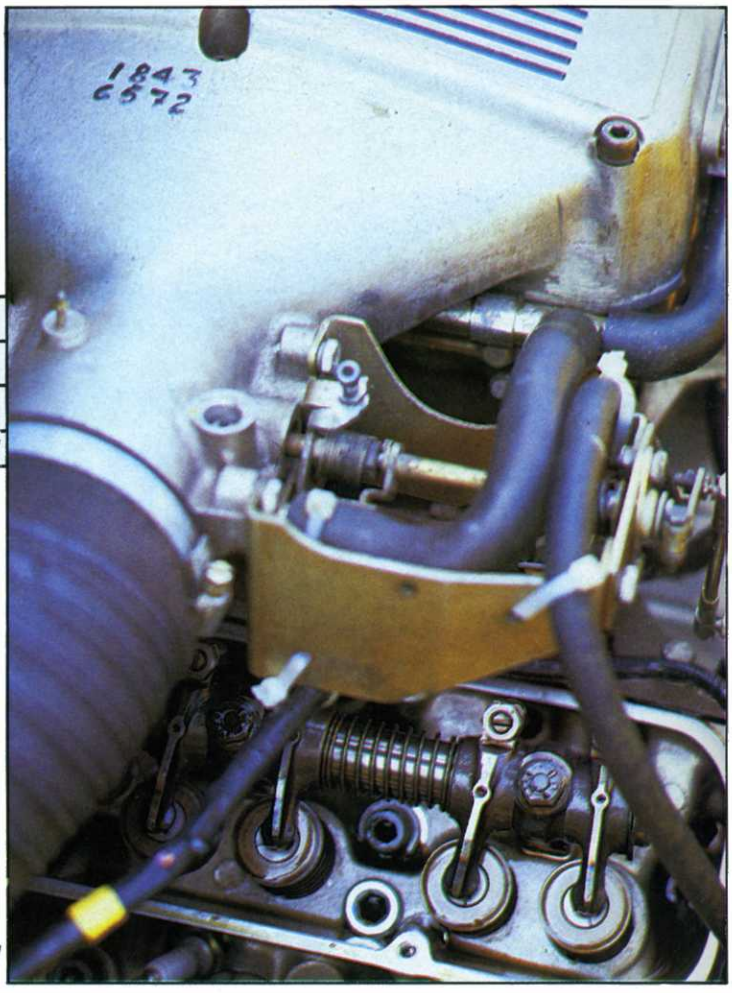
YELLOW FEVER

TVR's latest production sports racer is a stomping mix of glitz, grunt and go-for-it

Track test: Art Markus Photography: Tim Andrew



"Like a frightened mahout on a runaway bull elephant": our man grapples with TVR's fearsome 420 SEAC. Right: heavily re-worked Rover V8 engine produces a ground-shaking 365bhp. Opposite page, left: TVR corners flat, and fast, on heavily up-rated springs. Right: In a crisis the Royal Navy could launch Harriers off TVR's rear wing

When TVR sent us a press release about their racing exploits with their new 420 SEAC, we thought they were joking. It races in the 750MC's *Sporting Cars* Roadgoing Sports Cars Championship, it said; and in the BARC (NW) Sports and Saloon Challenge . . . in the production class. "Production?" we spluttered. "But look at that rear wing – like the flight deck of the Ark Royal – and that streamlined nose. No TVR we've ever seen looked like that!"

Well, it seems that the joke was on us. For some months now, the Blackpool low-volume sports car manufacturer has offered replicas of the 'works' racer for sale. A good number have already gone to wealthy buyers, most of them German.

Company chairman Peter Wheeler, you see, is totally and absolutely dedicated to the principle of making fast cars. Anything that might slow his products down is anathema to him; anything that might make them faster brings a gleam to his eye. Hence the 420 SEAC. The 420 denotes, as you might expect, engine capacity: the Rover-derived V8 has been extensively re-worked by TVR, to give a capacity of 4.2 litres.

Bore is increased from 71 to 77mm, with special Cosworth pistons giving a compression ratio of 10.5:1, while a special crankshaft, machined from a solid billet, sees to an increase in stroke. By the time TVR has incorporated a camshaft to its own specifications, and sundry other internal modifications, there is clearly not much left of the original Rover engine. In fact, TVR feels justified in claiming the engine as its own. Fair enough.

Perhaps more interesting is TVR's increasing fascination with lightweight materials. The 'AC' tacked onto the end of the existing SE (Special Equipment) designation, stands for Aramid Composite, the material used in the new body construction.

It is unusual, but very gratifying, to see such a furious pace of development, in a company the likes of TVR, whose comparatively modest annual production figures mean that development costs must be spread over a small number of vehicles. A tribute to the enthusiasm and drive of chairman Wheeler, who contrives to be both highly-respected and well-liked at the same time.

