

Popular

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Motoring



small, successful & British



**Confessions of
a rally driver**



**DIY gas welding
and brazing**



**Diesel v petrol
Golf match**

YOU'VE NO DOUBT seen the BP television ad where the man describes a successful company, then advises you to sit down because, surprise, surprise, it's actually British.

Well take a seat, 'cause I'm going to tell you a story about a prosperous British car manufacturer. I know it sounds unlikely in this time of recession, falling sales, massive foreign imports, doom and despondency, but it's true. Up there in the land of illuminations and Blackpool rock, TVR Sports Cars have got their staff of 86 working flat out five and a half days a week to keep up with orders.

Long associated with muscular glassfibre-bodied sports cars, but perhaps better known to enthusiasts rather than the general motoring public, TVR have at last hit the headlines with their stylish Tasmin Coupe, which was launched early last year.

Along with its more recently introduced Convertible and Plus Two stablemates, the Coupe is selling extremely well.

Things haven't always been so good for what is one of Britain's few independent motor manufacturers, in fact the original company founded by Trevor Wilkinson (the name is derived from TreVoR) went into liquidation in 1965, when the assets were bought out by existing bossman, Martin Lilley.

Wilkinson is now producing another sort of glassfibre product — fishponds — in the original Grantura Engineering site (that was the name of the company), but his creation has gone from strength to strength under the dedicated direction of former racing driver Lilley.

An average of five cars a week leave the Blackpool factory, which may not sound a lot compared with the thousands ejaculating from the production lines at, say, Ford; but as Martin Lilley proudly points out: "Every car we sell is one less Porsche coming into the country."

Production takes two to three weeks, from the glassfibre going into the mould to the completed car coming off the ramp at the end of the line.

Although they probably don't know it, it was Ford who hastened the Tasmin's introduction. Although it was on the TVR drawing board, the warning by Ford that they would be ceasing supply of the three-litre 'Essex' engine used in the 'M' series prompted them to go ahead with production of the Tasmin, using the more modern German-built 2.8 litre V6. This would not fit the old model.

I recently paid a visit to the TVR factory on a cold late November day along with photographer Rod Sloane.

Below: TVR line-up from left to right: the no longer produced 3000M, hatchback Taimar and Convertible Turbo; the Coupe Tasmin, and in the foreground the very stylish Plus Two. The Tasmin Convertible is missing.



Brash, beautiful & British

Blackpool, that twilight land of sticky rock and 'what the butler saw' machines, is also the home of one of Britain's last hand-built sports car makers.

Healey, Alvis, Jensen and other once great names have gone. Tragic testimony to the decline of Britain's automotive industry.

TVR nearly followed into the unfeeling hands of the receiver, but swift intervention by a 22-year-old with vision and enthusiasm created a success out of failure and proved that British can still be best.

Hold your head up high and wipe back that tear as **John Pearson** tells the tale . . .



Work starts by laying up the glassfibre in a base mould, while top and bottom sections are clamped together in moulds just behind completed body shell.



Although I had to force myself out of bed at an ungodly hour, once there it was all worthwhile. I've been around other car producing plants, but the atmosphere at TVR was something else. Everyone on the shop floor seemed to be working as a team, and they all had great pride and admiration in their product.

They also have considerable respect for Martin Lilley, who's often seen with his shirt sleeves rolled up helping them out.

There are no union members at TVR (which didn't go down too well with Red Rod, who's our NUJ official) but even he had to admit the system was working well with no industrial problems — and every production worker is (happily) on the same wage, regardless of the job he or she does.

The TVR factory is divided into three main areas: there's the main assembly shop (fronted by the offices), and the smaller paint and body shops.

Our guided tour started in the body shop. The tough glassfibre bodies are laid up in bath-like moulds, the same base ones being used for the original Tasmin Coupe and Convertible, but the longer Plus Two has a separate mould.

After being lifted out of the mould, the body is rubbed down — much of it by hand



After leaving the moulds the shells are rubbed down and carefully examined for pin-holes. A Coupe is in the foreground and a Convertible behind.

— to find any pin-holes or blemishes, which are then filled. Next it's 'cured' under a battery of very hot infra-red lamps, which basically dry out everything and ensure that the glassfibre and filler expand and contract together in hot or cold conditions (and the filler doesn't drop out).

TVR also produce all the body accessories such as spoilers, doors and dashboard in a separate part of the body shop.

