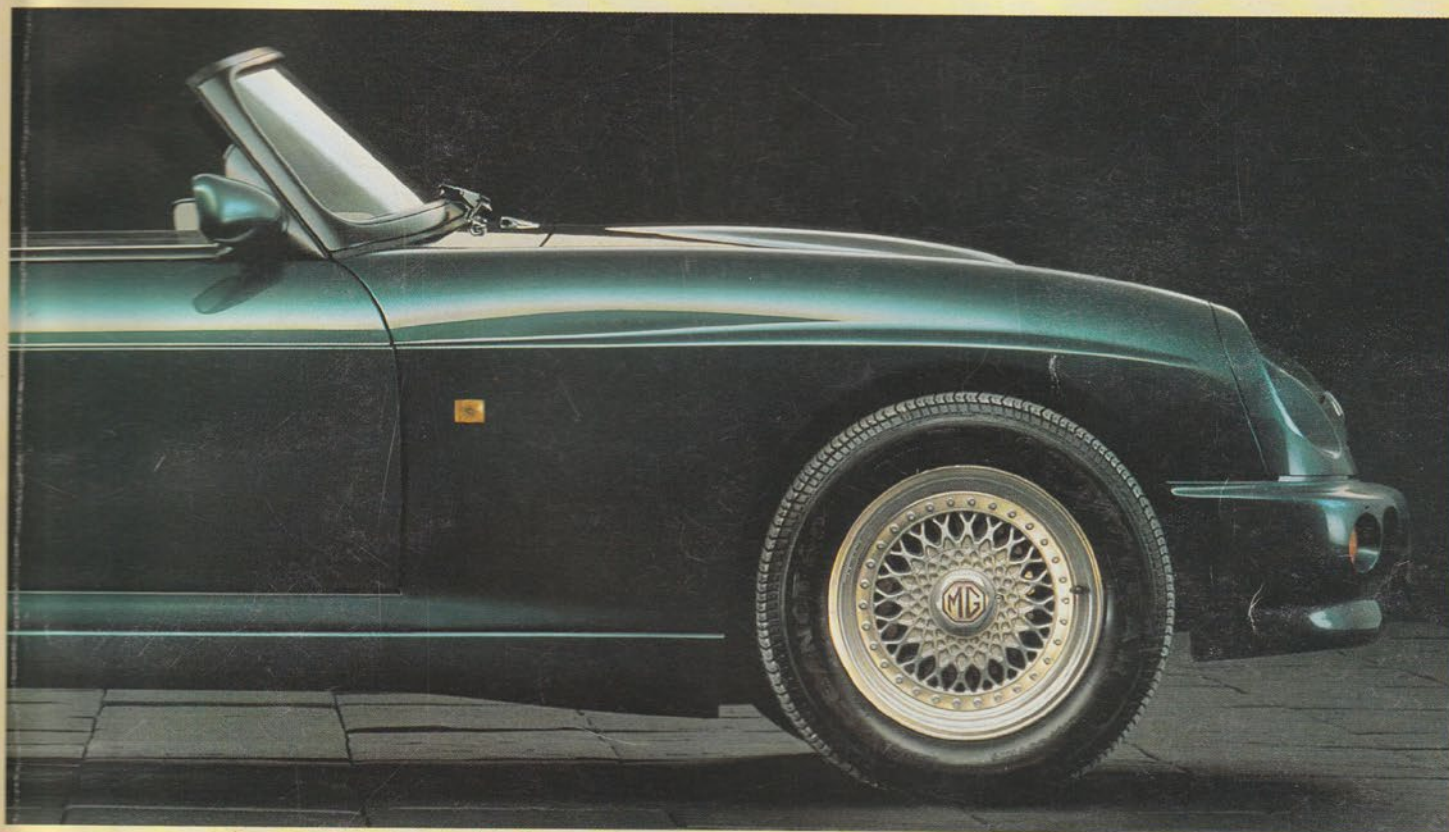


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MG is back!

With a new 3.9-litre V8 roadster

Extra

The Great British Sports Car

50-page supplement inside

The Great
British
Sports Car



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Forget the Metro, the MG badge is about to go where it belongs — on a new range of sports cars. By Michael Harvey

THERE ARE THREE MG roadsters in the pipeline at Rover: a radical mid-engined soft-top, a front-engined, big-bore convertible and, from this September, a chance to buy the MGB that never was — a V8 roadster.

