SOME LIKE IT HOT

Amongst its armoury, TVR can boast a couple of stupendously fast road cars, and an even more staggering racer. Mark Hales and Peter Dron discovered a few illuminating facts about Blackpool

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TVR 420 SEAC

THIS IS an exclusive club. And we are not talking here of class, breeding or style; we are simply talking grunt, and maybe aerodynamics. Mainly, though, it has to be grunt. We are talking about the 150mph club, but we will be adding another condition; that the car must be in series production, and made in Britain. In addition the speed should, if possible, have been verified by ourselves or our colleagues at *Motor*. For a moment though, let us ignore the made in Britain proviso, and take a look at the speed tables.

The one and a half ton list is short enough to examine here and it even begins in Britain, because Newport Pagnell's finest begins with the letter 'A'. Aston's 5.3-litre V8 Vantage has a claimed top speed of over 180mph; this for the moment remains a manufacturer's boast, simply because Millbrook's two mile bowl is too tight to contain any road car at that sort of gait. Even 160mph needs nearly a quarter of a turn of lock in anything, and you begin to fear for the tyres after two laps.

There's absolutely no doubt that the Vantage Aston will easily exceed 150 though – the basic standard V8 managed that some years back. Further down the list, Germany sneaks in by courtesy of BMW and Porsche; the 944 turbo, the 928, and all the 911s will quite comfortably put away the 150 break, never mind the 959. Talking of Porsche top speeds always reminds me of *Motor* magazine's Lawrence Pearce giggling with delight as he guided a 911 through *the pouring rain* to record 153mph at Millbrook. How he can ever claim to be a writer, having demonstrated a complete lack of imagination, remains beyond me

Back to Germany and the world's fastest five-seater saloon is in (at Millbrook) by 0.1mph, without needing to test out BMW's Green-pleasing claims that the 750 is electronically restricted to 155mph. Ferrari is there of course – I drove a 328 to 161mph, with a mean lap of 158.5 – and there's also the Testarossa and the F40. Lamborghini has the Countach in which Editor Dron touched 190mph, but not at Millbrook. Renault's slippery GTA is the sole French representative with 151mph and we mustn't forget Lotus's latest Esprit turbo (153mph) or the XJ-S Jaguar V12 which managed 151mph as long ago as 1981. There are some more, which might have done it given a different day – the Mercedes 560 probably (149.3mph), and BMW again, the M635 fell but a few 10ths short.

More members perhaps than you might think at first, but it nevertheless remains an exclusive club, and the dynamic demands required to push a ton of machinery through the air at that speed are substantial. To add 10mph to the top speed of a car with a Cd of around 0.35 requires about half as much power again.

Unsurprisingly this is not a gathering for the down at heel either. The XJ-S and Esprit retail at just under £30,000, a substantial sum of tax-paid income, but a real bargain when compared with Aston or Ferrari Testarossa price tags of just under £90,000. Britain though, despite what we understand is a declining car industry, does rather well in this, albeit rather academic, contest, thanks to Aston, Lotus and Jaguar.

There is, however, a new name to add to the list. The Blackpool sports car specialists TVR have finally done it. Just last month, we took a standard production 420SEAC to the magic 150mph mark, at which speed it felt utterly stable and understeered less than most round the diameter of the bowl. Not only that, we also recorded the fastest 0-60mph time we have ever seen from a production car – 4.7 seconds – and this with two up as always and without resort to special grippy tyres or the like. The performance just takes a 10th from the previous best, held by Lamborghini's Countach.

The 420SEAC sells for just under £30,000 – cheap given the company, but risking comparison with some classy products, and for attributes other than sheer speed. But the TVR is also a convertible, and there they have it. There simply isn't anything else which is roofless, and goes as fast for the money.

The recipe is simple. The basis of the car is the now familiar 390 wedge, with an aggressively restyled body, and a larger capacity development of the Rover V8. The trusty, all-aluminium, Buick-derived Range Rover engine (produced by Land Rover to Vitesse spec especially for TVR) receives larger (93.5mm) diameter Cosworth pistons, and a specially made steel crankshaft to expand the stroke to 77mm. This gives a total swept volume of 4,228cc, and there are also gas-flowed heads with bigger valves operated by a different camshaft via a set of solid lifters. These are an option over the standard hydraulic items, and are more efficient at high rpm but they do clatter. Maximum power varies slightly as each engine is hand-built and dyno-tested, but a representative figure is our test car's 304bhp at 5,750rpm. Torque is quoted as 290lb ft at about 4,500rpm. The whole engine is built and prepared with the care and time normally reserved for a racing engine, and it shows. Not only that, but just over 12 seconds to reach 100mph says most things about a power unit's effectiveness.

