

ARDENT CRITICS CLAIM THAT I'M an unashamed exhibitionist. Until recently they based their judgement on the unconvincing facts that I often wore a yellow shirt, that I knew too many card tricks to be healthy and that I talked too much. Now, all has changed. They've forgotten the yellow shirt, the card tricks and the big mouth and have turned their attention to my week with three of Britain's fun cars.

I didn't have to try to be noticed: I just was. My problems started when three cars, if that's the right word, arrived at CAR for inspection. The first was a completely new offering from the Reliant organisation, a three-wheeler to end all three-wheelers: the Bond Bug. Next to blast its way into the crowded confines of Victoria was the Manta Ray, a beach buggy from the Power On Wheels organisation. And finally came the most normal of the group, the latest Lotus Seven. Predictably, I was elected to investigate—and who could handle a trio like that without being noticed?

All three cars are new. The Manta Ray and

the Bond Bug are the first of their kind, and the Seven is the latest and most radically altered in a long line of baby Lotuses. They are also all most certainly fun cars: at least I think so, since I had a lot of fun in each of them!

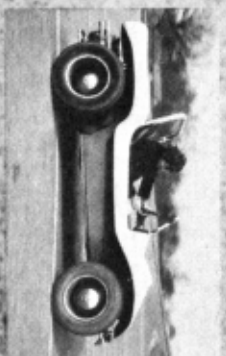
**THE BOND BUG 700 ES**

THE BOND BUG IS SO COMPLETELY DIFFERENT from anything else on the road today that it doesn't just steal glances, it gets the longest possible stares. Even London taxi drivers, a breed of men who will rarely stare at anything except the tip that was too small, gazed goggle-eyed at this creature as it threaded its way cheekily among them.

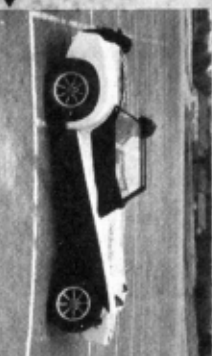
Located, as I found out by a process of elimination, inside the cockpit between the legs of the two passengers is an enlarged 700cc version of Reliant's trusty four-cylinder ohv engine, a distant derivative of the original Austin Seven. In its latest form it gives acceleration to 30 that will leave Spridget owners and the like decidedly embarrassed. So, as if it isn't enough to have everybody laughing at you while you're stationary at the lights, they're



