Fairthorpe Electron

Value
£3000-£7500.

Possible Upgrades
Larger Coventry Climax engine, disc front brakes (where early cars had drums), electric radiator fan, K&N air filters.

Common Faults
Rot in tubular chassis.

Safety
Seatbelts can be fitted although they weren't in period.

Unleaded
Yes – all-aluminium engine already has hardened valve seats.

LITTLE BRITAIN

Three homegrown sportscars with humble underpinnings, that are easy to own yet still offer plenty of thrills. ›

WORDS BY **IVAN OSTROFF** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MATT RICHARDSON**

Turner Mk1

Value
£4000-£7000.

Possible Upgrades
A-series engine can easily be tuned, Kent cam, gas-flowed head, MG front discs for early cars with drum brakes.

Common Faults
Rot in tubular chassis can be repaired easily and economically. Rot in inner steel tub requires expensive repairs.

Safety
Seatbelts can be fitted although they weren't in period.

Unleaded
A-series cylinder head can be converted and has been on this car.

Elva Courier

Value
£12,000-£18,000.

Possible Upgrades
Weber 45DCOE carb, K&N air filter, electric fan, oil cooler.

Common Faults
Early models suffer from chassis flexing around the front suspension mountings and require triangulating braces welded in to overcome this.

Safety
Seatbelts can be fitted although they weren't in period.

Unleaded
B-series cylinder head can be converted and has been on this car.

Owner's View
Andy Winston
Fairthorpe Electron

Andy's owned his Fairthorpe Electron for six years. In the 1980s, it was owned by a Belgian gentleman who wanted to race it. However, the car didn't have a chassis number so he couldn't get the necessary paperwork organised.

With considerable help from the records office in Bedfordshire, working with the registration number that the car has carried all its life, Andy's been able to obtain the correct and original chassis number.

Although the Electron was available with a hood, this car doesn't have one. Instead, Andy has a factory hardtop for the cold winter months, but on the whole prefers to drive the car in open form whenever possible.

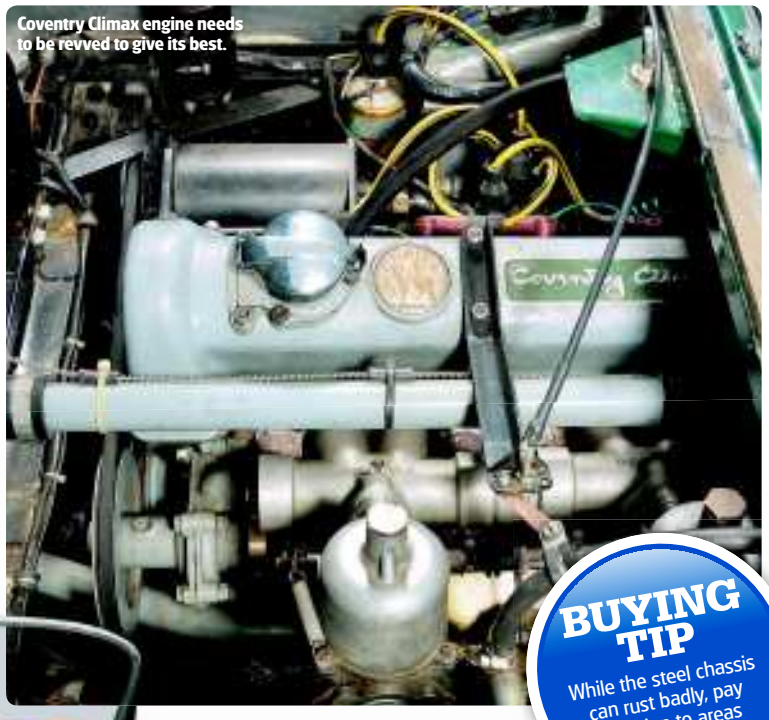
Rustbuster

All three cars use fibreglass bodies, but all can suffer corrosion within the steel chassis frames. However, since these are basically either round or square tubes they're easy and economical to replace.

Driving position is rather exposed, but the Fairthorpe is easy to place.

The late 1950s and early 60s saw a huge number of low-volume British sportscar manufacturers spring up. The majority of them made use of existing engines and mechanical components from major companies. They then added their own chassis and bodywork, the latter often being fibreglass, and sold them in small numbers to enthusiasts who could drive them to circuits, race them, then drive home again.

These days, most of those manufacturers have long since disappeared, but their cars are still around – and they have much to recommend them. The Fairthorpe Electron, Turner Mk1 and Elva Courier are small, fun, and basic.



Coventry Climax engine needs to be revved to give its best.

BUYING TIP

While the steel chassis can rust badly, pay attention to areas that'll be harder to replace.

