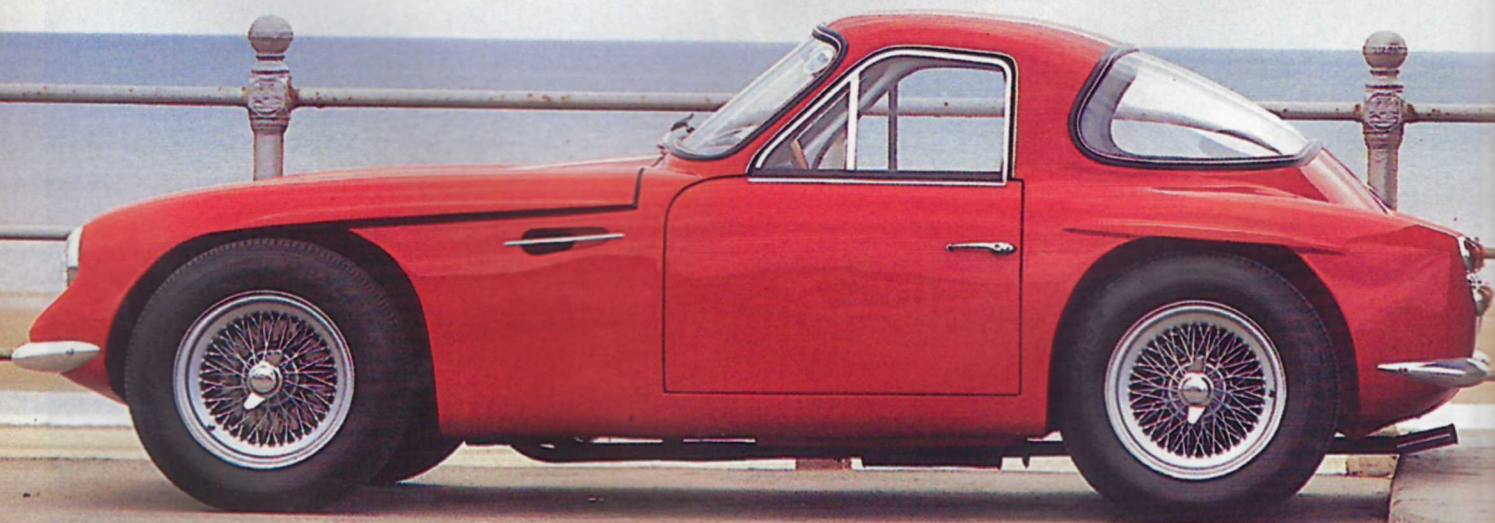
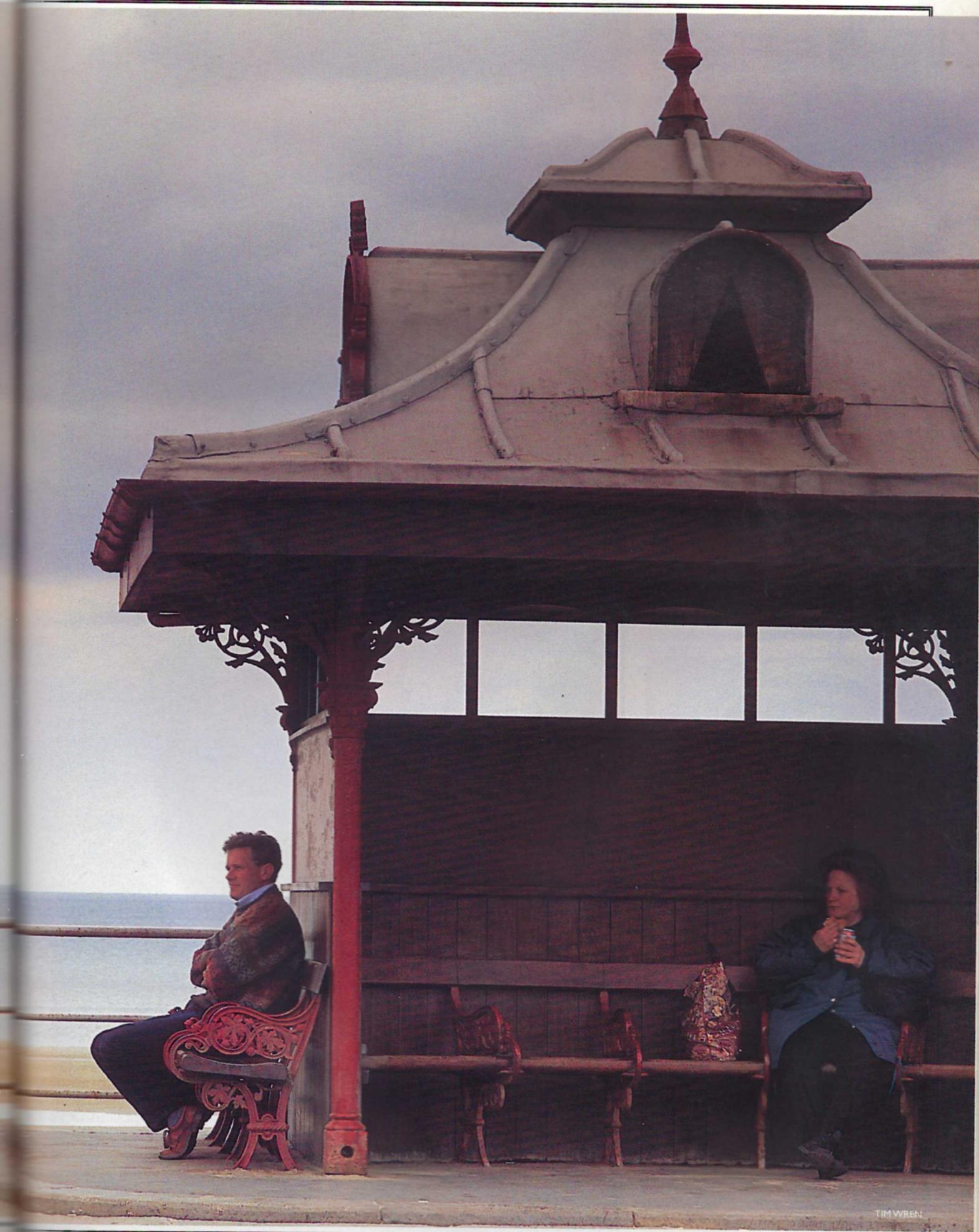


