

The man behind the brand



As one of the industry's best-known names, the story of Milltek Sport and its founder, Phil Millington, is more interesting than most. From humble beginnings, via royal patronage, to the scene stalwart it is today. We sent **Paul Cowland** to find out more.

TRUE CAR enthusiasts are a relatively rare commodity once you reach the upper echelons of the larger tuning brands. The skills needed to run a big business mean you often find very capable and amiable accountants, directors or managers with keys to the executive washroom, but true petrolheads at the helm? Take it from me, you don't stumble across that many...

Meeting the real McCoy, then, is always a true breath of fresh air. Milltek founder Phil Millington is one example, and as he picks up the tale, you begin to understand why. 'You can blame it on my Aunt!' he explains, 'She used to hill-climb Bentleys and race motorbikes before I was even born. Her father was John Bolster, the well-known journalist and racer, so it was inevitable that I would chose this industry, wasn't it? I was brainwashed pretty much from birth!'

This healthy interest and early dabbling with cars led Phil to take an Engineering Diploma and would set the course of his future career – with exhausts featuring very heavily throughout. As manager of one the UK's first exhaust centres, in Horsham in 1977, Phil took a keen interest in the market and learned a lot about customer expectations. Keen to expand his workshop's business, Phil started buying in quality stainless systems from a small



fabricator based down in Devon, for cars like the Jaguar XJ and Renault 16. All was going well until that firm, SS Exhausts, started getting erratic with their deliveries. 'It turned out that they were having financial difficulties,' says Phil. 'We knew it was a great product, so my boss decided to buy out their business – and sent me down to run it as a manager.'

After a chaotic and enlightening first few months, 'We were their finding their old writs stuffed behind the radiator!' laughs Phil, the young Millington soon had thing on an even keel, and in less than 12 months had the place back on its feet, back into profit and hungry for new business. Despite a staff count of just six, business was brisk, creating numerous stainless-steel classic car systems for marques like MG and Triumph. 'Those were great days,' says Phil reverentially. 'I realised then that this is what I was meant to do.'

Craving greater control and direction, in 1983, Phil decided to go it alone, forming Falcon Exhausts – the company that would eventually evolve into Milltek. Several loyal staff came with him and a small unit in Taunton was acquired so that production could begin. At the time, the market was geared up for labour-intensive, low output production, and Phil swiftly realised that by applying volume production philosophy and big company thinking to this 'cottage industry', savings could be made, and passed on, without compromising quality.

Unsurprisingly, this went down well in the trade, with Falcon's first classic car show appearance netting an order for 50 Stag exhausts. They all had to be delivered in the company hack at that time, a careworn Rover SDI of all things, but a couple of trips with the car on its bump-stops soon got them to their destination. In those early days, every penny made was ploughed straight back into the business to keep stock churning over. 'I didn't want to tie up funds in a van, so we usually delivered everything in a Mk 4 Cortina estate,' Phil recalls. 'With the load it was usually carrying we definitely pre-dated the current trend for lowered and stanced cars, that's for sure!'

Despite an endearingly Heath-Robinson attitude to logistics, Falcon's



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reputation soon spread, leading to many top-level clients like Princess Anne leaving her Scimitar with them for a custom system to be made. Major distributors were soon signed up – all of whom are still buying from the firm today.

After two obviously impressed US pilots sauntered in unannounced one morning, and asked to place an impromptu £18,000 order for Jaguar E-Type exhausts, Falcon quickly found its feet as an export concern. Orders for Austin Healeys and Triumphs soon followed, allowing the company ethos of precise and accurate volume fabrication to set it apart from its competitors.

It didn't take long for the fledgling firm to appear on radar screens slightly higher up the food chain and, in 1987, Falcon was appointed as the OEM supplier to Jaguar Cars, with full responsibility for the VIP programme. Systems were developed for Maggie's Jag, The Prince of Wales – and even the Queen's Jubilee car, with Phil getting to meet the monarch during the build. It wasn't just UK royalty though; even the Sultan of Brunei's people were calling Phil for special attention to his Bentley collection. 'As his cars were always secret one-offs, we were often literally scratch-building special turbo systems with the car fully shrouded in a sheet! It wasn't the easiest of tasks!' Phil grimaces.

