



Overnight Sensation

Like a shot out of the blue, the Farbio GTS seems to have come from the middle of nowhere and stunned the sports car world. It's actually been seven years in the making, the last three perfecting the concept. We met the team behind Britain's newest mid-engined super coupé . . .

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ou have to admire the fortitude it takes to launch a brand new sports car in to a competitive and highly desirable sector of the automotive market. It's an area dominated by some of the industry's heaviest hitters and it's hallowed territory upon which many other companies have waged valiant but ultimately futile campaigns.

The latest to enter the ring in Wiltshire-based company Farbio with its GTS, a carbon-fibre bodied, steel-spaceframe chassis based two-seat sports car powered by a mid-mounted V6 – a car company co-owner Chris Marsh is confident gives drivers a true alternative to the usual array of Bavarian bruisers.

If the car looks oddly familiar, it's because it's based on the Farboud GT supercar that has been around in various forms since the early part of the decade. Designed in Norfolk by Arash Farboud and his team, the car was originally intended to be a £170k limited production, high-powered and exclusive supercar with a twin-turbo Audi V6, inboard pushrod race style suspension and carbon fibre reinforced glass-fibre body. Farboud invited Marsh, who wasn't doing a lot at the time following a lengthy stint at Invicta getting the S1 working and the production line established, to join the Farboud project. Farboud had produced a full-scale working prototype, and Marsh said it showed tremendous potential.

"But it was clear some of the ideas weren't going to work. The roofline was too low for anyone over 5'3", Audi couldn't supply enough engines, and those they could supply were too expensive, visibility was terrible, it didn't have a boot and the suspension was too complex to incorporate in to the final design," he said. "But it was



Large fixed rear windscreen offers vast rear visibility.



Kahn 10-spoke alloys sit within deep sculpted wings.

an exciting prospect, and it needed a lot of work to get right."

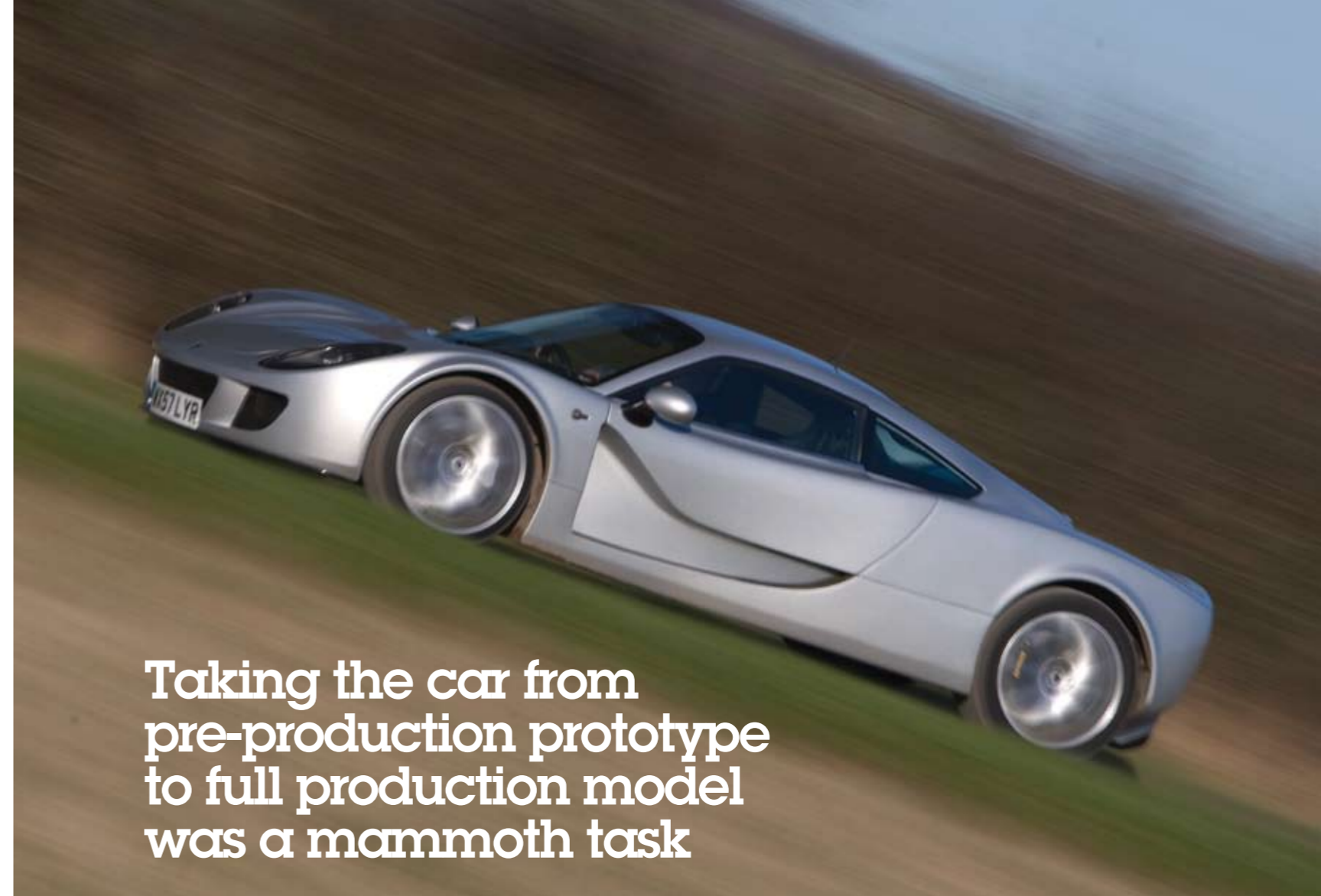
Marsh also felt the car's target audience was too exclusive for a new sports car company to sustain.

