

School's out for summer. Long sunset evenings and heat-soaked lunchtimes are Siren calls to crack a convertible sports car out of the garage. But if your motoring cupboard is bare and your bank balance on the ragged side of threadbare, do you grit your tin-top teeth and bear it? Not at all. Here are four routes into rag-top driving that won't upset the bank manager.

We've bypassed the usual entry routes into drop-top sports car ownership, the Midget and Spitfire, and headed straight for the less obvious choices, choosing two rival pairs. For sheer value for money it's hard to beat our first coupling, the Triumph TR7 and Reliant Scimitar SS1. Both have been much maligned in the past, which partly explains the extraordinary value they offer. No doubt about it, the SS1 is the greatest sports bargain here, with perfectly roadworthy examples going for between £1200 and £2000. You should be able to pick up an MoTd drophead TR7 at around the £2500 mark. A little further up the price scale, but no lesser bargains for that, are the Jensen-Healey and TVR Tasmin 280i. For £4000 you should be able to pick up a very respectable example of either one. In anyone's book that's good value.

What we have is three wedges, and a Jensen. Only the Jensen was a 'design by committee' job – almost everyone with design experience at Jensen had a hand in it. In the company of the wedges it looks far removed from the oft-quoted blandness that dogs it in classic circles. It obviously comes from a different age – there's not a straight line on it and it eschews pop-up headlamps for indented round eyes – and it looks the happiest of all the cars here.

The Scimitar SS1's design provenance is also a little murky. It was Giovanni Michelotti's last design before he died, although many have suggested that the car was unfinished and was delivered to Reliant 'not properly cooked' when the old man span his spaghetti for the last time. Its separate tubular frame meant that designing new body panels was fairly easy and William Towns (one of the people with input into the Jensen-Healey) had several goes at restyling the SS1. The Michelotti shape has some very odd details, such as the jut-forward accents over the front wheels mimicking the rear, and a sort of folded-Cornflakes packet effect at the rear end. The bodywork – made of three different types of plastic – also has perhaps the dodgiest panel fit in history.

