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AUTOCAR

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First full road test MG RV8

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Caterham,
Lotus**



...and a
C-type Jag

Great British Sports Cars

Bumper issue



DM 8,50, Lire 4600, 350 Ptas



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MG RV8

**A British legend is back.
But has 13 years on ice
left Rover's favourite
roadster out in the cold?**

WHAT DO A SWIMMING pool, a speedboat and an oil painting all have in common? Together they are considered by Rover to constitute the principal opposition for its £25,440 MG RV8 roadster. And if this sounds like a strange collection of rivals for a motor car, Rover would like you to see it instead as 'a recreational pursuit which just happens to take the form of a motor car.'

Rover claims that it is promoting its heavily revised MGB like this not out of fear of how it might compare to other, similarly priced, two-seater roadsters but because, it asserts, 90 per cent of the 2000 customers it is aiming for over the next two years will be weighing it up against the likes of the speedboat and oil painting, not another car.

So what is it about the RV8 that leads its makers to suggest it should be seen as a hobby on wheels rather than a modern motor car?

Simply put, and no-one argues this point, it is not a modern car but a modern interpretation of a car which was born 31 years ago. The essential bones of the original structure remain, from the bodyshell (now made by British Motor Heritage) to

the live rear axle, basic suspension design and most of the bodywork, from the bonnet and doors to the bootlid.

To look at, though, the changes Rover has made to exhume the most popular MG after 13 years in the grave are obvious and, by and large, successful. New wings front and rear give a more modern, integrated look while new bumpers and headlamps are a vast improvement on the ugly rubber mouldings that ruined the front and rear of all post-1974 MGBs.

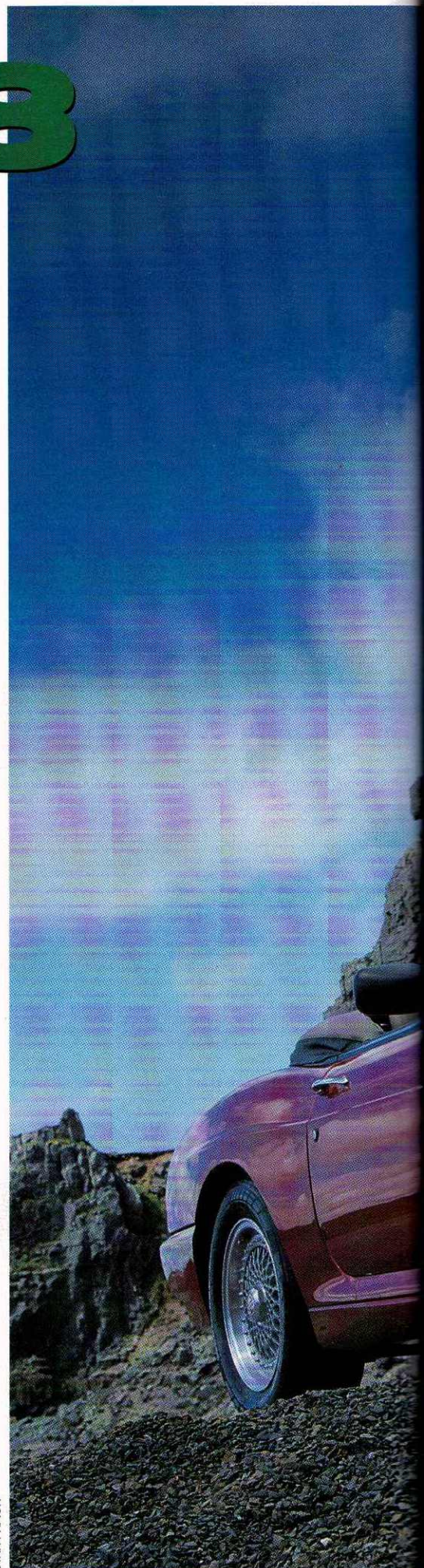
The car looks lower too, thanks to flared wheel arches, an increased track and fat, low profile tyres. Office opinion varied on the overall effect of the update but most agreed it fell somewhere between the elegance of the original design and the polluted, Federalised version of the mid to late '70s.