Called RV8 and seen here in final form for the first time, the retro-look roadster will pave the way for far more adventurous and modern designs over the next five years.

The resurrected B,

3.9-litre V8-powered and to cost £26,500, hits showrooms in September. Rover claims it has 400 serious enquiries already. Only 15 cars are to be made a week.

Rover has homologated the RV8 as a new car, but in truth all the ingredients are familiar. The MG team has been digging deep into the parts bin, taking components off the shelves of all of Rover's divisions.

The body is built by British Motor Heritage, Rover's classic spares business, which has sold complete MGB bodyshells for the past three years. Heritage will press the dramatically modified body from a combination of original and new stamps, assemble it and send the unpainted shell to Rover's Cowley plant for final assembly.

The engine is the



Rover V8, now built by Land Rover. In this fully catalysed version it produces 188bhp and more than 220lb ft of torque, enough, claims Rover, for the car to reach 135mph and 60mph in under 6secs. Land Rover also supplies the gearbox — the steadfast five speed end-on '77mm' gearbox.

Rover's engineers may have stopped short of giving RV8 independent rear suspension — it's still a live axle although there

is new front suspension — but the designers have gone to town.

The result is sure to be controversial with MG fans. It's difficult to see the original car's inoffensive lines behind this new profile although, square cut wings and bluff nose apart, this is essentially the same body axed by Michael Edwardes in October 1980. There's more than a touch of Bentley Continental to the tail in particular.

Its designers have been busy on the

"Rover is deadly serious about making MG work. RV8 is an appetiser"

interior, too. Hides and hardwoods abound, with traditional circular instruments to ram home the retro feel.

The public first sees the car in the flesh at the Birmingham motor show in September, and the first customers get their cars early next year.

The RV8 is happening, says Rover, to celebrate the 30 years since the birth of the original B. Secretly, however, it's admitting that a new bronze and cream MG logo will be

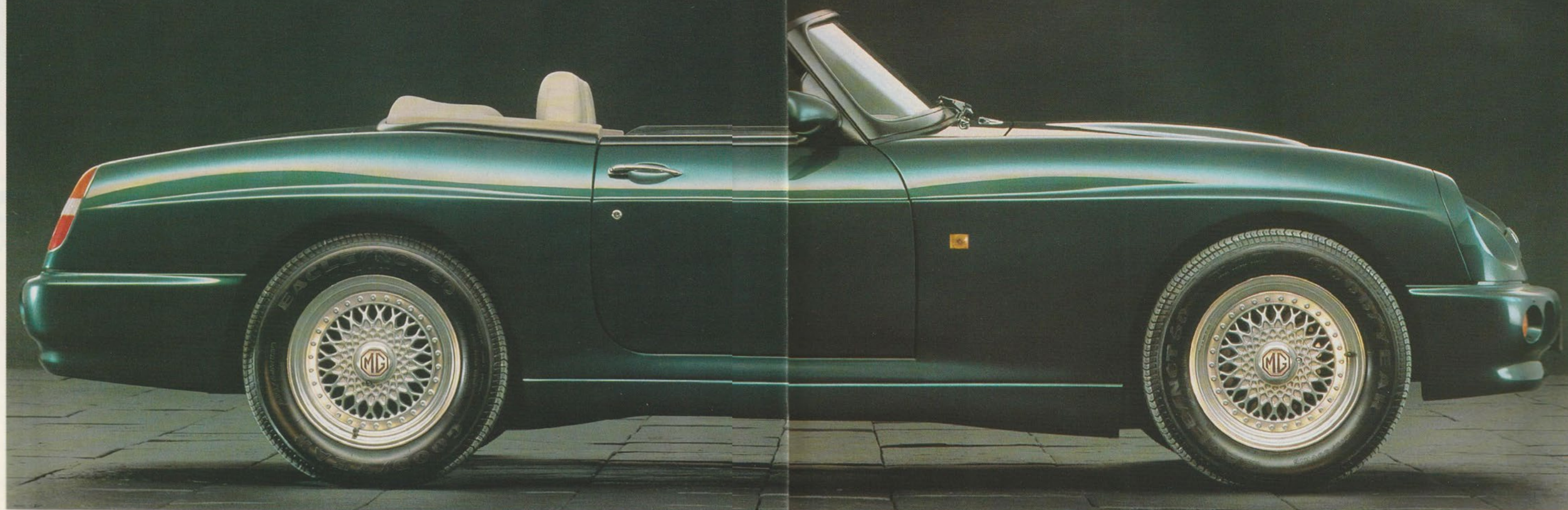
seen on more cars than just the RV8.

