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Motor

The Gables

SPOTLIGHT ON OPEL

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TVR TURBO-FASTEST SOFT-TOP?

Blackpool Power

. . . in the form of a turbocharged 3-litre V6 makes TVR's rugged sportster into a latter day AC Cobra, and one of the fastest cars that money can buy. Jeremy Sinek reports

IT IS a cliché of modern motoring that the real sports car is dead, that the days are long gone when any car with a low build, two seats and a convertible top could automatically run rings round any tin-top whether in a straight line or through the bendy bits. Today, the only thing sporty about most so-called sports cars is the facility to finish each journey with a polluted coiffure and bugs in your teeth. The sports saloon or coupé virtually reigns supreme; the Jaguar E-type has been superseded by the XJ-S, the TR6 by the TR7, the Elan by the Elite, the AC Cobra by the 3000 ME, and the big Healey by nothing at all.

Look beyond the big-name manufacturers, though, and the outlook is not quite so bleak. Panther and Caterham, with the Lima and Super Seven respectively, do make what are undeniably *real* sports cars, and the latter will even see off just about anything — up to 60 mph; the same is largely true of Morgan's Plus 8. But there are still plenty of svelte, sanitised-for-your-protection tin-top wedges that will leave them for dead on an autobahn. And besides, if you want a Morgan, you'll have to wait longer than to have your ingrown toenails operated on by the NHS.

But there is one car today that comes closer than any other to taking over the mantle worn by such as the AC Cobra in the 'sixties. It's built by TVR, and perhaps the most surprising thing about it is that the small Blackpool company never got round to it before. Since 1960 TVR has been building small but tough two-seat coupés with various engines ranging from 105E, through MGA, Ford 1600 crossflow, Triumph 2500 — even a Mustang V8 for a while — to the present fitment of Ford's 3-litre Capri V6.

Yet it was only a year ago that TVR added a convertible version to the range, based on the same rigid tubular spaceframe chassis with all-independent wishbone and coil spring suspension as the well-proven coupé versions, and with the same engine options; a 142 bhp naturally aspirated 3-litre V6 (£7,591), or, for £11,445, a 265 bhp turbocharged V6 . . .

The latter adds up to an awful lot of bellowing horses to power just one ton's worth of glass-fibre clothed sports car, and it was fitted to our test car. TVR tentatively suggested that their mean black roadster might well prove to be the fastest drop-top car in current production, and it was up to us to prove it.

What TVR didn't tell us was that the test car, for some obscure reason, was fitted with an extra long-legged non-standard 3.07:1 final drive in place of the usual 3.33:1. And as luck would have it, we had a wet track to contend with too when the time came to squirt TVR 100 down MIRA's horizontal acceleration straights.

Getting smartly off the line was a problem. Too few revs and the engine speed was hauled down below the point where the turbocharger boost comes in; too many revs and we had to back off to let the wheels stop spinning long enough to grip the track and catapult the car forward. Add to this the taller gearing and it is no surprise that we failed (just) to match the figures achieved a few years ago with TVR's Turbo coupé.

