



ARCADE FIRE

Passengers are so 2010. Who needs friends and family when you've got the single-seater BAC Mono to thrash on road and track? Not Stig...

Words: Sam Philip Photography: James Lipman





THERE ARE TWO FACTS YOU MUST know about the BAC Mono. Fact One: a life-size inflatable crocodile will not fit in its front boot. Fact Two: its cockpit lining is impervious to urine and human faeces. I discover both of these facts within five minutes of meeting the Mono for the first time, outside a beachfront stall in the North Wales seaside town of Rhyl.

Thankfully, it is only Fact One I experience first-hand. Fact Two, I'm relieved to report, is just a cheery piece of trivia from BAC boss Neill Briggs. That said, a pensioner with a colostomy bag poking out the bottom of his trouser leg is inching towards the Mono as we talk, so maybe there's an ulterior motive to the revelation.

So... an emissions-proof interior? Briggs smiles. "A synthetic suede originally developed for use in nursing homes, actually," he explains. "It's a variant of Alcantara designed to wipe clean after even the worst... accidents. Since the Mono's upholstery had to be weatherproof, we figured it was a good material to use."

This story reveals a lot about the BAC Mono. It would be easy to pass this off as another garage-build special, another 'racecar for the road' from a British start-up company, with a supercar-crushing power-to-weight ratio and a chassis constructed from bits of old washing machine and blind hope. But the Mono is different, and not just because of its antisocial seating plan. Though the headline stats are suitably devastating – 280bhp and a 540kg kerbweight means 519bhp per tonne, 0–60mph in 2.8 seconds and a top speed of 170mph – it's the Mono's sheer quality that sets it apart. This is a pocket-sized masterpiece of engineering.

A bit of background on Briggs Automotive Company. Since brothers Neill and Ian Briggs set up their consultancy firm 16 years ago, they have designed and engineered cars for some of the biggest manufacturers in the world: Porsche, Mercedes, Ford and more. Though they keep details of their back catalogue quiet, Neill admits

to engineering the MkI Focus RS, which isn't a bad car to have on your CV. So when, four years ago, the brothers drew up their own single-seater road car, they wanted it to reflect the very pinnacle of small-volume, high-end design.

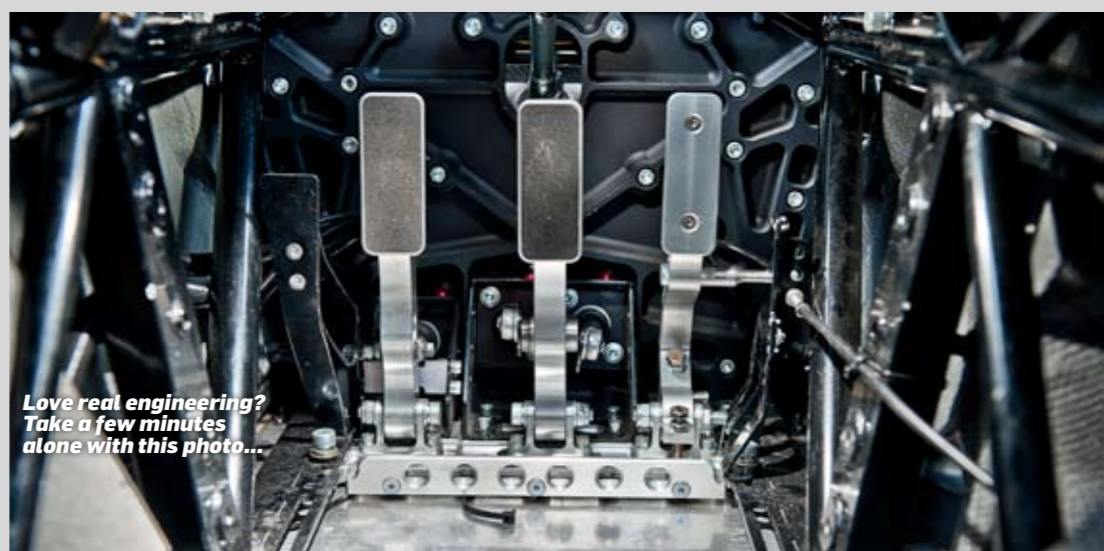
"We wanted to make the ultimate formula racer for the road," says Neill. "And the ultimate racers are single-seaters. In terms of dynamics, you always have a compromise with offset seating, so just one central seat was always part of our original concept. We love the Atom, but we wanted to take the classic British lightweight concept into the 21st century..."