The best news from a mechanical point of view is the installation of the 3.9-litre version of the all-alloy, pushrod V8 that has now been Rover's fast car mainstay for 26 years. Though this is not the first time this engine has seen service in an MGB — the coupe version was available with ►

Price as tested £26,030 **Top speed** 136mph
0-60mph 6.9secs **MPG** 20.2

For Strong engine, beautifully built, feels pleasantly quaint

Against Poor handling, unrefined and rather lumpy ride



STAN PAPIOR

The Autocar Road Test

◀ a 137bhp, 3.5-litre variant from 1973 to 1976 — this is the first time it has been factory-installed in the convertible. Power has risen to 190bhp at 4750rpm while 234lb ft of torque is at your disposal at 3200rpm.

Even if you accept Rover's contention that the RV8 is a car without four-wheeled rivals, there's no escaping the fact that there are a number of similar-sized roadsters available for a similar price. The most obvious of these is the £26,250, four-litre TVR Chimaera which, given its design brief to be both a sports car and a sophisticated tourer, is so clearly in competition with the RV8 that we have pitted the two together, starting on page 74.

It is also hard to ignore such similarly powered and ancient designs as the £24,081 Marcos Mantara 4.0 and the Morgan Plus Eight at £24,898.

If, however, it is a more civilised, modern convertible you're after, Audi will part with an 80 2.3 Cabriolet in exchange for £22,199 while Mazda's sweet looking and handling MX-5 can be specified in ritzy SE trim for just £18,686. At the other end of the spectrum you will find Porsche's 968 Cabriolet at £37,175 and by August BMW will have its ultra-sophisticated 325i Cabriolet to tempt you at about £28,000.

Performance

★★★★ The RV8 fulfils the first requirement of a sports tourer with ease: it feels fast. That this impression is not entirely backed up



Heaven is a smooth, dry road; bumps unsettle the RV8

by the performance figures is not something that will worry you on the open road. With a light alloy V8 making exactly the right noises, from its low rev woofle to its flat-out roar and supplying ample doses of torque at any engine speed you like, it simply never occurs to you that you're not actually travelling that quickly. Not by TVR Chimaera standards anyway.

Rover's own performance claims say the RV8 will scrape under 6secs for the 0-60mph sprint, a time which, had we been able to replicate it, would have seen the RV8 banging on the door of the supercar club. However, it was all we could do to coax it under 7secs, suggesting that the RV8 is merely very swift. After that, despite the aerodynamic limitations of a design older even than that of the Porsche 911, it still accelerates hard, hitting 100mph in 18.5secs and eventually reaching 136mph.

To put it another way, the RV8 posts a near-identical set of figures to the Volkswagen Golf VR6, which is

0.2secs slower to 60mph and 100mph, has a top speed just 2mph higher, and records an identical 30-70mph time of 6.4secs.

Yet such statistics fail to show the RV8 in its best light. Its engine is far stronger in the midrange than screaming at the 5900rpm rev limit so the technique is to change up early and let the torque do the work. Drive like this and the engine's flexibility becomes a joy, dispatching every 20mph increment between 20 and 80mph in fourth in less than 5.6secs. Added bonuses are the clean shifting gearchange and well-cushioned, progressive clutch.

Economy

★★★★ There are few cars in our road-test history whose thirst for petrol has varied as greatly as that of the RV8. Drive it fast enough to keep pace with a TVR Chimaera over the Brecon Beacons and, as we found, it will gulp down fuel at 13-15mpg all day. Conversely,

gently cruise the motorways and 35mpg is not an uncommon sight, thanks, in the main, to a top gear ratio which adds 29mph to the speed of the rear wheels for each additional 1000rpm.

Overall it managed 20.2mpg in our hands, a good result considering the car's power and the manner in which it was driven. It was a disappointment, then, to note that our touring route, a blend of towns, country roads and motorway, tackled at a suitably relaxed pace, could yield only 26.9mpg.

