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# SEASIDE SPORTS

*Blackpool-based TVR is on the crest of a wave in 1994, its 40th year. 'Twas not always thus, however, as Graham Robson recounts*

WHEN the tea-break bell rang at TVR, the Chairman's dog, Ned, appeared in the trim shop as if by magic. "What's going on?", I asked. "Oh that. That's Ned. He understands what the bell is all about, and he knows he can always get a titbit here." Peter Wheeler, TVR's Chairman, was nowhere in sight, but that didn't seem to worry anyone. Ned always seemed to know where he was, and the two were never far apart.

That was in 1993, but it might equally have been ten, 20 or 30 years earlier, for TVR has never been a formal business. Eccentric? The Harvard Business School graduates might think so, but no one at Blackpool cares about them. TVR is not so much a business (though it is, most definitely, profitable) as a way of life.

Although the marque is now approaching its 40th birthday, today's TVRs have a lot in common with the early ones, if only in their sporting feel. The original A40-powered 'sports saloon' of 1954 had a multi-tube chassis frame, a glassfibre bodyshell – and was built in Blackpool. Today's Griffiths and Chimaeras follow that pedigree, exactly.

Along the way, though, there has been a quantum leap in technology. The first series-production TVRs – the Grantura MkIs of 1958 – had 83bhp engines and a top speed of about 100mph. Today's 5-litre Griffiths have 325bhp engines and a top speed of nearly 170mph. In 1958 prices of Grantura kits started at £660; today's Griffith 500 retails for £32,995, and you could bump up that price by thousands with optional extras.