BOND BUG



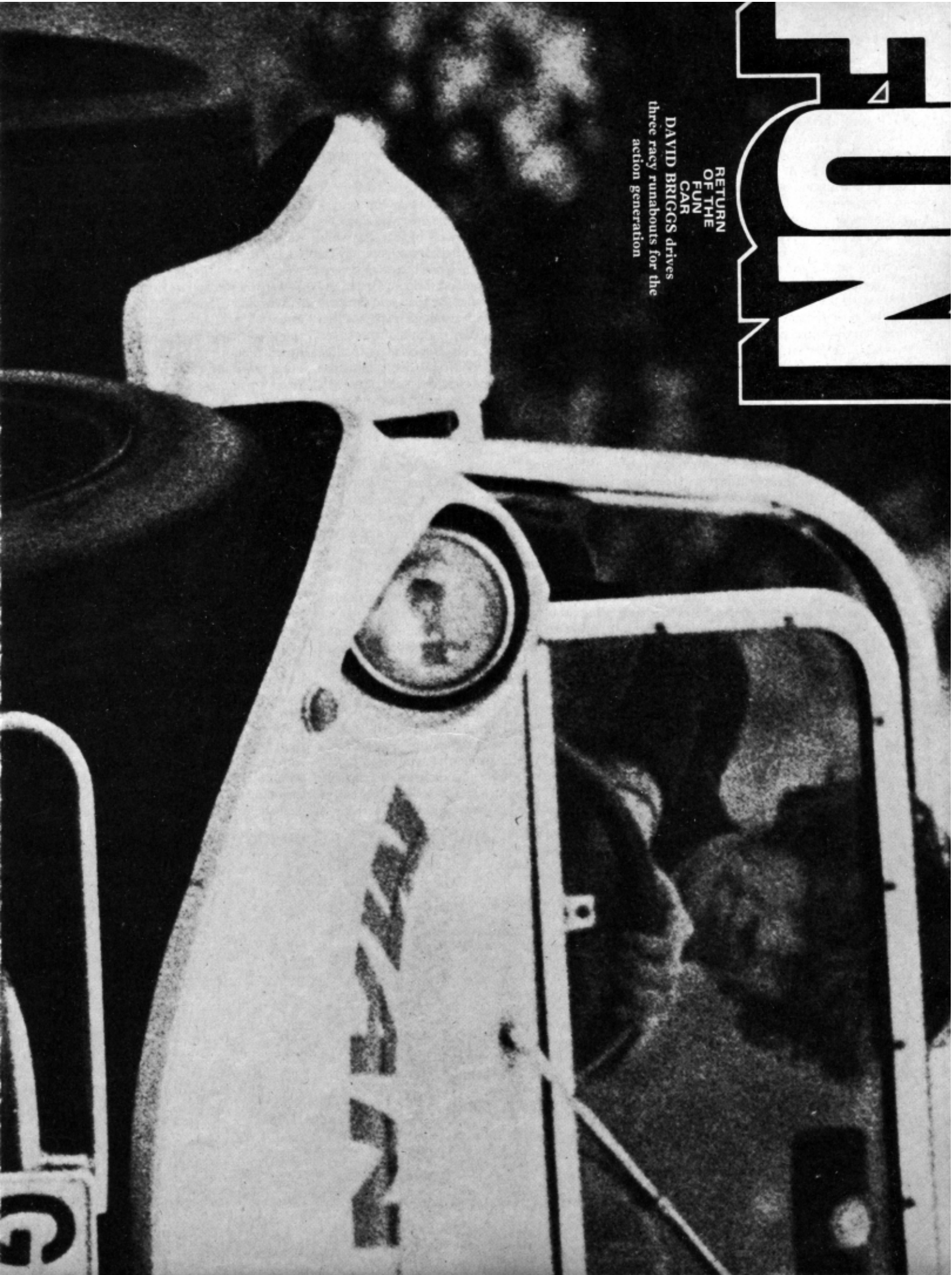
MANTA RAY



LOTUS SEVEN

# FUN

RETURN  
OF THE  
FUN  
CAR  
DAVID BRIGGS drives  
three racy runabouts for the  
action generation



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► guaranteed to be glaring at you from behind when you leave!

Whoever said that the English were a traditionally reserved race of beings should have come flown on the back of that Bug with me. All types, their curiosity heightened by the presence of masking tape on all the badges, wanted to know what it was. The situation got so bad at one point that my passenger had to have a brief lesson on the history of the car and the Reliant organisation in order to cope with the barrage of questions that were being fired at us from her side of the car while I warded off the attackers on the driver's side.

After you've got away from the crowds and the traffic jams and out on to the open road you can take note that Reliant, who are of course now the proprietors of the old Bond firm, have come up with something really special. The Bug is a brisk little car that will carry two, and only two, in reasonable comfort and surprisingly quickly. It is extremely compact, light to handle and thus ideal for use in town, yet on the motorway you can cruise at 70mph with ease and get up towards a genuine 90 if you're really feeling brave.

Handlingwise, the car's big drawback is of course that it's a three-wheeler. Its steering is quick and precise and in the dry it performs well, going just where you point the nose. It is even possible to hang the tail out under power in the lower gears, but at speed there is the feeling that 'swervability' might be lacking. If you should ever find yourself without a passenger by your side in the Bug—an unlikely event as the chicks love it—take good care on left-hand bends. We found out only too quickly that in

**The Bond Bug (below) gets ready to do a wheelie as it corners hard. To keep the nearside rear wheel on the ground we found the best solution was to find a passenger. In the Bug (second from left) and the Lotus (far right) the passenger gets a much better deal as far as seating is concerned, the driver having to contend with no adjustment on the seat or pedals. In the Manta Ray (third from left) despite other faults, we couldn't complain about the driver's seating**

the dry, without the extra weight of a second person, the nearside rear wheel is very willing to take to the air. In the wet, contending with roundabout-type corners becomes an art that needs a lot of skidpan practice. In fact I got the impression that the rear end road-holding had been deliberately restricted to compensate for the Bug's inherent instability.

Getting in and out of the cockpit, which is achieved by lifting the whole of the front section, is relatively simple when you get the hang of things, but I for one managed to collect a few bruises in the process of learning while some of my friends of the fair sex gave me less than happy looks as they tried to clamber into the machine in a dignified fashion. Once I did get in, however, I found the seats and the driving position very good, although it is a pity that Reliant could not have mounted the smart leather-trim wheel a bit higher so as to clear the driver's knees. The seats don't adjust, as they are built into the glassfibre body of the car, but they are very well shaped. Inside, the controls are neat and practical and there is a surprisingly efficient heater. There's also a sizeable boot.

