


V8

WIZARDRY

The last decade hasn't been kind to the traditional roadster market. Tony Bradshaw's recently completed Merlin V8 offers a modern twist to a familiar theme. More trad roadsters? Yes please!

▶▶▶ IAN STENT MET HIM



IF THERE'S ONE sector of the kit car market which has struggled over the last decade, then the traditional roadster scene has found it harder than most to maintain sufficient sales. The rise of trackday warriors, emergence of supercar bodykits and the evergreen appeal of Cobras and Lotus Seven replicas has squeezed the period appeal of the classic roadster close to extinction. Marlin and Findhorn Cars (NG) continue to fly the flag, but the likes of once major players such as Merlin and JBA appear to have slipped from our consciousness.

And the decline of the Merlin (which ceased production back in 1998) is one I particularly struggle to understand. It was always a great looking car, with a simple single-piece body tub over a typically basic cruciform ladderframe chassis. From memory, the company was slow to move from Cortina running gear to Sierra, while an attempt to concentrate on turnkey cars possibly didn't help. Whatever the reasons, it's been over 10 years since you could place an order for one.

Not that this stopped Tony Bradshaw, the owner of the car you see here. His Merlin was completed in 2007, went through SVA and is correctly registered on an age-related plate. He is not, however, a newcomer to the world of kit cars...

Undertaking an apprenticeship in mechanics after leaving school, he'd completed a Dutton Sierra before he'd passed his driving test at 17. Run as his only car, four years later he upgraded to a Dutton Phaeton before, in 1989, completing his first Merlin build. Like his Duttons, the finish was superb, and he'd added extra uniqueness to the car by being the first person to shoe-horn a Rover V8 under the bonnet. It won *Which Kit?* magazine's Best Engineered Car at that year's Capesthorne Hall kit car show.

A 4.6-litre V8 powered Sebring MX followed in the mid '90s, sold more recently to buy the plot of land on which he spent the early part of the new millennium building his current home.

His most recent project materialised when he met Kevin Seal at Capesthorpe Hall back in 2005. Kevin's another kit car diehard, who built a number of cars for *Which Kit?* magazine in the Noughties. Kevin mentioned he had a Merlin that had been sitting on the drive for the best part of a decade, bought as a part-built project from the original owner, who'd purchased it back in 1987.

Not surprisingly, the rolling body-chassis unit was in a state, but Tony had a recently built double garage that was begging for a project, and he still had a soft spot for the Merlin.

Stripped back to a bare chassis, the frame was modified to allow the installation of another Rover V8. From his first car (one of only two previous V8 Merlins he's aware of) he knew he wanted to locate the engine a little further back on the frame, but this not only required substantial modification to the chassis, but also fibreglass bulkhead and gearbox tunnel on the main tub.

All the Cortina components were comprehensively refurbished, with the



▲ No walnut veneer here! Carbon dash, modern gauges and switches... but they work perfectly.

▼ Superbly presented Rover V8 is home built and works well.

original rubber bushes replaced with poly ones to cope with the extra torque of the V8. At the front, the Cortina anti-roll bar, which was never used in the Merlin, was retro fitted, while at the back the live axle required more serious fettling...