"It had a far wider audience than originally anticipated, and it needed to sell in numbers to support the investment, workforce and future growth of the company. We could have done

what Koenigsegg and Pagani have and sold 25-30 very expensive cars per year – but it's something you need a lot of capital to do. We've been keen to establish a good dealer network and orders for the car, get the car in to production and generate the numbers of sales as soon as possible."

Marsh says the Farbio supercar may be a future possibility, but there's plenty to keep them occupied for the next few years without exploring new projects. There are the 420 orders to satisfy first; most have come from the company's dealer network in the UK, but there is growing interest in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. In fact, Marsh says there are five companies vying for the rights to distribute the Farbio throughout the Middle East, and he's having to interview them to establish the best point of contact. There's even interest in America for the car, but the responsibility for federalising the Farbio GTS is something Marsh says is probably best done by a third party company.

Marsh took the project over in 2004, and the car slipped quietly out of the public eye for three years as he and his



Taking the car from pre-production prototype to full production model was a mammoth task



Spacious workshop is now ramping up in to full production. The orange car is now complete.

engineers stripped the car to its core and rebuilt everything. Some manufacturers may have continued to court the press during this time to maintain interest, but Marsh focused his team on getting the car in to production by ironing out the car's faults.

"To be perfectly blunt, I didn't want

anyone here while we were developing it. I wanted to get the car to the point at which it was ready to be launched and we were ready to commence manufacturing. So many manufacturers make big announcements then fail to follow it up, and that's a shame. I like to make a decision to do

something, finish it and be in a position to supply it."

"The most obvious and urgent thing was to raise the roof-line, but that has such a knock-on effect to the rest of the car. The front and rear windscreen angles change, and they then have an effect on every single other surface: the bonnet, wings, doors, sills – everything needed to change. We had the original moulds for the prototype, but they had to be discarded and new ones made because everything changed."

Taking the car from a pre-production prototype to full production model was a mammoth undertaking, particularly when targeting the car at a completely different audience. Marsh was confident in his decision, and was confident that there was a ready market for a £60k sports car with decent power, lightweight bodywork, an evocative V6 engine note and a comfortable option to the über-expensive alternatives.

