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KIT CLINIC

PROBLEMS?
QUESTIONS? ASK
OUR TEAM OF EXPERTS

CLASSIC BEAUTY

MERLIN ROADSTER
TESTED

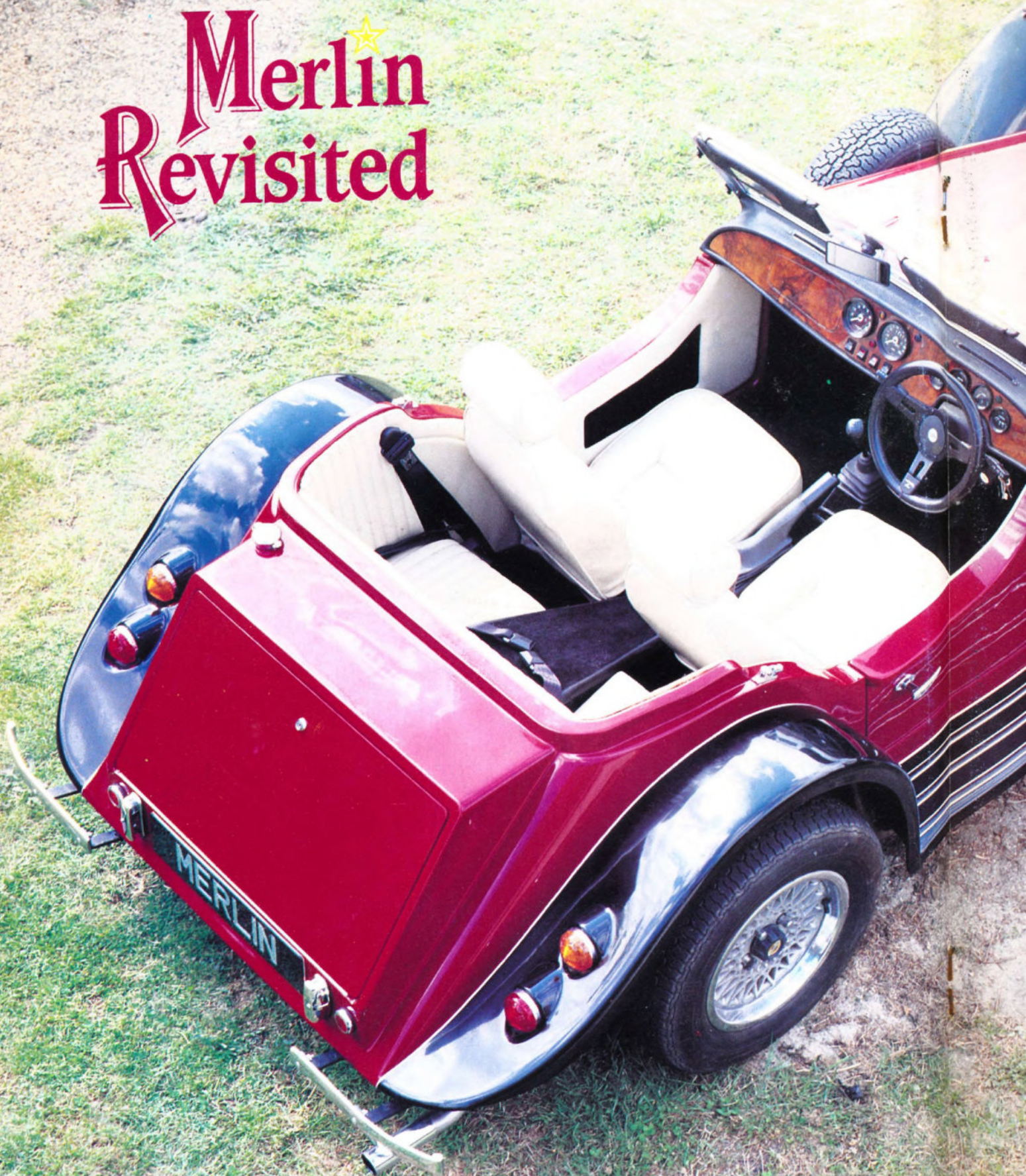


WIN! WIN! WIN!



