

*The Jowett Jupiter Corsa Spyder' by Geoff McAuley*



Which choice takes preference for the typical kit car builder – body style or donor vehicle?

Well, in my case at least, the acquisition many years ago of a derelict Jowett Jupiter rescued from the nettles of a Scottish sheep farmer's field, left me just with the not so simple task of finding a suitable body.

The Jupiter's moly-chrome tubular steel chassis was originally designed and built by English Racing Automobiles (ERA) Ltd of Dunstable in the late 'forties and was based on the mechanical components of the highly regarded Jowett Javelin saloon. It was anticipated that the client base would come from the specialist coach builder fraternity, but the Jowett company was soon to take over the project and fit their in-house designed aluminium body. This car was christened 'Jupiter'. However, the chassis continued to appeal to independent coachbuilders, and of the 1,000 or so constructed, more than 70 'Specials' were subsequently constructed over the years, some by famous coachbuilders such as Stabilimenti Farina, and many others by lesser luminaries closer to home like Mead and Rochdale.

So, I didn't feel too guilty about using my poor rusty chassis in this way. And the fact that I have owned, raced and rallied Jowetts for more than 40 years meant that I'd amassed not a little knowledge of the cars' oily bits, along with sheds full of bits and pieces!

So, the quandary was, what body style? It may have provided some amusement to go for a Lamborghini Diablo or Lancia Stratos option, but somehow this wasn't really in the spirit of things. Then, mooching around the 2005 National Kit Car Show at Stoneleigh, I came across a small group of '40s look-alike sports racers.

The styling was spot on in terms of paying homage to the Jowett marque. The shape of the bodies, named Fiorano Corsa Spyder by the kits' current supplier, is based on the pretty little Ferrari 166 Spider Corsa of 1947/48. So the era was just right for my – er - ERA!

Trouble was, the Fiorano was designed to be nailed onto a Triumph Spitfire or a GT6 chassis. So this was not going to be easy. But a subsequent bit of research into a Triumph's dimensional data persuaded me that the project would be quite do-able. So, suitably armed with tape measure, camera and notepad, a trip was arranged to see Fiorano's current owner Mick Michaelides in Bromley. It didn't take long to be persuaded and so an order was immediately placed for the manufacture of a body set (Fioranos are made to order), and in early December 2005, body number 13 (was this an omen?), was ready for its trip back to York. A block and tackle was erected from the eaves of my garage, and the body gently lowered towards the scruffy Jowett chassis. Oh dear! This wasn't going to be as easy as I'd imagined! I'd already calculated that the chassis would need a bit chopping off its tail, but some of the other dimensions were looking a bit – how shall I say – challenging. Furthermore, Jowett's aluminium 1486cc flat four engine resides far forward in the chassis – not at all similar to the Triumph's installation. So the body's sloping nose was going to create some clearance issues. And in order to achieve installation and access of the engine, it would be necessary to slice off the snout of the body so as to allow it to become a front - hinging 'bonnet'.

Eventually though, having offered the body to the chassis maybe 100 times, lots of cutting here and a little shaving there produced a suitable compromise, and gave me the encouragement to send the chassis away for shot-blasting and priming.

Eleven cans of Halfords satin black Plasticote later (it's good stuff this), the chassis lay resplendent once more, eagerly awaiting its new set of clothes. In the tradition of earlier Jupiter Specials, I was keen to retain as much 'Jowettness' to the project as I could. This meant utilising the original front and rear torsion bar suspension, gearbox, engine, steering rack and column, brakes, radiator (albeit remanufactured slightly shallower than standard), and even the column gearchange. Please don't cringe! The Jowett version of this popular fifties device was one of the best around, and with a little practice, shifting cogs can be satisfyingly swift. Furthermore, this arrangement allows for an unadulterated flat floor – quite useful in a body as narrow as the Fio's.

I chose to use Jupiter ventilated pressed steel 16" wheels which kept things in the family, although most Fioranos do in fact employ 15" spoked versions. Tyres are from Kingpin Remoulds – 175x16 Taxi size.

