Mike Bell's JBA Falcon

Reader Mike Bell went to town on a JBA Falcon, with impressive results. Iain Ayre admires his workmanship.

DUE TO A LACK OF FORESIGHT, MIKE Bell was faced with a major problem as soon as he decided he wanted to build a kit car. Had he only looked ahead and given it some thought, he could have started smoking when he was ten or so, which just might have stunted his growth a little. As it is, he didn't stop growing until he's reached 6'4" and 17½ stone. It just shows the benefit of thinking ahead, doesn't it?

When a copy of *Which Kit?* first came into Mike's view, he was a goner, with an immediate and serious kit infection. Having realised that as a kit buyer he could make any car he wanted for relative peanuts, the whole world of kitology opened up. Instead of choosing between a boring eurohatch, a dull one or a not terribly interesting one, he could now build an original design or a replica of almost anything he wanted, from any year since about 1930.

Ah...except that he couldn't get into most of them. After assorted sprains, stress fractures, osteopathy and so on due to getting stuck half in and half out of many diminutive cockpits at various shows, the internal dimensions of the JBA Falcon, as well as the appeal of the kit in general, came as a delightful surprise.

To get his wallet and his wife used to the idea of lots of dosh exiting JBA-wards, the first thing he bought was a pair of chrome headlights and sidelights. Mike couldn't afford the nicely rechromed trumpet horns then on sale for £35 the pair, and thus had to shell out £110 a few years later. He recommends readers bear this in mind: if something is expensive enough to hurt today, it's going to be agonising later. Grab what you can when you can.

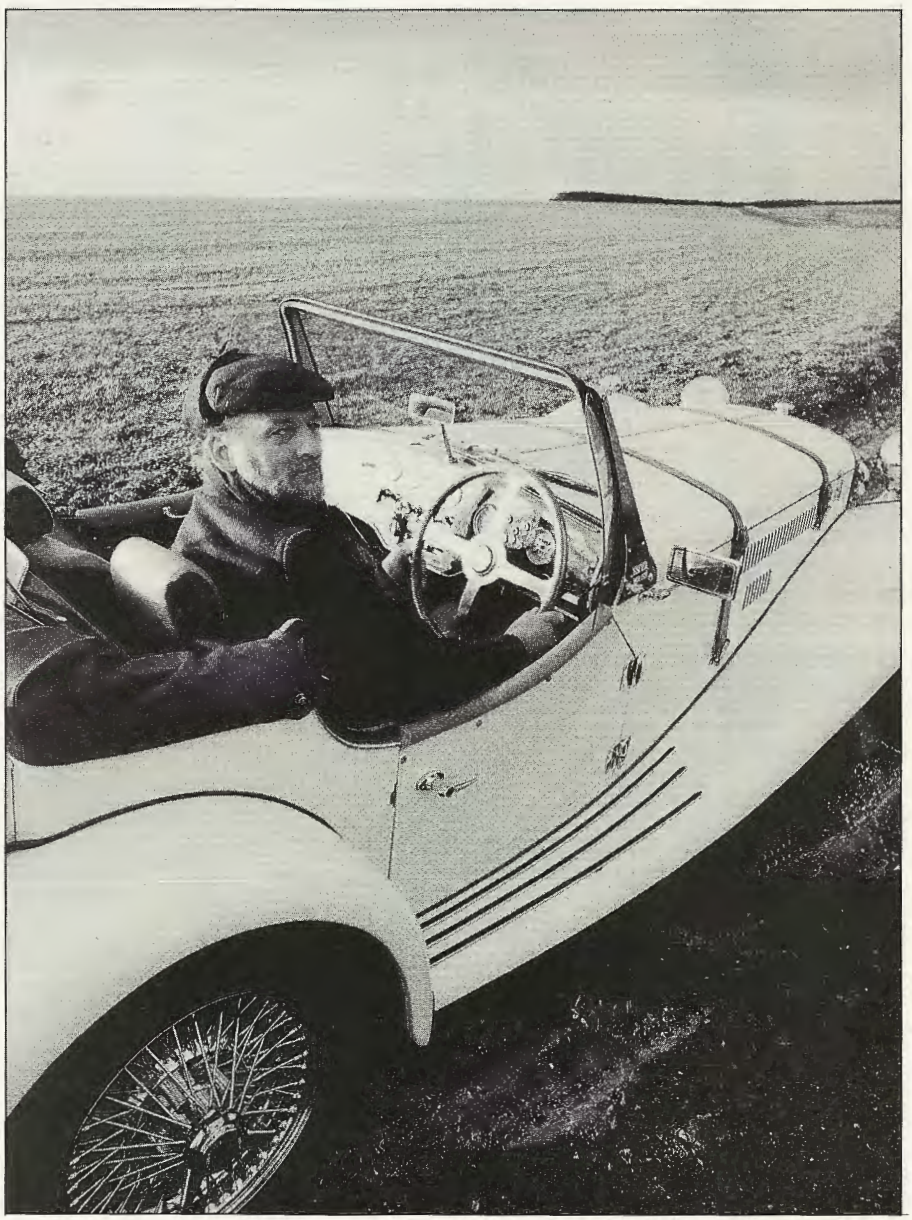
This policy paid off with the wooden Moto Lita wheel bought with a Cortina column for £5 and later sold for £60. The column, steering wheel and lights were laid out strategically on the bed, and Mike was gazing proudly down the imaginary bonnet at the gleaming headlight shells, when his wife walked in. Embarrassing or what? You can just picture the expression on her face, can't you?