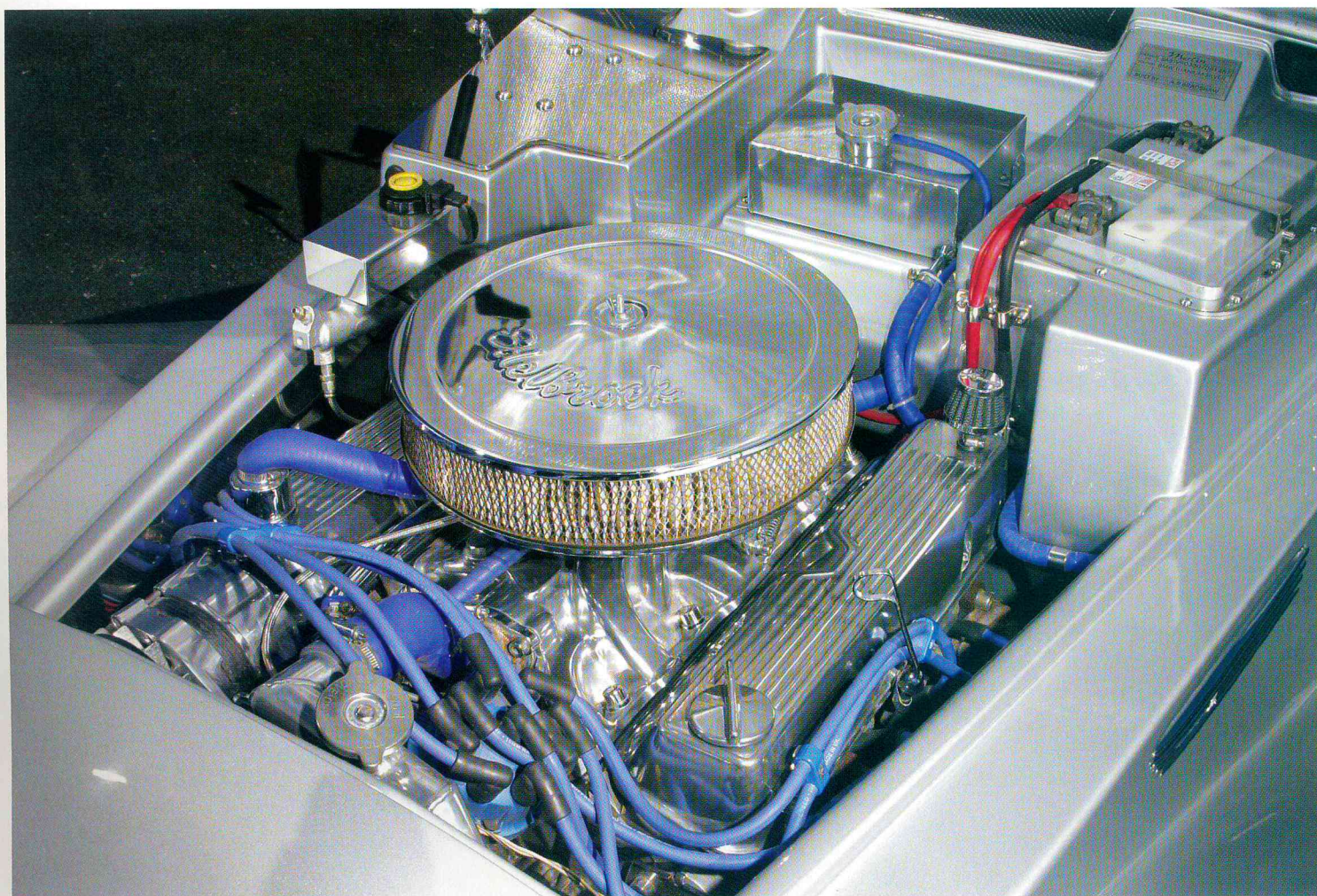
Always modified by the factory to accept its twin trailing arms and Panhard rod location method, with Tony's desire

to use larger and wider 17in rims, all the location points on the axle were ground off and remade some 20mm further inboard to give room for the wider alloy

Big 285mm vented and drilled front discs and HiSpec calipers are balanced at the back by a unique disc conversion on live axle more used to drum brakes. It required a new backplate being made to

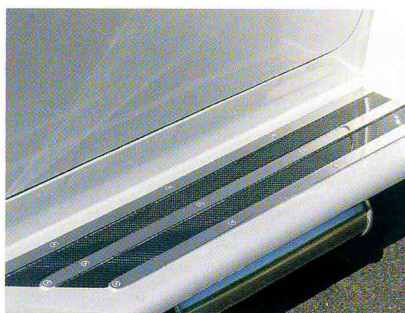
JOIN THE CLUB

Merlin Owners' Club, Sue Daniels.
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There's breathtaking attention to detail all over this car. Expansion bottle home made. Big 17in 3-piece alloys continue modern theme but made life difficult when it came to the suspension. Genuine carbon is inset into the running board.



Tony's pattern and fabricated by a local engineering firm. Onto this, he located Sierra rear discs and calipers, with a proportioning valve within the system to balance the braking force, acted on via an aftermarket dual circuit servo.

Once all the mechanical components which bolted to the chassis had been decided upon, everything was then stripped back off, shotblasted and powdercoated.

The Rover V8 engine was donated by his brother, Peter. A 3.5-litre unit, it was completely stripped by Tony and rebuilt with high compression pistons and a fancy camshaft, before being topped off with a hand polished Edelbrock inlet manifold and Weber 500cfm carb. Taken for a rolling road session once on the road, it's good for 220bhp at the flywheel, which is a superb result for this unit.

Just as with the rear brakes, Tony wanted to update the Cortina components where possible, so while the rack remains the earlier Ford unit, the steering column and stalk controls are

later Sierra items, while the wiring loom is a mix of Sierra and Fiesta.

Externally, the Merlin styling still looked right, although Tony wanted to get rid of the side wing located spare wheel. This was more of a job than it sounds, since the wing incorporated a fibreglass well into which the wheel could be located. Cutting this out and fibreglassing over the large hole was a difficult job, but an important component in his wishlist to update the styling and get away from the clichéd trad look.