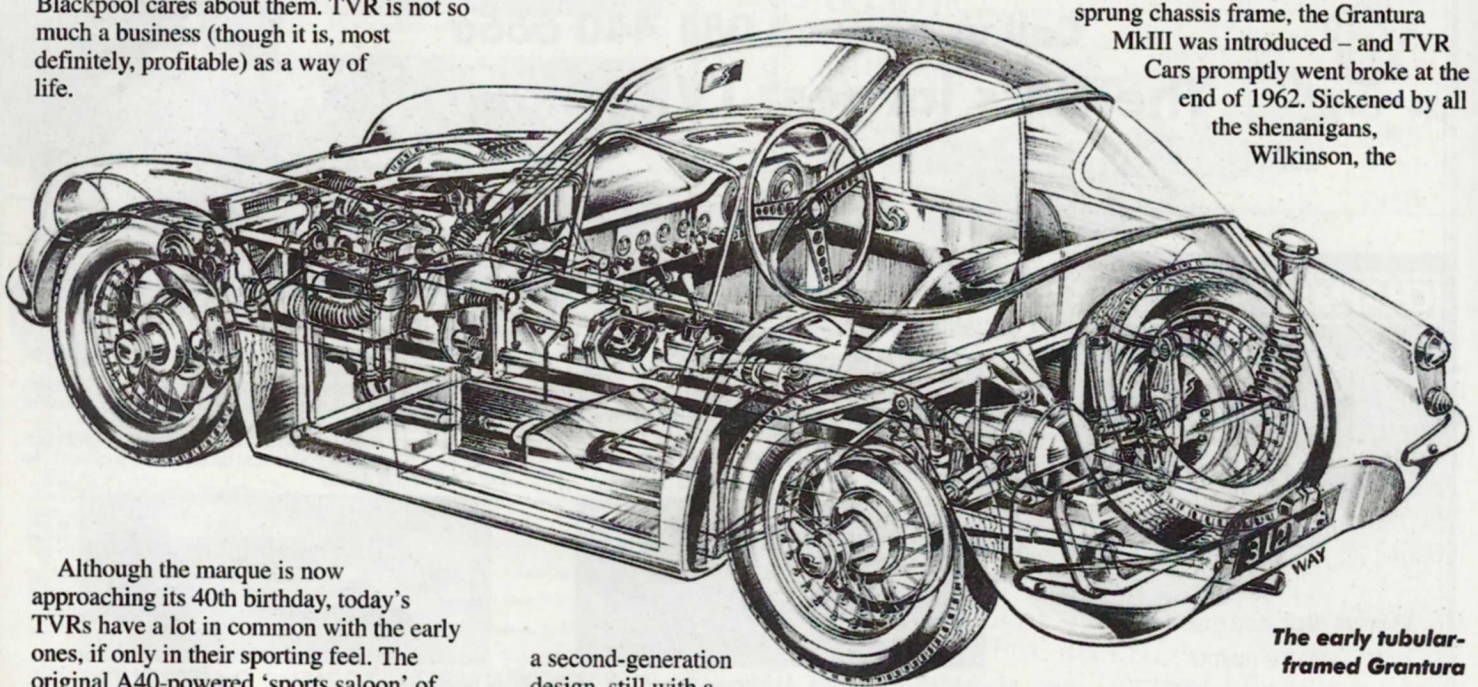
## ORIGINS

As every Classic enthusiast knows, the TVR story started with Trevor Wilkinson, a mechanic and Specials builder who set up his own business in Blackpool in 1946; the marque name, quite simply, was a diminution of his Christian name – TreVoR. His first multi-tube-framed Special was built in 1949, other Specials followed, but the original TVR-badged car did not follow until 1954. The frame of this car was Wilkinson's own design, the engines – often supplied by the customer – were many and various, and the glassfibre coupé bodyshells came mostly from RGS Atalanta.

Wilkinson took a lease on an old brickworks in the Hoo Hill Industrial Estate at Layton, on the outskirts of Blackpool, and started a second-generation design, still with a multi-tube frame, this time with VW Beetle trailing arm independent suspension at front and rear. The bodyshell, a stubby two-seater fastback coupé, evolved by cut-and-shut methods from that of a Microplas Mistral, another bodyshell of the period.

Series production followed an order from Ray Saidel of the USA, who sold some cars badged as Jomars, the definitive cars being advertised as Granturas. Like the original company itself, the Grantura was a rather informal animal. The customer could specify one of several engines – MGA, Coventry-Climax FWE and Ford 100E being the most popular. The car could be supplied as a kit, or completely built-up, the running gear including BMC stub axles, Austin-Healey brakes and a Ford steering box. There was only one short-chassis body style, a two-seater fixed-head coupé with no exterior access to the spare wheel or the luggage space!

Although TVR's reputation gradually built up, so did the problems of the business, and there seemed to be constant financial upheaval behind the scenes. Companies came and went, directors arrived and departed, then in 1961 the expansionary, but short-lived, Aitchison Hopton era began. Ken Richardson, ex-Triumph Competitions Manager, was hired to run a racing programme which failed completely, ex-Rolls-Royce engineer John Thurner designed an excellent new coil-sprung chassis frame, the Grantura MkIII was introduced – and TVR Cars promptly went broke at the end of 1962. Sickened by all the shenanigans, Wilkinson, the founder, had already walked away from the car whose birth he had inspired.



***The early tubular-framed Grantura***

Somehow though, a different company, Grantura Engineering, struggled on for another three years. Textile tycoon and TVR fanatic Arnold Burton funded the company, which survived by building V8-engined Griffiths (the name came from the American who sold the cars in the USA) and better MkIIIs, both of them latterly with restyled, cut-off tails.

The second bankruptcy came in 1965, after the company had spent a lot of time developing the Trident project. Since 1954 about 1,000 TVR-badged cars had been produced, but it really looked as if the marque's career might be over. Finally, after Martin Lilley (who ran the Barnet Motor Co, a TVR dealer) and his father


***Left, the Tasmin V6 convertible, launched in 1980, became a best seller***

interested in making his company into a second Morgan. He wanted to keep abreast of trends. Granturas gave way to Vixens, Griffiths to Tuscans, there were four-cylinder, V6 and V8 engines in the range by 1970, after which the USA-spec Triumph TR6 engine was added to help create the 2500 model. There was so much variety, and so much excitement, that it was easy to forget the failures – the Imp-engined Tinas which never got beyond the prototype stages, the awful lack of performance in the 1300, and the downbeat reception given to the Zante…

Production bounded ahead. By 1970 TVR was making nearly 300 cars a year, with more than 420 following in 1974 – a

***Right, assembly of TVR Tuscan models in the new Bristol Avenue factory at Blackpool in 1971***

bid for the wreckage of the business in November 1965, stability finally set in and the modern TVR concern began to emerge.

