

TVR 420 SEAC



This is an exclusive club: the 150 mph club. But there is another condition: that the car must be in series production, and made in Britain. In addition the speed should, if possible, have been verified by us. For a moment though, let us ignore the made in Britain proviso, and take a look at the speed tables.

The 150 mph list is short enough to examine here and it even begins in Britain, because Newport Pagnell's finest begins with the letter 'A'. Aston's 5.3-litre V8 Vantage has a claimed top speed of over 180 mph; this for the moment

155 mph. Ferrari is there of course – a 328 to 161 mph, with a mean lap of 158.5 – and there's also the Testarossa and the F40. Lamborghini has the Countach in which the author touched 190 mph, but not at Millbrook. Renault's slippery GTA is the sole French representative with 151 mph and we must not forget Lotus's latest Esprit turbo (153 mph) or the XJ-S Jaguar V12 which managed 151 mph as long ago as 1981. There are some more, which might have done it given a different day – the Mercedes 560 probably (149.3 mph), and the BMW again, the M635 fell only just short.



remains a manufacturer's boast, simply because Millbrook's two mile bowl is too tight to contain any road car at that sort of gait. Even 160 mph needs nearly a quarter of a turn of lock in anything, and you begin to fear for the tyres after two laps.

There's absolutely no doubt that the Vantage Aston will easily exceed 150 mph though – the basic standard V8 managed that some years back. Further down the list, Germany sneaks in by courtesy of BMW and Porsche; the 944 turbo, the 928, and all the 911s will quite comfortably put away the 150 break, never mind the 959.

Back to Germany and the world's fastest five-seater saloon qualifies (at Millbrook) by 0.1 mph, without needing to test out BMW's claims that the 750 is electronically restricted to

More members perhaps than might have been thought at first, but it nevertheless remains an exclusive club, and the dynamic demands required to push a ton of machinery through the air at that speed are substantial. To add 10 mph to the top speed of a car with a drag coefficient of around 0.35 requires about half as much power again.

Unsurprisingly this is not a gathering for the down at heel either. These are all expensive cars. Thanks to Aston, Lotus and Jaguar, Britain is well represented in this exclusive company, despite its declining car industry.

There is, however, a new name to add to the list. The Blackpool sports car specialist TVR has finally done it. We took a standard production 420 SEAC to the magic 150 mph mark, at which

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speed it felt utterly stable and understeered less than most round the diameter of the bowl. Not only that, we also recorded 0-60 mph in 4.7 seconds and this with two up as always and without resort to special grippy tyres. This is 0.1 sec quicker than Lamborghini's Countach.

The 420 SEAC's price is cheap given what it does, but risks comparison with some classy products, and for attributes other than sheer speed. But the TVR is also a convertible, and there they have it. There simply is nothing else which is roofless, and goes as fast for the money.

The recipe is simple. The basis of the car is the now familiar 390 wedge, with an aggressively restyled body, and a larger capacity development of the Rover V8. The trusty, all-aluminium, Buick-derived Range Rover engine (produced by Land Rover to Vitesse specification especially for TVR) receives larger (93.5 mm) diameter Cosworth pistons, and a specially made steel crankshaft to expand the stroke to 77 mm. This gives a total swept volume of 4,228 cc, and there are also gas-flowed heads with bigger valves operated by a different camshaft via a set of solid lifters. These are an option over the standard hydraulic items, and are more efficient at high rpm but they do clatter. Maximum power varies slightly as each engine is hand-built and dyno-tested, but a representative figure is our test car's 304 bhp at 5,750 rpm. Torque is quoted as 290 lb ft at about 4,500 rpm. The whole engine is built and prepared with the care and time normally reserved for a racing engine, and it shows. Not only that, but just over 12 seconds to reach 100 mph says most things about a power unit's effectiveness.

The figures, however, cannot convey the sheer sweetness of the power unit, combined with a free-revving urgency and a high rpm bark that sets the senses tingling. It is better if it is revved too, although the SEAC's five and a half second average to gobble up any of the 20 mph gaps up to 110 mph can hardly be described as a disappointment.

Stir the gear lever, though, and the 420 really wakes up. From a slightly nervous idle the power begins to pour from 2,000 rpm. Add another 2,000, and the exhaust note, booming from the single stainless steel drainpipe poking through the rear skirt, takes on a harder edge. It is not a heavy, uneven throb like a Chevrolet, nor the demonic scream of a Ferrari, but somewhere in-between. It feels much classier than it should, given the commercial vehicle origins of the engine, and it is smooth, devoid of any mechanical harshness or the thrumming that sets the panels of a Range Rover shimmying in sympathy when it is revved. There's no red sector on the TVR's tacho - Lotus

style - but we were told that 6,200 rpm was the advisable limit, although there is rarely any need to venture into those areas in everyday use.

