

SINCE TREVOR WILKINSON PRODUCED HIS FIRST CAR IN 1947, TVR HAVE COME A LONG WAY. PAUL CHUDECKI TAKES US THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT STAGES OF THIS BRITISH SPORTING CAR CONCERN

# DESTINATIONS UNLIMITED

**V**ery few of the small specialist car manufacturers of the 50's have survived to flourish in the 80's and even those that have, have suffered severe financial difficulties en route at one time or another. Many who struggled through to the 70's have since disappeared, very often the victims of a fluctuating economy, an over ambitious development programme and an ever changing and increasingly competitive market. Amongst the survivors, such as Aston Martin, Bristol, Lotus, Marcos and Morgan to name a few, TVR can now justifiably hold its head high and look to the future with optimism. Like Lotus and Marcos, it has finally thrown off the stigma of the kit car image and is manufacturing a product that can hold its own in the market place at home and abroad.

It all began in 1947 when 23 year old Trevor Wilkinson, an engineer and sports car enthusiast, decided to build his own car. His first was, in fact, a special two seat sports bodied Alvis Firebird chassis, various one-offs following, but within two years he had designed and built his own multitubular chassis which he sold under the name of TVR Engineering (previously he had called his concern Trevcar Motors). The initials coming from his own Christian name. This first TVR used the then ubiquitous Ford 1172cc sidevalve engine and gearbox, mated to a Morris Eight rear axle. Very soon it began to be successful in club racing which increased interest in the new car from Blackpool and by 1952 production of the TVR Coupe was underway, it being offered in either kit or complete form. Wilkinson found, like many other small manufacturers of the era, and indeed the present day, that economics necessitated sourcing engines and gearboxes from large producers though many of the cars other components were manufactured in-house.

By 1955 interest had spread to America and the TVR was now available with the Coventry Climax motor. Wilkinson had joined forces in the States with Saidel Sports Racing Cars of Manchester, New Hampshire to produce the Jomar, a special bodied TVR built by Ray Saidel and named after his two children, John and Margaret. The union came about after Saidel saw an advertisement for TVR cars and tested one in 1955, after which he wrote to Wilkinson enquiring if he could be supplied with Coventry Climax engined chassis to which he would fit his own alloy bodies. Two were

duly completed with an open two seat body but when Wilkinson offered Saidel the chance to import the TVR Coupe complete, Saidel quickly agreed. For a while the Coupe was marketed under the Jomar name and was successful in sportscar racing, but in 1957 it appeared as a TVR Coupe at the New York Auto Show where it was well received, leading to an increase in production, which had moved the previous year from Beverley Grove to Layton. An original brochure describes the car as a 'true race bred touring car' with cornering and road-holding 'absolutely unequalled by any other machine on the road today'. The Jomar/TVR Coupe - Saidel continued to market the TVR as a Jomar - weighed just 1400lbs and with Stage 2 Coventry Climax 1098cc engine producing 84bhp at 7000rpm, it was said to be capable of 135mph. The model was also available with Shorrock's supercharged Ford 1172cc motor producing 61bhp at 4500rpm.

**T**he same year saw the launch of the Grantura model, developed on the race tracks at home and abroad and by 1962 it was available in Mk 3 form with a new chassis, powered by BMC B Series engines of either 1489cc, 1622cc or 1798cc taken from the MGA and MGB models. Suspension was no longer torsion bars but used coil springs all round. The Grantura cost £880 in kit form or £1299 complete.

1962 also saw Trevor Wilkinson cease to operate the company, management being handed over to Grantura Engineering who made the body moulds and until then had been owned by Wilkinson - too much money had been poured into the racing programme and the Grantura's development and the company faced imminent closure. A financial boost, however, was provided by US dealer Jack Griffith, the man responsible for the fearsome TVR of the same name. Legend has it that the Griffith came about thanks to one Gerry Sagerman who raced a works TVR in the States with now well known driver Mark Donohue. The latter's usual car was a 289 AC Cobra and both cars were maintained by Griffith. One day Sagerman apparently complained about Donohue's AC receiving more attention than the TVR, so the mechanics shoe-horned the 4.7 litre Cobra engine into the Grantura. Griffith immediately liked the result and in testing