Rover has wanted to put MG back where it should be ever since the British Aerospace takeover. Under Sir Graham Day and George Simpson, joint-architects of modern day Rover, the MG badge has been removed from all warmed-over Metros, Maestros and Montegos.

But MG wasn't forgotten. Instead it was put on ice, and a small team of

MG IS BACK

and this V8 roadster is just the beginning



The big, two-plus-two, front-engined roadster is as big as a Rover 800, and opulent in the extreme. It will be powered by an all-new Rover vee engine



◀ engineers and designers began laying plans for the marque's resurrection.

Currently two MG proposals exist within Rover as engineering programmes. No production timetables yet exist but given a green light they could be on the roads in two years.

The most exciting is PR3. This is a mid-engined two-seat roadster, a little smaller than a Mazda MX-5 and powered by a turbocharged K-series engine. Those you've seen it say it's instantly recognisable as an MG with its round headlamps and soft, lean lines.

The mid-engined layout is seen as essential if the new MG is to take on cars like the Mazda MX-5, even though it means engineering a new platform independently of partner Honda.

One insider says:
"We missed the boat
when we didn't do an

MG MX-5 four years ago. We have to offer something else, something that's new and exclusive. What's more unique than an £18,000 mid-engined roadster?"

In fact, much of the running gear won't be all that new to PR3. The engine is to be the new 1.6-litre K-series unit, which is likely to be previewed in a facelifted Rover 200/400 line-up at this autumn's Birmingham show.

Supplementing the existing 1.1 and 1.4 K-series, the new bigger engine means the end for the Honda 1.6, which Rover is currently forced to use for lack of an alternative.

Producing around 140bhp in normally aspirated form, it promises close to 170bhp in turbocharged form for the new MG.

The steel-bodied car won't be a featherweight but the

turbo K-should nonetheless pack enough punch to take it over 130mph and close to 7secs for 0-60mph.

In true MG fashion, the new sports car will be more the practical, roomy, cheap to run and, above all, fun to drive sportster than all-out performance hero.

On the ride and

handling, it is thought a version of the Metro's immensely capable inter-connected Hydragas suspension will be used.

The design, like all the engineering, has been done in-house. It's a straightforward shape, very much in the

MG mould, with a friendly 'face' dominated by its round headlamps, with smaller indicators and spotlights in the bumper. The MG grille, as good as destroyed in the 'rubber bumper' era

from 1974 to 1980, makes a return, albeit a lot more discreetly.

Everything is ready to go on the mid-engined car. It's fully engineered, there's a massive costings report completed and the styling is 'signed-off'. All it needs now is a

board decision to build the car — expected by mid next year. With a go-ahead, the mid-engined MG could be on the road for the summer of 1995.

The mid-engined PR3 is a lot further advanced than the



other new MG in the pipeline — a big, front-engined roadster. It's unlike anything MG has ever done before.

This would be MG's, and Rover's, sporting flagship. As big as the Rover 800 coupe but strictly a two-plus-two, it would pack more luxury and high tech than any other Rover model. And with a new V8 under its long bonnet, it would be the closest any Rover's ever likely to come to being a Mercedes SL rival.

The key to the big car is a K-series based vee engine under development at Rover's Gaydon engineering centre. Sources confirm that bench tests are being carried

"With a new V8 it's the closest a Rover will get to being a Merc SL"

out on a 3.2 (two of the new four-cylinder 1.6-litre Ks on a common crank) and a more complex 2.5-litre K-series V6.

Like the 1.6-litre unit in the PR3, the MG project wouldn't have first call on either of the new vee engines. Rover believes it can produce

a V8 or a V6 for the 800 range for as little as a third of the price it currently pays Honda for the 2.7-litre V6.

Development of such an engine is easier to justify given that the next generation of 800 saloons, as well as

the Range Rover and Discovery, would also use it.

