

car



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WORLD
EXCLUSIVE!

WE DRIVE THE NEW MG



In a move that's as audacious as it is extraordinary, Rover has just resurrected the MG badge - on a totally revamped

MGB. Richard Bremner drives it

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM ANDREW

Vintage Recreation

IT'S BACK. A DOZEN YEARS after the Abingdon factory closed, killing MG and with it an icon for tens of thousands of enthusiasts, the MGB rides again, thrust into our gaze at the hands of a surprisingly audacious manoeuvre by Rover. Here we have not just the reintroduction of a car born 30 years ago, but the relaunch of the MG badge on real sports cars rather than warmed-over hot heaps such as the Maestro.

MG sportsters are back, after all these years, because Rover finally has a sports car strategy, and this retro roadster is a means of reintroducing the name before our memories get too faint. It will be followed, in three years, by a mid-engined, 1.6-litre supercharged roadster, and beyond that, perhaps a front-engined V8- or V6-powered grand tourer.

But all that is tomorrow. Today, we have a reworked MGB to mark the return of Britain's most popular sports car. Some may wonder at the wisdom of reintroducing a car so far past its sell-by date that by the end of its life it was fit for nothing more than reminding us how far cars had come. For many, not least this organ, it was a near undrainable fount of jokes. (*The Good, The Bad and the Ugly's* comments 15 years ago were, 'For: Lasts forever



Writer Bremner's driving evaluations made after piloting this mule, used by Rover for testing. It looks like an MGB, but underneath it's the RV8. Handling is a bit wayward at speed; roadholding runs out faster than you'd think

Against: That's the trouble Sum-up: Decrepit') Dismal grip, wayward handling and lousy performance were just part of a sour recipe that, incredibly, was supposed to tempt enthusiasts. Truth was, the MGB could be outsprinted by plenty of porridgey saloons back in 1980, and outcornered by them, too. Only Moskvichs and Marinas were equipped to challenge such dynamic mediocrity.

So it might relieve you to know that the MG RV8, as it has been rechristened, is not the same car. According to Steve Schlemmer, manager of Rover's special products division, the

outfit behind this car, only five percent of the RV8 is taken straight from the B, 20 percent consists of re-tooled, re-sourced or modified components and the remaining 75 percent, amazingly, is completely new or drawn from other Rovers.

Loads of new bits, then, but don't stride off with the idea that the RV8 is a brand-new car, because it's not - it uses a large slice of MGB technology, if the word 'technology' can be applied to the archaic world of live axles and leaf springs. Yes it's true: the RV8 does with a leaf-sprung live axle. It's not unaltered - the axle is reined in





Cabin is beautifully trimmed in 'traditional' leather and wood, although they were never traditional on MGBs or Midgets. VDO instruments are small, and are shared with TVR. Car should prove quite comfortable on long runs, unlike the MGB

with additional ironmongery, and the B's infamous lever-arm front dampers have been dumped in favour of telescopic shockers (hurrah, no less, as they are at the rear) but sophistication does not come as standard. There's better news on the mechanical front, not least the installation of the V8 that once propelled, in sometimes alarming fashion, the MGB GT V8. This time it's a 3.9-litre rather than a 3.5, affording 290 horses rather than 270hp, a difference, we can tell you, that is not unnoticeable. Though we haven't driven the RV8 in its final form, we've got damn close. Several hundred miles in the mechanically representative black W-registraion development mule we see on the left and a few more miles in the visually correct (but mechanically sorted) RV8 you see elsewhere on these pages have given us a very good idea of what the final result is going to be like. The answer is great fun, a bit vintage.

Mule is a good word for the black car, because it's no beauty. Crude rubber spats hang off the rear wings and the fatter 205/65 rubber and 15-inch wheels, an ugly stop caps the cabin and inside there's a gruesome mix of trim (a rape-seed yellow for early Allegro owners suffered), dirty pink carpets and black leather seats. Not pretty. It goes well, though. The V8 equates its familiar low-rev beat, the exhaust counterpointing with a roar that promises real. And on the road, you get it. less power, pretty much instant whatever the revs, has the B rocketing along in a manner that owners of 1.8-



litre versions can only dream of. When you discover that the car weighs only 2376lb, lending it a power to weight ratio of 179bhp per ton, you immediately know why. But it's the torque that really gets you going. There's a great fat wad of it at 3200rpm, when 242lb ft of twist action comes on stream, enough to thunder the MG effortlessly towards a comfortable high-speed cruise. At this speed, the engine is almost idling at 2900rpm, so tall is the gearing. Despite such rangey ratios (29mph per thousand in fifth) the ratios are spaced well enough to allow the torque to produce five convincing bursts of go as you work your way up through the gearbox.