## THE LILLEY YEARS

Martin Lilley was a sharp businessman – TVR had never been stable before he arrived, but always seemed to be on an even keel afterwards – but he was no extrovert, rarely saying more than was necessary about his cars. When he eventually sold his interest in TVR, he disappeared from the motoring scene.

Publicity for his cars, however, was never lacking. I will never forget, for instance, Preview Day at the Earls Court Motor Show of 1971, when two completely nude models cavorted around the cars on the stand! Martin, in fact, ran TVR for 16 years by personal whim, and few people other than his Sales Director, Stewart Halstead, could influence the model policy which did so much to make TVR's reputation. Like Trevor Wilkinson before him, and the motley crew who had managed the company in the interim, he stayed faithful to the GRP-bodied fastback approach. Until the arrival of the Taimar hatchback (1976) and the Convertible (1978), that never changed. This was the period when the TVR range proliferated, new model followed new model, and the marque's classic reputation was confirmed. Gradually, very gradually, the styling of the cars evolved too, for wheelbases increased from 84in to 90in, noses lengthened, cabins widened, and body lines became ever more sleek.

Lilley had no desire to freeze the style, or the engineering of his cars; he was not


***The 2500M was the most successful TVR of the Seventies; many went to the USA***

year in which most of the world's motor industry was in sharp decline after the Energy Crisis had taken its toll! In 1972, ten years after the existing coil-sprung chassis had been introduced, TVR finally produced a brand-new layout. Still multi-tube, still with a GRP coupé body, this was the M Series, (where M stood for Martin) of which nearly 2,500 were produced before the Tasmin model took over in 1980.

The Seventies were eventful for TVR – and Martin Lilley. Not only did the cars stop being curiosities and become accepted, mainstream, sports cars (the kit-car option was withdrawn in 1973) but the company moved its factory, suffered a disastrous fire, and also introduced Britain's first turbocharged production car.

The move, from Hoo Hill to Bristol Avenue, was needed to let the company expand further, but before long all the space was full, and ever since then the company has been putting up new departments, buying buildings close by – and occasionally wondering if it should move yet again! Up to six cars a week were being built in 1971, soon after the move was completed, but 18-19 cars a week were surging through the assembly shops by 1993.

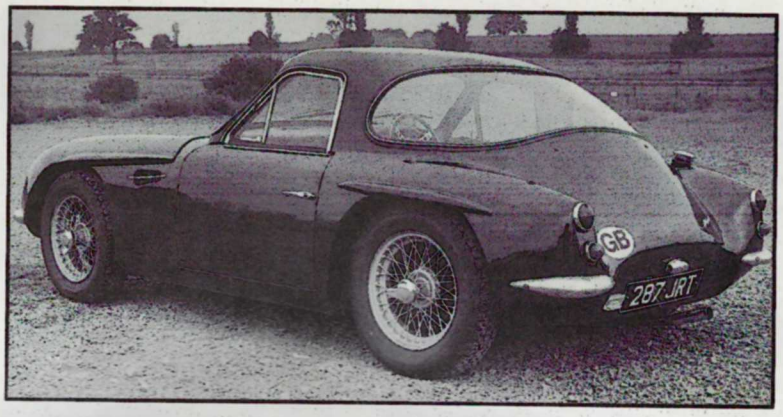
A fire, which broke out one evening on January 3, 1975, wiped out much of TVR's assembly hall, but never reached the highly-flammable bodyshell production department, where all the glass mat and resins were stored. It was only sheer hard work by the Fire Service, and good luck, which stopped it spreading to other departments and destroying every corner of the TVR business. Production did not start up again, for several months, and was not back to pre-fire levels until 1976.

Happily for Martin Lilley, design and development was not affected, for the very first Turbo model was built that year (Broadspeed provided the engine), and deliveries began during 1976. 'Tracing the... pipery is a job for a snakes and ladders expert,' journalist Gordon Bruce wrote at the time. Even though TVR only sold 63 Turbos in the next three years (the extra price of forced induction was around £2,500 at first – an impost of nearly 60%), these fabulous cars did great things for the company's image.

