

Exclusive!

SYLVA JESTER

Fun: Pure & Simple

Sylva Autokits latest offering to the kit car world finally hits the road and Which Kit?'s editor gets a first taste of what the little funster is all about.

WHEN ONE TAKES A MOMENT TO consider it, Sylva's main man, Jeremy Phillips, has been one of the most prolific kit car designers of recent years. Seven different models in the last fourteen years doesn't even take into account a variety of different suspension options offered on each of the various models. For many years the most successful of these was the pretty little Sylva Striker, a

sevenesque roadster with enough individuality to give it a clear and separate identity.

The highly successful Fury came next and is currently going strong under the active guidance of new custodian, Fisher Sportscars. In fact, Jeremy has always had a habit of selling off his designs after a year or so of marketing them under his own wing. The early Sylva Leader went the same way as the Fury and







the more recent Sylva Stylus has also changed hands to Specialist Sports Cars. Only the Striker has remained under the watchful eye of Phillips since it was first launched in 1986. But if there is one thing that has linked all Sylva cars over the years, it has been their unquestionable ability out on the track.

And so we come to the latest creation to come out of the Lincolnshire based workshops. Not only is the Sylva Jester the first car not designed in-house but it is also the first Sylva to be designed without competition use firmly in mind. So what was the design and marketing criteria behind the wacky looking Jester? First and foremost was affordability. A £2000 on the road price was the target with dirt-cheap running costs also a high priority. Next up on the list was achieving a unique marketplace. Forget replicas, the new Sylva would have no competitors by being totally unique in its styling and appeal. The new car would have to tap into an as-yet un-chartered market.

To achieve the former, ie low cost, immediately set its own parameters within which the company had to work. We're talking one-donor which is produced in large enough numbers and for long enough that old examples are readily available for no money. Reconditioning had to be cheap and engine capacity low enough to ensure affordable insurance for even the youngest drivers. A Mk1 Fiesta fits the bill perfectly. Keeping costs down also meant producing a kit that was easy and quick to build. A one-piece GRP tub, simple chassis and a mechanical configuration which mirrors that of the donor were also of great importance.

Next up was the design. Simplicity and fun were the order of the day and doodles in Jeremy's note pad show his initial thoughts were heading down a modern beach buggy route. Something like a cross between a beach buggy and a Mini Moke. It was at this juncture that Jeremy met Huw McPherson, whose brother, Jamie, had recently ordered a Striker kit. Huw was a design graduate from the Sheffield Hallam University and, on hearing of Jeremy's idea for a new project, offered to draw up some ideas of his own. With guidelines from Jeremy, the end result seemed to fit the bill perfectly and Jeremy suddenly found himself developing a new

car designed by someone other than himself.

The end result is the Sylva Jester you see here. Love it or otherwise, there can be no doubting the design is certainly out on a limb (perhaps even out to lunch!). No impersonations of 'sixties heart throbs here please. The Jester is all new and looking to party.

The one important feature of the car you slightly lose in photos is the car's tiny weeny proportions - it looks like a car that has been in some automotive cannibal's shrinking potion. The wheelbase is some 10cms shorter than the already petit Mk1 Fiesta on which it is based while the body overhang is zero out back and conservative in the front. This car is small - which only adds to the fun factor of actually taking it out onto the highway rather than around your mum's living room.

So how does it all hang together? Under the fibreglass bodywork is a chassis of typical Sylva integrity. In essence it's a semi spaceframe affair with sheet metal floor and front bulkhead plus a boxed sheet metal crossmember for added side-impact protection. As always, it's impressively put together and promises to make the most of the humble donor components...

Mk1 Fiestas are only available these days at what we'd call donor car prices. You'd struggle to pay more than £500 for a top notch example which is really too good to strip anyway. Much more common is £150 for a sensible donor car from which you'll be able to use most components with only minor reconditioning. For £25 Sylva bought a complete car the other day from which a reasonable selection of parts have been salvaged - not an ideal donor car, but invaluable for extra spares.