With so much tugging power under the lid, you'd expect that live back axle to turn very lively indeed when it's asked for a sprint start. But no. One of the few mods to the rear end has been the addition of a pair of

anti-tramp rods that bolt to the bottom of the axle and the forward spring hangers. It's simple, but it appears to work - dropping the clutch at 3500rpm certainly lights up the rear

wheels before they bite, but the axle stays under complete control. Pull that trick on a B V8 and its rear wheels would leap up and down like Norman Lamont's interest rate.

There's also a Quaife limited slip differential (Quaife is a racing car supplier) though as we shall shortly see, this is a curative rather than a preventative device. Up front, aside from the banishment of the lever arm dampers and the installation of cast aluminium spring holders to retain the coils, there are Goldline balljoints linking hubs to lower wishbones, joints that prevent the complete breakaway of the hub when they wear out, an alarming feature of ancient MGBs. The steering rack is modified, too, being a mix of Discovery and B components.

If all this sounds modest, it's more than BL managed for the cheapskate B V8, and the best that could be managed on a compact budget. Schlemmer claims that Rover set out to give the car 'an authentic feel', an assertion that is not inaccurate.

What you notice first is the ride. It isn't jarringly uncomfortable, proving surprisingly pliant over average roads so that, at first, you're not

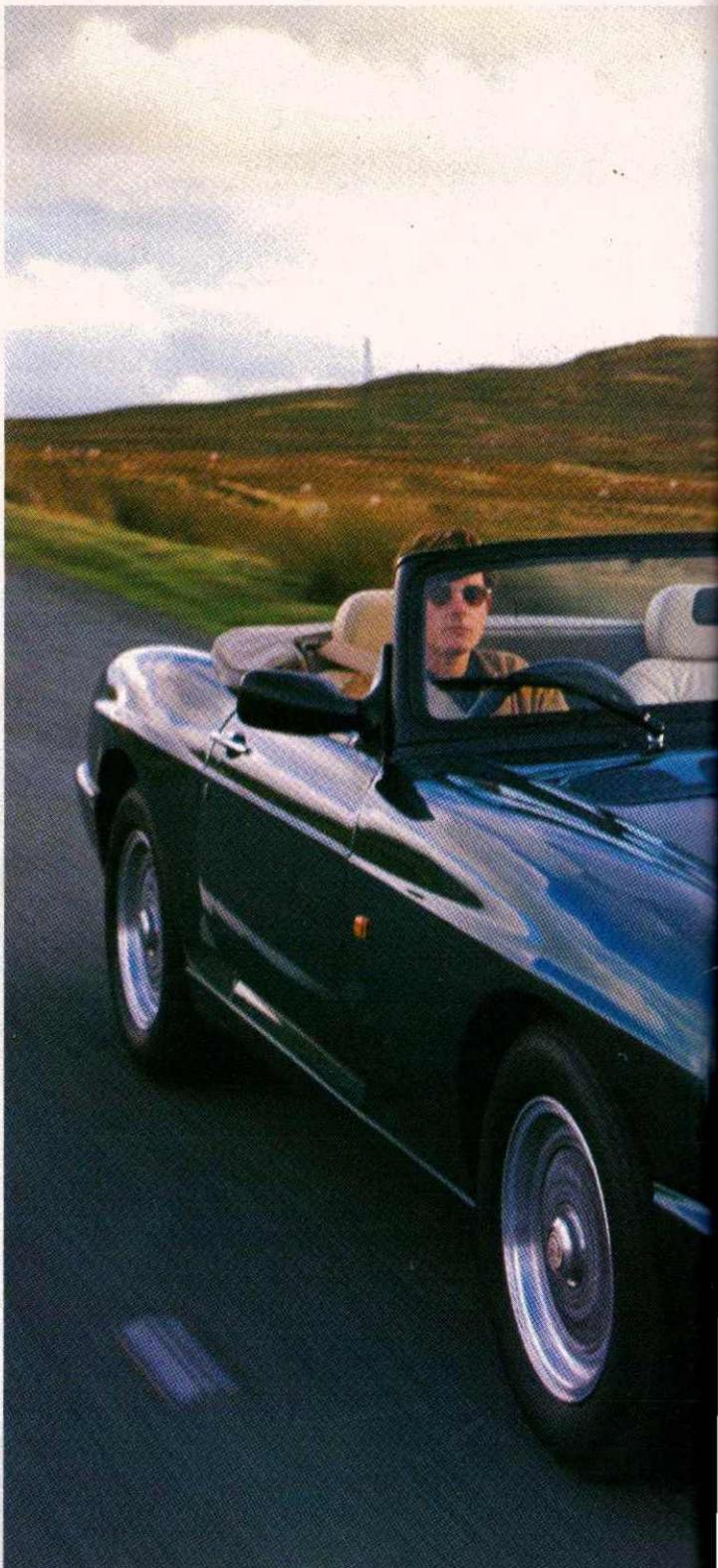
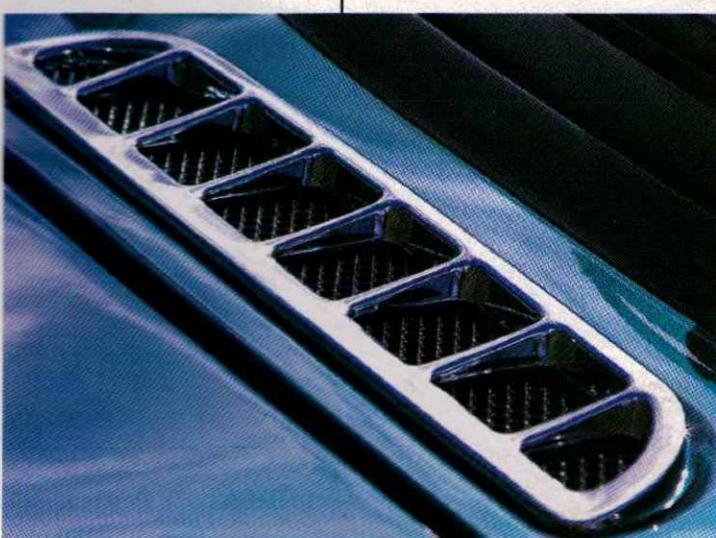