## TASMINS – AND ROVER ENGINES

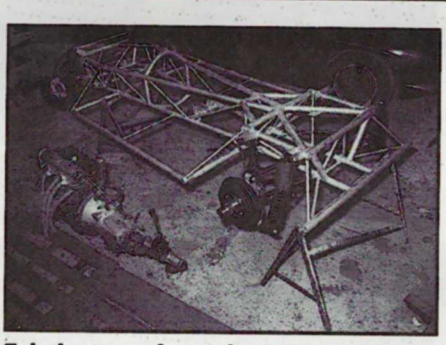
By the end of the Seventies the M-series chassis, and the styles, were showing their age, so Lilley committed his little company to a complete technical shake-up. Starting in 1980, the M-series cars were swept away, to be replaced by the Tasmin series. When quizzed about the new name, Martin Lilley would go quiet, look away under his bushy eyebrows, and eventually admit: "I had a girlfriend called Tamsin at the time. The name sounded good, but I altered it just a bit..."

The new car, styled by Oliver

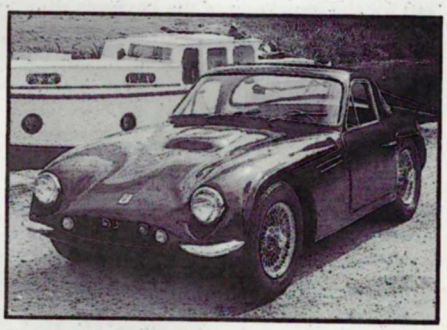



***Left, early Sixties Grantura had a tubular chassis under the glassfibre coupé body***

***Left, one of the three TVR Granturas built to compete in the 1962 Le Mans race***



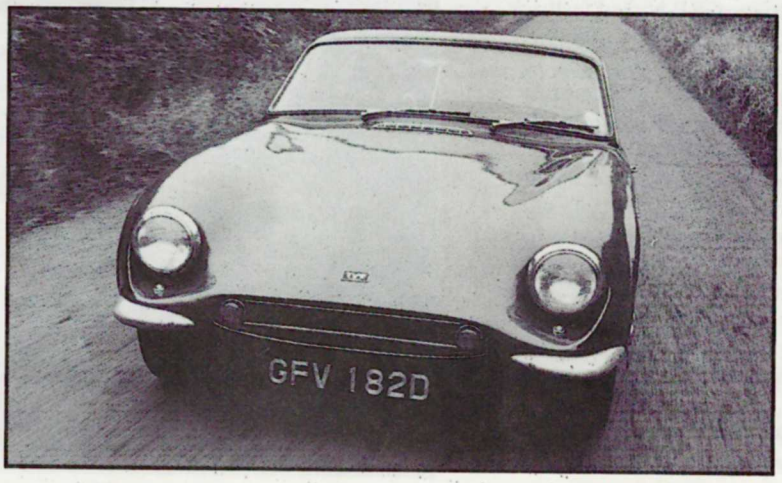
***Tubular spaceframe for Le Mans TVR***



