car were non adjustable and the wheels were heavy. Lighter wheels to reduce unsprung weight and adjustable dampers that allow you to cater for different conditions would go a long way to making the car more accomplished in this department. Indeed, since the Midas went up in smoke (see Hynesight), I have been loaned a Vauxhall Cavalier and a Sierra Sapphire, both of which have been all over the place one up so the problem is by no means restricted to kits.

Anyway, for the return journey from Harlow, I decided on a mystery tour and crossed the M 11 heading for Chelmsford before cutting off

into Apache country and going through Billericay, Wickford and Rayleigh before picking up the trail back into Southend. Where the motorway route had shown the car to be a relaxed cruiser, the twisting lanes conspired to reveal another side to the car's character as, having found my confidence, I attacked a few bends and increased my demands of the box and brakes.

Obviously, the wet weather was not the ideal time to pick for the exercise but the Merlin did well. The steering is nicely responsive and gives excellent feel. When reading a letter sent in by a reader who had bought a second hand Merlin and remarked that the steering felt dead, Peter said this is easily cured by increasing the castor angle by adjusting the tie rod ends. The demonstrator runs about 6 degrees and, to me, it felt fine. Nosing into corners too quickly produced the expected understeer highlighted by the slippery conditions but, adopting rather more restrained speeds the steering really bites while the brakes and gear-changework quickly and effectively to set the car up. There is a fair bit of roll but you sit so low between the wheels that it doesn't upset your concentration or the car's poise while a little too much power once you're in causes the rear end to break away in a manner that is very easy to catch. Safe and predictable but I reckon dry weather would see pretty high levels of roadholding. I have resolved to come back and try the car in the dry but, even so, I reckon I made a quick crossing between Harlow and Southend which says a great deal for the Merlin. In addition, I think the five link rear end has to be an improvement over the Cortina system while the extra cabin space that comes with it is an useful bonus.

I liked the Merlin and can quite see why the owners invest such great care and patience in them while I see quite a few on the road too which must be due to their civility. I often see a red one when I drive the M 42 between Ashby and Birmingham so next time I'll know what I'm missing.

Now, if you decide you would like a Merlin kit, there are only a couple of pages of the brochure to read rather than the reams of different and bewildering options that many manufacturers offer. There are two kits; one for the two seater and one for the 2 + 2 while the prices are £2165 and £2395 plus vat respectively, the only extras being a wiring loom at £89, a stainless steel exhaust system with a lifetime guarantee at £155 and a hood-frame and stainless steel fittings at £36 all plus vat. Both packages comprise all the special Merlin parts while the instructions are similarly straightforward with clear, explanatory diagrams taking the place of many words. It must do the job as nobody has ever rung me up to say they can't build a Merlin and, having seen the kit, I don't think anyone ever will.

The only other thing to mention is that items such as seats and hoods come direct from the manufacturers and are not supplied by Paris Cars. The reason is to save you the Paris handling charge and save Paris Cars the problem of holding stock. However, there are no problems in supply and the seats I would recommend as a must.

The other item that will be of interest to European enthusiasts is that this car is TUV approved for sale in Germany and Holland while testing is at an advanced stage for France (full crash testing required here) and just beginning in Belgium so customers across the Channel can do more than sit and dream in respect of this car.

Full details are contained in the brochure available from **Paris Cars, 1, Florence Villas, Barling Road, Great Waking, Essex SS3 0NF. Tel 0702 219145.**

Ah yes! The hermit crab! Well he changes his shell in much the same manner as the Cortina mechanics shrug off the Cortina shell and adopt the far more flamboyant and non corroding, GRP, Merlin shell. A bit deep but it all makes sense!