Handling

★★★ Rover has worked hard to keep the RV8's chassis out of the dark ages, widening its track, replacing the lever arm dampers of old with telescopic Konis and fitting ultra-modern fat 205/65 ZR 15 section Michelin MXV3 tyres.

Yet the live rear axle with its leaf springs remains and as a result, though grip has been markedly improved, the RV8's handling is still firmly rooted in a previous generation.

The first thing you learn about driving the RV8 fast is not to do anything at all which might upset it. No sudden movements of the arms, no over-zealous applications of the throttle.

Do so and, as one tester put it, you'll read the whole book of handling vices from cover to cover in one corner. Try to bully the RV8 along and the entire gamut of horrors from terminal understeer to roll oversteer will unfold before you. And if the road is wet or the least bit bumpy, you'd be better off not trying to hustle it along at all.

The roads the RV8 likes are smooth and dry with no hidden camber changes or bumps. Angle its nose gently into a sweeping bend and it will follow your command faithfully, provide more than enough grip and, thanks to steering that is impressively communicative, give you the feeling of being in touch with the car and the road surface that is essential to any sports car. Under such conditions the RV8 is a delight. The problem is, it takes so little to upset it as it lacks both the damping control to tackle ►

More modern than meets the eye

OVER AND ABOVE ITS NEW, GLASS-FIBRE WINGS, ROVER HAS GONE TO CONSIDERABLE lengths to update the shape of the RV8. Integrated bumpers visually top and tail the car while a widened track serves to give it a more modern and aggressive stance — look at the 1962 MGB roadster next to an RV8 (right).

The headlamps, uncannily like those fitted to the Porsche 911, slope backwards in place of the convex bulge of old. The rear lights, meanwhile, have a new, smoother profile.

There is a new badge in the grille, while fog lamps have now found their way into front bumpers. The bonnet has been reprofiled to accommodate the V8 engine. The windscreen surround is now a single-piece design. As well as improving aerodynamics, it should also ease maintenance.



MG RV8



Walnut door cappings and **dash** plus leather trim and **seats** give an air of class lacking in the rather tacky vinyl-and-cheap-carpet MGB ancestor. The **cabin**, however, is hardly roomy

Instruments are standard British sports car issue, familiar from much other homegrown machinery. They are clear and legible, though

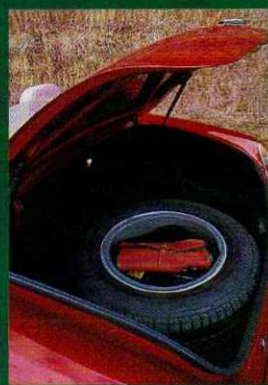
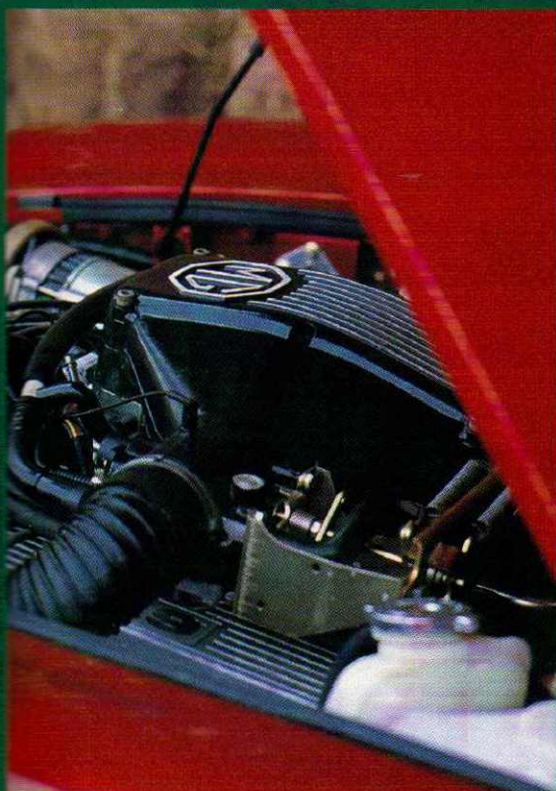
Venerable all-alloy ex-Buick Rover V8 **engine**, in 3.9-litre incarnation, fills the bay

