

BILBO'S CELEX



RISING CHALLENGE



Words and pictures by Dave Hurrell

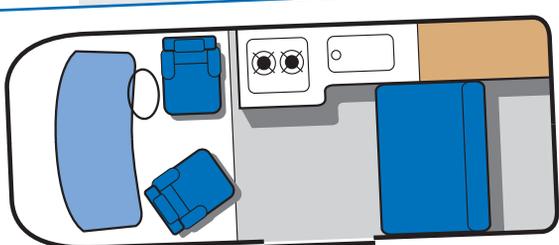
Value-for-money and clever ideas come together in a pair of compact new-look campers, perfect for everyday use



The credit crunch and spiralling fuel costs could be two of the reasons why panel van conversions are becoming increasingly popular, as folks look for a motorcaravan that's cheaper to run and far more cost effective (also being suitable for use as a sole or everyday vehicle). Anyone who's looked at the range of panel van-based motorcaravans on offer will know that plenty break the £40k

barrier and then some. Partly because of that, this month's challenge introduces rising roof campers that are perfect as everyday vehicles and also offer super value.

Bilbo's is one of the leading lights in the world of rising roof motorcaravans. Established in 1977, the Surrey-based firm specialises in Volkswagen T5-based models and is both Volkswagen and National Caravan Council approved. Building on these firm foundations, Bilbo's has introduced entry-



LAYOUT PLAN

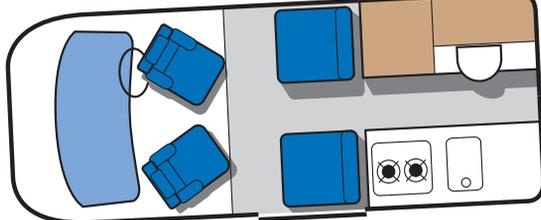
OVERALL LENGTH: 4.89m (16ft 0.5in)
OVERALL WIDTH: 1.90m (6ft 3in)



1 VW T5 cab is one of the best
2 Cab is car-like, but feels more heavy duty on the road

1

DEVON NEW SUNRISE



LAYOUT PLAN

- OVERALL LENGTH: 4.71m (15ft 5.5in)
- OVERALL WIDTH: 1.80m (5ft 11in)

level versions of three of its models dubbed Special. The Celex is one of these - offering the classic 'Volkswagen layout' of rear bench seat/bed and furniture all down one side.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the country,

County Durham-based Devon Conversions has always majored on producing a diverse range of value-for-money 'vans. Converting on a varied selection of base vehicles, including Renault, Volkswagen and Iveco, Devon is unusual as it also makes motorcaravans based on the Toyota Hiace compact panel van. The New Sunrise is a cleverly re-vamped version of the original. Based on the recently facelifted

Toyota, it offers a front lounge, rear kitchen design that's chalk to the Celex's cheese.

Both base vehicles have a reputation for superb build quality and reliability and are small enough to be a good alternative to a car - each offers a total of four belted seats and is easily able to slot into that all-important supermarket car park space.

The main difference - and one reason to buy or not to buy - lies in the sleeping arrangements as the Celex provides a double bed, the Sunrise two singles.

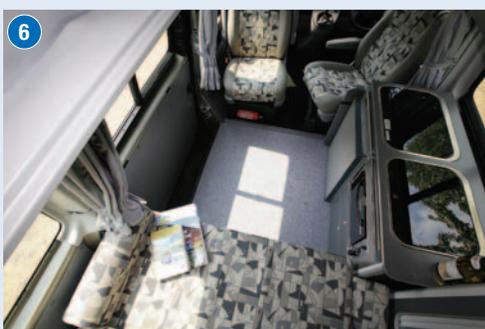
MOTIVE POWER

Both 'vans sport modern engines that conform to the latest emissions regulations, the Celex's 102bhp (84bhp is standard) 1.9-litre turbo-diesel unit pitched against the Sunrise's 95bhp D-4D oil burner. One crucial difference is the fact that - unusually - the Sunrise is rear-wheel drive - something that could well be useful when trying to leave a 'squidgy' pitch.

The Celex's front-wheel drive system is, of course tried and tested and both 'vans come equipped with a five-speed gearbox. Walk around the 'vans, operate the doors and you get the impression that the Sunrise is 'lighter' and more compact. Doors have a less weighty feel to them and this 'van is indeed shorter and narrower than its rival.