It's likely the Rover vee engine chosen will first see the light of day in a rebodied 800 in 1994/1995.

Aimed at a very different market from the mid-engined car, the big convertible will be long-legged, easy to drive and very refined. Like the mid-engined car, it will have its own rear-drive platform.

Not as big as the 4880mm (16ft) long 800 coupe but longer than next year's 4670mm (15ft 4ins) Montego replacement, the 600, this model promises to be a state-of-the-art, mid '90s interpretation of the classic front-engined, rear-drive MG.

But with neither the platform nor the engine in production form, the big car would be at least two years behind the mid-engined car even if it got the go-ahead next week. It will be 1997 at the earliest.

Rover is deadly serious about making MG work. Rest assured the RV8 is no more than an appetiser.

★ **MG vs TVR p114**

First mid-engined MG: PR3 packs two seats, 170bhp turbo 1.6 and Hydragas suspension. Could be on sale 1995. Just needs go-ahead





Great Expectations

How good will Rover's V8 MGB be?

Better than a TVR V8S? Another V8

MGB shows it's possible By Mark Hughes

How will the MG RV8 shape up against its nearest rival in spirit and price, the TVR V8S, when it is launched at the NEC show in October? Although the committed MG disciples would never entertain the notion that the brutish rocket from Blackpool is a competitor, there's no doubt it provides the best benchmark.

The real confrontation between these two V8-powered British sports cars will have to wait, but for the moment here's a taster. Various individuals and conversion companies have shoehorned Rover V8 engines into MGB roadster bodyshells over the years, with



MGB V8 is competent in the corners

differing degrees of professionalism. The car you see in these pictures, one man's home-built special, is probably the best of them. Were Rover's engineers to examine it, which they haven't, they might just find some interesting ideas.

In many ways, TVR has set an example over the years which Rover and its corporate — or should that be corpulent? — predecessors could have easily paralleled. Although much-

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developed, the V8S has its design roots in the M-series TVR which was conceived in 1971, halfway through the MGB's life. It's undoubtedly simpler to achieve continuous development with a tubular steel spaceframe chassis and a separate glass-fibre body, but the steel monocoque MGB nonetheless could have been gradually tailored to move with the times. After all, that's what Rover is now doing all these years later.

The V8S is the ultimate weapon in TVR's S family, sharing the same chassis, complete with semi-trailing arm rear suspension, as the V6-powered S3. By pushing up the V8's capacity to 3590cc, TVR Power — the Coventry-based engine building subsidiary — has produced 240bhp at 5750rpm and 275lb ft of torque at 4200rpm. Larger and more exotic V8 specs are available, but TVR prefers to reserve these for the Griffith's uprated chassis, which offers a race-bred double wishbone rear end.

As for the MGB, the idea of transplanting the Rover V8, an all-alloy unit which actually weighs less than the regular cast-iron B-series four-cylinder, goes back a long way. To my knowledge, the suggestion was first



Vivacious TVR at best on twisty roads

proposed in *Autocar* in 1968, when Michael Scarlett wrapped up his unenthusiastic road test of the six-cylinder MGC with the words, "Dare one also hope that they'll put the aluminium Rover 3.5-litre in one day?" It would have been so easy to have marketed a car quickly, if only British Leyland had had the will. Engine availability was not a problem: if an independent like Morgan could negotiate a supply of the V8 for its new



Plus 8, then MG, part of the same company as Rover, could have done the same. But BL failed to nibble the carrot under its nose, and so a couple of years later Ken Costello offered his own V8 conversion for £1000 above the MGB's £1400 list price.

This was the point when BL finally woke up. Following a string of glowing press reports, Costello received a letter from Leyland's director of engineering asking to borrow a car for appraisal. The

'Taylor's MGB V8 looks almost like a standard MGB, but under the surface it has been totally reworked'

conversions were selling so well that Costello didn't have a car to lend, but he wrote back promising to drop by at Longbridge as soon as he could.

Costello's car caused a stir when he eventually made an unannounced visit. Lord Stokes summoned him for a meeting shortly after, which led to BL sending him a car and a V8 engine to convert for them. Once this 'prototype' was completed, BL at last saw sense and decided to make its own MGB V8. In ►

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◀ truth, the 'official' car was a more thoroughly engineered package than Costello's, an uprated driveline including a stronger MGC gearbox.