Like many front-wheel-drive cars, the Fiesta's whole front suspension and engine assembly can be removed from the car in one piece. There's no subframe to deal with, although a simple engine cradle is retained and bolts onto the chassis both in front and behind the engine. Nothing from this whole assembly requires



Top: Basic Corbeau bucket seats do the job. Surprising amount of storage space behind them. Long gear shift actually very comfortable to use. Above: Donor dash pod clearly visible.

modification or changing except for the front springs, which are simply replaced by the Fiesta's rear springs.

Out back there's a simple beam axle with one trailing arm per side plus a Panhard rod. The donor's cunning dampers are retained and have a unique double location onto the axle which allows for the single trailing arm to work effectively. Not surprisingly, you'll need a second set of rear springs to replace those put on the front.

Construction continues on this simple take-off/put-on route as pedals, pedal box, remote servo, steering, radiator, heater, gearlinkage and handbrake all fit without any extra fiddling. Even the Fiesta's dash pod slots in place on the Jester's dash and the donor's loom is a straightforward installation with minor fiddling required for the non standard lights etc. The demo car uses 13" Escort steel wheels but the Fiesta's 12" items can be fitted or, of course,

you could push the boat out and fit some flash alloys. As it stands, the Escort items are hardly going to break the bank while the 155x70 tyres are not exactly costly.

Engine options from the Fiesta are wide and varied, from a meagre 950cc onto a more acceptable 1100cc followed by 1300cc, 1300cc Sport and 1600cc XR2. They're all based around the venerable X-flow lump and the 1100cc version on the demo car proved that even the smaller options are well worth consideration. Don't forget, the Jester weighs in at well under 500kg, so even the 55 odd bhp of the demo car engine produces over 120bhp/ton!

For the day of our test it may have been sunny but it was also jaw-numbingly cold. Sylva has just developed a very tidy soft top for the car and some neat solid sidescreens should give it some real all-year-round practicality if so desired. The side screens weren't

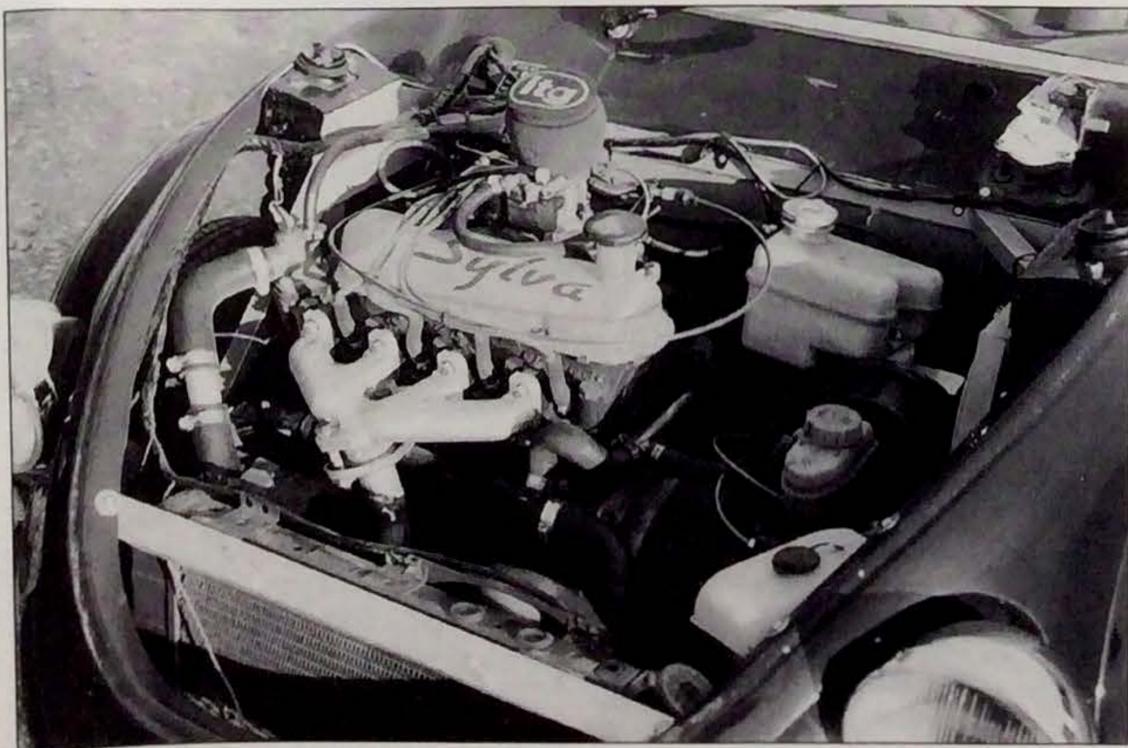
quite finished for our visit so initial impressions were had with just the hood on before finally removing even that for the real open-air feel. The things we do just to give you the whole story!

