GERRY & THE PACEMAKERS

Who better to conduct a track test of a pair of burly TVRs, separated by 20 years, than burly Gerry Marshall, one-time TVR racer of note? Pictures by John Colley

Many years ago, as a mere babe in arms, a certain Martin Lilley invited me to manage a car concern called the Barnet Motor Co, which he owned. He also happened to own a little car making company called TVR which he'd bought in one of its umpteen liquidation sales so that he could get his car, a Griffith, back. It had been extensively damaged by Martin at Brands, when a wheel fell off, and was in the Blackpool workshops being mended when the company went broke.

Naturally the TVR was raced. After its repairs, which involved filling the sunroof and prototype opening boot with 1in thick glass-fibre – it was a very *heavy* car by then – we developed it and improved it over the 1966-67 seasons. Most of the development seemed to go into convincing the brakes to stop the thing, and also persuading the rear wheels to stay attached, but other than that it was dead reliable, with a near-standard 4.7-litre Ford engine which, in heavy duty, solid lifter form, gave about 270bhp. I'm told that my driving style back then was regarded as fairly spectacular, but it was an extremely effective class winner in marque sports car and GT events, not to mention sprints and hillclimbs, including Tholt-y-Will on the Isle of Man where, in 1966, I came fifth overall against all those hillclimb specials. That Griffith (which later became a Tuscan via a change of badge) was very much my sort of car.

And now it's 20 years on and I find myself at Mallory Park behind the wheel of a TVR – or a couple of TVRs, actually – for the first time in all those years. It's time-warp time ...

But first a word about the cars. The pretty (well, *I*

Opposite page: TVRs old and new – Paul Weldon's blue Tuscan and TVR's own 420SEAC have few similarities. This page: "Both are very neutral in corners," claimed Mr Marshall. Here he is, demonstrating the fact, in the 420 (left) and the Tuscan (below). And we won't go into the methods used to fit Mr Marshall into the driving seats (below left)!

think it's pretty) blue one you see here belongs to Paul Weldon of Church Green Engineering fame: it's a rolling example of his company's (and his) abilities, and looks it. To call it merely immaculate is an understatement ...

It's a 1967 long wheelbase Tuscan, one of the few right-hand drive examples built, which makes it 4ins longer in the wheelbase than the Griffith I used to chuck about. It was originally supplied to a Mr W. Yates, who had an electrical business up in Cannock. He kept it until 1977 when it passed via Chris Smith of Westfield to a lady, Frances de Soissant. When she took it to her local garage for an MoT test it was found that the chassis was rusted to hell, so it went back to Liverpool for a new one to be fitted which caused a lot of aggro, not to mention cost.

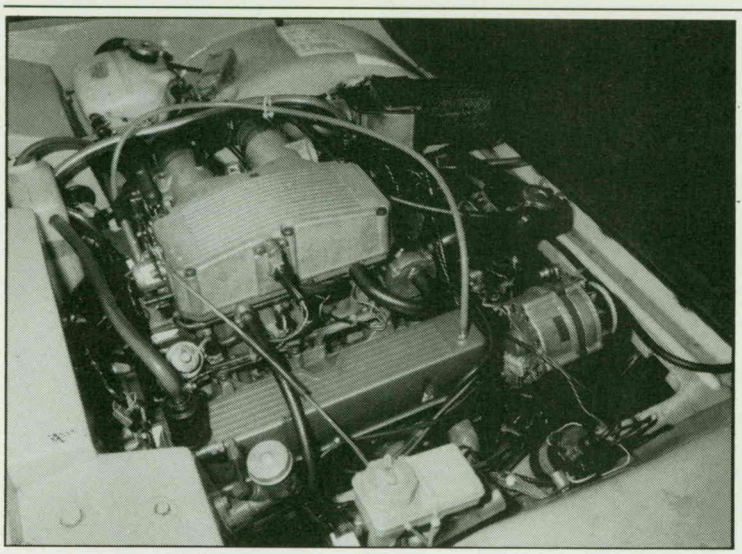
Paul was looking for a Tuscan because (a) they were a helluva lot cheaper to buy and run than a Cobra and (b) he could fit in it, which was more than he could in the SWB version. He happened to see this machine advertised in the pages of some rag called CLASSIC AND SPORTSCAR or something, took his mate David Barraclough along with him to have a look at it, they both decided it was far too dangerous, so of course Paul bought it. It was not in what you would call immaculate condition, so a complete strip-down and rebuild was the order of the day. It's very much a road-goer except for the racing Michelins, and weighs 1120kgs (22cwt) – a fair amount of weight has been put into it via roll-over bars and such like – so it's no skinny little thing. The engine's a 4.7 Hi-Po Mustang unit prepared by Mathwall: it has been blue-printed and has a decent manifold fitted, but cranks, rods and heads are standard so it's by no means wild. Paul says it gives about 300bhp, and I'll take his word for it. The diff is a 4.07:1 Salisbury unit, and the 'box is a Borg-Warner T10 Top-Loader.

