

RETRO REFINEMENT

With its heady mix of 'sixties styling and state-of-the-art Ford Zetec power, the SSC Stylus is a delight to drive as Richard Heseltine explains...





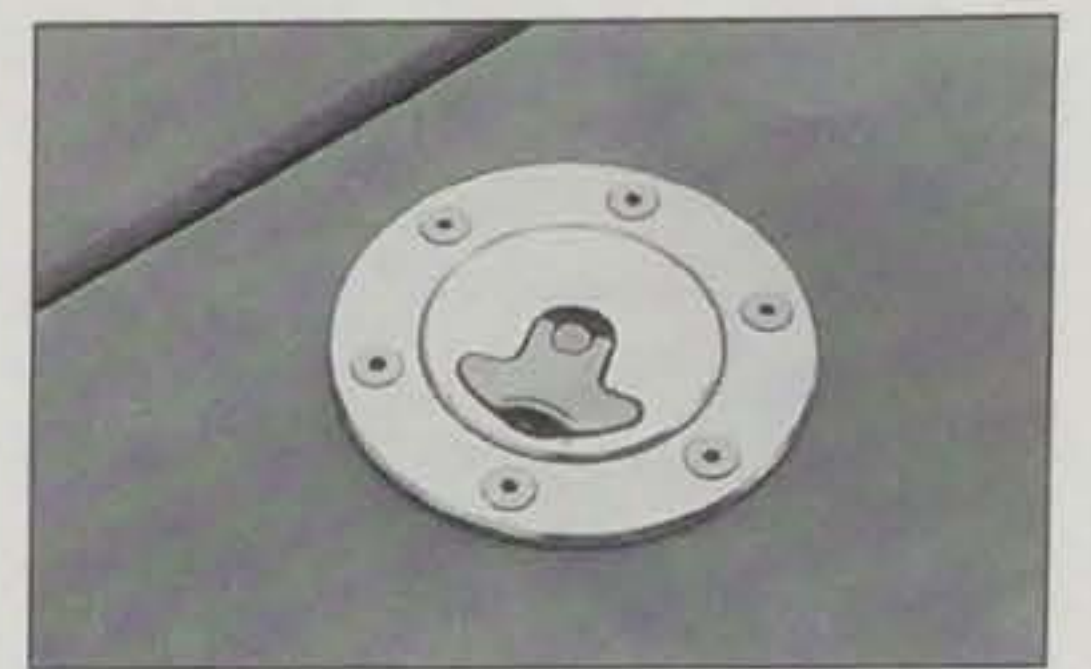
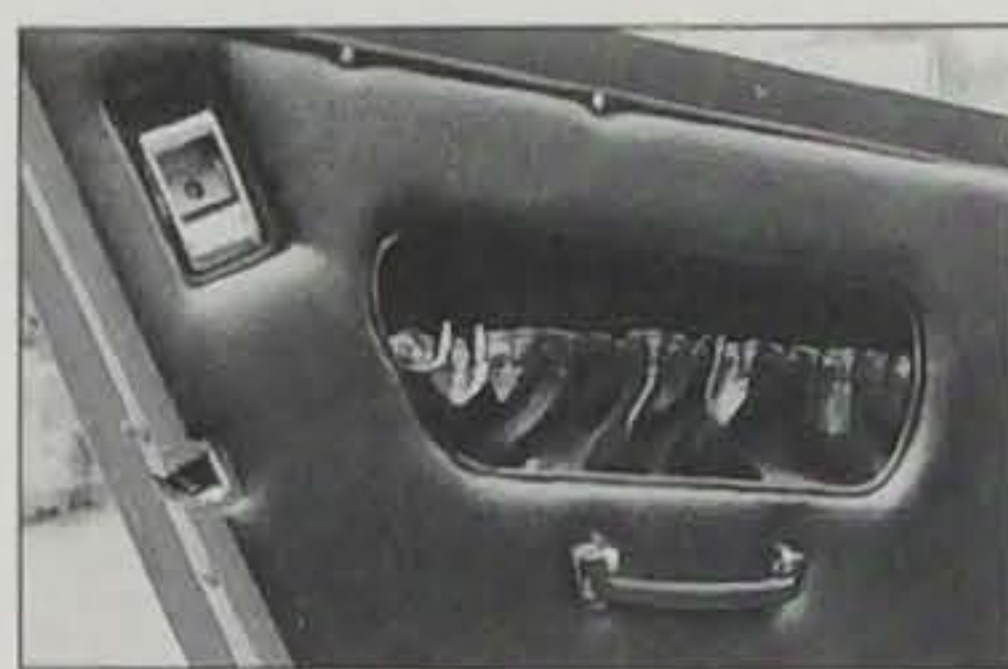




The Stylus' pretty visage is pure 'sixties, the theme being carried through to the spartan but comfortable cockpit. Lotus Elan owners should recognise the windscreen's origins!