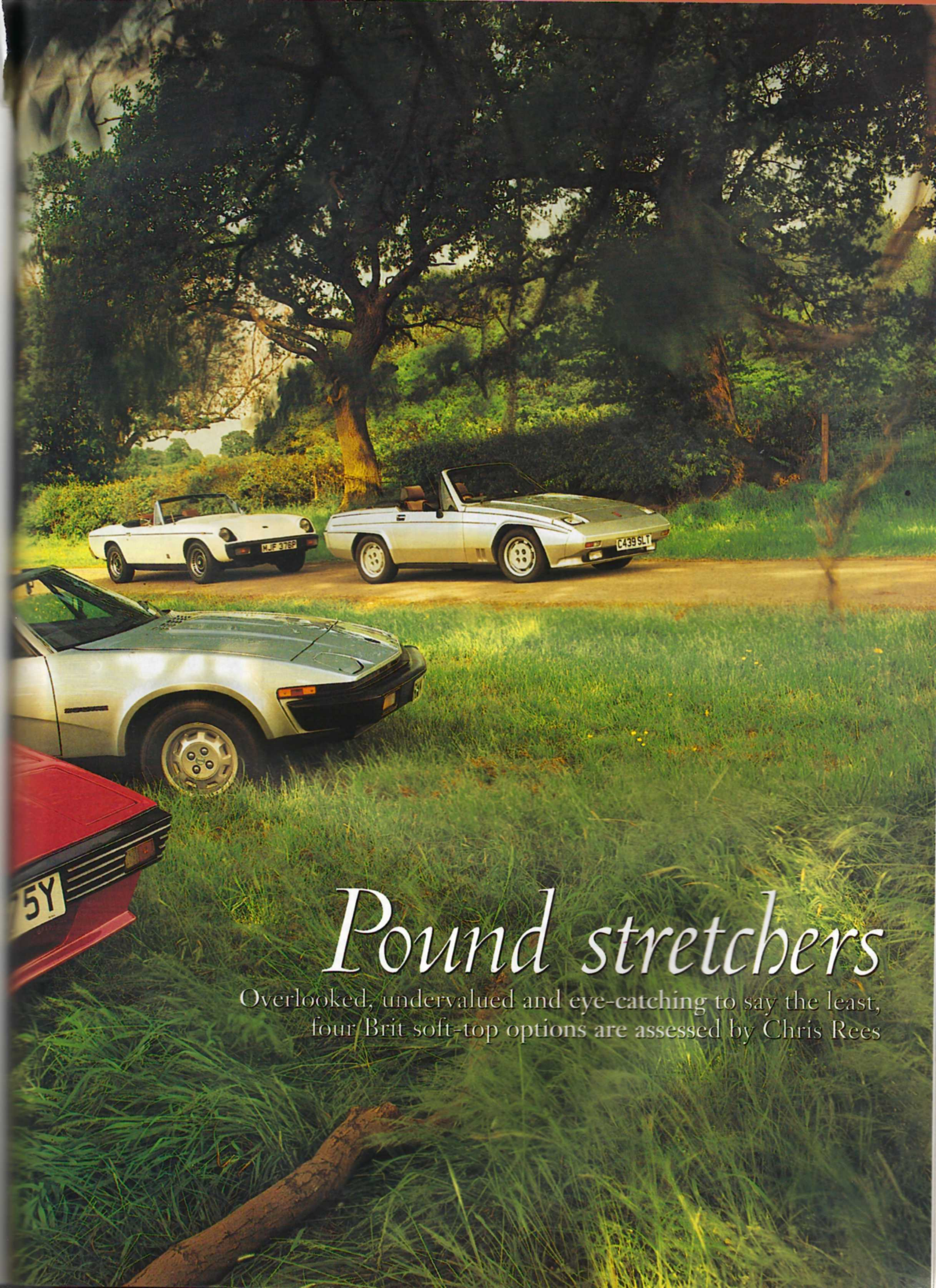
The TR7 remains the archetypal wedge, a Harris Mann fantasy of sculptured cheese. Triumph's launch ads compared the styling to Ferraris and Lamborghinis, but only showed the front end, the car's happiest angle. From other angles the plot goes awry but the drop-top is still a far nicer design than the coupé.

And what of the Tasmin? The first fruit of Peter Wheeler's acquisition of the company, it is another graduate of the wedge school. Distinctive though it is, it could never be described as beautiful. The smooth, uncompromising rise of the nose is tempered by a really awkward knuckle in the front wing above the wheel that looks as if someone has bent the shape around some angle-iron. Again the convertible shape works better than the coupé and its brash character surely scores the highest 'cool' quotient of all the cars gathered here.

The contrasts spill into the cabins. The TR7 looks most mass-produced – both good and bad news. In its favour, it looks integrated and



TIM WREN



Pound stretchers

Overlooked, undervalued and eye-catching to say the least, four Brit soft-top options are assessed by Chris Rees



Jensen-Healey has notable body roll and can be difficult to adjust



TR7 convertible infinitely better from the rear than unloved coupé



Interior from a different era; sweet Lotus twin-cam gives 120mph



Mass-produced interior; Dolomite-based four-pot shows its age



Blacked wheels a sign of the times; British pride on Jensen-Healey



Plastic wheel trims; rear light fairing a rare curve on the wedge

well laid-out, and the seats have been retrimmed in blue leather. Against it, the grey plastic looks soulless and downmarket. But not as downmarket as the Reliant, whose flimsy trim, plastic door panels, dated red-and-grey upholstery and Metro instrument binnacle remind you of questionable kit cars.