FREE COMPETITION
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THIS FABULOUS FUN CAR

Merlin[★] Revisited





In its heyday, during the early 1980s, the lovely Merlin roadster was one of the kit car industry's best known products. More recently, little has been seen of this potential Morgan basher except at the occasional show, so we decided it was time to pay a visit to current manufacturers, Paris Cars of Southend. Assigned to the job was the intrepid Roger Crowhurst.

THE BOSS OF PARIS CARS, PETER Cowing, is a likeable individual, who entered the kit car business way back in 1978. He was in fact the first to use the ubiquitous Ford Cortina as a donor car and this has not gone unnoticed in the trade, where many have followed his lead. Peter's entry into the alternative car world started when he discovered a VW-based traditional style sports car (yes, it was rear engined!) called the Witton, manufactured in America by its inventor, Len Witton. Peter approached Witton regarding marketing the car in the UK, the outcome being an agreement that Peter could actually manufacture the car himself.

Then began the hard work, as he soon realised that although Volkswagen based cars had enjoyed a good run, the market was in need of a fresh and readily available donor car indeed, the VW was fast becoming a collector's item and its future as a donor was becoming increasingly uncertain. So Peter began to re-shape his first build in material ways, modifying the concept to accept Cortina parts and completely re-designing the chassis for the front mounted engine. Called Merlin, the new car was released to an eager market eighteen months later. So successful was it that Peter's company rapidly expanded to keep pace with the ever increasing orders, until at its peak they employed a work force of twenty in a production line factory, turning out up to eight cars a week.



SPOTLIGHT

But just as things were going so well, the whole operation being moved into new premises, for which Peter had spent a near fortune on equipment, the bottom suddenly fell out of the market. Orders dropped dramatically as the money markets fell in turmoil and the company was forced to shrink dramatically in order to struggle through that lean period. Even now, Peter Gowing shudders as he reflects on those unhappy days, brought about by outside forces which he was unable to control. Strong-willed, however, he has continued to beaver away both on his own, with wife Angela and with the occasional helper, in the now cottage industry that is Paris Cars. Having been at the top, he now is quite happy to remain as a low volume business, with no worries about investment and cash flow and where he can once again give a very personal service to his customers.

Peter took us to his cosy home, on the outskirts of busy Southend, and we were surprised to find that, though only 2 miles from the town centre, it is situated amongst pleasant farmland, with a semi-rural aspect. At the end of the garden he showed us into his double garage and workshop where he painstakingly builds his Merlins to exacting standards, to any stage of completion, for his many satisfied customers. Reportedly, he has supplied either in kit form or near fully built, many hundreds of Merlins in the last eleven years.

Though proportionally much smaller these days, the company has lost none of its professionalism in its transformation. This was obvious by the tidiness of the workshop and a working display model of the superb Merlin dashboard and windscreen surround and of the cleverly designed Paris rear suspension unit. This we were very taken with and were interested to find out about. Peter utilises the Ford rear axle but engineers into the design a four-link twin upper and lower trailing arm system, with axle location via a Panhard rod. The set-up is complete with Spax gas shock absorbers and coil springs specially manufactured for the Merlin.

Some years ago now, realising that his original car could only accommodate drivers up to 5'10", Peter went back to the drawing board to create a Merlin which would allow the tallest of drivers to sit in comfort. To do this, the Cortina rear set-up would have to be dramatically altered and lowered, to give the required space in the area to the rear of the front seats, and it was as a result of this quest that the novel and beautifully engineered Paris rear suspension was created.

Whilst in the workshop, we were able to examine closely a Merlin rolling chassis being prepared for a customer. The manufacture of both chassis and body/panels is sub-contracted out and they appear to be of very good quality. The chassis is supplied in primer and fabricated from 50 x 55 x 3 mm steel and is of basic rectangular section ladder-frame construction. There are two parallel main rails, with five cross members for bracing the structure. The Mark 3, 4, or 5 Ford Cortina supplies the basics for the car, the front suspension, consisting of unequal length wishbones and mounted