Mark Hughes takes a TVR Grantura back to Blackpool to meet its maker

Prodigal run





TIM WREN

Maybe ghosts of TVR's tortured past are to blame. Here we are in Blackpool, this little Grantura and I, at the old factory where this engaging sports car was built, trying to get going again after a look round this scene of industrial decay. Repeatedly it refuses to start. I'm beginning to ponder the irony of having to summon help to the precise place where its engine was first fired up 35 years ago.

This is Hoo Hill, the old brickworks where early production TVRs were built before a 1970 move to larger premises in Bristol Avenue in which TVR currently thrives. In the past this yard between two rows of crumbling buildings hummed with the sounds and smells of automotive creation. On one wall there's the faded signwriting of Grantura Plastics, a past offshoot of TVR, but few links with the past remain.

Seeing the car, Mr Beaumont of Windmill Motor Co wanders out to chat about his TVR memories, remembering how dusty parts stock – dashboards, body panels, glassfibre moulds – used to be stacked in the roof space of the workshop he took over 15 years ago. Elsewhere is a shiny plaque newly unveiled by the TVR Car Club, showing that the marque faithful haven't forgotten the significance of this place.

It's my fault, of course, that the Grantura won't start. Given a minute for flooded Webers to breathe again, the engine splutters to life and we leave the ghosts to settle to their slumber. I move on, knowing I will make my appointment on time. Nearby Trevor Wilkinson, founder of TVR and life and soul of the company during those Hoo Hill days, is waiting.

