

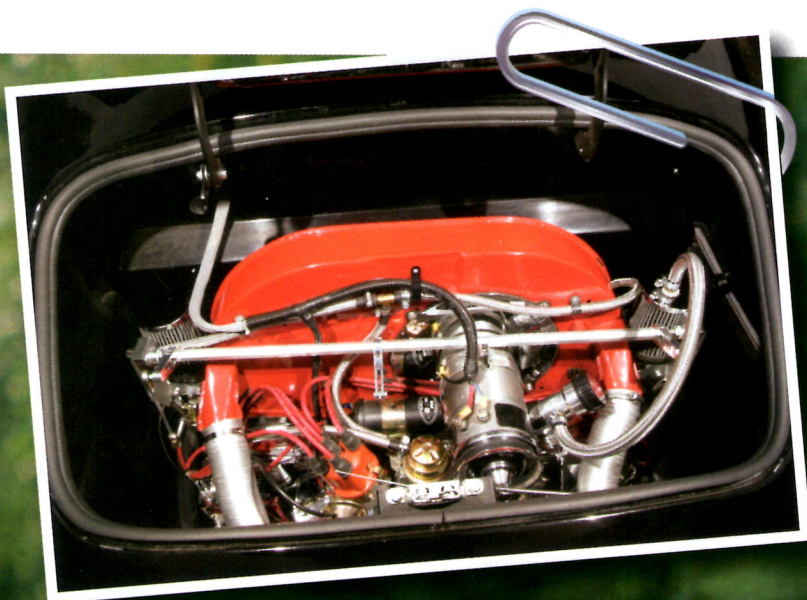
# BODY Of Work

With a natural kit car building eye for detail, Steve Gathercole's latest project is his best yet. CKC went to see it.

Words and Pictures: CKC







**Y**ou never stop learning... so it's a shame when some kit car builders never reach beyond their first project.

Either they keep their creation forever, or they build a car, run it for a few years before selling it and moving out of the kit car scene to something else. But just as the first Airfix model you stuck together wasn't your best, so the same is often the case for the larger scale creation you bolt together later in life... practice makes perfect.

Steve Gathercole's Chesil Speedster is his third kit car build... and it shows. The car is neat, tidy, seemingly simple, and pretty much immaculate, wherever you look. It's a well-built kit car, period.

In fairness, he did start his first build in 1999 already with a head start over many of us. As a Design and Development engineer, he had a number of skills that would benefit a kit car project, but when we meet him it soon becomes apparent that he also has the right mindset for kit car building.

And a Robin Hood 2B would be the perfect first project to test Steve's mettle. He'd have liked a Westfield, but the budget couldn't run that far and the Robin Hood's comprehensive kit package, allied to its extraordinary affordability was hard to resist. 18 months later it was complete and, at the end of its SVA test the inspector revealed it was the first example he'd ever come across that had passed at its first attempt. He was off to a good start.

The 2B didn't reside in the Gathercole household for long. Within less than a year, Steve's eye had been caught by the *A Car Is Born* programme, where a Pilgrim Sumo was built by TV presenter and vet, Mark Evans.

The 2B was put up for auction and sold swiftly for a handsome profit... a Sumo kit was immediately on order. Steve retained the Sumo's coloured gelcoat finish, preparing the bodywork himself, and over the next 12 months the car was assembled to a high standard, with lots of added extras and a 3.5-litre Rover V8 under the bonnet.

"I really enjoyed it," he remembers, and his seven-year ownership of the car bears witness to that. But by 2009 he was getting itchy fingers again, and a visit to the Exeter kit car show saw him looking for a new challenge. A Marlin 5EXi was in the frame, but the recently revitalised Chesil Speedster caught his eye... two very different kinds of car! He left the show intrigued and spent the next 12 months working out what he'd like to do, while building up some savings.

