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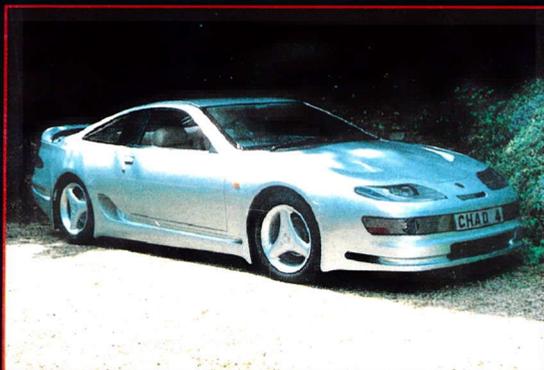
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TC WAS 'ERE ADAMS ROADSTER
KIT FORM COUPE STIRS JAGUAR BASED CLASSIC



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TOURING CLASS

Like the NG, JBA Falcon, Vincent and YKC Roadster the Merlin is among the longest established top flight roadsters but the current car is very different to the Merlin TF that appeared in 1980. Ian Hyne succumbs to its timeless allure.

I have recently read that the top brass of the UK motor industry has been having a go at their Japanese counterparts over the frequency with which they introduce new models, the current life span of a Japanese model on average having been reduced to around three years. I don't know the outcome of the negotiations but they have been prompted by the manner in which the introduction of new models and the subsequent diminishing supply of spares for existing models has depressed second hand prices for nearly new Japanese cars. I'm sure they'll sort something out but

my question is, 'Why do they need to replace a model every three years?' It can only be down to sales performance so the inference is that people quickly become bored with a

car and are forever seeking something new.

If that's the case, how come more than a few kit car companies can maintain customer interest in their cars over a far longer period? For instance the Merlin was introduced as the TF in 1980 and is still attracting enthusiastic and highly satisfied customers fifteen years later. Part of the reason is that the Merlin projects the timeless lines that will forever strike a chord with car enthusiasts. The other part is that the car today is very different to the 1980 debutante. Back then it was a straight twin rail ladder frame with standard



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Cortina suspension front and rear. It was also a strict two seater and though highly commended at the time, constant development of the mechanical and practical aspects of the design have conspired to create a succession of models, each better than the one before. The current car represents the pinnacle of Merlin development with Ford Sierra componentry, independent rear suspension and a DOHC, fuel injected, electronically managed and 3 way catalysed engine.

As well as addressing the looming problem of an increasing scarcity of decent Cortina donors (any donor will now be around fifteen years old) the Sierra based car with its ability to accept the latest specification engines also confronts the increasing need for regulatory compliance in order to generate sales in the wider European markets. The Cortina based Merlin, which continues to be available, already has German TUV certification and the plan is to follow it up with the same qualification for the Sierra based car.

The final point in the Merlin's favour is that, while the NG and YKC Roadster as well as a good few other similar cars are designed and developed as pretty basic sports cars, the Merlin joins the the camp occupied by the JBA Falcon, Marlin Cabrio and Royale Sabre in being a far more comfortable and luxurious touring car with all the right qualifications for the job.

So what's new?

For this car, the modifications concern the mechanical specification due to the changeover to Sierra componentry. The chassis is still a ladder frame but is far more complex than the original twin rail affair due to the mechanical installations to be accommodated. The front end has been modified to accept the cut down Sierra upright fitted to double, unequal length wishbones which are rubber mounted to the chassis using standard Ford bushes normally used for mounting the Sierra's lower track control arm. The adjustable coil spring damper unit comes through the upper wishbone and secures to the chassis above it. The Sierra's anti roll bar is dropped due to the Merlin's lower centre of gravity and flat cornering stance obviating the need for its retention.

The chassis provides the mountings for the Sierra rack and pinion steering and though the standard rack has a lengthy 4.15 turns between locks, quicker ratios are available.

At the back, Merlin have retained the semi trailing arm configuration of the Sierra but have



made their own components in order to maintain rear seat space. They have dropped the Sierra carrier and fitted their own semi trailing arms direct to the chassis. The Sierra hubs bolt to the arms and carry standard length driveshafts. The differential is rubber mounted to the chassis.