Donohue found it faster than the Cobra around some circuits, though the chassis left a lot to be desired, as did the brakes. The Anglo American hybrid was duly sent to TVR in Blackpool, still as a Grantura, and an agreement was soon struck with Griffith providing the finance for its manufacture as the TVR Griffith 200. As with the similarly conceived AC Cobra and Carroll Shelby's US works, the beefed up body and chassis units were shipped to Griffith's for V8 installation and the car was launched at the 1964 New York Auto Show. Development had been minimal due to lack of time and the car suffered disastrous overheating and ineffective brakes. Little was done about the brakes, but a larger radiator and twin Kenlowe fans were fitted and the car became the TVR Griffith 400 (the 200 had been so named after the V8's 195bhp and only a handful were produced) together with an optional 271bhp engine making the little car capable of 160 plus mph, phenomenal performance for the time and well in the supercar league. In Britain the Griffith was launched at the 1965 Racing Car Show and although perhaps it could have been the saviour of the TVR marque, a two month dock strike in the USA the same year had a devastating effect on the shipment of the bodies and chassis, resulting in the Griffith works and Grantura Engineering ceasing to trade, approximately 300 Griffiths having been produced by this time.

Adding to TVR's financial troubles was the expense of developing the Trident, launched at the 1965 Geneva Motor Show, a distinctly styled two seater coupe by Trevor Fiore and an attempt to move the TVR marque up market. The show prototype was bought by Suffolk TVR dealer Bill Last who formed Trident Cars, production of the Ford 4.7 litre, and later Chrysler 5.6 litre, cars beginning almost three years later, eventually evolving into the Ford 3 litre V6 and Triumph 2.5 litre straight six Venturer versions before Trident Cars closed in 1974, having produced 129 cars.

In 1966 TVR was rescued for the second time by Martin Lilley, aged just 22 years, who renamed the company TVR Engineering Ltd. Lilley instigated a replacement for the Grantura range, the Vixen series, but initially production resumed with the Griffith, renamed Tuscan V8, and the MGB engine Grantura Mk 4 1800S. The latter managed 120mph from its 98bhp with zero to 60mph coming up in 9.2 seconds and the car was advertised as giving 'all the excitement of DESTINATIONS UNLIMITED' (TVR's capitals)!

**A**n important improvement by Lilley, incidentally, was in the TVR build quality which had tarnished its reputation to date, and better trim and fittings were standardised.

The Tuscan V8 was introduced in 1967, the first 28 sharing the same seven ft 1½in wheelbase as Grantura and Griffith but a 4½ inch longer wheelbase version soon followed, giving a notable improvement over the ill-handling short wheelbase V8, although only 13 left hand drive and 11 right had drive cars were produced. (For a track test report on Paul Weldon's 300bhp racing version, see the July '86 issue of *SCI*—these cars can be made to handle well!).

The 200bhp £1967 Tuscan V8 was good for 130mph and 0-60mph in five seconds but, like the Griffith 400, the 271bhp option, at £2365, gave 160mph and 0-70mph in just six seconds. One TVR brochure of the time, delightfully evocative, credits a 306bhp version with a top speed of 175mph and 0 to 30mph in three seconds, while first gear was good for 70mph! 'The TVR Tuscan SE', it reads, 'ranks among the fastest cars in the world', no doubt a justifiable claim but having driven both swb and lwb V8 cars at well into three figures, I do wonder what driver control would have been like flat out!

The last model Tuscan V8, with similar dimensions to the long wheelbase cars but with a four inch wider cockpit, was aimed at American sales but it was costly to produce and just 21 were made, all V8 production ceasing in 1970. The Tuscan then continued in Ford 3 litre form while the Vixen used the 86bhp 1600cc Ford pushrod engine, the latter giving 115mph and 0-60mph in 12 seconds for £1242.

In preparation for a new range of cars.

*The latter managed  
120mph from its 98bhp  
and the car was  
advertised as giving '...  
all the excitement of  
destinations unlimited'*

Lilley and his company moved from their Layton premises in Blackpool to the present 60,000 square foot factory in Bristol Avenue and the M Series cars, after M for Martin, were ready for exhibit at the 1971 Earls Court Motor Show, the Vixen S4 and Tuscan V6 models being dropped the following year, their place being taken by the 1600M, 2500M (with Triumph 2.5 litre PI power unit) and the 3000M. These cars sold well, retaining the basic body style but updated, surviving well into the 70's and were given a boost of image with the announcement in 1975 of the Turbo model, its 3 litre V6 punching out 230bhp and becoming the first ever British car in regular production to have turbocharging. Some reports put the power at 265bhp but TVR's Noel Palmer says 230bhp is more accurate. Either way, this innovative TVR was capable of a genuine 140mph with acceleration that made it the fastest accelerating sports car then available, performance not seen in a TVR since the demise of the hairy Tuscan V8. But, like that older brother, the Turbo's production was limited.

