JULIAN MACKIE

The TVR tribe

For such a mongrel motor car, the TVR has a surprisingly pure and undiluted bloodline. Martin Buckley drives them all

From the first production Granturas of 1958 to the latest Chimaera, there have only been four basic types of TVR, all loyal to an enduring concoction of glassfibre bodywork, tubular steel frame and bought-in power, of four, six or eight cylinders.

The concept of TVR – the name came from that of the founder, TreVoR Wilkinson – of a big-hearted, hard-riding two-seater making creative use of off-the-shelf components has rarely been compromised over the last 36 years either: it dabbled only briefly in the luxury two-plus-two market and has only recently begun to consider a home-brewed engine, the brave V8 AJP.

It is by developing its traditional strengths rather than branching out into uncharted markets – leaving its 'backyard special' image behind without forgetting its roots – that TVR has survived and, lately, flourished. While Marcos, Gilbern and the Reliant Scimitar faded away (trying to build cars mainstream makers could do so much better) TVR survived factory fires, receivership and recession to make the most fêted and sought-after, gutsy, front-engined sports cars of the day.

Make that supercars: today's Griffith and Chimaera hold their own with the quickest road machines you can buy yet have the same brawny, uncomplicated, homespun British flavour – somewhere between the science of a Lotus and the antiquity of a Morgan – that gives the marque a singular appeal.

We gatecrashed one of the TVR Car Club's Snetterton test days to try a dozen representatives of the marque, spanning three decades of Blackpool production. Prepare to soak up some northern sports car soul.

EARLY CARS – Grantura MkIII & Vixen MkII

The MkIII Grantura was a crossover model mixing quaint early styling elements with the increased chassis sophistication of the later cars. For the first time, there was no choice of engine – it came with MGA power, take it or leave it – and, best of all, it had a new chassis, eschewing the ultra stiff-riding VW trailing link design for double-wishbone suspension.

Although still built up from 16 gauge steel tube, the frame – with a slightly longer wheelbase – was more rigid, good enough to live on into the early 1970s until the introduction of the 'M' series cars. The cast alloy front suspension uprights are unique to TVR and, although the differential internals are MG, they sit in TVR's own cast alloy housing.

The look is familiar, the stubby-tailed coupe shape dating from the first '58 Grantura, with a Perspex wraparound rear window, Ford Consul front screen, blistered wheelarches and a low, almost Porsche-like bonnet, a one-piece moulding hinged at the front.

With a relatively light engine the Grantura feels delicate and well balanced. The Triumph Spitfire-sourced rack is light and accurate, braking progressive and powerful with Girling discs at the front but no servo assistance.

Owner Ian Massey Crosse limits himself to 5750rpm, to which the three-bearing engine spins willingly, giving a top end of just under 110mph. Sweet and torquey, it's actually a later MGB 1800 unit (fitted from 1963 anyway) and could easily handle a longer, overdrive top.

The MGA gearbox remains, a precise but notchy, rifle-bolt change with no synchro on first, its stubby lever mounted on the characteristically broad transmission tunnel that gives the car its torsional strength: that's a cockpit characteristic of TVRs to this day.

Vixen interior: 2500M's is very similar

Snug yet airy, the cabin has a tidy leatherette-covered dash, the instruments lined up impressively along its length. In its simplicity, it looks more professional, somehow, than later, more elaborate efforts.

By 1967, Grantura had become Vixen, via 1800S and 1800S MkIV: the former introduced the squared-off 'Manx cat' tail with the bigger rear window and MkI Ford Cortina rear lights — the latter merely heralded detail refinements to suspension and interior.