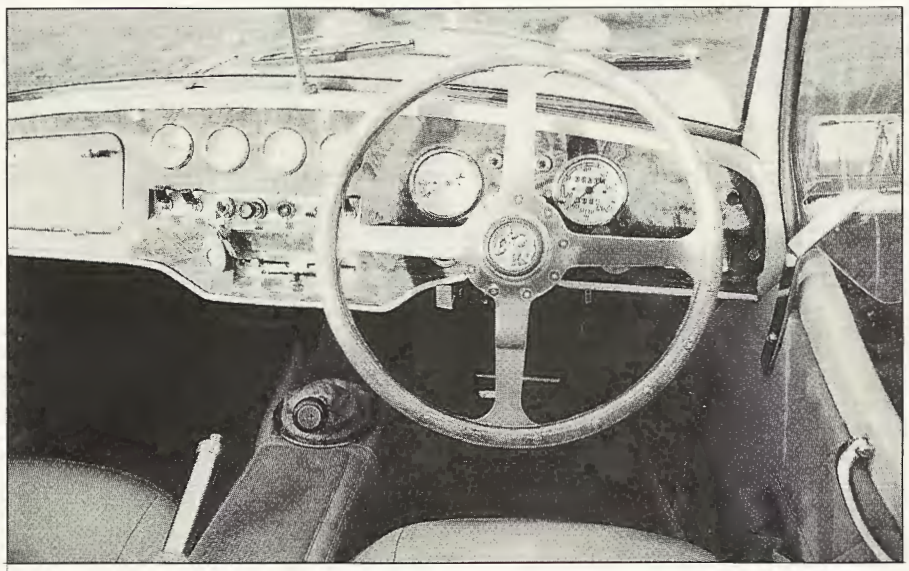
"How much is it going to cost?" she asked, with the I've-been-here-before look — the boat, the cameras, the sub aqua, the sea canoe etc etc. Out came the catalogues, the road tests, the rationalisations. "It'll cost about a thousand a year for something like four years. That's totally finished, looking completely gorgeous in Capo Di Monte white, and all packed and ready to take you on a long and luxurious touring holiday to the south of France." Put like that, who could resist?

Nine months after the deposit was put down, the kit arrived. During that time, the first dashboard had been complete, and all the donor parts had been reconditioned at least once and painted several times over. Looking at the collection of components, the first misgivings arose, as Mike wondered if he could actually make a car out of a pile of bits. However, a motto he'd found in the introduction to Professor Silvanouse P. Thompson's *Calculus Made Easy,* came to his rescue: "What one fool can do, so can another, given a little time and patience."

