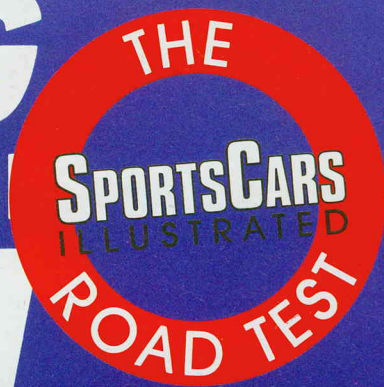


WINNING THE BATTLE OF THE BRAWN



*TVR has carved out a niche of its
own with the affordable S roadster. Now in
updated S2 guise, does its brawny nature
justify the current price of £16,645? ►*



TVR 100

UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT

Good, old-fashioned grunt is what the TVR S2 is all about. A brawny sports car if there ever was one, it puts the Fiat X1/9 into the kindergarten and the Toyota MR2 firmly in the junior classes. It's obviously a car born out of the bulldog breed of British sports cars of old – the Triumph TR6 and the Big Healey 3000 come to mind. It's not difficult to think of the old TVR M-series in this company, either. And, of course, the convertible from that family of TVRs – the 3000S – is a kissin' cousin of the new car.

A few of the essential ingredients developed for more than 30 years by the TVR marque appeared to be lost with the arrival of the company's Eighties range – the Tasmin. Announced at the Brussels Motor Show in 1981, the new cars broke away from the rounded lines of the old M-series, with flat panels and wedge looks, which came into production-car vogue six years before. They were, of course, about to go out, with the arrival of the jellymould Ford Sierra in September 1982.

By the mid-Eighties TVR realised it had to do something about its predicament. Wrong-footed by the onset of the 'aero' designs for even the most basic of family saloons, it needed to develop a new TVR image for the Nineties. A gradual performance up-grading had been applied to the Tasmin's successors – still wedge-shaped but with subtly softened body lines – but this meant a place had been opened up beneath the existing range for a new entry-level model.

The brief was that it had to be cheap to manufacture and, therefore, to retail. That also meant it shouldn't share anything with the bigger, Tasmin-series cars, underpowered with a two-litre Ford Cor-

tina Pinto beneath its snout and barely much better with the 2.8-litre V6 from the Capri in lieu of the old, three-litre V6 Essex, for so long the mainstay in the M-series.

Now, with the Tasmin replaced by an evolutionary development of its original layout – all V8 powered and to be comprehensively remodelled imminently, (see News Front, page 12, and Peter Wheeler Interview, page 28) – the new car, though smaller and lighter, should do quite well, with the German Ford 2.8-litre V6 in the nose. That was the theory and the TVR S was born at the 1986 British Motor Show.

Winner

With a target price set at £12,995, the new car went on sale in the summer of 1987. TVR knew it was on to a winner – 62 orders had been taken at the car's show launch and 150 were in the bag by the time the first customers were taking delivery of the car.

The price soon rose to £13,995, but the specification improved for £14,995, with the arrival of Ford's new 2.9-litre V6 development of the old, 2.8-litre unit. The latest price hike was during this summer – from £15,450 to £16,645 – but, again, with the added equipment. The 'improved' model is different enough for TVR to warrant giving it the S2 designation.

For your money, you still get the same, loud, 2.9-litre Ford V6, some chassis changes – particularly to the rear suspension – and equipment additions. There's wood veneer trim on top of the door panels and on the fascia, electric windows and door mirrors – all previously 'extras', which TVR says most owners were specifying anyway. ▶





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▶ The S2 sits squarely in a soon-to-be hotly contested sector of the sports car market. Nearest in price and performance is Morgan's Plus Four, fitted with Rover's multi-point, fuel-injected, two-litre M16 engine – a car that the old S undercut on price.

Similarly, when the S was introduced it could almost look the Toyota MR2 in the eye. That is to be replaced soon, but it sells in its T-bar

version for nearly £2,000 less, at £14,890.

The Mazda MX-5, due here early next year, should make it for just under £13,000, and the new Lotus Elan, not due on sale before the New Year, should offer the most direct competition.

So the question is: Does the S2 stand up to the growing opposition, at more than £3,500 above its introductory price ticket?

Styling and engineering

When TVR decided to produce a cheap, entry-level sports car, only at a late stage did someone at the factory suggest using the old, M-series 3000S convertible's body shape.

