

going green

Rover's A-series engine may be long dead along with the Mini, Metro and many of the popular kits based on their cast-iron residue but the Midas Gold convertible lives on and, after driving it, **Ian Hyne** reckons it's still a force to be reckoned with.

Back in the eighties, the Midas Gold was a top dog in the kit car industry. The Richard Oakes penned car championed professional styling and composite monocoque design of which the company itself was a leading exponent, ex-Jaguar development man and MD, Harold Dermott, was both an accomplished engineer as well as a leader in the marketing of his products, Midas Cars was a leading light in the battle to create respectability for the kit industry through the formation of the SCMG (Specialist Car Manufacturers' Group) within the SMMT and the company was hard at work on a new model.

When it arrived, it wasn't so much new as modified as it was the Midas Gold convertible. Even so, Car magazine put it on their front cover and billed it as a modern-day Frogeye Sprite along with the warning that it had a thing or two to teach production sports car manufacturers. And though that's hardly the case today, the Gold drop-top has lost none of its attraction, zip, zest and all round capacity to create driver enjoyment. True, the A-series engine with its four-speed box has long been left in the mechanical shade by the universal advent of Efi, twin-cams, 16-valves, five-speed boxes and electronic engine management but specialists can still give it some poke that the Gold can exercise to impressive effect.

Following the glory days, life went a bit sour for Midas Cars. A devastating fire at the Corby works claimed my own Midas Gold Coupe and ultimately caused the company to founder. It passed to Pastiche Cars, which also went belly up and then to GTM. GTM worked on it by removing the non-Mini or Metro parts and returning it to a single-donor kit in line with GTM policy and with consequent cost benefits to the customer. Having already gone the K-series route with the GTM Rossa, the company commissioned Richard Oakes to pen a K-series successor in the form of the new Gold. Although benefiting from the combined composite knowledge and experience of both Midas and GTM and maximising the performance benefits of the K-series engine, the car just lacked the old Gold's visual appeal and

sales were slow. GTM, finding itself with a bigger stable of models than it had resources to spread between them, moved the project on and once again, the company foundered only to be rescued three years ago by consultant engineer, Alistair Courtenay.

The elevated status may have gone, the elegant premises too but this is far from a kit-form Dodo and the last three years have seen Alistair investing pretty well all his spare time in updating and improving the old Gold as well as the new. He fully appreciates the newer models (coupe and convertible now named the Cortez and Excelsior respectively) lack the cosmetic pull of the old but rather than spread his meagre resources over a range of development projects, he is stolidly doing a thorough job on each aspect before moving on to the next. Take it from me, there

are further chapters to be written on Midas Cars. But while the new is on its way, the old is far from consigned to history.

The Midas Gold embodies all that is best in kit car design and construction in that it recycles a completely useable set of otherwise utterly redundant, not to say obsolete mechanical components in a lightweight, wind-cheating, ultra-modern composite monocoque giving improvements in strength and rigidity and thereby improving on the all-round universally acknowledged accomplishments of the donor car. That it's pretty is the icing on the cake and around 200 coupes had been

produced prior to the fire. Fortunately, the convertible prototype survived the inferno being elsewhere at the time and it was this model with which the project continued. The moulds for the original coupe were sold to Germany some years ago following which they have done absolutely nothing but Alistair is in contact with the owner and there may be future developments.

The convertible required a redesigned laminate for the floorpan to replace the rigidity lost by the removal of the roof. This has been achieved by creating a composite sandwich floor. The roll-over bar behind the seats is a positive safety feature but it

doubles as additional torsional bracing such that the car, though not as stiff as the coupe, is nevertheless stiff enough for anything any A-series can throw at it and that's plenty.

The monocoque accepts the standard A-series front subframe with engine, gearbox, suspension, brakes and steering attached in completely standard form. The only alteration is a switch to telescopic Avo dampers to complement the Mini's fluid springs which are downrated by 25% due to the Midas's 200lbs weight saving over the donor Metro.