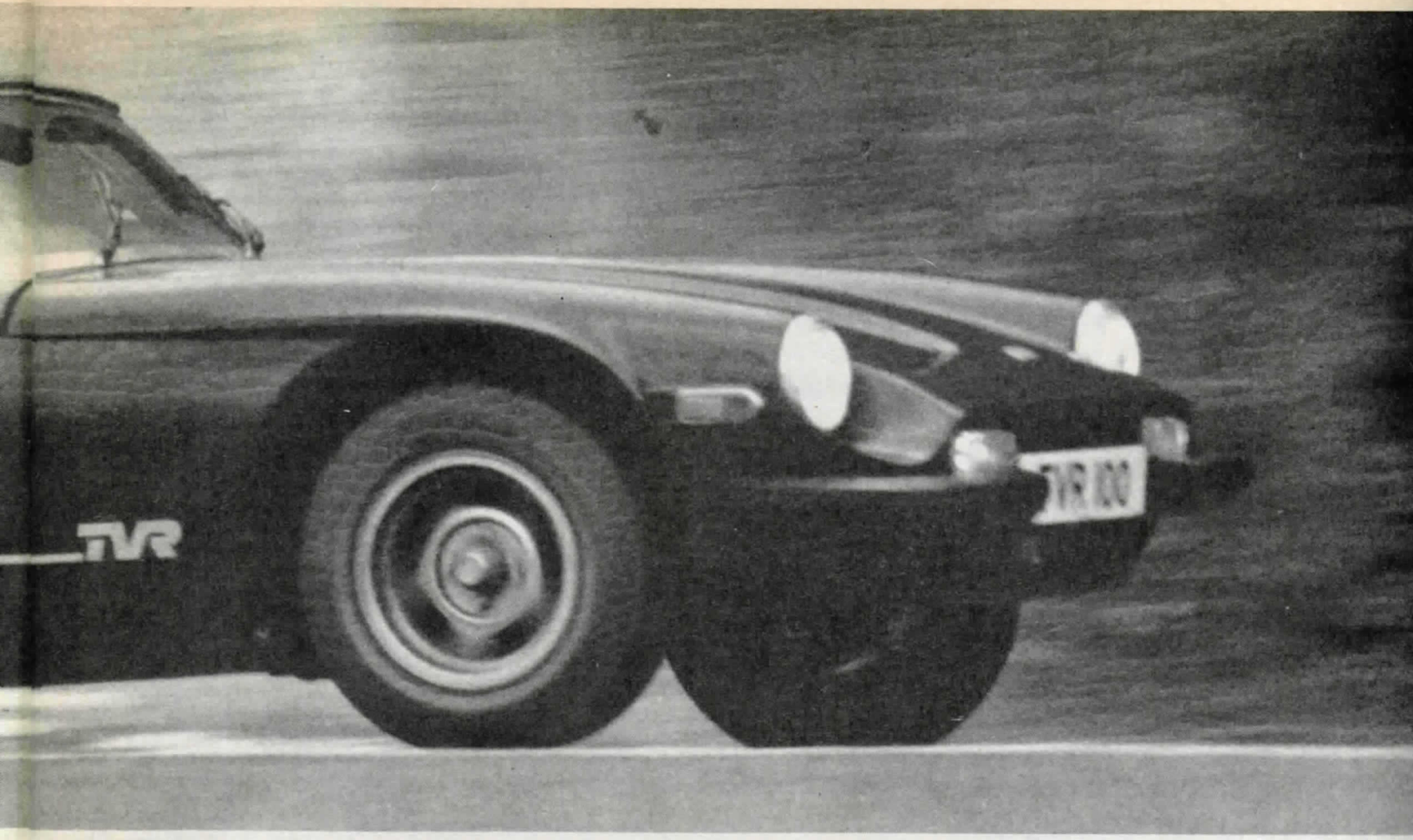
All things considered, though, the car did well to record such figures as 0-60 in 6.3 sec, 0-100 mph in 15.1, and 70-90 mph in top in 5.8 sec, and we trundled off home from MIRA all set to write about what a stunningly quick car the TVR Turbo is.

When TVR rang to find out how we'd done they were a trifle disappointed and several days later 'phoned with the news that the car now had the correct final drive and would we please try it again?

We were willing, but on the appointed day at MIRA the TVR failed to appear, so the Turbo convertible will have to be judged by the figures we recorded on the car as it was originally supplied for test.

And why not? Even without having to qualify them, these figures make the TVR one of the fastest cars you can buy at any price, and certainly the quickest current rag-top we've tested. Only the Caterham 7 (tested in ideal conditions) was quicker to 60 mph in 6.0 sec, while the TVR's 0-100 mph in 15.1 sec and 120 mph in 26.0 sec will see off the Ferrari 308 GTS (16.6. and 27.3 sec) and Porsche 911 SC Targa (16.3 sec and 28.9 sec). And given the *correct* final drive and perfect conditions, you've got to be talking of 0-60 mph in 6.0 sec or less and 0-100 mph comfortably in under 15 sec. They don't come much quicker than that.