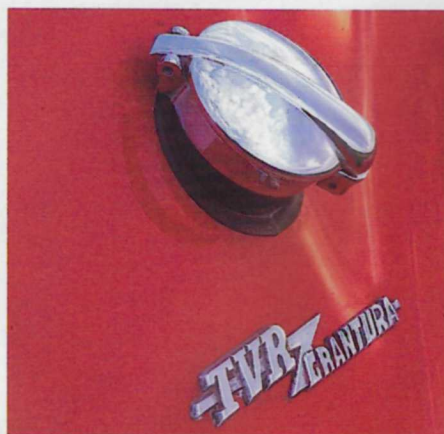
This unseemly blot on the Grantura's dependability is out of character with the



appealing machine I've grown to know during my pilgrimage to its birthplace over the previous 24 hours and 300 miles. Until now it hasn't missed a beat, and the character I found not entirely likeable at first has worked itself under my skin. Some cars charm you straight away, others remain unappealing forever, while a few reveal themselves more gradually.

I'd started near Chester at its owner's base. Steve Reid has been buying, selling, servicing, repairing and restoring TVRs for 30 years, so he knows a bit about them. His workshops are occupied by mind-bending '60s powerhouse TVRs of Griffith and Tuscan ilk, pocket rockets with V8 and V6 motors, but one of his treasures is this Grantura. Owned for 10 years, his specimen is among the best of the survivors.

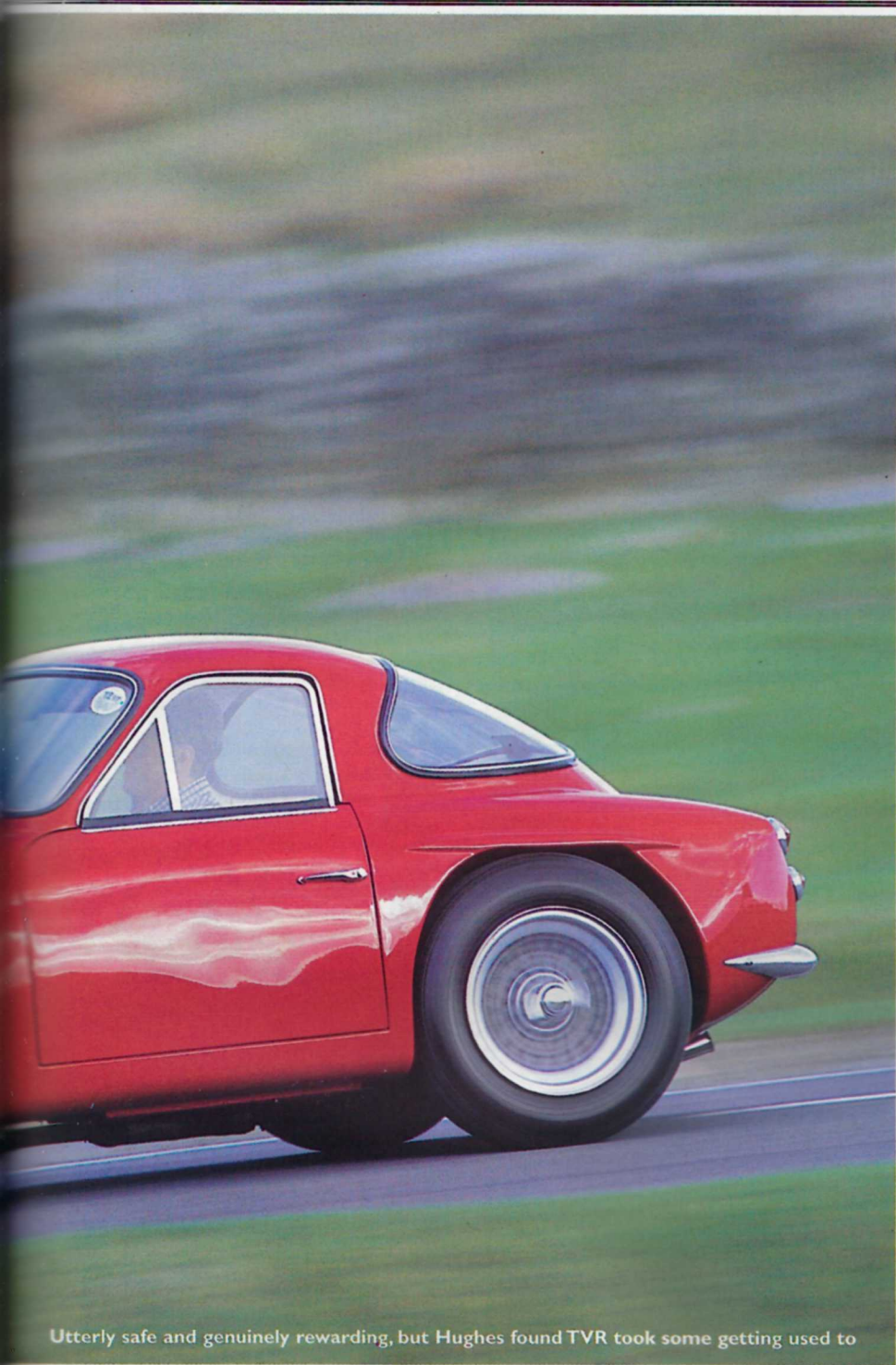
The Grantura – the name is a corruption of