Ford Zetec power along with innumerable special touches only heighten the Stylus' appeal. Flush race-style filler cap a reminder of the car's competition background.



I've driven, the SPC sportster feels remarkably rigid and is beautifully controllable being an absolute hoot in action. God I love rear wheel drive!

In recent weeks, I have been fortunate enough to pilot all manner of production and kit form sports cars. In my humble and often ignored opinion, the Stylus is right up there in the handling stakes with the best of them and could certainly show most of the mainstream offerings a thing or two.

If the handling is impressive, then so is the ride. Unlike a number of other roadsters I could mention, the after-shock from traversing every bump isn't transmitted directly to one's posterior. At high speed, on rougher surfaces, the ride did get a tad choppy but not to any greater degree than should be expected from a car of this nature. Overall, the Stylus is an accomplished package which will run rings around just about anything. Excellent stuff.

If you get the impression that I was really rather smitten with the Stylus then you are absolutely right. I loved it. Peter Powell should be congratulated on taking a silk purse and turning it into an even better silk purse. The Zetec installation has added that additional edge of refinement to the car without sanitising its race-bred spirit.

Peter has a few other



proper timing gear, this figure should be significantly reduced. Make no mistake, this car is fast!

For a transmission, SPC chose that old stager, the 5-speed Sierra 'box. I'm no great fan of this unit but it gets the job done with very little fuss. I just wish it wasn't quite so notchy. Still, having spent the last five years driving Alfas, the Sierra unit is the very picture of precision and smoothness. A longer first gear would no doubt have aided initial acceleration still further. However, unless you're racing, who really cares that much about shaving a couple of tenths of the 0-60mph time?

During the test, I took the car onto the M25 where it was rock solid at seventy plus miles per hour, with nothing flapping, creaking or groaning. The side screens and Lotus Elan sourced windscreen kept buffeting at a minimum. Indeed, it was all really rather civilised.

The cockpit was snug but comfortable nonetheless. The upholstered GRP seats offered welcome lower back support but did flex around the shoulders under

hard cornering. The actual driving position proved to be just about as close to perfect as one can get. The stubby gearknob was ideally positioned as was the handbrake, out of harms way on the passenger side of the transmission tunnel.

The dashboard layout was simple enough but none the worse for that. The classic white on black instruments were easy to read even though the rev counter failed to register above 1000rpm during the test. Proper carpeting and trimmed door panels made the interior surprisingly salubrious.

Having got clear of the M25 and found some suitable B-roads, the Stylus was in its element. This car hunts out corners like a pig after truffles. The Escort Sport rack sends back all the right messages allowing the pilot to hustle this car through twists and turns with confidence. On entering a corner, the front end tucks in nicely, the tale being similarly obedient. It is possible to unstick the rear but the Stylus gives you about half an hour's warning before hand. As with every Jeremy Phillips penned car

developments in the pipeline including a fastback hardtop and a De Dion rear end arrangement. These additions should make the Stylus an even more attractive proposition for sports car fanciers.

The demonstrator cost in the region of £8000 to build but a lesser specification example could be on the road for significantly less. Nonetheless, £8000 for such a delightful car isn't overly excessive. At the time of my visit to SPC's works, there was a Stylus being equipped with £6000 of Raceline Zetec power, a machine turned aluminum dashboard and several one-off modifications. The complete build of this machine will probably work out to be in the region of a whopping £14,000. So the only real constraint to building a Stylus is the size of your wallet.

Whether you're looking for an affordable sportster or an out and out racer, contact Peter Powell at **Specialist Sports Cars Ltd, Unit 3 Grangefield Small Holdings, Woking Road, Guildford, Surrey GU4 7PU. Tel: 01483 577107.** You'll be glad you did.

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AS REGULAR READERS MAY recall, last year I had the great pleasure of playing with Andy Mariner's 2-litre Vauxhall powered Stylus. This was a delightful car with only one major flaw - it was pink. It was very pink. Indeed, so vivid was its hue that one needed to don sunglasses just to gaze upon it.

Worse still, it had the legend 'Penelope' emblazoned over its nose and perfectly formed rump. Driving this leery bolide through down town Guildford ranks as one of the most cringe-worthy experiences of my life. People didn't so much stare, they gawped, gasped, yelled and laughed out loud. My abiding memory of this brief sortie was of wishing for a spray gun and a few litre of British racing green paint...