It's more of a climb into the Celex's cab and once there the impression is one of more 'truck-like' proportions. Climb aboard the Sunrise and you discover that the steering wheel is at a more car-like angle and the cab lower and smaller - your right shoulder closer to the cab door. In spite of being recently





facelifted, the Sunrise's Toyota cab still has its gearlever firmly attached to the floor. In the Celex, VW's dash-mounted lever frees up floor space. Cab seats, too, are very different. The Sunrise features replacement lay-flat items that are essential to create the beds; they're comfy enough, but far less supportive than the Celex's VW originals. Twin airbags are, thankfully, included in both (the prototype Sunrise had driver airbag only) and radio/CD players provide decent sounds.

Overall, both cabs are very pleasant places to be: the Celex's however, has the edge on quality, feeling solid and sporting twin door bins on both sides of the cab, plus a useful locking glovebox. The Sunrise hits back with electric windows and mirrors a standard fitment, in the Celex Special, they'll cost you an extra £450

ROAD MANNERS

The Sunrise may feel lighter and less truck-like at rest, but once on the road roles are reversed. Brakes are much of a muchness - both light-pedalled and powerful - however, the Sunrise has heavier steering and clutch and a gearchange that's very precise, but 'substantial.' The Celex exhibits all the qualities that makes the VW T5 one of the best motorcaravan base vehicles around - feeling solid, but more akin to a VW car than a builder's van.

Engine-wise, both 'vans performed with aplomb. The Sunrise lacked 'shove-in-the-back' acceleration, but reached licence-threatening speeds remarkably quickly, cruising at the legal limit with ease. In the rear, the conversion remained completely quiet and the whole 'van's structure felt very rigid. The only thing to break the silence was a whistle from the rising roof area when driving with the window open. No matter, fourteen-hundred quid'll get you air-conditioning (and reversing sensors) and you can then leave the window firmly shut.

As a VW T5 owner (my own 'van is a VW California), I had to be careful not to make comparisons with my own (five-cylinder, 130bhp, six-speed) 'van, as it's smooth, powerful motor is one of the best to be had anywhere. The Celex Special is fitted with the smaller four-cylinder engine (84bhp as standard) and five-speed gearbox, but even so, performed with verve. Slightly harsh in character, this motor too lacked a 'shove-in-the-back' talent when the loud pedal was operated, but again, cruised at legal limits with its head held high.

Both these motorcaravans are very easy and comfortable to drive and should make

I LIKED

- Superb VW base vehicle
- Lounge bench seat
- Gas-free fridge
- PVC-sided rising roof
- Drawer-based storage
- Easy-make double bed
- Big storage

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Better lighting
- Spark ignition for the hob

I DISLIKED

- Lack of blinds and flyscreens

3 'Classic VW' camper layout includes swivelling cab seats

4 Rear bench offers two three-point belts

5 Mealtimes see two tables in action

6 Cab seats and bench provide spacious lounging for four

I LIKED

- Compact, tough base vehicle
- Easy-turn cab seats
- Dining in cosy side dinette
- Separate 'room' layout
- Comfy beds
- Clever toilet/washroom solution

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Cab air-conditioning (option)
- Waste water tank

I DISLIKED

- Lack of blinds/flyscreens

great 'cars' for those folks wanting a 'van to use every day.

LOUNGE AND DINE

Once pitched, the first job is to raise the roof. Both function in much the same way; releasing hold-down straps from buckles and a sharp push, sees both roofs rise skywards to provide good standing headroom the length of living areas, thanks to the fact that they're both side-hinged. The Celex has the edge here, as its roof is fitted with strong PVC sides and flexible widows that let in lots of light. The Sunrise's canvas-sided top has no windows and so the interior is darker.

Next job is to swivel cab seats and this is more easily achieved in the Sunrise. In the Celex, cab doors need to be opened to allow the seats to easily turn and - thanks to the proximity of the kitchen unit - the driver's seat will only turn around 90 degrees. Four-person lounging is therefore better in the Sunrise as each gets a separate seat facing front or rear. The Celex scores with its bench seat offering more sprawling room for the lucky one of the two people who'll be this 'van's residents.

