

DGT



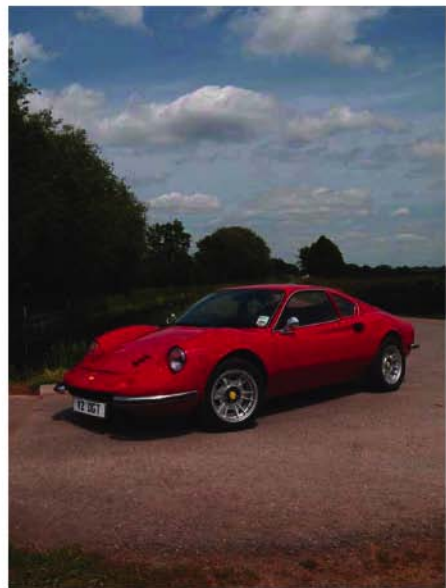
YOU WEAR IT WELL

If ever you needed proof that you can teach an old dog new tricks, here it is. The DGT has mutated from a Fiat / Lancia based kit to an MR2 Mk2 based panel transformation and it's none the worse for the experience. Ian Hyne welcomes it back.

You'd think that after the production of some 200 cars and 22 years, John Hurst would have by now satisfactorily scratched the itch that initially drove him to producing a Ferrari Dino replica but not a bit of it. After a period of gainful self-employment, he has happily abandoned the daily commute and the world of commercial property to repair to his workshop, dust off the tools and once again take to producing cars. Of course, in the years of his absence, the kit car world has changed but not to be outdone, so has the DGT and the car you see pictured is very different from the last one produced. Not only is it different, it's simpler and cheaper to build and, depending on your point of view, better. Not only that but most kits come to the end



The cabin is more thinly disguised than transformed but replica seats, instrument binnacle and discretely padded glovebox set the right tone and look the part.



No matter what it's based on, the Dino remains a gorgeous looking car. It's not yet quite as polished as the more modern MR2-based replicas but it will very soon get there.

of their lives when falling demand undermines their commercial viability but not as with the DGT for which demand remains buoyant due to the iconic nature of the car it emulates.

It was a happy accident of dimensions that led to the prototype JH Classics DGT back in the late eighties when Lotus enthusiast, Dave Merryless, was engaged in the restoration of a Lotus Europa and noticed the track and wheelbase was pretty much identical to that of another of his favourite cars, the Dino. It was another co-incidence that he knew of a Dino that had been stripped for restoration thus a deal was done to take a body mould. Unfortunately, the company commissioned to do the work were a bunch of cowboys who failed to do it, when Dave had done the job himself, nicked the moulds and advertised a kit for sale, using pictures of an original car in their advertising. Ex-army-officer recently returned to civvy street, John Hurst, was one of those who took the bait but when he discovered he'd bought a box of trouble he didn't give up but resolved to sort out the mess. The cowboys having disappeared, John set to work on the body and got Niall Johansen at Swindon Sportscars to create the Fiat/Lancia based tubular, backbone chassis to accept the classic twin-cam mounted amidships. The car was pretty well an instant hit and over the next few years, around 200 cars found enthusiastic homes. Near did it stop at the original Dino as further development additionally produced the open-top Spyder and targa-roofed GT5 versions.

What went wrong? It's a long story that's covered on the JH Classics website but suffice to say that John Hurst emerged with his honour and reputation utterly intact after which he made a very successful car-