This was Andy's pride and joy and, whilst I don't mean to cast dispersions on his efforts, he must have skin the thickness of a rhino's to take so much attention on board. Perhaps I'm just painfully self conscious. Whatever, I must admit that when the invitation came to test the new Specialist Sports Cars demonstrator I breathed an audible sigh of relief when informed that it wasn't pink; or yellow with mauve go-faster stripes; nor indeed any other God awful combination one can think of. Nope, the new test car is resplendent in a particularly fetching shade of Ferrari red and very pretty it looks too.

Company principle Peter Powell
Recent styling makeover has been successful though the tail light treatment could be a little tidier.

took over the Stylus project last summer and has since invested sizeable amounts of time and money making subtle changes that he hopes will only heighten the appeal of this already well regarded roadster. Andy's car was an early Stylus produced by the car's instigator, Jeremy Phillips, so I was intrigued as to whether I would spot the changes on the all new SPS effort straight away or whether some of them would elude me.

The already accomplished styling has come in for a minor makeover. In last year's feature, I commented that the Stylus was, perhaps, a little slab sided. Peter agreed and has since cut three angled air vents into the area of fibreglass between the front wheel and the doors, in the style of the seminal Ferrari 250 GTO. This serves an aesthetic function as well as a practical one, dissipating under bonnet heat build-up.

In that same article, I made some rather uncharitable remarks about the Porsche 356 headlights, stating that I infinitely preferred the optional Perspex ensconced 7-inch units that give the car an altogether different, mini TVR Griffiths look. Twelve months on and I've come full circle and prefer the 356 items. I must be getting old. No doubt next year I'll be hankering for a migraine inducing pink paint job and some black vinyl 'Penelope' stickers...

The dinky driving lights within the grille cavity look superb. The

simple mesh grill is new and helps protect these rather precariously placed units from being knocked off their perch by stones and such like. The frenched-in front indicators have been moved ever so slightly and are sourced from that old proverbial, the good old Mini. In addition, Ford Mondeo/Vauxhall Corsa oval side lights now take pride of place along the car's flanks.

The rear of the Stylus bears more than a passing resemblance to that fabled specialist classic, the Ginetta G4, which is no bad thing. The Austin Healey tail-lights have been retained for '97 but repositioned. The new arrangement does, at least to my eyes, look a tad fussy but each to their own. There's no external boot latch, entry being gained by

"No doubt next year I'll be hankering for a migraine inducing pink paint job and some black vinyl 'Penelope' stickers..."

pulling a small lever hidden within the cockpit. Similarly, the bonnet can only be opened in the same fashion.

The biggest changes over the Mariner car are underneath. Andy's car was essentially a Stylus prototype and used a Sylva/Fisher Fury chassis. The SPS demonstrator

uses a definitive Stylus frame which is substantially different. Basically, it's a semi-monoque in 16 gauge square section tube and 18 gauge sheet steel.

Running gear is largely Ford Escort derived with a live rear axle located on two long trailing arms, two leading arms and a Panhard rod along with adjustable coil-over dampers. An independent Sierra derived set-up is also available.

Front suspension till now has been via lower wishbones and upper rocking arms operating inboard adjustable coil spring dampers. In a recent development, the top rocker arm has been redesigned to take needle roller bearings complete with a grease nipple in an effort to prolong its life. The Vauxhall Chevette ball joint of old has been junked in favour of a more up date unit and all suspension bushes have been standardised.

Future developments on the suspension front include the use of a Sierra front stub axle instead of the current modified Escort item. This new tweak should make upgrading the braking system to something more exotic than the Escort discs that much easier, should you need extra stopping power.

Just to confuse matters, the car in the pictures uses a Mini Cooper system which might sound a tad inadequate but ultimately proved to be more than powerful enough. Weighing in at a paltry 680kgs, one doubts that one would need especially exotic anchors except for competition purposes.

On the engine front, it appears that Ford's 16-valve twin-cam Zetec unit is becoming increasingly popular amongst Stylus builders. Of the nineteen kits SPC have supplied in the last ten or so months, over half now boast this unit. Amazingly, the venerable Ford crossflow, so long a favourite with performance roadster types, hasn't had much of a look-in. Indeed, only two of SPC's customers have specified this unit. Toyota's Lotus inspired twin-cam lump and the delicious Fiat DOHC powerplant currently lie second and third respectively in the popularity stakes.

Peter is considering building a development car with a modern V6 motor, a Ford or Alfa Romeo unit being the most likely. As a rabid Alfista, I sincerely hope that he errs towards the latter. If nothing else, it would sound magnificent...

The Zetec unit in the SPC demonstrator is a little bit special, sporting a number of Raceline goodies. Estimated power is around 150bhp which is more than enough horses to hurl this flyweight bolide to some very naughty speeds. I managed the sixty miles per hour dash in around 6.5 seconds, although readily admit to not trying too hard. It's not my car after all. With slightly drier conditions and

