

Old flame

TRIDENT

Probably thanks to their humble backgrounds, limited production runs and chequered histories, Britain's vast numbers of widely varying specialist sports cars hold a real sense of mystery: once you become intrigued by one, the likelihood is that you'll soon want to know more about others. yet, for every enthusiast, there is always one marque in particular which becomes a real passion and, really, it is hardly surprising that so many car buffs are nowadays giving the Trident the attention it deserves. Here is a car which, in many ways, was well ahead of its time and could truly have been a British rival to all those Italian glamour machines. Sadly, though, the car never really 'happened', and today it is merely one of those desirable machines we look back on with fondness . . .

HISTORY

The origins of the Trident began with the Blackpool-based company of TVR, the specialist sports car concern set up in 1947 by Trevor Wilkinson. Towards the late 1950s, Wilkinson and his small band of enthusiastic craftsmen were busily engaged on styling a fixed head model, the Grantura, which was to form the basis of the company's production run for the next two decades and more. A stubby two-seater, the TVR had a character all its own and, fitted with a variety of engines and clothed with a distinctive GRP body, it soon found a ready market among the enthusiasts.

Soon TVRs became popular in America too, and by 1962 a certain Jack Griffith was busily engaged on building a derivative powered by an American 4.7-litre Ford V8 engine, the TVR's chassis design lending itself particularly well to this kind of modification while the comparatively lightweight body made the car perform extremely well.

The following year (1963) saw the development of a British prototype TVR V8, with the outcome that an agreement was signed between TVR and Griffith for the exporting of specially adapted TVRs to be sent—less power units—to the States where Ford V8 engines were to be installed. The resulting model was called the TVR Griffith and production started in 1964. This model, incidentally, was to go on and achieve quite a reputation!

The idea of introducing a restyled TVR had been mooted as early as 1962, for by this time the original shape was some six years old and lacked the flair which was so characteristic of the styles emerging from Italy. The first proposals were sketched by English born stylist, Trevor Fiore, during 1963, but TVR's management did not take up options on his work until 1964, when the project (named 'Trident' after Frank Costin's P5 prototype) was given the go-ahead. A standard TVR chassis was sent to Fissore's Italian workshops where work began on transforming the styling sketch into a prototype bodyshell.

Unfortunately, work had not been going long before Jack Griffith, who by this time was heavily involved with TVR, saw the Trident styling proposals and suggested that work be temporarily halted. He felt that if the car was to have a ready market in the States, then it would have to be fitted with a V8 engine (which would not fit the standard TVR chassis). Moreover, Griffith also suggested that the Trident ought to be a soft-top, which would make it even more attractive to the American buyer.

So work began on producing two lengthened TVR chassis, which were eventually fitted with 4.7 litre Ford V8 engines and sent out to Fissore. It was decided that, rather than completely upset the project by changing the design to a convertible, work should initially carry on with the coupés—the soft top version

being built at a later stage. It was arranged that both Tridents should appear at the 1965 Geneva Motor Show, with one car subsequently becoming the British prototype while the second would be sent for demonstration in America, production proper to begin in June that year. Everything sounded highly promising . . .

Indeed, the Tridents' reception at the Geneva Show was most encouraging. With their sleek, angular lines, the cars had a dateless appearance, so much a part of the styles which emerged from Italy during this period. They featured pop-up headlights and an impressive specification which placed their prospective market between those of the Aston Martin and the E-Type Jaguar.

But as June approached it was clear that production of the Trident would have to be deferred since TVR were undergoing considerable financial difficulties brought about by a prolonged dock strike (which had devastating effects on their American exports) and a less-than-healthy British market. Then, sadly, TVR Engineering Limited went into liquidation in August 1965, at which point the Trident saga was to take a dramatic turn.

Bill Last, a TVR agent in Woodbridge, Suffolk, had already been approached by TVR's Chairman, Arnold Burton, who asked Last if he would be prepared to take over the TVR company. But Last had refused, influenced no doubt by TVR's

Ken Morgan's customised car (left) features obvious differences to George Towkesbury's standard car in this front view . . .



erratic career. No, what Last was interested in was the Trident, which, with its impressive styling and specification, was in his view a far better bet for a good future. So Last approached Fiore regarding the design rights of the Trident, while at the same time ordering a convertible version and acquiring the original body plug. Soon after, a specially adapted Austin Healey 3000 chassis—modified to accept a Ford V8 engine—was sent to Italy for work to begin on building a Trident convertible.