Meals are consumed using different dining solutions - the Sunrise is the more conventional using a single-leg table. This is stored at the rear end of the kitchen unit with its leg lurking in the wardrobe across the aisle. Up front, two sockets on the floor allow the table to stand in the centre and serve all four seats or to one side, creating a cosy offside dinette for two. The Celex uses two tables to create adequate dining space. The main table (stored twixt driver's seat and kitchen unit) is rail-mounted onto the kitchen unit providing space for two eat side-by-side on the bench seat. The second dining surface takes the form of a dog-leg-mounted table that serves the swivelled passenger seat. These dining solutions work fine, but the cook should expect to work with their partner sitting - knife and fork raised in anticipation - in the cab seat waiting to be fed! This table also has no dedicated stowage space, so when other activities are taking place, shoving it in the cab is the best solution to getting it out of the way. The Sunrise is my favourite here, as this 'van's simple approach to dining can create a nice little dinette for two while still leaving a free route through the interior.

COOK'S QUARTERS

Although it's a preference for a double or single beds that'll ultimately be the deciding factor when choosing one of these two 'vans, that choice will get you radically different kitchens too. With its 'classic' VW camper layout, the Celex places the kitchen in the middle and

DEVON NEW SUNRISE



7 Sunrise features a separate rear kitchen

8 Twin single rear seats offer three-point seatbelts

9 Single-leg table helps make a cosy side dinette

10 Four single seats make up the lounge

On Test Bilbo's Celex & Devon New Sunrise

integrated with the main living area. The Sunrise locates its kitchen aft, giving it 'separate room' status. Although you can stand and use the Celex kitchen, it's worth remembering that it's also possible to function effectively in this galley while sitting. In the Sunrise it's better to stand, so this 'van works best with the roof raised in all situations. In the Celex, it's quite easy to cook sitting with the roof lowered - in bad (cold) weather, for instance.

And so to equipment, where both 'vans offer a very similar set-up. Two-burner hobs feature, but only the Sunrise is equipped with pushbutton ignition, in the Celex you'll need matches. Grills are present and correct too, an integral-with-the-hob unit in the Sunrise, separate Smev oven-style Mini grill in the Celex.

That's all the heat you get in these kitchens and this extends to the drainerless sinks, where folding taps offer cold water only: neither 'van is fitted with a water heater. In galleys this small, work surface is at a premium and each offers a different solution to the problem of having somewhere to chop the onions and cut a slice. The Celex uses the tried and tested method of sink and hob with hinged glass lids, backed up with a hardwood cutting board that lives slotted into the sink. It's also worth remembering that as the Celex's table attaches directly to a rail on the kitchen unit, it's ideally placed to provide the cook with a big working surface. The Sunrise actually offers a small amount of autonomous surface to the left of the sink, while the hob sports a Devon-made hinged worktop cover for the hob. Lastly, another small section slots in atop the sink.

Fridges are almost the same, both made by Waeco and both 12V powered compressor type, they come from different ranges, but have the same 65-litre capacity. Thankfully both 'vans are fitted with the type of - beefy - leisure batteries needed to power these coolers when away from mains hook-up.



11



12

11 No washroom, but a portable toilet can live under the rear seat

12 The galley features useful drawer-based storage

HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

BILBO'S CELEX

PRICE

- **From:** £30,600 OTR.
- **As tested:** £38,735 OTR

BASICS (*manufacturer's figures)

- **Berths:** 2
- **Three-point belted seats:** 4 (including driver)
- **Warranty:** Base vehicle 3 years, conversion 2 years
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant:** Yes
- **Length:** 4.89m (16ft 0.5in)*
- **Width:** 1.90m (6ft 3in)*
- **Height:** 1.99m (6ft 6.5in)*
- **Wheelbase:** 3.00m (9ft 10in)*
- **Rear overhang:** 996mm (3ft 3in)
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 3000kg*
- **Payload:** 830kg (after the vehicle in working order)

THE VEHICLE

- **Chassis:** Volkswagen T5 short wheelbase window van
- **Engine:** 1.9-litre turbo-diesel producing 102bhp
- **Transmission:** Five-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Brakes:** Servo-assisted discs with ABS all round
- **Suspension:** Independent with coil springs all round
- **Features:** Remote central locking, driver and passenger airbags, electrically-operated/folding mirrors, twin door bins, air-conditioning, reversing sensors, locking glove box, radio/CD player