"I guess, having gained a lot of knowledge through Marcos an Invicta, you get a feeling for the market and what people want. They don't necessarily want huge power: they want a

car that handles well, sound good, is quick when it needs to be, is quiet and comfortable on long road trips, and has air-conditioning."

Under the skin

At the heart of the Farbio lies a space-frame chassis constructed from high-strength steel with integral rollcage. Bolted to either end of the chassis are crash sections that are reinforced with carbon fibre panels bonded to key structural areas. The F1-style pushrod suspension was replaced with more traditional double wishbone suspension front and rear, while the provision for the Audi engine needed to change to accept its Ford-source 3.0-litre V6 replacement. Marsh had considered Ford's 4.6-litre V8 but it was too bulky, so opted for a modified version of the V6 capped with new inlet manifold, exhausts and mapped to produce 262bhp. The six-speed gearbox is also a Ford unit.

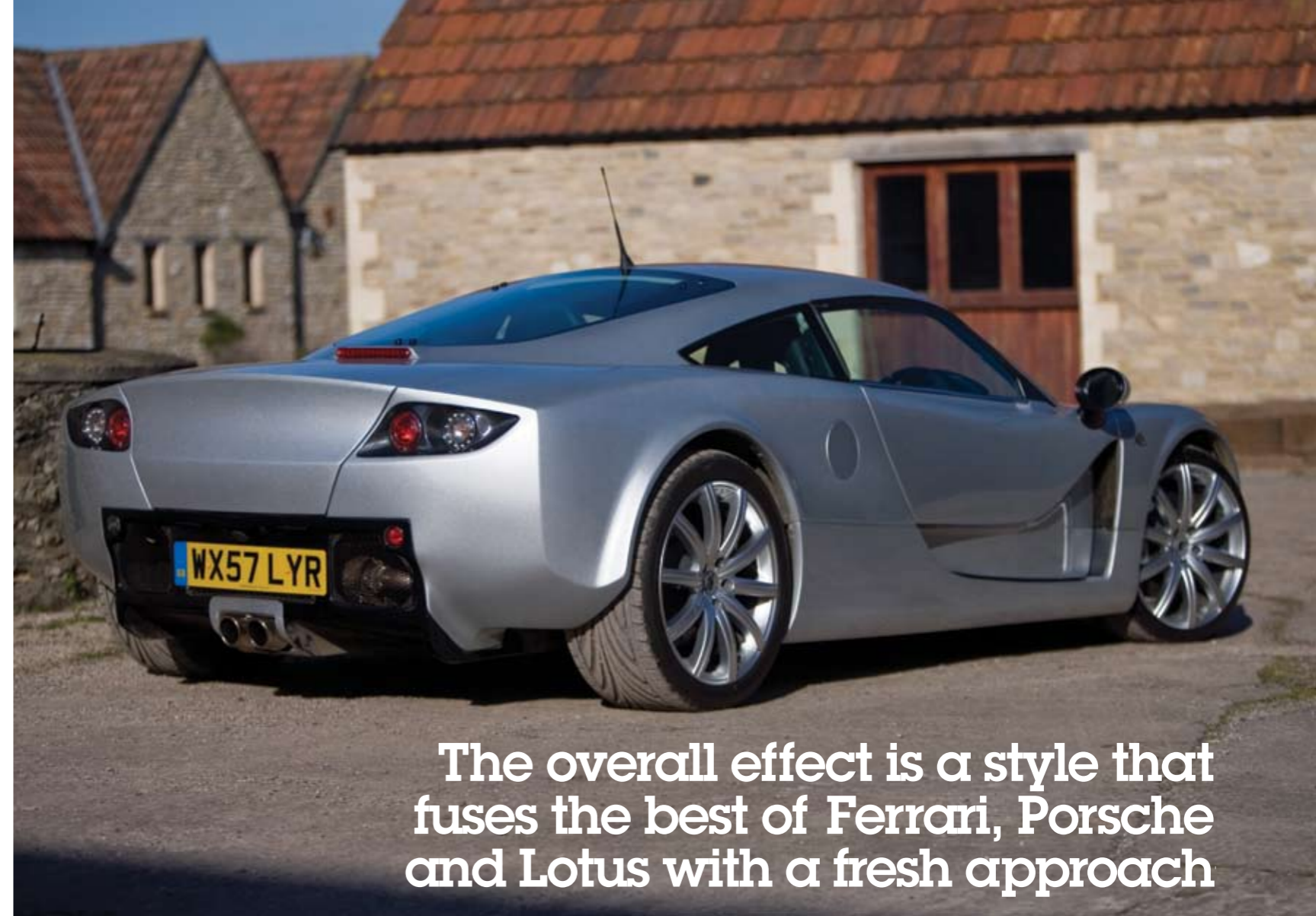
"There were lots of options. The V8 would have been nice, but it just didn't fit with the car's target audience or aims. The V6 was perfect: powerful enough to give the car a decent amount of acceleration, but smooth and quiet enough to make long journeys pleasant."