Colour choice was also going to be critical, and a visit to a local BMW showroom came up trumps, revealing the titanium silver he'd end up using, as well as the side grilles you can see on the car. Where are they from? Check out an M3 to find out. Manufactured in plastic (despite the chromed 'metal' finish, the cost was manageable and the M3 badge replaced with a suitable Merlin sticker.

Other mods to the bodywork came about after Tony had a local company make him up a flat sheet of genuine

TONY BRADSHAW'S MERLIN V8

Engine: 3.5-litre Rover V8, Weber 500cfm carb on Edelbrock manifold and filter. Typhoon camshaft, high compression pistons

Power: 220bhp

Gearbox: Rover SD1 5-speed

Suspension: Cortina double wishbones and stub axles, anti-roll bar, coil-over dampers. Cortina rear live axle with four trailing arms and Panhard rod.

Brakes: 285mm vented and drilled front discs with HiSpec calipers. Rear conversion to Sierra discs and calipers using bespoke back plate on original Cortina axle. Servo assisted

Wheels/Tyres: Image 17in 3-piece alloys made to specific offset. Dunlop Sport 9000 205x50 R17 tyres

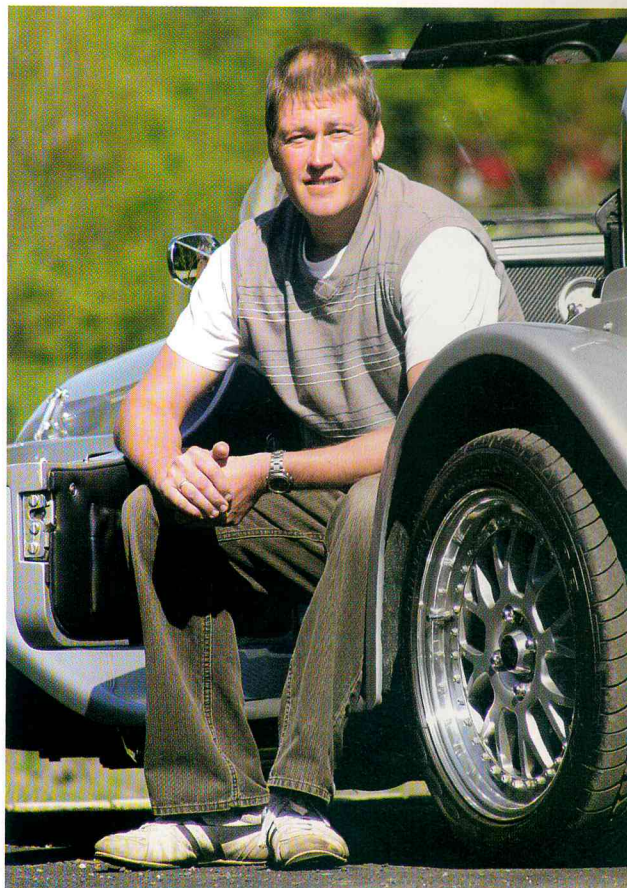
Interior: Carbon dash panel with Smiths gauges from Europa Spares, homemade centre console with Savage buttons, Extor steering wheel, button door releases, own door cards trimmed in matching leather to Richfield seats, one-off carpet set

Exterior: BMW Titanium silver, M3 side bonnet vents with 'Merlin' badges, specially made front and rear bumpers, roll-over bar, carbon inserts in running boards, original side-mounted spare wheel removed

carbon fibre. Originally meant for just the dash and centre console, the additional material was then used on the door tops, running boards and inside the engine bay on the bulkhead area. But rather than simply laid on top of the fibreglass, Tony routed out the areas where the carbon would go, allowing it to be flush fitted to the surface. If there's a downside, they now look a bit like fake carbon stickers – but don't tell Tony that!

He called on his brother Peter to help prepare the bodywork for paint, the duo first flattening and then priming the bodywork before dispatching it to a local paintshop for the final top coat.

Some people have the knack of building wonderful kit cars. Tony Bradshaw fits right in.

