



# HARRIS

## and CAR CONVERSIONS

### Special RAC Rally Issue

**Rally prospects:**  
can the Brits  
win?

**Rally weaponry:**  
can the  
Chevette HSR  
do the job?

**Midas: kit car utopia?**



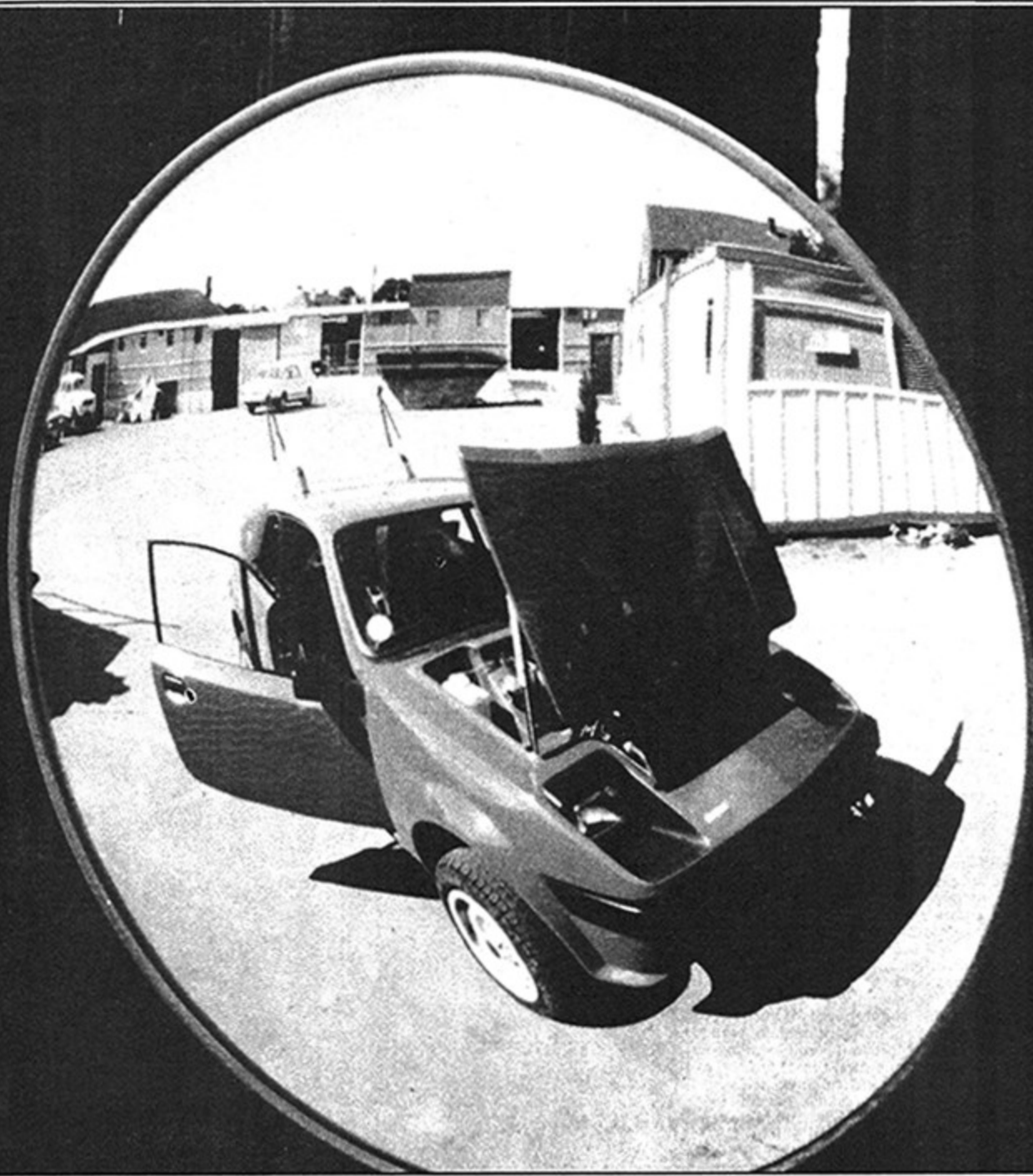
**Lombard Full Colour Route**  
**RAC rally Map Inside!!**

**FREE!**



# THE MIDAS TOUCH

Any hints that the svelte new Midas was potentially a fun sportscar were negated for Russell Bulgin by the fact that the glassfibre monocoque machine is a kit car, and also that fitting 6' 7" of Features Editor into a small two-seater was not his idea of a great day out. Eventually he grudgingly made his way to beautiful downtown Oldham to try the car. Three days (and 550 miles) later the ignition keys had to be prised away from his sweaty palm . . .







