

the comeback kid?

FB values are quietly climbing. It is a trend all rotary owners will welcome

The most prolific of the RX-7's and the best selling rotary of all, the SA-22 or FB, produced from 1979 to 1985 has always been a poor relation in the classic car market. In recent years the number of cars has continued to decline. The ravages of rust and decay coupled with depressed values have made it perilously easy to crush or break a serviceable car. But, as the eighties enjoy an otherwise largely undeserved revival, things are changing.

Success in US showrooms prompted Mazda to expect much of the FB in Europe. Like every Japanese manufacturer, import numbers were regulated by a gentleman's agreement with Mazda being a relative minnow alongside big names like Datsun and Toyota. Even so, the first generation RX7, helped by on-track success in British and European Touring car races, became a relatively popular choice.

Of the cars sold in the UK, MRC is now aware of only 168 survivors. This knowledge is thanks entirely to the dedicated scanning of every available sales channel by the FB detective, Ancient Dave, in South Yorkshire. (Think of a cross between Yoda and Miss Marple). An enthusiastic FB owner himself, an idle question about how many others might be left has turned into an ongoing quest that requires constant vigilance and the willing assistance of other keen eyed members who post their sightings of cars in small ads or on the streets.

The 12A engine is not a renowned fire breather being overshadowed on this front by the 13B with ever-larger turbochargers strapped to it. But, the light weight and relative simplicity of cars from the 70's and 80's can keep them viable even in modern road conditions. Unlikely to tear the arms from their sockets, it is nevertheless an enjoyable and spirited car with surprisingly good road manners, despite all the horror stories concerning vague steering. An improved steering box on later models partially addressed this but conventional wisdom says the earlier type is easier to adjust and some late cars have had these retro-fitted.

Restoration of an FB is complicated by the likelihood of rust

weakening the shell but some repair sections are available and though otherwise quite presentable cars may require

some attention, even those that look quite far gone could, and probably will, be saved as values continue to climb.

Cheap, basically sound, cars can still be found but that situation is changing fast. A few years ago an FB was not an easy car to sell. The rotary engine's reputation for unreliability, coupled with an acknowledged appetite for rust in the bodywork made them a risky choice. An MGB GT was a far safer bet. But a new generation of classic car buyers, brought up with reliable Japanese cars, are proving far less wary.

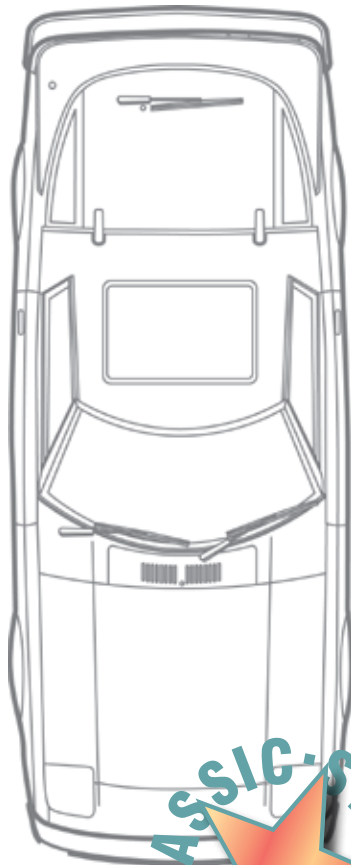
The top price seen asked for an FB recently was £6000. This was for sale by a classic car dealership renowned for highest quality, low mileage, cars. Whilst the figure might excite it probably flatters the rest of the market. That said, asking prices in excess of £4000 for top cars were no longer the exception just prior to the recession.

The middle ground, occupied by cars that had undergone varying levels of restoration or rebuild, regularly attracted asking prices of £2500 to £3000. The downturn has perhaps knocked £500 to £750 off these prices but

hopefully, recovery will see them rise again. Cheap cars still seem to be available from about £350 upwards, but prices climb rapidly towards the £1000 - £1300 level, given evidence of an MOT or reasonable hope of obtaining one without major expenditure. Spares cars used to be cheaper still but the line between what is suitable for repair and what cannot be saved is becoming increasingly blurred as top end values rise.

Still too young to qualify for some types of classic competition, the FB has always been a winner on track and makes a different, economic, choice when considered alongside the purchase costs of many contemporary small Fords and other popular classic competition cars. An MGB would be easier...but it would still 'only' be an MGB!

As a road car the FB allows for the carriage of smallish





children in relative comfort. Both quality and equipment levels were continuously (if slowly) improved across all three series' of production. The boot may look minimal but, covered by a roller blind rather than a rigid panel, it provides a very flexible load space and can easily consume enough stuff for a weekend away. The tailgate glazing was designed as a one piece glass hatch but Mazda accountants balked at the cost of making it and the three piece layout was used on all production cars. Access is reasonably good through the lift up rear window section and the back seat folds flat to give a remarkable load area considering that this is a sports car.

The 12A engine is relatively unstressed and, given the usual rotary advice, is commendably long lived. Very worn examples, with fading compression, will lack performance evenly across the board. They are however much less given to dramatic failure than later, turbocharged, engines and regularly pass 100,000 miles without serious intervention. That is comparable to BMC A and B series engines as well as Jaguar's 6 cylinder unit. It's better than many a well-used twin cam Ford motor (which can be far dearer to rebuild). Fuel consumption is, as ever, the achilles heel of a rotary engine but a normally aspirated FB is far gentler on the pocket than the forced induction motors in high power FD's and, given regular maintenance, its appetite should be on a par with a modern RX8. Unlike the current rotary model though, an FB is simple to maintain at home. With a less crowded engine bay, access to service items is spectacularly easy (you barely have to bend to change the oil filter) and the absence of electronic controls makes tuning a tactile rather than technological experience.

In Japan and America the 1st Gen was latterly offered with the 13B turbo engine but these cars were never listed here as various mechanical/materials modifications had already had to be made to adjust the engine for the relatively high-lead fuels used in the UK and Europe back then. However, the British Elford Engineering Company turned out Elford Turbo models from an early date; these cars being supported and warrantied by Mazda themselves.

The standard engine's smooth delivery of power won the car many friends when new and although some interior colours and fabrics may now look decidedly 1980's, the seat quality makes even long journeys no test. Hundreds of thousands of Americans, grown huge on millions of burgers, never faulted their 1st Gen's comfort and anyone who has creaked out of a comparable British classic after a two or three hundred mile journey would probably rejoice at the FB experience.

An FB as a star classic choice? ***Don't wait too long!***

If you've already got an FB that you think is not on the Register, join the club (if you're not already a member) post up pics and make Ancient Dave choke on his porridge to see a 1st Generation that he's missed.

Many thanks to 'Ancient Dave' for his help with this article



The Series 2 FB brochure crammed a lot of information into a single 2 page spread