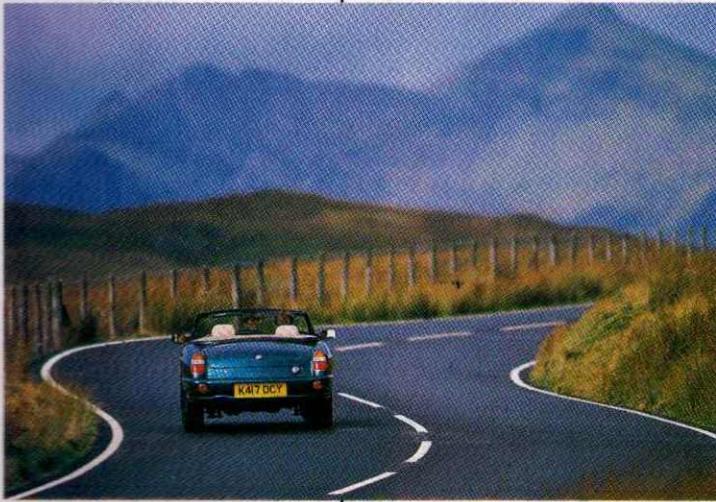
aware of anything unusual at all. Point the MG at the lanes people dream of driving it down, though, and it turns rude. Abrupt vertical jerks are its signature, the back end bucking boldly enough to remind you that you're aboard a relic of automotive history. And, of course, those bumps redirect the car if you happen to be cornering briskly at the time. Add in the fact that the new MG isn't exactly over-endowed with grip, and that the V8 can summon great welts of torque at just the wrong moment if you

happen to be injudicious, and you find yourself with plenty to keep you occupied.

Even on a trailing throttle, tight bends can have the rear heeling over, the tyres threatening to break loose. Stir in some power, and break loose they do. Pile in too keenly, on the other hand, and you'll enjoy a side-order of understeer that can swiftly turn to main course if determined slowing doesn't ensue. Care is needed, and if you don't exercise it, experience will soon instill the necessary amount of caution.



Rear lights are one of the happiest styling touches of the new RV8. Surprisingly, perhaps, there is not much chrome to be found on the new car. An exception is this vent inlet, borrowed from the MGB. It looks out of place



response invariably a withdrawal of the right foot. It's an unnerving sensation, one that needs expunging - we don't need authentic incompetence. At least the development programme isn't over yet - the RV8 appears at the Birmingham Show but doesn't go on sale until next spring, leaving time for further honing.