# MIDAS

Conceptually, the Midas seems uncannily right for the eighties. Fundamentally, it may be a comprehensive update of the late-sixties ugly duckling Mini Marcos, but the manner in which motoring circumstances have changed in the last five years has merely strengthened the Midas' strongpoints.

Displaying race car forethought, the monocoque structure is light, stiff and aerodynamically sound; with passenger car practicality, all the major mechanical elements are re-housed production components; and it's durable, cheap-to-service engine promises adequate horsepower figures reinforced by excellent specific fuel consumption.

So all the individual design facets desired in a machine designed for promoting driver enjoyment in this austere decade are present - the only rider being the underlying worry that any promised engineering expertise may cease to exist beyond the limits of a sheet of photostat A4.

Yet, in an industry currently snared in a three-way stretch of ever-tightening legislation, the need to spare available energy resources, and a dramatic fall-off in consumer demand, does a 10-man concern in a converted Lancashire mill stand any chance of surviving the mounting commercial pressures? Predecessors such as the similar - definitely in design terms, but certainly not in sales or marketing operations - Clan Crusader bit the dust, so why should Midas survive the current economic recession?

The answer rests with the product, fairly and squarely. And initial impressions are good. There are two ways to build a glassfibre car. The first is to get the mould about 80% correct in respect of final surface finish, and to have a rectification team ready with filler paste and spray guns to flat down and blow away the minor body defects. It's the easiest way to get an acceptable standard of bodywork; if you have the workforce and paintshop facilities to do it in. If, in other words, the business has the necessary capital.

Midas boss, Harold Dermott, took the decision to go firmly the other way. Sitting abandoned around the back of the compact glassfibre shop sits a perfect Midas bodyshell. Constructed, over an 18 month period, of plywood formers and 15cwt of glassfibre filler, it is the master from which the mould was taken. Now a scuffed red and black, it used to be mirror-slick. The self-coloured Midas thus pops out of the mould with a lacquer-look high gloss finish.

Harold Dermott - slight, bearded, thirtyish, continually modest about his brainchild, yet always wanting to improve it - will explain that the reasons for ensuring that the master was right are the cold, hard, businesslike ones. But you get the impression that this ex-Jaguar development engineer wants Midas to be inherently correct, to be a car where engineering integrity is all. He will talk of his desire to make it a "mini-Porsche", and while

you can smile smugly and say that's a high-faluting attitude for a cottage-industry superno, at least it hints at the seriousness of the man's intent.

Initially, Dermott found an advertisement offering the remains of the Mini Marcos under the 'Houses' heading of *Exchange and Mart*. A deal was eventually concluded, the few weak points on the car re-engineered and production began. In the first year of production, 45 cars - 400% up on the machine's previous 12 months - were sold. Last year - four summers on - 100 examples left the tiny workshop.

"The problem that the Mini Marcos has is that the poor old thing is always underrated because it looks peculiar. In fact, in terms of the performance envelope, and the economy it gives you, it's terrific," Dermott smiles, "but people never took it seriously because it looks peculiar. . . ."

So the inference is that Midas must be visually strong to sustain customer interest. And it is. The Shape is not photogenic - it seems oddly slab-sided on celluloid - but in the flesh the design is a revelation. The Shape consists of a combination of gently curved planes and sharp, clean edges. It has a fuss-

free visual impact that lifts it above most identikit car design; the effect is of an intelligently styled 1980 product, rather than just another car. The closest analogy to the way it looks is to compare it to a pocket calculator; each can be undeniably attractive, yet unswervingly practical; both consist of an aesthetically pleasing blend of flat planes and an overriding detail neatness; the calculator is the ultimate in late twentieth century function household appliance design.

