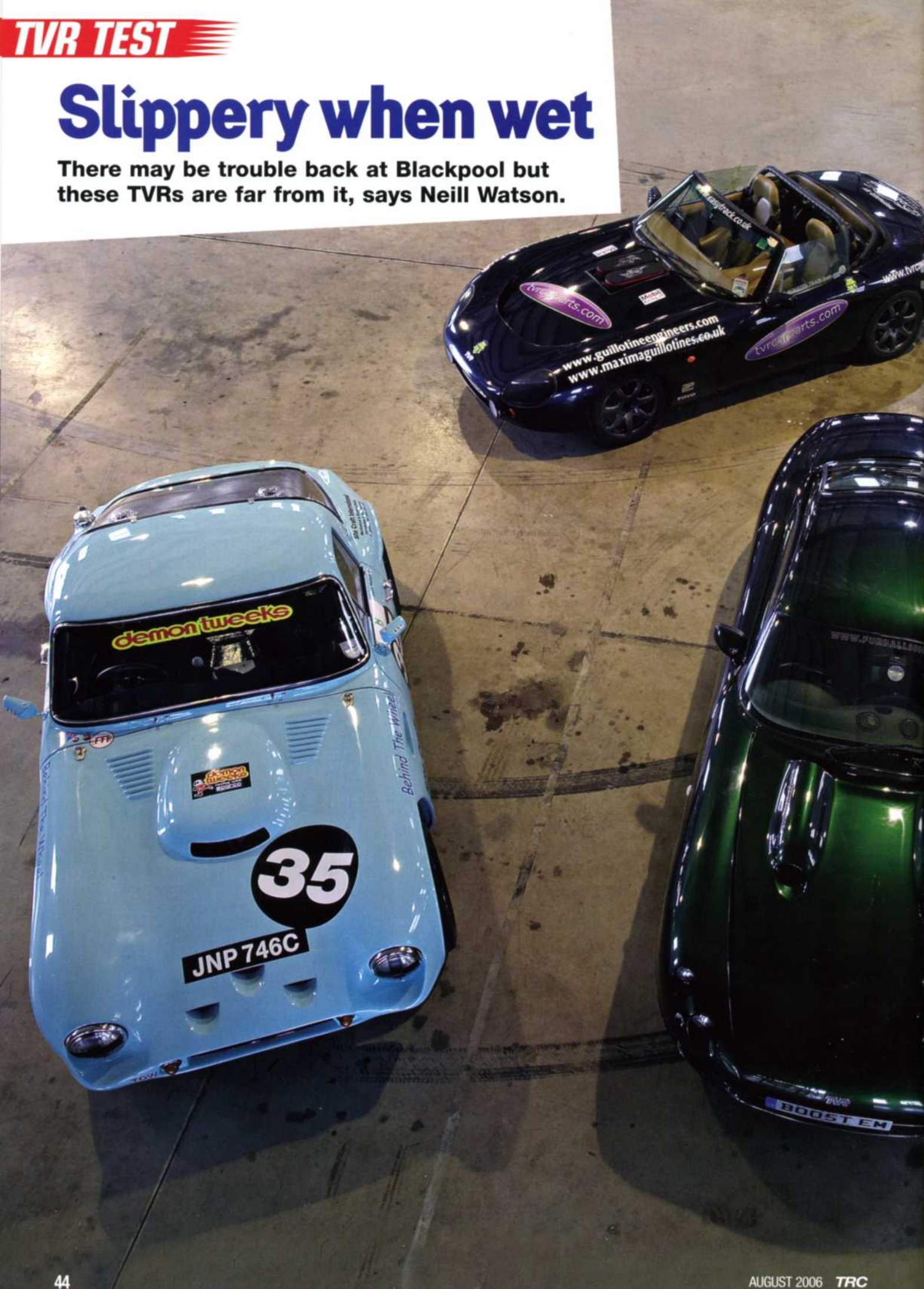
Slippery when wet

There may be trouble back at Blackpool but these TVRs are far from it, says Neill Watson.



As recipes go, this one was more likely to give you a thumping heart rather than drum up an appetite. Take 16 cylinders and just over 20 litres of engine capacity. Mix together at high rpm to create 1500bhp. Apply to a good tarmac surface using a combination of racing slicks and high performance tyres. Consume heartily. We were quite proud of ourselves, having assembled ingredients that were more in keeping with a firework display than a hearty meal. Indeed we were quite looking forward to the feast until mother nature added a few finishing touches.