But BL missed the boat in two ways. Launching the car in August 1973, on the eve of the fuel crisis, was just a stroke of bad luck because shifting thirsty V8 metal at that time was like selling umbrellas in a drought. The other mistake was self-inflicted. The factory's V8 was offered in only the hatchback GT bodyshell, effectively closing off half the market. BL always claimed that the roadster's structure was not rigid enough to take the V8's torque, but Costello's soft-top customers had never complained. So the MGB GT V8 was a flop, production ceasing after three years and 2591 sales.

Now the enterprising individual is Trevor Taylor, a self-employed mechanic who has restored several MGBs. This recent project is a one-off for his own use rather than a commercial exercise, but it represents a clever interpretation of a '90s MGB V8 and has beaten Rover's on to the streets.

Taylor's car looks just like a standard MGB apart from its low-profile tyres, wire wheels, lowered suspension and roll-over bar, but under the surface it has been comprehensively reworked. The engineering is first class, which is only to be expected from a man who served his apprenticeship with Jack Barclay Rolls-Royce. Taylor's inspiration came from the V8 Conversion Company in Orpington, but the execution is all his, achieved after "lots of reading and thinking to arrive at my own solutions".

This car was going to be a standard MGB built up around one of the new Heritage bodyshells, but the engine in Taylor's daily transport, a Rover SD1, starting him musing. In the end, a



Smart cabin has new leather wheel

friend's near-derelict SD1 provided a cheap donor car which Taylor dismantled for its engine and manual gearbox, along with other sundries.

Oselli of Oxford received a batch of V8 parts which it was told to prepare to fast road specification. The block was acid-dipped, the oilways were cleaned out, the heads were brought up to Oselli's Stage II tune, the camshaft was replaced by a meatier Crane 214, the crankshaft was reground and tufted



V8 conversion is first class in MGB



Handling is better than standard B's

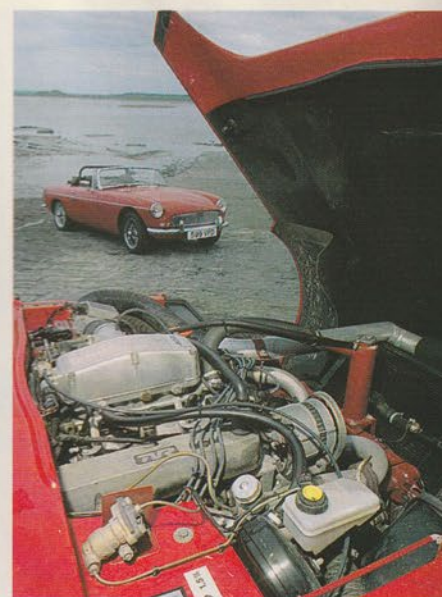
— and so on. Taylor assembled and balanced the engine himself, crowning it with a Holley four-barrel carburettor and 'low-rider' air filter. He feels the finished 3.5-litre unit is good for around 235bhp.

Taylor ordered his Heritage shell in 'rubber bumper' spec, which has a lower crossmember below the engine bay. This allowed him to drop the V8 engine by 50mm or so, once he had modified the inner wings to allow clearance for the heads and exhaust manifolds. As well as producing a worthwhile centre of gravity advantage, lowering the powertrain avoided the need for a bonnet bulge. Taylor likes the Q-car appeal of his creation.

Although the five-speed Rover 'box is unaltered, the rest of the driveline has been modified. A new propshaft leads to a rear axle suitable for wire wheels, together with a Quaife limited slip diff, a



Plush TVR has poorly sited gear lever



TVR V8 has broad spread of power

new crown wheel and pinion and an MGB GT V8's long-legged 3.07:1 final drive. The brakes have been changed to MGB GT V8 discs and calipers at the front, with Mini 1275GT wheel cylinders slightly reducing of the rear drums' efficiency to avoid lock-up.

On the suspension side, Taylor studied the numerous handling kits available for MGBs before selecting his own package based around Ron Hopkinson components. Stiffer coil springs, Spax adjustable telescopic dampers, a stiffer front anti-roll bar and a relocated rear bar have been fitted, and the whole suspension lowered. The new dampers simply replace the MGB's archaic lever arms at the rear, but at the front they attach to the rear of the suspension assembly, leaving the lever arm unit in place, with its valving removed, so it continues to act as the upper wishbone. Modified front lower arms aid tracking stability by reducing negative camber, while some nylontronic bushing tautens the suspension without making it too harsh.

