The fine art of Falconry



On highways populated by tin boxes of ever increasing similarity, a suggestion of the elegance of a bygone age is no bad thing. David Hill, with the aid of the JBA Falcon plus two, strikes a rich vein of nostalgia.



Simple but effective door trimming, note wooden pull capping. The flap immediately below the sidescreen covers the holding bolts. The door opens to nearly 90 degrees.

"Not only do you get timeless lines, albeit in a relatively compact way, but also you have the reliability of modern components, reasonable economy and even room in the back for the kids."



The boot is not enormous but is useful nonetheless. The action of the sprung numberplate can be seen, bottom left.

To my mind, there is nothing quite like a traditional roadster. The timeless grace of those long, flowing wings, the imperious gaze of the massive headlamps flanking the defiant upright radiator grille at the sharp end of a lengthy, louvred bonnet combine to epitomise the style of a time long past. Unfortunately, as the Hollywood dreams fade away like the morning mist, we are left with the harsh realities. In the first instance, the acquisition of such a car tends to involve non surgical removal of arms and legs. In addition, who, nowadays would want to live with cable brakes, enormously thirsty engines and all the other warts associated with these luxurious leviathans.

There is an answer, though, in the shape of our old friends, kit cars; and none more so than the Falcon. Not only do you get those timeless lines, albeit in a relatively compact way, but also you have the reliability of modern components, reasonable economy and even room in the back for the kids. I freely admit that, personally, as you may have gathered, I like traditional roadsters and when the opportunity to spend four days with the Falcon arose, I looked forward to it with eager anticipation.

Arriving at the less than prepossessing premises of JBA in Standish, near Wigan, I could have been excused for a certain dampening of that anticipation, for it is a dismal place. However, catching my first glimpse of the refined form of the Falcon dispelled any effects its unlikely setting may have had.

Since one of the last desired arts of our now departed publishing manager, John Hoyle, was to drive a kit car, having recently won his British licence, I was forced to follow in the infamous Black Toad, Pen Roberts' much maligned Nova 1.2L. With Hoyle manning the controls, the Falcon gave, the Toad, and much of the other traffic on the M62, a run for its money. Then, with our charge safely back at the office, I could look forward to taking temporary possession for a better part of a working week.

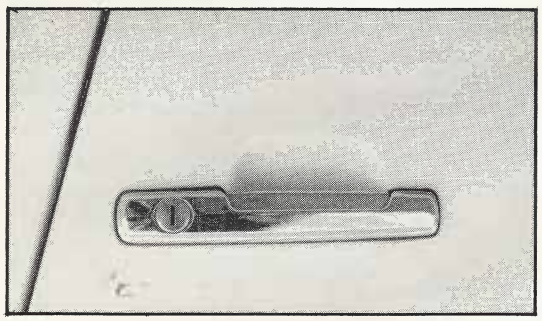
The Heart of the Matter

The JBA Falcon plus Two, for all its looks, is firmly based on that ever more popular donor, the Cortina Mk 3 or 4. From this worthy vehicle is taken the vast majority of the running gear including front and rear suspension, rear axle, engine and gearbox, radiator, heater, steering, wiper mechanism and wiring loom, not forgetting the door handles. This most economical use of a donor vehicle reflects itself in the cost, as will be seen in due course.

The Falcon is unusual for a kit car, in that the bodywork arrives in a number of separate pieces i.e. there is no body tub. The main structure is a twin rail, box section steel chassis of massive construction. This chassis, which has accommodation points for the Cortina running gear, also has a substantial number of body frames, including support pads for the large front wing/running board assemblies. In addition, sheet steel is used for the front bulkhead, the tunnel and the rear seat box areas. Whilst it is true to say that this form of construction is weighty, it is also exceedingly strong — an attribute the family man tends to appreciate.

To this basic structure is attached to the scuttle moulding and the two body side mouldings. The remainder of the rear body panels are hand formed aluminium items with the exception of the boot, which is, again a fibreglass moulding, as are the doors. The longitudinally hinged four section bonnet is aluminium and the front tray between the wings is of the same material. The wings themselves are fibreglass mouldings, the front wings and running boards being integral. The windscreen frame, which holds a flat laminated glass, is beautifully made in stainless steel, with a chromed channel at its foot, holding a Cobra-type windscreen to body seal.

The Cortina engine is mounted well back, necessitating prop shaft shortening operations, to the tune of 20". Consequently, the steering column comes in for some drastic lengthening, which is carried out with the aid of a solid shaft. This action conveniently disposes of the infamous Cortina rubber coupling which, in turn, does wonders for the feel of the steering. Similarly, the rubber mountings for the front cross member are done away with and the rear voided brushes are replaced with solid rubber items. A fibreglass housing accepts the



Cortina door handles suit the car well.

Cortina's heater internals and a long, flexible trunk leads down to the under grille area to provide forced fresh air.

