

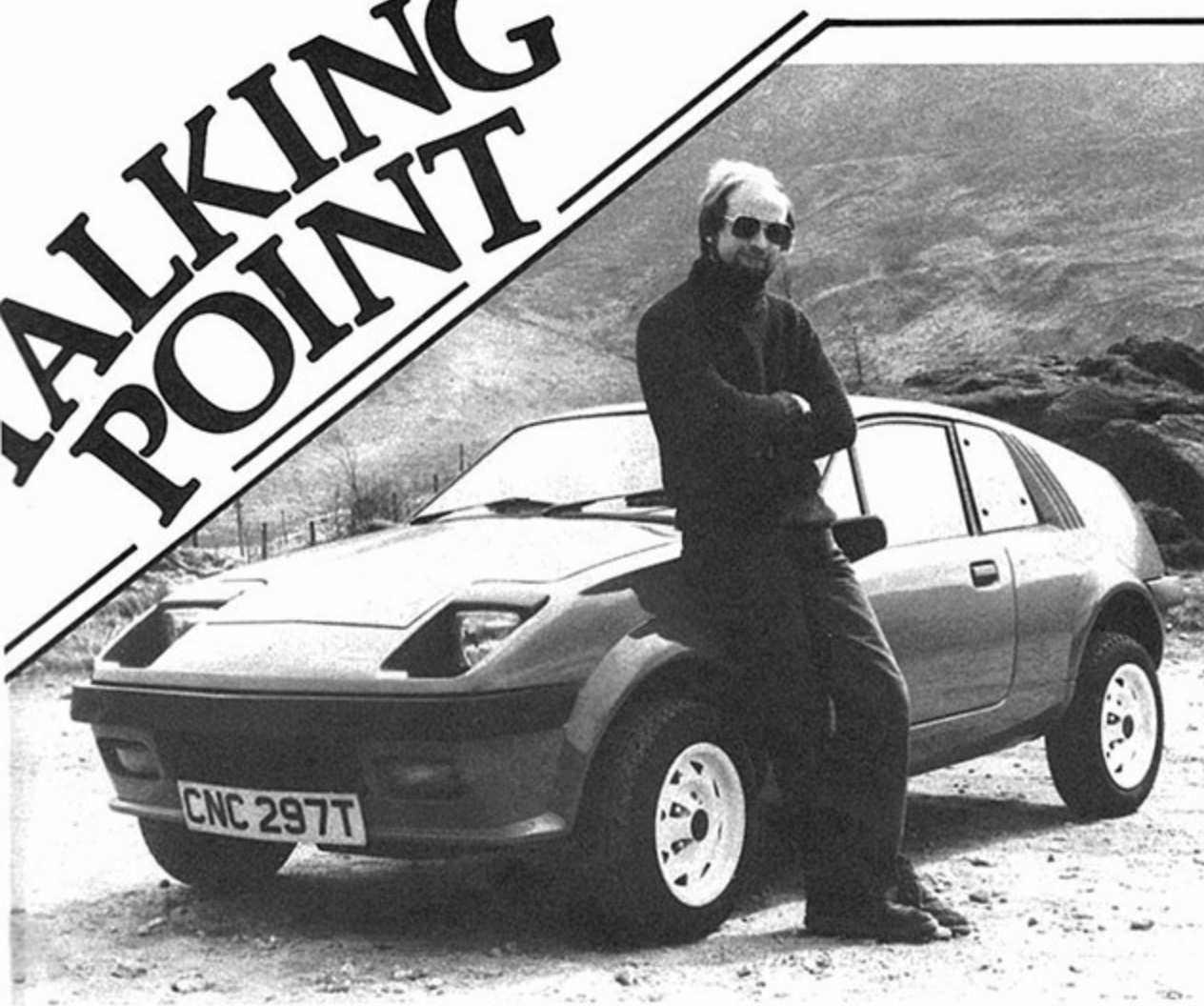
SUMMER 1980
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ALTERNATIVE CARS



**Ginetta refreshed
Marcos-detailed study
Midas-kit car for the 80s?
Drive something
different-complete guide**

TALKING POINT



To start with, Harold, tell me briefly about your motor industry experience.