The entire body consists of four major carbon-fibre panels that, despite the car's resemblance to the original prototype, are entirely different to it.



The A-pillars, roof and rear clamshell form the biggest part of the bodywork, but it's light enough for one person to lift and move about. In fact, if it wasn't so bulky, they could probably manage the two sills and front clamshell as well. The revamped body shape meant Farbio designers were able to incorporate a boot big enough to take a couple of weekend bags and a set of golfclubs while the engine is concealed under a hatch.

The original pushrod suspension was replaced with more traditional double wishbone arrangements front and rear. Farbio also installed fully adjustable dampers and Eibach coil-over springs. Spring and damping rates were fine tuned to Marsh's own feeling for what the car should deliver: firm but compliant damping, and reasonably stiff springs to reduce the amount of body roll while cornering at speed.



The overall effect is a style that fuses the best of Ferrari, Porsche and Lotus with a fresh approach

Marsh was strict on overheads as he strived to keep the car under its target £60k list price. While most of the car is produced inhouse, but the expensive parts such as the engine and gearbox, glass, suspension, brakes, wheels and tyres means Marsh has managed to develop close ties with his suppliers.

"As production ramps up and we start ordering more and more, it puts us in a stronger buying position with our suppliers. The buying power of

160 engines per year is far stronger than that of 50."

Driving it

The first thing that strikes you about the Farbio is the driving position. Marsh said they spent a long time getting the position right: placing the pedals and steering wheel directly ahead of the driver, and the driving controls close to hand. The second thing that strikes you about the car is its visibility. You seem to sit further forward than you'd imagine, making the panoramic windscreen and large side windows seemingly wrap around you. The A-pillar is barely noticeable, the view out of the rear window is unimpeded and the low-seat position means the car almost feels Elise like, particularly as the tops of the front arches are visible from the driver's seat.

The interior is swathed in leather, the SPA dash is the same one used in the Ariel Atom but with Farbio specified aluminium faces, blue numbers and markings and red needles – but the dash is dominated by a touch screen control unit which has been

made by a local military supplier. The unit does away with the traditional array of switches, knobs and dials and replaces them with an intuitive, fast and easy to read display. You can even slot a memory card packed with your favourite music directly in to the dash and access it through the touch screen display. Marsh is a *Dire Straits* man, and *Heavy Fuel* seems an appropriate enough tune for the test drive. The display controls everything: climate control, the stereo and even sat-nav if specified – and it's far simpler to operate than either BMW's iDrive or Audi's similar system.

