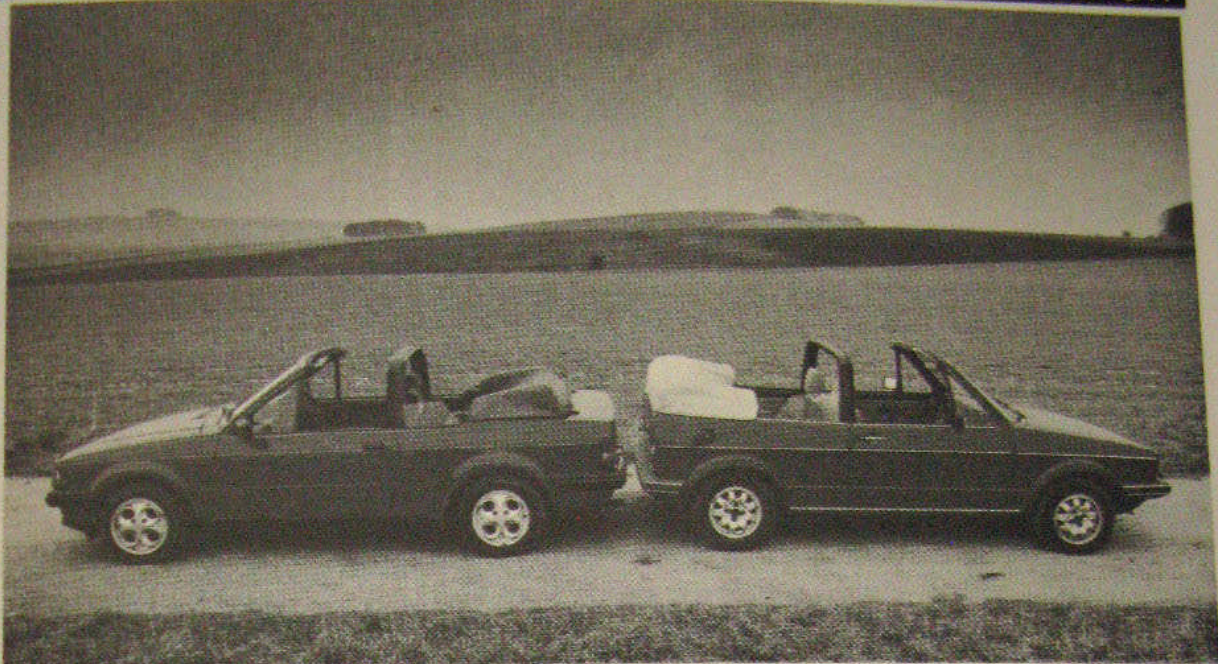




Fresh fun

Ford's sporting soft top Escort has now arrived as a deadly rival to the VW Golf convertible. We compare the hotshot 1.6i and GTi versions



Back to back, the similarities stand out. Both Ford and VW have neat hoods, prominent roll bars and the ability to carry four adults in the open air

with hindsight the launch earlier this year of Ford's stylish Escort Cabriolet – the first soft top to be catalogued by Ford since 1962 – was inevitable. To stay in contention with the hot shot Golf GTI, offered in both open and closed forms for the past four years, Ford had always needed to market a convertible Escort as well as the potent, Golf-rivalling XR3i saloon. After a lengthy gestation period, that car has become a production reality and it now competes head-on with the fashionable Volkswagen.

Ford first showed a convertible XR3i as a design exercise at the 1981 Frankfurt Show, more than a year after the Golf convertible had appeared on the UK market. It says a lot for the 'rightness' of that one-off show car that the car on sale today is identical in concept and altered only in detail.

German bodybuilders Karmann (who also manufacture the Golf convertible for VW) were insistent that the finished Escort be as quiet, comfortable and practical as the saloon on which it was based. In particular, it had to seat four adults, in the fresh air, without a squash and have a proper boot. The hood design also had to be simple, so that the task of raising and lowering the frame could be achieved without recourse to zips, poppers or separate strut supports.