It meant that on the Chesil stand at the 2010 Exeter show he was ready to make a final inspection of the factory demonstrator, before placing an order at





the event. While chatting to Chesil MD Peter Bailey, conversation moved to donors, at which point a person standing nearby chipped in that his son had a Beetle in need of a new home... and he lived only a few miles from Steve's Somerset base!

The 1972 Bug was a non-runner with a swing rear axle, but it had a 1600cc engine and Steve knew that most of the metal would be replaced anyway. Indeed, the bodywork was so tatty that it needed cutting into three large chunks before it could be removed from the floorpan and running gear that Steve needed to salvage. A search for a more desirable IRS rear axle, which could replace the existing swing axle drew a blank, so Steve stuck with what he had, ordering most of his

**Above:** Robin Hood 2B was Steve's first build. Quickly sold to fund build of his second project, a Pilgrim Sumo (above right).

**Below:** Black gelcoat bodywork has been polished to perfection.

replacement Beetle parts from VW Heritage in Surrey. In the process he also introduced a number of upgrades, including adjustable sway-a-ways for the front beam axle and twin carbs for the 1.6-litre engine. The latter, although a non-runner when Steve got it, had clearly been previously fully rebuilt and needed no internal refurbishment.

Of course, the big work at this stage involved sorting and shortening the floorpan. With previous welding skills, Steve was happy to do all the work himself at home. Having cut out the old floorpans and restored the frame head, new floorpans went back in and the whole structure was rebuilt... to standard wheelbase. Steve wanted everything straight and true, before he got the angle grinder out.

Chesil's advice on how much to shorten the floorpan was a little unnerving, since it included the word 'about' before the number of inches. Steve was looking for something a bit more precise! So after much research and measuring of examples at Chesil's workshop, he removed exactly 274mm from the length of the floor, overlapping

## I Built This... Steve Gathercole

**Age:** 55

**Occupation:** IT project manager

**Are you a club member?:** Apple County Kit Car Club

**Best bargain:** Beetle for £500

**First car:** Ford Anglia

**Lottery win car:** Ford GT40

**Fastest car you've experienced:** My V8 Pilgrim Sumo

**Favourite film:** Star Wars



the front and rear sections to retain strength. Great care was taken to keep chassis straight and level and when all welding was complete, he was delighted that the car was within a 1mm tolerance his target... but would it fit the subframe on the Chesil bodywork?

Although Steve had ordered the kit months before, he'd delayed delivery of bodywork while he got the chassis up and running. Indeed, this process could be taken to a high level, to the point where Steve was able to start the engine and drive the floorpan around on the drive time for a delivery from Chesil...

Peter Bailey delivered the body to Steve's home, bolted to a dolly frame so that it could be moved around in the

### Owner Rating (out of ten)

#### THE BUILD

**Kit quality:** 10

**Manufacturer back-up:** 10

**Build manual:** 4 (old DVD)

**Ease of build:** 8

**Ease of IVA compliance:** 9

#### ON THE ROAD

**Performance:** 7

**Handling:** 7

**Brakes:** 7

**Smile factor:** 10

**Value for money:** 8







**Left:** Retrosound stereo has all mods cons.



While Steve sourced most components straight from Chesil (including the full trim kit) he was also using VW Heritage and Machine7 for items such as the fantastic reproduction steering wheel. And then there were other areas such as the engine bay, where his own eye for detail meant an understated but meticulously finished installation. He's even retained the dynamo where most would instantly opt for a more modern alternator. Nice touch.

Having put two cars successfully through SVA, Steve wasn't too worried about IVA, despite the stories he'd heard. The closure of his local Taunton test centre certainly made the process more of a task, since now he had to head for the Exeter test centre. And where he'd previously driven his cars to the test site, the longer distance made him decide to call in a favour from his mate Steve Langridge, who trailered the car to the test.