You wonder if BAC might have overshot that runway by a century or two. Parked up in downtown Rhyl, the Mono looks like a visitor from the future. Decades ago, Rhyl was a grand seaside resort; now it's a dilapidated mishmash of amusement arcades, pound shops and gangs of marauding seagulls. Against this dingy backdrop, the Mono looks otherworldly, extra-terrestrial: a design-school concept made reality.

The Mono was shaped in CFD with the help of Stuttgart University's FKFS department, one of the world's leading authorities on aerodynamics. Every inch of its bodywork is honed to smooth airflow. Not that there's much bodywork: the Mono is hardcore engineering pornography, with all its oily functional parts left naked. Directly behind the central seat, a 2.3-litre, naturally aspirated Cosworth four-cylinder – originally a Ford Duratec unit, but treated to a dry sump, forged pistons and conrods – lurks exposed, butted up against a Xylon-coated, six-speed sequential gearbox. This Hewland transmission, borrowed from an F3 racer, drives the rear wheels through a limited-slip diff. About the powertrain, the Mono's pushrod suspension clings gracefully to its tub like a spider's web.

Enough looking – time to climb on board. Right. Ah. Hmm. Swing a leg into the cockpit, balancing on to the edge of the seat squab. Lift other leg in. Feet into the footwell, wriggle

"I pin the throttle, and the BAC Mono fires down the straight like a lit firework"



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If you want a Brit three-wheeler, the Morgan isn't your only option...



down. And down. And down. And... good God, what sort of a driving position is this? I'd compare it to sitting in a bath but, unless you're either very short or have a very large bath, you'll actually be more upright in the tub than you are in here. It's not uncomfortable – in fact, it's rather cosy – but finding your knees at the same height as your shoulders is an odd revelation.

I press the touch-sensitive 'M' button in the centre of the steering wheel once to prime the systems, then again to fire the engine. Wedged between my shoulder blades, the Cosworth engine rumbles to life with a discreet cough. No ear-puncturing bark here. How very civilised. I'm about to become the first human outside of BAC to drive the Mono on the road.

Click the wheel-mounted paddle in first gear. Brilliant: a hill start in a car with (a) no handbrake, (b) a race-grade sequential gearbox and (c) a gathering crowd of Welsh pensioners. Easy on the clutch, don't stall... and the Mono pulls away without a twitch or a hop, smooth as single-malt Scotch. Again, unexpectedly civilised.

Bobbling over the potholes and manhole covers and avoiding the occasional pissed-up seagull waddling in the gutter, the Mono serves up another surprise. Far from turning my lower vertebrae into sneezing powder, it rides sublimely. That open wheel, pushrod set-up provides 100mm of vertical wheel travel, allowing the Mono to articulate over Rhyl's nastiest ridges. The damping – a BAC speciality – is top-drawer, too. Unlike a narrow-body



Caterham, there's enough room in the Mono's footwell to flex your toes without sending the car careering into the North Sea. OK, at idle, the Mono chunters a little, and the gearbox emits an alarming clack on upchanges, but this isn't the highly strung, twitching live wire I was expecting. Time to let the Mono run free without the risk of destroying Denbighshire's entire supply of cut-price inflatable beach toys. With a flock of seagulls in tow, we bugger off south.

Fast-forward a couple of hours and, sunglasses swapped for a race helmet, I'm weaving warily behind the pace car on my second sighter lap of Cheshire's Oulton Park circuit. As recipes for embarrassment go, this is a sure-fire winner: unfamiliar circuit, a one-in-existence priceless lightweight, Veyron-rivalling power-to-weight ratio, rear drive, lack of driver talent. The pace car swings into the pits, and the track is clear.

I snap the left-hand paddle twice, down into second and pin the throttle. No squirm, no hesitation: the Mono fires down the straight like a lit firework and my helmet fills with furious swearing. After a few seconds, I discover this is



Dual zone climate control: doesn't come as standard



"I wonder what would happen if put my hand in here... hello, 999?"