Toward the end of the '80s, Falcon bought out a competitor in the Midlands, buying its property in the process. It was at this point that Phil decided to leave his West Country roots and move the entire company up to its new Midlands base. Although it proved to be a stroke of logistical genius in the long term, the 40 lorry loads of equipment and stock that had to be driven between the two sites was taxing at the time. 'Never again!' is Phil's succinct comment on this chapter of the company's history.

Now in the hub of all things automotive, Phil and his team were really starting to move along quite nicely. With Bentley on the books and numerous other well-known manufacturers ordering left, right and centre, the company weathered the recession well, meaning that by the time the mid '90s rolled around, they were all ready for a fresh challenge.

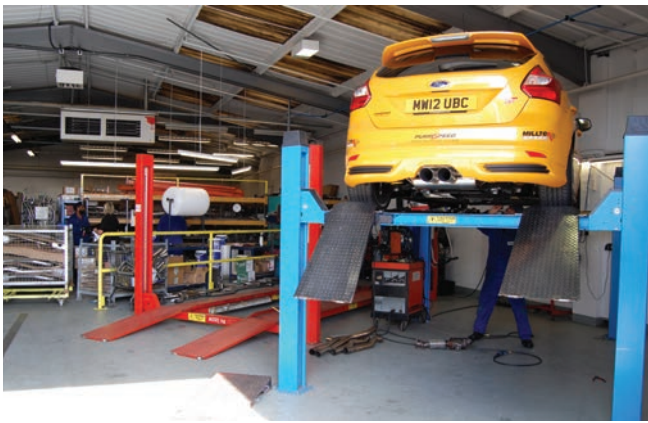
Regular visits to Essen netted tuner orders and switched-on local dealers and



tuning outfits revealed an exciting new direction for the firm; the performance aftermarket. 'The Falcon name was too well known as a classic and OEM brand,' Phil continues. 'So we decided to come up with a new company sub-brand for our new 'little' division. As I was really proud of the work we were doing, I made it partly eponymous. Funnily enough, years later, that little division has ended up becoming the biggest concern, which is why we moved the brand over completely a few years ago.'

Milltek Sport had timed its entrance to perfection. Riding on the crest of a wave of a relatively young industry, early fitments included the Golf GTI and Audi TT. Reading the market well proved to be the company's major talent, and with 'must have' cars of the moment like the MGF being catered for as quickly as development schedules would allow, the orders were piling in at a rate of knots.

Although the firm has created systems for many cars over the years, it always seems to be 'first past the post' with solutions for the Volkswagen Group cars. Why? 'It's simple, really,' explains Phil. 'Not only are they a personal favourite of mine, and many of our designers, but they're also a series of brands that have been enjoying somewhat of a golden era of design for an awfully long time. They



sell well in America, which means we do too. They're beautifully engineered, with great powerplants, so we know that our systems will be able to offer tangible gains to our end-users.'

From a starting point of just Phil, his phone and his car, the sales team – and supporting cast of engineers, fabricators, accountants, designers, warehouse staff and drivers sits at a headcount of around 50 these days. With a worldwide order book being satisfied entirely from Milltek's Derbyshire factory in Ilkeston and logistics hub in Derbyshire's prestigious Pride Park, in the heart of the city's 'Motor Mile', Milltek is busier than ever before. 'With every marque being represented literally on our doorstep,' says Phil (he can physically see Derby Audi out of his office window!) 'And a very good relationship with our local dealers, we're well placed to access the very latest cars at a moment's notice. It really helps our speed to market.'