Exeter also happens to be where Chesil puts through all its factory built cars, so the inspector was very familiar with the model, and also immediately impressed with Steve's build. Prior to the test Steve had been in regular contact with Chesil about the inspection and any areas of the car that needed careful preparation. This paid off big time when it came to the day, with the inspector managing to work



parts should line up correctly. With the body now fitted with doors, lights and other componentry (not to mention a bonded-in steel subframe) it was a heavy structure that meant drafting in six strong helpers to lift it over the rolling chassis, while Steve guided it into place.

At the back, the location

point is self aligning, so once

settled onto the Beetle floorpan, Steve quickly went to the front fixing points to see if the body frame holes lined up with those on the chassis... perfect. Phew!

Having spent several months on refurbishing the Beetle components, the actual assembly of the kit was now quite swift, with the whole project complete within a year of placing his order.

On both the Pilgrim and Robin Hood, Steve hadn't been overly worried about replication – the Sumo may have been a Cobra replica, but meticulous authenticity was never a priority. In sharp contrast, on the Chesil he found himself increasingly referring to books and archive photographs to get the details correct. Somehow, the quality of the kit and the look of the end product demanded it. He wasn't going to be obsessive, mind you, and there are telltale areas on the car that any aficionado will call into question, such as the wind-up windows and retrimmed Mazda MX-5 seats. While Steve would have liked the low-back buckets of the original car, the impending meeting with an IVA inspector (where headrests are a requirement) would preclude their inclusion.

garage prior to being  
ed onto the chassis. Steve had ordered a  
oured gelcoat finish from Chesil,  
something the company had been hesitant  
in. But the black finish on the body  
ked promising, even though Steve had  
again decided to remove all the  
uld flash lines and polish the shell  
himself (as he had done on his Pilgrim  
mo).

Black was always going to be a  
challenging colour to get right, since it  
ows up any imperfections. But Steve's  
vious experience meant he was  
unted by the work, which involved  
efully filing down the flash line ridges  
where the different parts of the body  
oids are bolted together, leaving a little  
ge in the gelcoat on the resulting  
els), before working with ever finer wet  
dry paper and then polishing  
mpounds. Five full weekends of work  
er, the black gelcoat was gleaming.  
Like the rolling chassis, quite a bit of  
sembly work was done on the body  
ure it needed lifting onto the shortened  
pan. When the day came, Steve was  
perately nervous that the two separate

**Above:** Interior looks far smarter than any original car! Wind-up windows a modern luxury.

**Left:** Period clocks and gorgeous Petri Banjo replica wheel.



**Right:** Steve is a serial kit car builder.



through the test with no major issues...

Until it came to the brake test, where the rear brakes were working more efficiently than the fronts, causing a failure. This was frustrating, since Steve

## Steve Gathercole's Chesil Speedster

### Specifications

**Engine:** 1582cc VW Beetle engine, twin carbs.

**Power:** Approximately 70bhp.

**Gearbox:** VW Beetle 4-speed.

**Suspension:** Torsion bar with adjustable sway-a-ways, trailing arms.

**Brakes:** Discs/drums.

**Wheels & Tyres:** 14in chromed steel wheels with polished hub caps. 185x65 R14 tyres.

**Interior:** Full Chesil leather interior, wind-up windows, trigger shift gear lever, Retrosound Model One radio, repro Petri Banjo steering wheel with St Christopher horn push, repro gauges.

**Exterior:** All original style Porsche detailing and badges, black gelcoat colour bodywork.

### Contacts

**The Kit:** Chesil Motor Company, Bridport, Dorset. **T:** 01308 897072. **E:** chesil@chesil.biz  
**W:** www.chesil.biz

**VW parts:** VW Heritage, Burgess Hill, West Sussex. **T:** 0845 873 8328.

**E:** esales@vwheritage.com **W:** www.vwheritage.com

**VW parts:** Machine7, Nuneaton, Warwickshire. **T:** 02476 356465.

**W:** www.machine7.com

**General parts:** Car Builder Solutions, Staplehurst, Kent. **T:** 01580 891309.

**E:** info@cbsonline.co.uk **W:** www.cbsonline.co.uk

**General parts:** Europa Spares, Tutbury, Staffordshire. **T:** 01283-815609.

**E:** info@europaspares.com **W:** www.europaspares.com

was convinced that had he driven the car to the test and fully bedded in the pads, then the correct balance would have been in place (and indeed this was the reality at the retest). More surprising was the standard factory supplied exhaust, which failed the noise test.