Last's programme was for a Trident convertible and a coupe to be exhibited at the Racing Car Show in January 1966, with production starting soon after. In the event, the appearance of the Tridents at the show proved a huge success, and caused a little surprise since, by this time, Arthur Lilley and his son Martin had bought the assets of TVR from the receiver and had thought that these included the Trident project!

As for Last, he had already decided that the existing Trident, the design which had aroused so much interest at the 1966 Show, was not quite what he had in mind. So, another car was ordered from Fissore, this time slightly longer and wider to improve its appearance still further and give more interior room. Fissore was contracted to produce another prototype, a coupé this time, as well as the body moulds (Fissore had suggested manufacturing the complete production bodies, but Last discounted this suggestion as being too costly). But, despite the fact that Last had supplied many of the components, when the prototype finally arrived in Britain it was found to contain many Italian fittings—which meant even more redesign work to enable British equivalents to be fitted. When, eventually, the Trident was completed, it was exhibited at the 1967 Racing Car Show on the Trident Car Company stand.

Despite the withdrawal of the Austin Healey from production, Last made special arrangements for the Healey chassis to be manufactured for him by Sankeys and that year, 1967 saw production begin with the Trident coupé being offered in kit form at £1923. With its V8 engine, performance



*Pilot's cabin for a V8 Trident and pretty plush it is too!
This is George Tewkesbury's car.*

was impressive with a 0-60 time of only 5.0 seconds and a maximum speed of 150mph. The car's specification included leather upholstery, electric windows and a radio as standard items.

Soon after production got under way, Trident began offering the car with the Ford V6 engine as an option, and prices ranged from £1840 in kit form to £2400 ready assembled. Performance was less impressive with only 148bhp on tap, and the leather trim and electric windows gave way to pvc and manual winders. Even so, the V6 Trident was still an impressive machine by any standards.

1968 saw the company move to a new location in Woodbridge, Suffolk. Meanwhile, earlier criticisms over the lack of detail finish had been attended to, while an export market to the States was increasing with these cars being fitted with the 302 cu. in. Mustang engine, which complied with the American emission regulations. By 1969 some 29 Tridents had been built, of which 20 had been exported to America. 1969 also saw the company move yet again, this time to 10,000 sq. ft. premises in Ipswich, and an appearance

was again made at the Racing Car Show in London. Also, the Trident chassis was changed from the old Healey type to the Triumph TR6 unit which featured i.r.s. By now, V8 Tridents were known as Clipper and the V6 models were called Venturers.

By now, sales of the Trident were encouraging enough for a dealer network to be established. However, for a small company (at their peak Trident employed only 30-odd staff) the greatest difficulty was the supply of components. As the availability of one item dried up, so another had to be substituted, creating a production nightmare. A strike at Ford, for example, had a dramatic effect on the supply of engines.

In 1971, Trident replaced the American Ford V8 engine with the 5.4-litre Chrysler unit, the car becoming known as the Trident V8 Super 300. Also, to supplement the erratic supplies of the Ford V6 engine, Trident began offering the 150bhp Triumph TR6 fuel injection unit, although in the event few of these cars were made. In an attempt to rationalise production, the V8 and V6 cars were available only in ready-assembled form, while all cars received a restyled front and were fitted with an opening tail gate. Prices ranged from £2876 for the Venturer to £4251 for the V8 Clipper.

But despite a concerted effort to keep production under way, a growing financial crisis saw Trident Cars Limited go into liquidation in 1972. An associate company, Viking Performance, was able to maintain a servicing agency and provide spares for customers' cars. Now came a period in the wilderness for an exotic car which had never really gained the success it deserved, but, eventually, in 1976, Bill Last was approached by an American investor who suggested that if he supplied the factory, stock, plant and experience, then finance could be made available to put the Trident back into production. A new company was formed called the Trident Motor Company, and arrangements were made ▶

... and also at the rear. Large lights are an improvement on the Morgan car but perhaps those arch flares aren't!







to start production once more with the car being exhibited at the 1976 Earls Court Motor Show.

While the general specification remained unchanged, only the V6 and V8 cars were available, the latter with the 6-litre Chrysler power unit. However, the revival was to be short-lived for, by the middle of 1977, the project had moved into liquidation yet again, with a total of some 130 Tridents having been made.

And at that point the Trident was finally laid to rest. Superb looks, oodles of power, a luxury cockpit and great promise, it still had all those assets but sadly now had virtually no chance of ever gaining the glory it deserved. Other than with enthusiasts who would, in future years, restore and cherish examples of the marque and perhaps even turn them into classics.