TVR Car Club knows of only 70 survivors



Gearlever and handbrake better transposed



Utterly safe and genuinely rewarding, but Hughes found TVR took some getting used to



'grand tourer' – was the first true production TVR, initiated eight years after Blackpool lad Wilkinson built his first special. After the prototype Grantura emerged from Hoo Hill in 1957, the model evolved through Mk1, Mk2, Mk2A and Mk3 guises, but none hit the road in great numbers: over

seven years about 675 Granturas – the exact figure is unknown – were built. Of these, about 70 are known by the TVR Car Club to survive worldwide, with 40 in some kind of running state and a handful in what one might call respectable condition.

Steve's Grantura is therefore a rare artefact in the history of today's biggest wholly British-owned car manufacturer. After we'd chewed the cud rueing the fact that older TVRs still haven't climbed to their rightful status and value in the classic market, he handed me the keys with one of those wonderfully generous statements that still amaze me after years of driving other people's possessions: "Take it away, enjoy it, and drive it as hard as you like."

So it was that I made my way to Blackpool, maybe 75 miles as the crow flies, by a convoluted route that took me four times that distance, criss-crossing northern England as far as Southport to the west and the Yorkshire Dales to the east. The M6 would have been the direct way, but, as it happened, I was travelling on one of those days of pre-election IRA travel mayhem and it was doubly wise to keep as far away from the motorway as possible.

Early doubts about the car amounted only to trivial complaints that I ended up forgetting about. Like M-series TVRs well into the '70s, the stubby gearlever – nicely crisp and quick in action – is set too far back on the enormous transmission tunnel, requiring an awkward shoulder swivel to move it. I found my fingers dropping to the adjacent handbrake, which is in the ideal place for the gearlever. In low sunlight the lack of visors is infuriating, vision rearwards is tricky because the mirror vibrates, and heaving your bags through one of the tiny doors – there's no opening boot – is a hassle.

But as familiarity grows, the roads become more interesting and traffic disperses, all the good things about the Grantura begin to reveal themselves. Gearlever notwithstanding, I'm extremely comfortable behind the wheel: the seat can't be faulted for cushioning and support, the legs-stretched driving position is terrific, the instrumentation clear and comprehensive, the steering near perfect. The rack and pinion system may have humble Triumph origins, but it delivers wonderful feel and accuracy.

Surely one mark of a successful sports car is the way your control and the car's responses blend into a seamless whole that makes quick driving an exercise in instinct alone. This little TVR excels in making such a close relationship with you that it's uncommonly effortless and truly invigorating to drive towards its limits.



**Well tuned 1622cc
MGA engine propels
1500lb Grantura**



Steve Reid; his car is in rare good health for the endangered model

approaching a corner, there are no battles to fight, no niggling doubts about how the car will behave. You can belt along with complete confidence that the chassis, a revised design for the Mk3 with double wish-bones front and rear, will be completely faithful.

At speed the Grantura's natural line through bends brings gentle understeer under power, but the car's adjustability is superb when you treat it with some finesse into corners. Hold on to braking for an instant as you begin to turn and the tail will sit into the curve for you, nudging the car into a neat drift. It's all so utterly safe and genuinely rewarding.

I'm also finding the Grantura's pert looks growing on me. So strongly made in glassfibre of considerable thickness, the teardrop body is quite pointed at the front but almost egg-shaped at the rear between the tail-lamp fins. Lots of people seem to notice the car and plenty know what it is without having to look at the winged badge on the nose – perhaps they, like me, can detect signs of miniaturised resemblance to TVR's current muscle-bound offerings. Personal TVR connections, too, keep arising as people stop to natter.