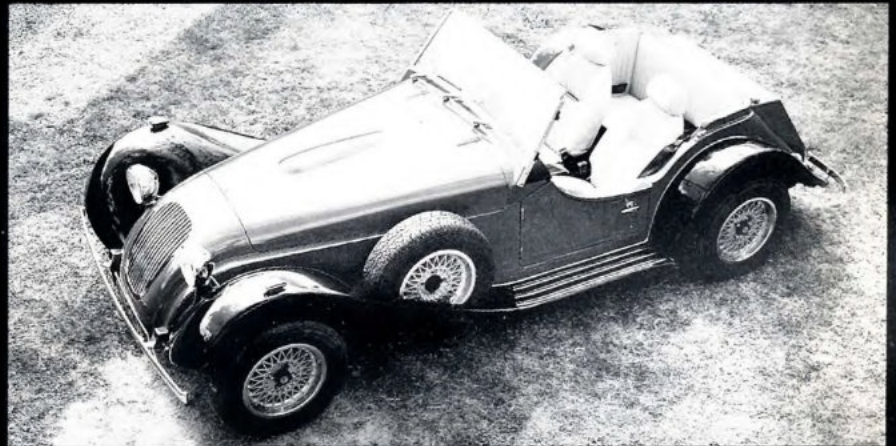
on a subframe, fitting neatly under the nose of the car. Paris Cars have gone to some lengths to replicate the Cortina's geometry, so there is no problem with bump steer or odd camber and caster angles here.

Braking power is provided by the Ford's solid disc with single caliper at the front and self-adjusting drums at the rear. The Cortina handbrake is used, together with Paris Cars' own cables. The steering column is again Cortina, though the centre shaft is an in-house item manufactured by outside contractors and angles through a Land Rover universal joint, which can be supplied by the company. The propshaft is shortened and new units can be supplied if required. The demonstrator runs on Compomotive 14 inch x 6J alloy wheels with Firestone 195 x 70 x 14 tyres front and rear, though 185 section items may also be used.

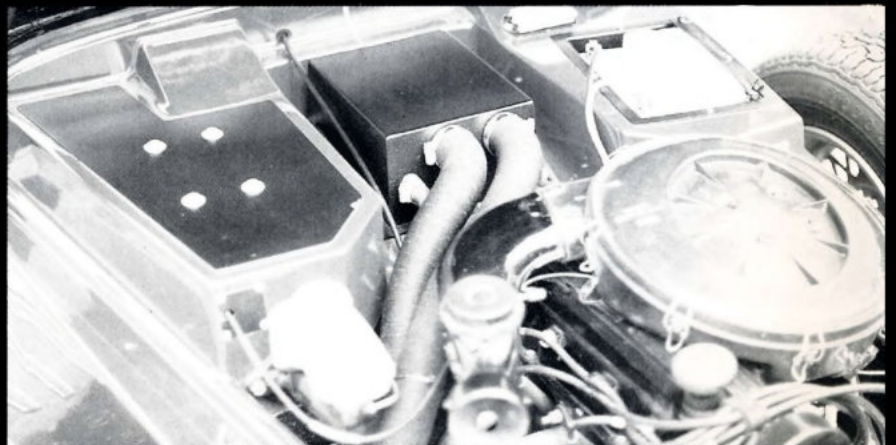
The Merlin builder has the option of either the 1600 or 2-litre OHC Pinto engines, though we know Peter would be willing to consider the fitment of other power trains and we have seen Merlins fitted with Rover V8s. The demo car gearbox is the usual Cortina 4-speed unit though, if you prefer, the Sierra 5-speed unit will fit straight on. Depending on the model specification, the larger engine should give around 95-105 bhp in good condition. There would appear to be ample room in the engine compartment, with all ancillaries easily accessible for maintenance and replacement.

The flat laminated windscreen is supplied by the company and is set in a polished alloy surround. The car uses any Leyland motor and worm drive wiper system, with adjustable length arms and blades from the Mini. A special stainless steel exhaust system can be supplied by the company for a very reasonable £155 plus VAT and fits well up to the underside of the vehicle, using compressed rubber cotton reels, and is hung at three separate locations. One large silencer box is used, which effectively subdues the exhaust noise to a pleasant street legal level. The special Paris Cars petrol tank, a 10-gallon capacity steel item, lays neatly in its prepared position beneath the boot.