Like the Golf, the Escort is thus as far removed from the bumpy, noisy impractical sports cars of yore as can be imagined. And because both were developed under the same roof, it's no surprise to discover the hood fittings are the same in each case. The Escort, in company with the Golf, has a fully-lined fabric hood that, upon the release of two windscreen clips, concertinas down to rest on top of the rear parcel shelf. Wind-down rear quarter lights feature in either case along with heated rear screens.

Ford's Escort cabriolet range currently takes in three variants, two based on the Escort GL, the third on the XR3i. Engines and transmissions apart, all three share the same mechanical underpinnings; that is, front-wheel-drive, MacPherson strut front suspension with transverse arms and coils at the rear, rack and pinion steering and ventilated front disc brakes.

The GL-based cabriolets, the 1.3 and 1.6 Sohc carburettor Escorts, cost £7446 and £7513 respectively. The top-of-the-range 1.6i tested here, runs with the fuel injected 1597cc XR3i engine which turns out 105bhp at 6000rpm and 101lb. ft of torque at 4500rpm. Tyres too are different, the 1.6i benefitting from 6in alloy wheels shod with ultra low profile covers.

VW only market two manual versions of the Golf convertible in the UK, the GTI tested here at £8980 and the cheaper, carburettor GL at £8150. The 1457cc GL develops 70bhp in contrast to the 112bhp (at

5800rpm) of the 1780cc injected GTI.

The GTI convertible has MacPherson suspension struts at the front, rack and pinion steering and ventilated disc/drum brake set-up, mirroring its Escort rival. Its transverse engine-front-wheel-drive concept is another similarity. But the Golf's rear suspension arrangement of trailing arms linked to a coil-sprung torsion crank axle is different and the factory-fitted 175/70 HR 13 tyres are not as wide as the Escort's.

Thanks to prominent front and rear overriders, the Escort stands nearly 10in longer than the Golf which, at 63in wide, is 2in narrower than the Ford. These differences and the Escort's greater weight aside, the two cars are dimensionally pretty similar.

PERFORMANCE

VOLKSWAGEN	●●●●
FORD	●●●●

Advantage Golf – but on this showing the Escort is far from disgraced since its 112mph maximum is superior to that of the VW and from 80mph upwards it is clearly the quicker of the two cars.

Off-the-line times reveal that up to 70mph the Golf just has the edge, yet in a straight confrontation, the 1.6i would then be poised to move out in front, ready to reach three figures ahead of the VW. The Escort's extra zest in these upper elecons is perhaps just a little academic in Britain but its through-the-gears pace is sufficient to embarrass many so-called sports cars.

Any car that can sprint to 60mph from standstill in under or around 9 sec is fast and the 1.6i certainly comes under that heading. But the stopwatch shows the Golf to be quicker still and, thanks to its torquier engine, it's also more flexible. Third gear favours the 1.6i but in fourth and

fifth the Golf is the fleetest of the two. Fourth and fifth on both Escort and Golf are evenly matched, superior aerodynamics finally allowing the 1.6i to outpace the VW past 100mph.

The 1.6i engine, while sharing Bosch K-Jetronic fuel injection with the Golf, lacks the VW's superb smoothness and impeccable refinement. Even so, the Escort's CVH four packs plenty of punch, revving freely to the red line and pulling without temperament from 1500rpm in top.

But above 4000rpm the engine becomes harsh and progressively more raucous as the revs rise. Worse still, it sounds strained, especially when extended.

By contrast, the masterful VW 1.8 litre is now something of a legend. Crisp, eager and smooth – the Golf engine is all these things and more. Whether charging hard, cruising gently, or lugging from low down in fifth, the engine is never ruffled. Its steady flow of discreet, usable power is a joy to exploit – and it is quiet too.

Despite a slightly awkward change into fifth, the Golf gearchange is

efficient and reasonably quick. But an occasional trace of notchiness was detectable on that of our test car. The Escort's movements are longer and generally lighter yet the lever sometimes 'sticks' in gear, causing exasperating transmission snatch. All five ratios are well chosen.