OWNER'S IMPRESSIONS—1

George Tewkesbury is an American working and living in the UK. His primary interest, he says, is in British sports cars, and a Sunbeam Alpine, Sunbeam Tiger, as well as an MG Midget and several big Healeys, are among the cars he has owned. He says he got to know of the Trident's existence through the odd article in motoring magazines during its production period, but never bought one at the time. Then he began looking around for a TVR Griffith V8 to restore, but very soon found that there were none to be had. So when a Trident was advertised in the columns of the *Exchange and Mart* he went along to have a look . . .

On further investigation, the Trident for sale, a V8 Clipper in fact, was found to be in less than first class order. To begin with, there was no glass, and George says he was handed what remained of the interior in a manure bag! However, despite this depressing state of affairs, the car turned out to be a good buy since structurally it was in sound condition which made it an excellent basis for renovation.

George says that the Trident is very like the TVR Griffith in that its attraction lies in a combination of style and power. The

Trident has, he says, a timeless shape. Although he is careful to point out that he always takes his restoration projects in step-by-step stages, clearly the condition of the Trident called for a considerable amount of work. He enjoys working in his garage, but trying to find all the missing parts to put the Trident back together again was, he says, very much like completing a jigsaw puzzle!

George describes his Trident's interior now as being about the way he wants it, with the engine compartment requiring a little more work before that too is finished. His summer project for 1982 is to wire brush the chassis and treat it with red oxide and Hammerite. With the Trident back on the road, George is able to reassess it and describes the car as "exhilarating" to drive. His prerequisite for any car of this kind is that it should have good acceleration. This the Trident has. He says it is the most interesting car he has ever owned.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of George's Trident is that while he was at the Brighton Classic Car Show in 1981, someone came up to the Trident Club Stand and told George that he thought his car was the first production Trident. Apparently, all the indications are that this may well be the case.

OWNER'S IMPRESSIONS—2

Ken Morgan is the driving force behind the Trident Owners Club. He saw his first Trident at the 1976 Earls Court Motor Show, where he was immediately impressed by its shape, thinking that it had to be of Italian origin. Not surprisingly, he was amazed to find that it was a British car made by a small company in Suffolk.

Later, when Ken decided to sell his 3.8 Jaguar, he remembered the Trident and decided to put an advert in the 'wanted' columns of *Exchange and Mart*. The result of this was several replies, and of these the most promising seemed a V8 Clipper owned by a policeman in Hull. Ken got in touch with him and they agreed to meet at a service area on the M1.

The car turned out to be metallic blue,

and while its basic condition was very sound, it really needed a complete respray. Having bought the car, Ken ran it for about six months before taking it off the road for a thorough refurbishing. But he admits that at the time he was more interested in the marine world than motoring, turning his attention temporarily to yachting.

However, he soon recovered from this relapse (!) and began the task of putting the Trident into first-class condition. The body was stripped down to bare GRP and modified to take Porsche rear lamp clusters before being sprayed with some *twelve* coats of paint. The chassis was scraped and treated and the suspension rebuilt using new bushes. Also, the rear lever arm dampers were changed to adjustable telescopic. As for the power unit, Ken says that the car had only done about 34,000 miles so he just removed the cylinder heads and reconditioned them, leaving the engine in situ. He also put in a Crane camshaft and rewired the entire car because the original wiring was a bit of a mess.

Inside the Trident, Ken modified the seats and altered the area behind, removing the occasional seats and putting in a removable false floor to improve storage space. The battery was moved to the rear of the car and extra instruments were fitted to the dashboard.

For Ken, the attraction of the Trident is a combination of the V8 power unit (which gives the car impressive performance), its character and style (which he feels are more than a match for many contemporary models), and its refinements such as the hide upholstery and electric windows. He admits that he has stronger feelings about his Trident today than he did when he first bought it, saying that quite an affection has built up between them.

Ken first thought of starting a club for Trident owners around December 1980, with the first advertisements inviting interested owners to apply appearing in motoring journals in early 1981. From then the club has not looked back, with members both in this country and abroad. The club will be exhibiting at the Classic Car Show in Brighton this year and at Knebworth House on August 1st.

When it comes to cars, Ken feels that more and more people are looking for something a little bit different, with the result that interest in cars like the Trident is increasing all the time.

CONCLUSION

Today the Trident project emerges as something of an enigma. Its styling was dateless and it benefited from Harold Radford and Delaney Galley's expertise, these men giving advice on interior trim and ventilation. Yet the car's production engineering was weak and the company's public relations programme non-existent; few cars were ever road tested to bring the marque to enthusiasts' attention. Nevertheless, the Trident is still a very desirable car for those who want performance, style and individuality. And, surely, it is fast becoming a classic.

Clean and tidy engine compartment on the Morgan car. There's a V8 under there somewhere! Engine access is superb