Getting in with the hood in place isn't half as tricky as one might expect of a car without conventional doors. The side sill is really quite low while access with the hood in place is pretty generous. Some cheap Corbeau buckets do a fine job and thankfully their position was pretty OK despite the lack of any seat runners. Instruments in the Fiesta dash pod are all plainly visible and the Ghia example fitted in this car features a rev counter unlike the more humble options.

Not surprisingly, the standard Ford pedals cause no problems and the long gear lever actually falls remarkably naturally to hand. Only the position of the steering wheel initially feels a little high and close to the driver, but as you get underway it all seems to fall into place. As far as trim goes, the demo car features some rubber matting in the footwells and simple vinyl trimmed side panels. We're never going to be talking plush and the matting really suits the jump in and go image.

The Fiesta's heater wasn't plumbed-in in time for our visit (damn!) but it fits a treat and should do much to warm up otherwise frozen occupants on a crisp winter's day. Surprisingly, there really is a reasonable amount of storage space behind the seats and under the rear body tub area.

Little 1100cc engine is loads of fun in the Jester. It also makes the car distinctly more insurance friendly than larger 1600cc lump. Everything that can possibly be retained from the donor car has been.



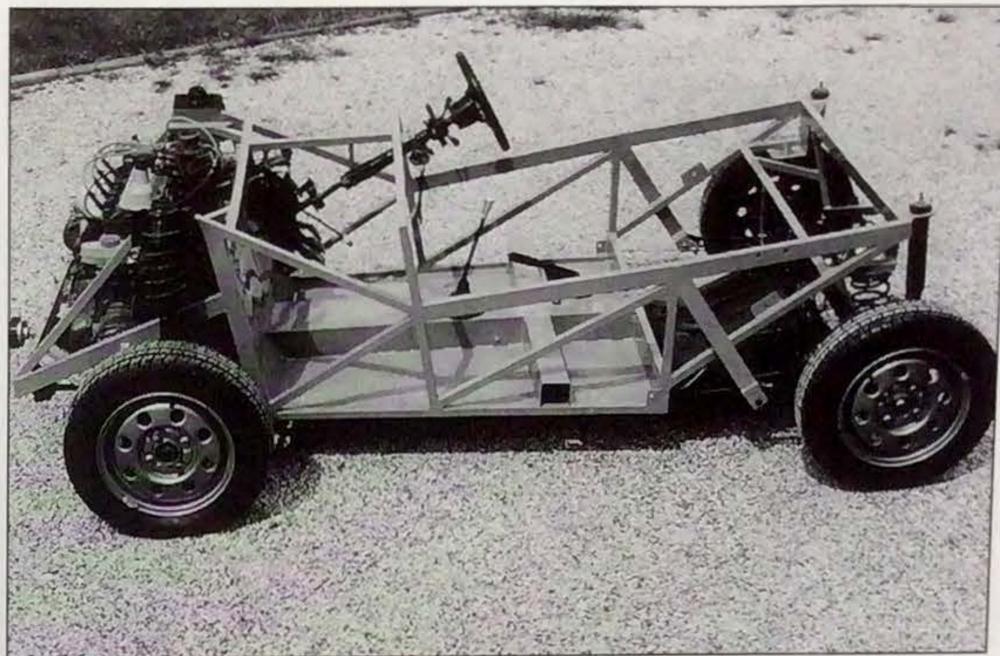
With some tipping seats, access to this would be pretty good, too.