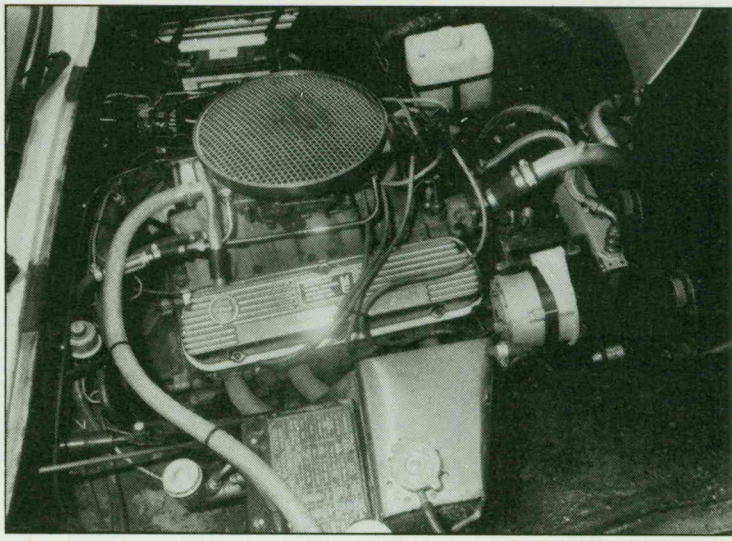
Paul started using it at the end of 1985, and has raced it constantly during 1986, during which he ran in 12 races (rarely out of the top three at that), won at Silverstone (with the lap record to go with it), Donington and Thruxton, finishing up the year as Class A winner in the Post-Historic Championship. He reckons it's great fun, and pretty quick on the road. I'm glad it was after I'd been bashing about in it that he told me of the time he was doing a genuine 158mph in it (the speedo showing 190mph or so!) when the windscreen popped out ... That's the sort of distraction you can do without in a race.

The difference between Paul's Tuscan and TVR's own 420 is that Paul's has to be road legal, and is, if you like, mildly tweaked for a racing car, whereas the 420 makes no pretensions: it'a a full-blooded racer. It's actually TVR's 1985 car rebuilt with added urge into a SEAC, the 'AC' standing for Aramid Compound (which means Kevlar to you and me, which TVR use for their production shells as well). The engine is a good old Rover V8, opened up with a bigger bore and a longer stroke, to give 4228cc. It was put together at NCK down in Coventry, and is also – oddly enough – giving about 300bhp.

TVR's Chris Schirle has put a lot of time and effort into the suspension geometry. When Chris joined TVR he received a Chairman's edict: kill the over-steer in the road cars and transform them into understeerers, which he has done by redesigning the geometry to the point where he reckons he now has a well-balanced car.

All the usual things have been done – brakes uprated, Konis all round, you know – and about the only thing which slightly embarrasses Chris is the weight, 1060kgs (21cwt). And, like Paul's car, this





one has had its fair share of success, such as 17 wins out of 22 starts in the hands of its regular driver Steve Cole, who was also Class Champion in the BARC North West Sports Saloon Challenge. This year they're after overall winner Steve Ellis's blood.

Paul's was the first car out on a dampish and very cold Mallory, and my initial impression was that there is a fair amount of pad knock-off and some steering twitch, while for some reason I expected rather more urge from 300bhp. Then it was the turn of the 420 and I managed to break the car's Mallory lap record by 1.7secs. At the end, the 420 was some 6secs or so faster than the Tuscan, though I was driving it harder because it was a factory machine.

Comparisons in detail, then. When it comes to power, if you were to put the two together at, say, Santa Pod in a straight line, there wouldn't be much in it. The Rover, giving the same output with 500cc less, and in racing trim, feels much cammier than the Ford, and of course that's the way it's set up: it's an out-and-out competition unit. Paul's engine, by the same token, has more low-down punch and, it must be said, is a beautifully responsive and smooth device, but just didn't feel as if it was giving 300bhp. But then 300bhp 20 years ago was quite something, so maybe I was just expecting too much.

And then there was the handling. Both cars have a relatively square wheelbase to track ratio, and people keep telling me that this makes cars twitchy, a fact which I don't accept. I reckon they're *more* controllable because when you're sideways there's less overhang. It says here ...

In fact, neither car was the brute everyone thinks they should be. Both turn in well, and both are very neutral in the corners, with enough power to be able to convert them to oversteerers at will. There may have been a touch more understeer in the 420 in the dry, which surprised me a little, and neither was vicious in any transition period. Both are very responsive, which reflects on the driver more than with unresponsive beasts – if you're trying hard in a quick-acting responsive car it will look more dramatic and TVRs are, and always have been, meant to be *driven*. Of course with more modern suspension settings and slightly wider rim widths the 420 is that little bit more quick, accurate and – that word again – responsive. One constant is that both cars still show considerable bump-steer, the Tuscan more so, but to a lesser extent than it used to be back in the good old, bad old days. That's one way you can tell a TVR: the other is that they both have tremendous traction out of corners – yet another TVR characteristic that goes back to the Mk2s and 2As.