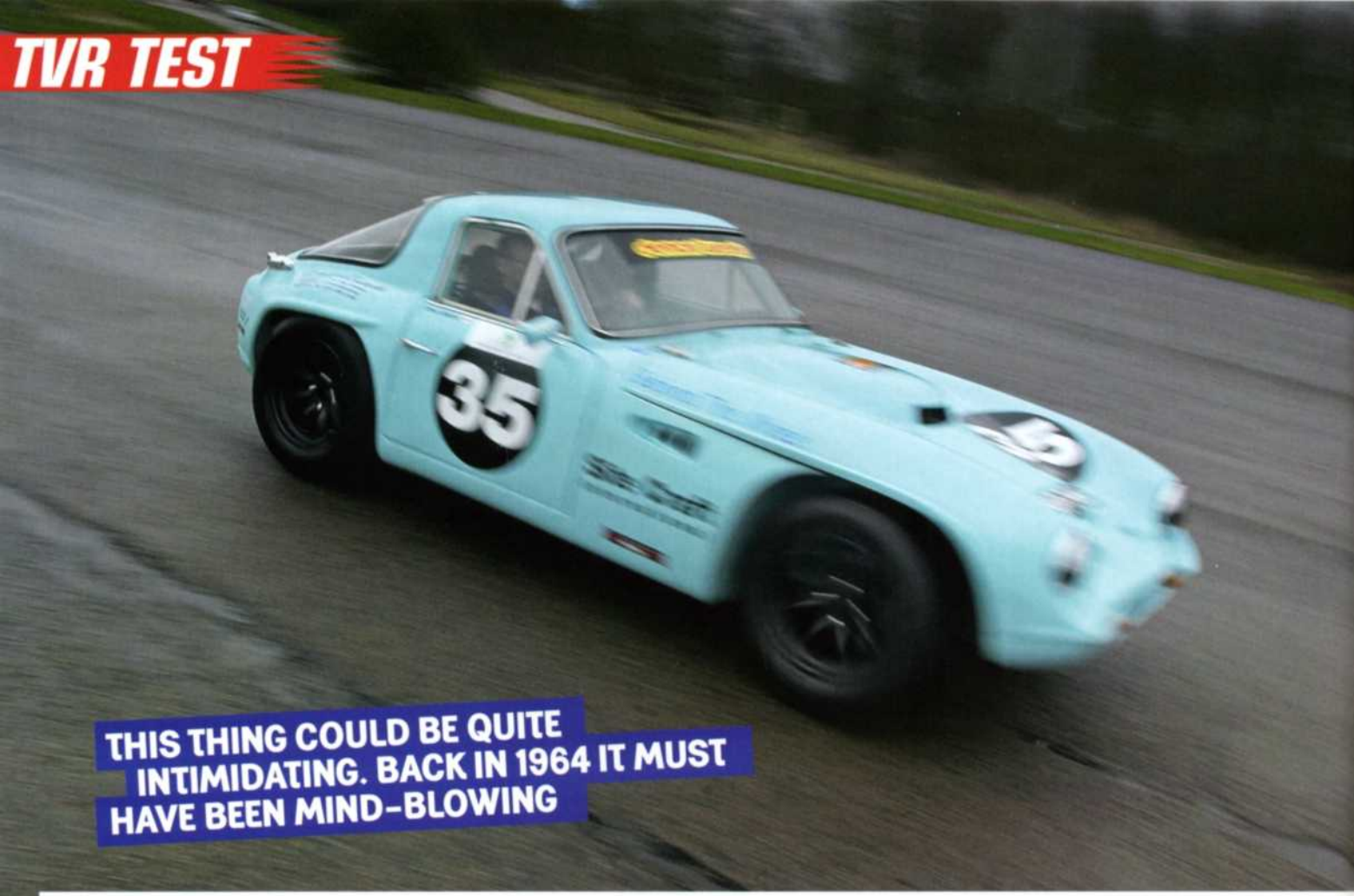
So, then… add large quantities of rain water, preferably applied horizontally using a howling gale. Soak the tarmac surface lovingly prepared beforehand until greasy to the touch. Chill to just above freezing before use, then start all engines and retire to a safe distance, ideally holding a warm coffee and a bacon sarnie. If ever there was a time when the phrase "And here's one we made earlier," would have been useful this was it.

