

# Napier Ruxton Verses Almac TC

*By Patrick Harlow*

Cars are fun to drive, especially if they are someone else's and they are unique to anything else on the road. When the opportunity came to have a drive in John Manders beautiful Napier Ruxton I couldn't pass it up. Mike Boven generously offered me his Almac TC as the car that I could use for a comparison. The cars are similar with their long bonnets and swept fenders with big headlights sitting on top of them. It is a classic style dating back to the first half of the last century.



*Both cars are shown in true scale with the Napier Ruxton clearly putting the Almac in its place.*

Mike's Almac TC is one of those cars that will be finished one day possibly. He likes to tinker with it and do things like change motors and gearboxes and the less important jobs like detailing the car can wait. This car was originally built by Derrick Halford when he acquired the partially complete kit back in 1989. In those days it was powered by a Triumph Toledo and had Fiat instrumentation. After Derrick had used it for his everyday car for a couple of years he sold it to Mike Boven who pulled it to bits and rebuilt it again. Now it has a Triumph 2000 Mk II 6 cylinder engine and a Humber 80 Speedo with a modified tachometer to cope with two extra cylinders.

Based on the Triumph Herald chassis this car was designed by Alex McDonald and went into production in the mid 1980's. Alex never intended it to be a MG replica although the MG TD did influence him in his styling. But any similar measurements to the MG are purely by coincidence. Approximately twenty-five of these cars were made before Almac Cars brought out the Almac TG which was a more swept up and upgraded version of the TC. The TC was intended to be an easy kit to build with its one-piece body. Designed to take only a single donor car, the Triumph Herald, which provided virtually everything except the windscreen, windscreen surround and the doors. The doors were simply

cut out of the body and hinged. Many builders opted for slightly more powerful engines than the humble Triumph 1.3 four cylinder.

John Mander started planing early for his retirement and intended to build the car of his dreams. The Napier Ruxton is not a copy of any single car but a collection of all the things that John liked about the typical 1930's big open tourers. To ensure that he got it right the first time he built a detailed scale model to test out his ideas. The finished model was over half a metre in length and very highly detailed. The finished car is an exact copy of the model in every aspect. The only clear difference is the scale. A scratch built special requires a lot more thought than the average kit car to build, hence



*Engine bay of the Napier Ruxton is clean and uncluttered.*

John built a model first. Steel was cut for the full-scale version in 1991 and it was first registered and warranted in 1997. Where possible John did everything himself. The chassis was built by Graham Berry Racecars. The four mudguards were a mission and were each made out of fibreglass with John painstakingly constructing each of the formers before fibreglassing over the top.

Through regular visits I was able to watch both cars being built and it was fascinating to watch the solutions that each builder found to various problems.



*Triumph six is shoehorned along with a couple of carburetors into the narrow Almac engine bay.*

## EXTERIOR

Both owners have opted for different finishes on their cars. The Almac TC still stands proudly in its original Gelcoat green and was never painted. It is now showing its age and is now a bit scuffed in places. Mike has never intended it to be the prettiest car on the block. Originally built to be a fun car and something that could be tinkered with on weekends. It is used in motorkhanas and race days with out fear of the paintwork being scratched or damaged. If something spills on it is be wiped off. If caught in a flash rainstorm then it will dry out. The kit originally came with a fibreglass radiator surround the same colour as the body. It did look a bit cheap and nasty but it did help to reduce the price of the kit and kept it in range of most people's wallets. With the advent of the TG the radiator surround and grill were updated. Mike has elected to keep the custom aluminium one cast by Derrick Halford which ensures that the car fits in more with its intended era. The

body is extremely solid and as I watched Mike walked up the front fender and stood on the edge gazing at the world around him. Although the fender did flex a bit.



*Napier Ruxton is stately from any angle.*

At the time of the test the car was kitted out in its soft-top which was tight and well made. Should Mike decide that winter has finally arrived he can fit the hard-top which looks exactly like the soft-top except that it is made of fibreglass. An ingenious idea that has the advantage of looking like a soft-top but it is totally waterproof with all the transparent bits being actual glass. Another advantage is driving at night. The numerous car lights that you see in your rear screen mirror through the plastic becomes one car when viewed through the glass. The easiest way to tell them apart is to tap them. One will give a "knocking" sound and the other a "blap" sound. I will let you work out which is which. Although any expense has been spared the car still looks good and in proportion.

The spare wheel mounted on the boot in a recess of the fake fuel tank brings images of this car flying through back country roads. The spare wheel would have a wicker picnic basket strapped to it. The car would be driven by Flight Lieutenant Mike Boven out on a day pass from the airbase with a pretty WREN sitting beside him. After which he would drive into the setting sun, back to the airbase where his Hurricane would be waiting for him to have another crack at the "Jerry". The WREN of course would be standing at the side of the road, her dress would be fluttering and she would be holding a handkerchief to her eyes. Doesn't it make your heart go all pitta patter?