Office Furniture

The inside of the demonstrator was a revelation, possessing the correct period feel without being an anachronism. A french polished wooden dash combines the looks of a set of brass rimmed VDO instruments with the practicality of Cortina heater controls, handbrake and column stalks. The seating consisted of Spitfire seats, expertly retrimmed in red leather with black piping and the tiny rear seat was upholstered to match. The side panels and the door panels were in red leatherette and the addition of neat, polished wood rear arm rests and door pulls contrasted with the modern idea of concealed inertia reels. A Mountney wood rim steering wheel topped the column and the whole effect was completed by a set of neat, black carpets. Up top, a simple hood, held by press studs, was complimented by the workmanlike side screens. These perspex items were equipped with efficient swinging catches and the lifting of an internal flap revealed their two bolt fixing. Cortina door handles coupled to factory locks served to secure the wide opening doors and a tradtional stiched leather strap kept the doors in check. One of those despicable rubber sucker interior mirrors was provided, as was a tax disc holder of the same ilk, which fell off frequently. Obvious thought had gone into the sealing of the doors and the standard rubbers continued up and over the top of the windscreen.

Period Piece

To enhance the thirties feel of the Falcon, the external fittings had been carefully chosen. Atop the front tray, a chromed badge bar held two Lucas auxiliary lamps and a pair of Union Flag badges. Immediately in front of this, the twin-rail chromed bumper bore a pair of rectangular Escort Mk2 indicators, skilfully recessed and therefore, unobtrusive. Chromed period sidelights sat proudly at the peak of the wings and the standard 7" headlights in fibreglass bowls, mounted on sturdy chromed brackets, flanked the peaked grille, again chromium plated. This is an option, the supplied grille is GRP. At the rear, Morris Minor rear light lenses are used, on JBA supplied pedestals. The rear bumper was similar to the front and was topped by a rectangular number plate ingeniously hinged to avoid the rear mounted spare wheel, as the boot is opened. The boot lid itself is locked into place by a full width rod mechanism controlled by an external chromed locking handle. The boot is not particularly capacious but would easily hold enough luggage for a long weekend, providing squashy bags were used.

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The filler cap is mounted on the nearside of the boot and the filler pipe leads down to an Escort van fuel tank. The filler pipe itself takes a sudden turn downwards from the cap. This proved to be a problem, in that only the very tip of a petrol pump nozzle could be inserted. In consequence, fuel tended to blow back at the aperture and filling up was a very slow procedure.

The overall effect of the car was enhanced by the subtle but effective badging and I particularly liked the inclusion of enamel Union Flag badges at the base of the windscreen pillars. Another nice touch was the stainless steel bonnet hinges' method of fitting. Rather than rivet the hinge directly to the bonnet skin, a return flange on the bonnet was provided, eliminating all that tedious filling. The same went for the side hinges and louvred panels were held in place by neat tubular spring catches, again chromed. The overall effect was of a high quality product, the ripple free bodywork being particularly enhanced by the expertly applied paintwork. This was, according to the chassis plate, Jaguar Old English White.

The choice of wheels ideally suited the car although chromed wires, even the bolt on variety, can be a pain to look after. These were shod with 165SR1S Goodyear G800 + S tyres, the spare being similarly equipped.

Day to Day with a Bird of Prey

The unexpected fine weather encountered during my time with the Falcon allowed both open air and hood up motoring to be experienced. I used the car to travel the twenty-odd miles to work as well as the motorway driving to and from Standish, so an overall picture of the car's capabilities could be assembled. Getting in was remarkably easy, despite the depth of the footwells, which necessitated some leg-folding to get past the door pillar. Once installed, the driving position was exemplary, with excellent vision to front, side and rear, and plenty of headroom. The only thing lacking was some sort of overtaking mirror, an awkward shoulder check being the order of the day prior to lane-changing exercises. The 2000 OHC engine was equipped with an autochoke which surprisingly enough, worked and no starting problems were encountered. The exhaust, a shortened Cortina system terminated in an XR3 silencer which emitted just enough sound to let it be known you were driving a 'proper' car, without being a nuisance at speed.

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The greatest feeling about the car was its atmosphere. The long, narrow bonnet, coupled with the rearward driving position gave the feeling of sweeping along majestically and this feeling tended to make a relaxed driving attitude almost compulsory. The Falcon was also remarkably civilised and its quiet, refined progress was an attractive attribute. That is not to say that the Falcon could not be pushed. It could, in a respectable manner. Flying into corners revealed the expected understeer but this was not excessive. Try a



The beautifully trimmed rear seat will hold a sideways adult for short trips. The hood folds away neatly.



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"The greatest feeling about the car was its atmosphere. The long, narrow bonnet."

little too hard and the rear end would begin to amble round, to be easily caught with a touch of opposite lock. Under these conditions, the lack of side support of the slippery seats necessitated hanging on to the wheel to avoid joining the passenger. Also the close proximity of the driver's door tended to inhibit fast steering movements. It would probably be as well to limit high speed driving to times when the side-screens are in the back. The lack of a home for the idle clutch foot was also disconcerting.