HANDLING AND RIDE

VOLKSWAGEN	●●●●
FORD	●●●●

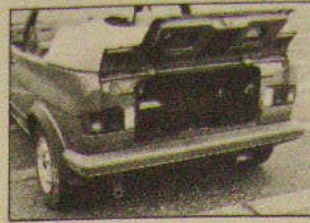
High marks for both cars here – no real surprise considering the pair are based on the hottest versions of their saloon cousins.

On paper the Escort's more evenly-balanced weight distribution seems more attractive than the Golf's. The presence of fat Pirelli P6 tyres, also bodes well for the 1.6i's ability to hang on through fast corners yet for all that, it is the Golf that rates as the more polished performer. Whereas the Escort suffers from a great deal of front-drive steering fight while putting the power down, the Golf's driving wheels hardly twitch or

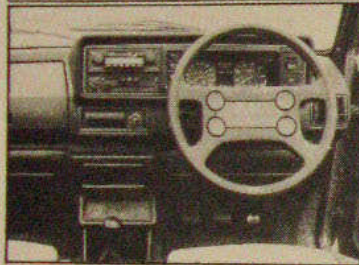




Sharply-styled Escort has tight-fitting hood but thick rear pillars create visibility problems. Driving position is excellent. Big, easy-to-load boot betters Golf's



Alongside the Escort, Golf convertible looks neat but a little staid. Build quality is impressive but awkward boot a chore to load because of narrow opening



FORD ESCORT 1.6i CABRIO VW GOLF GTi CABRIO

to be cornered very quickly indeed, and one has to be going excessively rapidly to have the tail flick out of line. The steering is sharp, too, and its quick, responsive movements will delight the enthusiast driver. Like the Golf, the Escort has fast reflexes.

The Golf also has direct steering but at parking speeds or around tight bends it's pretty hard work on the forearms: on the move it lightens up.

ACCOMMODATION

FORD ●●●●
VOLKSWAGEN ●●●●

Unlike many rival sports cars, both Ford and VW can seat four adults in comfort and carry a useful amount of luggage. Of the two, the Escort is the roomier, offering acceptable leg, shoulder and headroom in both back and front. The Golf is certainly not bad in this respect but the cabin is slightly smaller and rear seat legroom cannot quite match that of the Ford.

The Golf's seats are comfortable and fully adjustable but from the driver's point of view the seat base is a little too close to the steering wheel. Because the bases are quite thick the Golf's passengers sit high up and have a good view of the road ahead. All-round visibility with the hood up is better than the Escort but still leaves blindspots to the rear.

Two large doors allow easy entry and exit to the rear seats. Here the Golf slightly betters the longer and wider Escort whose rear shoulder room is cramped quite badly by two protruding pods which house two of the (optional) radio speaker grilles. Those travelling up front fare much

better thanks to close-fitting, Recaro-style sports seats, with adjustable lumbar support. The Escort's driving position is excellent.

But the main talking point is of course the two cars' fabric hoods. Karmann's brief – to design a sensible arrangement whereby each hood folds down easily, yet doesn't encroach on valuable boot space – has been cleverly carried out.

Both hoods operate in the same way, as already explained, but neither is totally perfect. The Ford suffers from bad three-quarter rear blind spots due to the thick hood 'pillars' while the VW's soft top doesn't really fold down far enough. When topless, the Golf looks very smart but the stowed hood gear in its matching cover does block off some rearwards visibility and can make parking tricky.

Collapsible rear seat backrests are a feature of both cars, and serve to more than double the luggage-carrying capacity in either case. VW's quoted capacity (with the seats upright) of 9.9 cu. ft is a little hard to believe since the Escort boot, at 8.5 cu. ft, seems much bigger.

LIVING WITH THE CARS

VOLKSWAGEN ●●●●
FORD ●●●●

No problems in this area; here are two very desirable convertibles, with sufficient attributes to appeal strongly to the head as well as the heart.