At last it was time to test the demonstrator. The car looked well in its two-tone livery: black wings and running boards and deep burgundy for the main body tub. The painted finish was excellent



Bird's eye view of the Merlin Plus 2 demonstrator. Note neat positioning of spare wheel in the nearside front wing. Below: the 2-litre Pinto fits with room to spare and was prepared to concours standard as usual



SPOTLIGHT

(Merlins are supplied in white gel coat, ready for spraying, and Paris Cars can arrange this for you at below normal prices) and the whole body free from ripples with the exception of the bonnet. This was a rejected item, which had been re-skinned by the contractors and in the very hot weather had rippled. We must emphasize that this is not by any means normal and we have never seen another Merlin with other than a superb finish.

The Merlin boasts a main body tub, separate scuttle, bootlid and doors of large section inside to out, the decent width enabling the provision of a very

comfortable arm rest. The hood and side windows are supplied as a set and fit snugly. Fitting well and displaying nicely equal shut lines, the large doors are crafted in a heavy GRP lay-up, with supplied latches and locks of good quality (American made) with chrome handles. And we are pleased to report that the doors are completely rattle free!

Entry to the spacious interior was accomplished without hassle and we found the in-house manufactured seats to be very supportive and infinitely adjustable. They can be covered to any specification, including leather, and boast

fore-and-aft positions and rake. Co-ordinated headrests may also be specified. Cleverly, Peter has designed an upward slope on the floor towards the pedals, so that as the seat is adjusted forwards for shorter drivers, the seat rises up and vice versa for tall drivers. Simple yet very effective and, with wide spacing of the pedals and plenty of room width-wise, the Merlin was comfortable and roomy and a joy to drive.

On the road we were immediately struck by the comfortable ride, due to a large extent, we feel, to the excellent in-house rear suspension. This car really does feel all together and very much the equal of a production car in its ride comfort and handling capabilities. No matter how hard the Merlin was pushed through the winding country bends, there was no trace of wander or uncertainty and just barely perceptible body roll when pushed to the limit. It was nice, too, to find a Cortina based car where the steering column and wheel are straight ahead and in front of the driver - a few other manufacturers might learn a thing or two about development by checking out a Merlin!

Whilst in action we checked out the heater unit and it worked very efficiently. The unit may be taken from either the Mini or the Triumph Spitfire, though doubtless most after-market items will fit in the generous space available. Paris Cars can also supply the very smart walnut dashboard, nicely sealed with a polyurethane lacquer and supplied ready finished to bolt straight on to the scuttle. Visibility of all gauges and switches is excellent and Ford's unaltered length gear lever falls to hand nicely. The supplied carpet set is a good fit and owners may specify whatever colour and material they wish, in any quality, starting from around £100 plus VAT.

The car we were testing is known as the Merlin Plus Two, so of course the test would not be complete without trying out the rear bench seat. We found it to be generous for such a title and the area quite comfortable. As the title suggests, the seating position would only suit two adults occasionally, though we see no reason why two, if not three, children should not be carried in relative comfort. The boot is incorporated in the false slab tank design at the rear and though not large, this writer was able to store a large camera bag, briefcase, tripod and coat within the area and with room to spare.

In conclusion, then, we found the Merlin Plus Two to be well engineered, with clean attractive lines, powerful and safe; with this concept Peter Gowing has achieved all he set out to do. The Plus Two kit is a very comprehensive one indeed, comprising almost every part, less donor vehicle, that you will require for the build. It costs £2395 plus VAT. The Merlin two-seater is a further option and this, again a comprehensive kit, will cost you £2165 plus VAT. For more information on the cars, contact *Paris Cars Ltd., 1 Florence Villas, Barling Road, Bailing Magna, Southend, Essex SS3 ONE* Tel: 0702 219145. By the way, Peter, thank you for the rectangular meal. Note that we didn't allow it to influence our writings on your product in any way!



The rear seat area offers generous seating for a Plus 2 and we found it very comfortable. Luggage is stored in the false slab tank area, with access by folding down the rear backrest. The interior was nicely upholstered.



The traditional '30s style dashboard' sets off the interior, nicely covered in burr walnut. The steering wheel is directly in front of the driver. Note the wide top surface of the doors, which double as arm rests.

