

PRODUCT TEST

JAMES STANBURY explores cheaper and more portable alternatives to four- and two-post lifts. This month we look at SIX offerings.

BIG RAMPS

PART ONE

WHAT'S IMPORTANT?

HANDLING & STORAGE: Anything that's going to lift a car high is going to be pretty big. But few of us have huge amounts of garage space to dedicate to a new lifting device. Consequently we look favourably on systems that can be stored easily – due to perhaps low weight, small size, or very modular construction. It's important, though, that the system can be re-assembled easily, otherwise you simply won't use it. Similarly, it should be easy, once assembled, to get your car on it and lifted. Ideally both assembling and using shouldn't need the assistance of an extra person.

VERSATILITY: A ramp or lift should be as compatible with as many different cars as possible. Two particularly important factors are the systems' max weight capacities and – if ramp based – their gradient or maximum drive-on height. Bear in mind that even modest cars are now fitted with deep spoilers than can make ramp use tricky.

HEIGHT: You might think that the higher these systems lift, the better. But that's not necessarily true. None lift to a height that you can comfortably walk under, so is there really much advantage to the car being a metre up in the air rather than half a metre? In fact some would argue that half a metre is better as it allows comfortable creeper usage, and you can easily get above and below the car. We feel that having a range of heights is more important than all out maximum lift. It's also best if a system lifts the entire car, rather than having to resort to stands and jacking for one end.

SUITABILITY: We consider how suitable each system is for a selection of common jobs. Changing an exhaust is one – which requires almost all of the length of the underside to be free, and enough clearance to thread the pipes around axles and obstructions. Test job number two is brake/suspension work. This is usually carried out from outside the car, preferably with the wheel at stool height. Obviously the wheel must be removable too. Our final test task is the classic car favourite of sill welding. To do this easily, it must be possible to access the sills from both sides, and there should be enough clearance to use power tools such as welders and grinders.

CJ Hydraulic Drive On Ramps

PRICE: £399.00 CONTACT: 01706 367649

MAX LOAD: 2 Tons per pair

TRACK AND WIDTH LIMITS: None

WHEELBASE LIMITS: None

MAX LIFT HEIGHT: 40cm to bottom of tyre

PERFORMANCE: 9/14

IS IT WORTH THE MONEY? 5/6

OVERALL SCORE: 14/20

**BEST
CAR
MECHANICS
BUY**



Position the ramps by the tyres of choice (fronts, rears, or both on one side).



Drive or push the car up them, and pump the ramps to full height.



When the ram is fully extended...



Flip down safety catch, which prevents ram retracting should the hydraulics fail.



Quick release connectors make it possible to remove the hoses and pump, if required.

PROS: Brilliant whether used as ramps, or as a very fast way of getting a car raised enough to be lowered onto high stands. When lowered, the ramps' 14cm max height makes pushing a car onto them possible, and most low slung cars will manage the shallow 16 degree slope. Used with stands, these products give outstanding underbody access with minimal effort. Handling and storage are amongst the easiest here too.

CONS: Hmmmm, not many! Okay, to make the best of these you'll need to buy a set of high axle stands as well. Whether that's for raising the whole car, or supporting one corner when removing a ramp – such as during brake or suspension jobs. Also, although the ramps are fully adjustable in height, the safety catch only operates at the maximum setting.

It's a fair bet that if you won the lottery, and were kitting out your dream workshop, then a four-post lift would be high up your wish list. But, back in the real world, this is all fantasy – isn't it? Well, second-hand two- and four-post lifts are surprisingly reasonable from plant and machinery dealers and even eBay. But installing one at home is a whole different matter. Most require a substantial concrete base, a 3-phase supply, and – often overlooked – a very high garage. Think about it. If the lift raises your car's underside above your head – say 6ft 5in – then you've got the height of the car on top of that to also consider.

Fortunately there are a whole plethora of ramps and lift systems that are designed with the small trader, or keen amateur, firmly in mind. They all work in different ways, but each one has considerable advantages over using a trolley jack and axle stands.

