21ST CENTURY RESTO

1987 Volkswagen GOLF GTI

Michael King wanted his MkII Golf GTI to be just like a MkII Golf GTI... but better!

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Michael King wasn't looking for a Golf specifically when he first came across this MkII GTI back in July 2008, nor was he on the hunt for another project. However, events conspired to send the car his way... and for a bargain 'price', too. 'My mate had owned it for a while, but it was suffering from a badly knocking bottom end and he didn't want to get into the works required to sort it. I decided that I wanted to save it and use it as my daily driver.'

In the end, Michael got the Golf, plus a secondhand bottom end, in exchange for – wait for it – a front bumper for a Volkswagen Type 2 'Split Screen' van!

With the engine repairs completed and a suspension refresh undertaken, the Golf was back on the road, with Michael using it as his daily for the next year or so. 'However, it had a few niggling issues with fuelling, plus several oil leaks, so the car came off the road again to be fully restored. My plan was for a stock rebuild – I even bought a donor car in the same specification to make life easier when sourcing parts.' It was at this point that the project took a change in direction. 'While the stripdown was ongoing, a crash-damaged MkIV Golf GTI came up for sale locally for just £250 and I decided to do an engine conversion. The plan was to end up with a reliable and more powerful engine, but in a car that still looked as stock as possible.'

Keeping it simple

The conversion process itself is well documented online, so it was relatively straightforward... or so Michael assures us. 'I decided to use the MkIV gearbox with LSD, which isn't the simplest way to go, but I wanted to retain it for both reliability and ➡

From the outside, you'd never know MkII's secret.

TO THIS...

FROM THIS...

September 2011: the car still has its original engine in place, but plans are afoot for something altogether more interesting.

‘I wanted the car to look as stock as possible on the exterior’

TECH SPEC

ENGINE 1781cc/4-cyl/DOHC
POWER 148bhp@5700rpm
TORQUE 155lb ft@1750rpm
GEARBOX 5-speed manual
0-60mph 8.2sec
TOP SPEED 134mph
FUEL ECONOMY 36mpg

LEFT Engine has that OEM look.

LEFT Interior is completely original bar the addition of a more modern, but subtle, radio/CD head unit.

RIGHT Donor car’s seats replaced tired originals.

BELOW NOS front grille smartened things up nicely.

BLIND ALLEY

Fitting the intercooler in was tricky. Eventually Mike sourced an intercooler with inlet and outlet on the same side, while a Trackslag intercooler pipe made the route from the turbo easier. The front panel was modified to take the intercooler and the ’cooler to inlet manifold pipework was made up of 90- and 45-degree elbows and pipes, while trying to keep the runs as close to stock lengths as possible. There was lots of mocking up with scrap pipe and hose before Mike ordered the silicone hoses.

for the hydraulic clutch to make it easier to drive.’ Michael swapped the gearbox driveshaft cups to 100mm items to enable standard MkII driveshafts to be used. He then modified a Corrado pedal box to fit, which also called for him to make some slight bulkhead modifications to allow for the hydraulic clutch compared to the original cable-operated unit. A Golf MkIII gearshift setup and cables also replaced the original rods. Some things were easier than others though, as Michael recalls: ‘The engine mounts are in the original location on the MkII bodyshell because, despite coming from a MkIV, the engine block still has the drillings and threads for the MkII rear mount to bolt in, while a Corrado gearbox mount also slotted into position perfectly.’

Now you’re talking my language

Getting the newer engine to play nicely with the older car’s existing systems wasn’t too painful either. ‘The ECU was sent away to have the immobiliser removed’, explains Michael, ‘which meant that the more modern looking MkIV keyfob and complicated instrument cluster didn’t need to be used. An adaptor was also required to enable the original rev counter to work, too. ‘Since I had the complete donor car, I was able to work out what wires I needed for what, plus I’d had the engine running in the donor with all the wiring separate from the car, so I was confident there would be no issues once it was all installed in the MkII.’

An aftermarket intercooler is fitted neatly behind the front grille, but in front of the standard radiator and fan. Michael carefully modified the front panel to enable it to fit, and moved the radiator backwards to allow for extra room. ‘Making a neat job of the installation was important to me’, explains Michael, ‘because I really didn’t want the intercooler to be seen from the outside of the car. As a ‘small bumper’ car, this meant that the intercooler had to be tucked away behind the front grille.’

The intercooler pipe work was made up from an aftermarket main pipe, while Michael made up the rest of the setup from scratch with a series of hoses and joiners. The exhaust system uses a Seat Ibiza down pipe including integral catalytic converter, with the factory MkII first silencer deleted, but the rest of the system is standard, including a NOS back box to keep things looking original out back. ‘Once again, I wanted to avoid having to use an aftermarket back box because that would give away the fact that the car has been modified’, says Michael.