JOHN COLLEY

The figures, however, cannot convey the sheer sweetness of the power unit, combined with a free-revving urgency and a high rpm bark that sets the senses tingling. It's better if you do rev it too. Both we and TVR were surprised to find that the fourth-gear performance was shy of the 350SX supercharged car (described elsewhere in this issue), although the SEAC's five and a half second average to gobble up any of the 20mph gaps up to 110mph can hardly be described as a disappointment.

Stir the gear lever, though, and the 420 really wakes up. From a slightly nervous idle the power begins to pour from 2,000rpm. Add another 2,000, and the exhaust note, booming from the single stainless steel drainpipe poking through the rear skirt, takes on a harder edge. It's not a heavy, uneven throb like a Chevrolet, nor the demonic scream of a Ferrari, but somewhere in-between. It feels much classier than it should, given the commercial vehicle origins of the engine, and it's smooth, devoid of any mechanical harshness or the thrumming that sets the panels of a Range Rover shimmying in sympathy when you rev it. There's no red sector on the TVR's tacho – Lotus style – but we were advised that 6,200rpm was the advisable limit, although there's rarely any need to venture into those areas in everyday use.

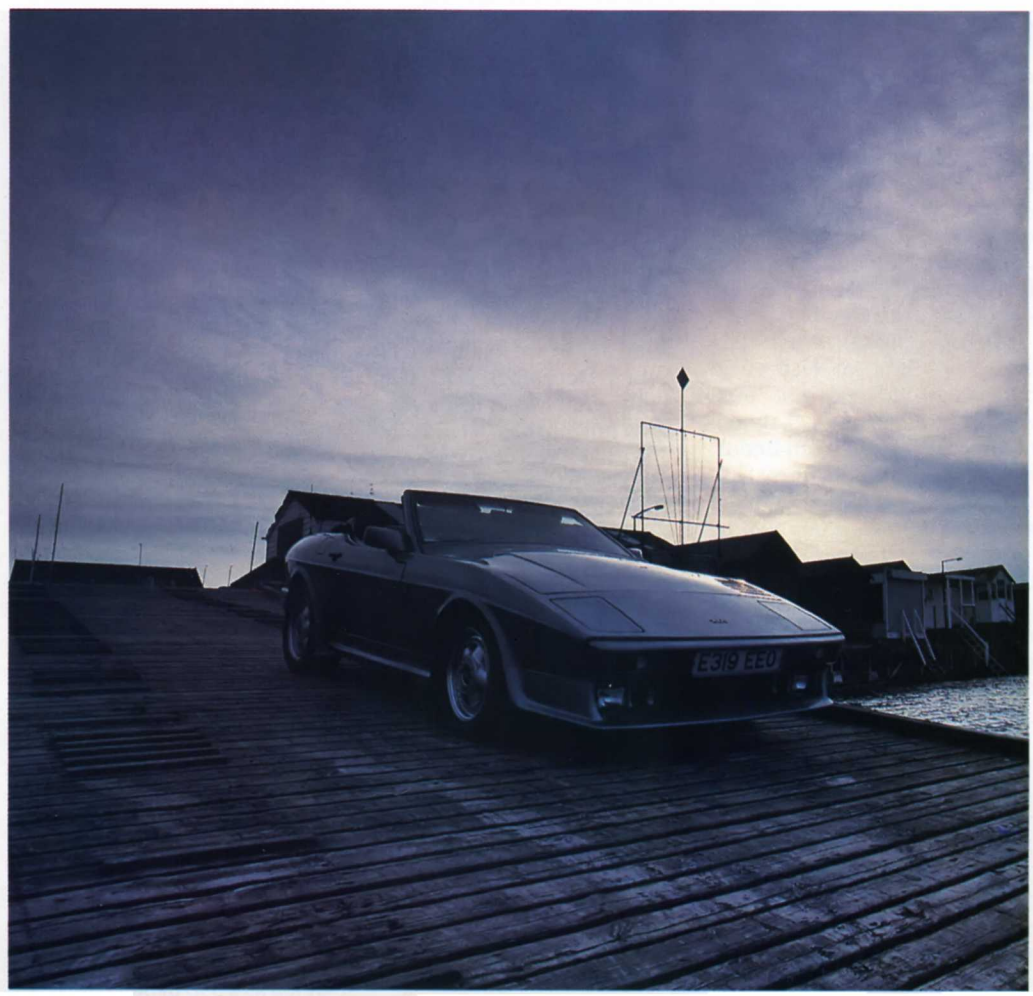
Gearbox is the Rover Vitesse manual item, and if the change is not up to the standard of the best modern Japanese units, it's light and quite pleasant to use although the spring biasing between planes can be rather vague. This really only causes problems while performance testing, not in everyday use. The lever is sited too far back on the transmission tunnel, though.