BAC MONO

Engine: 2,300cc Cosworth four-cylinder, 280bhp @ 7700rpm, 206lb ft @ 6000rpm
Performance: 2.8secs 0-62mph, 170mph top speed
Trans: Six-speed sequential, rear-wheel drive
Price: £79,950 **Weight:** 540kg

coming from my own mouth. The version fit for public consumption runs something like this: "By Jove, what an unusually quick car."

Almost as shocking as the momentous, massless acceleration is how easy, how natural, it is to drive the Mono fast. It's a grim cliché to describe a car as an extension of your body, but here it's actually true. Lying on your back in the dead centre of the chassis, a wheel at each corner, engine behind your head and a never-ending slug of even, addictive power, it's an act of instinct to thread the Mono through corners, rear tyres chatting convivially with your bottom.

Better still, the Mono isn't a murderous bastard. On my second flying lap, I pile into a right-hander that, mysteriously, is far tighter than it was on the first lap, necessitating a panicked mid-corner prod of the brakes to prevent a costly, crunchy Mono-barrier interaction. I flinch, expecting the rear end to part company with the track, but the Mono stays bolted to the tarmac, shrugging off my blunder and nipping neatly back into shape.

At the limit, there's a frisson of understeer, but for the most part, the BAC is deliciously neutral. It's easy to explore the Mono's limits, to push harder and harder without fear that it'll deposit you in the Armco. Despite its compliance on the road, there's not an ounce of squish or lean here on the track. If you're used to road cars – even supercars – the Mono requires a recalibration of your brain to deal with its physics-warping abilities: brake deeper, turn in later, get on the

power earlier. Darting from apex to apex with joyous, weightless agility – gearchanges firing like buckshot – this is a supernaturally good track car.

Ten laps in, cackling insanely to myself as I tip into the Foulstons chicane, a familiar white figure strides into the middle of the track, holding a white, gloved hand outstretched in front of its white, helmeted head. Stig.

I slam on the brakes and come jittering to a stop a couple of feet in front of him. Stig, naturally, doesn't flinch, giving only the faintest flick of his right paw to gesture me from the Mono. I unstrap and exit from the car as rapidly as my portly frame will allow...

Fifteen minutes and a couple of shoehorns later, I extricate myself from the depths of the Mono. As if to mock my ungainly exit, Stig slithers like mercury into the cockpit and fires off down the track, wringing the Mono out all the way to its 8,500rpm red line before upchanging with a crunching sonic thump.

Stig doesn't believe in taking time to acclimatise to a car. On his first lap, he exits the cambered Shell hairpin absolutely sideways. If he has testicles – and I'm not volunteering to find out – they're surely constructed of carbon-titanium. Stig is drifting the Mono. Unimpressed, the Mono snaps angrily back, lining up the Stig for a direct impact with a tyre wall, but our tame racing driver simply keeps his foot in, pelting across the grass for a couple of hundred yards before rejoining the track in a flurry of mud. Just a typical day in the life of

Stig, but sobering proof that the Mono isn't a car for going sideways in the hands of mortals.

For lap after lap, Stig pounds the Mono. No stopping him now. As we're considering hunting for a tranquilliser gun, the Mono crosses the finish line for perhaps the 20th time and splutters to a halt, out of fuel. Stig hops unapologetically from the car, vaults the pit wall and scampers to the sanctity of garage 17.

Stig feedback is never easy to garner, but the man in white seems impressed. His criticisms are minor: he'd like a greater blip from the gearbox on downchanges (an improvement already on the way), stiffer roll-bars at the front and a slight softening at the rear to cancel out the Mono's tendency to understeer. The BAC engineers scribble notes furiously: they're still tweaking the chassis set-up before signing off the final car. So keen is Neill to perfect the Mono, I feel a bit disappointed that the only real criticism I can add is that the LCD screen on the wheel – the sole source of information in the cockpit – is unreadable in direct sunlight. We'll survive.

Truth is, this single-minded single-seater is a singular success. Sure, £80,000 is a lot for a car that requires you to strap your significant other to the roll-hoop if you're planning a romantic weekend away, but, given its cortex-melting performance and engineering, the Mono looks a veritable bargain from where I'm standing. If you're happy to leave your inflatable crocodile at home, the Mono is one of the great drivers' cars of 2011. Even incontinent drivers.



"On Stig's first lap, he exits the cambered Shell hairpin absolutely sideways"



As wide as a 458, lower than an F1 car. Sinister