Stylist - a somehow demeaning term for the man who shaped this delight - Richard Oakes had few parameters to work on, the major factor being the retention of a production car windscreen and that every other glass panel should be flat to cut costs. Naturally, the biggest inherent bugbear was the towering vertical height of the BL A-Series powerplant. In resolving the brief, Oakes came up with some invigorating detail finishing; the blending of the front spoiler into the wheelarches is particularly neat, as is the use of those clean-lined spats to give a purposeful, wide-tracked stance. At the rear, the tunnelled TR7 backlights and square number plate combine with an upswept valance to give a smoothly flowing look to this difficult-to-define area.





Fluting on the rear quarter panels is unobtrusively echoed on the panel at the trailing edge of the gas strut-supported glass hatch. The shape is stunning.

It holds other surprises. In a country where glassfibre is a dirty word reserved for lamebrain loophole tricycles, the ultimate complement to pay the Midas is to explain that it's all too easy to forget the stigma attached to the material from which it's constructed. Midas' test car is chassis number XP781; the hack prototype with over 14 000 hard miles under its belt. Carefully examine every panel under fluorescent or natural light and you discover that they are totally ripple-free. Park it next to a Lotus Esprit S2 and see which has the deeper colour; there's two-and-a-half litres of pigment in each body-shell.

And strength is there. It is claimed that the roof will support a weight of two tons; trying to flex any panel is as foolhardy as attempting to rabbit punch Mohammed Ali's midriff. With no expensive computer assistance to pinpoint unstressed areas, and thus allow excess thickness to be pared away, Dermott will admit that the car is over-engineered.

Don't think that all is sacrificed to styling. Look at the carefully located bonnet and hatch

apertures, note that the doors may be long for easy access, but the sill is high; the chunky rear three-quarters are double skinned. Each of those features adds strength. Without trick plastics technology - there's no carbon fibre, and the huge sideboxes are hollow, rather than foam filled - clever design means that the car has an all-up, ready to roll weight of around 650 kilograms; and an approximate beam stiffness some 17 times greater than a Mini. . . .

At the front, a Mini engine, gearbox and subframe assembly bolts up directly into a superthick, moulded-in crossmember with immensely strong plywood segments helping to absorb the load. At the rear, the design is unique to Midas. Harold Dermott sounds dismissive in his throwaway description of it; "It's nothing sensational; it's only based on 10-year old racing technology". Similar to the system used in Steven Roberts' all-conquering Modsports racing Mini Marcos, the rear crossmember - zinc coated like every other piece of steel on the car, and beautifully constructed by a Norfolk based firm who fabricate Lotus Formula One suspension - locates Mini trailing arms and specially calibrated Spax shock absorbers clad in Midas

## Putting your (left) foot in it



**D**ave Bird is a quiet individual who exudes an introverted, boffin-like air. After damaging his trick lightweight road rally Mini against the scenery, he decided to take up stage rallying and built the three-tone Midas (pictured) as a break from the mundane.

The rethought bodyshell is constructed from four-and-a-half, rather than three ounce glassfibre mat, the duralumin-plated floor is thicker and the fuel tank recess is enlarged to take a bigger capacity tank. Totally altering the look of the car - it seems even more compact, whilst looming aggressively large in rear view mirrors - are the very smart Richard Oakes-designed wheelarches. An optimistic dyno exaggerates the power output of the neatly prepared car to around 120bhp at the wheels from 1430cc. Whatever the true figure, it has the potential for being frighteningly quick.

Now comes the interesting technical novelty. Linking the handcut Kléber tarmac tyres, with their Audi Quattro developed beefy tread pattern, to the crankcase is an automatic transmission. Based on the AP Products BL



system, the competition variant is modified by Hot Rod racer Keith Gerrard. It can be set to change up at a desired engine speed; in this case 7000rpm. A conventional clutch is used to get the car off the line, and the selector is snapped into Drive. And everytime the full-race engine hits the magic figure, another gear is selected. Which means that foot-to-the-boards power-on changes are possible. 0-60mph takes a claimed 4.5 seconds!

Naturally ratios are changed faster than is possible manually; the noise from the cockpit - in counterpoint with the dentist-drill screaming of the strengthened Jack Knight transfer gears - is one free-breathing, continually rising, wall of revs. There's no respite, no faint lag as the cogs shift; just a continual neck-snapping, accelerative pull.

Decelerating, the 'box down changes at set points. So - the theory runs - Bird can back off later, and brake deeper with the left foot as he turns in with the power back on.