So, how do cars get chosen for development? And what's the process behind it all? 'It's changed a lot over the last few years,' smiles Phil. 'In the old days, we would read all the magazines, keep our ear to the ground, and I would personally travel a lot more. I was constantly on the road, so I would pick up ideas from events or motorshows. We still do that, of course, but now, with a bigger dealer network, access to forums and owners' groups, we also engage in regular dialogue with our retailers and end-users to ascertain exactly what they want. We analyse registration

data in each territory to see what's on the road too, but we're not just looking for volume. To choose cars with heart and soul is equally as important. Cars that we know people will want to own and enhance. It has to be desirable and it needs to have an 'X' factor. Only then will we add that car to our shortlist.'

The Milltek testing process is a mixture of pure science and, we're delighted to hear, a fair deal of visceral, human input as well. 'I personally track test almost every single system we make,' says Phil. 'It's a tough old job, but somebody's got to do it! I do love trackdays, and it allows us to test our systems to the very edge of the car's performance envelope in complete safety. It's also imperative to know that all of our systems will pass noise checks too, as we know it's an essential for many of our clients.'

The Milltek Audi R8 system is a prime example of this, with Phil's personal track testing during its development,

(some 6,000 track miles in the first year!), allowing the team to perfect the sound and performance of each part for every application. This attention to detail and personal touch saw Milltek net well in excess of over 500 orders in just the first few months. 'We build the demo cars for the good of our dealers,' continues Phil. 'They're there to enthuse them and our end users on the difference we can make to their car. People buy on the look and engineering quality of an exhaust, but ultimately, it's the sound and performance that really sells it to them. With careful design, you can have the lot!'

Prior to Phil's more 'hands-on' approach, however, every car that comes into Milltek's Derbyshire R&D and production facility is subjected to a precise and carefully calculated barrage of noise tests. Statics, drive-bys and resonance checks are all logged in OEM trim, before detailed photography and CAD drawings are made of all the OEM parts. This process is



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revisited throughout each stage of the process with clinical levels of repetition.

The design team then examines the possible solutions, before sitting down with the Sales and Marketing side of the business to decide which configurations the dealers and market require. 'It's incredibly important to listen to what people want,' says Phil. 'Certain markets we know will want a de-cat option from day one, whereas some premium prestige marques may prefer a half system early on in the model's life, with de-cat options being available as the cars get older and fall out of warranty. Timing is everything in this job, and it changes from badge to badge. We learned that a long time ago.'

This tiered approach to releasing new products also helps as other tuning concerns join the party when a new car is released. 'Often by waiting a while to release the entire system means we can accommodate the requirements of ECU tuning companies – and even styling houses in our later designs,' says Phil. 'The ability to work with our technical partners to ensure that a downpipe allows them to perfect a throttle map, or a tailpipe suits a new rear valance design is an essential part of what we do.'

Milltek's designers spend a long time tweaking the sounds and frequencies of the system, as well as optimising diameters and tube lengths to ensure that the new-found increase in power gleaned from better breathing is being delivered in precisely the right place, and perhaps even more importantly, in the right manner!

'We've thrown day's worth of work away many times before now, and started again,' intones Phil. 'So many people chase dyno numbers on an exhaust as the absolute end result, but it's only a tiny part of the story. If the sound throughout the power band isn't just right, or you pick up an annoying resonant frequency on your way through the rev range, it will spoil your driving experience, and it really won't matter how much power you make. We're also more interested in creating performance that makes a tangible difference to your enjoyment of the car. If it sounds and feels faster, and you're enjoying yourself, and we've say, sacrificed 1 or 2 PS at the very top end, to achieve some genuine entertainment factor in the middle, then that's a trade-off we will make every day of the week.'

We say in our ads, 'Make Every Journey Epic', and that's the best distillation of our design philosophy, really. You need to enjoy every single mile, every gear-change and every blip of the throttle. That's what a good exhaust system should help you to do.'

Understanding the differing tastes of individual markets is important too. 'Our US customers like things a little louder, our European clients, slightly quieter,' explains Phil. 'Over here, we also prepare many systems for full TÜV Approval and homologation, so we're looking at the same design and operating features that OEM technical teams need to address. Our HJS sports cat range helps us to cater for the issues of environmental

responsibility with our tuning, and we're constantly striving to stay one step ahead of the legislation to ensure that those customers who want to enhance their car, but stay the right side of the Blue Book, or their prevailing emissions legislation, can do so with impunity.'