Next stage for the bare body shell, which weighs approximately 240lb, is to be wheeled on its trolley to the paint shop where it gets one coat of primer before being thoroughly examined for blemishes or surface irregularities. Apparently it can be checked more easily when painted.

Rejects are few and far between due to the high standard of preparation — and if anyone's had a close look at a TVR body they'll know what I mean. Glassfibre it may be, but it's good.

If everything is okay, the remaining under and top coats of paint are hand-sprayed, then baked in one of two ovens.

While all this is happening some Chinese

The man and his cars



MARTIN LILLEY was just 22 years old when he sold a successful garage business to resurrect the bankrupt TVR Sports Cars. Quite a gamble, but Lilley's dedication and single-mindedness have helped him and his company through good times and bad to the thriving position they are in today — 15 years later.

A quiet, introvert man, Lilley could be mistaken for a gentleman farmer with his sports jacket and ruddy complexion; but his talents are definitely not agricultural when it comes to designing and producing exciting sports cars.

Lilley's love affair with TVR started when he raced a V8-engined Griffith TVR back in 1961. That car took him to some reasonable successes against such notables as Gerry Marshall.

His enthusiasm for it led him to purchase £1,000-worth of Grantura Engineering (TVR) shares, but things didn't work out very profitably, as Lilley dejectedly remembers: "They went bankrupt a week later!"

Most people would have cut their losses and got out after this, but Martyn Lilley didn't want that to be the end of the TVR sports car, so he sold his garage and bought out the few remaining assets.

Production started and eventually outgrew the original premises, which were in an old brickworks, forcing a move in 1970 to the main part of the existing Bristol Avenue site. They took over the bodyshop a year later.

It was in 1977 that Martin Lilley decided to build a new car for the 1980s. Although the 'M' series was selling well, it was starting to look slightly dated and obviously couldn't last forever.

He decided to use the same basic format as the existing car, with a glassfibre body on a tubular steel chassis, but with an extensively revised chassis and body.

Lilley takes up the story: "We decided to go for a modern, new style, designed as much from the inside as the outside so it would be easy to get in and out of with a good driving position."

Development of the Tasmin really started in 1978 and TVR had a prototype running at the end of that year — due

mainly to the round-the-clock efforts of Martin Lilley. As one of his production workers told me: "Lots of times I've driven past the works at 10 or 11 o'clock at night and the boss has been working away in his office."

Very much a car enthusiast, Lilley was obviously upset to have to crash one of his creations into a brick wall for Type Approval tests.

"I agree with it for mass production cars for everyday motorists, but our cars are designed for drivers.

"We know the steering column will not push into the driver's chest in an accident — it is designed to pull the other way — but we had to crash it into a wall to prove it."

Although not actively competing in motor sport nowadays, Martin Lilley is still very much involved by sponsoring Colin Blower in a 3-litre convertible. The TVR has proven highly competitive, with Blower winning two production sports car championships.

Lilley is justifiably proud of this success, but wishes his company had more money to capitalise on it with advertising. It's not sour grapes when he bemoans: "I wish we could be like BL; they took full page adverts in the national newspapers after the big Rover had won a club race at Donington. We've won two championships, but can't afford to tell anyone."

As TVR has been involved with turbocharging in the past, the obvious question is when are they going to produce a turbo Tasmin? Martin Lilley proudly pointed out: "We were the first with a turbo-charged production car."

TVR don't have the necessary facilities for extensive development work, so they have entrusted German engineer May Michel with the job. Michel was involved with Jaguar on their V12, and has 4,500 turbos running in Germany.

A turbo Tasmin should be available later this year with, interestingly, a normal compression ratio instead of the more common reduced compression used with most turbo systems.

Having driven the quick, normally aspirated Tasmin, this should definitely be worth waiting for.



Looking more like a car now, a Coupe gets its seats and interior trim.

puzzles of tubing are being assembled and argon-arc welded together over the other side of the yard in the chassis assembly part of the main production area.

Anyone in sympathy with Mary Whitehouse and her organisation had better not go in there — the walls are papered with pictures of ladies in various poses, some of which permit extensive gynaecological examination, if you get what I mean. I bet they've got the centre pages from last month's Popular Motoring pinned on the wall by now.

The completed chassis units are then taken to the Adlington, Cheshire, based Intermetco where they're dipped in red oxide to prevent corrosion and then black paint.

Back at the factory the chassis units are built up with engines, front and rear suspension, exhausts, brakes and wheels. TVR use their own designed Talcast built wheels.