In top gear the TVR's performance was almost beyond belief. Even on its wrong, long gearing, the TVR accelerated briskly at low, below-boost speeds, while its



acceleration between 70 mph and 110 mph was virtually without peers among cars we've tested.

Only above 110 mph and in the £20,000 plus bracket are there cars that will draw away from the TVR. Top speed? The usual constraints applied when it comes to maximum speed testing in a very fast car, but the TVR was still accelerating strongly at 125 mph at MIRA, and on the gearing it had when we tested it 6000 rpm top might have been on, which gives 140 mph. On standard gearing, though, 6000 rpm is only 130 mph, and we doubt that it would do much more than that, being already well over the 5500 rpm power peak.

On the road the TVR's performance is schizophrenic in quality; keep it in the lower half of its rev range and it is merely another quick car, but take it beyond 3500 rpm and any appearances of tractable gentility are cast aside. It is transformed into a bellowing monster with magical properties. It has the power to turn wide open roads into narrow, tortuous lanes; to make other cars disappear backwards with astonishing rapidity; to bring far-away objects suddenly and frighteningly close; and to make police cars materialise from nowhere. In overtaking situations it can achieve the impossible: you're already safely back on your side of the road by the time the oncoming driver has reached in alarm for his headlamp flasher.

Trouble is, the dividing line between the Turbo's two personalities is too sharply defined, the transformation into turbo-boosted omnipotence occurring abruptly and quite late in the rev range, between 3500 and 4000 rpm. This would matter less if there were another 3000 rpm's worth of rev range still in hand, but in fact peak power occurs at a fairly pedestrian 5500 rpm, and by the time 6000 rpm is passed it's all starting to fade away; in performance testing it did pay to hang on to 1st and 2nd to 6500 rpm but in 3rd 6000 rpm was about it. Should the Turbo's performance be forcibly restrained by traffic conditions or constabulary constraints it potters along equably enough, displaying some temperament only when next you have a chance to unleash it, for a high speed, full load misfire develops that indicates fouled plugs, and takes a mile or two of hard driving to clear.

That we indulged in such driving whenever we could and still obtained 17.4 mpg overall makes the TVR unusually thrifty for a car so quick. The worst figure we saw — over a 500 mile period inclusive of performance testing — was 15.9 mpg, while 20 mpg was achieved on a couple of occasions.

Mind you, our test car did have a slight unfair advantage with its non-standard final drive giving 23.4 mph per 1000 rpm instead of the usual 21.6. Thanks to Mr Ford's easy-changing Capri 3-litre gearbox the intermediate ratios are nicely stacked giving 45 and 72 mph in the first two gears at 6500 rpm (on standard gearing) and a more realistic 92 mph at 6000 rpm in third. A less satisfactory feature of the transmission is the extremely heavy and — on our test car — sticky clutch action, though it manfully withstood the rigours of 10 successive *Motor*-style acceleration runs at MIRA.

Performance testing at MIRA also provided a stringent test for the brakes, which on paper look less than imposing with unventilated front discs and rear drums, in a performance class that usually warrants a full house four-wheel ventilate disc set-up.

And indeed, the first time w had to brake hard — from 120 mph at MIRA with little room spare — we frightened ourselves. The car pulled up stably enough, and that on a wet, puddle-strewn surface, bu what felt like instant fade had us wondering whether we wer going to stop before the end o the straight. We did — just — and it transpired, that the friction materials had merely needed warming to their task, for thereafter the brakes repeatedly hauled the car dow from 125 mph, powerfully and progressively, with never a hi of fade.