reer change into commercial property. But all things come and John is essentially a hands-on sort of bloke. His greatest enjoyment in the world of commercial property was refurbishing derelict buildings, restoring properties of architectural merit and enjoying the warm glow of satisfaction that comes from a tricky job well done. That is also made money was the cream on the cake and, having tired of the daily motorway commute, he has forsaken the world of big business to return to the cottage industry environs of his workshop in the garden of his idyllic rural home and once again busy himself with the world of sports cars for which he's always harboured a strong affection, Alfas, Mini Coopers, a Morgan 4/4 and a Maserati 3500 having long ago benefitted from his ministrations that were honed on military tanks. However, looking at the figures involved, it rapidly became clear that producing the car in its original form would be an expensive undertaking for both manufacturer and kit builder but a little lateral thinking caused him to draw the same conclusion as Dave Merryless when looking at the Toyota MR2 Mk2. The track and wheelbase were more or less right, the shape was right too. Indeed, the MR2 has often been referred to as the 'poor man's Ferrari' and once your attention is drawn to a few specific styling details of the car, it's not hard to see why. Indeed many road testers at the time remarked on the possibility of Dino inspiration in the Kanutshi Arima penned MR2 Mk2 as well as in the general side profile.

But it's not just the Toyota's shape that seals the deal; the car comes with excellent dynamic credentials to cement its strong attraction and total suitability. For a start it has the correct mechanical layout of mid-mounted, transverse engine with a useful boot behind it. OK, it's not a quad-cam V6 but don't forget, the Dino is a sixties car since when engine technology has advanced immeasurably. The Dino V6 first appeared in the 206 in 1968 with a 2-litre, all-aluminium, 65° V6 developing 160 bhp @ a lardy 8,000 rpm. Production



Replica heater slide controls and switches on centre dash are dummies. There's no Prancing Horse on the wheel boss or anywhere else as the car never carried them. It was marketed as a Dino.



The 2-litre 16-valve, 35-0C engine develops 158 bhp although later cars had more power (up to 172 bhp). The turbo models were not sold in Europe but there are plenty of grey imports around.





Just like its inspiration, the DGT retains its practicality with a transverse engine with a decent boot behind it. It's like your choice of golf clubs or the weekly shopping.

lashed only a year before the arrival of the 246 with the engine enlarged to 2.4-litres, now with an iron block and developing an increased 195 bhp @ 7,600. The Toyota's 2-litre 3S-CE four-cylinder may lack a little in standard bhp but earlier cars developed 158 bhp and later ones up to 172 while the advances of fuel injection and electronic engine management produce greater torque and sharper throttle response whilst making it all more accessible and usable.

Next comes handling and roadholding. Like many cars, the MK2 MK2 improved with age. The longer tail upset the perfect balance of the MK1 and constituted part of the reason for the early MK2's quickly acquired reputation for sudden back-end breakaway, especially in corners when combined with a 158 bhp shove and brakes that were regarded as on the weak side. It was introduced in 1989 but 1991 heralded the advent of the Revision 2 model that got larger wheels, up from 14" to 15 and bigger brakes which effectively tamed the beast. A Revision 3 model came in 1993 that gained power (172 bhp) as well as solid torque that did much to increase its pace. Add in a smooth ride, very slick gear shift and very direct steering that was power assisted from the Revision 2 onwards, and you have all the essential ingredients for a hugely entertaining, rewarding and visually attractive modern sports car – but, if you're reading this with any degree of serious interest, you don't need me to tell you it can be even more visually attractive with a new suit, which is what inspired JH Classics.

The Pininfarina styled Dino is a classic shape, the 206 and 246 being visually identical save for the 60 mm longer wheelbase of the 246, and unlike other models of the big F, both real and replica, you'll notice there isn't a Prancing Horse anywhere in sight. That's not a concession to

Ferrari's feelings but merely to the truth as the car was marketed as a Dino with no mention of Ferrari. Why?

As ever it was to do with industry politics which, in order to homologate Ferrari's new V6 engine for competition use, required 500 units to have been manufactured.

That figure was approaching Ferrari's total annual production so the answer was to fill the engine to Fiat's flag-ship sports car, the Dino. Fiat also made the engines and, despite Ferrari's claim of 180 bhp for the engine, all were identical and made on the same production line and the power output was 160 as quoted for the Fiat.

And why Dino? Alfredo Ferrari was Enzo's only son who, with an excellent aptitude for engineering, was groomed to take over his father's company but sadly he died from muscular dystrophy aged just 24 and the Dino (affectionate diminutive of Alfredo) was named in his memory – and like the car that bore his name, that memory has endured.