A body shape of mainly curved panels would save time and, therefore, cost in hand-laying the glass-fibre – it takes just 250 hours to build the S2, compared with 400 hours for the V8 'Tasmin-series' cars, according to TVR.

Apart from the flared-wheel arches – which give the S2 a distinctly 'open arch' look – wider body and nose/tail bumper sections built into the bodywork, the shape is like that of the 3000S. TVR says every panel is different – it's the style that is the same and, obviously, the common engineering philosophy of the TVR range.

Windshield

Key visual differences from the old 3000S include the windshield surround, in glass-fibre – the body colour. There's no scuttle panel, although there was on the original prototype S at the 1986 Motor Show. So the bonnet blends into the dog-

leg of the doors and runs the full length of the nose, lifting forwards.

As on the old model, its side shutline incorporates the front wheel arch brow – now flared unlike that of the 3000S. The bonnet engine duct was not on the old car, either.

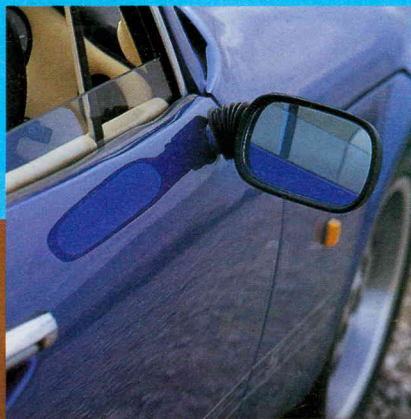
Purposeful

At the rear, there's no boot lid kick-up, unlike the 3000S. But the tail treatment certainly looks squat and purposeful. The simple, rubber strip quarter bumper treatment of the car's nose – now highlighted by a chrome strip on top of it on the S2 – is carried through to the rear. The number plate sits between large, rectangular tail light clusters. Simple but effective.

At the front, the chrome strips now help the nose rid itself of an 'I want to drop on the floor' look because the nose bumper/apron treatment is higher than on the previous model. Keeping the spare wheel at the front might have helped to reduce this, and increase luggage space at the same time.

The doors of the S2 boast quarter lights because the main glass is wind-down





(now electrically controlled), whereas sidescreens were fitted on the 3000S allowing the driver to put an elbow out leisurely while driving when the roof was down.

In fact, it was the only element of the M-series car's styling lost with the new model: the curve along the top of the door was particularly neat.

According to TVR, most S2 customers buy because of the car's Sixties looks; other factors – such as exclusivity or being hand-built – contribute. Another vital ingredient is the separate steel tube chassis, allowing the body-shell to remain unstressed.

Using a central spine, the chassis consists of four tubes running the length of the car. The lower two are rectangular in section and spread out from the central spine at front and rear to support the engine, rear differential and suspension. There are also outriggers to the sides for side-impact protection.

Front suspension is by wishbones, supporting Sierra uprights and Koni spring/damper units. At the rear, TVR has discarded the double wishbone set-up of the Tasmin-series and uses semi-trailing arms. A pure cost-cutting exercise.

Most of the driveline bits are familiar. Items such as the propshaft and rear differential are in the Ford mould, but others are unfamiliar – being manufactured to TVR's design – such as the ventilated front brake discs.

Ballyhooed

This all provides a near 50/50 weight distribution – like the much ballyhooed BMW Z1 roadster. This is helped, no doubt, by the S2's much shorter frame than the bigger V8 wedge-shaped cars. Sitting on a 90in wheelbase, it's just 14ft long, though wider than you might think – much wider than the old 3000S.

Performance and economy

The roar of the S2's 2.9-litre V6 is really something. Until you've looked under the bonnet, you would be mistaken for thinking it's a V8. From inside the car, you begin to suspect its Jekyll and Hyde character.

Gruff

Fire the engine up and, despite the exhaust's gruff snarl when you blip the throttle, it doesn't have the lumpy throb of a V8 coming through the accelerator pedal as you depress it.

No, this is 168 horses-worth of V6 – and very

appealing horses at that. Whereas it behaves like a limp cow in Ford's top-line Granadas, under the S2's snout this unit can do almost no wrong – female body builders, this is the car for you! With 172lb/ft of torque at just 3,000rpm, the S2 has much more low-end lug over its 2.8-litre predecessor.