With its low build and fat Dunlop SP Super tyres the TV has no lack of sheer grip and provided you're not trying too hard it can be cornered impressively fast, guided by steering that is precise and we weighted, though lack of self-centring makes it feel rather dead and the car has to be consciously "driven" all the time, even in a straight line. Its natural inclination is to understeer, but the ultimate attitude is dependent purely o the throttle opening, for oversteer (of a fairly abrupt catch-it-quick kind) can always be induced at will — or inadvertently if you are careles and allow the turbo to sudden double the power at the rear wheels half way through a corner as the boost comes in. In the wet, even more discretion is called for, as the rear wheels will

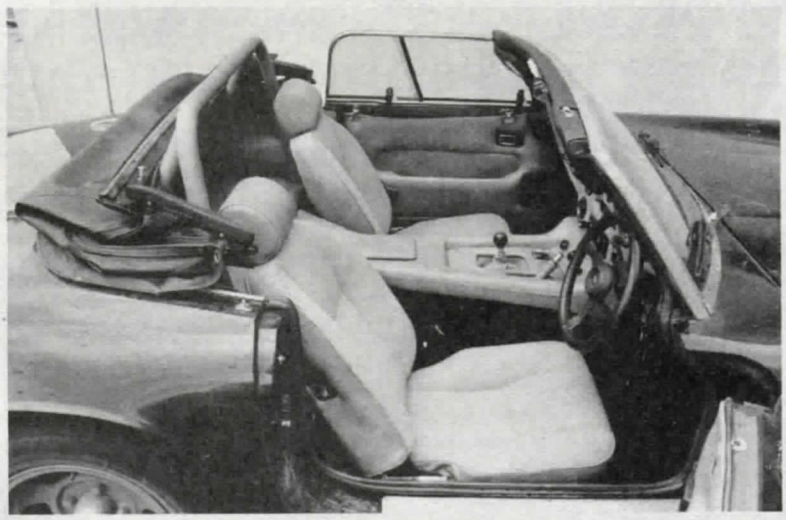
break traction even in a straight line and in a high gear, although leaving throttle effects aside, the tyres' hold on the road is quite respectable. Bumpy bends are another area where discretion — or quick reactions — are called for, as it's easily thrown off line by bumps.

Ride comfort (or lack of it) was an aspect of the TVR that few of our testers were agreed upon, other than that it is certainly very firm. Most did also agree that it was quite comfortable on relatively smooth surfaces, but on the rough stuff assessments ranged from "dismally bad" to "hard but not uncomfortable". Really it all depends on what you expect, or alternatively are prepared to tolerate, from a "real" sports car. It's worth mentioning that the ride seems better with the hood down, as suspension crashes and bangs are less apparent.

Although the hood appears to fit well and looks well made, it is not entirely waterproof (there are few things more dismal than sitting on wet seats), and if legal considerations don't ensure observance of the 70 mph limit on motorway runs, wind noise will; at high cruising speeds it's near intolerable with the hood up. The hood can either be folded back — in which condition it tends to obscure rearward vision, or removed completely — simple enough operations in either case — while the sidescreens are easily and quickly detachable.

Occupants suffer little buffeting with the hood down, thanks no doubt to the very low seating position which, on the other hand, was too low for short drivers. Otherwise, comfort at the wheel was rated quite good with a fair amount of legroom, good column stalks, well spaced pedals and comfortable (TR7?) seats. The fly in the ointment is the massive transmission tunnel with the gearlever perched on top and too far back for comfort, enforcing a somewhat contorted left arm when changing gear.

Above: a hefty roll cage, well padded, in case you loop the loop. Right: tacho to left of the steering wheel, speedo in front of the passenger... Below: comfortable seats, but low set



There are lots of traditionally styled instruments, scattered somewhat haphazardly across the facia, with oil pressure and water temperature gauges in front of the driver and then, from right to left, voltmeter, tachometer, boost gauge, clock, fuel gauge, and the speedometer right over on the far side of the facia in front of the passenger.