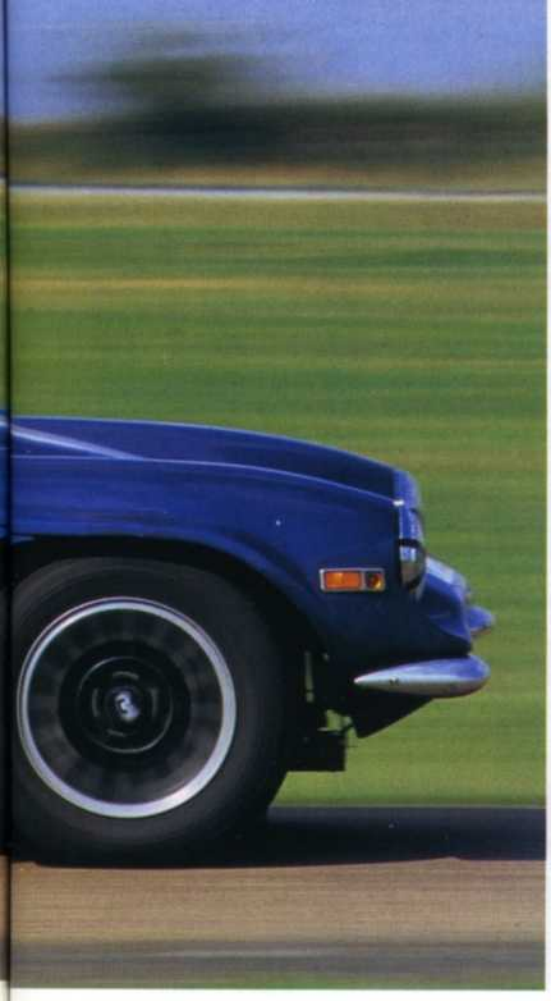
The sausage-bonnet Vixen was essentially a Ford Cortina GT-engined version of the 1800S, using a lighter, 88bhp crossflow unit with matching all synchro' Ford gearbox.

The blue S2 featured here – belonging to David James – replaced it after just 12 months, using the longer-wheelbase chassis developed for the Tuscan V8 SE. That meant larger doors, wraparound MkII Cortina lights, a new bonnet bulge and lots of detail changes. Also, it was the first TVR on which the body was bolted, rather than bonded, to the chassis. You could still buy it as a kit, although the new Lilley family management didn't encourage DIY builders and, by the turn of the decade, new Purchase Tax rules wiped out the kit car market anyway.

With a good power-to-weight ratio, quick steering, lots of grip and little roll, the Vixen's a nimble machine although it feels very little faster than the Grantura. Its engine's not so torquey low down: to make good headway you need to keep it on the boil, which is no hardship with that slick Corsair 2000E gearbox.

Like most TVRs, the Vixen is low to the ground, so sleeping policemen need care but, like the Grantura, the ride isn't bad for a '60s specialist sports car – primitively bumpy, yes, but not bad enough to threaten denture location. The steering writhes and jiggles

Vixen's cut-off tail with Cortina lights replaced Grantura bob-tail. Consul 'screen



Above: Grantura was first proper production TVR. Left: M series – this is 1600 but 2500 outwardly identical – evolved from Vixen (far left): same rear window used

informatively on anything but the smoothest roads and, although there isn't enough torque to break away the rear wheels, generally the Vixen feels balanced, helped by side-hugging seats that brace you well under the hard cornering forces it can generate on its 185/70 tyres.

Despite a high price (£1500 was serious money in 1970) the Vixen made a credible MGB GT alternative in its day and sales figures proved it: 746 were produced before the 1600M took over in 1973 as the small-engined car in the TVR range.

'M' CARS - 2500M, Taimar & 3000S Convertible

'M' stood for Martin, Martin Lilley, at the TVR helm alongside his father Arthur since 1965. It was with the 'M' cars the marque came to puberty – if not maturity – in 1971.

Although similar in principle, the all-new chassis featured thicker, 14 gauge tubing, with some square-section tubing in places: it was stronger and easier to build.

The body was new too, recognisably developed from the original Grantura (the screens and doors were the same) but 10in longer than before, most of the length being in the new bonnet, which could accommodate the spare wheel in its nose.

Mechanically, the cars were much as before, using the Triumph 2500 straight-six (first used by TVR in the old chassis a year previously), the Ford 'Essex' 3-litre V6 (seen previously in the 1969-71 Tuscan) and the 1600cc, four-cylinder 'Kent' engine familiar to Vixen owners.

To British enthusiasts, the 2500M is something of an enigma, using a detoxed twin-carb version of the Triumph TR6 straight-six (rather than the 150bhp injected version) to capture US sales. In fact, it was the most successful TVR of the '70s, with almost 1000 built, and wasn't even sold in the UK after 1973.

It's an altogether smoother device, the 2500M, though little faster than its four-cylinder forebears with its paltry 106bhp.