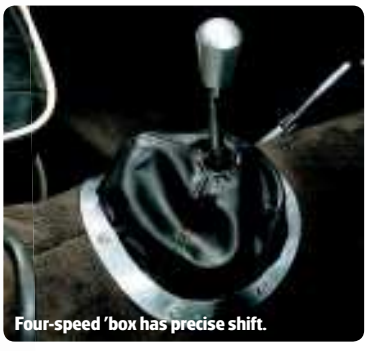
DID YOU KNOW?
The later Turner Mk2 used Triumph Herald front suspension and a range of Ford engines.


Les Leston steering wheel completes the period feel.


Unusual but stylish dashboard in the Electron.

"These three cars might be a bit out of the ordinary, but they're also perfect for the DIY owner"

Nigel's Turner has been subtly upgraded.


Four-speed 'box has precise shift.

Turner lasted from 1949-1966.

And while they're a bit out of the ordinary, they're also perfect for the DIY owner. Underneath the bespoke bodywork are parts from manufacturers such as MG and Triumph – companies that are as well catered for today as many modern marques. Even the rare Fairthorpe shouldn't cause too many headaches – Coventry Climax engines found their way into all sorts of cars during this period. So, if you fancy an alternative to the 'usual suspects', you could do a lot worse than one of these three.

Fairthorpe Electron

The Fairthorpe's powered by a 1098cc engine, breathing through twin SU carburettors. The front is pretty much all borrowed from the Triumph TR2, complete with its wishbones, plus an anti-roll bar. Brakes are also sourced from Triumph, with discs at the front and drums at the rear, and the radiator is straight out of a Standard Ten.

The ladder-frame chassis is constructed from steel box sections with pressed steel outriggers. Unfortunately, the Electron's bonnet doesn't open very far, which means that for anything other than ›

Owner's View
Nigel Taylor
Turner Mk1

When Nigel Taylor was seven years old, he played in this Turner in a garage near Milton Keynes. In 1992, he returned to that garage, pulled the Turner from under a lorry (the remains cost him £35) and restored it.

The Turner's chassis uses a ladder-frame construction. The 1275cc BMC A-series engine has been modified to fast road spec – it's fitted with a Kent camshaft and the flywheel has been lightened. The cylinder head has also been reworked with hardened valve seats so that it's now suitable for unleaded fuel.

changing plugs and points or checking levels, you have to remove the front end for access.

However, while the mechanical bits might be borrowed from other manufacturers, the comfortable seats are of Fairthorpe's own design. Like the Turner, the Electron features carpets, which does help it feel a bit more cosy in there – even if that goes against its 'back to basics' feel. It also boasts a relatively cavernous boot.

Being equipped with the smallest engine, the Fairthorpe is the least powerful of the three but it's still loads of fun. From the moment you grip the Les Leston steering wheel and drop the fly-off handbrake, you're back in the early 1960s all over again. In standard tune, you do have to rev the Climax engine to get anything out of it, though.

The ride is fair and the handling very safe, if not over exciting, but

BMC's A-series engine is one of the most enduring classic powerplants around.

Turner's cabin is plain but does at least feature carpets.

The easily upgraded 1275cc unit breathes though a single SU carburettor.

Rare parts

Mechanical items for all three of these classics were mostly taken from more mainstream cars of the time, such as the Austin A35 and Riley 1.5, so finding those doesn't pose a big problem today. However, body panels are now becoming very hard to find. The 'Fairthorpe' script on the back of the Electron is no longer available, but the circular badge at the front is being remanufactured by the club.

BUYING TIP

Information on all three cars is scarce, so be sure to join the relevant owners clubs.

DID YOU KNOW?

Frank G Nichols was Elva's founder. The name is a modification of the French for 'she goes' – 'elle va'.