Near Blackburn a market researcher armed with pen and clipboard says she used to work at an engineering company that supplied components to TVR. As I fill the tank in Settle, a lad comes up to say that his unemployed dad once owned a TVR and still likes glassfibre cars, but for the moment has to confine this penchant to a Reliant Rebel. Overnight in the Hark to Bounty pub in Slaidburn, a beautiful village deep in the Pennines, someone asks if I'm connected with current TVR owner Peter Wheeler, who, apparently, is looking to move to one of the grand houses in the area.

Up in the hills around Slaidburn, the Forest of Bowland region contains some fabulous off-the-beaten-track roads. The TVR isn't quite so assured on the bumpier ones, occasionally grazing part of the chassis on the tarmac when



Close to home many remember the distinctive car, Hughes met inquisitors everywhere



Home to roost: TVR gets back to its roots

coming down hard on its springs, but such surfaces don't spoil the predictability of its cornering, nor the kickback-free fluidity of the steering. More than ever, I'm enjoying the subtle messages coming through the wooden rim of the three-spoke Astrali wheel.

This TVR also accelerates very effectively, helped by the state of tune of its 1622cc MGA engine and a 4.3:1 axle ratio that trades top-end cruising for extra sharpness through the gears. To add to its desirability, this car has a sought-after HRG-Derrington crossflow alloy cylinder head mated with twin Weber (instead of SU) carburetors. This was the factory's ultimate performance option which, says Steve Reid, raised power from the standard 86bhp to around 120bhp. Earlier Granturas could be bought alternatively with Climax FWE or



Blackpool tat: meets TVR; Reid's other Grantura (below)

surge. John Bolster achieved 0-60mph in 9.6 secs and 0-80mph in 15.4 secs when he tested a Grantura Mk3 for *Autosport* in 1962, but I'd guess this car's HRG-Derrington installation slices at least a second off those figures. He went on to a top speed of 107mph, but on the M55 near the end of my journey more than an indicated 85mph felt cruel. The clock under-reads thanks to larger 185/15 tyres.

Meeting Trevor Wilkinson is a rare opportunity. A fit, suntanned 75-year-old, he lives in retirement in Minorca, without even a 'phone to disturb him, and only occasionally returns to his home town. The reason this time is the TVR Car Club's 'Back Home' event, where he's a guest of honour – and a modest one who seems touched that people are still interested in him 36 years after he had to sever connec-



tions with the company he founded.

Wilkinson was the brains and inspiration behind TVR (he coined the company name by contracting TreVoR), but through bad luck and dishonesty on the part of associates he was never able to be part of the glory that accrued after Grantura days. Talking with him, I'm repeatedly struck by the parallels with Colin Chapman and Lotus, for his early ventures were so similar – but only Chapman made money. Both men conceived home-built specials in the late '40s, at a time during the post-war export drive when it was impossible for the British to buy new cars. Within a few years their creations had done well enough on the tracks to attract customers, but Chapman's business, perhaps propelled a little more strongly by a ruthless streak that contrasted

Ford 109E engines, but the MGA unit had virtually been standardised when the Mk3 came along.

Although this pushrod engine is a little coarse on the ear, the Webers add a pleasing sporting gurgle and performance is delivered with excellent flexibility considering that lofty power output. Pull is clean from only 1500rpm, and the 3000-5000rpm range gives a good

An audience with clever Trevor

Trevor Wilkinson didn't set out to become a car manufacturer. In 1949 he built himself a special to sprint and hillclimb, but his cousin liked it so much that he bought it. Wilkinson had to make another one and someone else came along wanting that. He did manage to keep the third car, but its success in club competition awakened more interest.

"I suppose I'd built about 12 cars with various engines and bodies when things changed," remembers Wilkinson. "My real livelihood was general engineering work for a local company, but they got a new buyer and I lost all that business. I really only had my car hobby to fall back on. At about this time someone called Bernard Williams came along wanting a car with a 2.5-litre Lea-Francis engine.