The Bond Bug looks to me like one of those design exercises which were on the motor show stands three years ago; they were described then as the commuter cars of the future. Reliant are now producing the car of the future and they are hoping not only to catch the town-car commuter market but to interest the converted ton-up boys and the 16year olds who can drive it on a motorcycle licence. Certainly a Bug would make an ideal 'third car' for the family with teenage kids, providing useful and amusing transport for all at around £500 with very little to pay in the way of tax (£10 a year) or fuel bills (40+ mpg).

#### MANTA RAY BEACH BUGGY

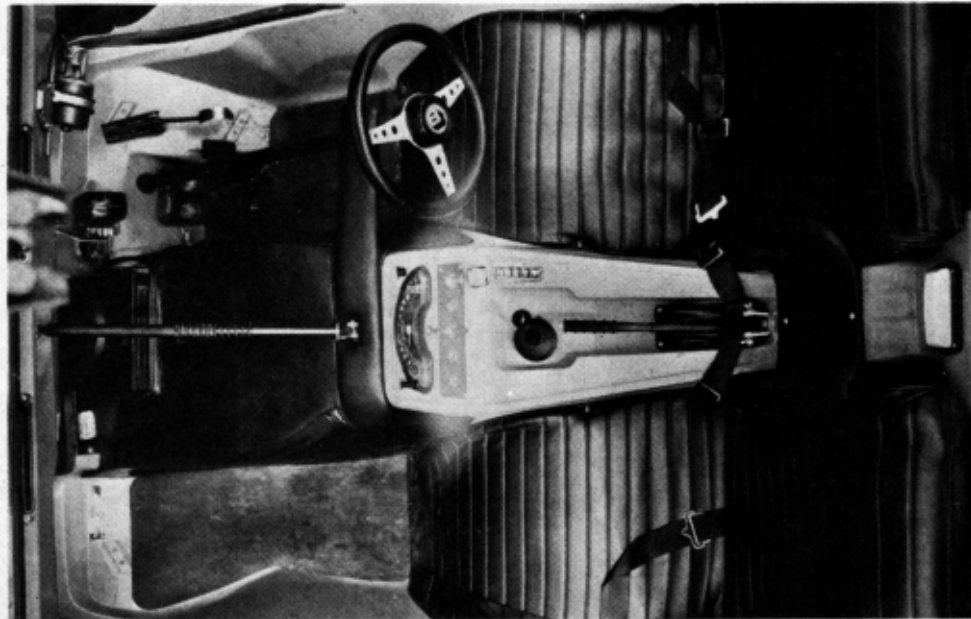
AFTER HAVING SAMPLED SEVERAL BEACH buggies in the past, the motley crew at CAR magazine seemed somewhat surprised at my enthusiasm to drive this monster which from all external appearances looks just like any of the others. But I am very conscious that the idea

of dressing a VW up in beach clothes has really caught on in this country (Carol, the editor's new secy, is just dying to build one) and I would have thought that if you were going to describe any car on the British roads today as a fun car then this would be it.

Having got used to the contortions needed to get in and out of the Bond Bug, it required particular concentration to bring quite another set of dormant muscles into play to get into the beach buggy. While forcing the sidescreens out of the way one has to clamber through a gap just about wide enough for my pet goldfish to wiggle through, and with the rush-hour crowd watching you doing it in the middle of Victoria—well, maybe that's half the fun.

Wedging myself into the bucket seat, an essential item on this car, I discovered something of major importance to me: I actually fitted! This is more than can be said for the other two machines under test, and it was a big relief to find that for once my knees weren't tangled up with the leather-rimmed steering wheel. While counting my blessings I reached for the ignition key to start the 1500cc VW engine that I had observed looking as though it was falling out of the back.

There were two moments of shock driving this car; one was when I started it, the other when I tried to steer it. After the first splutters of ignition the engine burst into life and something resembling the sound of four BSA 500cc motorbikes at full revs went resounding down the road. Some cars are noisy, others growl. The Manta Ray emits a noisy growl that sounds simply terrifying. Gathering the shreds of my well-worn car coat around me, I prepared to do battle with the monster. The first few hundred yards were quite painless; it was only when we topped a traumatic 20mph that the shaking effect which was to become all too familiar later on made itself evident—a shuddering sensation, travelling through the floor and right up my spine. We jumped and jolted our way precariously on ultra-wide racing tyres around Hyde Park Corner and down Park Lane and by the time Marble Arch had come vaguely into view I had decided that the Manta



Ray was going to be no joy to drive on tarmac. The 12in tyres on the back seemed to be the root cause of the trouble, because due to their width they bounced the car across the road in response to the slightest imperfection. Yet the tyres couldn't be blamed for everything: the car itself seemed to have an inborn desire to cast me out on the road.

