



Grin and dare it

Modified cars are rarely successful.
JEREMY CLARKSON
found one that is

In 1973, it was perfectly normal for people to scan the back pages of the New Musical Express, seeking out adverts for mail order loons, which, at a pinch, could double as spinnakers. Then, when these 24-in Lionels arrived through the post, the first thing we all did was to take them to our mothers, who would insert V-shaped pieces of brown velvet to make them even more flared.

We'd been given the best but it wasn't good enough. I had a pair of purple loons which were so voluminous round my ankles, that I couldn't go out if it was windy.

There's the thing. By altering the basic design, I had ruined the original concept.

Now, this was only a pair of trousers, but what if you alter the basic design of something that has cost you thousands, like a car, and then find out it's horrid?

Manufacturers don't always get it right, but behind every new car is a billion dollars' worth of research and development. Some of the world's greatest brains have been employed to blend style, power, economy and longevity into what should be an affordable package, but this doesn't stop the odd clever dick thinking he can do better.

I have driven a fair few modified cars, and usually they're pretty bad. Even if they're pretty good, you know that the engine will do a passable imitation of Nagasaki after it has covered a few hundred miles.

Today, it's all the rage to change the electronic chip which governs the engine management system, and this does have a marked effect. The Escort Cosworth that Ford sells produces 227 bhp, but change its brain — a very easy job — and you drive home with up to 400 bhp under your right foot. I don't know what that does to longevity or fuel consumption — quite a lot, I should think — but at least a Cosworth's chassis can take the extra power.

Last week, I drove a Hummer which was designed to cross deserts and win wars. This one featured a 7 litre engine and so many toys that it weighed three tons. It was the most hopeless off roader I've been in.

Then there was a Jaguar XJS which had been extensively modified so that its 4-litre engine produced 500 bhp. The trouble was it felt more like 50 bhp. It also hiccupped at idle, refused to rev above 5,000 rpm and produced such a dreadful din that, after three miles, I needed some Disprin. Happily, after three miles, it had run out of petrol so I had to stop anyway. Someone had paid £16,000 for this conversion, on top of the



Hot spot: Range Rover Overfinch. Photograph by MPA Fingal

£34,000 needed for a new Jag, and he'd ended up with impossible-to-insure, uncomfortable, unsaleable, and unreliable rubbish.

Now you can start to see why I am so wary of tinkered-with cars. You can also see why I was so wary of the Overfinch Range Rover. The specification sheet showed that this Hampshire-based engineering company had taken the world's finest off-road vehicle, and ruined its off-road ability.

Range Rovers have always scored over their rivals when they're actually in the countryside because they have such astonishing axle articulation, which ensures that all their tyres are in contact with something, thus giving the driver grip.

Overfinch fit anti-roll bars which slightly limit this articulation. They also throw away the standard, knobbly off-road tyres and fit exactly the same rubberwear that goes on a Bentley Turbo. The man from Overfinch confirmed my worst fears: "Don't, whatever you do, take it into deep mud on those tyres."

What's the point of a Range Rover that goes all shy when it sees some mud?

Part of the answer comes when you lift up the bonnet, because instead of the usual Land Rover device, there's a thumping great 5-litre Chevrolet V8. Mmmm, my kind of motor. And when you climb inside you will beam some more, because the dials have a Ferrari-esque look and the leather Recaro seats a body-hugging sporty feel to them. Then you turn the key and the beam becomes incandescent. This car doesn't just

start. It explodes. And then you sit there revving it, feeling the whole body shudder and shake as the exhausts smash windows for miles around. This is going to be some kind of wild ride. And it is. The Overfinch Range Rover accelerates from 0 to 60 in seven seconds and will crack 120mph.

This car has the handling to match its power. The anti-roll bars and toughened-up shock absorbers completely transform its behaviour. With four-wheel drive and those Bentley Turbo tyres, it has grip, too.

You can still enjoy that lofty seating position and the sheer style and practicality of a Range Rover, but this has towering performance and sports-car handling. It is all things to all men. It is a great car.

It is not cheap, though. Quite apart from the price of a standard Range Rover — you can send them a used one if you like — you are looking at a bill for £17,606 for the transformation. And then you will be lucky to return more than 14mpg using super unleaded — the Overfinch has no catalytic converters.

Without the cosmetic changes it costs £11,000. If you just want them to change your suspension — a very good idea at only £895.

Remember though that you are altering a basic design. No small engineering company can match the resources and testing facilities of a major player like Land Rover. However when all is said and done I can honestly say it's one of the five best cars I have ever driven.