The V6 idles at a pleasant burble and the clutch is weighted nicely. The gearshift is positive, acceleration is very quick and gear gate spacing is exactly as it should be: precise, pin-point and lightning quick. The Farbio is also a car that you quickly get used to, especially if you're cruising. Around town, the car feels just right: not as snappy as an Elise, nor as blunt as an M3 – while the torquy V6 and generous low speed mapping means you can drive smoothly even with

SHOULD PORSCHE BE CONCERNED?

With a handbuilt chassis, carbon fibre body, mid-mounted V6 and plans to introduce a supercharged variant soon, the £60,000 Farbio GTS represents fantastic value for money – but it faces an uphill battle if it's to take on Germany's heavyweights. In the short term, this doesn't seem too much of a problem. Order books are already full and will keep the company busy for the next few years as production ramps up to cope with demand. Farbio's initial target is a car per week, then two as the production facility expands, the work force grows and supplier networks and relationships become more firmly established. By contrast, Porsche's turnover in 2007 was €5.8bn thanks to a

record-breaking production run of 101,844 cars and SUVs. Of that total, 38,959 variants of the 911 found new homes – another record number – while a further 26,712 Boxsters and Caymans were delivered to new owners. It doesn't take a leading London city accountant to work out the 50-100 cars Farbio will produce per year is hardly going cause the German sports car giant's board to radically alter its business plan to account for any glitches in its sales sheets caused by the Brits. Porsche customers will always look to the marque for its build quality, heritage and badge. The flat-six, rear-engined 911 provides pure driving thrills and a connected, intuitive drive, and ground break-