What's more, the company philosophy of constant improvement seems to be working, for demand is increasing all the time. Essentially, the company is now concentrating on the production of convertibles, with only the occasional hardtop coming off the line. Think about it. What other reasonably modern open-top sports car offers anything like the same performance at anything like the price?

Body styling is also subject to continual improvement, with the racer perhaps being the ultimate expression of the modern, mucho macho wedge theme. It features a shortened nose with a full-width perspex panel covering the licence plate, indicators and driving lights. All very Corvette. The deep front spoiler is almost certainly too low for street use, though.

Almost unnoticed, the abrupt and ungainly break in the line of the bonnet, which so marred the appearance of earlier examples of the TVR, has gone, replaced by a softer, more flowing line. More than anything else, that one change has transformed the TVR – where once it didn't look quite right, now it looks 'the business'. Obviously then, the canary yellow 420 SEAC racer is both a mobile test-bed, and a showpiece and publicity tool for TVR.

It is driven by the experienced Steve Cole, perhaps best known for his exploits at the wheel of a fearsome Morgan +8. He began his racing career in 1978 with a Ginetta, before having a season in the frantic Renault 5RS championship in 1979. However, in 1980 he moved on to the fabulous +8, and over the next five seasons steadily improved the car, earning a reputation as a fast and fearless driver, and becoming prod-sports champion in 1982.

He has also competed occasionally in Sports 2000, FF 2000, and Thundersports, as well as winning one of the infamous Shellsport Celebrity races in a Sunbeam ti in 1980 – a win he remembers with particular pleasure, not least because of the quality of the opposition. Cole and the TVR seem made for each other. With his experience of the fast, powerful and occasionally wayward Morgan, Cole was the logical choice of driver to tame the 420 SEAC; while for the Liverpool newsagent, the TVR was the ideal tool to counter the growing threat of the more modern machinery in production sports car racing.

TVR's competition programme is directed by the vastly experienced Chris Schirle; among his many credits, Schirle was general manager of Broadspeed – the company whose preparation standards ushered in a new era of professionalism in British and European saloon car racing – and has worked at the highest levels of Formula One and Indycar racing. The actual preparation of the car is entrusted to race engineer Dave Bentley, while 'truckie' Mick Taylor transports the car to and from the circuits, also assisting on race and test days.

Interestingly, the company's heavily signwritten transporter is used during the week to ferry the production TVRs to the docks, prior to their shipment to the USA. A clever way of maximising resources, while generating some useful publicity at the same time. Obviously, there are some astute minds at work in Blackpool.

Because of its reasonable proximity to the factory, the picturesque, but bumpy and tricky, parkland setting of Oulton Park was chosen for our test. Naturally, photographer Tim Andrew was delighted. Our intrepid driver was not. Never have the flat, featureless, but *safe* wastes of Silverstone's Club Circuit seemed so attractive. Chris Schirle did little to ground the squadron of butterflies in my stomach as I prepared to venture onto the circuit. "It is not a toy", he intoned solemnly. "It is a serious motor car. You have to treat it with respect."

Because the racer has an open exhaust, a different camshaft, and a slightly raised compression ratio, it produces even more power than the road cars – some 365bhp. And with a big, fat, torque curve to match. Cole had already briefed me: "Don't use more than 6200rpm – just use the torque. You won't need fifth." The gearbox is the normal Rover five-speed (Schirle is working on a Getrag option) with a 3.54:1 rear axle ratio.

Race engineer Dave Bentley helped me get comfortable, adjusting the seat, tightening the belts. Cole sits very low in the car, partly because it is good for the centre of gravity, and partly because headroom is limited. Because it is inevitably better aerodynamically, the TVR races with the soft-top erect. In fact, the term soft-top is a bit of a misnomer; because it remains permanently fixed, it has been treated to an internal skin of rigid glass-fibre, thus preserving the appearance, but preventing any flapping or bowing out at speed. As a sop to ventilation, though, and to keep cockpit temperatures reasonable on a very hot day, we kept the window wound down.

My first impression, then, as I burble gently out of the pit lane towards Old Hall, is of that wonderful V8 beat wafting in through the open window. Music . . . sheer music. Say what you like about the ear-splitting scream of a high-revving four, or the blood-curdling howl of a six, you can't beat a good V8! Down through Cascades, and the steering feels perfect; accurate, quick, nicely-weighted and with plenty of feel. The wheel is perfectly placed (the column

is adjustable) and exactly the right size.

Through Cascades in third, then up to fourth for the run to the very tight hairpin. And there, the first problem manifests itself; the old TVR bugbear of the awkwardly placed gearshift lever. It is well back, and seems very high, at least in relation to the low seating position. Cole has assured me, though, that you soon adapt to it, and it seems that he is right. Within a few laps, I don't think about it any more.