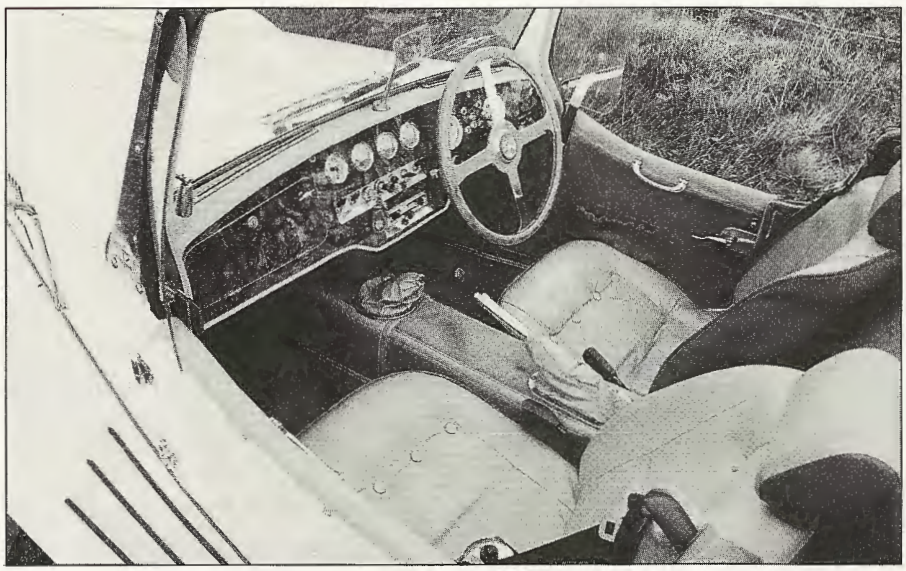
The stripdown and rebuilding of the donor Cortina's running gear had been no problem, other than in trying to change void bushes without the proper equipment. For this job, you need either the right tool or a controlled nuclear explosion, really. Even Ford Special Tool No.1, the four pound club-hammer, won't hack it. However, all that end of things remained relatively easy: the build only became complicated due to Mike modifying the design to get it exactly the way he wanted it.

He wanted the filler cap on the offside, space for demisters, speedo and tacho in front of the wheel, a big wooden steering wheel that he could still get past to get

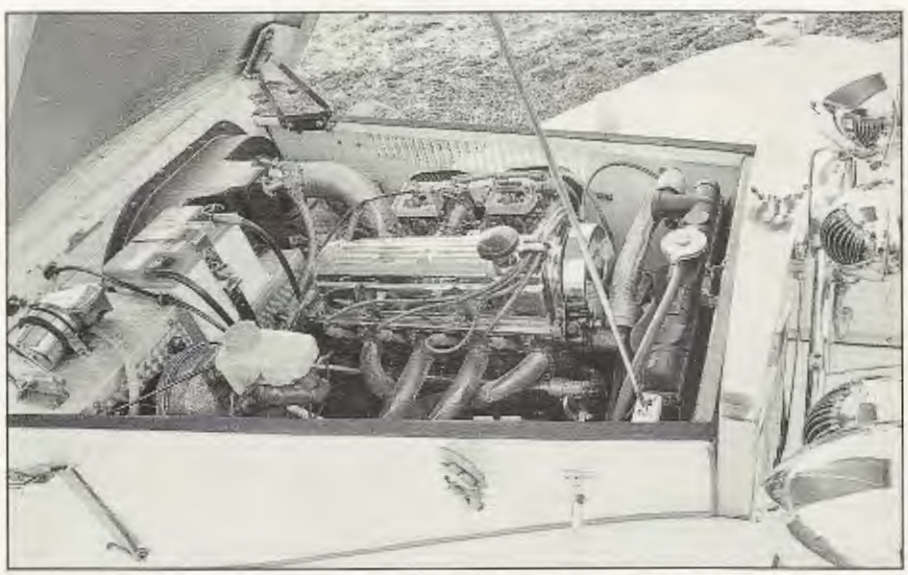




Above: Traditional style dials and Mike's own steering wheel combined with the beautiful veneered dashboard really are exceptional. Below: Seat and interior trim was stitched at home using imitation pigskin vinyl. The end effect is excellent.



Below: The meticulous approach continues under the bonnet. 2-litre Pinto engine has a high lift cam and performance exhaust. With twin carburettors the unit currently puts out around 120 bhp at the rear wheels. Achieves 24 mpg when driven hard.



into the car, independently mounted headlights and big bolt-on chrome wires with spinners, as well myriad small modifications. The thing is, for each mod you do, there are ten further complications that develop. Such as the dash design requiring gear-lever rearrangement, and the steering wheel change meaning relocation of the pedal.