Owner's View
Ding Boston
Elva Courier

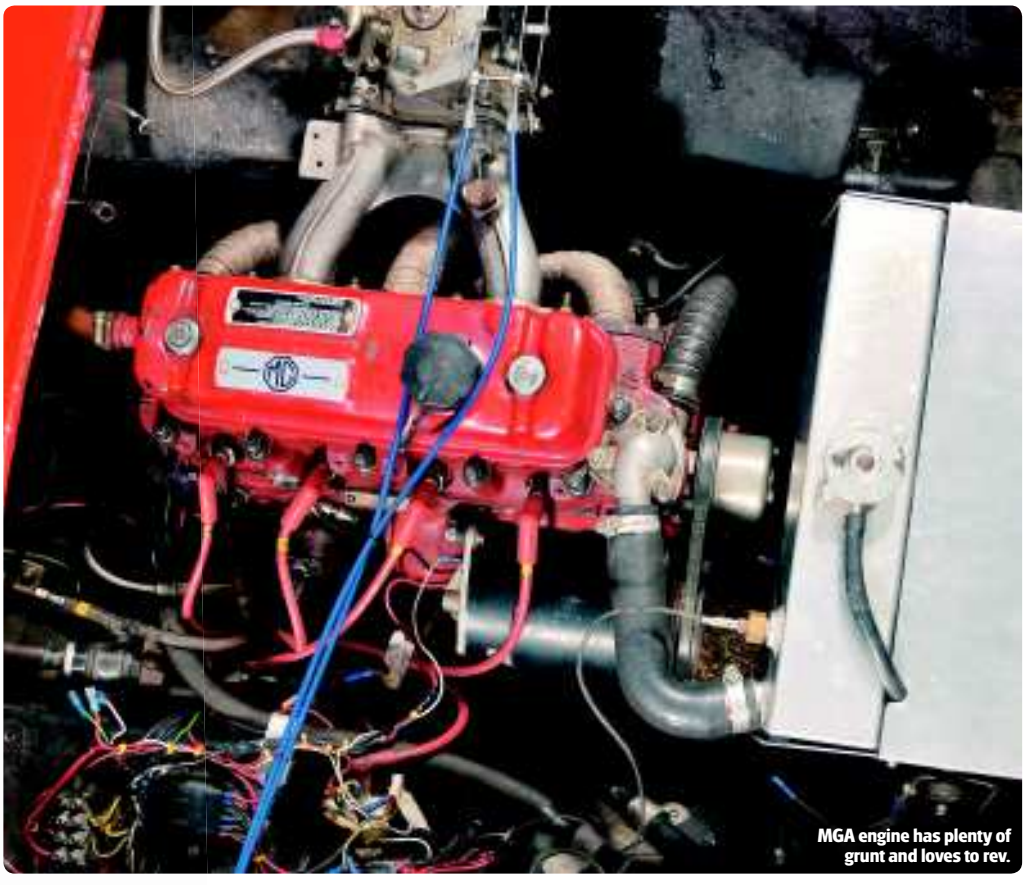
Ding Boston found his Elva languishing in a field in Wales in 1980. Over the past few years, it's been restored as an Oxford University Motorsport Foundation (OUMF) project. Ding founded OUMF to encourage young motoring engineers.

First registered in 1959, this particular Elva was raced at Goodwood in 1960, where it finished eighth in the Easter Trophy race. When the car was found, there were no seats in it, so it was temporarily fitted with a pair of Recaros. Ding's recently found some correct seats, which will be fitted when they've been refurbished.

www.oumf.org

The Elva feels by far the most sorted of the three cars.

> "Depending on how hard it's driven, the Fairthorpe will return 30-40mpg"



MGA engine has plenty of grunt and loves to rev.

the little Electron is supremely manoeuvrable in town, with a turning circle of 32ft – and it's economical too. Depending how hard it's driven, the Fairthorpe will return 30-40mpg. If you're lucky enough to come across one of these cars, you'll have a great alternative to an MG or Triumph.

Turner Mk1

Compared to the Fairthorpe, the Turner is relatively common. There are estimated to be about 150 of them in the UK, with the same again currently living in the USA. The club are aware of only a handful of Electrons – three in the UK, three in the USA and Austria, and another that's being prepared for track use next year.

Nigel Taylor has owned his Turner for 18 years. Like the Fairthorpe, it features a ladder chassis, this time using three-inch tubes. The front suspension comes from the Austin A35, with coil springs and lever-arm dampers. At the rear, Jack Turner came up with his own design using torsional leaves – in essence, four strips of spring steel that are able ›


Courier has a bare, functional cockpit.

to twist. It's all fully adjustable, light, and very compact. The axle is laterally located with a Panhard rod, trailing arms, top links and telescopic dampers.

There would originally have been drum brakes all round but Nigel's upgraded this car with MG Midget discs on the front. These were available for the car in period, and therefore bolt straight on.

The 1275cc BMC engine in this car has been modified but remains perfectly usable, with adequate reserves of grunt. The handling is very good, with a neutral bias, and it comes as no surprise to hear that Nigel's done a couple of auto-tests in it. My only grumble would be that the pedals are a bit too close together but I expect that's something you'd get used to.

Elva Courier

While researching his Courier, Ding Boston discovered it was assembled


Students at Oxford University Motorsport Foundation helped restore the Elva.