Standard equipment is far from comprehensive by near-£12,000 standards, the only notable items being alloy wheels, a laminated screen and petrol filler lock. More impressive, though, is the standard of finish, quite plush in appearance and neatly executed in padded leathercloth; the quality of glass-fibre construction is good, as is the paint finish, and although there were a few rattles from the bodywork, the chassis itself felt immensely strong and rigid.

Wind noise has already been mentioned. The engine is also far from quiet, though most of our testers liked the quality of the noise in spite of a rather surprising mid-range boom period; it's acceptable within the context of the car's character.

And therein lies the secret of the TVR's appeal, or lack of it, depending on your viewpoint. Surely the very reason for such a car's existence is that it makes no compromises. True, £11,500 seems a lot of money to pay for a basically unsophisticated ragtop that still has the aura of the kit car about it, and it's certainly not the car for everyone. But if it is your kind of car, if what you want is that proverbial "real" sports car that will outperform just about anything you're ever likely to meet on the road, what else is there at even twice the price?

PERFORMANCE

CONDITIONS

Weather	Wind 15-25 mph
Temperature	42°F
Barometer	29.3 in Hg
Surface	Wet tarmacadam
	MAXIMUM SPEEDS
	mph
Banked Circuit	see text
Terminal Speeds:	
at ¼ mile	98
at kilometre	121

Speed in gears (at 6500 rpm):

1st	45
2nd	72
3rd	99

ACCELERATION FROM REST

mph	sec
0-30	2.8
0-40	3.6
0-50	5.2
0-60	6.3
0-70	7.7
0-80	9.9
0-90	12.0
0-100	15.1
0-110	19.7
0-120	26.0
Stand'g ¼	14.3
Stand'g km	26.7

ACCELERATION IN TOP

mph	sec
20-40	8.0
30-50	7.9
40-60	8.0
50-70	7.0
60-80	6.3
70-90	5.8
80-100	5.8
90-110	7.1
100-120	10.8

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Touring*	20 mpg (estimate)
Overall	17.4 mpg
Fuel grade	97 octane (4 star)
Tank capacity	12 galls
Max range	240 miles

*Consumption midway between 30 mph and maximum less 5 per cent for acceleration.

WEIGHT

	cwt	kg
Unladen weight*	20.6	1047
Weight as tested	24.3	1234

*with fuel for approx 50 miles

Performance tests carried out by Motor's staff at the Motor Industry Research Association proving ground, Lindley.

GENERAL SPECIFICATION

ENGINE

Cylinders	6 in vee
Capacity	2994 cc (182.6 cu in)
Bore/stroke	93.97/72.41 mm (3.7/2.85 in)
Cooling	Water
Block	Cast iron
Head	Cast iron
Valves	Pushrod ohv
Cam drive	Toothed wheels
Compression	8.0:1
Carburetter	Weber twin-choke turbocharged
Bearings	4 main
Max power	265 bhp (DIN) at 5500 rpm
Max torque	275 lb ft (DIN) at 3500 rpm

TRANSMISSION

Type	4-speed manual
Clutch dia	9.5 in
Actuation	Cable

Internal ratios and mph/1000 rpm

Top	1.00:1/21.6
3rd	1.41:1/15.3
2nd	1.95:1/11.1
1st	3.16:1/6.8
Rev	3.35:1
Final drive	3.33:1

BODY/CHASSIS

Construction	Tubular steel chassis, glass-fibre body
Protection	Chassis stove enamelled

SUSPENSION

Front	Independent, coil springs, wishbones, telescopic dampers.
Rear	Independent, coil springs, wishbones, telescopic dampers.

STEERING

Type	Rack and pinion
Assistance	No

BRAKES

Front	10.85 in discs
Rear	9.0 in drums
Park	On rear
Servo	Yes
Circuit	Split, front/rear
Rear valve	No
Adjustment	On rear

WHEELS/TYRES

Type	Alloy, 6J x 14
Tyres	195/70 VR 14
Pressures	22/24 psi

ELECTRICAL

Battery	12V, 60 Ah
Earth	Negative
Generator	38Ah alternator