Hefty, heavily chromed interior door handles are Jaguar-like, and aid the car's overall feel of solidity and quality

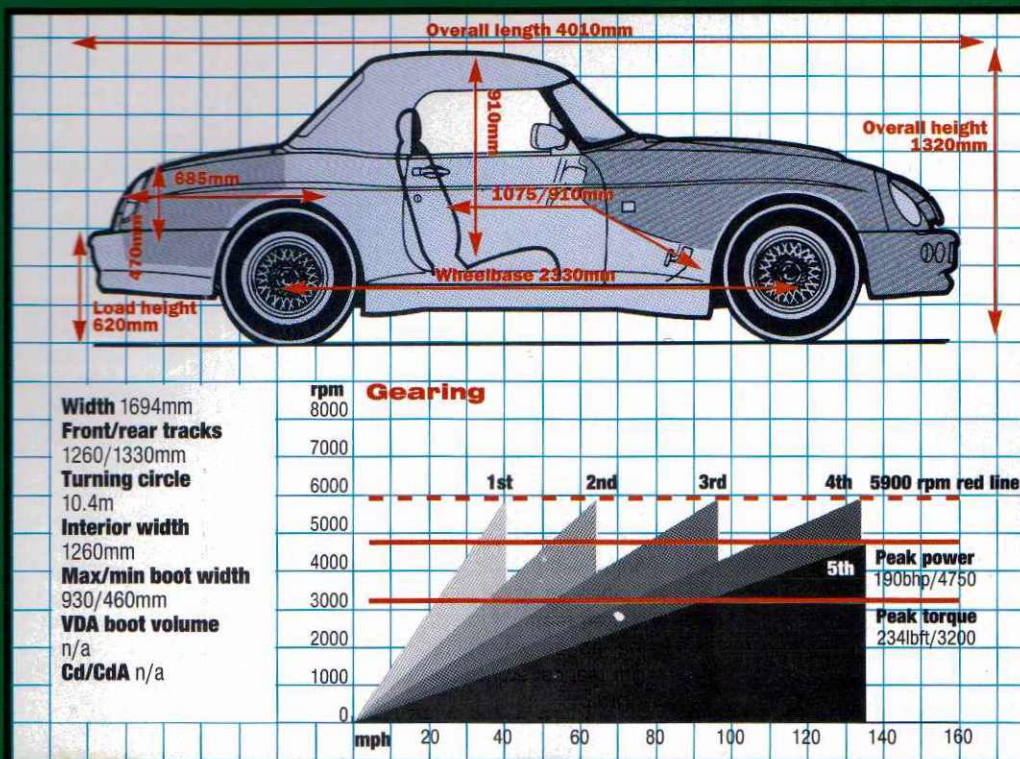
The bespoke **steering wheel** boss is neat and distinctive

Boot is mostly full of spare wheel. Space is just about adequate for a weekend away but leave the full set of Louis Vuitton luggage at home

Both **front** and rear aspects are massive improvements over the rubber bumpered '70s versions of the MGB. Headlamps now slope backwards



The Autocar Road Test



Specification

Engine

Layout	8cyls in a vee, 3946cc
Max power	190bhp/4750rpm
Max torque	234lb ft/3200rpm
Specific output	48.7bhp/litre
Power to weight	172bhp/tonne
Installation	longitudinal, front, rear-wheel drive
Made of	aluminium block, head
Bore/stroke	94.0/71.12mm
Comp ratio	9.35:1
Valves	2 per cyl, ohv
Ignition and fuel	fully mapped breakerless ignition, Lucas multi-point fuel injection, catalyst

Gearbox

Type	five-speed manual
Ratios/mph per 1000rpm	
1st	3.32/6.91
2nd	2.09/10.98
3rd	1.40/16.4
4th	1.00/22.9
5th	0.79/28.97
Final drive	3.31:1