INSIDE

- **Layout:** Swivelling cab seats ahead of offside kitchen and wardrobe, forward-facing bench seat, rear 'boot'
- **Insulation:** Thinsulate all round
- **Interior height:** Roof down: 1.47m (4ft 10in); roof up: 2.15m (7ft 0.5in)

KITCHEN

- **Sink:** Smev square stainless steel unit with hinged glass lid, folding chrome tap, hardwood cutting board

- **Cooker:** Smev two-burner hob with hinged glass lid, no ignition. Smev Mini Grill with ignition and internal illumination
- **Fridge:** Waeco Coolmatic 065 12V compressor type. Capacity 65 litres

WASHROOM

- **Toilet:** Thetford Porta Potti 335 portable in dedicated locker
- **Basin:** None fitted
- **Shower:** None fitted

BED

Lounge double

- **Length:** 1.90m (6ft 3in)
- **Width:** 1.32m (4ft 4in)

EQUIPMENT

- **Fresh water:** Inboard 36 litres (8 gallons)
- **Waste water:** Underslung. 35 litres (7.7 gallons)
- **Water heater:** None fitted
- **Space heater:** None fitted
- **Leisure battery:** 135 amp hr
- **Gas:** Capacity one 4.5kg or one 907 Camping Gaz 2.72kg cylinder
- **Lighting:** Twin-tube fluorescents to kitchen and lounge, adjustable 'stalk' lamps either side of cab and at far rear
- **Sockets:** 230V: One (in kitchen), 12V: One (in kitchen)

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- **Base:** Upgrade from Special window van specification including 102bhp engine (£6050) Air-conditioning (£650), reversing sensors (£205), mud flaps (£100), metallic paint (£880)
 - **Conversion:** Bike rack (£180), Porta Potti toilet (£70)
- Other options
- **Base:** Alloy wheels (£490), cruise control (£180), trip computer (£120), tow bar (£390), alarm (£400)
 - **Conversion:** Blown-air space heating (£895), rear speakers (£90), safe (£90), extra socket (£125), roof bed (£350), wind-out awning (£400), leather upholstery (£1395)

E&OE



HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

DEVON NEW SUNRISE

PRICE

- From: £27,931 OTR
- As tested: £27,931 OTR

BASICS (*manufacturer's figures)

- Berths: 2
- Three-point belted seats: 4 (including driver)
- Warranty: Base vehicle and conversion 3 years
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No
- Length: 4.71m (15ft 5.5in)*
- Width: 1.80m (5ft 11in)*
- Height: 2.10m (6ft 10.5in)*
- Wheelbase: 2.98m (9ft 9.5in)*
- Rear overhang: 870mm (2ft 10in)
- Maximum authorised weight: 2800kg*
- Payload: 670kg* (after the vehicle in working order, driver (75kg) and fuel)

THE VEHICLE

- Chassis: Toyota Hiace short wheelbase window van
- Engine: 2.5-litre common-rail turbo-diesel producing 95bhp
- Transmission: Five-speed manual gearbox, rear-wheel drive
- Brakes: Servo-assisted discs front, drums rear, with ABS
- Suspension: Front: Independent with torsion bar Rear: Independent with coil springs
- Features: Remote central locking, electrically-operated windows and mirrors, Driver's airbag (passenger's airbag will also be standard-fit), single radio/CD player, tilt-adjustable steering column, digital clock, central storage compartment, driver's door bin, overcab shelf

INSIDE

- Layout: Swivelling cab seats ahead of two single forward-facing seats, offside fridge, wardrobe, cassette toilet, nearside kitchen unit
- Insulation: Thinsulate all round
- Interior height: Roof down: 1.45m (4ft 9in); roof up: 2.26m (7ft 5in)

KITCHEN

- Sink: Square stainless steel unit with folding tap and drop-on worktop cover
- Cooker: Smev two-burner hob/grill with electronic ignition and hinged worktop cover
- Fridge: Waeco Coolmatic CR65 12V compressor type. Capacity 65 litres

WASHROOM

- Toilet: Thetford C-400 electric-flush, with wheeled cassette, built-in flush water tank
- Basin: None fitted
- Shower: None fitted