The body is different in construction as well as style from those of ordinary 390 TVRs. The nose is sleeker and lower (an improvement), and there are blended-in side skirts and a beaver-tail rear spoiler atop the boot surface (a matter of taste). The car's dimensions are possibly a little bluff for this sort of treatment, and the side skirts and spoiler tend to accentuate the boot's truncated nature. You cannot deny that it's purposeful, and in fact TVR could easily sell more than the 20 or so cars that they can build every year.

The body is hand-laid in a lightweight composite fibre material (hence the acronym Special Equipment *Aramid Composite*), and is some 200lb lighter than the 350/390 with no loss of strength. Mounted on the rugged, square-tube spaceframe chassis by silentbloc rubber sandwiches, the structure feels rigid, and as shake-free as you can expect in a roofless vehicle.

Suspension is the 390 twin wishbone front, lower wishbone with driveshaft as upper link rear, arrangement, and the car sports 225/50 × 15 Bridgestone RE71 tyres on 8.5in TVR pattern aluminium wheels – 245/45 × 16 on 9in wheels are an option for the rear. On the road, the SEAC has all the traditional TVR virtues; super-sharp, accurate turn-in, gentle understeer which can be banished then converted to a gentle power slide by pressure of the right foot, superb balance and absolutely enormous grip. The ride, however, is less satisfactory, and dampers are currently an area of great concern to TVR. The test car had Bilstein at the rear, Spax at the front, and the compromise between taut body control over crests at the expense of much jiggling at low speeds – or a wallowing of the front – has yet to be discovered. At the time of writing it seems that Koni may provide the long-term answer, and we will report in due course. Like Ferrari's 328, the steering, which is subtly power assisted, may have excellent feel, but there is wrist-jarring kickback over large potholes.

Interior finish is traditionally-styled walnut veneer and leather, and is nicely executed. Heating and ventilation are fairly primitive, especially the cool air supply, but then you



can always take the roof off – something which needs barely 30 seconds thanks to TVR's award-winning hood design. Wind buffeting is absolutely minimal which means that you don't need to stop and replace the lid once you leave the posing areas.

Summing up the 420SEAC is difficult. The problem, as always, is what else you can buy for the money, but then as we discovered while assessing the 390, there isn't really anything directly comparable. Ironically perhaps, the major opposition comes from TVR itself. The 390 is almost as quick, and is substantially cheaper. Cheaper still is the 350. None of them has the class of a Ferrari, or is as well made as a Jaguar XJ-S, but then the TVR is different. It has a supremely muscular charm, is devoid of temperament, and with the roof off on a sunny day, makes all the sense in the world. If anyone can think of a competitor, and by this we mean something for which you can expect to buy spares in years to come, then please let us know, and we'll test it.

PERFORMANCE

TVR 420 SEAC

Maximum speed, 150mph

Acceleration through gears, sec

0-30mph	0-40mph	0-50mph	0-60mph	0-70mph	0-80mph	0-90mph	0-100mph	0-110mph	0-120mph
1.9	2.8	3.8	4.7	6.3	8.0	10.0	12.3	15.2	18.7

Acceleration in fourth, sec

40-60mph	50-70mph	60-80mph	70-90mph	80-100mph	90-110mph	100-120mph
5.2	5.3	5.6	5.6	5.4	5.8	6.8

Acceleration in fifth, sec

40-60mph	50-70mph	60-80mph	70-90mph	80-100mph	90-110mph
7.0	7.8	8.3	9.2	10.5	11.7