In respect of engines, this car carries Ford's 2 litre EFi, DOHC, 8 valve unit with electronic engine management and a 3 way catalytic converter. Development has ensured the frame will also accept the later Zetec four cylinder 16 valve unit with its emission control equipment as well as 2.8 and 2.9 V6 units and Rover's evergreen V8. The Ford units drive through the MT 75 five speed manual box or the automatic equivalent.

The Merlin body is a one piece moulding that includes the wings and front and rear panels. The only separate mouldings are the bonnet, boot and doors. This method of manufacture contributes much to the

total absence of squeaks and rattles as well as the effective prevention of water ingress. The other aspect of it is that it has a very heavy lay up which greatly enhances the strength and torsional rigidity of the completed car. It is also extremely durable and bodies manufactured a ten years ago still look pristine today.

Opening the Merlin door cockpit reveals a cockpit of sumptuous elegance and comfort, the most noticeable aspect of which is the large, leather trimmed seat. With a similar track to its competitors, you wonder how they fit it in as many such cars are limited to narrow seats with scant lateral support. The secret lies in the chassis design that places the fore and aft members where they do not restrict seatwell width. Merlin have these steel framed seats specially made with a full tilt facility to allow rear seat access. Drop into them and the comfort is immediately apparent as is the excellence of the driving position. The wheel and gear



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This car is far more of a four seater than a 2 + 2 providing decent head, leg and foot room for quite large rear seat passengers. Rear lap belts are a standard feature.



With a wing mounted spare wheel, boot space is very generous for this style of car. An external boot mounted luggage rack increases carrying capacity.

lever are well sited, as are the pedals with plenty of room around them (another benefit of the wide seatwell) and the seat adjusts on a sloping floor to suit any size of driver from the six foot plus to the five foot shorty.

Quite apart from the comfort of the driving position, you are also aware of the opulent decor. A burr veneer dashboard housing a full complement of well positioned clocks each bearing the Merlin logo of a hermit crab. Hermit crabs, like the donor Cortina or Sierra, change their shells; subtle. There's also a leather rimmed steering wheel, full leather trim, beautifully tailored and fitted carpets and a quality of finish that

belies the car's kit built origins.

The doors are worthy of special mention. They are double skinned to give commodious storage between the inner and outer panels and are capable of swallowing a road atlas and most things generally bigger than everyday oddments like packets of Polos, cloths and Esso tokens. The upper edge provides a comfortable elbow rest and when the sidescreens are fitted, the lower edge has a Y section that secures both inside and outside the panel to retain the elbow room and effectively cut off the draughts that traditionally blow in from underneath.

Alternatively, Merlin offer a rigid

sidescreen kit to complement their hard top which typically features a heated rear window and full head lining.

On the road, the Merlin lives up to its image of a luxury liner. The independent rear end allows the use of slightly softer springs which combine with the car's 2200 lbs weight and long wheelbase to soak up road imperfections with consummate ease. It doesn't matter whether you're doing 30 or 90 mph, the Merlin just rolls serenely on displaying commendable ride, stability and feel. For corners, the remote servo brakes give instant and effective reaction to a light pressure prod on the middle pedal, the steering obeys the helm with accuracy and smooth efficiency and the car adopts a firmly flat stance for the manoeuvre and all the while the engine management system maintains a constant supply of power and torque in exchange for minimum revs.

In this manner the Merlin will carry you across continents in total comfort without ever pausing for breath. Not only that, you'll arrive feeling only slightly less fresh than when you started.

However, should someone close fast on your tail on a twisting mountain road, the Merlin provides a hugely entertaining alternative to waving him past.

The 2 litre motor may only produce 125 bhp but unlike normally aspirated engines, the electronic management system delivers power wherever and whenever you want it in addition to maximum torque from low down the rev range. Thus equipped, you can drop a gear and take off, if not like a scalded cat, certainly a fairly well heated one. What's more, the engine is very free revving and will power up and down the rev range without complaint achieving impressive speeds along the way. A quick calculation reveals a power to weight ratio of 127 bhp per ton. It doesn't sound that much but it's on a par with a Golf GTi while the engine management system is a secret weapon that's worth a good few bhp in any language.

Make no mistake, though well short of fast, the Merlin is certainly quick and it has handling and roadholding that really help it on its way.