Given Blomqvist-fast reactions the idea sounds invincible, provided that the psychological adaption to using both feet on the pedals and two hands on the steering wheel can be made. As Bird is a rally car electrician, another neat touch is the provision of fast-acting electric windows to complete the disorientation of stage marshals initiated by the lack of any correlation between gear changes, engine note and the tiny machine's speed.

With co-driver Richard Potts, Stoke-on-Trent based Bird plans a limited number of stage events with the innovative two seater this year. If you see it on a rally, take a closer look at its avant-garde technical approach to the sport. And be sure to point it out to the doubters who claim that amateur stage rallying is all about an endless stream of big winged Escorts. . . .

specification springs.

Sit in a Midas. Two 6'8" tall humans can get comfortable in the Huntmaster cloth covered buckets. There are acres of legroom, and a corresponding amount of foot space. Behind is a hinged fold-down rear seat. Harold Dermott is at pains to stress that it's not designed for adults. What it will reasonably accommodate are two children below teenager size. With no rear firewall to intrude, the size of the passenger compartment is enormous. Pull the rear seat up, and there is sufficient space for a week's shopping. Flip the backrest down and there's ample luggage room for two.

Start it up. And it sounds like a Mini. A thousand power-stealing gears mesh dryly. The reasons for retaining the Mini engine have already been partially explained; add to that ready parts availability in every High Street, and the ease of obtaining tuning bits and other equipment. Mr Midas will agree that it would be fine to pop in a Ford Fiesta or hydraulic tappet Opel Kadett engine; but for a small company the Mini motor is a known quantity and - perhaps surprisingly - BL is also extremely helpful. A minus point is that old BL transverse power unit deficiency: engine rock under load. The Midas' stabiliser rods are puny by comparison with the torque reaction.

Now comes the tricky part. How do you evaluate a Midas? As another kit car? In which case you psychologically make exception for minor deficiencies that would destroy a mass produced machine, on the basis that it's nonetheless a pretty good attempt by some misguided, but well-meaning car freaks. Or as you would a million dollar-backed product from one of the Big Four? The latter sounds the best way, especially when it is learnt that the median Midas buyer is in his early thirties, married, and the car he most closely investigated before posting his cheque in the direction of Oldham is an Alfasud Ti. But, no, check out it's dynamic qualities as a driver's car - for that, essentially, is its raison d'être - and see if you can live with the rest.

It's easy to be undecided about your first few miles with a Midas, especially if they are on a motorway. Once you're in, and the inertia-reel belt clipped on, the first worry is that the short nose is invisible beyond the pronounced curve on the lower edge of the Fiat 126 windscreen. That's forever forgotten after the first 100 yards. Similarly, it actually takes time to realise that you're sitting low enough to research a thesis on the workings of a juggernaut's suspension as you drive. Once it's crossed your mind, the thought is dismissed. A low set, laid-back driving position gives you that vital feeling of oneness with the car.

It's noisy when cruising. At least, the thrashy engine is. There are no resonances travelling through the structure, no tiresome zizzing across whippy panels. There's some tyre roar, and a higher final drive would drop the engine revs from what seems an excessive 4000rpm at 70mph. Excessive that is, until you top up the tank. Running a standard 1275GT motor, motorway cruising at around the legal limit gave 45mpg.

Which hints at considerable aerodynamic efficiency. The design has never been near a windtunnel; yet the silhouette offers all the right factors necessary for a low drag shape. There's the deep front spoiler, smooth undertray - save for an ugly and vulnerable looking exhaust system - and Citroenesque rising rear under-panel. In practical matters - little things you spot on a boring M-way trudge - the lack of wind noise from any source, especially the A-pillars; the way the rear window stays clean; the straight running in crosswinds and the minimal disturbance from eddies fantailing out from articulated trucks, all confirm the body's suspected quality.

Another source of noise is the rear quarter lights. In order to get any flow from the spherical airvents, at least one rear window must be opened. The ram effect so created is good; but the blast peters out below 30mph and the heater fan refuses to help in traffic.