This translates into a car that will run to 130mph-plus – given the right conditions. TVR claims the S2 is a 140mph car, but that's a theoretical figure off the car's 23.4mph/1,000rpm fifth-gear ratio: we suspect the lack of slippery aerodynamics (TVR doesn't give a Cd figure), which is the bugbear of most



roadsters, puts paid to that.

Crank the S2 off the line, and it soon reveals ample performance. The rear wheels put the power down with little fuss. There is torque steer pulling away from the line, but the S2 quickly inspires confidence, with its well sorted suspension sitting on fat Bridgestone RE71 205/60 VR15 rubber. Grip aplenty, it enables the driver to get into the mood of this car quickly.

Indeed, drive it how you wish. Lope along and accelerate only in fourth and fifth

when required. Or *gun* it, by using the lower ratios. It's that Jekyll and Hyde character. And there's never a problem with the car's overtaking ability, either.

Used like this – or hammering the S2 round bends in photo sessions – fuel economy takes its toll. We got only 25.8mpg overall. But some longer runs on open A-roads compensated for the hard driving. By keeping the S2 in the top ratio, we nudged up to 30mpg – not bad for a 2.9-litre sports car in the S2's mould.

On the road

Without doubt, the S2 has the best semi-trailing arm suspension set-up ever used on a road vehicle.

Forget the stories of tail-happy BMWs.

The S2 inspires ample confidence in any driver to get on with it – only the really foolhardy could get it badly wrong in this car.

Simply, the S2 has uncanny stability and cornering ability for a car of its type. Time and again, we pushed the S2 through bends and it never faulted. As long as the S2 has power through the rear wheels all the time, it is at its best.

Sympathetic

Go in one a trailing throttle, and the nose soon goes wide. The best ploy is to get the power down early. Even drivers unskilled with a car of the S2's power can get the knack: it is that sympathetic and responsive.

Adopt the policy described, and the S2's steering lightens and becomes even more communicative as you get into the bend. Get the steering line right, and it is so easy to tighten the S2's cor-

nering attitude with the throttle.

If you do get the tail out of line, it's easy to catch with a flick of the wrists – the S2's responsive, high-g geared steering makes this the sort of effort sports car learners can cope with.

It shouldn't be done too often, though, unless you're in the Charles Atlas class of bodybuilding...

The S2's handling is best nurtured by getting the line of attack right and *not* provoking the car.

It is a firmly sprung car, generally free of roll, but watch it if you do get it wrong! Especially in slippery or wet conditions.

Underneath, a lot of work has gone on to iron out some of the original car's bugs. Now fitted with Koni adjustable dampers, these appeared to be a bit softer than an earlier car we tried that was fitted with Spax units.

Ultimately, it's probably the unassisted steering that gives the S2 such prowess through bends. Ideally geared, its weighting and feel get better the quicker you go, reacting with sensitivity and pinpoint accuracy whenever you set up the car.

In daily use

It's only the turning circle on which the S2's steering falls down.

Its 13in steering wheel goes through 2.8 turns and 39ft from lock to lock, belying the quick nature of the rack on the open road.

But it is a car with which you very quickly become involved.

Such shortcomings as we've described disappear when you take the car's responsiveness as a whole.

Although it doesn't quite have the subtlety of a Lotus, the S2 is none the worse for it. That engine roar makes you want to master this car – not a difficult task, actually, because the S2 is such a well sorted machine.

Delivers

Use the S2 as it is meant to be used – in anger – and it delivers the goods. The 2.9-litre V6 coupled to the S2's low weight makes for a car that will pull easily from less than 1,000rpm in all except top gear.

You tend to drive the S2 in a leisurely fashion, often at least a cog higher than you would do in a similar car in similar conditions – an MR2, for example.

Drop the ratios, open up the throttle, and the roads beckon. The latest Ford MT75 gearbox is a delight to use – if you're used to a sports car of this type.

A lightweight, finger-tip touch, Japanese gearchange it is not, but you soon get used to it, given that the clutch is also weighted towards the heavy end of the spectrum.

The handling is very forgiving, so you might not expect the S2's ride to be

quite up to the mark. Not so. It is absorbent, although a little jiggly. Road bump-thump and tyre roar is well subdued.