More torque low down means you don't have to work so hard for what's on offer and you sense it's a more accomplished machine with much less bump-steer. Despite its length (and weight), the straight-six is mounted behind the front wheel line so the neutral cornering stance of the earlier cars remains and, even on ordinary 70-series rubber, the 2500M has tremendous grip and real poise: contemporary American reports showed the car could pull almost as many corner g-forces as a 308 Ferrari, which is going some.

Steering is heavier at low speeds than earlier cars (not surprising with that long, hefty lump) and the gearchange – still mounted high on that dominant central tunnel – isn't quite so sweet.

Inside, the sixth-form project feel remains, bane of the British specialist car: acres of black plastic, appalling ergonomics and familiar, parts bin decor scattered throughout, smiling back at you like old friends.

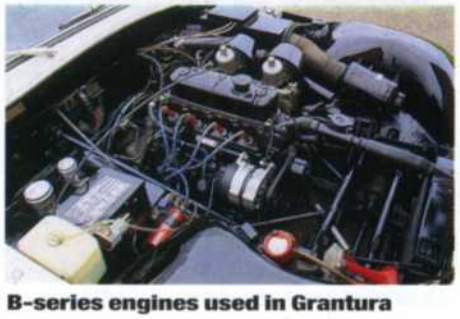
The 1977 Taimar was TVR's answer to the Scimitar GTE and Ford Capri II, basically a 3000M with an opening rear hatchback. This feature very quickly made the Taimar the most popular TVR in the range.

Taken from the much heavier Capris and Granada of the 1970s the big, dumb 3-litre V6 has an easy time in the TVR, firing it rapidly yet effortlessly off the mark: 0-60mph in 7.8 secs made the Taimar substantially quicker through the gears than its steel-bodied '70s rivals and 172lb ft of torque peaking at 3000rpm means it will slug it out in top from virtually tickover.

Slightly awkwardly placed, the gearchange doesn't have the crisp precision of earlier cars

Grantura basic, doors are very short

Ford Kent in 1600M, 2500 uses Triumph



B-series engines used in Grantura

Above: Tasmin the first of the wedge cars, born in 1980, grew into the mighty 420SEAC by '86. Left: 3000S convertible an updated 'M' car, looks similar to Grantura but 10in longer, better chassis. Right: Taimar

(there's more willowy linkage between lever and actual cog movement) and the clutch is heavy and long in travel. The grip and precision of the car remain impressive, belying the crude image of the '70s 3-litre TVRs.

Last of the 'M' series cars was the Convertible, announced in 1978 and much against the trend at the time because production soft-tops had almost died out. It had a deeper screen (the MkII Ford Consul glass was banished at last), a new tail with a separate boot and those distinctive, dished-top doors. Mechanically it was identical to the 3000M/Taimar but there was a new dash with speedo and rev-counter oddly mounted in the centre. Even more bizarre were the rattling plastic side curtains but none of this put buyers off: the convertible soon became the most popular car in the TVR range.

The stiff-riding Convertible has none of the Taimar's pretensions to sophistication. With no roof for bracing there's blatant scuttle shake in the best tradition of British sports cars, and the dashboard actually moves around visibly on rough roads. Accompanied by a gruff, off-beat thrum from the V6, acceleration feels even more vigorous with the top down, although it runs out of breath early with a tappety thrash that never lets you forget its Granada origins.

It was a shortlived variant, the convertible, but the concept was revived to excellent effect in the mid-'80s with the TVR S, the beginning of the Blackpool company's profitable journey down the retro-look route

Big butch 3000M first to use Ford V6...

THE 'WEDGE' CARS - Tasmin, 350i & 420SEAC

Born at the beginning of 1980, the wedgy Tasmin coupé was meant to be a brave new dawn for Martin Lilley's TVR, a fresh strain of pricier luxury GT machines in the Lotus Elite mould. Lilley even imported the designer of the Elite – Oliver Winterbottom – to style his new car, and the resulting shape was a sharp-edged hatchback coupé with more than a passing resemblance to the Maserati Khamsin of seven years earlier. It was well received but its time seemed to pass quickly: it always looked like a car from an earlier era which, in a sense, it was. That said, the style lasted for 12 years, and formed the basis of 2600 TVR sales.

Mechanically, the Tasmin was built along the same lines as the 'M' series but the chassis had a longer wheelbase and was entirely new in design, with Cortina front wishbone suspension and TVR's own transverse link and trailing arm set-up at the rear. At last disc brakes arrived at the rear, mounted inboard too.