Think about it, though, and it's amazing that Rover ever got to this stage at all. Few mainstream makers build cars in such low volume - Rover will make just 15 RV8s a week - and we can think of no manufacturer that has reinstated production of a car so long after it was killed.

So how did it happen? The story starts with the amazing efforts of the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust, which is charged with preserving the history of most of Britain's motor industry (mainly the output of Rover and all its British Leyland antecedents) and equally usefully for us enthusiasts, validating the quality of reproduction parts for said ancient produce.

The popularity of the B led to Heritage assistant managing director David Bishop discovering that much of the tooling for the car was still lying



Finish of the RV8 is much better than it ever was on the MGB. Car goes through same paint shop as the Rover 800; zinc-coated steel should prevent rust. Despite obvious MGB overtones, 75 percent of the RV8 is brand new

about, and after an enormous effort he was able to locate it, enabling BMIHT to go into manufacturing, the shells being produced in Faringdon, not far from where MGs were made. The shells are even welded up with some of the original gear used at Pressed Steel in Cowley.

Once the body was in production BMIHT began asking itself the obvious question - could it bring the entire car back from the dead? Parts lists were drawn up, but in the end the trust decided that it would be inappropriate to turn car maker.

At which point, enter Schlemmer and crew. His special products department was set up at the start of 1990, employing 40 people to dream up profitable, low-volume niche models for Rover. The group's first project was the limited-edition Mini Cooper. 'It was such a success that we ended up being able to charge £500 more for the standard model that followed,' says Schlemmer. Gee, thanks Steve. Since then there's been the limited-edition Range Rover CSK (after the initials of the Range Rover's creator, Spen King) and, more recently, the limited-edition Land Rover Defender for North America.

But the most ambitious project to date has been the RV8. The idea was the same as BMIHT's - to use the MGB roadster bodyshell as a means of putting the B back into production, but with the aim of building 'the ultimate expression of what the MGB would have been had it stayed in production,' in Schlemmer's words.

And so project Adder, named by a development engineer who had misty-eyed memories of the Cobra and could see certain similarities (wild oversteer was probably one) was born. Deciding on the V8 powertrain was easy, given that BL had already done it. This time the Buick motor is mated to the Rover SD1's 77mm gearbox, now used in assorted Land Rovers, to give five speeds, effectively the same as the GT

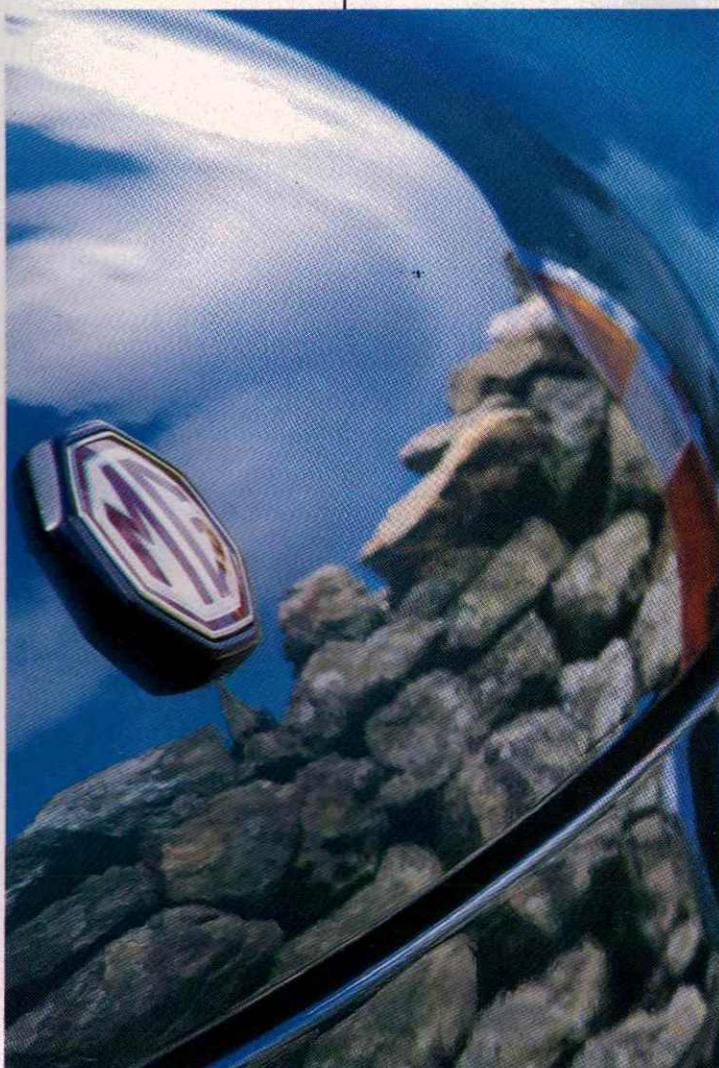
RV8's four plus overdrive on top. And the suspension, for years the bane of the B? It was, says Schlemmer, 'thought-provoking'.