Suspension

Front	double wishbones, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar
Rear	Live axle, elliptic leaf springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar

Steering

Type	rack and pinion
Lock to lock	3.1 turns

Brakes

Front	270mm ventilated discs
Rear	228mm drums
Anti-lock	not available

Wheels and tyres

Size	15x6ins
Made of	aluminium alloy
Tyres	205/65 VR15
Spare	full size

Made and sold by

Rover Cars, Canley Road, Coventry
 CV5 6QX. Tel: 0203 670111

Performance

Maximum speeds

Top gear	136mph/4694rpm
4th	135/5900
3rd	97/5900
2nd	65/5900
1st	41/5900

Acceleration from rest

True mph	Secs	Speedo mph
30	2.4	35
40	3.7	45
50	5.0	56
60	6.9	66
70	8.8	76
80	11.2	87
90	14.5	98
100	18.5	109
110	23.6	120

Standing qtr mile 15.2secs/92mph

Standing km 27.9secs/116mph

30-70mph through gears 6.4secs

Acceleration in each gear

mph	top	4th	3rd	2nd
10-30	-	6.1	4.1	2.6
20-40	7.8	5.6	3.9	2.4
30-50	7.7	5.5	3.7	2.6
40-50	7.6	5.4	3.6	3.4
50-70	7.7	5.2	3.8	-
60-80	7.9	5.4	4.4	-
70-90	8.5	6.0	5.6	-
80-100	9.6	7.0	-	-
90-110	11.0	8.4	-	-

Fuel consumption

Overall mpg on test	20.2
Best/worst on test	37.1/10.4
Touring*	26.9
Range	301 miles
Govt tests (mpg):	
urban	17.2
56mph	40.9
75mph	32.5
Tank capacity	51 litres (11.2 galls)

* Achieved over a pre-set test route designed to replicate an average range of driving conditions. The figures were taken at the Lotus proving ground, Millbrook, with the odometer reading 2100 miles. Autocar & Motor test results are protected by world copyright and may not be reproduced without the editor's written permission.

Brakes

Distance travelled under max braking	
Track surface	dry
Anti-lock	no

30mph	11.3m
50mph	33m
70mph	68m
st qtr mile (92mph)	114m

Fade tests

Consecutive brake applications at 0.5g retardation from st qtr terminal speed

(figures on the right represent pedal pressures)



Weight

Kerb (incl half tank)	1101kg
Distribution f/r	51/49%
Max payload	220kg
Max towing weight	1310kg



- 1 Voltmeter 2 Ventilation controls 3 Analogue clock 4 Hazard warning switch 5 Water temperature gauge 6 Stereo radio/cassette 7 Indicator stalk 8 Rev-counter 9 Fuel gauge 10 Speedometer 11 Windscreen wiper stalk 12 Front fog lamps 13 Rear fog lamps 14 Interior adjustable mirrors

What it costs

Prices

List price	£25,440
Total as tested	£26,030

Equipment

(prices in **bold type** denote option fitted to test car)

Automatic gearbox	-
Electric sunroof	-
Metallic paint	★
Adjustable seatbelt height	-
Seatbelt pretensioners	-
Rear wash/wipe	-
Variable speed intermittent wipe	★
Electrically adjustable mirrors	-
Auto-reverse radio/cassette player	★
2/4/6 speakers	4
CD player	£590
Split/folding rear seat	-
Lights-on buzzer	-
Power steering	-
Alloy wheels	★
Adjustable steering column	-
Electric windows all round	★
Central locking on any door	-
Height and tilt adjustable driver's seat	-
Driver's seat lumbar adjustment	-
Anti-lock brakes	-
Anti-theft system	★
Front fog lights	★

★ standard — not available

Insurance group 17

Depreciation n/a

Warranty

12 months unlimited mileage, 6 years anti-corrosion, 12 month recovery

Servicing

Major 12,000 miles, service time n/a
Interim 6000miles n/a

Parts costs

Set spark plugs	£18.40
Brake pads front	n/a
Brake pads rear	n/a
Exhaust (exc cat)	£220
Door mirror glass	n/a
Tyre (each, typical)	£160
Windscreen	£100
Headlamp unit	£60
Front wing	£180
Rear bumper	£250



Handling goes to pieces under pressure, despite modernisation of chassis. Grip is good — while the going is good

undulations with confidence and the suspension travel to soak up the kind of mid-corner bumps that an independently sprung car would scarcely notice.