Prior to the Mini Marcos, I got a degree in Mechanical Engineering from Southampton University and then joined Leyland as a graduate engineer at the age of 22. Leyland in those days wasn't what it is today. It was a most peculiar organisation, and one got terribly bogged down in systems. I ended up in the Research and Development department at Jaguars, and after a couple of years there, it became apparent that there was just no future. It was the old business of, you know, you stay in this grade until you're x years old, and then you'll get promoted. It doesn't matter how good or bad you are – that's where you stay. It didn't seem to be the future for me.

But it gave you a good solid grounding?

Oh, absolutely, yes. It gave me a good solid start with motor cars, and also showed me how to do some things and how not to do some things. It was experience, and there's just no substitute for it.

Considering the Mini Marcos was first introduced in the early 60's, and by the time you took it over was perhaps in danger of overstaying its welcome, didn't you feel it was rather a dangerous project to try and revive?

Yes, looking back, it was an extremely dangerous project to take on. But we had done a lot of research into kit cars and specialist cars, including why some of them had gone bankrupt. We decided there was a pattern as to why they didn't work, and we set about to try and avoid

those mistakes with the Mini Marcos. The first thing was avoid the direct marketing – not having dealers, and instead selling cars from small ads in the back of motoring magazines. The second thing was obviously the product. The car hadn't been reviewed for a long time, so we had a good look at it and made various changes. Going to self-coloured fibreglass doesn't seem like a big change, but of course it saves the customer a vast amount of money and time, because he gets a car which is all one colour, shiny and so forth, instead of having to get down and spray it. Also it guarantees a higher standard for the finished product. Some people do seem to spray their kit cars with the vacuum cleaner in the drive, which doesn't give a particularly good finish.

Would you say that your own business ability was a large part of giving the car a new lease of life?

I don't think so. The Mini-Marcos had always been in the shadow of the larger Marcoses, and was regarded as the poor relation. We just had the opportunity to step back and look at it by itself, and realise that it was very much a car for the late seventies and eighties – much more so than its larger brothers would ever be.

You're now making two cars a week. Apart from the gel coat, were there any other major changes you made to turn the car into such a successful proposition?

We improved the structure in various areas and made it easier to make in various places. But the main reason for its success is realising who we're selling it to. It is not a sports GT car; it is an economy car – that is what we sell it as. 80% of our customers fit

either an 850cc or a 1-litre engine, which gives you some idea of the proof of that fact. Dropping the ridiculous GT tag, emphasising that it's totally rust-free, economical and practical – that's what brought the sales.

You've supported Steven Roberts' Mini-Marcos racer for some time now. To what extent do you think this has helped the business?

Well, awareness is a very difficult thing to measure. You don't do any one thing in a business this size, and then suddenly everybody in the country hears of you. It's really a question of building a wall of bricks one at a time, and there's no doubt that Steven's car has put one brick into a very large wall. His car has been enormously successful and, yes, it has increased awareness of the name. As you know, I'm a great motorsport enthusiast, but unfortunately the returns we get from racing are minimal. In fact, we can only direct the sale of one car to our presence in motor racing. The situation isn't helped by the majority of the motor sporting magazines still regarding kit cars as a joke, and doing their best to avoid giving us coverage, even when we're winning. It's not sour grapes – you've only got to look through the magazines to see that is the case.

This leads me on to the fact that you're not actually supporting Steven any more.