TECH SPEC	Fairthorpe Electron	Turner Mk1	Elva Courier
ENGINE	1098cc Coventry Climax inline-four	1275cc BMC A-series inline-four	1489cc MGA B-series, inline-four
POWER	85bhp at 6300rpm	73bhp at 5800rpm	78bhp at 5500rpm
TORQUE	71 lb-ft at 5000rpm	45 lb-ft at 4500rpm	77 lb-ft at 3500rpm
TRANSMISSION	Four-speed manual	Four-speed manual	Four-speed manual, Riley 1.5 axle, LSD
FRONT SUSPENSION	Double wishbones, coilover dampers	Lever-arm dampers, lower wishbones, coil springs	Independent, double wishbones, coil springs
REAR SUSPENSION	Live axle, top and bottom trailing links, coilover dampers	Live axle, Panhard rod, four trailing links, telescopic dampers, torsional leaves	Live axle, Panhard rod, radius arms, coil springs
BRAKES	Triumph front discs, drums rear	Discs front, drums rear	Drums all round
WHEELS & TYRES	155x15, steel wire wheels	165x15, steel wire wheels	Dunlop 550x14 crossply, 14 Minilite alloys
DIMENSIONS	Length 11ft 6in, width 4ft 10in, height N/A	Length 11ft 8in, width 4ft 8in, height 3ft 11in	Length 12ft 7.5in, width 4ft 11.5in, height 4ft 1.5in (hood up)
WEIGHT	521kg	620kg	600kg
0-60MPH	12.8sec	12.5sec	12.7sec
TOP SPEED	104mph	105mph	98.5mph
PRODUCED	1956-1965	1959-1961	1958-1962

BUYING TIP
With their competition potential, don't be surprised to find cars with upgrades.

DID YOU KNOW?
The first bodyshells for the Fairthorpe were supplied by a London-based company called Microplas.


Modern hoses and cables feature under the Elva's bonnet.

Elva enjoyed plenty of motorsport success.


Gearbox is a delight to use.

Contacts

Fairthorpe

- **Fairthorpe Sportscar Club**
  www.fairthorpescc.com
- **TR Register**
  Fairthorpe components
  www.tr-register.co.uk

Turner

- **Turner**
  www.turnersportscars.co.uk

Elva

- **Elva Club**
  www.elva.com
- **Roger Dunbar**
  Elva parts supplier
  www.elvacourier.com
- **MG Owners Club**
  Elva components
  www.mgownersclub.co.uk

> "The Elva's MGA engine really urges you to wind it up through the rev range"

at the factory, which is strange because these cars were all sold in kit form. The idea was that they should be assembled privately by their new owners in order to avoid the purchase tax on completed vehicles at that time.

The Elva's steel chassis is made up from a rather lightweight tubular ladder frame construction, to which the fibreglass body is bonded. An MGA engine and gearbox are mated to a Riley 1.5 rear axle incorporating a limited-slip differential. There's an anti-roll bar at the front and Ding's Courier features coilover dampers all round.

In driving terms, there's an interesting progression from the Fairthorpe to the Turner, and finally to the Elva. The Courier's MGA engine and gearbox are set quite far back in the chassis so it's pretty much a 50/50 weight split, making it very neutral and nimble, with extremely flat cornering. The complete assembly only weighs about 600kg, so it's quicker than an MGA of the same period. The suspension's rather hard but the Elva's great fun – it has absolutely brilliant handling and is so enjoyable to drive. You can just work away at the steering wheel controlling the car on the throttle.

Despite a misfire causing one or two problems, the MGA engine provides oodles of power for Ding's Elva, really urging you to wind it up through the rev range. I restrict it to about 6000rpm in deference to the owner, but that's plenty. The pedals are placed perfectly for heel-and-toe work and the brakes are just perfect – a proper driver's car. While some might say the suspension is too hard for regular use, I could drive it all day.

CM SAYS...

Fairthorpe Electron

Handling	1 2 **3** 4 5
Economy	1 2 **3** 4 5
DIY maintenance	1 2 3 **4** 5
Performance	1 2 **3** 4 5
Club backup	1 2 3 **4** 5
Total	**17/25**

Turner Mk1

Handling	1 2 3 **4** 5
Economy	1 2 3 **4** 5
DIY maintenance	1 2 3 **4** 5
Performance	1 2 3 **4** 5
Club backup	1 2 3 **4** 5
Total	**20/25**

Elva Courier

Handling	1 2 3 4 **5**
Economy	1 2 3 4 **5**
DIY maintenance	1 2 3 **4** 5
Performance	1 2 3 **4** 5
Club backup	1 2 **3** 4 5
Total	**21/25**

All three are great alternative classics and all are enjoyable in their own way. These examples are used as often as possible, weather permitting, proving that they're not compromised too much by their sporting pretensions. On balance, though, I felt that the Electron was just a tad too low on power. The Turner is a better proposition, and very good value for money, but with its splendid MGA powerplant and perfect balance, the Courier won the day for me. After starting with the Fairthorpe, a gentle little car, then moving on to the Turner, which is not unlike a Sprite in many ways, the Elva simply felt like the real deal. That's the only way to describe it. CM