The same power unit became available on the Taimar, this model superceding the 3000s in 1976, the body style resembling a much facelifted 3000 with revised front and rear end treatment. With the standard 142bhp V6, performance of 125mph and 0-60mph in 7.5 seconds was still well in keeping with contemporaries, while respective Taimar Turbo figures were quoted as 145mph and six seconds. The year before, the Taimar's launch was delayed by a fire which destroyed half the

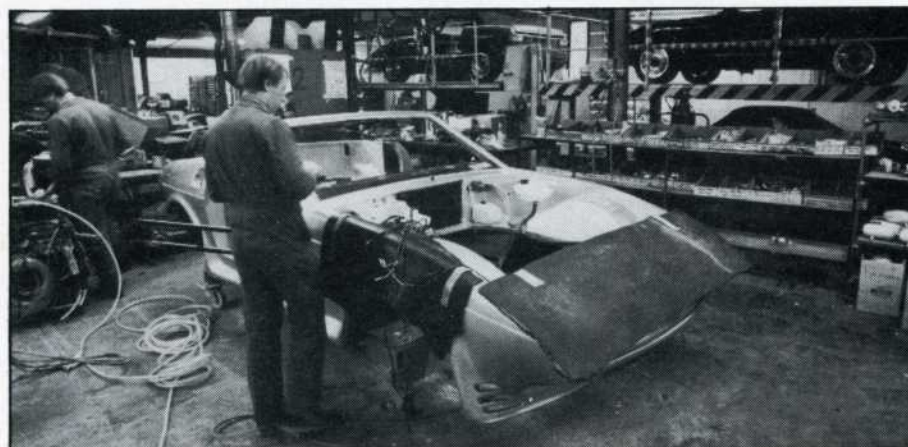
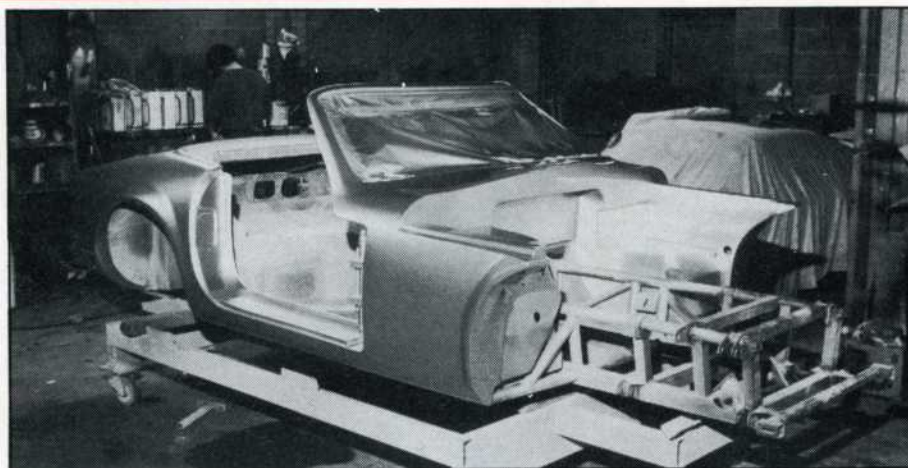
factory. The exact cause was never discovered and it took a year before production was back to normal.

**T**he Tasmin, which is the basis of the TVR range as we know it today, made its debut at the 1980 Brussels Motor Show, the first TVR to feature the 160bhp injected German Ford 2.8 litre V6 engine. The epoxy coated chassis retained coil spring/wishbone suspension while the rear discs were positioned in-board. Connolly hide became an option but electric windows, heated headlamps, radio cassette and electric aerial were all standard. Work had begun on the Tasmin in 1977, the design by former Lotus stylist Oliver Winterbottom—the resemblance to the Elite and Eclat models is clearly visible. Initially this wedge design was available only as a fixed head coupe which offered a generous 16 cubic foot of luggage space for the first time, increasing its appeal as a touring car. A convertible followed in 1981 with a unique patented hood, still current, that can be positioned either closed, open or in targa form in a matter of seconds, and the design of this model won TVR the Overall Supreme Award and Silver Trophy in the Coachwork of the Year Awards at Beaulieu. The same year, the Tasmin 200 with single overhead camshaft 2 litre Ford Pinto engine appeared at Motorfair as a £10,000 downmarket model, released to fill the gap left by BL's discontinued Triumph TR7. With 101bhp this was capable of 115mph and acceleration to 60mph in 9.6 seconds, performance similar to the 1600cc Vixen, but the model proved far less popular in Britain, though it did well in Singapore, and it was short lived. Respective figures for the 2.8 litre Tasmin 280i were 133mph and 7.5 seconds.