The Napier Ruxton on first impression looks a little bigger than the TC. Like the Almac everything looks in proportion. However when you put the two cars together it actually dwarfs the TC. A real example of David and Goliath gone mad. The Napier Ruxton is a big car. If one was prepared to walk around it you would pack a lunch and tell your mum to hold your tea. If you tried to take a short cut and leap over the bonnet in one mighty leap something is bound to happen which would make your eyes water. Washing the car would be a mission and if you wanted to wash the roof you would need to borrow a ladder from the neighbour. Fortunately it would take very little polishing as from the firewall back the exterior has been upholstered in white vinyl. From the firewall forward it would only require as much polish as your average family stationwagon. To do the back you would only need a huge duster or half a gallon of Amourall. The car has been tastefully finished with the mudguards being a dark blue. Spare wheel on the driver's side is held in place by an old fashioned kitchen lemon squeezer handle. On the passenger side in the same location is a beautiful wooden toolbox custom made by John. Like the TC's the radiator surround was made first in wood, then cast in aluminium and polished along with the tail light mounts. The car has been carefully detailed to look the part. The huge headlights are actually only used as park lights as it would have been too hard to get them certified. The small driving lights or spotlights lights mounted below the main lights are the real headlights. A recent addition since I last saw the car is the hardtop. Made out of fibreglass, John designed it to be removable but the driving pleasure has been so much enhanced with it in place it will become a permanent fixture.

The car falls into a totally different category to the TC. Firstly it would be driven by a chauffeur called Parker or Jeeves. Sir John Mander would ascend into the back of car after being preceded by Lady Mander on their way to having a glass of champers, with the Windsors, at the palace down the road. Where they would have their door opened by the footman and proceed up the graceful flight of steps to where the butler would take Sir John's top hat and cane and Lady Mander's wrap.



*All the mudguards were carefully handcrafted by John Mander. Tool box shown on front mudguard has been equally crafted with careful attention to detail.*

#### INTERIOR

The first and most grateful impression on getting into both cars is that I fit. All the pedals are in the right place and I am staring down a long bonnet with two huge lights on either side.

The Almac TC although it still has a bit of an unfinished look around the dashboard and centre console it has been nicely carpeted and the seats are very comfortable. The gauges are mounted in the centre of the dashboard with the speedo being the futherest away as it is plainly unimportant. It is there for the amusement of the passenger only. The important gauge the tachometer is directly in the line of vision. The interior gives the distinct impression that this is a car to driven for the pure pleasure of driving with the top down and plenty of wind fluttering through the hair.



*The dashboard on the Napier Ruxton was made from a bead headboard that John had lying around, Gauges are clear and easy to read.*

The area behind the front seats constitutes the only storage space the car has but there is sufficient space to store weekend luggage. The

car has no wind up windows, as cars didn't in those days and settles for side-screens. Once in place these are quite functional in keeping the worst of the weather out. Doors are as yet unlined with the fibreglass mat being still visible. They open in the 'suicide style' which actually makes it easier to get in and out. Once seated in place there is plenty of elbowroom. Everything is in keeping with the period the car is aimed at with toggle switches for most of the electrical functions.



*The Almac TC's dashboard is period looking and simple to read.*

Getting into the Napier Ruxton the feeling of size and space is very strong with acres of woodgrain kindly provided by some old bed's headboard. In this instance all the gauges are in front of a driver so as not to bother his Lordship with insignificant details. They are Triumph 2500 gauges and are clear and easy to read. Toggle switches again are all used for most of the electrical functions. These are unlabelled as Jeeves would know what each switch did as part of his job.

Most of the cars of this type were tall and thin. The cabin width was sacrificed to allow room for running bards and huge fenders. To cope with this problem John simply made the car wider. Simple solution really. This car is a two plus two with the key difference between this and a modern car being that it actually is a two plus two as well as the family dog sitting on the floor. A friend of mine has a Mazda RX7 which is called a two plus two which is strange as I can only see space for two basketballs in the back seats. In the Napier Ruxton the rear seats are comfortable thrones with plenty of legroom. There is even a second windscreen between

the front and the back seats to allow for private conversations to be held with out fear of it being spread amongst the rif-raf if Jeeves was prone to being a little too chatty with the other staff. The only complaint I could have was the absence of the cocktail cabinet.



*From this angle the TC's attractive MG inspired styling is evident.*

Front doors open also in the 'suicide' variety and huge. Back doors are smaller as was the style in that period. Doors are a good fit but the road can be seen through the edges of the back doors. John did all the upholstery with the exception of the roof that was done by an upholsterer.

#### DRIVING IMPRESSIONS

Driving these two cars I discovered that they are as different as chalk and cheese. The TC is very much the sportscar with instant response from its willing 2000cc engine while the Napier Ruxton is very much the grand tourer.