The engine was now a more powerful German 2.8 V6 with injection rather than the 3-litre Essex V6, initially with a four-speed gearbox and later with optional five-speeder (or a shortlived automatic). The body, although still glassfibre, was moulded in two sections and joined along the waist strip. Two-plus-two and convertible versions came later in 1980.

Initially the Tasmin wasn't a success, the jump in price from the 'M' cars being too much for the traditional TVR buyer – still very much the enthusiast. Some found Winterbottom's sharp-edged design slightly effete, too.

Inside, the Tasmin immediately feels lighter and more airy than a hardtop 'M' car and leaps a couple of generations in style and aspiration with its leather seats, more considered instrument layout and opulent veneer on dash and doors. You still get a big carpeted shelf behind the seats for luggage, accessed through a glass hatch, but the Khamsin/Espada-style glass tail panel is a novel touch.

It's as easy and unintimidating to drive as the earlier cars, the initial impression of a vast,

...set well back to make room for spare

Convertible of '78 first with new screen

Above: 350i coupé shares body with Tasmin. Some cars were two-plus-two – Esprit territory. Far left: Tasmin got Rover V8 to become 350i and (left) tweaked-up, rip-snorting 420SEAC

290lb ft of torque at 4500rpm. Dry-sumped racing versions of this engine claimed a further 85bhp and the shortlived 450SEAC gave 324bhp even in standard form.

Originally owned by a rich Arab, who spent his leisure time embarrassing Porsche and Ferrari owners in the blistering Middle Eastern sun (owner Price still finds sand in the cockpit), it's one of around 35 420SEACs built during a brief two-year model life, and probably the only left-hand drive example built. In 1988-89, the 450SEAC mustered just 18 orders at an inflated £33,950, £7000 more than the standard 450SE convertible.

The SEAC is no spartan racer inside. Its dash, more conventional than earlier 'Wedge' cars, uses wood veneer on most of its flat surfaces, leather everywhere else.

Gripping the chunky Personal sports wheel you notice special Stewart Warner gauges, the speedo and tachometer calibrated so their sweep isn't obscured by the thick spokes of the steering wheel – a nice touch.

With such a muscular power-to-weight ratio (291bhp per ton) the SEAC is knee-tremblingly rapid, the sort of blistering pace that has your neck muscles straining against acceleration, an irresistible semi-whiplash sensation as each gearchange sends a surge to the rear wheels.

Acutely aware of the short wheelbase and the light weight, you treat the hefty clutch gently, lest the monster torque breaks the grip of the big 225/50 tyres on their 8.5in rims.

The SEAC performance snaps closely at the heels of mid-engined 1980s bruisers like the Countach and Testarossa yet it can be as docile and gentle as the most prosaic executive car if you want it to be. As an open car, it was uniquely quick in its day, although factory claims of 165mph never seem to have been verified. Terrifying performance aside, its responses seem more finely honed, sharper than earlier 'Wedge' cars, with zippy turn-in that makes it feel almost too responsive at first and with almost undetectable roll.

The SEAC is already becoming a prized collector's TVR of the '80s (a good one can command £25,000) and it's easy to see why. Shrinking violets need not apply, though: this car gets you noticed.

1990s SUPERCARS - Griffith & Chimaera

Launched as a toe-in-the water exercise at the British Motor Show in 1990 (using the prototype V8 S chassis) the bold and beautiful Griffith made the world stand up and take notice of a new, more mature TVR.

It was to be a further 15 months before the first production Griffiths were delivered to customers – with a new Tuscan racer-based chassis and extensive styling tweaks – yet its impact was undiminished: for the price nothing could touch it for looks or straight-line musclecar urge.