A company the size of TVR just cannot produce all its own components, so quite a number are bought in from outside. As I've already mentioned, the engine is the German-built Ford 2.8 litre Granada engine which produces 160bhp at 5,700rpm.

The independent front suspension with wishbones and coil springs is also Ford, from the MkIV Cortina, but the also independent rear end is TVR designed with a Jaguar XJS diff unit.

The really observant might even spot Capri door handles and TR7 switches.

The body comes out of the paint shop and is fitted with its pop-up lights, brake servo, wiper motor and wiring.

You might imagine that TVR would buy in wiring looms from someone like Lucas, but in fact they are made up at the factory by a girl who produces one a day, threading each wire over a specially laid out board. Boring work, but she apparently enjoys it.

Mating of the body and chassis units is under a giant gantry, after which they're bolted together.

The Coupes are just about finished at this stage, they get seats, carpets and trim, then go on to the ramp for all pipe and hoses to be connected up and the brakes bled. The Convertible, however, still needs to have its hood made up. This is, I suppose, where you get the difference between hand-built and mass-produced cars — each hood is furnished separately to make sure it is an exact fit.

Finally, the finished car is driven out of the factory doors for road testing, first by the production manager and then by either Martin Lilley or Sales Director Stewart Halstead.

Tasmin road test

QUITE A DECEPTIVE car the TVR Tasmin. No disrespect meant, but at first glance it looks somewhat more graceful and dainty than its muscular predecessor, the 'M' Series.

But slide into that well thought out cockpit behind the deeply dished Springalex steering wheel and drive for a few miles — and you'll change your mind. Dainty it ain't.

Although a lot more refined than the previous model, it's still very much a 'driver's' performance car — definitely butch.

We just had to test a Tasmin as part of this feature; trouble is TVR are selling all the cars they can produce, so spare ones are non-existent. My chance came when TVR's development car was just down the A47 from us at Hinckley for some engineering work, and was free for a day.

Driving back along the twisting A47 the Tasmin's character very quickly became apparent. At low speeds the steering feels heavy — and would prove excessively so for women drivers, but when travelling more quickly it feels very accurate.

It would be silly to expect anything but firm suspension on a car like the Tasmin, and it sits firmly on the road, rolling little even when cornering hard. Handling is predictably neutral at most speeds, but the tail can be hung out if the go pedal is pressed a little too much. Great fun though.

Although very much a sportster, the Tasmin also makes an ideal long distance cruiser. At the legal limit the V6 is only burbling along at 3,000rpm, and it will happily cruise at much higher speeds.

The Tasmin is one of those cars that never seems to be going as fast as it actually is — and could soon get unsuspecting owners who don't keep an eye on the speedo some black marks on their licence.

The consumption over our 250-mile test can hardly be described as representative, but we guess the overall figure in the lower twenties is about right.

Our test car was the original two-seater coupe, which is strictly that; there's no room for rear passengers at all. Mind you, there's plenty of luggage space.

The low seating position in some sports cars can make them tricky to reverse but the Tasmin's glass panel across the rear solves this problem. Even Terry Gray managed to park it without hitting anything.

The day of the Tasmin ended all too quickly and I was once again heading back

along the road to Hinckley. Halfway there it started to rain — which made things a little tricky, to say the least. Definite restraint is needed on behalf of the right foot.

At £12,800 the Tasmin is not cheap, but for your money you get an exciting and attractive BRITISH sports car.

PERFORMANCE

0-30	3.4
0-40	4.9
0-50	6.5
0-60	8.9
0-70	10.3

Standing start ¼ mile	16.5 secs
Max speeds in: 1st	44mph
2nd	73mph
3rd	99mph
Top (best)	132mph

ECONOMY

Overall fuel consumption	22.1
●Note this figure was recorded over one day's driving instead of our usual week to 10 days. However, we consider it representative of what most drivers would achieve.	
Fuel tank capacity	14 galls
Fuel grade	★★★★
Effective range	200 miles

TECHNICAL INFO

Engine: Six cylinder vee. Capacity 2,792cc (93mm bore, 68.5mm stroke). Compression ratio 9.2:1. Max power 160bhp at 5,700rpm. Max torque 162lb ft at 4,300rpm.
Transmission: Four speed gearbox, rear drive.
Suspension: Independent, coil springs and dampers front and rear.
Steering: Rack and pinion, 3.7 turns lock to lock.