Ride

★ ★ The RV8 falls prey to its live rear axle again. At medium effort on unchallenging roads or motorways its suspension is well controlled and comfortable, fuelling the notion that here is a car more concerned with light cruising than more serious driving. Its composure, however, is seriously challenged both by urban potholes and twisting country roads, where you find yourself patrolling the horizon for bumps to avoid.

Brakes

★ ★ ★ At just 1100kg, the RV8 hardly needs a headline-grabbing brake specification. Big ventilated discs at the front and much smaller rear drums may not seem adequate to slow a car with such a performance potential but, on the road,

there are no such worries.

Pedal feel is excellent and retardation, so long as you don't encounter a bump which can cause premature lock-up, is strong and in all normal use fade-free. Anti-lock brakes are unavailable which, were this any other kind of car costing this much, would be seen as a disgrace.

For some reason though, open British sports cars seem to have excused themselves from fitting such basic and essential safety equipment. The truth is that the RV8, like any car with a top speed close to 140mph, should have anti-lock as standard.

At the wheel

★ ★ ★ The RV8's driving position is hugely undermined by the fact that the unadjustable steering wheel is severely offset towards the centre of the car. Were this not the case, you would sit exactly as you'd wish in a low slung British sports

car: reclined, legs reaching to well spaced pedals with your hands gripping a chunky steering wheel right in front of you. In reality though, it is hard to escape from the feeling that your arms are operating a wheel that's in a different part of the car to the rest of you.

The instruments are standard fare for our indigenous sportsters, populating cars from the cheapest Caterham to the mighty Lotus Esprit S4. Though small, they work well and add to the flavour of Britishness. Column stalks,

minor switches and the steering wheel, if not its newly designed MG boss, come courtesy of Rover's parts bin and blend in well with rest of the interior.

Accommodation and comfort

★ ★ The RV8 is a strict two-seater. Though hood-up headroom is just sufficient, tall drivers will have to drive the RV8 barefoot to make enough space to work the pedals comfortably. The hood itself is ►



Rear view is neat but hood cover is difficult to attach properly

The Autocar Road Test



Wind noise is obtrusive at speed by modern cabrio standards; new wings subtly update evocative lines of original

◀ essentially the MGB hood of old. To raise it, you simply pull it forward, clamp it to the trailing edge of the windscreen and attach four pop studs to keep the loose ends from flapping at speed.

Lowering the hood is nearly as straightforward — just reverse the process. The hood bag, however, essential if a tidy appearance is to be maintained, is fiddly to attach and needs to be fitted over a small metal skeleton to provide the correct tautness.

The boot is large enough to swallow enough squashy bags for a fortnight's casual holiday, but thoughts of packaging large, formal suitcases should be dismissed immediately.

Noise

★ ★ Noise suppression has come a long way since the days of the MGB and, in the RV8, it shows. At speed, excessive wind noise is a constant companion (though the situation is much improved with the hood in place) and this is exacerbated if the manual

aerial is raised — it creates such a loud whistle that you can't hear the radio that you lifted the aerial for in the first place.

Off the motorway, the RV8's noises make much more pleasant companions as they emanate almost entirely from the sweet-sounding V8.

Build quality and safety

★ ★ ★ You quite simply cannot quibble with the way the RV8 is pieced together. The quality of the interior materials, especially the leather, is top drawer, while you'd have to look a long way indeed to find a paint finish better than that which adorned the test RV8.

Lovely touches like the heavy, chromed door handles inside and out give the RV8 a pleasant period feel of solidity, too.