The Golf's simple fascia with its sensible radio location and neat grouping of instruments and warning lights has always scored high marks for practicability and ease of use. The



heating system, similarly, is the model of efficiency, and the workings of the multi-function, on-board computer are easy to grasp – other manufacturers please take note. Although from an ergonomics viewpoint the Golf is hard to fault, we weren't too keen on some of the cheap-looking plasticky dash finish.

By comparison, the fascia of the Escort is a little messy. The prominent tachometer, speedometer, fuel and temperature gauges pose no problem yet the accompanying bank of tiny emergency symbols is unhelpful. The thick, three-spoke steering wheel can at times obscure some of the instruments – and the heating and ventilation will annoy those who like to drive with warm feet and a cool face. Quite simply, that happy state of affairs is impossible to achieve with the Escort's system.

Considering both hoods are designed and constructed by the same company, one would not expect to find much difference when putting either one up or down. Yet to drop the Golf's canopy and fit its accompanying cover, the rear backrests need to go forward – an awkward task – and then a struggle with recalcitrant poppers and elasticated hooks ensues. With the Escort, the hood (which locks down, unlike that of the

misbehave at all in the same situation. It's this kind of refinement which ranks the GTi as one of the greats.

The Golf is a well-balanced car and one that handles neutrally and predictably at all times. Ultimately under-steer sets in but it is easy to check. The ride, furthermore, is excellent, with strong damping control and bump absorption. Pressed hard into a corner, the body will roll, yet the car's in-built stability is an effective counter to that. In short, in the roadholding/handling department, the VW is exceptional; its high standard of ride comfort is another strong suit.

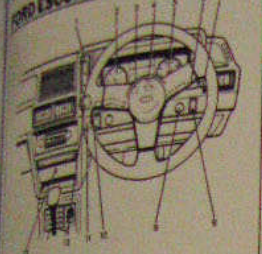
Drop the hood, though, and the body will shake slightly over less-than-smooth surfaces. But the Escort is far worse in this respect, road bumps causing the body to flex and the steering wheel to tremor quite noticeably. This, together with the front wheels' habit of tugging and tramping under duress, comes as something of a disappointment.

With hood up the shakes all but die away, but there still remains the firm ride which at times lets one feel almost every undulation in the road. That said, the latest suspension settings are still far more forgiving than those of earlier front-drive Escorts.

The 1.6i's ultra low profile P6 tyres provide sufficient grip to allow the car

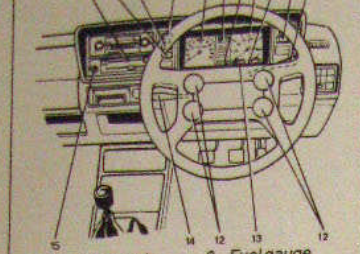
GROUP TEST: SPORTING CONVERTIBLES

FORD ESCORT 1.6i CABRIO



- 1. Heater controls
- 2. Rev counter
- 3. Temperature
- 4. Fuel gauge
- 5. Speedometer
- 6. Lights
- 7. Wipers, washers
- 8. Heated rear window
- 9. Wiper speed
- 10. Indicators/dip/flash
- 11. Rear fog light
- 12. Fan
- 13. Lighter

VW GOLF GTI CONVERTIBLE



- 1. Heater controls
- 2. Hazard warning
- 3. Heated rear window
- 4. Rear fog light
- 5. Speedometer
- 6. Economy gauge
- 7. Clock
- 8. Rev counter
- 9. Fuel gauge
- 10. Lights
- 11. Washers, wipers
- 12. Horn
- 13. Temperature
- 14. Indicators/dip/flash
- 15. Fan

category – but the Escort inevitably has the last word; currently it's cheaper to buy, by £404.

Looking to the future, both Escort and Golf soft tops are well on course to assume 'classic car' status once their respective production runs have ended, so depreciation in the intervening period should be kinder than normal.