Generally, there is a coil-spring damper conversion at the back but this car is unique in retaining the Hydrolastic suspension system. In fact, the whole car is unique having been built by Alistair



height adjustable too. The wheels that do the job are a bit intrusive but the system works to perfection. Internal space was never a problem for the Midas, a situation now improved with the recessed door trims, also covered in matching monotone livery. Originally, the Midas Gold convertible went a little upmarket with a redesigned dashboard incorporating the instrument cluster from a Rover 200 but GTM's policy of single-donor kits returned to the instrument cluster from the Metro. It's a bit less interesting but everything's there and it fits neatly into a well laid out dash. The glaring non-Metro fixture is the Ford Ka clock above the stereo recess which additionally incorporates the alarm / immobiliser which keeps the doors locked on the move.

Access to the Gold's interior is easy via wide opening doors. On arrival, the firm caress of the Golf GTi leather sets the quality

tone that continues throughout. Though space in any direction is generous, even for those well over six feet tall, the proximity of the large seats to each other and the manner in which they fill the well-trimmed cockpit creates a snug feel enhanced by the larger than normal 14" Moto Lita wheel.

If the cockpit's snug, the boot is cavernous even with the spare wheel and CD auto-changer fitted. Indeed, the boot is a major asset to the car's everyday usability and practicality along with the excellent hood and optional hard-top that incorporates a heated rear window. You're not restricted to weekend luggage and soft bags with this car; you can stow holiday luggage and the kitchen sink!

But the generous proportions of the cockpit and the boot underline the quality of the Gold's design which accommodates it

all within a footprint that's a shade slimmer than the donor and only a couple of inches longer. And yet it looks small, the depth of the body creating the illusion that it's short and stubby. To my mind, it's also pretty and though some may disagree, I don't think anyone would deny that it's certainly got bags of appeal.

But it's on the road where the Gold's current attraction will either be enhanced or broken as a very great deal has changed since the car's glory days following its 1989 launch. Almost twenty years ago, the Mini was a popular donor and among the industry staples of Jaguar XJ6, MGB, Ford Escort, VW Beetle and BL's most famous son. The A-series engine was dated back then having first seen the light of day in the Austin A30 of the 1952

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Golf GTi two-tone leather seats dictated the interior décor which is efficient rather than luxurious but everything you want is there.



Even with the spare wheel and the CD auto-changer on board, the Gold's boot is very practical and accommodating.

The A-series may lag behind in terms of sophistication but it's a willing performer in standard form and very amenable to further tuning.



The dashboard fittings are standard Rover Metro save for the Ford Ka clock which also houses the anti-theft alarm and immobiliser.



The dished door trim panels add useable elbow room to the cockpit and enhance the comfort of the driving position.



but such was the world's undying affection for the Mini that thousands of tuning recipes were available to allow it to punch well above its weight. But that's not the case today when even to most basic 1-litre DOHC, 16-valve, five-speed delivers electronically measured punch anywhere in the rev range and 100 mph ability.

Even the Midas's top engine option of an Avonbar 1400 still only mustered 102 bhp and a 0 - 60 time of 9.5 seconds. Top speed was respectable at around 120 mph but then to dwell on figures is to miss the point as well as the enjoyment of driving and getting the best from the car.

Fire it up and anyone expecting a nostalgia trip triggered by the sound of clattering tappets will be immediately disappointed. The engine purrs with a strong hint of solid strength. The gear-change is very positive as you push it into first and though the sounds of the sixties infiltrate the cockpit with a bit of typical Mini first gear whine, as the revs build, it's drowned by a very strong, rasping and pleasing exhaust note. The other impression that comes across in the

on behalf of Steven Kennedy who supplied the Metro donor complete with 1,275 A-series engine that had only covered a genuine 25,000 miles. Steven had a number of stipulations, all of which Alistair has built into the car. The result, whilst causing a few headaches along the way, is really impressive and though the car may lack the power, torque and responsiveness of its more mechanically modern stablemates, it's a really great drive, the rewards coming from using and co-ordinating the power, revs, torque and gears to keep the motor in the power

band. It may not be fast but it is nippy and backed up by great handling, balance and roadholding.