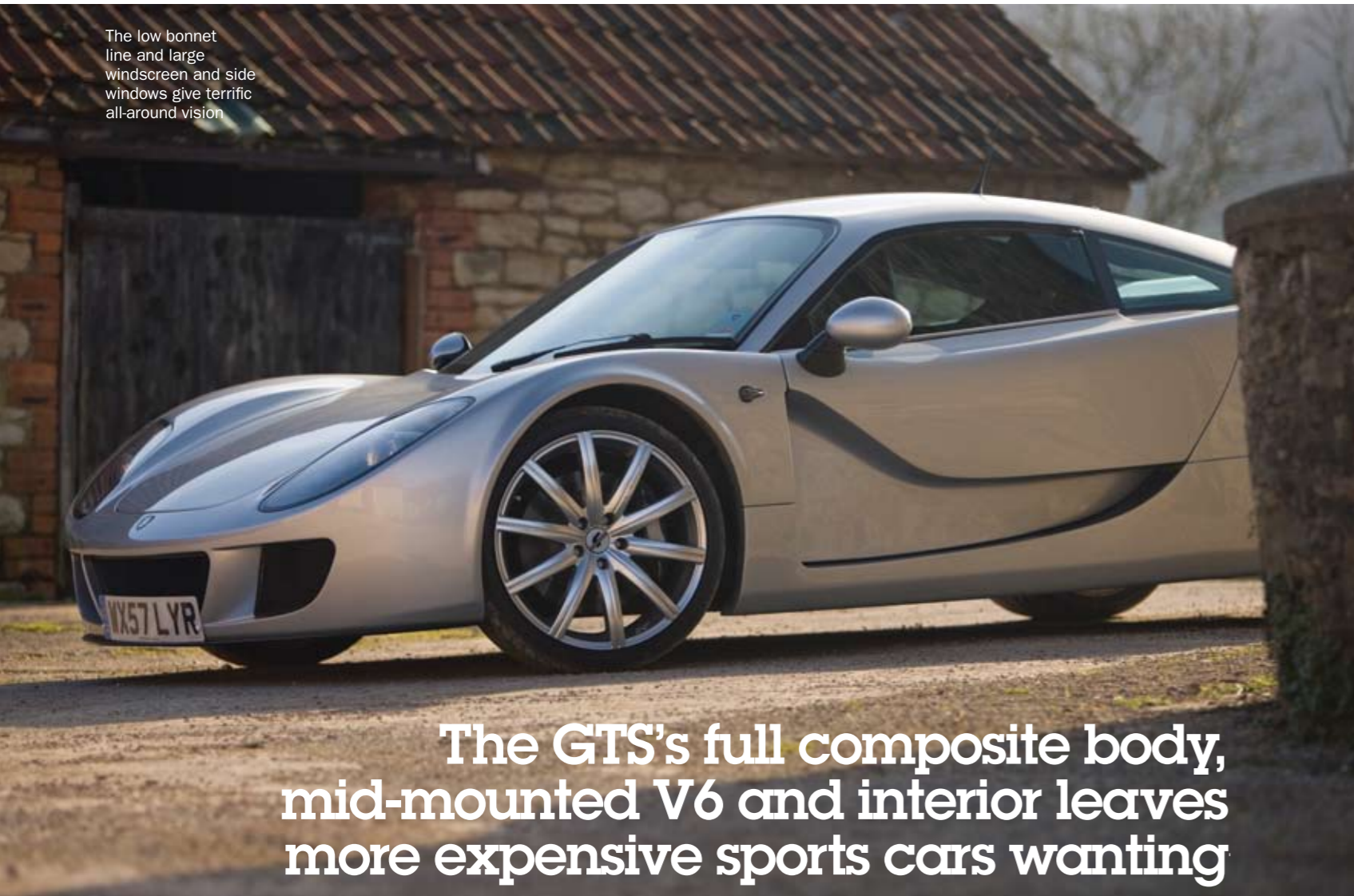


ing levels of grip, performance and enjoyment make it the obvious choice for upwardly mobile sportscar fans. The Farbio does too but couples the drive, tenacity and performance with a carbon fibre monocoque, race-inspired suspension and a driving position that has to be experienced to be

believed. The Farbio represents the sort of thinking core to the British niche car industry: light-weight performance and innovative technology. The ability to fine-tune these features as Farbio grows is an exciting prospect, and so too is the constant flow of orders from customers around the world.



The low bonnet line and large windscreen and side windows give terrific all-around vision



The GTS's full composite body, mid-mounted V6 and interior leaves more expensive sports cars wanting



Carbon detailing on the rear lights is first class

aggressive pedal inputs. Once outside the confines of urban speed limits, the car's mid-range torque gives the car handy any-gear-acceleration and, if you're in a hurry, sharp performance and lightning quick steering.

Handling is resounding too. The front remains glued to the road while the rear simply plants its power and follows suit; steering straddles the line between laser-perfect race car precision and road car compromise

without falling in to the trap of tram-lining on centre lines, ruts or grooves in the road.

Verdict

With a full composite body, mid-mounted V6, an interior that leaves more expensive sports cars wanting, handling that rivals the Lotus Elise and a list of features as long as your arm, the Farbio GTS is a fantastic achievement for a small British team of highly skilled engineers. It looks like it should have more power, but with a lightweight body that tips the scales at just 1048kg, the car's power to weight ratio rivals the new M3 and Carrera S for pace. Only time will tell whether it'll beat them on the track or in handling tests, but it's a worthy alternative and a hell of a package. The £71,675 384bhp supercharged variant is popular, but the naturally aspirated V6 is all you really need for spirited driving and sporty thrills.

SPECS:

Price: £59,925

One sale: Now

Engine: 3.0-litre V6, mid-mounted

Transmission: six speed manual only, rear-wheel-drive

Suspension: Double wishbone front and rear with full adjustable dampers and Eibach coil-overs

Brakes: Four pot AP Racing calipers front (350mm discs) and rear (328mm discs)

Wheels: 19 x 8.5 inch Kahn alloys front with 19 x 9.5 Kahn alloys rear.

Tyres: Toyo T1-R Proxes, 245/35 R19 front and 285/35 R19 rear.

Power: 262bhp @ 6400rpm

Torque: 215lb.ft @ 3000rpm

Performance: 4.8s 0-60mph, 160+mph

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