Although the Manta Ray is something of a problem to conduct safely on the public highway it revealed itself as a true buggy on the rough stuff, thus proving to me that the breed does have some redeeming features. For anyone who spends a lot of his/her fun time off the road, either driving among the dunes in true Californian fashion or belting round on farms or mountains, the Manta Ray is as good a buy as the next buggy. For the Chelsea set the same applies provided they confine themselves to the Kings Road and a 20mph speed limit...

The controls are sparse, and again there is no luxury to the car at all although presumably one could build in a few home comforts since the machine is only available in kit form. The makers, Power On Wheels (the initials neatly express their aim), claim that their £475 complete conversion kit can be fitted to the chassis of a VW in 12 hours. But first, of course, you have to spend some time finding an old VW with bad bodywork but a good chassis and engine. POW can also supply the engine, should you want it, from their buggy shop and with adaptors the Manta Ray body can take Corvair, Ford V4 or Renault power units.

As I have already indicated, driving the Manta is somewhat of a chancy business and the whole operation is not helped by the awkward VW pedal setup which can lead the less tolerant to stamping on clutch and brake in the same movement. This, as you can imagine, has worrying side effects, particularly in the wet. The Manta Ray is the only car of these three that can really boast of being a four-seater fun wagon, but to get four people in you have to take the roof down—a process that is speeded up automatically at 50mph or over when it blows off anyway. You may think that the Manta Ray adds up to being just another beach

buggy, but it does have important styling differences which are claimed to make it immune from the sort of police interest that landed us in the cart after driving an earlier rival effort.

#### LOTUS SEVEN

AFTER SOME 13 YEARS OF PRODUCTION the wind-in-your-face enthusiasts' sports car, the Lotus Seven, had to undergo some change. For just a bit too long now people have been expected to drive what has often been described as the Little Tin Can without any home comforts at all. Now, would you believe a comfortable Lotus Seven?

After leaving behind all 29bhp of the Bond Bug it was nice to feel the 84bhp Ford GT engine under me. The Lotus seating arrangements although looking very sporty turned out to be poor for me due to the lack of legroom (I am just over six feet), but I could forget all that as I began to motor what must still rate as a fun car in a class of its own—as indeed it ought to at £1025 in kit form, or £1353 fully assembled.

Since its inception in 1957 the Lotus Seven has never until this year really undergone any major alterations. There have been minor modifications to the chassis, the bodywork and the interior and over the years the car has worked its way through a varied assortment of Ford engines that have been available at the time. Now the chassis has been redesigned as a sort of glassfibre and sheet steel composite using mostly Escort and Europa bits, and the 1600cc twin carburettor crossflow engine is standard. No doubt the dwindling collection of motoring dichards will describe the car as losing its character by this transition, but for me it now seems to have almost everything for the now-be fun seeker.

The Caterham Car Sales demonstrator that we were able to borrow for a day was the first of the 1970 cars, so we were ready to excuse a few small faults. The new interior, with much padding in evidence, sports an instrument layout that is neat and easy to use and whereas in the past the interior of the Lotus has looked as though everything has been thrown together

the new one has all the classy finish of its bigger sister the Elan.

Handlingwise the new car, in line with all its predecessors, is a winner. Despite a disconcerting amount of tyre noise while pushing the car hard through corners, it grips the road well and only a real hard blast on the throttle will produce anything resembling oversteer. A close ratio gearbox offers acceleration figures that must be hard to match anywhere in fun car world and with a claimed top speed in excess of 110mph the new Seven has a speed range that I sometimes wonder if the body can match. The unassisted brakes were quite adequate and fade was undetectable.

Financially speaking, it is interesting to note that you could buy a Manta Ray and a Bond Bug for the price of one Lotus in the form we tested it, but to put things into perspective it should be pointed out that the test car did have quite a few optional extras fitted which bumped up the price. Looking at the other side of the story, you can note that the combined bhp of the Bug and Manta Ray only just exceeds the 84bhp of the Lotus, which goes to prove that power costs more money than seats—even in the fun car business.

At a quick glance the new Seven looks much the same as all its ancestors, so it tends not to get the same attention as the other two. If fun cars are meant to be cars that are noticed then it doesn't rate, but in all other respects for my money it's in pole position.

#### IN CONCLUSION

WHICH OF THESE THREE WILL CATCH ON rather depends on that mysterious central body in the Kings Road who determine what shall and shall not be trendy. The Bond Bug, which will probably be priced somewhere just over £500 in the form I tried, is easily the most revolutionary of the collection, whereas the Seven must be the most competitive allrounder. And what of the Manta Ray? Well, how long it would go on being fun for is the \$64,000 question but we'll leave that to the fair Carol, shall we? Meanwhile back to my yellow shirt and those terrible card tricks...