When you stand on the brakes, the effect is highly impressive; you lose speed in great dollops, the car slowing dramatically but never locking or slewing off line. The gearchange of the MT 75 box is a bit rubbery but if you disregard the feel of the lever and just make the move, it will always find the right slot and

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quickly too. It's just a little less satisfying than the feel of a more precise linkage. If the gearchange is less than electrifying, throttle response is nigh on perfect as you drop down the box. When you turn in, especially into the sharper bends, you could wish for a faster rack than the Sierra's standard 4.15 turns between locks (quicker Sierra racks are available from Ford) but the front end obeys the wheel and the system firms up slightly when committed to the turn feeding full information up the column. With light throttle pressure through the turn the Merlin is nothing but obedient and when you come to the exit, the performance benefit of the IRS really shines. You can boot it out of the turn and it will grip and drive in contrast to the Cortina live axle version which will achieve the desired result but only in exchange for a slide and a bit of opposite lock. It's great fun but not the quickest way round a bend.

As you power out of the turn, as well as grip, you get maximum, electronically calculated shove and driven with skill, there is little with similar power that will stay with you.

I really enjoyed my stint behind the wheel of the Merlin and can see it tempting a good few roadster customers in search of something offering a little bit more than basic, open top thrills and appealing looks. To my mind, the Merlin joins an exclusive club offering the perfect solution.

And now to the cost. The Merlin's quoted prices of £2880 + vat for the Cortina based version and £3750 + vat for the Sierra based will initially seem uncompetitive with the car's direct competitors. However, when you peruse the information pack you will see that a great deal listed as extras with some kits included in the Merlin kits. In addition



The Merlin's hood and sidescreens are among the best in the business but winter driving is improved with the company's solid sidescreens and hard top conversion.



Despite a complex engine, the Merlin installation is still very neat and though it only musters 127 bhp per ton, the management system creates a supremely punchy and flexible unit that complements the Merlin's characteristics.

to the body and chassis the Merlin kit supplies the complete windscreen, fuel tank, grille, special pedal box and bumpers while the Cortina based kit additionally supplies the five link axle installation components complete with rear coil spring damper units and rerated front springs. In place of that, the Sierra based kit supplies the

wishbones, semi trailing arms, bushes, ball joints springs and dampers.

They're very comprehensive packages and careful assembly will result in a car that looks superb, will stay looking superb and which will be a far more flexible and versatile friend than an Access card could ever be.

SPECIFICATION - MERLIN (Sierra based)

Chassis.	Twin rail ladder frame in 3" x 2" x 3 mm box section steel tube.
Body.	2 + 2 tourer. GRP single piece body tub, separate doors, bonnet and boot.
Suspension, front.	Double fabricated rubber mounted, round tube wishbones, Ford Sierra uprights, inclined, adjustable coil spring damper units.
Suspension, rear.	Sierra IRS - Fabricated, rubber mounted semi trailing arms, Sierra hubs, adjustable coil spring damper units.
Steering.	Sierra rack and pinion. 4.15 turns lock to lock. Lower ratios are available.
Brakes.	Sierra disc front, drum rear. Remote servo. Optional all disc system with ventilated fronts.
Engine.	Ford four cylinder 2 litre, DOHC, 8 valve with fuel injection, electronic engine management and 3 way catalytic converter. 125 bhp @ 5500 rpm. 128 ft lbs @ 2500 rpm. Power to weight ratio - 127 bhp per ton.
Transmission.	Ford MT 75 five speed manual gearbox.
Wheels and tyres.	6" x 15" alloy rims fitted with 185/70 or 65 profile radial ply tyres.
Dimensions.	Overall length. 12 ft. 8 ins. Overall width. 5 ft. 5 ins. Overall height. 4 ft. 3 ins. Wheelbase. 8 ft. 2 ins. Weight. 2200 lbs. Weight split. 45 F/ 55 R.
Kit prices.	Merlin kit - Cortina based. £2880 + vat. Merlin kit - Sierra based. £3750 + vat.

Full details of kit contents, specifications, prices, options and extras are given in the fully detailed colour brochure and information pack available from: Merlin Sports Cars, Dept KCl, 1, Florence Villas, Barling Road, Great Wakering, Southend, Essex SS3 0NF. Tel. 01702 219145.