Harold Dermott and he will claim that the Mini figure – going by the homologated competition weight – could be as much as 100 kg out; which suffices as one explanation. Around town, the thick rim 13-inch wheel adds a little to the steering effort. Quick Minis require a lot of forearm action to fight around corners. The archetypal Mini cornering technique is the twitching of the steering to 'threepenny bit' the turn and fight off the understeer. With its overall lighter weight and altered distribution – the wheelbase is a useful four inches longer than the Mini's – the Midas feels different at speed. No longer is the forearm jab the quickest driving style; reclined in the Midas, you drive from the wrists. The turn-in is go-kart quick, as are transient responses.

The steering itself seems lighter, whilst on the move that welcome decrease in effort is complemented by an altogether faster movement from lock-to-lock; it feels as though a quicker rack is fitted. The cornering sensation is similar to that in a hot Mini. And because you are so close to the ground, that slight feeling of roll present in the saloon has been banished. It offers the choice of two methods for tightening your passage through a corner; power on or power off. Both will rapidly drag the nose in closer to the kerb. On a road you know well, it's easy to find a few mph here and there by the careful positioning of the car on the tarmac; six inches to the left or right makes a discernible difference.

Harold Dermott accepts that the ride at the rear is not perfect, but is realistic in his assessment of the problem. "We regard it as acceptable, but there's more to come. Part of the answer is that a company of our size can only spend so long developing something. Sometimes you have to say, 'well, right, it's not perfect, no car on the road is perfect, but what we've got is perfectly saleable.'" That understood, the ride/handling compromise still needs a little more work. One up, the rear is too stiff. The front absorbs bumps well, the back end barely tolerates them. Driving as the car invites you to do, a mid-turn shock can unsettle the rear wheels. With a passenger aboard it feels steadier; with luggage in the tail the balance is near perfect. Softer springs and revised damping should promote a cure.

Naturally that little flick the tail occasionally gives when pressing on can be taken as a true sports car input; equally the thump that percolates through when you hit a change of surface while trolling down to the launderette can become a real annoyance.

One of Britain's leading Mini rally drivers took the Midas down a favourite road and drove it with a flair that separates him from the talentless. He felt – after cornering it in a style that Joe Average could only dream about – that ultimately it required only wider tyres than the rather dead 145/70 Dunlop SP Sports to give a tad more front end bite, and

the rear suspension adjustments already mentioned to make it a "really great car". After commenting on the fine all-round visibility, he then asked about the price of a competition shell. . . .

After the test, the disc/drum brakes were found to require bleeding. Which explains the alarmingly soft pedal on occasions. Initial thoughts on the 1275GT system centred on the fitment of a servo to cure the problem, but air in the pipework was found to be the cause of the upset. Aside from that, the brake balance – with just a hint of forward bias – was superb, and the constant foursquare pull-up reassuring in a car where it's deceptively easy to haul into a curve substantially quicker than is desired.

If Harold Dermott had wanted to build a race car, think how much simpler his life would have been. Provided his cars lasted race distance, they could be as crude as a supermarket trolley. The only rules he would have to obey would be those of the RAC; the driver would be concerned only with going

continued from page 37

An ever open window is also insidiously tiring on the ears.

Midas country is full of fast, open curved B-roads with a few white lanes thrown in for good measure. Along such routes, staggeringly quick journey times can be achieved. Such performance should, however, be slotted firmly into perspective. This is not a Porsche 924 Turbo beater; or even a Golf GTi contender. What it merely does, if the legal limit is 60mph, is allow you to average 60mph virtually anywhere. The test vehicle had an out-of-tune 1275GT engine giving 42bhp at the wheels; calculations show that some 40bhp will push the coupé along at around 100mph. Combine that with a 0-60 time of around 12 seconds and it's performance would seem fixed as pretty dull.

Except that it flies around corners. It's all too easy to be having a ball at 55mph on a favourite road, enjoying the responsiveness, the total feel, and then suddenly realising that you can take these curves up to 15 mph quicker without any whitening of the knuckles.

So although the car would be written off by those short-sighted individuals who can see no further than the black-and-white of a performance graph, the truth is that it summons up enough usable total performance to slay most two litre family boxes.

There's a typical A-series flexibility in both third and – especially – top gear; but it is enhanced in a Midas. It allows the majority of overtaking to be done without having to drop down a cog; a pluspoint that emphasises the car's light weight. Wherein lies an anomaly. A Midas scales around 650 kg; BL Cars' published brochure figure for a 1275GT is 675kg. A 50 pound loss does not promote that kind of very real benefit. Mention this to



ever faster. In a road machine, you crave refinement; easy-to-overlook engineering nightmares like wind-up windows and interior body moulds take a disproportionate amount of time to design and develop. Typically, Dermott wanted the Midas to look good inside.