***Potent V8-engined Griffith***

***1966 TVR Tina prototype was Imp-based***

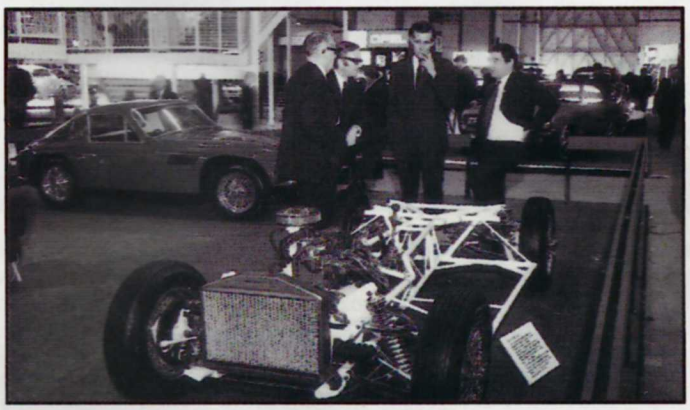
***1967 Imp-based fastback prototype***



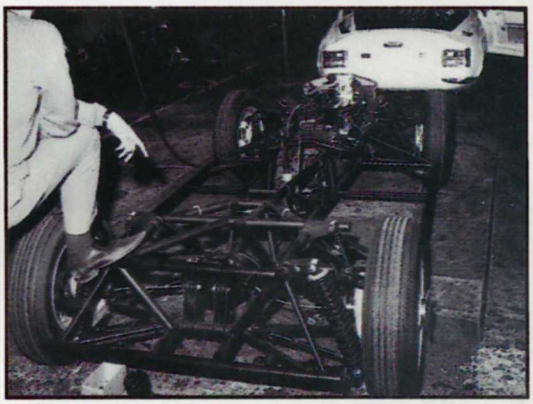

***Grantura 1800S MkIV was tested by Motor in 1966. It reached 60mph in10.9sec, 100mph in 36.8sec and had a maximum speed of 107mph***

Right, snug cockpit of the 1969 Tuscan V6

Far right, 1967 Tuscan 4.7 V8 tested by Motor reached 100mph in 13.8sec



Right, TVR boss Martin Lilley (far right) with the new Vixen S2 at the 1968 Motor Show. Far right, Vixen S2's 4½in longer chassis with Cortina 1600 GT engine




Above, SM/Zante at 1971 Motor Show never made production

Above, Seventies 3000M (Ford V6) was TVR's best seller in UK


Above, Tasmin Turbo Coupé one-off prototype at 1982 NEC


Above, 1981-84 Tasmin 200s had 1,993cc Ford Pinto engine

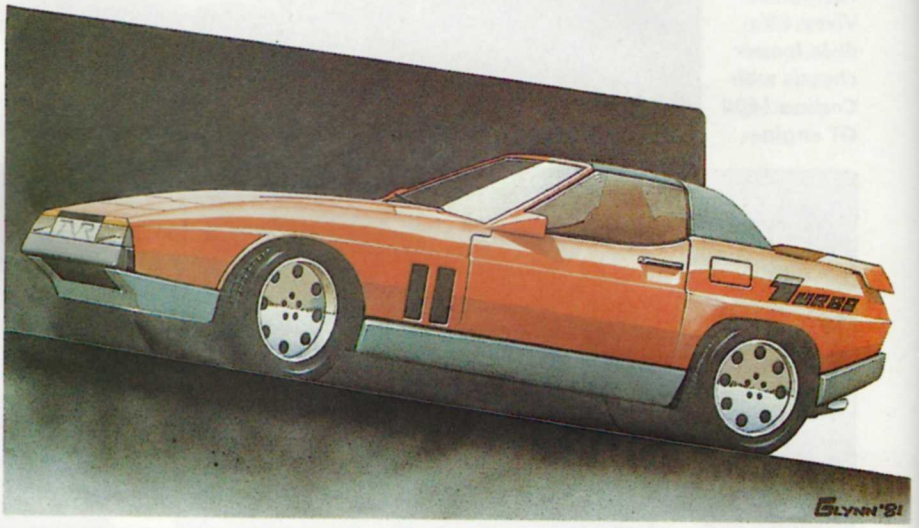
Right, fettling Tasmin Coupé glassfibre bodies prior to painting, in 1979


Right, TVR Chairman Peter Wheeler (far right) with the 1986 420 SEAC Works racer



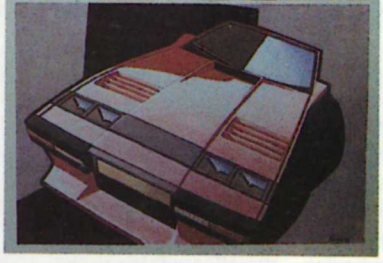
**Above, the 1983 350i marked a change of engine supplier. It used Rover's 190bhp Vitesse unit. Right, 1984 390SE had 3,905cc Rover V8 converted by Rouse to give 275bhp**