Yes, the situation is this: Steven has won a National Modified Sports Car Championship for two years running – 1978 and 1979. He also won the 1500cc class in both of them, so he has really won everything there is to win. Now from here we could only go one way – either repeat the success or go backwards. To guarantee a repeated success would have required a large investment of time on Steven's part and some money on our part. In view of what I've just said about sales from motor racing, I felt that we could not justify that expense at this time. Also, I attended a meeting of the RAC last June, the annual meeting for airing views on each formula, and it was quite clear that for Modsports the way the rules are written, if I was starting with a clean sheet of paper, there's no way I'd choose a Mini-Marcos. I could tell you which car was going to win each of the categories now, if you like. The racing is more or less incidental. Davrian will win the 1150 class, Fiat have spent £60,000 on developing an X1/9 which should win the 1500 class, an Elan will win the next class and a Porsche will win the big class. That's it, and it's become silly, so we feel it's best if we retire gracefully whilst on top. We've recommended to Steven that he races a Davrian,

MANUFACTURER OF THE MIDAS AND MINI-MARCOS, HAROLD DERMOTT RUNS ONE OF THE MOST PROFESSIONAL AND AMBITIOUS COMPANIES IN THE KIT CAR BUSINESS. WE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE SECRETS OF HAROLD'S SUCCESS. PETER FILBY ASKS THE QUESTIONS.

because we feel that car will be more competitive than the Mini-Marcos. The aside to that is, because of the large amount of work that is necessary on a Davrian once you've received it from the factory, Steven's car isn't ready yet. So he's been running the Mini-Marcos for the first few races of the season, and is currently leading the STP Championship!

What have you learnt about your customers from the statistical surveys you do?

We've discovered the average age of a Mini-Marcos customer is 31, much older than you'd expect. Over half of them (54%) are married which immediately leads to the 2+2 configuration to provide space for children. This might explain why we market the car in the way that we do.

Let's move on to the Midas now. As a small business, how have you been able to afford to design and develop it to such a high standard?

With great difficulty! It has been an enormous drain on your financial resources. Basically it's taken all the profit we've made out of making Mini-Marcos and doing contract laminating work, plus a bit more. It's also been achieved by enormous efforts on the part of our work force, especially John Ingram. Also on the part of Richard Oakes who designed the car. A lot of people have put in a lot of effort without, say, the sort of reward they might get if they worked for ICI - let's put it that way. This of course is the sort of thing that happens in small businesses. Yes, it has been an enormous drain.

How long has it been going on now?

We started in September 1976 and it took about 18 months to finish the pattern. Then we made the moulds and built the first car just in time to appear at the Performance Car Show at Alexandra Palace in December '78. The car then underwent nine months of pre-production testing on the continent - Pavé testing, Autobahn testing, generally trying to break the car. We also tested for water ingress, dust ingress, all the sort of testing that major manufacturers do - as much as we could within our



resources. We also had to productionise various one-off components we built for the prototypes and that took nine months.

I know a lot of money has been spent on special studio photography and on some superb colour brochures. Do you think you can justify this sort of cost for a small company?

Well, you've got to start as you mean to go on. The Midas is intended to be the most sophisticated small kit car that you can purchase anywhere in England. We think that the publicity material that goes with it must also be the best available. Various journalists including yourself have been kind enough to say it is the best available for kit cars, and that's the sort of standard we want to set.

Tell me a bit more about the people you've got behind you, who they are, what they've done and what sort of influence they've had on you.

Well, my brother, who is a director of the company and works part time for us, is otherwise employed as a senior executive in a very large advertising agency. He is used to analysing statistics to give information about marketing.