In fact, the systems are so different; the hardest part about this test is finding a criteria that's appropriate to all of them. Okay, we're not exactly comparing apples with apples, but we think it's right to pit these products against one another. First, every product is designed to make it easier to access a car's underside. Second, it's almost certain that you'd only ever buy one of them. Ultimately

THE TESTS

HANDLING & STORAGE: Our first point only goes to systems that we feel could easily be stored in a typical single garage – complete with car. Another point is awarded to systems that can be set up in less than five minutes. And the final point, in this section, only goes to products that take less than five minutes to raise the car to working height.

VERSATILITY: Only systems capable of lifting up to 2 Tons get this next point. And we consider each ramp's minimum height, and maximum gradient, to see how suitable they are for the vast majority of cars. Only the most versatile get another point here.

HEIGHT: Up to two points go to products that have more than one height setting. For a full house there must be more than five height settings, and the product should be safe to use, without additional support, at any of them. Another point is available for products that raise all the car rather than just one end.

SUITABILITY: Up to six points are for grabs – two for each task – for each product's suitability to exhaust replacement, brake/suspension work.



We realise the room needed to store the system is a big consideration for many people. With the two ramp sections on roof bars, the rest of this Levo Artis system stashes away in a Mondeo boot.



Cars may be getting higher and higher off the ground, but big bumpers and spoilers make ramp usage increasingly difficult. We suspect few cars will struggle with the shallow slopes on our 'Best Buy' though.

our scoring and awards highlight the best all-rounders.

Another problem is the sheer number of systems that have hit the market recently. We could try and cram all the systems into the

four pages we have here, but we don't feel we can do that without compromising the amount of information available. So, we've decided to split the test between this and next month's issue – six now, five next time!



CJ Mobile Axle Stands

PRICE: £132.25 each

CONTACT:
01706 367649

MAX LOAD:
1 Ton per cradle

TRACK AND
WIDTH LIMITS:

Supports can be to 1.44m apart

WHEELBASE LIMITS: None

MAX LIFT HEIGHT: 53cm to chassis

PERFORMANCE: 8/14

IS IT WORTH THE MONEY? 6/6

OVERALL SCORE: 14/20

PROS: Usable on all cars, whether they should be supported by the sills or chassis sections. And they make even axle-less "projects" mobile. Used as a pair, the stands give excellent access to wheels, brakes, sills, and suspension, whilst keeping access to the middle of the underside reasonably good too. Finally, they're lightweight and knock down very small for storage.

CONS: The cradles' cross bars inhibit easy creeper use under the car. And getting the car onto them is a slow business. Even with a good jack, the process has to be done in 2-3 stages for each stand. Putting the entire weight of the car through 8 castors can lead to sinkage unless the ground is slabbed, concrete, or block paving. Tarmac and gravel are best avoided.



These stands are fully mobile, and both the supports' height and distance apart are adjustable.



For lightweight cars – such as kits, or small sports cars – taller support tubes are available.



Thanks to the castors, even axle-less projects can be kept mobile. Brakes are fitted too though.



Getting the car onto stands can be a slow business unless you have a high lifting jack...



...or an alternative lifting device – such as our Best Buy Ramps or CJ or Strongman's tilting lift.

RECOMMENDED ✓

Restoration Ramps Ez Up Car Ramps

PRICE: £250.00

CONTACT: 0870 011 3118

MAX LOAD: 2 Tons

TRACK AND WIDTH LIMITS:

Tyres must be 275mm wide or less

WHEELBASE LIMITS: None

MAX LIFT HEIGHT: 33cm to bottom of tyre

PERFORMANCE: 7/14

IS IT WORTH THE MONEY? 6/6

OVERALL SCORE: 13/20

PROS: Incredible value for money, fast and easy to assemble, and even easier to drive up. The adjustable gradient makes the system usable with even the most stupidly low cars and "specials". Being able to remove the ramp sections gives excellent entry and exit to the centre of the underbody. Used with stands at the other end of the car, all areas of the underbody are very easily accessed.