The finishing touches are designed for comfort, safety and good looks. MGC 72-spoke 15ins wire wheels (standard MGB 48-spoke 14ins wheels would not withstand the power) are shod with Michelin MXV 185/55 R 15 tyres. Besides its obvious purpose, the roll-over bar is a useful aid in structural rigidity. New seats, a thick-rimmed steering wheel and electric windows (SD1 motors adapted to the MGB's mechanisms) smarten up the cabin.

Considering that this MGB gives away nearly 500cc to the TVR, its performance deficit is surprisingly small thanks to Taylor's tweaks. But the V8's character is quite different because the potent camshaft and giant carburettor shift most of the poke to the top end. Although the MGB lights up sufficiently dramatically above 3500rpm to match the TVR's blustering acceleration



Refined and quiet at high speed — impressive for a 30-year-old soft-top shape



TVR V8S is lacking as long-distance cruiser but makes up for it elsewhere

through the higher ranges, the V8S's torque reaches much further down the scale to around 2000rpm to give stirring performance over a broad range.

As long as you have the MGB's tuned 3.5-litre singing well, there's little to choose between these two cars for a surge of overtaking power. Few cars this side of a 911 provide such effortless acceleration, although I would guess the MGB's low-speed reluctance loses it about 1sec on the TVR's 5.2secs 0-60mph time. Rover will be doing well to match this with the catalysed 185bhp 3.9-litre engine from the Range Rover, even if this unit promises to be less peaky. Maximum speed? The TVR tops out at 146mph, the MGB probably at 135mph.

You need to work the gearbox more on the MGB, but this is no hardship because the lever has a light, clean action and the clutch is moderately weighted. The TVR's gearchange, heavy to use and positioned too far

back, isn't in the same class, detracting significantly from the otherwise supreme joy of driving the V8S in anger.

This MGB's single most impressive trait is its stability and refinement at high speed, surprising in view of its 30-year-old shape. It may not be such thundering good fun as the V8S, but on our cruise down the M4 to the Severn Bridge it was much more relaxing. Despite the lack of aerodynamic addenda (Taylor didn't want to depart

'Hard on the power through an open bend, balance the steering, straighten up, punch up through the gears'

too far from a standard appearance), the car tracks accurately, produces relatively little wind noise at speed and rides with more composure than a standard MGB. Adding to the equation the TVR's fruity exhaust note — wonderful most of the time, but ultimately wearing — gives this MGB a clear advantage as a long-haul sports car.

Where the TVR really scores is for its vivacity on give-and-take roads. Better throttle response, grip, steering precision, braking and handling combine to make it an electrifying experience through a sequence of bends. The rear wheels step briskly out of line if you power too hard through a corner, but the steering is talkative and allows comfortable correction. Hard on the power through an open bend, balance the steering, straighten up, punch through to the next gear, stand on the brakes, lunge into another corner — the V8S is wonderful when the roads are sinuous, dry and empty.

For all its competence, this MGB cannot match the TVR in these dynamic areas. Measured against any standard MGB, it produces worthwhile improvements in roadholding, roll stiffness and stable handling through bumpy corners, but you are still left with the feeling that any amount of suspension modification is ultimately compromised by a live axle rear end and fairly ordinary levels of torsional rigidity. There's sometimes a trace of scuttle shake and structural looseness, whether cornering spiritedly or crashing through urban potholes.

Despite showing its age, this big-engined MGB is a faithful companion, with superb brakes, reasonably lively steering and a gentle understeer-to-oversteer transition, unless provoked. But it's not a pumping-iron machine in the TVR



TVR has fine grip, precise steering

mould. I would imagine that Rover's work in giving the RV8 an up-to-date persona has concentrated not on the powertrain, but on stiffening the bodyshell and refining the chassis. For all I know, Trevor Taylor's car and the RV8 may be like chalk and cheese, but I suspect there will be much common thinking. Taylor has assembled a remarkably accomplished car at home. Heaven forbid if Rover can't do even better. ■