We bet it was. Here we are, in 1992, witnessing the birth of a new vehicle with a live axle, and it's not a new Transit van. Worse still, it's a sports car. How can it compete? The blunt answer, as we've already seen, is that when it comes to pulling g and staying off the grass, it can't. 'This is no a rival for the TVR Griffith,' says Schlemmer, with candour. 'You can't expect that of a 30-year-old design.' The RV8 is not about ultimate handling and grip but grand touring, and Schlemmer reckons that in this role the RV8 is a tamer beast than the TVR, which he reckons is hard to live with. Ironic then, that Rover's research suggests that most Griffiths are first cars whereas the RV8 will be a second or third machine.

So who is going to buy it? Not many MG club members apparently, because at £26,500 it's going to cost too much. Instead, the target buyer is the affluent 40-years-plus executive who fancies the idea of a classic car, but not the idea of getting grubby running it. The RV8 offers classic ownership with a warranty (including a six-year anti-corrosion guarantee) and dealer network. Plenty of owners will be people who once owned a B, or wished they had.

Apparently, says Schlemmer, there were many interviewees who could describe the experience of driving a British sports car (sunny day, country lane, wind-whipped hair, rural odours - you know the scene) even though they'd never own one. That's probably why they left out the flip side - the oil leaks, the endless wrestles with the Prince of Darkness (Joe Lucas), the water-logged carpets, the frozen mitts and replacement sill kits.

So, Schlemmer is confident his buyers and confident that there's money in the deal. Not surprising when you consider that the price is five times a

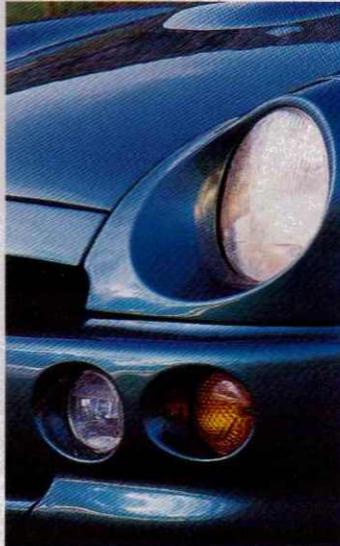




mini's. In 1973, the B GT V8 cost three times as much. Then again, a surprising quantity of the car is new.

The body is obviously different, having turned all muscular, and although the understructure lives on unchanged, all four wings, the bonnet and the rear deck (the panel that fits around the bootlid) are new. The inner wings are altered, too, to make way for the V8's spectacular four one stainless steel tubular manifolds. The only external carry-over panels are the scuttle, the sills (hidden beneath extensions) and the doors.

The shell is a higher quality item, too. Shut lines will be tightened up, the paint finish dramatically improved - the bodies go through the same paint shop as the 800 - and more importantly so will corrosion protection. Zinc-coated steels are used throughout, though certain vulnerable outer panels are coated on one side only; seam sealer is used in all clinched panels and adhesive applied where key panels are welded together. Apart from keeping the worm at bay, the glue also stiffens the shell slightly. The difference can't be great, though, which makes it curious that in 1973, BL claimed that the master shell wasn't stiff enough for a V8.



Changes to bodies don't come cheap, any more than do the plastic components that adorn them. Reinforced reaction moulded plastic bumpers cap each end of the RV8 and the same material is used for the sill extensions, too. Also new are the tail-lamp clusters (which look terrific) and the plastic mesh grille lurking behind the V8's air intake.