Unfortunately this is not backed up by the addition of modern safety features like side

impact bars, pre-tensioned seat belts, anti-lock brakes or an airbag. If you have an accident in the RV8 it will be the car's inherent strength, rather than any clever safety features, that saves you from injury.

Equipment and value

★ ★ ★ The RV8 comes with its beautiful leather upholstery, lavish walnut trim, neat alloy wheels, superb paintwork and an immobilis-

er as standard. Look for electric windows, mirrors or power steering though and you'll be dis-appointed. The only option listed is a £590 CD player fitted in the boot.

Whether the RV8 is good value or not depends on how you perceive it. If you judge it simply on its capabilities, it is hard to justify the expense.

Look at it as a piece of nostalgia which provides both a trip down memory lane plus decent performance and the £25,440 purchase price is easier to swallow.

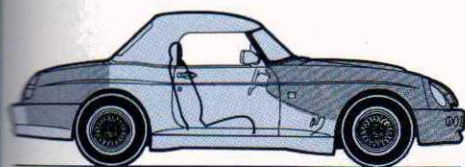
Verdict

★ ★ ★ Every time you drive the RV8 you are reminded that it owes its existence to a design that is now more than 30 years old.

For those who buy British sports cars for their dynamic ability, the RV8 rules itself out of the running almost immediately. Rover realises this, which is why it is so eager to distance itself from cars like the TVR Chimaera. It knows there are people, MGB owners of old for instance, who care less about point-to-point speed and pin-sharp responses than they do about being in, and being seen in, a pleasantly styled, familiar old friend which now goes and sounds like never before. For them, the RV8 may well prove irresistible. The bottom line is, and Rover admits it, that the RV8 exists as much to be a status symbol as a car in which to enjoy driving. To us the RV8 is an anachronism, albeit a strangely likeable one. It is nowhere near as good a new car as a TVR or an old one as a Morgan but on the right day, in the right conditions, it is easy to enjoy and even fun to drive in an agricultural, vintage manner. If, however, you asked us whether we would part with £25,440 for the pleasure of its company, we would regrettably have to decline.

MG RV8

★★★ £25,440



Length 4010mm Width 1694mm Front track 1260mm Wheelbase 2330mm
Height 1320mm Rear track 1330mm Weight distribution front/rear 51/49

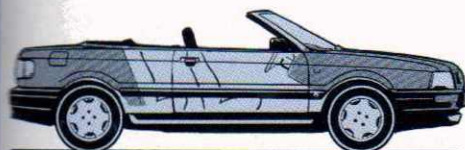


The MGB is back, albeit in revised form with a V8 in the convertible body for the first time. This means straight-line performance is strong enough for most tastes even if, with its live rear axle, its handling leaves rather a lot to be desired. A likeable, if seriously flawed car that will certainly appeal to marque enthusiasts. Others may wonder its purpose.

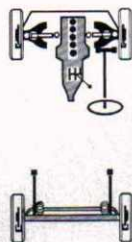
Capacity	3946cc
Power	190bhp/4750rpm
Torque	234lb ft/3200rpm
Max speed	136mph
0-60mph	6.9secs
30-70mph through gears	6.4secs
Standing quarter mile	15.2secs
30-50mph in fourth	5.5secs
50-70mph in top	7.7secs
Mpg overall/touring	20.2/26.9
Mph/1000rpm in top	29.0
Kerb weight	1101kg
Date tested	16.6.93

Audi 80 Cabriolet

★★★ £22,199



Length 4366mm Width 1716mm Front track 1453mm Wheelbase 2545mm
Height 1379mm Rear track 1447mm Weight distribution front/rear n/a



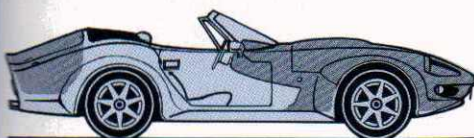
Chopping the top off the 80 has turned a good-looking car into a great one. Unfortunately it's still the same underneath, which means performance is barely adequate for a car costing this much and handling, while pleasant, is hardly the stuff of dreams. Best driven slowly, when you have more time to appreciate its superb build, rigid structure and all the looks it draws.