BEDS

- Lounge singles
- Length: 1.90m (6ft 3in)
- Width: 610mm (2ft 0in)

EQUIPMENT

- Fresh water: Underslung 29.5 litres (6.5 gallons)
- Waste water: None fitted
- Water heater: None fitted
- Space heater: None fitted
- Leisure battery: 110 amp hr
- Gas: Capacity one 7kg cylinder, one 2.72kg 907 Camping Gaz cylinder
- Lighting: Two Twin-tube fluorescents to rising roof, halogen reading light to offside of lounge
- Sockets: 230V: 2 (lounge and kitchen), 12V:1 (lounge)

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

- Fitted to test vehicle
- Base: None fitted
- Conversion: None fitted
- Other options
- Base: Cab air-conditioning and reversing sensors (£1410)
- Conversion: None

E&OE

Celex's galley storage is centred around two domestic-sized drawers that are great to use. Two diddy lockers above are only any good for bits and bobs, but just aft there's a nicely-made tambour-doored cupboard perfect for foodstuffs and the like.

The Sunrise features a more eclectic range of lockers and cupboards, with one large and two small cupboards and a cutlery drawer. Above the fridge, a large locker with open-topped 'box' above finishes thing off in a slightly 'quaint' style. I couldn't, at first think of the kind of things I'd put in the 'box,' as it's not a very secure place for anything. However, once the roof is lowered, its contents are kept in place by the now-lowered ceiling. Think kitchen roll, tea towels in here, maybe even your towels and wash kit

BATHING SPACE

Rising roof campers with washrooms are as rare as duck's dentures, but one of our protagonists almost breaks the mould.

The Celex is a no-nonsense, classic VW camper and so its hot water ablation solution is limited to the kettle and sink. There's no loo either, but 70 quid'll net you the smallest Porta Potti toilet: one of the lockers under the bench seat is just the right size to let it lurk within.

The Sunrise will also see you using sink and kettle for ablutions, but that's where the similarity ends. Under an upholstered cover at the rear offside is a full-blown cassette toilet. Even better, this is the upmarket bench type model, complete with easy-to-use wheeled cassette and built-in flush water tank. The *pièce de résistance* of this set-up is the fact that the kitchen area can be fully enclosed for privacy crucially, negating the need to draw all the 'van's curtains to use the loo. Sliding doors at the rear of the lounge close, while privacy at high-level is gained thanks to a carpet-covered panel that hinges down from the ceiling. This isn't some big bucks whizzo design solution



13 The rear features a cassette loo, while sliding doors and drop-down screen make it into a separate room

14 Kitchen enjoys separate room status

On Test Bilbo's Celex & Devon New Sunrise



BILBO'S CELEX

from a major manufacturer, but a common-sense down-to-earth idea that works: the kind of thing that Devon's supremo, Peter Gowland, comes up with on a regular basis.

BED TIME

The jargon will have it that the beds are the USP with these two 'vans, although you could make a strong case that the Sunrise's clever washroom solution is actually its unique selling point.

Even so, double bed lovers will probably hate the Sunrise beds, while folks interested in the 'singles scene' will rejoice in the easy-access toilet - especially at three in the morning!

The Celex's bed could well be the reason why folks chose this 'van over other VW campers. Operate a catch under the squab cushion and the backrest hinges forward across and down, coming to rest in front of the squab. The rear 'parcel shelf' completes what is a comfy and flat bed. Cleverly, Bilbo's has slimmed down the furniture at the rear, increasing the width of the bed to give the essential shoulder room that's important when two are sleeping here.

In the Sunrise, both single beds are identical and made in the same way. A cab seat is swivelled and slid as far forward as it will go. Next, remove the headrest and flatten the seatback to make the foot of the bed. The base of the forward-facing seat behind slides out to meet the flat cab seat and its backrest slots in to complete the bed. Quicker to do than it takes to tell, the resultant beds are of good length (6ft 3in), but only two feet wide. It goes with the territory that I'm a dyed-in-the-wool motorcaravanning cynic, so I didn't have high hopes for a narrow bed made from two flattened seats. How wrong could I be? The Sunrise beds are, in fact, remarkably comfy - I, for one, would be very happy to slumber aboard either.