So we stand here at Bruntingthorpe, looking at four TVRs that encompass pretty much the history of V8 power from the Blackpool company. As rain drips down my neck from the old Boeing 747 we've taken shelter under, Jeff Statham peers out at his 420 SEAC and mutters, " Wish I hadn't left the slicks on…"

Until very recently, V8 power and TVR were always in the same sentence. Yes, so Ford V6s have been used and in the very early days a range of four-cylinder units from Coventry Climax, MG and Ford. But V8 noise is what the company is most famous for, even though it took several decades to get around to building its own.

Indeed, TVR wasn't even the first to fit one. That, the story goes, was an American car dealer called Jack Griffith who, when bored one day, fitted an AC Cobra race engine into a TVR Grantura "just to see". It was such a good fit that the Griffith you see here was born. Nearly all '60s Griffiths were made in the US; Jack Griffith imported the rolling chassis before fitting the small-block Ford V8. Just ten right-hand drive Griffiths were made in the UK. Steve Watton's lovely sky blue car was actually American, originally hailing from Iowa and then New Jersey before arriving in the UK in 1999 in need of some serious help. Steve spotted it and made a dive for his chequebook. Griffiths from the '60s can make serious money these days, and he knew this was a unique chance to get a car he would never normally be able to afford. This was in 2000, and since then he's been burning both midnight oil and piles of money building the chassis up into a full FIA-spec racer. As Steve fires it up, the most striking thing about the car is the wonderful V8 that bursts into life and revs more like a 1.6 BDA than a 4.7-litre piece of iron. "I looked all over, both in Europe and the US before finding a guy called Greg Heumian in the States. I liked what he had to say about engine building and I've nothing but praise for him." Power output? "It's never been on the rollers, but

PHOTOGRAPHY NEILL WATSON



THIS THING COULD BE QUITE INTIMIDATING. BACK IN 1964 IT MUST HAVE BEEN MIND-BLOWING

comfortably over 400bhp." Very comfortably over, too, it would appear, as Steve splashes out for a bit of powerboat racing.

Although he built it to FIA Historic specification, Steve's running the car in the 750 Motor Club's Thoroughbred Sports Car series this year. "The biggest problem is stopping it. It's only got drums on the rear, so we've fitted vented discs at the front to help. They aren't homologated but are easy to change, should I wish to do an international meeting." Other changes for the 750MC series include Yokohama tyres which mean that a car originally set up to run cross pies is racing on radials. "That, the brakes and its very short wheelbase make it entertaining to drive," reckons Steve. The quality of the build is first rate, with a clear set of instruments across a matt black panel. The very upright steering position close in to the wheel and huge Hurst gearshift lever sitting almost shoulder high give the impression that this thing could be quite intimidating and needs a firm hand to keep a hold of it – definitely not one for the indecisive. Back in 1964 it must have been mind-blowing.

These days, of course, noise "pollution" is a big thing and we decided to only run one car at a time on the track. There were nervous glances over our shoulders as Steve howled off and the other cars growled into life behind us, owners trying to get some heat into the works as the V8s coughed and cleared their throats, all but one having spent the last few hours sitting in the deep freeze behind tow cars on the M1. As the rain paused to gather its breath Jeff Statham took the opportunity to grab a few laps. The 420 SEAC was not only running on slicks, but had no weather protection at all. With offers from the others to drill a hole in the floorpan and fit a plug, Jeff slithered out for a few diff-shuddering laps. If he had been a little hesitant, it would have been understandable as his car is unique, but he soon had the Quaife diff working hard. To the casual eye, it seems like just a TVR Wedge with a bit of a body kit. However, Google "SEAC" and you'll be rewarded with phrases like "Kevlar, composite, carbon fibre". For a car built in 1985 from a company known for building low volume cars using techniques only just ahead of a wooden Morgan, it must have seemed as if Supermarine had won the contract to build the stealth bomber. Back than, carbon composites were hailed as the magic bullet to end all our car-building problems. So why are we all still driving about in tin cars? Erm, well because it's not quite that simple. Anyone watching two Formula One cars tangle in a pile of splintered wishbones will have seen that composites are only strong in one direction. Plus, it ain't cheap. TVR was very brave, creating a short production run of road cars that came in at least 200 pounds lighter than the GRP version, but then the bean counters yelled "HOW MUCH !?" and after

THE FOUR TVRs HERE PRETTY MUCH ENCOMPASS THE HISTORY OF V8 POWER FROM THE BLACKPOOL COMPANY

roughly twenty cars, the workforce changed back to good old glue-sniffing GRP. Only one racing car was built and this is it.