In 1982 TVR Engineering Ltd underwent its third change of ownership, going into the hands of Peter Wheeler—chemical engineering was his previous forté—who became chairman with a 51 per cent share holding, and Stewart Halstead as Managing Director with 49 per cent, the latter having been sales manager with the Blackpool concern since 1975. The partnership's first new model guided the final Lilley line-up, in the form of another turbocharged flyer, this time with the 2.8 litre V6 receiving the treatment complete with high boost and intercooler. Performance was again very rapid, 60mph being reached in six seconds with a top speed over 140mph. Wheel diameter was increased to 16 inches for the first time (though it was to appear in later years as an option on the 420 SEAC) with 225 section tyres and ventilated discs helping to stop it. Interest at the NEC Motor Show proved high but alas the model was dropped due to political problems in supplying the Ford engine cars to the Middle East, from whence several orders had come, leading ultimately to the Rover V8 being substituted for the V6 as the power-plant for TVR's new flagship. In fact, TVR had been experimenting with the 3.5 litre unit well before the launch of the Tasmin Turbo. In injection form the performance was very similar to the turbo car and in August 1983 the Tasmin 350i was born and the Tasmin Turbo dropped.

The launch of the Tasmin range in the United States was a success for TVR, to the extent that in December 1983 it was decided





to set up TVR of America Inc. in Jacksonville and to which six out of every 10 cars produced each week were shipped. Though American models were only available with emission versions of the V6 engine, the demand for these across the Atlantic led to the deletion of the 2 litre model in the UK though it remained in production in small numbers for specific export markets. The same year, 1983, also saw the deletion of the name Tasmin, the company adopting a Mercedes-Benz style badging system. In 1985 all models were slightly restyled with a rounder appearance and less awkward front wing line and new bumpers and rear lights. The continued success in America also led to TVR of America Inc. moving to Connecticut, 20 dealers by then having been set up between there and Florida.

Today, TVR cars are very much

handmade, as they always have been, but with far more careful attention to detail and assembly than they received in the early days, 400 hours being needed to complete one vehicle, half of which if spent on the bodysell. Indeed 85 per cent of the vehicles content is manufactured in-house. When the 350i first appeared with the 190bhp Rover Vitesse engine, the same year the 'donor' car made its debut, performance was once again approaching that of the wonderful Tuscan model. But more on a par with that is the 390SE, launched at the 1984 NEC Show, with its blue-printed and balanced 3.9 litre V8 producing 275bhp at 5500rpm and a huge 270lbs/ft of torque at 3500rpm, enough to propel it to 60mph in five seconds and onto a maximum of 150mph. To cope with the extra performance the suspension has been

uprated, a heavy duty clutch fitted and ventilated disc brakes while the body features an integrated front spoiler/bumper and a rear apron, giving this TVR an altogether more aggressive look. The engine, incidentally, was developed by Andy Rouse Engineering a company that has enormous experience with Rover's V8 (though now it is built by TVR), while TVR did much development on the racetrack including the *Sporting Cars International* Road Going Sport car Championship.

**W**hich brings us to the latest and quickest ever TVR flagship, the 420 SEAC, again developed on the track and raced in the *SCI* series until the 750 Motor Club banned it by virtue of not enough numbers of the model having been produced. Indeed the racer, from which the road car was directly developed, was track tested by myself in the December '86 issue of *SCI*, a double helping of brute power provided by a 300bhp Griffith on the same day!

In the 420, the TVR built V8 features a change of stroke, as well as bore, with a specially built steel crankshaft giving a capacity of 4228cc and 300 plus bhp – though there are engine options up to 375bhp. The standard 300bhp car, which unofficially TVR says has been timed at 165mph, features Kevlar bodywork in place of glassfibre (SEAC stands for Special Equipment Aramid Composite) with a revised and far more pleasing to the eye, softer and rounder front end, less of a wedge than before, while at the rear there is a boot mounted spoiler for increased downforce.