Back at home Steve adjusted the tappets on the engine, which made it run slightly more quietly, and also installed some db killers into the tail pipes which instantly reduced the noise level to the point where he felt confident to head for a retest. The Chesil passed.

Registration was next on the agenda, and the refurbished VW floorpan and sundries meant an age-related number plate was applied for (with no inspection requirement)... and received within a week! A particularly speedy and satisfactory service.

When it first hit the road Steve had no expectations in terms of performance. After all, the 1600cc air-cooled engine was producing perhaps no more than 70bhp where previously he'd been used to the grunt and power of his V8 engined Sumo. But the reality has been surprising, with the flat-four engine delivering good torque, a relaxed cruising ability and a surprising turn of speed... "I wasn't expecting any performance," says Steve, "but it's much better than I thought."

### With Thanks

Steve would like to thank Steve Langridge for IVA trailing duties and support, the Apple County Kit Car Club and special thanks for wife Rachel and daughters Lauren and Zoe.

However, the handling was less accomplished straight out of the box, and it took a while for Steve to get the tyre pressures correct, get the front camber angles right and change the original dampers for shorter ones to improve traction on the lowered suspension. But it was worth it. "It handles brilliantly," he comments.

Indeed, Steve's clearly loving the ownership experience, just as much as he enjoyed the build. This is perhaps the most upmarket kit he's built so far, and he could see that in the quality of parts that came with the kit. And now that it's on the road he's amazed by the reaction it gets... far more than his two previous cars.

When it comes to the budget, this experienced builder has been keeping close tabs on the bank balance. The original budget was around £12,000, but the car has come in at nearer £16,000. Unlike so many builds, where it is the little things that have accumulated to hammer the budget, here Steve knows exactly where the extra spend has been.





and it's almost exclusively on the finishing items. The superb steering wheel was a cool £500, while the full leather interior was also very expensive, while items such as the chromed wheels and bespoke Speedster items such as the USA sourced rear lights also hit the bank balance.

But there's no questioning the perceived value of the finished article. The car looks fantastic and the first thing we notice is the immaculate bodywork. The polished gelcoat looks just as good as any expensive paint job, while Steve always approached the gel finish as a potentially medium term solution, that he may end up painting the car after a few years of use.

Solid black certainly adds to the period authenticity he was after, aided and abetted by the lovely period finishing details and cheeky Porsche badging sprinkled around the car. Look inside and the plush leather finish is surely more accommodating than anything offered within the '50s original, but the gauges, switches and period style radio are fab touches. And we bet the MX-5 derived seats are more comfortable than any original buckets.

Pop the engine cover and what's revealed demonstrates to us perhaps more than anything else the experience of Steve's previous builds and his natural eye for detail. The look in here is clean and

uncluttered. It looks just perfect. It looks effortless, when we know in reality such an impression is rarely achieved without considerable effort.

What's also great to see is Steve's enthusiasm for the car. Having built two kits previously, he was never daunted by the prospect of building this car, but he still enjoyed the process. Perhaps more tellingly, he's really enjoying the ownership experience too. It creates enormous interest from onlookers, and it's a better all round car than perhaps he expected. Certainly, for the time being there's no indication that the Chesil will be looking for a new home, but you wouldn't bet against it, would you? **CKC**



"Wasn't expecting any performance," says Steve, "but it's much better than I thought."