One of the few areas where I had to depart from the true Jowett specification was caused by clearance problems with the high-mounted mechanical water pump/cooling fan assembly (the Jowett radiator lives behind the engine with the fan hung on the end of a long spindle from the front positioned pump). So I had to opt for a Pacet electric fan and a Davies Craig electric pump. And in recognition of the high-amp diet of these devices, the Lucas dynamo was replaced with an alternator, the drive belt being diverted to run around an improvised Golf cambelt tensioner pulley.

One aspect of the build which seemed straightforward (but which was anything but!), was the mounting of the mudguards. Unlike the Ferrari, the Fio's guards are intended to be affixed to the hub backplates, and thus travel up and down

with the suspension. I spent many hours fabricating tubular steel struts, which, in all modesty I say, looked quite nice. Trouble was, as I found on the first shakedown of the car, the flapping of the 'guards caused the struts to fracture at the fixing points, and so a beefier square tube steel version had to be designed. They don't look as good – but at least they're still in one piece!

Because the Jowett's track is a little smaller than a Triumph's, it wasn't possible to achieve full lock due to the front mudguards fouling the body side, so segments had to be cut out on either side to accommodate them. It's so nerve wracking to start chomping away at your pretty GRP body, but with a bit of black leatherette trim strip, the surgery now looks okay.

Eventually, with the (supplied) front and rear bulkheads slightly modified and installed, and a Spitfire fuel tank neatly slotted in between the rear one and the chassis crucible, the Jupiter Fio was ready for its floor. Jowett used marine ply for the original car, so I followed suit, but because of the absence of steel sills it had to be mounted on oak blocks. More oak was employed to provide longitudinal rails for the body to sit on. Marcos – eat your heart out! Tin worm won't be a problem with this car – but woodworm might be!

In keeping with the traditions of the time, I made up a bespoke wiring loom using colour coded, braided cable with soldered bullet connectors, all sourced from the excellent Auto Electric Supplies of Tenbury Wells.

The rough-cut wooden dashboard as supplied with the kit was skinned with turned aluminium sheet and holes were bored to take the instruments. Minor gauges come from an old Sunbeam Rapier, (scrapped many years ago), whilst speedo and rev counter are Jaguar, sourced at a local autojumble and recalibrated to suit. An attractive four spoke Moto-Lita steering wheel finishes the job off nicely.

A pair of old Spitfire seats was re-upholstered, and the bare fibre glass interior of the body was trimmed with a sort of corrugated rubbery sheeting material, bought from a local hardware store, and intended to cover your kitchen table! All this, along with a hundred other jobs, caused the project to drag on much longer than planned. Indeed, it was March of 2008 when the car made its first tentative journey under its own power along the length of my driveway – some 27 months after the start date.

The surface finish of the Fiorano shell as supplied is excellent, and minimum preparation was needed before its top coat (Ferrari Corsa Rosso – racing red. What else?). In fact, I initially made an abortive attempt to colour the car using aerosols, but I should have known better, so when finances allowed, off it went to a professional spray shop.

And the driving experience? Well, having identified and fixed a few rattles, the car now feels very well screwed together. At just 12.8 cwt (654 kg), it's quite a lot lighter than a standard Jupiter, so the ride is a little on the firm side. But it handles very nicely in a drifty sort of way, and performance is quite brisk despite having only around 60bhp available from the 1486cc engine.

Although the finished car is in the tradition of a coach built model, I could not have done it without resorting to the kit car scene. Apart from the obvious bit – the body - so many other parts have been sourced from established kit car suppliers such as Car Builder Solutions of Staplehurst in Kent. I feel it's been a very successful combination of two rather different approaches.

Throughout the project I had wondered whether other Jowett owners, or indeed kit car enthusiasts, might be a bit sniffy about what I'd done. But the car has

been very well received. Not only has it been accepted as a genuine Special Bodied Jupiter by the Jupiter Owners' Auto Club (JOAC) and the Jowett Car Club (both of whom have judged it best in the Special Bodied Jowett class at their respective awards ceremonies), it also attracted much interest and kind comment from visitors to the 2008 Stoneleigh National Kit Car Show. And owners of more traditional Corsa '48s and Fioranos have also been complimentary.

So, it seems everyone's happy.

I certainly am!