From in to out

With the engine and running gear in hand, Michael still had some work to do. ‘The bodywork was fairly tatty all round, while there was historic accident damage to both the offside front wing and driver’s

Here’s how Michael did it

1 FEB 2012 Wiring work
It took Michael a while to work out what was what with the wiring loom from the MkIV donor car, but he was eventually able to get the engine running in his MkII.

2 JUN 2012 Trial and error
First fit of the engine in its new home. Michael worked through a few ideas and was able to mock up how the final installation was going to come together.

3 SEP 2014 Disc swap
Michael was keen to ensure that the MkII had the stopping power to match its newfound extra grunt, hence he went for larger Seat Ibiza discs on the front.

4 APR 2019 Colour me!
After many hours spent preparing the bodywork, the Golf was finally ready to go to the paint shop for some top coats – Diamond Silver, as was originally laid on at the factory back in ’87.

5 JUN 2019 Not far now
With the bodyshell now looking sharper than ever, the laborious process of attaching all the trim and assorted exterior adornments could begin... but the project was now on the home stretch.

SOURCE MATERIAL

From spare parts and engines, to donor cars and more...

The later engine/gearbox combo isn’t the only upgrade on this car. The front brake discs were upsized from 239mm to 280mm, using Seat Ibiza parts, which meant the hubs also had to be swapped. Rear brakes are stock MkII discs with braided lines. To gain clearance from the cam cover, the brake master cylinder is now a rehomed Ford Focus item, while the speedo cable is from a Golf MkII 1.3 and replaces the electronic MkIV item. Bilstein dampers are teamed with Eibach 35mm lowering springs, while the front wishbones have TT/R32 bushes in them.

At great expense, the washer bottle was relocated to the boot and replaced with an extremely rare early Golf MkII bottle – this enabled a factory MkIV airbox to be fitted under the bonnet, as the cone induction kit he used at first was just ‘far too noisy’ according to Michael.


Donor MkIV.

ESTIMATED COSTS

Car purchase price	Swapped for T2 bumper
MkII donor car	£100
MkIV engine donor car	£250
Springs and dampers	£300
280mm calipers and uprights	£80
Intercooler	£60
Intercooler cooler pipe work	£300
Ibiza down pipe	£80
Focus brake master cylinder	£30
TOTAL	**£1140**

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO DRIVE

Having owned a couple of MkII GTIs, I had a fairly good idea as to what this one might be like. And initially, it was exactly what I had expected. In fact, this car drives just like a MkII GTI in A1 condition should do... but better. The steering offers plenty of feel, while you can snick through the different gears with consummate ease. As Mike intended, there is more power on tap than standard, without being too outrageous, while those larger brake discs borrowed from elsewhere within the behemoth that is VAG means you can attack corners with plenty of confidence, too. All in all, this car now behaves pretty much as the factory intended, just with a little bit more of everything in each critical area. Which is a very good thing.

Our Matt was very much at home in this modded MkII.

G60 steel wheels fit perfectly with sleeper vibe.

Those three letters make all the difference to VW fans.

door, too.' Michael also needed to replace sections of the rear arches and part of the rear valance because of the creeping onset of corrosion. 'I replaced the panels with donor ones, so they were straight and genuine. The rusty areas were all rectified, before the entire body was taken back to bare metal and treated to a respray in the original Diamond Silver.' To finish things off, new decals were applied, along with a NOS front grille.

Putting it all back together

By this time, Michael was approaching the fun part of any project, when things start going back together again, as he recalls with a smile: 'The most enjoyable part was the fitting-up process post-paint. Seeing it all come together was extremely satisfying.' The Golf's interior is completely stock and looks all the better for it. 'I rebuilt the driver's seat using the parts from the donor car's passenger seat, so the dreaded side bolster wear is now a thing of the past.' Michael also junked the dodgy aftermarket central locking system and electric windows and replaced them with good old-fashioned manual locks and 'keep fit' windows, again using parts from the ever-useful donor car.

Finally, after more than a decade, the project had come to a successful conclusion, something that Michael relished. 'The hardest part of the entire restoration and modification process was keeping my motivation levels up at times. I must admit that, at one stage, it did get to the point where I couldn't see an end to the project and struggled to stay motivated. Trying to make the engine bay look as stock as possible was quite a challenge, for example, although thankfully I was able to get it to the point where I'm now very happy with it. But I'm so glad that I stuck at it – it was hugely satisfying when the car finally came together as I had envisaged at the beginning of the project.'

In July 2019, Michael took the Golf for its first MOT test since way back in 2008 and happily it passed with flying colours. 'The first drive was great', enthuses Michael, 'as was each one after, as my confidence in the car grew.' His next mini project is to replace the fifth gear from the current gearbox with one from a MkIV diesel gearbox to make motorway driving more refined. This is necessary because the MkIV came on 16in wheels with higher-profile tyres than the MkII's 15s, which means that the MkII is a bit 'busy' revs-wise when travelling at higher speeds on the motorway. 'Beyond that, right now I just want to keep it as it is, while enjoying driving it and surprising other people in their modern cars!' Sounds good to us! ■