Down from the Hills

Nobody who has attended Classic Trials in the past couple of seasons can have failed to notice the growing number of one particular type of purposeful and attractive small sports-car, the Troll.

Just as in Nordic legend, modern-day Trolls are usually found at the *top* of hills. In fact, the marque's 1987 successes included no fewer than eight outright victories and the overall British Championship.

Its origins go back to the winter of 1979-80. Minehead-based trialling enthusiast Peter James had enjoyed considerable success trialling Ford "Pops", Hillman Imps and a supercharged Dellow, all of which he had thoughtfully and ingeniously modified and developed in the family garage, and he now decided it was high-time he built his own pukka competition car from scratch.

The result of his efforts was the Troll Mk 4, a neat spaceframe two-seater with stressed floor and seat squab panels, clothed in simple bodywork with cycle wings, and powered by a blown and highly-tuned 1340cc BMC "A" series engine. Not only was this 80in-wheelbase 9cwt projectile soon carrying its builder to new heights in the trials world, but its power-to-weight ratio in the region of 200 bhp/ton allied to excellent roadholding was able to give a good account of itself on the tarmac in local sprints and speed hill-climbs.

Such performance inevitably led to enquiries about replicas, so during 1986 more cars were constructed and given the model reference Mk 6 (the missing model number refers to a different avenue of exploration).

The spaceframe chassis had been well proven over six seasons of strenuous competition, so all efforts were concentrated on the mechanical package: the resulting 1700cc Ford crossflow-powered cars have maintained the earlier model's trialling capability and combined it with greater reliability.

Each of the early cars was hand-built by Peter James and friends in a small workshop behind the James family business premises in Minehead. Fortunately one of the early Mk 6 buyers was Jim Templeton, an Essex businessman. Realising the general appeal and multi-sport potential of these exciting little cars, Templeton wasted no time in applying his commercial expertise to the venture, and Troll Engineering Ltd was formed.

During the past year several more Troll Mk 6 models have been completed, as Peter James' small team works flat-out to keep pace with a swelling order-book. But these will be the last cars to emerge from the Minehead workshop, since the new company is soon to move to new premises in Rainham, where batches of five chassis can be assembled in parallel. James will remain in Minehead, concentrating on design and development of the current Mk 6B production model.

Troll Mk 6B — trialler, autotester, hill-climber, clubman's sports-car and road car.

Like all previous Troll models, the Mk 6B is of true spaceframe construction, using square- and round-section tubing; additional stiffness is achieved by stressed NS 4 aluminium panels forming the cockpit floor, seat squab and dashboard.

The light but rigid chassis is supported at the front by unequal-length upper and lower wishbones with fully adjustable coil-spring/gas damper units. Front suspension is fully rose-jointed, fitted with an adjustable anti-roll bar, and activated by a modified Escort "quick" steering rack. At the rear a modified Escort axle is attached to the frame by a rose-jointed five-link trailing arm system, with springing once again provided by coil-spring/gas damper units.

A great deal of attention has been paid to suspension, and the resulting fully-adjustable anti-dive-anti-squat set up affords the little car leech-like roadholding, despite its 8in ground clearance and 15in wire wheels shod with 70 aspect-ratio road rubber.

The mechanical package comprises a Troll-modified 1700cc Ford crossflow engine in "Sprint" tune, giving a reliable 115bhp at the flywheel. This is backed up by a Sierra gearbox and a 4.5 differential on a specially strengthened pin.

Braking is provided by 9in-diameter front discs backed by rear drums. A unique feature is the externally-mounted hydraulic handbrake lever, specially developed for trials use: the driver holds the lever back to hold the car on the rear brakes, and lets go to release them. For parking, a conventional handbrake is mounted in the passenger footwell, alongside the transmission tunnel.

The Troll's beautifully-proportioned bodywork comprises aluminium panels for all flat and single-curvature surfaces with well finished glass-fibre mouldings for the combined bonnet/nosecone and four cycle-type wings. The body does not have doors, but once the driver has stepped in and wriggled down into the flat seat there is adequate comfort and good lateral location due to the narrowness of the cockpit.

On the road the Mk 6B is a real adrenalin-pumper. I immediately felt as one with the machine; it is light, responsive and extremely quick, although its highly developed suspension and instant-response steering kept me on my toes.

Peter James suggested I try a racing start, and I was soon snicking my way up the gears on the way to a 0-60 mph time in the six-second bracket. Originally designed to climb slippery trials hills, the Troll possesses a great deal of traction, and this, coupled with the low differential ratio and extremely torquey engine, makes it depart very quickly indeed.

The concept behind the Mk 6 has always been to produce a modern equivalent of the pre-war "blown" MG or immediate post-war Dellow. It is a clubman's sports-car, finished to a very high standard and equally capable as a trials machine, sprinter, speed hill-climber, autotester, or road car. With its compact dimensions and large-diameter wire wheels, it captures exactly the desired image.

Subject to the customer's desired specification, a built-up Troll Mk 6B will cost in the region of £9500 but, for those who feel they have the necessary skills to finish the job, the basic rolling chassis, mechanical and body components can be supplied for roughly half that figure. When one considers the Troll's versatility, this represents a very astute investment on a fun-per-pound ratio. **DA**

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