I suppose where those 20 years of development really show, and where much of the 6secs difference comes in, is in the brakes. Paul's car has Herald/Vitesse uprights which aren't really up to it, poor things, flexing as they do, while the calipers are from a TR4, which were all right for an economy sports car but have to work very hard indeed with 300bhp of Tuscan. Also, disc/drum set-ups are never truly satisfactory on the track, since they give different degrees of fade, while the power-assisted system is just too powerful, with too much servo effect even on gentle application, taking out much of the feel. All in all, racing with the Tuscan is splendid but you have to respect the brakes at a circuit like Mallory or lose them completely. Unfortunately, there's not much Paul can do about it if the car is to remain strictly standard, which it must do. The brakes on the 420, on the other hand, are simply sensational – Chris muttered something about so they damn well ought to be, they've come in for a lot of attention!

I was also impressed by the Tuscan's steering, which is light considering its age, parentage and weight of engine. Paul has obviously done a lot of work on it, and it doesn't steer like a 20-year old competition car. In fact it steers a damn sight better than it was entitled to! The 420, of course, was exactly as I expected it to be, and as it *should* be. TVR could, maybe, try a slightly higher geared rack, but that would be minor fiddling.

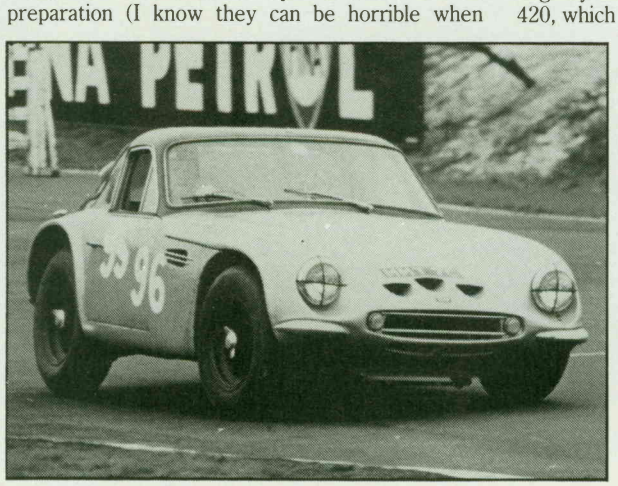
The Tuscan's steering was impressively light, and a damn sight better than it was entitled to be

Gearchanges on both are fine, the Rover's 'box suffering from a hard season's racing so synchro on first has long since disappeared and owing to the 'race tune' of the engine it was needed at the hairpin. The ratios are fine – again a close-ratio 'box might improve things fractionally – but is much lower geared compared to the Tuscan, basically because it's a five-speed device unlike the Tuscan's four speeds – I never actually used fifth, which created the impression of lower gearing. The Borg Warner, on the other hand, was exactly as expected, heavy but solid, and is another example of Paul's careful preparation (I know they can be horrible when worn). The Tuscan's clutch also is heavy, which is again to be expected, and has to be prodded right to the floor. A diaphragm clutch might make it lighter and quicker, but would only help really when you're scrabbling for fractions.

People kept asking me all day whether the cars were similar or not, and on the whole the answer was no. There were one or two things which were similar – steering kick-back, that sort of thing – dynamically, but I suppose the biggest was that bloody great tunnel running down the middle of the car, on which you rest your elbow. I suppose there wasn't all that much in it in the power stakes too, but in the essentials – brakes, steering and so on – there were no similarities. The major difference, though, was that Paul's car had been built for competition *by a man who competes*, and knows its historic financial value, whereas the 420 was built by a company to win races for someone to drive who doesn't prepare the car.

The difference, then, shows in thousands of little ways. On the 420, the standard hand-brake gets in the way of the gear lever if you're not careful – in the Tuscan it has been moved out of the way. The pedals on the 420 are standard – Paul has put a lot of work into his, enlarging them and fitting non-slip mesh. These are the sort of things I'm talking about. Paul has been driving for years, and it shows: Chris prepares the car but doesn't race it, and unless the driver tells him what he wants, Chris doesn't know what he wants, if you see what I mean. Both cars have been properly developed in all the major areas, but Paul's wins hands down in the detailed, careful, routine things that add up.

Finally, people also kept asking me how they compared with the Griffith. I suppose over the years my opinions have been set, and I remember the Griffith as a wild and woolly beast: in fact both the Tuscan and the 420 are lovely and couth. Much more couth than I expected, to be honest. Why, I was mightily impressed by the electric windows in the 420, which proves that it's a production car.



Above: Two ways of getting 300bhp. The Rover engine on the left is much cammier, more a racing set-up, while the Ford on the right has much more low-down punch, is beautifully smooth, but is just off road-going trim. Left: Nothing changes – Gerry in the Griffith back in 1966, sideways as ever ...