STORE ROOM

Travelling light will be the Modus operandi for Sunrise owners as storage under both rear seats swallows the bedding, but not much else. In the rear, a shallow, but deep wardrobe lives behind the toilet, its lower regions spacious enough for shoes and kit such as hook-up lead, enclosed in clean containers. A locker below the fridge houses the leisure battery and here you may find a home for tools and the like. The rest of the Sunrise's storage space is in the previously mentioned cupboards and lockers in the kitchen area, so care and imagination will be needed if going away for more than a weekend. As an everyday car, the Sunrise has plenty of room for four people, while its interior layout allows easy transport of long items. You may be pleased or dismayed to discover that flat-pack furniture and timber should slide in a treat through the tailgate.

Storage capacity is yet another reason that makes the 'classic' VW layout the most popular camper type of all time. Outside the kitchen, Celex has two big cupboards under the bench seat (one houses the optional toilet), while at the rear, there's a small wardrobe with a slightly annoying sloping hanging rail. There's another locker above at the rear, but the best bit is the 'boot' area behind the bench seat. Above, on the 'parcel shelf' is the best place for sleeping bags/duvet, pillows and extra clothes in a squashy bag. Below this is a big space for all manner of gear - folding bikes or outdoor chairs and table can be securely stashed out of sight. Just in case you thought



15 Celex bed is easy to make and comfy too

16 Loads of storage space in the rear

17 A shallow locker is located above the rear seat

18 Latest digital controls are easy to use



a trip to Ikea was impossible with the Celex, you'll be pleased/dismayed to discover that a panel in the bench seat's base moves aside to allow long items to be slid through.

Payloads in both 'vans are generous enough to make many a coachbuilt owner envious and, it seemed to me, ideal for a Dover-Calais booze cruise!

LIFE SUPPORT

No space heating or hot water is fitted in either 'van, although £895 will see your Celex fitted with a diesel-fired blown-air space heater. Both 'vans are fitted with high quality digital control panels that are easy to use. My biggest beef with either of these campers is the lack of blinds or flyscreens. Both are fitted with single-glazed glass windows, and curtains which tend to get in the way when drawn. This is especially true in the kitchens, where care will be needed to keep them away from splashes and heat.

Water is taken care of by a desirable inboard tank in the Celex, a less good, underslung unit in the Sunrise. The Celex's underslung waste tank has no competition; the Sunrise has none fitted. The Sunrise wins the gas competition with room for both a 7kg and Campingaz 907 cylinder, that should last for ages, considering they only have to supply the cooker. The Celex's single 4.5kg (or 907) cylinder is adequate for the same reason.

Finally, lighting is less than exciting in either contender, with a couple of fluorescents doing duty. Celex scores with three 'stalk' reading lamps, the Sunrise offers just one lonely reading lamp in the lounge.

CONCLUSION

Two value-for-money campers: perfect as everyday or sole vehicles, offering comfortable piloting, easy parking and four three-point seatbelts. Top quality base vehicles should be reliable and last for many years.

Selling points start with the beds, as the Celex offers the chance to cosy up, the Sunrise provides easy-access singles, suitable for not just couples, but lone motorcaravanners and those who like to camp with friends or other family members.

The Sunrise's separate kitchen and fixed toilet are superb features, paid for by reduced storage space. Celex scores with lots of storage space in a small vehicle and the fact that living aboard with the roof down is easier.

One thing's for certain, both are capable motorcaravans, offering very good value for money. I'd even go as far as to say that they could shrink your carbon footprint. ■

DEVON NEW SUNRISE



19



20



21



22

19 Single beds are narrow but comfy. I'd prefer to see blinds instead of curtains

20 Top-notch toilet includes a back-friendly wheeled cassette

21 Storage under the seats should take your bedding

22 Table stows neatly at the aft end of the galley

VEHICLES LOANED FOR

EVALUATION BY:

Devon New Sunrise
Devon Conversions Ltd,
 Mainsforth Road, Ferryhill,
 County Durham DL17 9DE
 (tel: 01740 655700;
 web site: www.devonconversions.com)

Bilbo's Celex
Bilbo's, Eastbourne Road,
 South Godstone, Surrey RH9 8JQ
 (tel: 01342 892499;
 web site: www.bilbos.com)