The interior was one of the fun bits, with many happy hours spent thinking about the possibilities. In the end, it all went fairly easily, except for the stitching of diamond shapes into the imitation pigskin vinyl. Your average sewing machine will cope with three layers of vinyl, but not four. Time for a new sewing machine. But then that's all part of life's rich tapestry, so to speak, isn't it?

The bodywork was a little more daunting, as a hole drilled in aluminium tends to be rather permanent in nature. Take the natty dummy petrol tank straps in polished stainless over black rubber. They cover up the erroneous hole drilled for the electric aerial. Whoops.

The lighting probably deserves its own feature, as Mike's lukewarm appreciation of the Falcon headlight arrangements led him to design and construct his own. The main headlights themselves are simple enough: chrome plated, 60/50 watts with internal sidelamps. The spots are 100 watt items and the fogs are the period wide beam type. Sidelamps perched on top of the wings are 2" Lucas Red Spots.

The real Robinson Crusoe stuff starts with the casting of the brass mountings for the headlights. Off to the local scrap merchant for a collection of odds and sods made of brass, and a call to a pal with a high-powered propane torch and a cast iron P-trap, as found on Victorian toilets. This was supported by bricks and the torch fired up. "It's amazing," said Mike to the colleague with the roaring torch as the scraps were fed into the furnace, "how much brass you need to melt before you can see it in the bottom."

The next thing they heard was a polite enquiry about the ten-foot trail of smoking metal winding its way down the drive. Oh dear. Still, how many people do you know with a brass-inlaid driveway? The next attempt involved a proper crucible, casting sand, and ultimately some pretty good results, as you can see from the pictures.

Done that, what's next? Next up were the bumpers. Mike wasn't too impressed with the kit fraternity's approach to bumpers generally, so he decided to do them himself. Hefty, solid stainless steel numbers, strong and well proportioned, were the result of his labours in that direction.

Red Indians used to have a good trick of giving cowboys a hard time by strapping wet leather to their extremities and then leaving the sun to dry the leather and dismember the cowboys. Hi, ho, Silver and all that. The leather bonnet straps were likely to suffer the same fate, so they're now mounted on little adjustable sprung mounts that Mike turned up

himself on his father's lathe.

The steering wheel is hand-made from solid brass and wood, and sets off the rest of the dashboard metalwork virtually all executed in polished brass. The whole look of the thing could easily have gone over the top, except that the proportions and positioning of the features are spot-on, not by any means an easy achievement. The result, while not strictly in period, nonetheless looks very authentic indeed.

As to the grubby bits, motive power is the 2-litre Pinto unit, with a five-speed 'box from a Sierra, both luckily picked up in almost new condition. Mike wanted to achieve blistering acceleration, but not at the expense of blistering fuel consumption. He achieved this by combining the spread of ratios in the Sierra box with a Transit crown wheel and pinion, changing the rear axle ratio from 3.75:1 to 4.63:1. This more than offset the higher gearing provided by the road wheel diameter change form 13" to 15". The wheels themselves are 15" x 6" chrome bolt-on wires, with genuine three-lug spinners mounted on them for authenticity: as you can see, the effect is pretty convincing.

To encourage the Pinto engine to produce sensible amounts of grunt, Mike started with a couple of twin-chokes and a 4-2-1 exhaust in 2" piping. The head was hand polished, and the cam replaced a Piper 272 Magnum asymmetrical fast lift slow drop item. A lumpy one, in other words. Then he found out that you really need a matching vernier cam cog to go with it. Serious dosh here, if you go out and buy one: less so if you make it yourself. A mapped distributor was the next stop, and the big day loomed when the engine would be started for the first time.