The Jensen and TVR represent a superior flip of the specialist coin, the Jensen's attractions including a downward-angled instrument binnacle and the light wood trim that distinguishes the Mk2. Even so it lacks the sense of occasion of the Tasmin with trademark transmission tunnel dominating what is easily the widest cabin of the four. Tasteful magnolia half-leather upholstery, lustrous walnut inserts, a

Momo steering wheel and a clear-to-read six-gauge dash give it a luxurious, feel-good aura.

You can't drive a soft-top without considering raising and lowering the hood. A bad hood can make life a battleground of skewed fingers and cussing, a well-designed one presents as little fuss as possible. Instantly falling into the latter category is the TVR's elegantly simple top. It has a hard centre roof section that just unclips and stores in the boot, while the folding rear section pushes back into the area behind the seats. The operation takes under a minute and is easy for one person. And as for the TVR bugbear of leaks, the Tasmin's roof is better than later types, its only weak area being the seal at the top of the windscreen pillar.

The other hoods require some element of fiddling around and stowing under tonneau covers. The TR7's is easy to fold back (not so easy to re-engage though) but suffers from having a fiddly pop-stud tonneau. The same is true of the Jensen, only more so. Folding back the roof is not the problem, but getting the vinyl cover over it takes forever. The Scimitar's top can be stowed away in about three minutes, and it too suffers the tonneau torture.

All are two-seaters and the best for luggage space is the Jensen-Healey with its long, deep tail and generous space behind the seats. The TR7 is next; the SS1 struggles to accommodate two squashy bags; and once you have the Tasmin's roof and spare wheel in place in its



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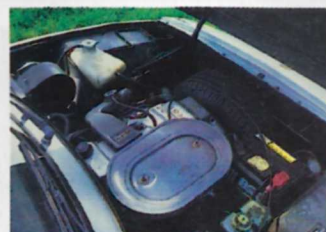
No body roll, but heavy-ish steering though TVR is very controllable



SSI's handling a revelation, low centre of gravity helps greatly



Transmission tunnel dominates; 2.8-litre Cologne V6 gives 160bhp



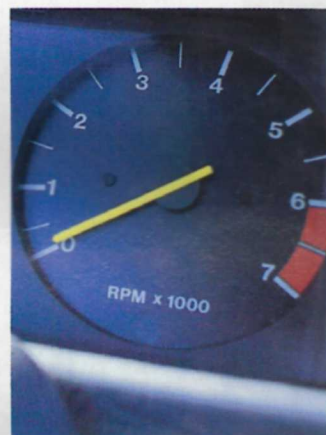
Distinctly down-market interior; 1.6-litre Ford CVH engine as in XR3



Latticed alloys; most powerful engine of four needs help breathing



Styled alloys; 6000rpm redline, but top-end performance lacking



FACTFILE

JENSEN-HEALEY

ENGINE

In-line, all-alloy twin overhead cam four, 1973cc, 140bhp @ 6500rpm, 130 lb ft @ 5000rpm, driving through five-speed manual 'box (four speeds up to '74)

SUSPENSION

Front Wishbones with coil springs

Rear Rigid axle with trailing and semi-trailing links and coil springs

BRAKES

Discs front, drums rear

BODY

Length 161.2in

Width 63.4in

Height 47.6in

Weight 2120lb

PERFORMANCE

Top speed 120mph

0-60mph 7.8 secs

PRICES

When new (1975): £3130

Now (average cond):

£3500

TVR TASMINE 280i

ENGINE

Cast-iron pushrod V6, 2792cc, 160bhp @ 5700rpm, 162 lb ft @ 4300rpm, driving through four or five-speed manual 'box

SUSPENSION

Front Wishbones with lower transverse link, coil springs, anti-roll bar

Rear Radius arms, lower transverse link and coil springs

BRAKES

Discs front and rear

BODY

Length 158in

Width 68in

Height 47in

Weight 2335lb

PERFORMANCE

Top speed 133mph

0-60mph 7.8 secs

PRICES

When new (1984): £13,254

Now (average cond):