**Above, 350i Series 2 had more rounded nose**




**Above, styling drawing of TVR's 1981 Turbo convertible which never progressed beyond the prototype stage**

**Right, 1981 sketches showing alternative styling treatments for the TVR Tasmin 280**




**Left, Nineties TVR Tuscan had a new chassis but was built only as a racer**


***1987 TVR S with 2.8-litre Capri engine offered no-frills sports car for £12,995***

Winterbottom of Lotus fame, had an all-new chassis, new sharp-edged body styling, and new-type German Ford V6 engines. Because these engines did not meet North American emissions laws, TVR had to withdraw from that market, which meant that overall sales slumped – from 308 in 1979 to a mere 144 in 1980. Not even the arrival of the Tasmin Convertible could turn that around completely, and no one noticed the building of the 5,000th TVR in that year.

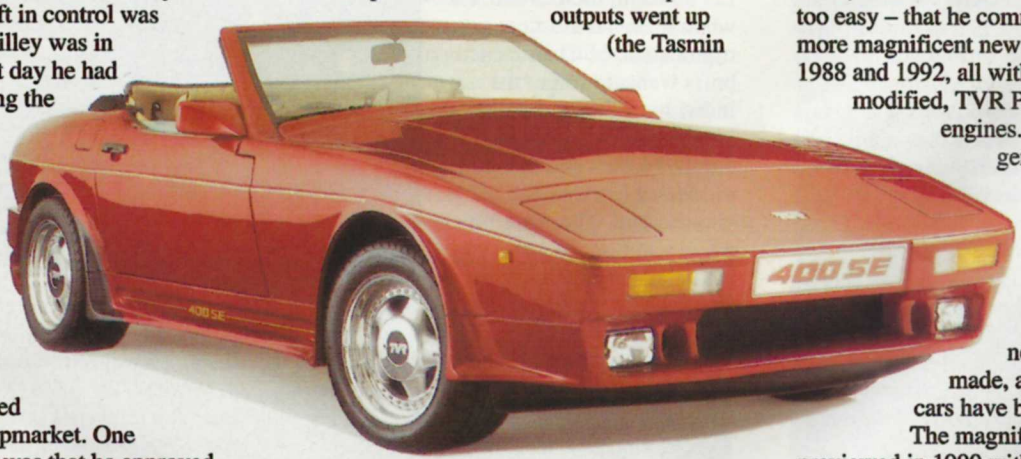
Once again the company's finances were hard hit, so when TVR fanatic and North Sea oil millionaire Peter Wheeler (who was a mere 38 years old at the time) made an offer for the business, Lilley accepted it. The shift in control was sudden – one day Lilley was in control, but the next day he had slipped away, leaving the tall, moustachio'd Wheeler, in total control. The link between the two regimes was Stewart Halstead but he, too, left the company a few years later.

Under Wheeler, the company changed direction, moving upmarket. One major development was that he approved schemes to get TVR back into the USA – deliveries of V6-engined cars began again in 1983, peaked in 1985, then rapidly fell away again as all the potential problems of product liability laws and of a long 'pipeline' closed in on the small Blackpool company.

"We used to be highly dependent on the export market," Wheeler told me but, "... we find long-term relationships with these importers extremely difficult to maintain." USA sales were "... easily my biggest crisis – when we fell out with the importer for not paying for some cars and not looking after them and having a lot of hassle. I would never sell cars to America again... Now my export market is the South East of England."

Another move was to develop a series of really fast models. Martin Lilley had favoured turbocharging the German V6 engine (two prototypes were built), but Wheeler scrapped that idea, opting instead for the bigger-engine approach, using the light-alloy Rover V8 units. The first of these Tasmin-based cars, the 350i, was launched in 1983, eventually to be joined by cars like the 390SE, the 420SE, the 450SE and even the extraordinarily high-tech 420 SEAC/450 SEAC two-seaters, which were really detuned race cars.

The problem was that as the cars' power outputs went up (the Tasmin produced 160bhp; the 450 SEAC had 325bhp), so did the equipment level and the price, and TVR dealers began screaming for a return to their roots. Wheeler liked nothing more than to dabble with new models and was more of a 'hands-on' stylist than Martin Lilley had ever been. He listened, said nothing, but went away to talk to his designers, who speedily produced the new S of 1986, a car which shared the current V6 engine with some of the styling lines from the old M-series Convertible, but had yet another ne chassis.




