

New Body And Soul

Exclusive

There's a great deal of homespun wisdom in the oft' uttered phrase: "If it ain't bust, don't fix it." But there's nothing to stop you fiddling with it. The latest bout of artistic attention devoted to the Sylva triker Mk4 Clubmans has resulted in a new body shape and a new name: Phoenix. But there's more than a fresh form behind the company's thinking.

Backed into a corner Sylva's Jeremy Phillips readily admits: "When I drive a Sylva purely for pleasure, my favourite is the Mk4 Striker every time."

The Mk4 Striker, later christened the Clubmans, was introduced in 1989 primarily as a more aerodynamically effective body for the existing Striker spaceframe chassis and running gear.

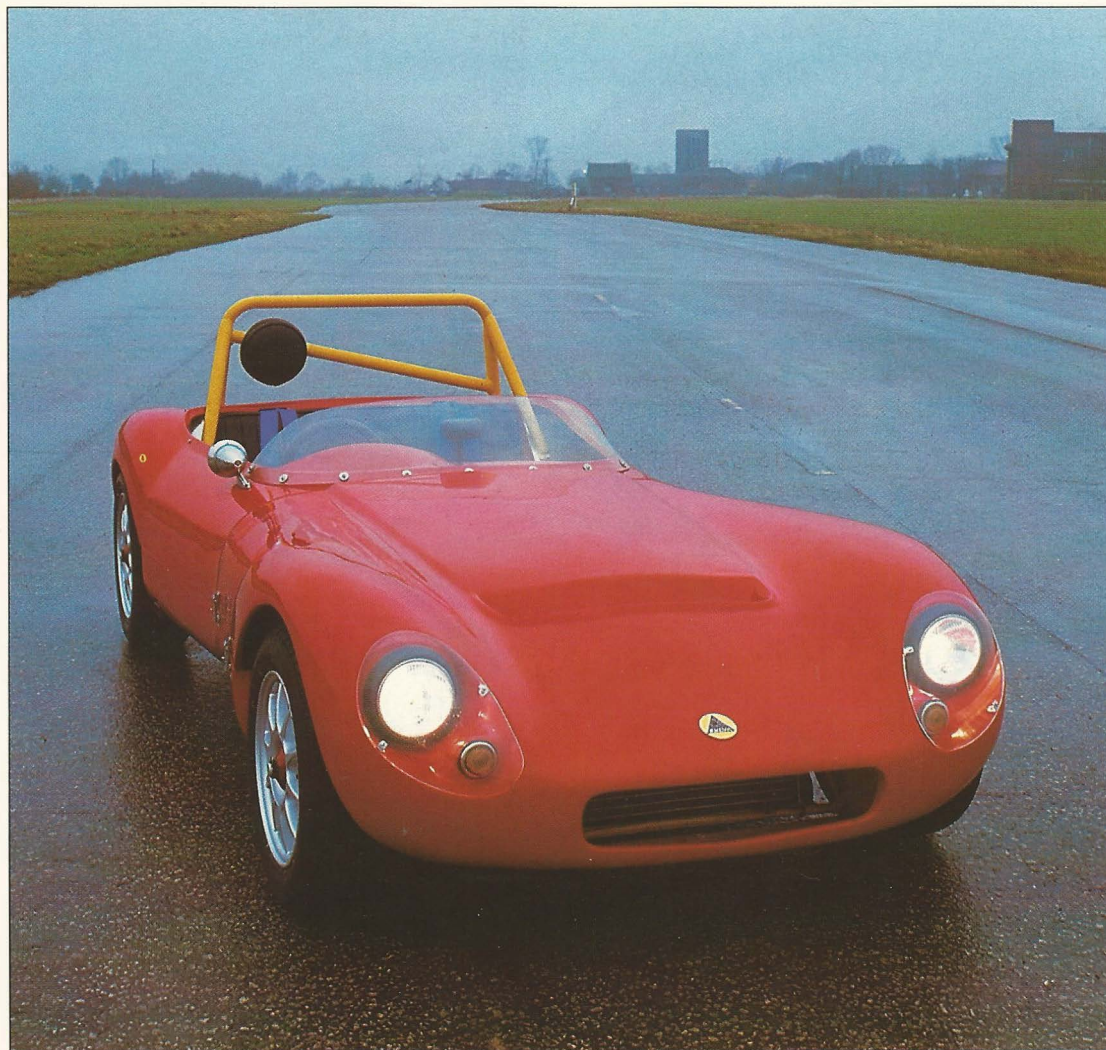
It was instantly successful, giving Brian Healey the first of his two, back-to-back 750 Motor Club kit car racing championships and the first of

six since collected by the Louth-based marque. Already a very capable design, the advent of all-enveloping bodywork added around 15mph to the speed at the end of a decent straight, over the open-wheeled Mk3. This highly desirable performance property has made the full-bodied form the racer's choice such that most kit car-aware observers tend to regard the model as a race car and ignore it as a road-going proposition.