VERDICT

VOLKSWAGEN ●●●●

FORD ●●●●

Choosing a winner here has not been an easy task. The Escort Cabriolet, so good to look at, so strong on raw excitement, could easily have come first were it not for its over-harsh engine, snatchy gearchange and tendency to body flex over poor road surfaces.

On the bonus side, the 1.6i has exceptional handling, superb steering and scintillating performance. Its higher top speed is another attraction. And, coming down to earth, it is significantly cheaper to buy and run than the GTi; it has a bigger boot, better hood and at the moment, a stronger chance of drawing a crowd – and doubtless that will interest some potential buyers more than its ability to turn in 33 mpg under light load conditions. Certainly of the two it's the more overtly sporting machine, and terrific fun into the bargain. But it's not quite a GTi beater – yet.

The Golf thus wins this contest on technical merit, because it's solidly made, rivetingly fast and so superbly refined in virtually everything it does. To drive, the car is a gem; inside and out, its standard of finish is exemplary – and the 1.8 engine is almost perfection itself. But for all that, the car is now looking old (for VW, the open top 'Golf 2' obviously cannot come soon enough) and it lacks the Escort's infectious get-up-and-go character. Furthermore, the steering can be heavy. These, and a number of other minor niggles – such as the fussy hood – may well be eradicated when the second generation Golf convertible arrives, in which case the GTi, should by rights, be better than ever.

CAR	Ford Escort 1.6i Convertible	Volkswagen Golf GTI Cabriolet
PRICE	£8576	£8980
Other models Price span	2 Cabs £7446-£7513	1 Convert. £8150-£8980

PERFORMANCE		
Max Speed (mph)	112	108
Max in 4th (mph)	107	104
Max in 3rd (mph)	81	82
Max in 2nd (mph)	53	59
Max in 1st (mph)	31	39
0-30 (sec)	3.2	2.8
0-40 (sec)	5.2	4.8
0-50 (sec)	6.9	6.5
0-60 (sec)	9.3	8.8
0-70 (sec)	11.5	11.3
0-80 (sec)	14.3	14.7
0-90 (sec)	19.6	20.7
0-100 (sec)	17.4	17.5
Terminal speed (mph)	84	85
30-50 in 3rd/4th/5th (sec)	5.1/6.5/9.4	4.2/5.8/8.3
40-60 in 3rd/4th/5th (sec)	4.7/6.2/9.2	4.2/5.7/8.8
50-70 in 3rd/4th/5th (sec)	4.3/7.1/9.4	4.5/6.4/8.8
60-80 in 3rd/4th/5th (sec)	5.5/7.8/11.4	5.8/7.4/9.7

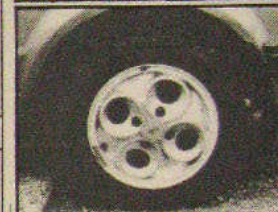
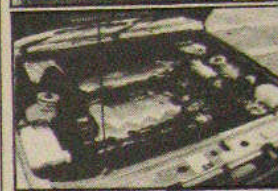
SPECIFICATIONS		
Cylinders/capacity (cc)	4/1597	4/1780
Bore x stroke (mm)	80x79.5	81x86.4
Valve gear	ohc	ohc
Induction	injection	injection
Compression	9.5:1	10:1
Power/rpm (bhp)	105/6000	112/5800
Torque/rpm (lbs/ft)	101/4800	109/3500
Steering	rack/pin	rack/pin
Turns lock to lock	3.8	3.8
Turning circle (ft)	34.0	33.8
Brakes	S/Di/Dr	S/Di/Dr
Suspension front	I/McP	I/McP
Suspension rear	I/TA/C	I/TA/C
Tyres	185/60 HR-14	175/70 HR-13