***TVR claimed 0-60mph in under 5sec for the 1988 275bhp 400SE; it cost £24,995***

This car, which went on sale in 1987, was dramatically cheaper than any other current TVR – £12,995 compared with £21,995 for a 390SE – and was a huge success. The result was that TVR production rocketed from 322 in 1987 to 701 in 1988, and output has been rising ever since. The much coveted 1,000-cars-a-year mark is still out of reach, but surely not for long?

Wheeler, however, was such a great fan of motoring excitement – he loved big-horsepower machines but hated four-whe drive, which he once told me made drivin too easy – that he commissioned three more magnificent new models between 1988 and 1992, all with enlarged, modified, TVR Power/Rover V8 engines. The new-generation Tuscan wa originally mean to be a road ca for which a one make race-car Challenge was se up, but in the end no road cars were made, and nearly 50 race cars have been built.

The magnificent Griffith, previewed in 1990 with an S chassis hidden away under that sexy style, eventually went on sale in 1992 on a modified Tuscan chassis, with larger and more powerful engines. Anything, it seems, is possible at Blackpool, for TVR and Wheeler are like that.

Only TVR, too, would have dared to withdraw the Griffith from the UK marke after 602 cars had been produced in 1992 at the same time the less sleek and distinctive Chimaera was launched. The front lamp recess reputedly was chewed out of a mock-up by Ned, the Chairman's faithful dog !

Along the way, of course, there has bee

plenty of time to dabble. At one time in the mid-Eighties there might have been a version with a GM-Holden V6 or V8 engine. The 420 Sports Saloon was a stillborn project (Peter Wheeler himself did like the style), as was the Speed Eight Roadster, of which Wheeler said: "Our dealers have been asking for a four-seater convertible for years..."

Today TVR is no less mysterious, nor less controversial, than ever it was, and its motives are sometimes difficult to define. The ambitious AJP8 V8 engine, previewed in 1992, and supposedly scheduled for production six months later in the Griffith, had not been fitted to road cars after a year. Wheeler's throwaway line at the time – "Everything here is done quickly..." – had backfired on him. The Griffith, once withdrawn, came back with a 5-litre TVR/Rover engine. The Cerbera was yet another attempt at the 2+2 market, when all previous TVR 2+2s had made no impact.

Not that Peter Wheeler seemed to mind. It is his company, after all, and he can do what he likes with it. The first 40 years, for sure, have been exciting. What will the next decade hold?

## TVR MILESTONES

| | |
|---|---|
| 1954 | First-ever A40-powered TVR built |
| 1958 | Grantura Mkl launched from Hoo Hill works, Blackpool |
| 1962 | Grantura MkIII revealed. Short-lived Works motor sport programme. Bankruptcy |
| 1963 | Original V8-powered Griffith put on sale |
| 1965 | Second bankruptcy. Arthur and Martin Lilley rescued the company. TVR Engineering Ltd formed |
| 1970 | Business moved to new factory at Bristol Avenue, Blackpool |
| 1972 | Long-running M-series launched. Turbo, Taimar and Convertible all followed during Seventies |
| 1980 | Tasmin, all-new generation of TVR cars, introduced |
| 1981/82 | Peter Wheeler bought control of TVR from Martin Lilley |
| 1983 | Launch of 350i, first Rover V8-engined TVR |
| 1986S | Roadster introduced – rebirth of lower-priced TVRs |
| 1988 | Tuscan, and Tuscan Challenge, introduced |
| 1990 | Griffith prototype first shown |
| 1992 | Griffith deliveries began. Chimaera introduced. Preview of AJP8 V8 engine |
| 1993 | Preview of Cerbera 2+2 |



***The TVR tradition continues: above, over 20 years separate Tuscan and Chimaera***
***Left, Peter Wheeler and brainchild outside the Blackpool factory***
***Below, former boss Martin Lilley retains his links with the factory in the shape of a new Griffith***