Since 1989, Sylva has sold around eighty Mk4 Clubmans kits alongside the open-wheeled but highly individual, Seven-inspired Striker Mk2. In the meantime the company has developed the theme of the Mk4 to produce first the Fury - since sold to Fisher Sports Cars - and latterly the Stylus - since sold to Specialist Sports Cars. The company has also recorded another success with the front-wheel-drive, Fiesta Mk1 based Jester recently shipped out to Harlequin Autokits.

In the aftermath of this little lot, Jeremy Phillips once more turned his attention to the Mk4 with a view to enhancing its attraction as a road car without undermining its suitability for track work. The result is a new, but clearly similar body style now referred to somewhat more easily as the Sylva Phoenix.

So what's new? A casual glance will instantly reveal a more curvaceous treatment front and rear. Indeed, this pen-work forms the vast majority of the new look. At the front the body has been narrowed by 2½". When the design switched from Vauxhall double wishbones and inclined dampers to the company's well known upper rocking arm and inboard damper design, the front track was reduced by the



same amount. The company just didn't get round to altering the body, with the result that the front wheels nestle deep within the front arches. This has been put right.

SVA has also played a part in the new style as the lights have been moved to a location that complies with the positional requirements. They are smaller diameter, 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ " round units with the indicators properly fitted rather than just popped onto the body seemingly as an afterthought. The Perspex covers finish the job smoothly as well as maintaining the sweeping line of the front wings.

The centre section is unchanged but the scratch-resistant screen has been given a new profile that, when bent and fitted to the car at a reduced rake, gives it about $\frac{3}{4}$ " more height in the centre as well as at the sides. This offers increased protection and much reduced wind buffeting for the occupants over the wind-lashing dished out by traditional flat screens.

At the back, the stubby spoiler has been replaced by a rounded tail with moulded locations for the individual rear



Above: If anything, the new Phoenix is an even better looking car than its curvaceous forbear, the Striker Mk4 Clubmans.

lights. As well as a more shapely rump, the car is also some 5" longer behind the rear wheels thus increasing available boot space even if access currently remains restricted from behind the seats. That said, if public reaction follows the route Jeremy hopes for, an opening boot is a future option.

Though internally the car still shuns trim, it can be made comfortable and cossetting. Some people may view the lack

of a full screen and hood as a deterrent to road use but Sylva doesn't see it that way.

Says Jeremy Phillips: "In Sylva's extensive experience, very few of these cars ever really use their hoods. They are driven in good weather and don't really need a hood. In addition, lacking doors, they are difficult to get into with a hood in place."

There's the added fact that a proper hood would require a full screen, which would take the car too close to the Fury now produced by Kent-based Fisher Sports Cars. But he does have a point even if you don't agree.

On the mechanical side, Jeremy hasn't interfered with a winning formula, so the tried, tested and thoroughly proven rocker arm front and live axle rear stays exactly the same, the latter located by the company's unique and supremely effective twin longitudinal Watts linkages. However, engine options have been looked at.

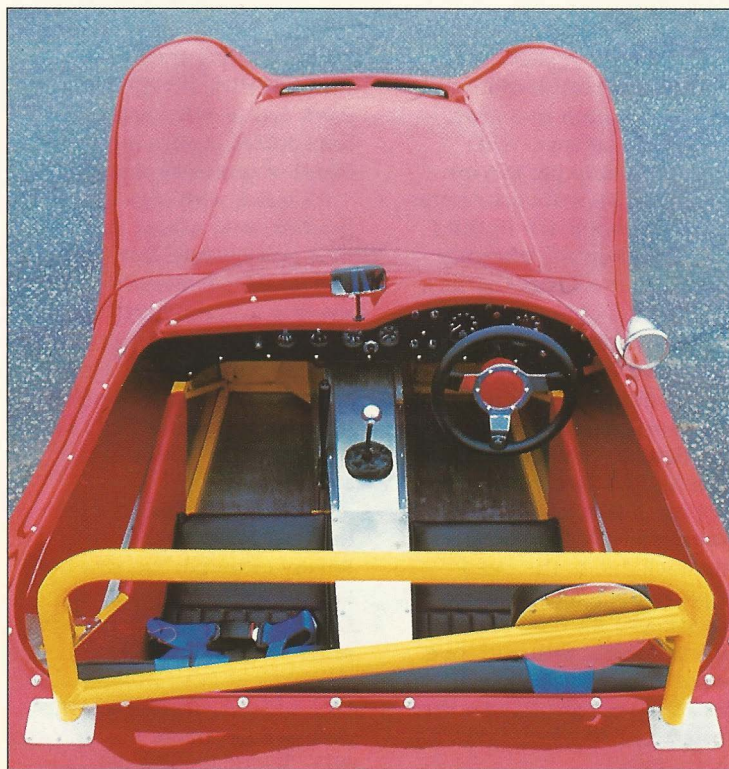
The Sylva frame has provided a welcoming home for mechanical refugees from Ford, Fiat, Toyota, Mazda and others. Though most four-pot, normally-aspirated engines will fit, the popularity, performance and affordability of Ford's crossflow and especially Pinto, as well as Fiat's beautifully engineered twin-cam, seems set to continue. But in keeping

with the updating of the car, Jeremy is keen to offer the option of updating the mechanical package.