The engine itself is in the tune in which Land Rover supplies it to Morgan, TVR and others. It is fired and fuelled by Lucas ignition and injection and comes with a catalyst. This accounts for

some of the power increase over the old B V8, but the rest is down to the larger capacity and redesigned intake system - the old car's arrangements were plumb to dodge retooling the bonnet, a ploy that slaughtered many horses. The old V8 GT was good for 60mph in 8.3 seconds and a 124mph top speed - Rover claims a 135mph top speed and the 0-60mph sprint in 5.9 seconds for the RV8.

Also new are a pressed steel windscreens surround instead of the original aluminium job, a new double-skinned hood co-designed with Tickford that's



Bremner at the wheel (above).

Seats and heating much improved over old MGs'. Steering progressive, but a bit weighty. Headlamps are from the Porsche 911. Plastic bumpers look much better than those used on late MGBs



Body now looks much more muscular. Although the understructure is carried over from the MGB, the bodywork is new, apart from the doors, the scuttle and the sills. Windscreen surround now pressed steel, not aluminium

said to be easier to fell and erect, and new draught sealing to lower wind noise.

Inside, there's a 'traditional' British wood and leather theme, though it was never traditional for Midgets and Bs, of course. Leather and wood abound, affording an inviting ambience and a (slightly) deeper understanding of why the RV8 costs so much.

Driving the 'real' RV8 a few days later revealed some of the more subtle engineering that's gone into the project.

For instance, the pedals have

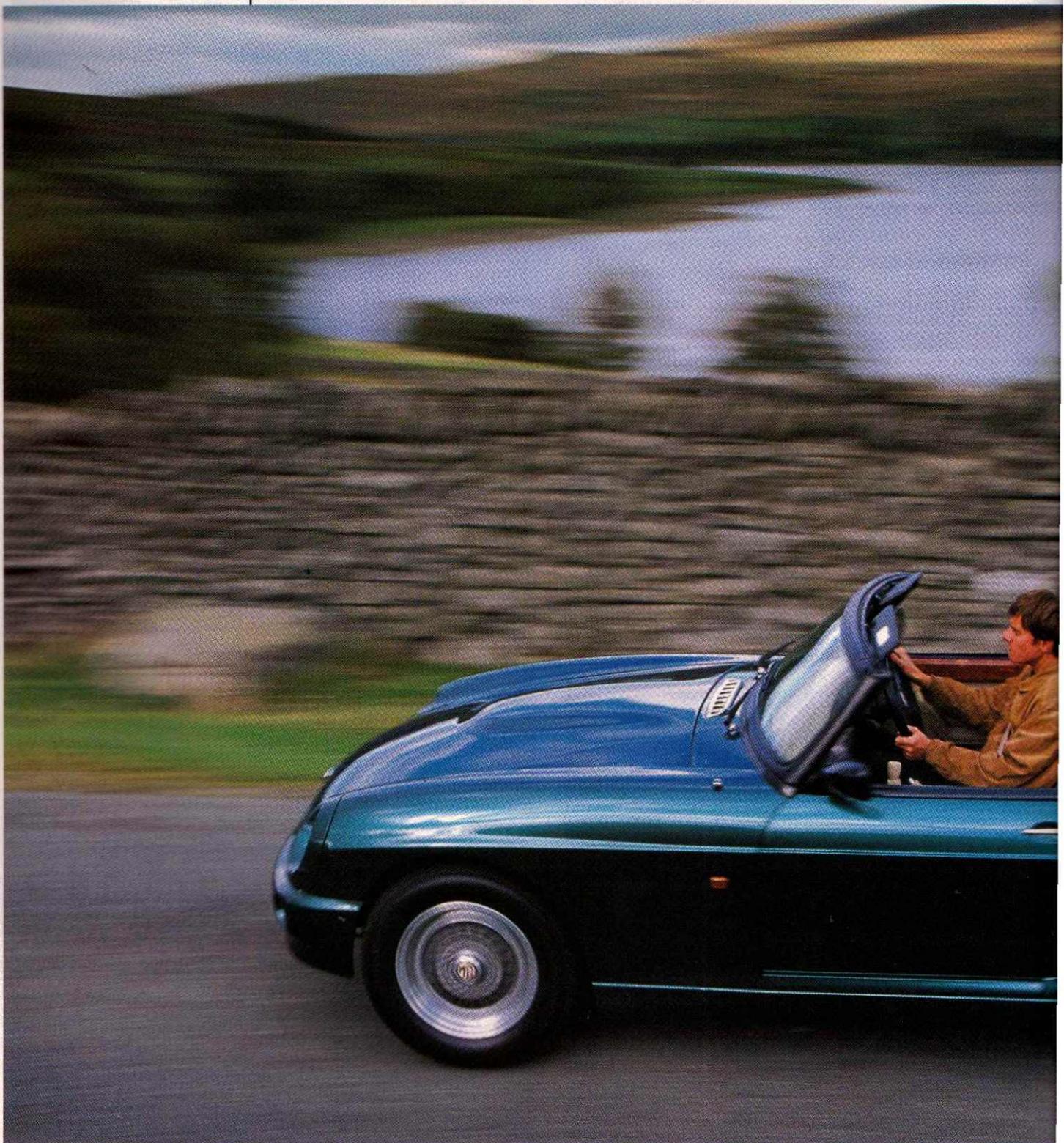
been repositioned to ease heel and toe manoeuvres (an absolute must in a British sports car, Archie), the steering wheel relocated for less intrusion and the driving position refined. The seats themselves are completely new, have dual hardness foams for better support and, like the door trims, are leather clad. Plush carpets and several highly polished planks of elm complete the upgrade, giving this latest MG the look of an olde worlde aristo's sportster.

