

## FIRST DRIVE

Driving a car without a windscreen has its pitfalls but, says Anthony French-Constant, in the Marlin Sportster TOi, it is an exhilarating experience

### Feel the breeze... and the bees.

**A**t 60mph, a drop of water tumbling from a passing tree assaults the bridge of the nose with all the subtlety of a robber's cosh. Not that this eye-watering episode worsens my current plight much. At such speeds, rain on exposed flesh offers the soothing caress of coarse sandpaper and the airflow causes my sunglasses to vibrate like an errant road drill, merely adding further futility to the use of a frantically wagging forefinger as a makeshift wiper blade.



As wing-walking is not listed among my hobbies, I'd forgotten the sheer power of a 70mph gale directly in the teeth. The last car I drove without a windscreen was Renault's mid-engined Spider. It sported an inverted "aeroscreen" wing atop the dashboard to deflect airflow over the driver's head. Though functioning admirably in this respect, the device proved less adroit at persuading anything heavier than air to alter course; the best that can be said for it is that, rather than swallowing an incoming bumble-bee the size of a B-52 bomber, I simply head-butted it with sufficient vim to elicit a bruise the size of a squash ball on the forehead.

What I had not forgotten —wincing with every passing lorry at the threat of hurtling aggregate, allied to the non-availability of NHS dental work — is the sheer, unalloyed joy of driving a car devoid of a windscreen.

You may, in truth, acquire a Sportster with a screen fitted. But Marlin Cars neglected to fit one to this demonstrator because they felt it not only looked better but also, armed with the engine, gearbox and undercarriage of a BMW M3, became an entirely hilarious driving proposition. Both sentiments with which I am forced to concur.

When Mark and Terry Matthews bought Marlin Engineering 10 years ago, the kit-car company was not so much waving as drowning, set to go the way of so many small, British, bespoke car manufacturers. Yet a scant two years later the introduction of a turnkey car, the Hunter, proved almost too successful for Mark: "Suddenly, on top of a healthy kit-car turnover, we were making about 36 finished cars per annum. The trouble is, one look at the books told us we were just working a lot harder without making any more money."

Shrinking the business back to three staff, a joint MD spouse and a hungry-looking Doberman pinscher, Mark designed the Sportster TOi because, while he relishes what a Caterham does for his adrenal gland, he simply can't get comfortable behind the wheel. The decision to offer a car built around BMW components "because of the public perception of their quality and performance" has, however, not been without its pitfalls. "I can buy individual BMW components until they're coming out of my ears," he frowns. "But

despite pushing them for years now, I still can't buy a complete engine and transmission unit from the factory."

Which is why his TOi demonstrator is fitted with what he describes as a "remanufactured" 3.0-litre straight-six from the E36 M3 model range launched in 1995, shunning the later 3.2-litre iteration in response to reports of problems associated with that unit's VANOS variable valve timing.

"I love the look of 1930s cars," Mark enthuses. "But I don't want to have to drive one." Nor do I. And nor, frankly, do I share his sentiments concerning brand-new cars that look 70 years old straight out of the box. Happily — and it might merely be the marriage of Dodge Prowler-evoking, purple presentation and the aforementioned windscreen theft — there's just enough of the mod con about the Sportster, particularly in the detailing, to maintain interest.



The nose and tail elements of the bodywork, including the front mudguards, are glass-fibre. All else is aluminium-alloy or stainless steel. Headlamps are bespoke, chromed spun brass, rather than bought off the shelf from Thailand. Indicators and other lamps boast various sources, including the clever use of motorcycle indicators atop vestigial, stainless-steel bumpers astern. Door and rear-view mirrors are Formula One-sized fillets trapped in elegant carbon-fibre casings, while, artfully shunning the leather straps of yore, bonnet catches are the clips from motocross boots; perfect for the part.