Immediately prior to last year's NEC Motor Show, *Sporting Cars International* was given the opportunity to drive the road version of the 420 SEAC launched at Birmingham and we were pleased to find remarkably little difference between the car's handling and roadholding compared to the racer.

In November I was also lucky enough to have the latest 350i model which, like all models since the Show, features the track developed four point rear suspension and a new style veneer dashboard. I used the 350i in last year's BARC Baeujolais Run and while it proved a rapid car, it was a little tame after the 420 SEAC which puts TVR right into the supercar bracket.

TVR cars have certainly come a long, long way since 1947 in terms of refinement and comfort. Gone are the rattles and shakes of old and in their place a level of sophistication owners 20 years ago wouldn't have thought possible. Mind you, many of them would also flinch at the prices, such as £29,500 for the SEAC, though compared to competitors, in performance terms the TVR range seems to offer value for money.

In an attempt to attract the enthusiast with less money in his pocket, at the 1986 show the TVR S was launched, basically a facelifted 3000 bodysell, but with a completely new chassis with central mounted differential wishbones powered by the 2.8 litre injected Ford V6 which will sell for £13,000 (£2000 more than originally anticipated but still nearly £5000 less than the 350i, the cheapest V8). Its introduction is obviously a popular move, because no less than 30 deposits for the S were taken at





In Britain the Griffith was launched at the 1965 Racing Car Show. The rounded body styling shows a marked contrast to the wedge like profile of modern day 420 and 350i models









Birmingham. Production of the 150bhp S, which sprints to 60mph in seven seconds and onto a 135mph maximum, should be underway by this March and it is planned that four of the present weekly output of 12 cars will be this model. (There is also the exciting possibility of a Cosworth engine option, but at £4500 it is expensive, the same cost as the 420's V8). At present almost two thirds of production goes to the States while 80 per cent of those sold in Britain and Europe are 350i models. Only the 280, which is no longer available at home, goes across the Atlantic due to strict emission regulations but TVR are hard at work developing a version with Ford's new 2.9 litre V6 which should restore some of the lost performance for the next generation of US bound cars. Only two per cent of total production, incidentally, uses the closed coupe body.

**S**heltered for the time being is the rather ugly and overweight looking 420 Sports Saloon, launched alongside the S at Birmingham, which is to be powered by the SEAC's engine but in 265bhp tune with a massive 300lbs/ft of torque at 3500rpm. This four seat, two door coupe, eight inches longer than the SEAC, is aimed at the person who might buy a Porsche 944 but wants something more individual. Indeed, TVR claim not only will the Saloon have similar performance – 0-60mph in six seconds and 150mph maximum – to the German car, it will also boast two inches more legroom, one inch more headroom and a large boot. Price will be a cool £24,500.

One of the most striking things about the 420 SEAC is its looks. With its rounder snout, sideskirts and boot mounted wing, it exudes subtle aggression. The spoiler from some angles can look awkward, but generally it blends in well and one gets used to it.

As soon as one starts up the throaty 4228cc V8, it is obvious there is something rather potent under the bonnet, similarly so is the chassis' tautness once on the move with the steering responsive to the slightest input.

The engine's torque – it produces 290lbs/ft at 4500rpm – is spread throughout the rev range and throttle response, via a rather long travel pedal, is instant, making the car a joy out on winding country roads where the chassis can be exploited. The five speed gearbox's short lever has a nice, precise movement with well spaced ratios but such is the engine's torque, the *wrong* gear is hardly noticeable.

The SEAC runs on new style five spoke aluminium alloy 8½ x 15 inch wheels shod with 225/50 section Bridgestone RE71 rubber (as used by the racer in the SC/ Championship) and there is an option of 9 x 16 inch split rims with 245/45 section Bridgestones. The handling and roadholding really are superb and turn-in is excellent while through the corners the new rear suspension, which features a fabricated four point mounted lower wishbone, connected from the limited slip differential's carrier to the hub carrier, with a torque reaction from the latter to the chassis located at 90 degrees, is said to considerably increase traction. The system certainly keeps the SEAC very squat and flat through the bends, the rear wing providing

ample downforce, and there is virtually no roll whatsoever. One can power out of the corners with plenty of throttle and no shortage of traction, sliding the tail for sheer enjoyment if one wishes, provoking oversteer from the otherwise neutral stance. On damp roads, of course, this 300bhp TVR has to be given a little more respect.