COSTS		
Test mpg	25.2-33.7	27.5-30.6
Govt mpg City/56/75	28.8/47.1/37.2	26.6/46.3/33.6
Tank galls (grade)	10.5(4)	9.0(4)
Major service miles (hours)	12,000(1.7)	10,000(1.9)
Parts costs (fitting hours)		
Front wing	£42.43(—)	£51.43(1.9)
Front bumper	£44.22(0.3)	£50.82(0.4)
Headlamp unit	£36.01(0.3)	£24.53(0.3)
Rear light lens	£10.98(0.3)	£26.11(0.2)
Front brake pads	£26.04(0.6)	£22.09(0.7)
Shock absorber	£26.23(0.5)	£38.30(1.2)
Windscreen	£27.55(0.8)	£48.00(0.7)
Exhaust system	£84.84(0.6)	£131.83(1.3)
Clutch unit	£56.95(2.5)	£72.79(2.9)
Alternator	£67.83(0.5)	£59.54(0.5)
Insurance group	6	6
Warranty	12/UL	12/UL
Anti-Rust	N/A	6 years
Paint warranty	N/A	3 years

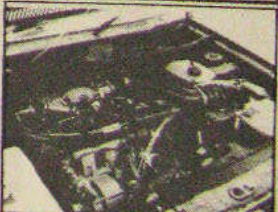
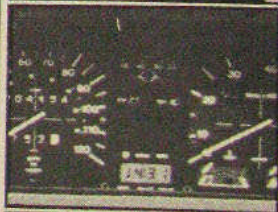
EQUIPMENT		
Alloy wheels	yes	yes
Automatic choke	yes	yes
Automatic transmission	N/A	N/A
Five-speed gearbox	yes	yes
Electronic ignition	yes	yes
Central locking systems	no	no
Headlamp wash	no	yes
Electric windows	no	no
Petrol cap lock	yes	yes
Power steering	N/A	N/A
Sound system	S/radio/cass	no
On-board computer	no	yes
Fabric trim	yes	yes
Head restraints	yes	yes
Rear seat belts	£97	yes

DIMENSIONS		
Front headroom (ins)	37	37
Front legroom (ins)	34-40	33-41.5
Steering-wheel-seat (ins)	14-21	11.5-15.5
Rear headroom (ins)	34	33
Rear knee room (ins)	26-32.5	23-32
Length (ins)	156	146.5
Wheelbase (ins)	94.3	94.5
Height (ins)	55	56
Boot load height (ins)	24	21
Overall width (ins)	65	63
Int. width (ins)	52	52
Weight (cwt)	19.1	18.5
Towing weight (cwt)	17.7	23.6
Boot capacity (cu. ft)	8.5	9.9

KEY. Valve gear: ohc, overhead camshaft. Steering: rack/pin, rack and pinion. Brakes: Di, discs; Dr, drums; S, servo assistance. Suspension: I, independent; C, coil springs; McP, MacPherson struts; TA, transverse arms; TCA, torsion crank axle.



Hoods down, both are good lookers. Escort engine, top, is punchy and free-revving but far too harsh when extended. Stylish sculptured wheels are tricky to keep clean. Golf retains familiar dashboard layout and 1.8 injected engine is still a real gem in use



COSTS

FORD ●●●●

VOLKSWAGEN ●●●●

Neither of these two will be particularly cheap to run, yet in the economy stakes the Escort emerges as the victor, with a clear-cut mpg advantage over the Golf. Both can manage 30mpg or more when driven gently – and that's to their credit.

The 1.6i's test range of 25.2-33.7mpg is pretty good for a 112mph sporting car; but it doesn't quite match the figures of the hatchback XR3i which recently managed 29.4-34.9mpg in our hands.

On this showing, the fuel efficient 1.6i betters the Golf Cabrio in the Government's official tests as well, and thanks to the bigger, 10.5 gallon tank, its range will be greater, too.

The cost of servicing and spare parts also favours the Escort. Not only are the parts generally cheaper to buy than VW's, they take less time to fit. On the dealer front, the advantage still goes the 1.6i's way; at the test count, there were 380 VW agents to Ford's 1240. New car warranties, which take in anti rust and paint protection clauses, are the Golf's sole advantage over the Ford in this