The gearbox is the Rover Vitesse manual item, and if the change is not up to the standard of the best modern Japanese units, it is light and quite pleasant to use although the spring biasing between planes can be rather vague. This really only causes problems while performance testing, not in everyday use. The lever is sited too far back on the transmission tunnel, though.

The body is different in construction as well as style from those of ordinary 390 TVRs. The nose is sleeker and lower (an improvement), and there are blended-in side skirts and a beaver-tail rear spoiler atop the boot surface which is a matter of taste. The car's dimensions are possibly a little bluff for this sort of treatment, and the side skirts and spoiler tend to accentuate the truncated rear. It is undeniably purposeful, and in fact TVR could easily sell more than the 20 or so cars that they can build every year.

The body is hand-laid in a lightweight composite fibre material (hence the acronym Special Equipment Aramid Composite), and is



some 200 lb lighter than the 350/390 with no loss of strength. Mounted on the rugged, square-tube spaceframe chassis by silent-bloc rubber sandwiches, the structure feels rigid, and as shake-free as can be expected in a roofless vehicle.

Suspension is the 390 twin wishbone front, lower wishbone with driveshaft as upper link rear, arrangement, and the car sports 225/50 x 15 Bridgestone RE71 tyres on 8.5 in TVR pattern aluminium wheels – 245/45 x 16 on 9 in wheels are an option for the rear. On the road, the SEAC has all the traditional TVR virtues: super-sharp, accurate turn-in, gentle understeer which can be banished then converted to a gentle power slide by pressure of the right foot, superb balance and absolutely enormous grip. The ride, however, is less satisfactory, and dampers are currently an area of great concern to TVR. The test car had Bilstein at the rear, Spax at the front, and the compromise between taut body control over crests at the expense of much jiggling at low speeds – or a wallowing of the front – has yet to be discovered. At the time of writing (1988) it seems that Koni may provide the long-term answer. Like Ferrari's 328, the steering, which

is subtly power assisted, may have excellent feel, but there is wrist-jarring kickback over large potholes.

Interior finish is traditionally-styled walnut veneer and leather, and is nicely executed. Heating and ventilation are fairly primitive, especially the cool air supply, but then the roof can always be taken off – something which needs barely 30 seconds thanks to TVR's award-winning hood design. Wind buffeting is minimal.

Summing up the 420 SEAC is difficult. The problem, as always, is what else you can buy for the money, but then as we discovered while assessing the 390, there is really nothing directly comparable. Ironically perhaps, the major opposition comes from TVR itself. The 390 is almost as quick, and is substantially cheaper. Cheaper still is the 350. None of them has the class of a Ferrari, or is as well made as a Jaguar XJ-S, but then the TVR is different. It has a supremely muscular charm, is devoid of temperament, and with the roof off on a sunny day, makes all the sense in the world.



TVR 420 SEAC

ENGINE

Cylinders: V8 (90-degree), in-line, front-mounted.

Capacity: 4,230 cc (254 cu in).

Bore/stroke: 93.5/77 mm (3.68/3.03 in).

Valve gear: single central camshaft, chain driven, pushrod ohv, two valves per cylinder.

Compression ratio: 9.75:1.

Fuel system: electronic injection.

Maximum power: 304 bhp/5,750 rpm.

Maximum torque: 290 lb ft/4,500 rpm.

TRANSMISSION

Type: 5-speed manual, rear-wheel drive.

Mph/kph per 1,000 rpm in top gear: 28.5/45.8.

SUSPENSION, WHEELS

Front: independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar.

Rear: trailing arms, lateral links (driveshafts acting as stressed members), coil springs, anti-roll bar.

Steering: assisted rack and pinion.

Brakes: (Front) ventilated discs/(Rear) plain discs, servo assisted.

Tyres/wheels: front and rear 225/50 VR 15 -8.5J (or 245/45 VR 16 -9J).

DIMENSIONS

Length: 153.0 in (389 cm).

Width: 68.0 in (170 cm).

Height: 47.4 in (120.5 cm).

Wheelbase: 93.8 in (238.5 cm).

Front/rear track: 57.9/58.3 in (147/148 cm).

Weight: 2,486 lbs (1,130 kg).

Fuel tank: 13.4 gallons (61 litres).

PERFORMANCE*

Maximum speed: 155 mph (248 kph).

Acceleration: 0-60 mph (96.5 kph) 5 sec.

Fuel consumption (average): 22.6 mpg (12.5 litres/100 km).

*Estimated