Made for the 1986 season, it was a full factory effort in the 750 MC Production class and race by Steve Cole where it promptly ran away and won everything. They were back in 1987 for another dose of pot hunting before eventually someone grabbed a rule book and asked "exactly how many of these bloody things constitute a production run?". Ooops. A quick tweak to the rule book left TVR with nowhere to play. The rest of that story culminated with TVR boss Peter Wheeler throwing his teddy right through the factory gates and going off to create his own racing series that became the famous Tuscan Challenge.

Meanwhile, the 420 SEAC (Special Edition Aramid Composite) boarded a cargo 747 bound for Macau and a bit of street fighting. It didn't return to the UK. Spotted by a big hitter on the Hong Kong stock exchange the car stayed in the East, its owner flying in technical support from the UK whenever he raced it. After a while, the car was mothballed before the return journey to the UK to be sold in 1991.

Jeff was looking for a Tuscan but prices were out of his reach, when Chris Shearle from DG Automotive called to tell him about the car. Jeff was through the door before the phone had landed. When he first saw the car it had changed colour and was what Jeff would only describe as an "interesting" shade of green. He spent the next three years restoring it. "Mechanically, it was first rate, but that colour…"

Now, it's back in its original factory colour and Jeff has kept the mechanical side almost exactly as it was in the Eighties. Back then, the Rover SD1 unit was the weapon of choice. The SEAC has a 4.5 version with a cross bolted block and pistons squeezing up a 12:1 compression. Oil surge issues are dealt with by a dry sump with the oil tank right out front. "At some time, the nose was modified and can be removed for access to the tank." Explains Jeff. "Quite how they got to it before, I'll never know as the oil filler point is hidden behind one of the headlamp pods".

Brakes are AP fronts but the rear discs are inboard and had to be specially made. They also create heat problems for the diff, the Quaife unit running a separate cooler with a small belt-driven oil pump under the rear. Jeff doesn't race the car, "If I had a big off, I've no idea where I'd start to repair that bodywork, so apart from sprints, I enjoy letting it rip on track days".

Goodridge hoses are everywhere, yet for a car with a high-tech body, it's strange to be looking at four 48 Delloro carbs sitting under the ITG filters, but there they are, shovelling fossil fuels in as the butterflies snap open.

It might seem odd in these days of ECUs and mapping from laptops, but three of the four cars here run on carbs, two of them on Dellortos.

AS EVOLUTION GOES, WE HAVE A PRETTY GOOD DNA LINE PRESENT HERE

Andy Race's Nineties Griffith didn't start life breathing through an intake trumpet, it had a reasonably normal 5.0-litre motor with EFI. Today though things are different. You might notice the very suitable badge on the front of Andy's car and it is indeed totally apt. He's collected together a pile of TVR anatomy from various donors and created something that would raise the hairs on the good Doctor's neck. As a road car, it's totally focused, with a dry sumped 5.0 Tuscan Challenge engine coupled to a Red Rose T5 box with a short fifth. All internal parts are forged, steel, titanium, reinforced, upgraded, stiffened, sintered rose-jointed, ceramic coated and pretty much anything else that could be conceived to make the car faster and tougher. To fit everything in, including the dry sump, some body mods were needed including moving the chassis struts and chopping the bonnet with an angle grinder…

Andy's Griff is primarily a track car but it's road legal and he's driven it both to and around most of the iconic racing circuits in Europe. By the time you read this, he'll have just returned from a trip to Spa, then over to Hockenheim and back to Spa again all within a few days. He's also blasted down to Imola and done the 'Ring several times too, so his car isn't a collector's butterfly but a hard-working machine that's constantly a work-in-progress. The bodywork wears the evidence of high speed insect impact and the T350 seats and five-point harnesses have what classic car collectors call "patina", giving the car the appearance of your favourite pair of trainers. I've seen many cars modified by their owners and all too often, the result falls of expectation when looking at everything that's gone in. Not so with Andy's car. With an engine revving all the way to 7800rpm, not only is it very quick indeed, but reliable too. Andy's even quite kind to his passengers – having built a motor developing more than 400bhp, he decided he could spare a few horses and leave the air conditioning in place.