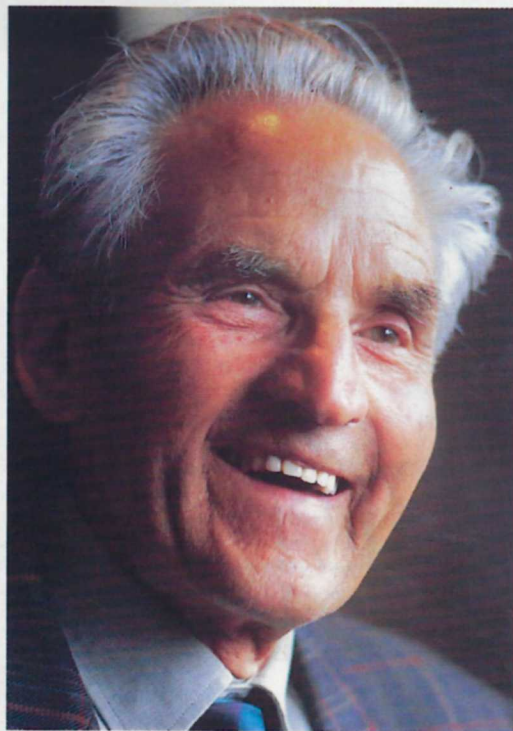
"Looking back, that was when it all started to go wrong. Williams found out about my difficulties and said he could find me plenty of work, but he turned out to be a great teller of half-truths – he brought in some sub-contract work but I lost money on half of it. Then came the big idea: he introduced me to Fred Thomas, md of a big electrical switchgear manufacturer in Bolton, and Thomas promised to finance proper car production.

"I didn't realise, but Thomas's plan was to take me only so far and then make the company bankrupt, in order to reclaim the tax losses. Perhaps I was naïve: in those days I thought the world was basically an honest place with the odd rogue, but I was coming to realise that it was basically dishonest and you met the odd good person." With orders but serious cash-flow problems, TVR Engineering was wound up in 1958, but by then the government had closed the loophole in the law allowing tax losses. Thomas had to find another way to cream money out of Wilkinson's car production, so he and Williams set about finding people willing to invest in a new company called Layton Sports Cars, which was to put the Grantura into production. In the end there were 12 directors and Wilkinson gradually became a peripheral figure.

"Not one of them had a clue what they were doing," says Wilkinson. "I became completely fed up, and couldn't wait to get out when my contract expired in 1961. But I lost everything. I'd owned my own freehold premises and all my engineering equipment 10 years before. When I left I had nothing, not even an electric drill." Experienced in building car bodies from the 'wonder' material of the '50s, Wilkinson, then aged 39, started a new company making glassfibre equipment for customers such as the police and local corporations. He never again had anything to do with cars, but he built up a good business from which he retired in 1988.

Talking now, he's almost able to be dispassionate about his TVR saga, time and subsequent success having healed much of the bitterness. But unhappy memories still dominate, and only a few recollections make him chuckle. Most of them seem to involve harmless shunts.

"A friend bought the first Grantura and put it in a ditch driving home one night – he'd passed a house with the curtains undrawn and noticed a girl undressing in her bedroom. Years before with the very first car, Les Dale, who built the body for it, was desperate to have a go in the rolling chassis, even though the only braking fitted was a pair of handbrake cables – he got carried away and the only way he could stop was to hit a tree. Once I was testing a chassis when the steering wheel came off, and the car veered towards a row of builders sitting on a plank having lunch – they all keeled over backwards into the hole they'd been digging..."



Pilgrim's progress: Hughes heads north

with Wilkinson's decency, prospered more quickly. By '61, when Wilkinson found himself eased out of still-gestating TVR, Lotus was on the brink of great things, about to launch the Elan and close to winning a first F1 World Championship title with Jim Clark.

Any benefit of TVR's success has long since passed Wilkinson by, but he expresses pleasure that his old company has done so well – better than Lotus in the long run – without departing significantly from the sports car ethos he laid down all those years ago. And he appears touched to have memories rekindled by this particular Grantura, which, it turns out, he's met before. Why, that squiggle in gold felt-tip pen on the door trim is his signature, inscribed there at Steve Reid's request on another TVR get-together a few years ago. ♦