Exiting through a shortened Fiesta exhaust, the 1100cc X-flow lump sounds willing enough. In a moment of rashness, Jeremy had a fancy camshaft dropped into it and has regretted the move ever since. The unit runs well enough but under full throttle seems to choke up a bit, which spoils one of the Jester's most endearing features - total thrashability!

Weighing the car equivalent of Kate Moss, the Jester makes the absolute most of every ounce of horsepower. First and second gears are snapped up in no time while third sees some real progress and fourth has you pounding through the speed limit. The gearing seems pretty spot on to us, with the 13" wheels giving a surprisingly realistic top speed.

With skinny little tyres and quite firm suspension one soon gets the hang of pushing the little Jester to its remarkably capable limits. A degree of body roll keeps the entertainment coming thick and fast while the skinny tyres can easily be overcome and resort to understeer if you push into a corner without thinking. However, the secret, as ever, is to make sure you're in the right gear to power on and pull yourself out of the bend. Get this sorted and the Jester sticks to the task like a trooper.

If there was a downside to the demo's otherwise user-friendly set-up it was in the steering, which lacked feel in these more important moments. A tad more adjustment in this department would greatly



Above: Jester chassis seems to work a treat. You can see how easy it would be to get to a rolling chassis stage without having to purchase a bodyshell. That can save valuable space in a small garage.

improve confidence in the early stages of a sortie, when the driver is a little more unfamiliar with the car.

Otherwise we're talking a serious grin machine of monster proportions. You only have to get in the Jester and you're pretty much guaranteed to have a smile on your face. Vicious wheel-spinning antics from take-off only add to the complete daftness of this micro-maniac. You can be a complete hooligan with this machine before you've even reached ten miles an hour. Which, of course, is another secret weapon in the Jester's impressive armoury. You simply don't have to be travelling at psychotic speeds in order to have a ball. With sensible gearing, a willing engine and flyweight bodyshell, the Jester makes complete use of every ounce of power for bargain basement prices and at speeds that would be mind-numbingly dull in a Mondeo. 50mph in the Jester is a complete hoot.

All of which reminded me of the terrific little Fiat 126 based Barchetta 595 which is now sadly no longer available. But where the Barchetta felt a little frail on the mechanical side, the Jester feels rock-solid, and where the Barchetta may as well of had no brakes at all, they were so bad, the Jester's servo assisted Fiesta items stop the tiny buzz-bomb in quick-smart fashion.

So what's it all going to cost you? While the first twenty kits have been offered at an introductory

£1200 inclusive of VAT (and there were still one or two available when we visited) the standard kit price will be £1220 + the dreaded VAT. However, to help spread the costs, Sylvia will happily supply you with just the chassis for £525 which will allow you to progress a long way towards completion before you have to order the body.

A quick walk around the demo car and we found ourselves looking at around £3000 (inclusive) to put something similar on the road. This included a number of options which a budget builder may either do himself or do without all together, plus the purchase of a reasonable donor car. For instance, powder coating at £130, factory to remove flash lines in the bodyshell for £40, soft top and doors at £232 (all plus VAT) could all be either done by the purchaser at home or avoided all together. There are other savings that could be made elsewhere and Sylvia's target of a basic car on-the-road for £2000 doesn't seem too far off the mark.

So it would certainly appear that Sylvia has largely achieved its initial aims when it tried to design this latest offering. There's certainly nothing like it in terms of individuality; it's cheap to build and insure; it certainly looks easy to construct and I'd be the last to say it wasn't a complete giggle to drive. More than that, it also handles remarkably well, has an excellent ride for such a short car and provides extraordinary performance from distinctly humble origins.

Yup, the Jester really is fun; pure and simple. For more information you can contact the company at **Unit A11, Downlands Business Park, Manby, Nr Louth, Lincolnshire LN11 8UX. Tel: 01507 328809.**