£4500

SCIMITAR SSI

ENGINE

In-line, single overhead cam alloy head four, 1598cc, 96bhp @ 5600rpm, 97 lb ft @ 4000rpm, driving through five-speed manual 'box

SUSPENSION

Front Double wishbones, coil springs and anti-roll bar

Rear Semi-trailing arms, coil springs and anti-roll bar

BRAKES

Discs front, drums rear

BODY

Length 153in

Width 62.2in

Height 48.8in

Weight 1850lb

PERFORMANCE

Top speed 108mph

0-60mph 10.5 secs

PRICES

When new (1985): £7795

Now (average cond):

£2000

TRIUMPH TR7

ENGINE

In-line, single overhead cam alloy-head four, 1998cc, 105bhp @ 5500rpm, 119 lb ft @ 3500rpm, driving through five-speed manual 'box

SUSPENSION

Front MacPherson struts with anti-roll bar and coil springs

Rear Rigid axle with trailing arms, radius arms, anti-roll bar and coil springs

BRAKES

Discs front, drums rear

BODY

Length 164.5in

Width 66.2in

Height 49.9in

Weight 2351lb

PERFORMANCE

Top speed 115mph

0-60mph 9.1 secs

PRICES

When new (1981): £6382

Now (average cond):

£2000



'What we have here is three wedges... and the Jensen-Healey, a real design by committee job'

boot, you can forget carrying anything.

While you may sit low down in the TVR, it's lofty compared to the SS1, which you feel you sit on rather than in. Firing up the longitudinally-mounted 1.6-litre Ford CVH engine (basically an XR3 unit) produces an instantly recognisable and rather lumpy sound. The CVH engine was never a great performance unit but it has a twin-choke carburettor and the SS1's exhaust note is pure sports car. With only 96bhp, performance is not the SS1's strong suit (the Nissan Silvia turbo-engined version with 135bhp is far better in this respect). Progress through the gears is positive, however, and despite the unusual forward-canted gear lever the Sierra-sourced five-speeder is easy to use.

That the TR7 is quicker is never in doubt. It'll run out of puff at around the same top speed as the SS1 but in every acceleration shoot-out it beats the Reliant easily, though the 2 litre Dolomite derived four-cylinder engine is certainly showing its age. Driving it underlines how wide of the mark Triumph was in creating its 1970s sports car – it feels unrefined, wooden and unresponsive. The steering is slow, weighty and dead-feeling, leaving you discouraged to explore the handling – which is just as well because it is limited. The stiffer-than-normal springing on this example keeps the body better under control but there is no getting away from understeer and disappointing scuttle shake. On the other hand, the Triumph braked confidently – perhaps the owner's uprated brake pads provide the answer here. The SS1's handling is a revelation. It benefits from a low centre of gravity and a mix

of Vauxhall front and Ford rear all-independent suspension that really works. Unusually the front end has near-horizontal dampers. The steering is quick (less than three turns lock-to-lock) and the best-weighted of all the cars present (none of which has power steering). That gives you the confidence to fling the car into bends, and it responds with crisp turn-in, minimal understeer and a wonderful adjustability. It's very forgiving too. It's easy to be apprehensive about the low-cred SS1 but its chassis is easily the most fun of all the cars here.

In the 'senior' contest between the Jensen and TVR, another clear winner emerges. The Jensen-Healey is plainly a product of late 1960s technology, while the TVR has all the benefits of a more developed chassis and a gutsier engine. Let's not be too critical of the Jensen, though – the Lotus twin-cam engine has the sportiest timbre. Open it up and the acceleration is still eyebrow raising – *Motor's* 0-60mph time of 7.5 secs beats *Autocar's* Tasmin time of 7.8 secs. Where it falls down is a lack of low-down torque and tendency to go out of tune.