Look harder, and you realise there's a game of spot the

component to be had, always a popular sport among owners of British ragtops. The headlamps are from the Porsche 911, the VDO instruments appear in TVRs, the interior door handles are from the Jaguar XJS, the stalks from the Rover 800, and the door mirrors from the Metro 6R4 as are the air vents. The armrests are plundered, too, but we know not whence.

Not that the RV8 looks like the product of pillaged parts bins. In fact, it looks particularly well co-ordinated and handsome.

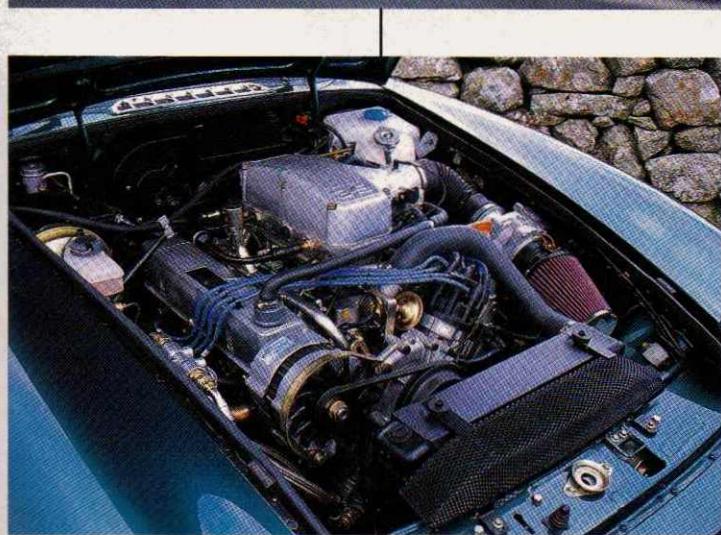
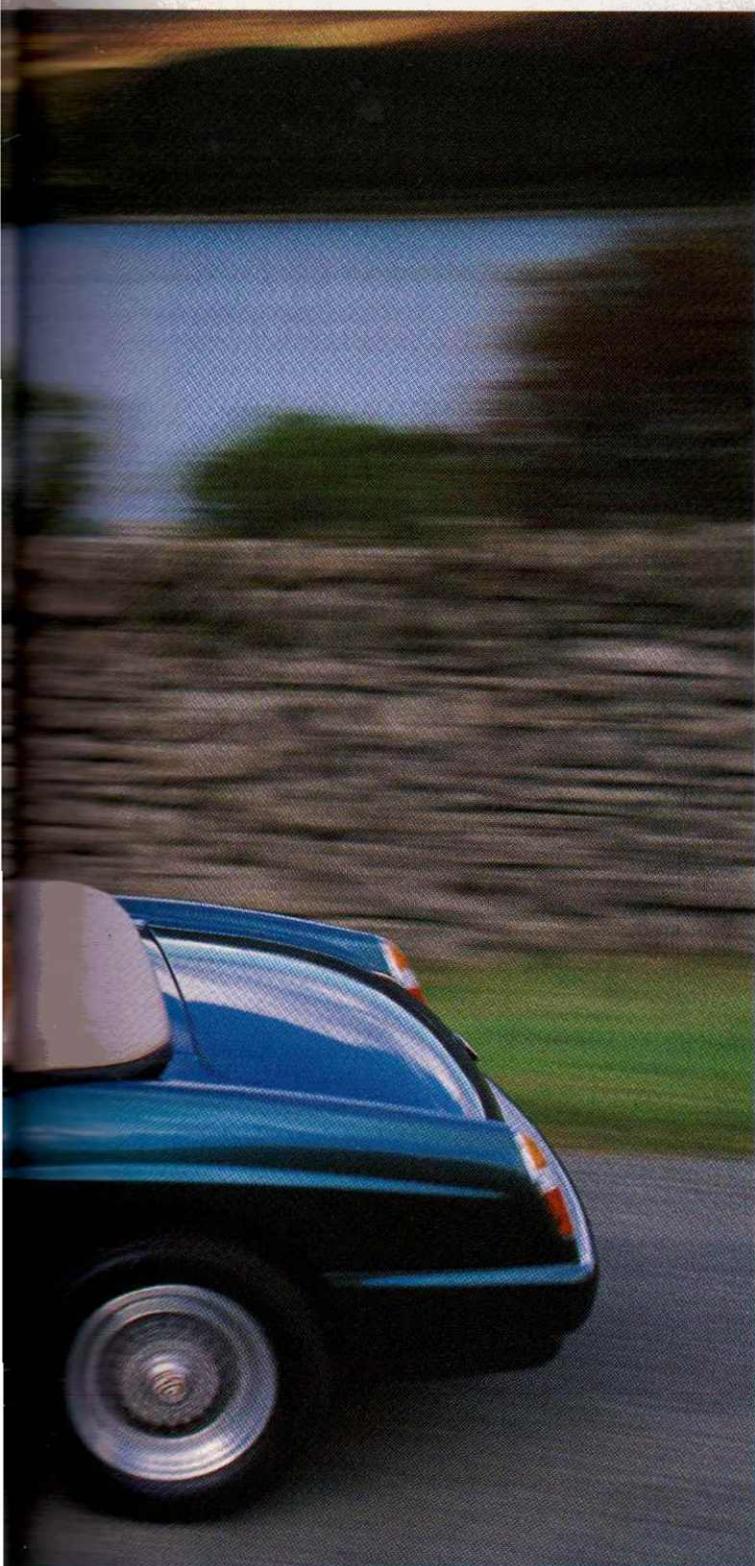
Driving this car proved