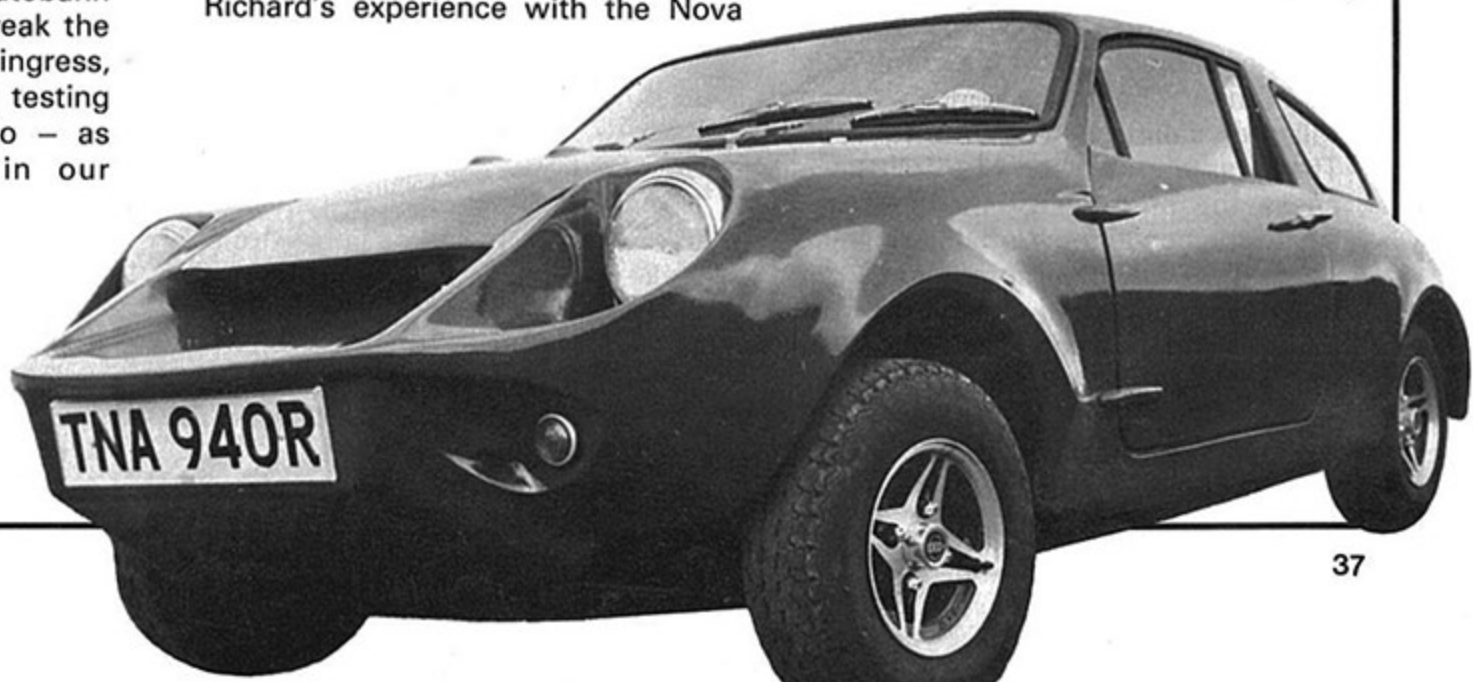
Then there's Richard Oakes, of course, who styled the Midas and is another director of the company. Richard's experience with the Nova