Top of the list has to be Ford's Zetec unit, especially as the 750 Motor Club has introduced a Zetec-powered class for this year's kit car championship where outside it, twin-cams are not permitted. The standard EFI equipment won't fit under the smooth bonnet but throttle body injection is an option for meeting SVA emission standards. A Sylva plenum chamber could be on the cards but the company would need advance orders to cover the tooling and development costs.

In addition there is the current mechanical flavour of the month in Rover's potent K-series. A Vauxhall twin-cam, 16-valve motor has also taken Jeremy's fancy while the 1.9-litre unit from the Citroen BX and Peugeot 309 is another strong contender. This is the engine fitted to the new Pell Genesis featured elsewhere in this issue and is an all-aluminium unit available in 8-valve (130bhp) and 16-valve (160bhp) forms. It is also a fuel injected unit but, due to being canted over in a standard installation, the EFI equipment all fits beneath the Sylva's smooth bonnet. One customer has even fitted a Honda V-TEC.

Below: As you'd expect from a serious road racer, Phoenix interior is purely functional. Driving position is spot-on.





Above: New headlamp apertures now include side lights.

Below: Demonstrator is powered by a mildly tuned, Weber-fed Lancia twin-cam offering some 150bhp. Equates to 290bhp per ton!



Though seeking to stress the Phoenix's credentials as a road machine, its dynamic versatility and natural aptitude for competition remain intact. The company offers a lightweight chassis shaving 30kgs off the standard weight by dropping from 16 to 18 gauge tube. You can also go for a featherweight body allowing dedicated racers to slim down to around 510kgs, which is lighter than the open-wheeled Mk2.

Two cars are being built for racing, one to be campaigned by the factory's Mark Arden while new style body panels are a straight fit onto existing Mk4 Clubmans cars, so some existing cars may also carry the new shape. But what of road use?

Though test driven on Ireland's endlessly challenging Mondello Park circuit, the demonstrator was in standard road trim and powered by a mildly tuned, twin Weber-fed Lancia twin-cam knocking out an estimated 150bhp. The only concession to a track was the well scrubbed-in Yokohama rubber.

Mondello Park is a very tricky circuit that tests both driver and machine. It's also a circuit that takes a long time to know, but the Phoenix rose to the challenge of increasingly quick exploration.

Out of the pits and onto the latter half of the start-finish straight has you building speed on the approach to a wide, right-hand hairpin. With around 290bhp per ton on board, the Phoenix accelerates quickly to approach in third gear. A dab on the instantly responsive brakes as you tuck into the left of the track and drop to second sets the car up.

The Escort's quick rack creates minimal wheel-work as you power it round, and grip is excellent as you avoid the tail slide and go back on the gas. Not too much, as you don't want to use the whole width of the track due to the rapid approach of a left-hander. On the straight it's hard on the power, fourth, fifth and then braking hard for a difficult, double-apex right-hander the, correct line of which takes time to master.

Down the straight on the other side you're approaching a tricky left and need to go very deep into the corner to come out on the correct line for the almost instant right. The Sylva's brakes and steering are well up to the job, whilst the Fiat's well spaced cogs allow you to keep the motor up on the cams and provide the urge when it's needed.

As a spectator, the following straight seems a decent stretch but in the car you're almost immediately over a brow and into the heavily-rubbered braking area for a looping hairpin that brings you back onto the main straight. Again, the line is difficult to see from in the car but the Phoenix is a forgiving machine that makes seemingly endless allowance for driver error.

Second time round, I think I'm in the groove and set off at a harder gallop. Predictably I'm not, and the first hairpin prompts a lurid tail-slide that has the car in the wrong position for the following left. Though it's no way to win a race, it's a constructive experience that heavily underlines the Sylva's supreme balance and natural controllability.

It's an easy, enjoyable and thoroughly rewarding car to drive no matter what the environment especially as, being a road car, this machine boasts nothing trick in its componentry. It's all standard Ford, Fiat or Sylva parts, and the cocktail creates the perfect blend of sports car credentials.

It's quick with a good gearbox, well spaced ratios, a neat gear-change, fast, positive and unerringly accurate steering, instantly responsive brakes, brilliant balance and natural controllability. It's great and, even if it had poured in torrents, the absence of a hood would not have marred the experience.

Prices for the Phoenix kit have yet to be finalised but Jeremy estimates the new body kit will be the right side of £1000. If you want to find out more you can contact the company at Sylva Autokits, KCI, Unit A11 Downlands Business Park, Manby, Louth, Lincs LN11 8UX. Tel: 01507 328809.