several things. First, that the press shell does seem stiff enough to contain the exertions of the V8. Yes, the scuttle shakes, but it's rare for the body to tremble. Second, that the gearbox, as in the mule, is a weak link, the range notchy and worse still, operating in planes that aren't much north-south as north, north-west, south, south-east, an arrangement that leads to missed gears. At least the clutch is progressive, and matched to a fairly smooth throttle. The steering is improved on

the mule's, now almost light enough to have you thinking that the lack of assistance at parking speeds is acceptable. More important, it's progressive and sufficiently alive to deliver pleasure. You can read the road below, and know when you should be swivelling the tiller the opposite way in a slippery corner. There's enough room in the cockpit to get your arms around the wheel, too.

Most would call the cabin snug, though, and many will find the seat mounted a bit high, even if it allows a better (though



Engine is the familiar Buick-based alloy V8, as used by Land Rover, and supplied to TVR and Morgan, among others. Its 3.9 litres produce 190bhp and 242lb ft of torque. A catalyst is standard. Rover claims 0-60 in 5.9sec and top speed 135mph

still not brilliant) view of the dinky instruments. In contrast to the original B, the RV8's a comfortable perch for long journeys (if you don't mind the V8's rather vocal roar, and we don't) not least because of its vastly better seats, the novelty of a heater that works (and may be offered as an aftermarket kit for frozen B owners) and a decent hood, though we have to take that on trust, because there was no chance to test it.

Yes, it's fun, this RV8. It needs more grip, and it certainly needs to reassure more in fast sweepers. Yet curiously, it feels well planted most of the time, a sensation heightened by the lack of roll and the weighty steering. It doesn't extend the dynamic envelope of rear-drive cars - indeed, it sits depressingly well inside it at times - but its vintage deportment isn't unappealing, and there's no question of the allure of the V8's rip and roar. And, important this, the RV8 looks good, too.

No, it's not a Griffith rival, nor a rival for any other modern sportster for that matter. If you like, it's what MGs have been ever since the B began to get old - something for the bloke who fancies a sports car, but isn't a really knowing enthusiast. If he was, he wouldn't be buying an MG.