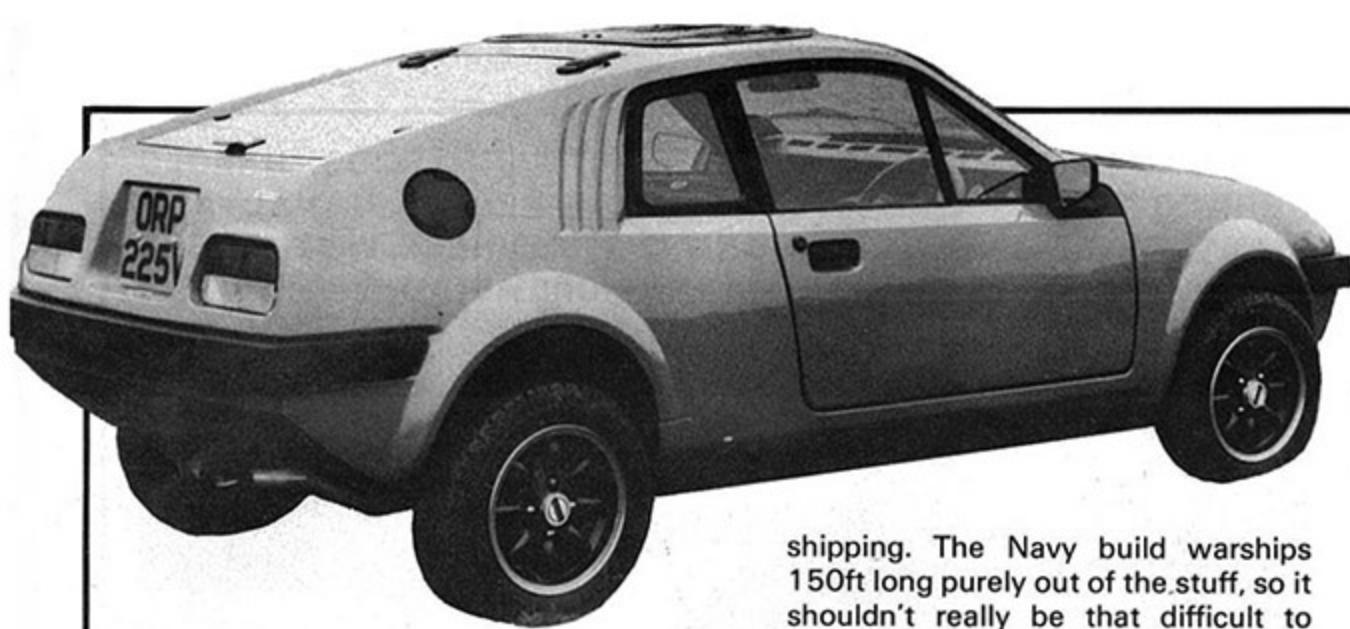
was invaluable to us - it's always very useful to have the benefit of someone else's hindsight. He gave us a professional talent and in fact now runs his own design consultancy with which we work very closely.

Arthur Birchall is another asset to the company; he's had 13 years' experience as a mechanic in Formula 1, including a position as Chief Mechanic with Team Lotus. He, of course, is capable of building cars to an extremely high standard - exactly the sort of person we need with the Midas Superkit because it is virtually a complete car. We are, if you like, trying to build a Mini-Porsche, a car which is built of high quality materials, beautifully finished and assembled by probably one of the best five mechanics in the country.

The Midas could cost its owners anywhere between £3000 and £5000 to put on the road. How do you feel you can justify asking someone to spend that much money on a specialist vehicle when there is so much excellent mass-production competition around?

There's no way that we pretend to compete on price with mass-produced vehicles. If a customer can only see as far as the initial cost of a vehicle, then we very happily point





him at some production line wonder. We hope that our customers will be discerning enough to realise that with a Midas they are buying a car which is going to last them a very long time. A Midas in ten years is going to look much the same as the day it was bought, because it can't rust, ever. So that is one enormous benefit. Also, it is a genuine 2+2 package which will give you over 40 to the gallon, cruising at 70mph with a maximum speed of 100 – and there are very few cars offering the same deal. So we think it's quite easy to justify the price. It is, after all, no more than an MGB GT which the Midas beats on every count.

I know it's fully proven but do you think many customers worry about the all-glassfibre monocoque construction?

Of course they do, yes. It's the single most raised question, and probably the thing that people are most worried about with our vehicles. I could fill probably four pages talking about the strength of our vehicles.

Well make it one page! What about the Midas that's been rolled?