Within a cabin mercifully uncluttered by nostalgia, a simple carbon-fibre mat on aluminium dashboard houses comprehensive, bespoke instrumentation finished in — gulp — magnolia. White on black is, however, an option. Reach-only adjustable seats, finished in tough vinyl for weatherproofing purposes, are snug, comfortable and provide a fine driving position despite a fixed helmet. Good-quality carpeting completes largely faultless detailing, although I'd opt for a simple, milled gearlever — packed with lead to add weight to the throw — over the somewhat ornate offering here.

Mounted far enough aft to distribute weight 52:48 in favour of the rear axle, the 2,990cc straight-six drives the rear wheels via the standard five-speed transmission and Z-axle of the donor car, although Mark confesses to having removed a good 50 per cent of the rear suspension's rubber bushing to give a more direct trailing-arm fixing. Front suspension employs the standard BMW wheel spindle and upright, shortened to suit Marlin's double wishbone layout, with adjustable damping. The brakes are also BMW sourced, while the steering rack is Marlin's own; here it requires four turns lock-to-lock, but customers may specify anything down to about the 2.5 mark.

Predictably, the exhaust throb is hilariously loud and surprisingly lumpen until the engine gets into its stride; a by-product of revised induction and bespoke stainless-steel pipes raising power output 25bhp beyond BMW's quoted 286bhp at 7,000rpm and 236lb ft of torque at 3,000rpm. Mark reckons the TOi, almost 50 per cent lighter than the donor car at only 750kg, is good for something in the order of 400bhp per tonne.

All of which, on a day wetter than a Phil Collins ballad, calls for particularly judicious use of the throttle. On dry tarmac, Mark (displaying Rolls-Royce levels of interest in bald statistics acceleration: adequate) estimates the as-yet unfigured Sportster is capable of 0-60mph in about four seconds and a top speed of more than 150mph.

The Marlin boasts no traction-control electronics, no power steering and the brakes — minimally servoed in the interests of feel — require an authoritative shove to generate any interest in proceedings asked of them. So today, fearful of returning the only extant TOi to base in two large buckets, I'll have to settle for exploring the car's gratifyingly high in-gear levels of traction and grip. In truth, the engine's so tractable that fifth gear is readily accessible from potter. In the interests of noise, and face-battering thrust, third is more entertaining.

Tonneau cover in place, the elements assault is restricted to the neck up. The cabin, wide enough to helm with elbows inboard, remains entirely snug thanks to a one-position heater so ruthless that caution is advised in the wearing of nylon socks.

North of the shoulders however, hair involuntarily styled by slipstream, life is more akin to riding a motorcycle without a helmet; fun with flinching.

Attempts to stabilise my wildly vibrating sunglasses in the hope of seeing anything at all are best rewarded by a head slumped into the chest like someone nodding off after a heavy meal.

Despite a deliberate, and initially unnerving, lack of self-centring, the unassisted steering is wonderful — a living thing communicating every change of surface and road imperfection.

This, allied to a firm, informative ride that remains supple throughout — no hint of scuttle shake, unexpectedly high grip levels astern, even in the wet, and the complete absence of understeer — adds up to precisely the "grown-up, comfortable Caterham" experience to which Marlin aspires. Marlin sells the Sportster for £13,750 plus the cost of engine and gearbox. In this E36 M3-pilfered guise, that equates to about £24,500. As I find accessing a Caterham about as easy as posting a marshmallow into a piggy bank, if I could persuade Mark to remove the last styling vestiges of vintage body in favour of bespoke hot-rod, I'd be seriously tempted.

## **TECHSPEC**

**Price/availability:** £24,500 as tested. On sale now.

**Engine/transmission:** 2,990cc, BMW E36 M3 straight-six; 310bhp at 7,000rpm (est) and 236lb ft of torque at 3,000rpm (est). BMW five-speed manual transmission, rear-wheel drive.

**Performance:** top speed in excess of 150mph, 0-60mph in 4.0sec (est). EC Urban fuel consumption n/a, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions n/a.

## **WE LIKE**

Outrageous performance, Caterham thrills for the corpulent.

## **WE DON'T LIKE**

Overt 30s styling elements, bee in face.

## **ALTERNATIVES**

Caterham minus windscreen, motorcycling without a helmet, wing walking.