The ventilated disc brakes, which are, incidentally, fitted with asbestos free pads, are 10.6 inches at the front, 10.9 inches at the rear. They are superb, and fade-free, and more than capable of handling the car's considerable performance.

Unfortunately *Sporting Cars International* only had this latest TVR flagship for a few hours and we were unable to take performance figures, but acceleration to 60mph in the very low five second bracket seems likely. As photographer Kennard put it, 'it's got plenty of oomph!' Regarding

*With its rounder snout,  
sideskirts and boot  
mounted wing it exudes  
subtle aggression*

maximum speed, we touched a very stable 140mph with the hood down but that was it, the car towards the end of our test suffering from fuel starvation due, say TVR, to a faulty pre-production swirl pot. Indeed, it deteriorated to the extent that out of tight corners and roundabouts the V8 would cut-out altogether. Open the 420 SEAC should manage 155mph while with the hood up, TVR says it has recorded no less than 165mph, achieved at 5500rpm.

**O**n the minus side, the 420 consistently bottomed on minor roads, on a couple of occasions particularly hard, and not a trait one would want to live with having paid £29,500. Some of the fibreglass edges on the door mirrors were slightly sub-standard and the heater quadrants have a tacky appearance, not in keeping with the price tag, though the body finish as a whole was very good, as was the comfortable leather interior.

Two particularly annoying faults were a driver's visor that persistently vibrated and a windscreen wiper that would intermittently lift off the screen at around 120mph, and completely once 130mph was exceeded, rendering it completely useless – this last problem is something we have experienced on several TVRs.

These faults apart, though, TVR really has come up with a supercar to take on the best in the performance stakes with a high degree of driver enjoyment and a sophisticated chassis, remarkably close in its behaviour to the racer I track tested in the December issue.

The 350i is TVR's baseline model and also its biggest seller, offering good performance from its now 197bhp Rover

Vitesse engine with useful and impressive torque of 220lbs/ft at 4000rpm. The car loaned to *Sporting Cars International* which I used on last year's BARC Beaujolais Run was one of the latest Series 2 models, so it had the four point rear suspension of the SEAC which is now standard throughout the V8 range.

**T**he Beaujolais Run was a good test for the £18,000 TVR, involving a total return trip of around 1000 miles over a types of roads. For much of the journey down to the starting point at Lacenas, south east of villefranche-sur-Saone, the hood was down or in the Targa position, the patented design really being simple to operate with just two clips atop the windscreen, with the centre section fitting neatly in the boot.

Compared to earlier 350is, there is an improvement in traction out of bends with the power down, it can be fed in that little bit earlier, though otherwise the new rear end does not let its presence known – the roadholding was already of the high standard. Where the increased traction really becomes apparent is in the wet and much of the Run across France was just that. The fact that the TVR averaged over 60mph on B and C class roads on a consistently wet night speaks for itself. And the fact that at the end of it, neither co-driver Grant Berkeley nor myself suffered any discomfort, the 350i being a relaxing car to drive fast with excellent ride characteristics.