The Gold was always an attractive car and chopping the roof off did nothing to diminish its visual charm. Its bug-eyed look is given a degree of purpose by the smooth nose and big driving lights. That purpose is underlined by the wide track, bulging wings and minimal front and rear overhangs that create a wheel-at-each-corner stance. A modification to this car that will be a standard feature of all future cars is the quarter-light treatment. The old car had a full

quarter-light window but the edges of the aluminium channel used for the rear upright created an SVA fail point due to insufficient radius on the aluminium extrusion employed so Alistair has created a one-piece window with the overtaking mirror covering any SVA contact points and the car looks the better for it.

Open the door and the British Racing Green external livery is complemented by a two-tone grey leather interior, the décor chosen to match the leather covered Golf GTi seats that Steven supplied. As well as moving fore and aft, Alistair has made them



Although the K-series based Cortez and Excelsior improve on the Gold's mechanical refinement, they don't match its appealing and purposeful looks.

strongest manner possible is the total solidity of the whole car and the sheer excellence of the ride. Even though the damping is firm, the ride is ultra-smooth across the whole gamut of surfaces traditionally encountered in any extensive foray and at all speeds. But ruts, bumps and pot-holes notwithstanding, there's never a creak, squeak or rattle from anywhere. Indeed, the only extraneous sound I could detect was a slight squeak from the Polyurethane bushes.

So, it's supremely comfortable and very well built but how does the A-series stack up against more up to date mechanical bases? As I said, talking figures is to miss the point. As Car magazine pointed out in its February 1989 write up, a good sports car isn't only judged by its ability to leave black lines on the road and they were absolutely right. The Midas isn't a fast car but then it's not slow either. It can post very respectable point-to-point pace aided by good steering, excellent brakes, great balance, top handling and bags of grip from the big 185/55s at each corner. But you have to work to do it and therein lies the enjoyment of driving it.

One of the big complaints in respect of the Mini's modern day performance is the lack of a fifth gear, a refinement the four-in-the-ump box couldn't provide but it really isn't a problem as the four-speed

box can easily cover the engine's spread of power and torque which it does by providing pretty big gaps between the gears, especially between third and fourth. The remedy is to use the revs and keep the motor up on the cam. This car has a standard 1275 unit with a single SU carburettor and develops around 63 bhp (MG Metro 72 bhp) @ 5,650 with 72 lbs ft @ 3,100 rpm. Again a power to weight ratio of just 8.5 bhp per ton isn't a great deal to write home about either but the secret is to keep it up in the 4000 plus area of the rev counter where the engine is strongest and really use the gearbox, especially second.

As you master the technique of keeping the engine on the boil, you begin to appreciate the mechanical deviations from the standard Metro. Reduced fluid pressure and telescopic dampers weren't only put up front to be different but also to improve grip which it does. The same goes for the back end substitution of coil spring damper units but this car with its retained Hydrolastic system certainly seems to have the back end obediently following the front. Indeed, pushing the engine to deliver its best gives you supreme confidence in the car's handling and roadholding and once you're on top of it, the Midas Gold provides just as much driver enjoyment as many a far more powerful car, kit or production.

Finally, one thing the Gold has that most kit cars do not is full practicality. You've got a spacious, well equipped and appointed

cabin with good space behind the seats for everyday luggage, you've got a cavernous boot for anything more bulky, a good hood and, for the winter months there's the excellent and form flattering hard top with its diamond pattern interior trim and heated rear window.

I covered 70,000 miles in my Midas Gold Coupe before it was hit up the back and written off on the A1 but I enjoyed it very much and the convertible cousin put me in the same frame of mind. Add in economy, cheap spares and simple, fixable mechanics and electrics and you have a recipe for continued success in the modern industry. There's also the subject of its price. Kits start at £4,500 for the complete body and all necessary Midas parts while suitable Metro donors are incredibly cheap. They're long in the tooth now and will require thorough mechanical overhaul but parts are cheap and widely available such that a car can be fully finished and put on the road for around £8,000. That's a throwback to the eighties as well.

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