'I think the most important decision we ever made was when we first started, 30 years ago – and that's to never rush to get a design out to be first to market. I have always said, I would rather miss 3 or 4 month's sales and get a design perfect, than be first to market and ask our customers to finish our testing. I think nothing kills a brand faster than that,' intones Phil seriously.

As an ISO 9001 accredited company, this quality-based approach to design is imperative, with the first version of most new systems being a cat-back homologated design. Once these have been done, quiet product placements are made with trusted dealers and importers, and occasionally, even respected forum members before the system is finally released. 'These 'Focus Groups' are an important sanity check before we fully sign off,' says Phil. 'It's always great to get a third-party opinion or three on what you've done before you commit to series production, and it all goes back to listening to our dealers and customers. Ultimately, if they aren't utterly delighted with what we've done, we start again from the very beginning.'

But what about motorsport? How important a role does that play in the



R&D process? 'It's an essential and integral part of what we do,' smiles Phil. 'It's the next step up from our own track testing, and it teaches us an awful lot about exhaust design and heat handling. We engage at every level, from sponsoring club championships like the SuperPro VAG Trophy and UK Time Attack series, right up to the pinnacle of saloon racing, producing systems for the BTCC. Even in Time Attack, our road car systems are more than up to the job of providing extraction duties on our own Mk 6 Golf. This is because we only make systems up to one quality – and that has to be good enough for all of our customers!

These days, Milltek has blossomed to cover some 25,000 sq. ft. of warehouse and office space, with sophisticated online production scheduling and ordering for dealers, and over £1,000,000 of stock, at retail value, on the shelf at any time, ready to go out to expectant dealers. Over half of those 50 staff have been on the payroll for over two decades and there's clearly a bond that keeps Milltek's retailers, end-users and staff happy and loyal. 'Over the years we've 'grown' with a lot of people,' smiles Phil. 'We've grown with our end-users as they've climbed from say a Golf, to a Skyline, then to a Porsche. We've helped many once-small dealers to become significant retail concerns, and I'm delighted to have retained so many staff that have progressed and been promoted through the company as we have got bigger. It's a big part of our continuity and success, I think.'



So what does the future hold for Phil and this perennial tuning brand? Does he ever lie awake, worrying that we'll all be driving electric cars in 20 year's time? 'It's a thought, isn't it?' laughs Phil, 'But I think there will always be a market for responsible tuning. 'We're now developing more 'split personality' products like switchable valve systems that allow you to have two cars in one, and we have so many environmentally-focussed catalyst solutions, that I'm sure there will always be a place for us in the automotive market somewhere. To me, the big thrill of this job has been creating something special out of inanimate stainless-steel sheet and tube. Watching it being formed into something that can physically change the very character and ability of a car is very rewarding, and it's what still gets me up in the morning.'

The firm still enjoys considerable success in the classic car market, and with a plethora of new releases always on the drawing board, how does Phil see the next 30 years panning out for Milltek? 'Hopefully an awful lot like the last 30!' he smiles. 'Technology advances all the time, but our approach to the process

“Technology advances all the time, but our approach to the process and to our staff, dealers and customers will never alter...”

and to our staff, dealers and customers will never alter. I have great people around me, and with the internal promotion of Steve Pound as our new managing director, allowing me to take a role as Milltek's chairman, I feel confident that we have a fantastic vista ahead. Steve will be dealing with the day-to-day running of Milltek to allow me to look after special projects and become more of an ambassador for the company. I've already told him that I need to increase our track testing programme!' And with a hearty laugh that somehow lets you know that he really means it, Phil's off talking about his favourite circuits and best driving moments once again. With a genuine passion and impeccable heritage behind it, and clear planning and investment before it, those next 30 years for Milltek look pretty safe indeed... 🇩🇪