The front spring rate of the Falcon has been reduced to a seemingly perfect level. This, and the comparitively high weight of the car, undoubtedly contributes to its nature. Standard dampers were fitted all round and I felt that the rear end was little a wallowy as a result. Not a severe problem. The servo assisted Cortina disc brakes were entirely adequate at all times and the controls were light and easy to use with the exception of the gear lever. Perhaps the box was tired, I don't know, but second gear, especially, was tricky, particularly when cold.

The hood was extremely easy to use and was one of the quietest soft tops under which I have travelled. The side screens were excellent and only at high speed was a slight draught experienced. At high speed the hood tended to lift away from the side screens, particularly on the passenger's side and the optional hard top would be a good investment when high speed work is contemplated. The directional stability at speed was exemplary and the moderate side winds encountered did nothing to upset the car, even at 100mph.

The same levels of praise cannot be applied to the instruments. Whilst brass rimmed, white faced period instruments may look pretty, they are worthless if they don't work properly. In the Falcon, flooring the accelerator sent the temperature gauge off the scale and the fuel gauge went into spasms. The speedometer was wildly optimistic and the only instrument with any pretence at accuracy was the tachometer. I would also have liked to see an oil pressure gauge.

The column switches were a delight to use, despite the intermittent self-cancelling of the indicators. The heater pushed out great gusts of hot air, making it useful when the hood was down. The wipers seemed afflicted with some kind of palsy and staggered across the screen in an alarming fashion. Also the washer switch, placed in a pendant position centrally below the dash, was in the ideal place to rake the back of the hand when going for third. Apart from this, the washers worked admirably as did the hooters, although wind tones would have had more class. Another niggle was that it was impossible to lock the passenger door from inside, the only way being to use the key from outside.



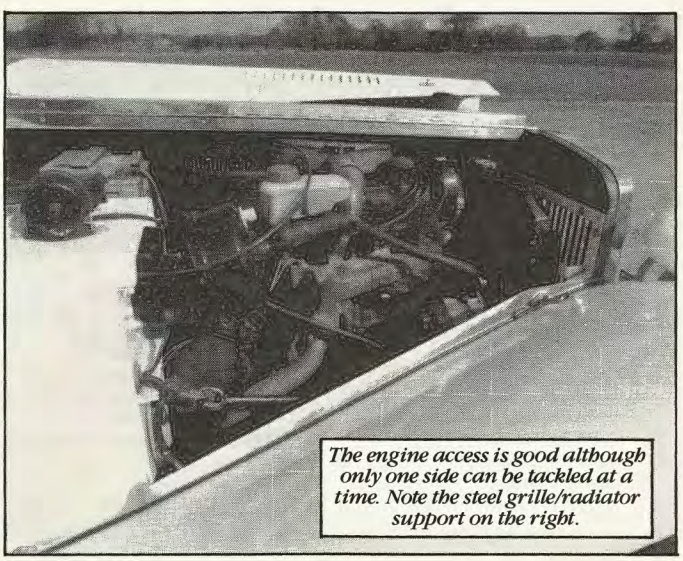
The interior is well laid out and attractive. The capacious glovebox is lockable and the controls are all to hand. The seats lacked side support.

At the End of the Day

Of all the Falcon' attributes three things stood out. Firstly, its apparent universal appeal. From kids of three to pensioners, everyone who saw it, liked it. The second thing was the ludicrous expressions it generated on the faces of drivers as it swept by in the fast lane. Imagine their surprise at being overtaken at speed by an apparent anathronism. The third was its overall competence as a day to day car. So much so that I was genuinely sorry to give the car back, it wasn't perfect, but what is? Nevertheless I would have one for myself.

I have already mentioned the thorough way in which the donor components are used. The prices, considering the quality of the car, are similarly attractive. The stage 1 kit comprising the chassis, door aperture mouldings, doors (complete with hinges and anti burst locks), rear floor, rear spring mountings, dashboard, steering extension, rear body panel moulding, fasteners and instructions cost £1087 + VAT. This enables you to go beyond the rolling chassis stage. The stage 2 kit, consisting of bonnet and body panels, bonnet hinge, wings, boot, boot lid and hinge, front tray, windscreen, glass and sealing rubbers, GRP radiator shell, heater air box, light mouldings and lenses, badge, aluminium trim and wing piping costs a further £900 + VAT. If bought simultaneoulsy, the price is knocked down to £1941 + VAT. The necessary extras include a de-luxe double duck hood in black at £129.50, or a mohair hood in black, beige or brown, at £149.25. The hood frame costs £21, the sliding windows, £64.90 each. The bumpers (unchromed) are £35.20 each and the radiator grille in steel, again unchromed, costs £69.50. All these prices are subject to VAT.

To my mind, those prices make for a pretty reasonable deal, all things considered. If you feel the same way send £1 for a brochure to **JBA Engineering Ltd, Unit 56B, Bradley Hall Trading Estate, Bradley Lane, Standish, Nr. Wigan, Greater Manchester. Tel: 0257 424549.**



The engine access is good although only one side can be tackled at a time. Note the steel grille/radiator support on the right.