No need for air-con today, apart from demisting the windows, as we splash about having resigned ourselves to the facts that firstly a human can only get so wet before it becomes irrelevant and secondly that cameras and flash units generally dry out after a few days in an airing cupboard. Phil James certainly wasn't perturbed, but then his Cerbera is perhaps the most civilised of the cars here, if there is such a thing. Of course, it's not standard, that would be far too simple.

Phil's a huge fan of TVR; cut him in two and there'll be Blackpool rock running through him. Having owned a Cerbera 4.5 since '98 and having also raced in the Tuscan Challenge, he had a hankering for something even faster.

Despite lodging a deposit in 2000 for the new Tuscan R, Phil had a feeling that it wasn't really him. "I really love Cerberas and I couldn't see the point of the Tuscan R. It wasn't offering much more power." TVR responded by offering the supercharged Typhon in 2003 which, initially, Phil was going to buy. But when it came to finalising the specification of his Typhon, he asked if, instead, he could commission "the mother of all Cerberas, a 600bhp supercharged 4.5". From TVR racing, he had a relationship with the factory so the feasibility of the request was duly considered and it was determined that supercharging the 4.5 V8 would be too difficult to cool. A 4.2 Typhon straight-six engine was offered but Phil wanted a V8. The impasse was relieved when TVR engine guru John Ravenscroft suggested there might be enough parts in "Peter Wheeler's toybox" to make a very special 5.0-

Pistonheads

Started in 1999 as a hobby by TVR-owning Dave Edmonston, Pistonheads has become one of the major online watering holes of sports car and track day addicts.

"I owned a TVR at the time and it was an exciting period for the company, so it formed a good basis to build the site around. I jacked in the day job and spent two years making it into a viable business as well as being just fun"

Today, it's more than just an online list of press releases, but an interactive resource with forums and major advertising presence as well as discussions on track days, motorsport and the omnipresent Gatso.

www.pistonheads.com

litre engine with 500bhp. "Fine," said Phil "I'll make that up to 600 with nitrous then."

The result here is an unmistakable car developed to maximise the deep-breathing potential of its unique dry-sumped 5.0-litre engine and release 500bhp and 440lb ft of torque. Work began in the spring of 2004 when Phil picked the Reflex charcoal paint, but then there was a protracted development time as the car took around nine months to create. Phil was quite happy to let function take precedence. The result is a car that evolved to fit its environment. The huge 'nostrils' on the bonnet reach out to grab air like a pair of four-bore shotgun barrels. Designed by Graham Browne who penned the Sagaris, maximum power and cooling was the aim with the minimum of induction trunking. Likewise, the exhaust. The angled silencer cans are only half the story. Some think it's a bit of a V-sign type thing, but the angle is purely for function. Grovel on the wet track and the most remarkable optimised exhaust can just be made out. "Yes, it's an 8-into-2-into-4-into-2," explains Phil. Say again? "The eight headers go into two pipes, then divide into four to clear the axle before going back to two for the rear silencers. The angle is so that there are no sharp turns to reduce the velocity of exhaust gases. It sounds glorious." What about the nitrous? "I don't think it needs it. But never say never." That Darwin thing again.

In fact, as evolution goes, we've a pretty good DNA line present here. We've long ago forgotten about the water being dumped on our heads. We're having a great time now and everyone takes a chance to grab a few more laps before we get shouted at for noise.

As species progress, some evolve and others become extinct, some deservedly so. TVR has had its share of dramas and has been an endangered species on occasion. But it makes you wonder what might have happened to TVR if old Jack Griffith hadn't parked his Cobra beside the Grantura way back in '64 ■

Massive thanks to:

Steve Watton, Griffith 4.7
Jeff Statham, 420 SEAC
Andy Race, Griffith 500 'monster'
Phil James, Boss Cerbera 5.0
All of whom got a good soaking over and above the call of duty.