O.K. For a start, there's experience. The Mini-Marcos has now been in production for 14 years, and is a glassfibre monocoque. The Midas structure was based on that of the Mini-Marcos, so we've got a structure which is well-proven by experience. Let's face it, at the end of the day, that's the most important proof of all. We also know from experience (unfortunately) with people crashing Mini Marcoses and with one crashed Midas, that the structure is enormously strong. We've had two 100mph closing speed head-on impacts with Mini Marcoses and another car which hit a telegraph pole at 70mph. The Midas did a 70mph roll-over, falling 8 foot onto its roof. That was car number 1! In all these cases the strength of the structure saved the occupants from injury. In all cases I've had nice comments from the customers saying thank you for building such strong cars. So again the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

Of course, the other thing is that glassfibre is extremely widely used in

shipping. The Navy build warships 150ft long purely out of the stuff, so it shouldn't really be that difficult to build a vehicle with a structural length of 7ft.

You know my feelings about the Midas. I'm sure it is an exceptional car although I feel it's rather let down by its interior trim standards.

I don't think that's completely fair, Peter. The car that you drove was a pre-production car and the trim panels weren't too brilliant, but I think you'll agree that the car outside is much better trimmed. The material we've chosen is vinyl-painted glassfibre to give extremely hard wear. If you want the sort of trim that you find in a TVR or a Lotus, it would put £500-£800 on the cost of a kit. Our experience is that everybody wants this until they find out how much it costs.

The Mini Marcos and the Midas both use Mini engines. How much longer do you think you can go on building cars using a twenty year old power unit?

It might be a twenty year old power unit but it's got extremely good specifics, especially fuel consumption. We are of course not committed to using the Mini power unit. We used it for the Midas because it gave us one less problem – i.e. it was a power unit that we knew. Obviously the job with a front-wheel drive car is that there are literally dozens of fwd power packs available, and if the Leyland engine becomes unavailable, we have the choice of either using its replacement or of using a power unit from a different manufacturer altogether.

Can you say anything about possible developments of current cars – in terms of future models?

Yes, I can – there won't be any! As we've been saying, the Midas has been a tremendous financial drain on the company, and obviously we have to put some money back in the kitty before we can consider any modifications, either to the Mini-Marcos or the Midas. Let's face it, the Mini-Marcos is still selling extremely well – still selling more than we can make, so there's no real need to change it.

So we can't hope for a convertible Midas or an estate Mini-Marcos for quite a while yet then?

Not in the foreseeable future, no.

If any, which other specialist/kit car companies do you admire?

Hmmm... I certainly admire Tim Woolley's success with his very simple kits and I will be interested to see if the apparently more complicated Sierra is as successful. The other specialist company I particularly admire is TVR. I hope this won't offend him, but in my opinion Martin Lilley has done a similar job to myself in taking an ailing, ageing design (the original TVR) and turning it into a success. Now his company has just brought out the Tasmin which could be regarded as the equivalent of the Midas. My only hesitation about TVR is the wisdom of discontinuing an existing model when bringing out a brand new model, but they have a great deal of experience, and I'm sure they know what they are doing.

How do you get on with the other kit car companies?

Most of them I can pick up the phone to and be on first name terms with – we all get on well. The problem is that I feel that we should be working increasingly together to provide a united front for the legislation which is the biggest single threat to our continued existence. I tried in 1978 to get something going along these lines, and was met with massive apathy. In conjunction with GP at Isleworth, we are now joining an American-based organisation called the Speciality Automotive Manufacturers Association. We shall possibly be liaising with GP in the future to try and get the British branch of the association moving, and approaching the Department of Transport as a united front to try and get this situation clarified.

Lastly, Harold, why do you think that the general motoring press and the media still have such a strange attitude about kit cars?

Looking back, it's quite easy to see how the kit car industry became a laughing stock – by presenting itself amateurishly with bits of bent tube and tin that fell apart, starred fibreglass, flapping hoods, etc. And you have to realise that most motoring journalists are afraid of being made a laughing stock of themselves if they write what they actually think. They'd rather jump on the current bandwagon. It takes a brave journalist to state that a car considered by others to be a joke is in fact a good and sensible car, because he himself is in danger of becoming a laughing stock. There are some excellent kit cars around but the motoring press are very short sighted to dismiss them – as the success of your own magazine proves.