Custom-made fitted carpet covers the floor. The whole interior is panelled in black fleck vinyl painted glassfibre pieces. It's a great idea. In the prototype, some of the panel-to-panel joints were sloppy. And whilst self-tapping screws are an ideal fixing method, they look irritatingly tacky if the heads protrude at untidy angles. Admittedly, on a production car the fitment was far, far better – but some passengers found the all black road-rally car look interior somewhat oppressive.

The inner door panels with their recessed handles and Stratos-derived map carrying door bags were neat; but even allowing for the glovebox in the newer cars, more storage space would be a help. And whilst the dashboard is ergonomically sound with its BL column stalks and neat switch binnacle, most felt that it could do with a little brightening up. Perhaps a few subtle bezels around the instruments would do the trick. And the stick-on rear screen heater gives the car a slightly low-rent appearance.

Type Approval is a fierce EEC-demanded testing procedure that instills a deep fear into small-run car makers. The Midas is designed to comply with the actual regulations; the problem is that to undertake the necessary testing programme would add a minimum of 25% to the car's price. It's to gain exemption from the TA regime that the car must be offered in kit form. Two variants are offered; the Superkit and the Deluxe kit. Bolt up your own engine, gearbox and subframe to a Superkit and with 12 hours work, you've got a fully-built Midas, ready to go. The simplified – and more popular – Deluxe variant requires that you not only supply the complete front end, but also the rear brakes and hubs, wheels and tyres, seats, fuel tank and gauge, steering column – basically all the components you've already got lying around if the floor's rotted out of your old Mini.

The Deluxe kit costs £1950. The Superkit an additional £1300. Once the VAT content has



been added, the car starts to look a little expensive. When compared to some of its rivals - like the Alfasud - the decision to purchase can become more tricky. What the Midas offers is an anticipated 60-year unitary structure life, a distinctiveness (just over 50 will be made next year, and this machine turns heads faster than the appearance of Debbie Harry in Sainsbury's. . . .) tried and trusted mechanicals, and a reassuring feeling of engineered durability.

When Harold Dermott talks of commercial expansion, he means the jump from building three cars a month to one per week. Mention that you've seen a Midas in London and he can tell you the owner's name, which is refreshing in an age where your local garage treats you like a cash-happy zombie. Should you want a rally shell, then Harold will build one - to your precise specification. Exports should increase; European TVR dealers will discuss the possibility of their selling the Midas as a bottom line Vixen replacement; fully-built cars will still be big news in Greece. The

business is small, compact, and adaptable. It's order book is satisfyingly full. The number of hours Harold Dermott must have worked on the car don't bear thinking about; but he's not likely to let the whole project fail through any rash actions in these troubled times.

In its development, the Midas trekked down the Belgian pavé and charged around the Nurburgring. That toil has paid off. It is unfortunate that it must be considered as a kit car, because that immediately reduces it in some people's eyes to the level of most of the pure junk which dominates that market like deadwood in a fast flowing stream. Name it a specialist car and unfortunate visions of pre-Edwardes Leyland meanderings are recalled.

Best to title it an individual car. Individual in its handbuilt nature (there are 115 hours of work in the body unit); individual in its flexibility (you want one with Recaro seats and a rally bodyshell? That's no problem); individual in its styling, its design; individual in that each one is built for a the specific demands of an individual customer.

The Midas is so much better than its parts-bin heritage suggests, although such use of existing components gave you the Porsche 924 . . . . It's the manner in which the proprietary parts and plastic monocoque have been combined that give the car its definite character. Find a winding road and corner this little machine until the tyres scabble if you think it's pricey. Park it in a city centre and listen to the admiring comments if you're unsure that you want to ditch the anonymous three-box family wagon.

It may have a few shortcomings - but they're solvable. And charging down a twisty road, snapping down into third - blowing past the Jackie Stewart cap in his MGBGT - and putting the power on hard is even more fun at 38mpg.

Conceptually, the Midas remains uncannily right for the eighties. Fundamentally, it is a comprehensive update of the Mini Marcos. But it is something much more than just a last-ditch rehash. That's the ultimate difference; that's the Midas touch. ■