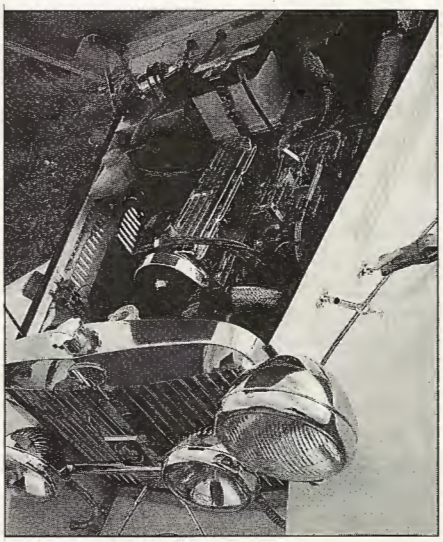
As it turned out, the distributor, mapped or not, had no idea at all where it was going, except that it had no intention of describing any useful circles inside Mike's engine bay. An undignified tow to the rolling road bay at RAT auto tune in Worcester soon had it sorted out, however, and revealed the good news that the engine was producing 120 bhp at the wheels, which isn't bad for a Pinto. Fuel consumption varies between 24 mpg in traffic light Grand Prix mode, and 28 mpg taking it easy.

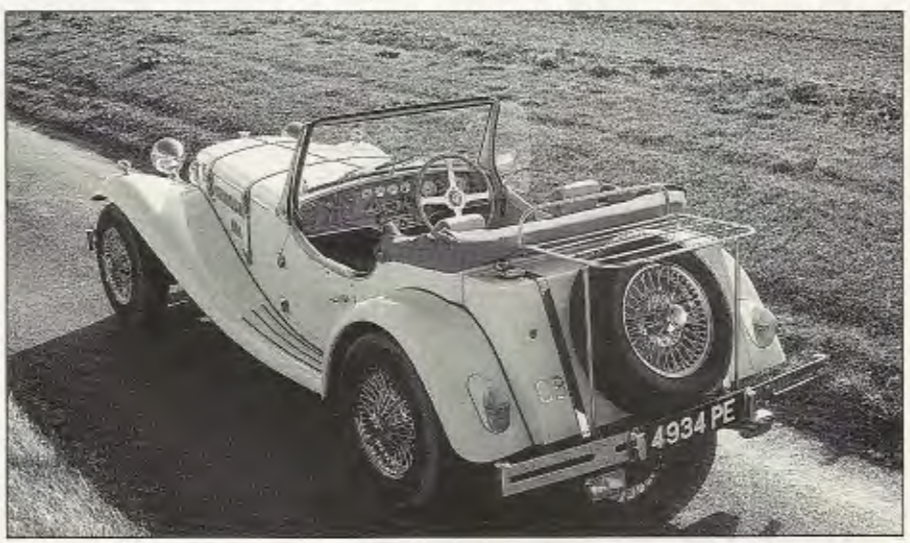
Top speed, worked out by the rev counter, is over 120mph, which is about enough for most. More importantly, the suspension and handling are all a known quantity, with a fair number of JBA Falcons on the road. The Cortina springs are de-rated, and adjustable gas Spax are fitted all round.

The further you look into this car, the more you notice the attention to detail. The hoses are all braided in stainless steel, with blue anodised end covers, and the engine bay is panelled in what looks like engine turned aluminium. The windscreen wiper motor has been chromed. The radio is hidden in the glovebox, and the location of the aerial remains a secret. You'd have to know Falcons to realise the entire dash has been moved backwards into the cabin: this was partly to facilitate proper demisting, but the other main motive was to hide the control stalks and thus preserve the period feel of the interior.

To date, the car has been on the road for about a year and a half, and has covered some 8000 completely trouble-free miles. Having got everything exactly the way he wanted it from day one, Mike is completely happy with his Falcon. The cost wasn't wildly excessive, either, as most of the bought parts came from either JBA or Ford, neither of whose products are overpriced: all the bits and pieces that look seriously expensive were hand made, requiring massive amounts of dedication and imagination, but very little hard cash.

Mike reckons that anyone who really wants to can build a car of this quality: you need to start with a good kit and proven mechanicals, as ably provided in this case by JBA and Ford respectively. Then you need to remember the professor's advice about what one fool can do, and so on. As Mike points out from personal experience, you can build a car to the high standard of his Falcon without even knowing how to change the points in the distributor *(the what? — Ed)*.





Top: Front of the Falcon has a very traditional feel with chromed lights, spots, horns and polished radiator grille. Above: The rear view of the car shows the metal dummy fuel tank straps, luggage rack and specially made bumpers. Below: What more can one say?

