

Westfield special

Here's to the next 25 years as Westfield spreads the word

Peter Carroll looks at the story behind the British-owned marque built down the road - or in your garage



A Westfield sports car may be capable of storming to 60mph in under three and a half seconds - but that's not necessarily the whole thrill for some owners.

Many appear to derive as much pleasure from building their cars as driving them - and nearly three quarters of all 'Westie' customers buy their vehicles in kit form.

Even the boss of the firm admits Westfields are "Meccano kits for grown-ups" - but these are boys' toys which can be driven on public roads and are capable of speeds of up to 150mph on race tracks.

Building your own sports car from scratch may seem a daunting prospect but the Kingswinford firm does its best to make the construction process as painless as possible. It can supply kits in complete or part form so customers can assemble the car at their own pace.

Westfield also produces a dedicated tool kit with everything needed for the build - and has even set up a hotline staffed with experts who can provide advice as required.

The construction process entails drilling, screwing, lifting and electrical work - but major jobs like welding are done in advance at the factory.

What every kit customer must do, however, is dedicate the 120 hours needed to put a car together. And not everybody can.

"One guy had been working on his on and off for 15 years," says sales manager Simon Westwood. "Eventually we had to finish it off for him because he simply didn't have the time to get it done."

The easy way out, of course, is to order a factory-built car.

"The saving isn't necessarily that



The Meccano kit for dads: nearly three quarters of all Westfields are sold in kit form and it takes around 120 hours to build one

great if you opt for the kit version," says Mr Westwood. "But many customers are adamant that they want to build it themselves."

One man who knows more than most about building Westfields is Adrian Halford. He was one of the first apprentices taken on by the firm in the 1980s and has done everything at the factory from welding to panelling to testing the cars.

"One of the reasons I like it here is the job satisfaction," says Adrian, who is now the firm's operations manager. "Some people work in a factory making brackets and they never see the end product."

"If I see a Westfield on the road I know I've helped to make it and it's something to be proud of. It's a good feeling."

Adrian has built up a knowledge of all parts of the manufacturing process - and this multi-skilling is

something boss Julian Turner is keen to encourage among his workforce.

He is setting up training opportu-

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nities and arranging visits to other car factories for his staff.

"There is always something you can learn from the way other car manufacturers work," he says.

Mr Turner said he was concerned

there appeared to be a shortage of suitably-skilled workers in the local area.

"When Rover closed we were deluged with CVs but there were very few people who had the sort of experience we were looking for."

He is also looking to concentrate on the marketing side of the operation to ensure the name of Westfield becomes better known. It is among some two dozen firms which currently make products based on the renowned Lotus 7. Rivals include Surrey-based Caterham, which purchased the rights to manufacture the 7 in 1973 and regards itself as 'custodian of the legend'.

"The trouble is," says Mr Turner "that every time someone drives a Westfield down the road they are advertising Caterham's product. And we've got to change that."

He is looking to increase awareness of the brand both on a national

and international level - but also looking to boost the firm's involvement in the local community.

Westfield has embarked on a number of initiatives with local schools and colleges - and even launched a project to design a hybrid sports car in conjunction with the University of Warwick.

"We want youngsters to recognise our name - but also to have a good idea of what we are about."

Other than the 25th anniversary cars there are no new models ready for launch just at the moment - but Mr Turner is considering a scaled-down model of a Westfield which would make an ideal child's present.

For he knows that the child who is delighted with a model 'Westie' could easily return in later life to buy the grown-up version of the sports car "Meccano kit".



The firm was started by Chris Smith in 1982



The Westfield kit, should you choose to build one...



... all the welding is done in the factory though



A factory built 'Westie', ready to roll

ROAD TEST

Basic - but lower, louder and faster

Peter Carroll takes a Westfield Jubilee Sport for a quick spin and finds it a 'visceral' experience..

First things first - a Westfield is a hardcore motor. It should not be regarded as the next step up from an MX-5 - even if you do decide to have your Westie

powered by a Mazda 'donor' engine.

You sit lower, the noise is louder, the ride is harder, the pedals stiffer, and the facilities more basic.

But it's also more visceral: the steering is super sharp, the gearbox has a

short, sporty throw, the exhaust rasps meatily in your right ear and you feel connected to the road in a way that you seldom do in a more conventional modern hatch.

The driving experience will not be for everyone - but Westfield fans wouldn't have it any other way.

Among the firm's latest offerings is the Jubilee Sport, which is based on an SE but with a number of special features for around £26,000 on the road. You can save six grand on the price by building it yourself.

The car has a lovely silver and black paint job and an anniversary plaque to distinguish it from other Westfields. The dash has a nicer design and better quality trim and the seats are leather instead of vinyl. The steering wheel is removable,

which not only makes it easier to get in and out, but acts as a pretty effective anti-theft deterrent. There's not exactly a lot of

storage space, so if you want to go for a weekend away in one you'll be advised by staff at the factory to 'pack smarter'.

Power comes courtesy of a two-litre Ford Duratec engine. Is there any need for more than 200hp in a car carrying so little weight? Most rational people would think not.

Performance is brisk and exhilarating. You'll need a firm foot on the brakes when the time comes to stop.

The Jubilee Sport has a firm suspension set-up designed to be suitable for either track or road. The underpinnings include Nitron aluminium-bodied competition suspension, with anti-roll bars fore and aft. It's fine to drive on a reasonable surface but it doesn't like road humps and really started to bounce around over some of the back lanes near Kinver.

Four-point racing harnesses come as standard and a full roll cage can be added if you want to go racing.

Those who want to go even quicker - and the Sport is no slouch - can install a Suzuki-sourced Megabus engine which will propel them to 60mph in under three and a half seconds. These revvy screamers are not best suited for day-to-day use, however, and will not prove as durable as a car engine.



• The firm's latest Jubilee Sport costs around £26,000

Westfield Fact File

- The firm was set up by historic grand prix racer and engineer Chris Smith in 1982. After designing and building a copy of one of his favourite race cars of all time, the legendary 1956 Lotus XI, in his garage at his home Westfield House in Armitage, near Rugeley, he was deluged with requests from enthusiasts wanting one for themselves.

- By Easter the following year Westfield Sportscars was up and running and looking for bigger premises. Mr Smith and his business partner and wife Eileen realised that continual investment in product development was the key to success and introduced a new car, the Westfield 7SE.

- The firm continued to expand and moved to its current premises on the Dudley Road in Kingswinford in 1991. The SEIGHT became Westfield's most powerful car to date - and then the firm began exploring the potential of harnessing small but powerful motorbike engines.

- In 2004 the XI was re-introduced - and remains as popular as ever.

- In 2006 British-owned Potenza Sports Cars bought out Chris Smith and is looking to develop and invest in the firm.