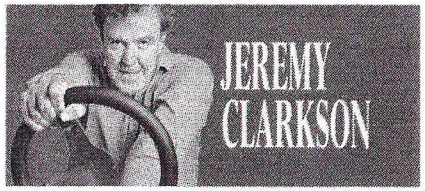
Little green engine that could

5 ℓ/100km



THE Volkswagen Golf. The Vauxhall Astra. That medium-sized Toyota that is not called the Corolla any more. What is it called? It's a name that's sadly not on the tip of my tongue. The Areola? Or is that the ring around your nipple? Whatever, the reason that I rarely test such cars is simple: what's to say? *

For some time carmakers have been treading water in a stagnant pool. If they wanted to launch a new car, it was easy. They called a company that made shock absorbers, a company that made pistons and a company that made satnavs. Then got some Poles or Slovaks to sellotape them together — et voila.

In the mainstream there was no fizz, drama, inventiveness or risk. It got to the point where Ford's engineers made a big noise about the Focus having expensive independent rear suspension. Yes, this made it lovely to drive at the sort of speed it would never travel, but the main reason they were so proud is they had won an internal battle with the bean counters, who would have wanted them to use a cheaper fixed-axle set-up. Carmaking had become accountancy.

But a man called Swampy had taken up residence in a tunnel in Berkshire and started talking about something called "the environment". Now there had been lots of anti-state, anti-system Swampies in the past, shouting about workers' rights and peace and communism, but none had gained traction with the middle classes. So they had remained a noisy but minority interest, like bell-ringing.

Swampy, though, had hit on an idea that did strike a chord with the jam makers. They liked gardening and peace and quiet. They liked the idea of this young man in dirty trousers trying to stop the government building a bypass. So suddenly he was joined in his campaign by lots of ladies in camel-hair coats.

In fact, environmentalism was taking off. Leninism had a new face, that of a polar bear. Everyone seemed to like it.

Naturally, the motor car was quickly identified as the main problem. Not only did it allow workers personal freedom but also it produced vast quantities of carbon dioxide from its tailpipe . . . as a direct result of environmentalists insisting in the 1980s that it had to be fitted with a catalytic converter. A device that converts gases that don't warm the planet into CO_2. Which does, apparently.

So every year governments imposed tougher legislation that forced carmakers to make their products chew less fuel. As a result, mainstream cars are getting interesting again. We now have hybrids; I love how they obey the letter of the law but ignore its spirit. How can a car with two power plants possibly be good for the planet? These cars are tools for fools.

We have lately been seeing some clever variations on the theme. From Vauxhall there's the Ampera and from a small firm in the US there's the Fisker Karma, which works like a diesel-electric locomotive. Elsewhere people are working on hydrogen fuel cells, and there are pure electric cars, too, such as the Nissan Leaf. But the less we say about those, the better. They are interesting to write about, but . . . They. Do. Not. Work.

They are expensive, their ecological benefits are debatable and if you want the costly battery pack to last, it takes several hours to charge it. It would take several days to drive from London to Edinburgh.

All of which brings me to the Ford Focus (pictured). It's called the EcoBoost and it meets the new green legislation in the cleverest way yet. It runs on an engine so small, the cylinder block would sit neatly on a piece of A4 paper.

And if you think a 1.0-litre three-cylinder engine could not produce enough power to move a Focus, look at the figures. It produces 92kW — exactly what was delivered by Ford's old 1.6 Focus. But you get more torque and greatly reduced fuel consumption.

This best-of-all-worlds solution has been achieved thanks to some extremely clever thinking. The torque comes from a long piston stroke and a turbocharger that can spin at up to 248,000rpm, 16 times faster than a jet engine's blades.

The cam belt runs in oil so it's silent and will last forever. Ford has split the cooling system so that the business part of the engine and the people in the car can warm up quickly on cold mornings. And the exhaust manifold is water-cooled. It's probably fair to say there is more innovation and technology in this engine than in a Lamborghini V12.

There's so much torque that you can spin the wheels into second, and it'll easily hold its own with Johnny Van Driver in a traffic light grand prix. And best of all, because the engine is so light, some of the agility missing from recent Focuses is back. To drive, it is brilliant, and apart from a gruff but rather endearing engine noise, there's no indication you are being pulled along by an engine the size of Richard Hammond's left testicle.

The inside is spacious, and my test car had every conceivable extra. This is the most important Ford since the Cortina.

Corolla hatchback is Auris in Europe.

NEED TO KNOW

FORD FOCUS 1.0

VEHICLE
Small hatchback

ENGINE
1.0-litre turbocharged three-cylinder petrol

OUTPUTS
92kW at 6000rpm and 200Nm at 1400rpm

TRANSMISSION
Six-speed manual, front-wheel drive

RATING
4 stars

VERDICT
Who'd have thought it? A green car that makes sense