It is a simple process to start the keyless ignition of the Almac TC. A single dashboard toggle switch is flicked down through two positions and a black starter button is depressed. The engine started with a roar and quickly settled down to a smooth idle. I couldn't resist saying, "Roger, wilco, chocks away", as the car pulled out into traffic. Pedal position on the Almac TC is excellent. Never once did I pump the wrong pedal. The gearbox took a little bit of getting used to with its very short throw and reverse

was to the left and up. It was also lacking a gate spring which made the location of first and second gears a bit of a mystery. The little car is very much point and shoot to drive. With the front wheels being so far in front they tend to go around corners before you do. The car has the amazing steering of the Triumph Herald which had the smallest turning circle of any car in its time. The 2000cc engine proved to be very responsive and smooth. For a small 6-cylinder engine it had loads of acceleration and power and a very pleasant burble. Handling was very neutral with a touch towards understeer if pushed. Although the mechanical bits of this car are over thirty years old they can easily keep up with its modern siblings. Driving this car I felt like I was part of the scenery and at one with



*Aluminium grill was especially cast from a pattern made by Derrick Halford the cars original builder.*

the road. Sufficient feeling came through the steering wheel to allow me to know exactly what was happening at the front of the car.

Starting its bigger cousin was much similar except this time I was told to pull the red button and press the back one. Simple to say but I had to ponder a little while as they all looked black to me. (I am colour blind) In the end I took a punt and got it right the second time. This engine also started easily but as I was so far away from it I could not hear it. The muted rumble of the V8 is for those whom you drive past to hear. His Lordship who would not be distracted while he reads his morning paper on his way to the board meeting.

Driving the Napier Ruxton the first thing you are aware of is its height. You are looking down at the cars in front of you. The second thing is its

## John on the Napier Ruxton

### Likes

The style of the car. It is a gentleman's carriage;

The 5.7 litre V8 engine fits in with the Rolls Royce axiom of being adequately powered;

The automatic gearbox and power steering make it very pleasant to drive;

### Dislikes

Two big to get it around some tight corners on first attempt;

Costs a fortune to fill the tanks with petrol which tends to flow into the engine like it was going out of fashion;

A pig to park as it won't fit into a standard metered car park;

Reverse backing is best done with the mother-in-law guiding you from behind the car. In this manner nothing will happen that you truly regret;

weight. Although there is remarkably little body roll in a car that is so far off the ground. Corners are at first approached with caution while I waited to see what the car would do. Thankfully it went round all of them. Comparing this car with the Almac is like comparing a battleship with a destroyer. They are both very different and have different functions. Not designed for narrow twisty roads this car is best suited for cruising at effortless speed. The power assisted steering could be managed with only one finger. The sheer power of the V8 conquered and hills easily and weight and the suspension floated over any bumps in the road as if they were not there. The car was a pleasure to drive.

On our last stop I insisted on climbing into the back seat and carrying on from there. With Mike Boven driving we cruised around Paparaumu. I felt a little underdressed but I still gave a friendly wave to the masses. Miles could be swallowed up from this position and spat out without being noticed.

#### AND THE WINNER IS...

It is very hard to choose a winner in this instance. Both cars are very different although they do share the interior door handles from a mini. Each is aimed at a different audience for a different purpose. It is clear that the Almac could out drive the Napier Ruxton anywhere. While the Napier Ruxton can out pose the Almac and is a wonderful grand tourer. To put it another way, they do what they are designed to do and they do it well. Still at the end of the day a winner must be decided. Therefore I must give the winning Laurel Wreath to John Mander for the detailing and finish of the Napier Ruxton. It is a superb piece of work. Had the Almac been fully upholstered and finished it would have been a far harder decision.

## Mike on the Almac TC

### Likes

- Cheap
- Open air, sounds great;
- Reliable, easy to work on/simple;
- Brilliant soft-top.

### Dislikes

- Swing rear suspension;
- Useless side-screens;
- Difficult gear change, (Heather wants a new gearbox!)

## Specifications

Car	Napier Ruxton	Almac TC
<b>Engine</b>	Chevrolet 5.7 ltr V8	Triumph 2.0 ltr 6
<b>Fuel</b>	Holly 4 barrel cd 600	Twin cd150 Strombergs
<b>Power</b>	213hp	155hp
<b>Gearbox</b>	Chev 350 automatic	Triumph GT6 4 speed manual
<b>0-100 kph</b>	9.9 seconds	8.5 seconds
<b>Frt Suspension</b>	HZ radial tuned Holden wishbone	Triumph Herald wishbone
<b>Rr Suspension</b>	Jaguar XJ6 Independent	Triumph Herald independent
<b>Brakes</b>	Disk front and rear	Disk front and drum rear
<b>Length</b>	5030mm	3660mm
<b>Width</b>	1980mm	1600mm
<b>Height</b>	1650mm	1240mm
<b>Wheelbase</b>	3556mm	1600mm
<b>Chassis</b>	Platform	Platform
<b>Body</b>	Steel and fibreglass	Fibreglass
<b>Weight</b>	1700kg	590kg