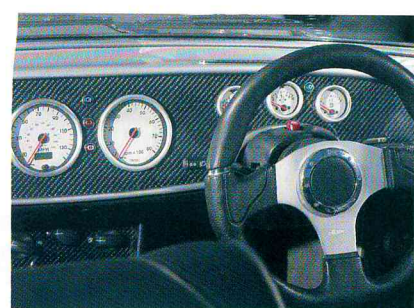
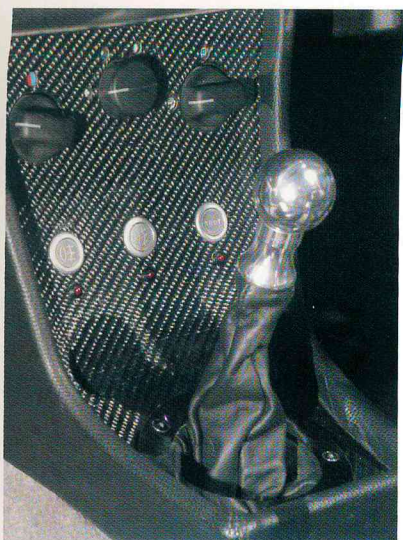


WHAT'S HAPPENED TO MERLIN CARS?

Believe it or not, the Merlin originally began life as an American kit with a VW Beetle engine in the back! In 1980 Peter Gowing imported two Tiger bodysells into the UK and launched it (still with Beetle underpinnings) as the Merlin TA. However, it was soon apparent that the antiquated VW components had to go, and the car was revamped to accommodate Cortina running gear within a new chassis and modified bodysell.

The Merlin was marketed by Peter's company, Thoroughbred Cars, from its base in Essex and success came quickly, with over 300 cars sold before Thoroughbred Cars ceased trading in 1984 and Paris Cars reappeared in 1985, also with Peter at its helm! The previously developed Monro 2+2 version of the car was simply renamed the Merlin Plus Two and now became the mainstay model.

A Sierra based version was launched in 1992 and Peter finally called a halt on proceedings in 1998, when it's believed that just over 700 Merlins had been produced.



Centre console made for the job. Savage buttons look great. ▲ Note button release for door and mounting plinth for speaker. ▼ Modern instruments and steering wheel. ► BMW M3 badge and side grille neatly tweaked for use in its new location.



Modern Smiths-style gauges also take a step back from the more typical designs one might expect, while equally modern heater controls and Savage aluminium buttons maintain the contemporary feel. Paper templates for a carpet set were cut out by Tony and the resultant carpet panels sent to a local trimmer for edging. Leather seats from Richfield were supplied with additional matching leather for the door trims, gear lever gaiter and other highlights.

SVA was constantly in the back of Tony's mind throughout the project, leading to the addition of a roll-over bar, which then helped act as a top mount for the seat belt harnesses. The original Merlin inner door release handles seemed too sharp, leading Tony to ditch them completely in favour of buttons from Car Builder Solutions which actuate Escort boot opener solenoids.

But despite his best efforts, when it did come to the big day, the SVA inspector still found a number of items that needed further work. While he complimented Tony on the build quality, the windscreen didn't have the correct radius, along with the front bumpers, bottom dash rail and a number of other exterior items. Sent home with a list of failures, it was the windscreen that caused most problems, eventually cured with the additional of a fibreglass over cover.

Thankfully, there was nothing that couldn't be sorted and Tony was also relieved that none of the tweaks required mods to the painted bodywork.

Sadly, the delays meant the car was trailered to the 2007 Stoneleigh kit car show, rather than driven, but the problems were quickly addressed and it wasn't long before he was clutching his SVA MAC certificate. Registration was the next hurdle. Taking the car to his nearest registration office for inspection, he was led to believe that he had enough donor components to be allocated an age-related plate, but when his paperwork finally came back he was horrified to find he'd been allocated a

Q-plate. A panic call to the VRO revealed they needed more information on the car's history in order to confirm that it hadn't already been registered at some earlier stage. Luckily, Tony had the original invoice for the sale of the kit and previous owner, Kevin, still had the contact details of the original kit purchaser. When Tony contacted him, he was delighted to hear the car had finally been built, and more than happy to confirm details for the VRO. Within 10 days he was re-issued with an age-related number!

Now on the road, the car has required almost no further fettling and Tony's hoping to rack up some serious miles after the wet summer of 2008.

Not surprisingly, the car has caused enormous interest within the Merlin Owners' Club, and with its modern edge I'm hardly surprised. It's a superb looking machine and I can't help but think that with the right marketing and a sensible sales target, the Merlin could once again create a little kit car magic. Anyone know where the moulds are? ◀◀

THANKS

Tony would like to thank his mum and dad Tony and Doreen, and wife Vicky.

I BUILT THIS...

Owner: Tony Bradshaw
Age: 42
Occupation: Builder
Are you a member of a club? Merlin Owners' Club
Best thing about your car? Performance
Worst thing about your car? Gearbox notchy
Favourite supplier? Car Builder Solutions & Rally Design
Lottery win car? Range Rover Sport
Best bargain? Engine from Peter
Favourite tool? Bottle opener