One of the curious aspects of driving a V8 is that, despite the noise they make, and despite the huge amount of torque they produce, they often don't *feel* very fast. It is only when you get to the end of a straight, with the next corner looming, that you realise how rapidly you have been propelled from the last corner, and how fast you're going, and will the brakes be up to it, and . . . *ohmigawd!* Seriously, I didn't have any problems, simply because, in the relatively few laps I was able to do, I didn't get close to the fat Michelin slicks' limits of adhesion, (the car also runs on Bridgestone's new RE71 road radials in some races) but the engine has a mesmeric quality when it's on full song.

A reminder of its sheer grunt came on the very quick run up Clay Hill, a slight, but bumpy, left, which you scarcely notice in some cars – it is more of a curved straight than a corner. But the TVR – on its heavily uprated (750lb.in rather in 360lb.in) springs – seemed determined to charge into the bushes on the right of the circuit, with me desperately handing on to the wheel, like a frightened mahout on a runaway bull elephant! It undoubtedly felt more frightening than it really was. We asked Steve Cole about it later. "They all do that!" he replied, quick as a flash – maybe he used to be a motor trader . . . . "The Morgan used to leap right off the ground up there." Brave man.

I'm ashamed to say that I never quite got up Clay Hill without feathering the throttle . . . .

At the top of Clay Hill is Druids Bend, a very fast double-apex right-hander. It is always a bit of a scramble, as you need to try and straighten the car up (you're still turning left as you approach), before a quick stab at the brakes and a single downshift gets you set up for the corner. As you approach, you can't see the more important second apex, and as you sweep through, you can't see your exit point, which is hidden by a shallow brow. It was there, on one lap, that the tail stepped briefly out of line under full power, presumably as the tyres were unweighted over the brow. I closed my eyes. When I opened them we were still heading towards Lodge. "Good car" I thought, giving it an appreciative pat on the steering wheel. "Good car."

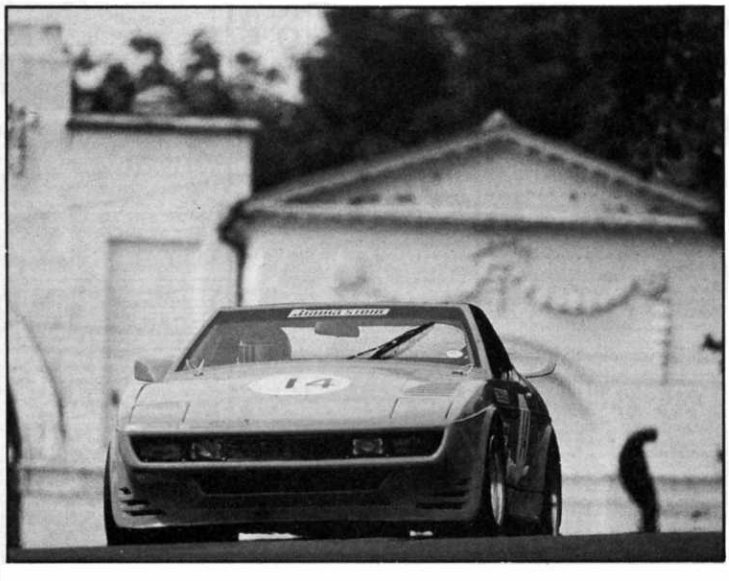
At Lodge, I could detect just a trace of understeer as I cranked the wheel over, but it was gone so quickly as the slicks bit, it was sometimes difficult to know whether I'd imagined it. But it was at the ludicrously-tight hairpin that I had the most fun, changing all the way down to first gear, blipping the throttle with exaggerated care, revelling in the noise. *Va-rooom-aaah. Va-rooom-aaah. Va-rooom-aaah.* Turn in; start to accelerate. Bumpity-thump. Damn, I've run over the cobbles on the inside kerb. Must get that right next lap.

Next lap, OK; but on the next, I'm on those cobbles again. I scold myself inside my helmet. It is only much later, on quiet reflection, that I understand why I've had such difficulty steering precisely. Because the seating position is so low, I can't see anything of the bonnet or front wings, so there is nothing to sight along (page 164 in *The Racing Driver's Book of Excuses).*

Obviously, this is not a problem for regular driver Cole, whose familiarity with the car is such that he can slide it around at will. But it doesn't help a driver new to the car. Fortunately, the chassis gives the driver a lot of 'feel', which is a big help. Curiously, many race vehicles offer the opposite characteristics; good visibility, but very little feel.

None of the above is intended as a criticism of the mighty TVR, which is obviously a highly effective race car. On the day of our drive, Cole was preparing for a round of BARC Sports-Saloon Challenge, in which he won his class with ease, placing third overall, and setting a new lap record, in a staggering 1 minute 29.9 seonds.

Peter Wheeler's company makes *fast* cars. ■

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