The JH Classics conversion is very well executed with top quality GRP panels. There's a front end combining the nose and wings with a separate valence panel and a bonnet. Open it and through you see the Toyota's familiar mechanical furniture, like all the good quality panel conversions, it's impossible to see where MK2 ends and DGT begins. At the back again, a single panel accounts for the rear end, wings and three-quarter panels with a separate bootlid and engine cover. Finally come the two doorskins. There's minimal use of filler involved to feather the new panels into those of the MK2 and, once the point goes on, you really can't see the join while the visual effect is as artistically accomplished as the original ever was. Also, the MK2's target-roofed versatility allows the produc-



tion of a GTS version which will be the next car built.

Internally, the donor car makes its presence felt rather more strongly and while the trim disguise may not banish all traces of MK2, it certainly does a credible and creditable job of creating the required atmosphere. JH Classics have created Dino looking seats that fit to the MK2 runners. They've made Dino-style door trim panels which carry the Toyota electric window controls and door lock buttons, they've recreated the binnade around the instrument cluster, added to distinctive padded section on the passenger side and, between the two, have added replica heater side controls and switches although they are dummies. The tunnel they can do nothing about but as I say, what they have done creates the right feel and the urge is to see whether that feel translates to driving it.

Looking at it is pure delight but you will spot the slight muddle where the chrome strip goes a little away around the rear three-quarter windows as well as the leading edge of the bonnet being a little proud but these things only stand out because the quality of other panel kits is so good now that builders are looking for maximum authenticity. Indeed, the quality of this car is excellent which is why the small flaws are so noticeable. They'll get it too but this is the prototype car and as the song says,

'things can only get better'. But all the essentials are there including the unique chrome door handles although you push them down to operate the MK2's door release mechanism rather than pull them outwards as per the pukka job. Slide into the seat and the fantasy is maintained as

the dashboard works its magic. Of course, as you become familiar with the surroundings, the small flaws emerge, but they all relate to the new trim panels and the seams which aren't as straight or professional as they might be. However, all is forgiven when you twist the key for, included in the kit is a stainless steel exhaust system that transforms the MK2's normal burble with a full throated grumble that increases its effect on your senses as the revs climb without ever becoming too loud. It's a classic sound track to accompany the engine's excellent performance which combines with the car's solid feel and the sensations of what it looks like to create a true sports car experience of which you'll never tire.

Is it better than the old Fiat-based kit? I suppose that very much depends on the quality of build and where some are always better than others, the MK2 base will create a far better and more uniform base from which all builders will be able to achieve the desired dynamic result, that of the car's aesthetics being dependent purely on the car, patience and skill of its panel transformation. So is it cheaper? Absolutely Yes.

MK2 prices vary widely but certainly well under £ will secure a cracker while John has recently acquired a peach of a top-top car for the forthcoming GTS for so you need to look well for the right car. The after, the body kit, lighting pack, bumpers and brightwork, interior and dash, exhaust and fuel pack, ancillary parts and wheels are offered in separate packs which purchased together, come to

to that you need to add the cost of the donor, tyres, paintwork and lowering



The front compartment is all business with the spare wheel, tools, master-cylinders and electrics but there's still room for a few odds and ends.

spring. Full details of the pricing, kit packs and contents are given on the company website along with a host of more detailed information and many photographs. Though there exists opportunity for criticism of this particular car, the points raised are minor and will be put right. Indeed, having reported on the very first DGT and then subsequently followed its evolution and success, I can improve to the continual development and improvement of the car as it went along and I am fully confident that this car will follow the same evolutionary path. That said, John doesn't intend to flood the market, nor does he want to; rather he's looking to build half a dozen cars a year and hopefully a similar level of kit sales and, judging by the undiminished admiration for the Dino form, the all-round excellence of the MK2 as a donor and the excellent pricing of the new kit, I think he could just be successful.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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