Conceived by TVR boss Peter Wheeler as an upmarket sister to the V8S and a replacement for the 'Wedge' cars, it was and is the best TVR ever, a brutally aggressive, sensuously beautiful two-seater sports car that soon had dribbling buyers queueing around the block to buy one. Some were longstanding TVR customers but others were betraying their Porsches and Ferraris for the new Blackpool rocketship. Production of the other TVR models fell off sharply when the Griffith came on stream and it was soon accounting for 72 per cent of production at the firm's Bristol Avenue factory. 4- and 4.3-litre V8 engines were offered initially but, strangely, despite an insatiable demand for the car TVR halted UK production in Decem-

More instruments for SEAC; good hood

Tasmin/350is have upmarket interiors

Rover's V8 punched to 4.2litres, 300bhp

HOW THE BLACKPOOL BRUISERS HAVE DEVELOPED

	GRANTURA III	VIXEN S2	TAIMAR	TASMIN S1	420 SEAC	GRIFFITH 500
Engine	MGA S4	Cortina GT S4	Granada 3.0 V6	Granada 2.8 V6	Rover 4.2 V8	Rover 5.0 V8
Power	86bhp	88bhp	142bhp	160bhp	300bhp	325bhp
Top speed	108mph	109mph	117mph	130mph	165mph	157mph
0-60mph	12 secs	10.5 secs	7.8 secs	8.2 secs	4.7 secs	4.5 secs
Produced	1962-64	1968-70	1976-79	1980-81	1986-88	1993-now
Number built	90 approx	438	395	118	37	400 approx

ber 1992, to refine the car's design and make time to develop the AJP V8 engine.

That was taking a little longer than expected so, to quench rabid home market demand, production started again in August 1993 with the 5-litre Griffith 500, a 325bhp, 160mph stop-gap car until the AJP V8 is fully developed.

It doesn't take long to realise that this three-month old Griffith 500 is from another planet than TVRs of old when it comes to finish, build quality and professionalism.

The body and paint are ripple-free, glass-smooth. Open the doors (with a neat handle that's never been near a Ford Capri) and you enter a womb-like cockpit no owner would have to make excuses for. There's a handsome, organically rounded dash, a slither of wood, and a turned-aluminium ball of a gearlever.

Its exhaust note is almost embarrassingly raucous, a lusty, bass, guttural bellow, and is matched by brutally rapid acceleration: through the gears nothing this side of a Diablo could live with a 500, such is the towering poke. Each shift, in a lovely American Borg Warner box with a rather hefty clutch, administers a slam in the back that leaves you breathless, the rounded prow sucking in the scenery at a rate that makes the knees weak with excitement on first acquaintance.

In feel and temperament, the nearest thing I can equate it with is an AC Cobra – the sensation of raw, open-topped speed to the accompaniment of a V8 roar is similar – but the Griffith offers much more refinement, much more grip and far better composure. It's not perfect – the steering's a bit lifeless (if accurate), as are the massively powerful brakes – but at the price you'll not find better, or faster.

The Chimaera was conceived as a less aggressive sister car to the Griffith, with 4- or 4.3-litre V8s only, slightly softer suspension and a less rude exhaust note. Chassis and interior are basically the same, but it's a bigger car with increased luggage space, more big-boots tourer than super-sports car. The look is softer, less tautly drawn than the Griffith but still delectably curvaceous. A top-up blast revealed a car that doesn't have quite the blistering pace of the Griffith yet still feels capable of zapping 99 per cent of challengers: a communicative, grippy, chuckable car with a good ride and surprising refinement.

No longer the well-meaning builder of superior backyard specials, the last 20 years have been a kind of awkward adolescence for TVR: few could look back at early build quality without a cringe, or catch sight of the first of the gawky Tasmins, and not grin a little.

But it was a learning process, and nobody laughs at TVR any more – least of all Porsche, Ferrari and all the other supercar builders from whom its stunning Griffith and Chimaera are snaffling customers.

With the new, home-made AJP V8 about to enter production in the four-seater Cerbera coupé, TVR can at last gain access to the thoroughbred club. It deserves it.

Griffith 500 here; Chimaera at top

Griff's ergonomic interior still has quirks

Mighty 500 Griffith has 325bhp 4.9 V8

Our grateful thanks to the members of the TVR Car Club whose cars we photographed: Ian Massey-Crosse (Grantura), David James (Vixen), David Warner (1600M), Roger Folkhard (2500M), David and Una Harvey (Taimar and Chimaera), Colin Parry (3000S), T Bellchambers (Tasmin 280), Mervyn Larner (350i fhc), Tim Fairbank (350i), Martin Price (420 SEAC) and Simon Lindley (Griffith 500). Also to John Hayter and Roger Cook for making the day possible. Contact the TVR Car Club via Roger Cook on 01242 22287, or write to him at 21 Hawkswood Road, The Woodlands, Cheltenham, Glos GL51 5DT.