CONS: Although the system has two heights – depending whether you use the tubular legs or not – unlike our Best Buy ramps the height cannot be adjusted when the car's on them. So these aren't to be used as a fast way of getting a car on high stands for brake/suspension work. And, at this price level, the product comes uncoated. If you want powder coating, the cost rises to £285 – though that's still something of a bargain.



Start off by upturning the wheel support sections, fitting the tubular legs, and clamping them.



Bolt the first ramp section to each wheel stand. If necessary, adjust the screwed legs to...



...give the right gradient. Then attach the final ramp sections. Adjust the ramps the right...



...distance apart for your car's track, and drive up them.



For added access to the sill area, the ramp sections can be removed once the car's raised.

CJ Tilting Lift

PRICE: £431.25

CONTACT: 01706 367649

MAX LOAD: 1.5 Tons

TRACK AND WIDTH LIMITS:

Sills/supports must be between 1.19 and 1.54 metres apart

WHEELBASE LIMITS: None

MAX LIFT HEIGHT: 58.5cm to chassis

PERFORMANCE: 8/14

IS IT WORTH THE MONEY? 5/6

OVERALL SCORE: 13/20

PROS: With the right power tool driving it, the tilter makes getting a car high in the air a very fast and easy business. Its central position also makes it perfect for engine, wheels, brakes, and suspension tasks. To use stands raise the tilter but leave it unlocked, manually push down the light end to pivot the heavy end up, position the stands, and allow the heavy end to drop onto them. Position the "light end" stands and lower the lift down until the car's on them too.

CONS: These tilters need a lot of torque, so forget using the hand crank or anything but the most powerful drill. And, very obviously, they only jack through the sills – so use them on classics at your own risk! When fully flattened, the product's 145 x 128cm size could be a storage problem, unless you've got a large area of free wall to lean it against.



Thanks to its 4 wheels, the tilting lift is easy to slide under the car.



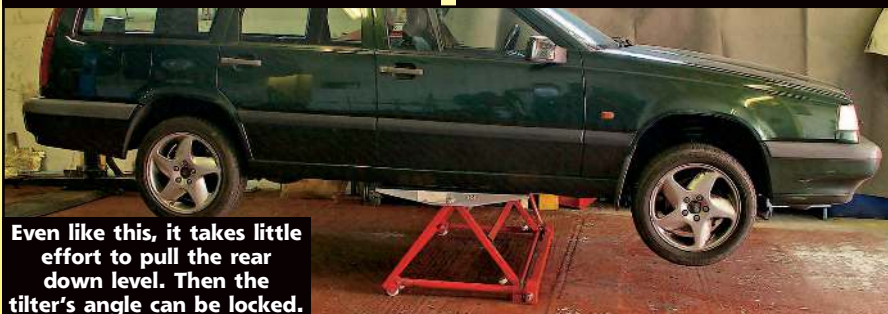
The mechanism is designed to be raised by a drill or impact wrench. The box here holds the tool...



...to prevent snatching. With practice you'll soon find your car's "balance point".



At the moment, the car's obviously nose heavy – giving dramatic rear end access!



Even like this, it takes little effort to pull the rear down level. Then the tilter's angle can be locked.

PRODUCT TEST – BIG RAMPS

Levo-Artis 2000Kg Drive On Support System

PRICE: £861.35

CONTACT: 01904 700270

MAX LOAD: 2 Tons

TRACK AND WIDTH LIMITS: None

WHEELBASE LIMITS: Up to 2.45m

MAX LIFT HEIGHT: 40cm to bottom of tyre

PERFORMANCE: 10/14

IS IT WORTH THE MONEY? 3/6

OVERALL SCORE: 13/20

PROS: Although it takes a few minutes to set the system up, getting your car onto it is incredibly quick and easy. Being able to jack, and use stands, on the ramps means every part of the underside is easily accessed too. The decision to use cleverly shaped aluminium, rather than substantial – and heavy – steel sections also makes this an easy system to store and handle. It will sit in your garage rafters quite happily.