In contrast, the Cologne 2.8 V6 in the Tasmin sounds, looks and feels butch. The twin exhausts emit that classic TVR rumble and flooring the throttle produces a delicious, attention-grabbing roar. While it isn't as fast or as charismatic as the later V8 TVRs, the Tasmin is quick and torquey. The contrasts multiply the more you drive. The Healey has ultra-light steering, the TVR rather a firm helm. The dog-leg five-speed gearbox of this late-model Healey is light to use, the TVR's rather heavier. The Healey settles into a corner

with notable body roll, the TVR almost none. The Jensen is not as easy to adjust through bends, nor as sure-footed. Overall the TVR simply feels better planted on the road and ultimately more controllable. In a sports car, control is surely what all the fun is about.

Crunch time. Which car would I take home? I can't find much to recommend the TR7 other than its outstanding value – but then this test is all about value. It is merely adequate in too many areas for it to win in this company. For all its quirkiness, the Reliant SS1 is engaging to drive. You could stomach the compromised styling and low build quality for the entertainment it offers. Better still, find a few hundred quid extra and savour the 1.8i Turbo version.

The contest between the Jensen and TVR is interesting too. You can buy decent examples of each for around £4000 mark but they come from very different eras. The Jensen-Healey is a charming car – understated and with a fine engine – but the prospect of standing on rust alert and sighing as the Lotus engine meanders off-song again is enough to dissuade many. And it is outclassed by the TVR if only because this benefits from being substantially more modern. The exhaust note, the attractive cabin and the sheer guts of its V6 powerplant swing the day. The Tasmin is the winner... and an AI undiscovered sports car bargain. ♦

Thanks to the TVR Car Club (01952 770635), TR Register (01235 818866), Reliant Scimitar & Sabre Owners' Club (0181 977 6625) and Jensen Owners' Club (01460 64165)

THREE WEDGES AND FERAL FUN – THE OWNERS SPEAK



DAVID BOOTH

1976 Jensen-Healey

David Booth is a dyed-in-the wool Jensen-Healey enthusiast. He's owned one since '74, when he traded up from an MGB, and has never looked back. Now he's the Healey Registrar in the Jensen Owners' Club and has a GT and an Interceptor too. Amazingly this rare Mk2 five-speeder was found derelict in a Wirral scrapyards in '88 and was restored by David using mostly new parts. It has a larger 2.2-litre Lotus twin cam engine but is otherwise as original as they come, and a multi-concours winner.



DON MCCOY

1981 Triumph TR7

Don McCoy is a British sports car nut – as well as the convertible TR7 he has a fixed-head TR7, a Stag and a Mk3 Sprite. But it's obvious the TR7 is the apple of his eye: "I'd always wanted one because it's such a comfortable car." In the five years he's owned this 1981 example, it has had new wings and sills and has been resprayed Iceberg Silver from the original Pharaoh Gold. Other modifications include an unleaded head, stiffer springs, Spax adjustables, Mintex brake pads, an Aley roll-over bar and blue leather upholstery.



ALAN MORRIS

1983 TVR Tasmin

Having retired from his job as a bank manager, Alan Morris treated himself to a TVR Tasmin as a "big boy's toy". He came across it on a dealer's forecourt and was immediately struck by its superb condition and reasonable price. It's almost entirely original – even the decals are still settling in – and, while not in concours condition, it's not far off. It has proven very reliable so far and parts pose no problem at all, for the mechanicals and much of the trim is Ford and the factory body moulds are still in excellent condition.



PETER WILBY

1985 Reliant Scimitar SS1 1600

Peter Wilby is a Scimitar SE5A owner of eight years standing and was looking for an open two-seater to join it: "I chanced on an advert in the Reliant Scimitar & Sabre Owners' Club magazine for the SS1 and bought it, almost as an impulse buy." It's used as an everyday car (often with a B-flat tuba in the passenger seat!) and regularly travels the continent. As for spare parts, Peter comments that it helps to know where everything in Reliant's parts bin special came from.