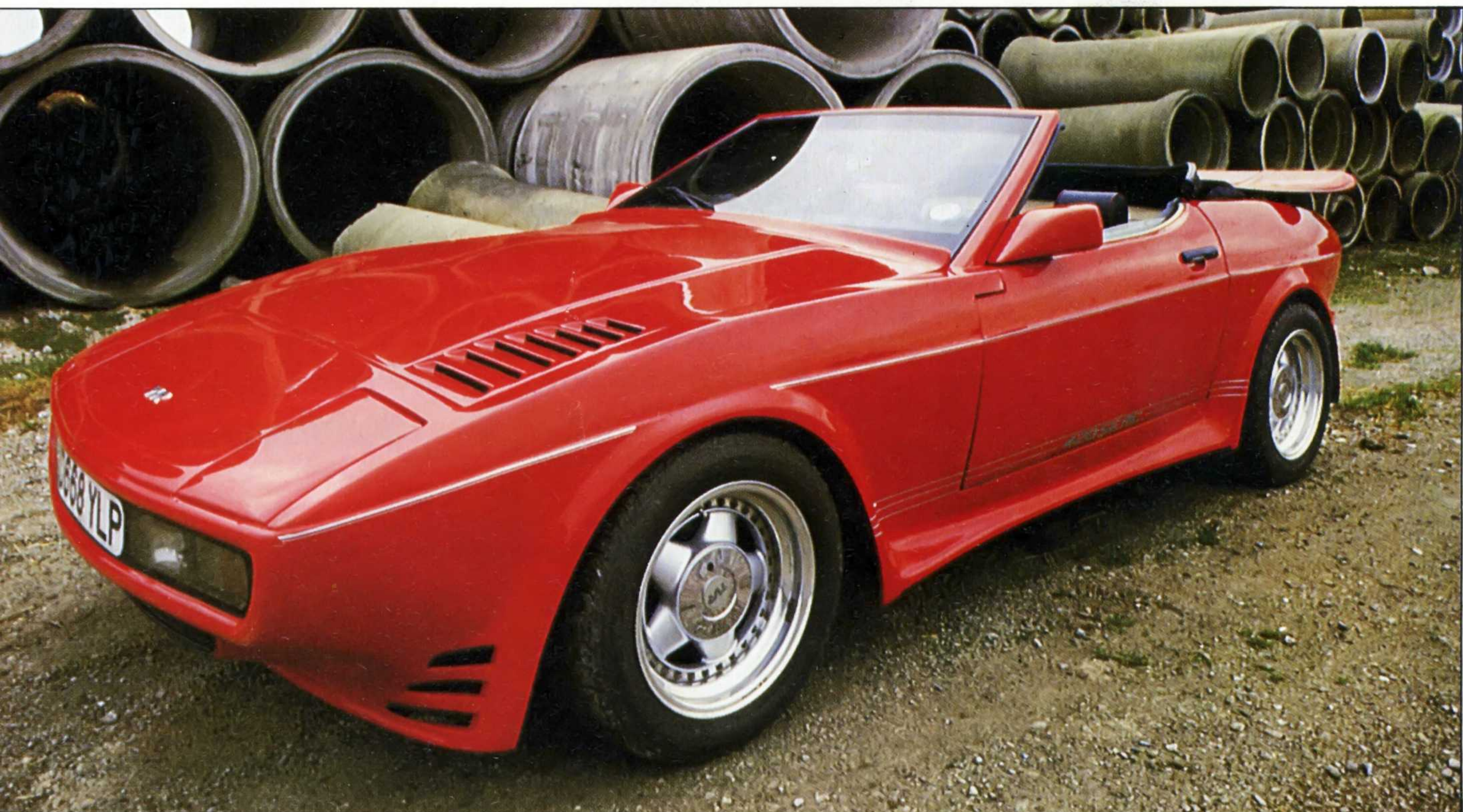
In the wet the 205 section low profile RE71 Bridgestones grip well but at the limit of adhesion, which is high, the TVR can let go very quickly though it responds equally quickly to corrective action, the rear obediently stepping back into line.

'Our' 350i was fitted with the optional 3.06:1 differential (standard on German bound cars) as opposed to the normal 3.54:1 item – Which could be why our mileage of 488 miles so far making us 120th of 124 finishes! This increases mph per 1000rpm to 30.7 from 25.4 and, interestingly, gives the same 0 to 60mph time of 6.5 seconds as the 350i with the normal axle ratio. Top speed, rises by one mph from 133mph to 134mph but the real difference is in high speed cruising (we saw an indicated 186mph), the TVR maintaining an easy 120mph in a more relaxed fashion. The high diff, though, does affect the mid range acceleration, the performance feeling a little flat until three figure speeds are reached. But as long distance touring car, the TVR performed admirably, apart from the infuriating lifting of the wiper, this time from around 115mph, necessitating a reduction in speed in order to see through the screen.

Fuel consumption worked out at between 15 and 18mpg which is high but not bad considering the roads used and the high average speed. In normal running 20mpg should be possible.

At £18,000 the TVR 350i is on the expensive side but it is individual and the finish is good. The only problem is that the bodystyle of the 420 SEAC is such an improvement on the 350i, it makes this bottom of the range V8 look rather awkward, though the softer front wing line and restyled bumpers have improved matters. But I wouldn't say no to one.





*The striking looks of the 420 SEAC are aimed at the person who might buy a Porsche 944 but would like something even more individual. 0-60mph is in the six second bracket*