Despite the separate body/chassis, scuttle shake is effectively banished from the S2. Hood up or down, the mechanicals dominate noise intrusion but, given this summer's hot weather, ours was down most of the time. But, when the hood is up, the feeling of well-being is carried through: you're as snug as a bug – it's rain- and draught-proof.



The hood is simple to fold, but the Targa roof panels rob luggage space from the S2's boot





Behind the wheel

Although the hood arrangement is excellent, if you put the roof down and stow the Chevrolet Corvette-style removeable large roof panels, much of the S2's boot space is robbed.

But tolerable, open-air motoring can be achieved by removing just one panel if you're driving only one up, but there isn't a space problem, either!

Mohair-covered

Alternatively, you can run with only the rear section up. Folding it and removing or replacing the roof targa panels is easy enough. What's more, the whole lot is mohair-covered.

Getting in and out with the hood down is obviously easy. With it up, a couple of the S2's downsides show. Although the cockpit is generally roomy, with enough headroom for six-footers, and leg-room from the extensive rearward travel allowed by the seats, getting in and out is a little different. You notice how short the door openings

are – a hark back to the old M-series.

You can't lock the doors from the inside, either. Or the boot, or the petrol cap – although the boot is opened using a button recessed in the C-post to the driver's door.

Once inside, taller, long-legged drivers will find it a bit of a squeeze beneath the facia panel, which curves down to the centre console. But there's nothing wrong with the pedal set-up for heel and toe changes, although the accelerator pedal has a long-travel action.

The seats are good, though lacking a little in lumbar support. But, with some 250-mile stints behind the wheel of the S2, we didn't feel that they would give any trouble.

The interior is also well appointed. Half-hide is now standard, as are the walnut door cappings and handle of the glovebox lid, which also boasts the TVR logo.

Ergonomically

There's not much wrong with the major controls but, although the facia layout is attractive, it leaves something to be desired ergonomically.

On the S2, the speedometer and tachometer boast dials reading 180 degrees from the norm. But the markings are too small to read easily, especially because they are dimly lit in night-time, lights-on driving.

Similarly, the odometer figures are too small to read easily, and there's no trip.

Minor gauges cascade from the left of the speedometer down into the centre console, above a curved plastic strip of warning lights. The standard electric window switches are

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each side of the clock and there's now a tidier heater control above them.

Interestingly, the ashtrays are mounted each side of the centre console, where the driver, legs splayed by the steering wheel, could easily knock ash on to clothing.

Space-saver

Other niggles? The S2 has a space-saver tyre. We had to use ours and can't really see the merits of them. A standard size spare would rob the boot of so much space, though.

But, if TVR had followed the old M-series practice of mounting the spare in the nose of the car, you wouldn't need a space-saver.

Engine access is not brilliant in the current S2 design, either, so it doesn't seem a realistic possibility.

Finally, we felt the door mirrors could be better and there's a lack of storage space inside the car.

Conclusion

In its latest guise, the S – now denoted S2 – is an improvement, particularly on the original 2.8-litre engine car. The basic ingredients are all there, but is it worth £16,645?

Well, the answer to that is yes *and* no. Yes, because there's nothing comparable on the road. Only the Morgan Plus Four, with its two-litre, 16-valve, Rover 800 engine, the Alfa Spider, imported from Italy by specialists, and the Panther Kallista, with the

same engine as the S2 but in standard Ford tune, can claim to be rivals. But all are inferior performers, either because of inferior outright power to the S2, inferior aerodynamics or both.

Driveability

With the S2, you get a lot of modern standards – in ride and driveability, for example – built in, plus a sales-winning modicum of refinement and living features. Unlike the

Morgan and Panther, at least it has a proper boot.

The answer is No because the S2 faces increasingly stiff competition from newer rivals. The Mazda MX-5 (Miata), due out next spring, will undercut the S2 by *at least* £3,500 – a hefty sum and, incidentally, one by which the S has risen since it went on sale in the summer of 1987. Is it still worth it?

Carved

Overall, we say Yes. Although the new Lotus Elan will be in the same price bracket when it goes on sale in the New Year, we believe the S2 has carved out its own niche.

It's bound to come under pressure from now on: some people might doubt the quality of its fit and finish, and the merits in making electric windows, for example, standard fitment – items that are likely to come under scrutiny. But, in our book, the S2 is a winner. ■