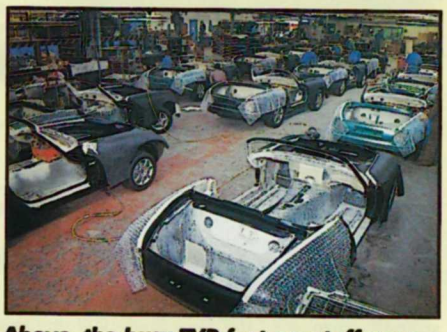

## TVR CHIMAERA

Let's face it, there are times when even the most masochistic of Classic car buffs wants to forget the individualistic experience of crossply tyres, vibration-numbed hands and damp, mildewed leather against your bottom. There are times when you want to leave your mechanical sympathy on the mantlepiece, jump into a brand, spanking new sports car and drive the hell out of it.

Cars don't come much newer than this TVR Chimaera, with a mere 147 miles on the clock when I picked it up from Henley TVR Heritage. Were they mad?

It was 10 o'clock when I set off for a cross-country blast to Inkberrow, about 20 miles south of Birmingham. I was there in an hour and a quarter, without touching the motorway. No, I didn't thrash it: this 4.3-litre, 280bhp V8 (Rover-derived) turns over at a relaxed 2,000rpm at 70mph in fifth. The red-line is at 6,250, but I guess you'd never see that in top gear.

The steering wheel kicks around in



***Above, the busy TVR factory: staff may expand to meet growing demand***

***Fancy making your own TVR? Well, you'll need one of these body moulds***

*The Tuscan retains its (dare I say it?) macho appeal – just avoid those speed bumps...*


*Short chassis, but predictable cornering*

your hands as the fat tyres tramline frantically at every hedgehog spine they find in the road: this car is direct, the steering being unassisted and pretty heavy at low speeds. Torque is huge right through the rev range – the lower gears seem more or less optional – and roadholding is superb too. A slight understeer on entry turns into a nice predictable oversteer as you push the car out of a bend. Body control is excellent, the whole car feeling utterly solid around you. And it does surround you – you're positively buried in leather. The driving position is perfect.

In Greek mythology, a chimaera was a monster with a lion's head, goat's body and serpent's tail. A suitable name for one of TVR's early parts-bin works, perhaps, but not really for this car, which feels a lot more homogeneous. The whole package screams "drive!" at you with a V8 howl: the Chimaera is almost smug in its all-round competence, continually tempting you to explore its limits. Whoops officer, was that really 90mph? Well, I was slowing down for the roundabout...

## TVR TUSCAN

David Gerald TVR was my destination in the Chimaera. This 'pre-wedge' TVR specialist actually has the moulds to manufacture replacement panels, but besides the spares side the company also sells cars – original convertibles and various Ms, Vixens and Tuscans – one of which we chose for the cover shoot.

This late example, using Ford's 3-litre, 128bhp V6 unit, had a ground clearance of about three inches due entirely to its exhaust, making it pretty impractical. But practicality was never TVR's emphasis: you won't be using your back-hatchless Tuscan for lugging refuse down the dump.

This Tuscan has had a fair bit of restoration work, so probably approaches what it was like when new. It's rock hard, very loud, very fast, and has dodgy electrics. It feels like it's as quick as the Chimaera, even if it obviously isn't – so if you want to save your driving licence, buy a Tuscan. You might still get arrested, though; if not for speeding then for creating a disturbance. That exhaust sounds like a mortar attack from outside the car, while the untamed popping on overrun will bring an adolescent smile to your face.

The brakes on this car at least are sweat-inducing, adding to the thrill factor. Despite the harsh ride, the Tuscan also rolls enough to risk grounding the exhaust at the limit, but it ability to maintain a stable drift through a hard corner is impressive. Changing up to third on exit makes you realise that the gear ratios aren't perfect, though; and engaging overdrive with your knee is easy as you come off the clutch.

The Chimaera's genetic ancestry is apparent in the Tuscan, but so is the generation gap. Luckily, the modern day, rather more upmarket TVRs retain all the best character traits of their predecessors.


*If other car companies took a leaf out of TVR's styling book, they too might create something that looks as good as the Chimaera*