CONS: All that aluminium and stainless steel bumps up the price considerably compared to systems that lift to a similar degree. And whilst the flat ramp tops allow any width of tyre to be used, and make it easy for you to stand on them too, the lack of a lip feels precarious when driving up. You could easily go over the edge unless you have a mate guiding you, or you frequently stop and check.



Set the two ramps/platforms a suitable distance apart to match your car's track.



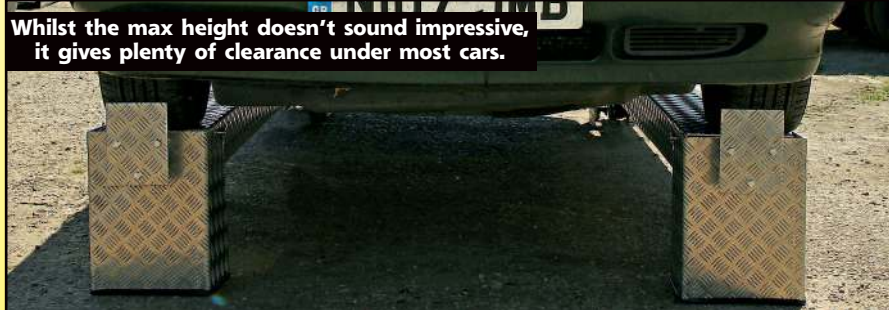
Then simply drive up, apply the handbrake, and – if necessary – remove the two sloping sections.



Jacks and stands can be also used to gain access to the sill area or remove wheels.



And optional "bridges" – costing around £100 – allow easy jacking/supporting of chassis sections.



Whilst the max height doesn't sound impressive, it gives plenty of clearance under most cars.

Levo-Artis 2000Kg Lift Support System

PRICE: £677.35

CONTACT: 01904 700270

MAX LOAD: 2 Tons

TRACK AND WIDTH LIMITS: None

WHEELBASE LIMITS: Up to 2.45m

MAX LIFT HEIGHT: 40cm to bottom of tyre

PERFORMANCE: 9/14

IS IT WORTH THE MONEY? 4/6

OVERALL SCORE: 13/20

PROS: Again, we love the overall underside access this system gives. Especially as jacks/stands can be used to raise the car further off the flat ramp sections. The optional centre bridge really enhances the system by allowing you to jack/support practically anywhere. The system's low weight and ease of storage is another bonus, as is the low gradient – which means even the most ground hugging cars will go up.

CONS: As with the Drive On system, the price and the lack of edge lips on the ramps are our two main concerns. And, with this system, please remember that you'll need two trolley jacks to lift the rear end. You may be lucky and find two you already own will fit in the towers' cut-outs and lift the right height. If not, Halfords' 2 Ton Jacks will do the job. But they aren't cheap. The jacking also doubles the time needed to raise the car.



Again, start laying the system out by measuring your car's track and setting the posts apart...



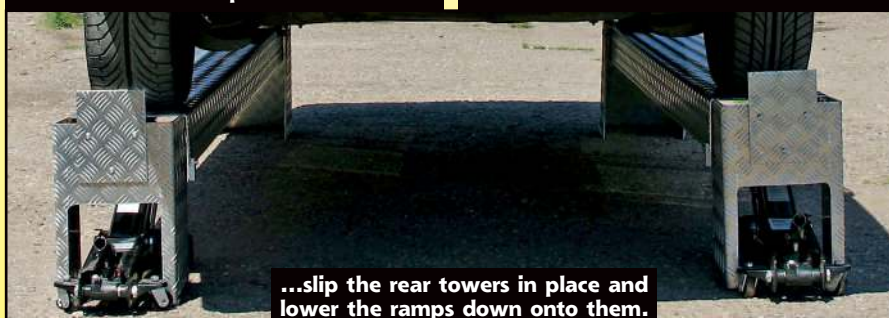
...the right distance. Then use the pin and R-clips to connect the ramps to the towers.



Drive on until you reach the end of the track, and simply remove the small rear ramps.



Use a jack under each rear ramp to evenly lift the ramps higher than the front and...



...slip the rear towers in place and lower the ramps down onto them.