

CLASSIC DRIVER

John Dodd and the Merlin-engined monstrosity that infuriated Rolls-Royce

Lead

In the early 1970s, eccentric Englishman John Dodd took possession of a home-brewed monstrosity that used a 27-litre Rolls-Royce Merlin engine as its primary power source. It wasn't the engine that the company took exception to, however – it was the trademark(ed) grille it wore on its lengthy nose...

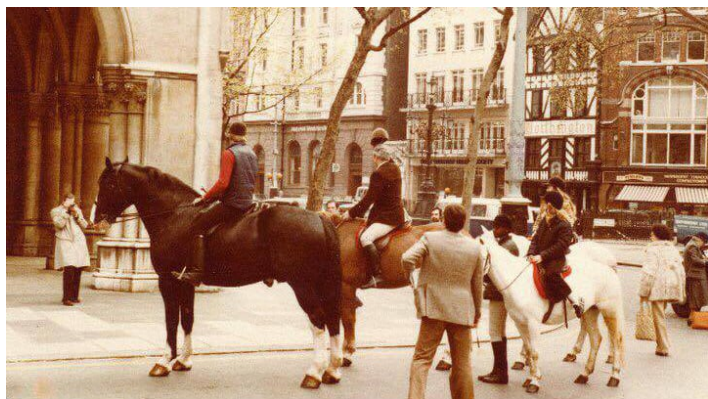
Wearing hand-made glassfibre bodywork with a backwards-mounted 27-litre Merlin V12 (minus superchargers) driving the rear wheels through a step-up gearbox, the Merlincar is possibly one of the most curious cars you'll ever see – and for its owner John Dodd, it certainly proved the costliest. The car came into his possession as a rolling chassis after he had helped its then-owner solve the conundrum of which gearbox the Merlin could be twinned with – and once the bodywork was completed, he immediately went about getting the car road-registered. Even without the superchargers, it was included in the Guinness Book of Records as the most powerful car on the road at the time.

Merlin-engined mischief-maker



Unsurprisingly, this brought about plenty of attention, good and bad. The latter came predominantly from Rolls-Royce, which has always been fiercely protective over the likeness of its famous grille and Spirit of Ecstasy emblem. The breaking point came when Dodd took a trip to Germany and blitzed past a German baron driving a Porsche on the autobahn. The baron called Rolls-Royce to enquire about its 'new model' – and soon afterwards, Dodd was summoned to the High Court for breach of trademark. "I drove it to the hearing every day and parked right outside the court. The Rolls-Royce representatives parked opposite in a Silver Spirit with the numberplate 'RR 1' – funnily enough, they got towed away and I didn't. On the final morning of the trial, my lawyer sacked himself, saying I was ridiculing the highest court in the land. His last piece of advice was not to take the car that day, otherwise it'd be confiscated and I'd never get it back."

Horsing around



"They said I was behaving like a maverick. Perhaps 1,000 horsepower *was* a bit excessive, I thought, so I called a friend who had some stables in Hyde Park for a favour. Me, my wife and my children took a horse each, and clip-clopped to the doors of the Courts of Justice – that caused a bigger sensation than the car had!" Ultimately, Dodd – who provocatively wore a sweater with the interlocking Rs emblem to court – lost the case and, as a result of his animated 'interjections' during the proceedings, was relieved of his house and numerous other possessions, including a twin-engined aeroplane, for Contempt of Court. However, he managed to keep hold of 'The Beast', which was soon given a replacement grille bearing his initials. "Luckily enough, I was always pretty handy with gearboxes, so when I had lost everything I decided to start afresh in Spain. Since then, I've learned to windsurf, waterski and do all sorts of other things I'd never have done otherwise."

Now 84 years old, Dodd still spends his days reconditioning Rolls-Royce and Bentley gearboxes from his workshop in Malaga – and 'The Beast' is something of a local hero. "She's still alive and well, and I still take her out regularly – although not quite as often as I used to, as it does around 2mpg and BP no longer pays the fuel bill."

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