Capacity	2309cc
Power	133bhp/5500rpm
Torque	137lb ft/4000rpm
Max speed	123mph*
0-60mph	10.8secs*
30-70mph through gears	n/a
Standing quarter mile	n/a
30-50mph in fourth	n/a
50-70mph in top	n/a
Mpg overall/touring	n/a
Mph/1000rpm in top	21.9
Kerb weight	1350kg
Date tested	n/a

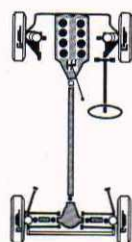
*manufacturer's claim

Marcos Mantara 4.0

★★★ £24,081



Length 4267mm Width 1588mm Front track 1448mm Wheelbase 2273mm
Height 1080mm Rear track 1397mm Weight distribution front/rear n/a



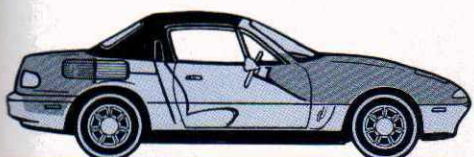
Thirty years on, Jem Marsh's design looks set for many more years yet. A restyle and a change of name from Mantula to Mantara have cost some visual panache but has earned limited volume Type Approval. With power coming, naturally, from the ubiquitous 3.9-litre Rover V8, the Mantara proves able to provide a blast from the past as well as fine top-down touring.

Capacity	3946cc
Power	190bhp/4750rpm
Torque	234lb ft/3200rpm
Max speed	140mph*
0-60mph	5.4secs*
30-70mph through gears	n/a
Standing quarter mile	n/a
30-50mph in fourth	n/a
50-70mph in top	n/a
Mpg overall/touring	n/a
Mph/1000rpm in top	29.0
Kerb weight	1020kg
Date tested	n/a

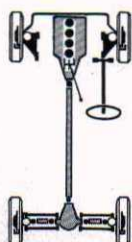
*manufacturer's claim

Mazda MX-5 SE

★★★★ £18,686



Length 3975mm Width 1675mm Front track 1410mm Wheelbase 2265mm
Height 1219mm Rear track 1430mm Weight distribution front/rear 52/48



The SE version of Mazda's seminal sportscar boasts anti-lock brakes, new alloy wheels and a leather interior with a wooden steering wheel. Paintwork is any colour you like so long as it's black. Your money also buys one of the best looking cars of the '90s as well as one of the finest handling. It only seems like a lot of money until you drive it.

Capacity	1597cc
Power	115bhp/6500rpm
Torque	100lb ft/5500rpm
Max speed	114mph
0-60mph	9.1secs
30-70mph through gears	9.5secs
Standing quarter mile	17.4secs
30-50mph in fourth	7.5secs
50-70mph in top	13.9secs
Mpg overall/touring	24.0/34.1
Mph/1000rpm in top	18.8
Kerb weight	950kg
Date tested	14.3.90

OUR CHOICE

Morgan Plus 8

★★★ £24,898



Length 3962mm Width 1600mm Front track 1371mm Wheelbase 2489mm
Height 1219mm Rear track 1371mm Weight distribution front/rear 49/51

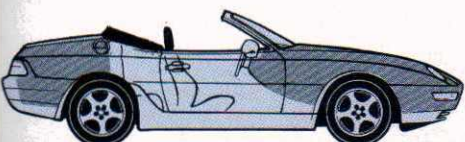


Those who buy these Morgans couldn't care less about the dreadful ride, terrible weather equipment and appalling lack of refinement. What attracts them is the joy of old car motoring with the security of modern, mass-produced mechanicals. That this also buys them one of the most evocative and just plain beautiful cars around is merely icing on their cake. We don't blame them.

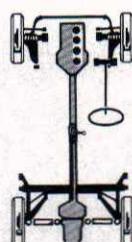
Capacity	3946cc
Power	190bhp/4750rpm
Torque	235lb ft/2600rpm
Max speed	121mph
0-60mph	6.1secs
30-70mph through gears	6.1secs
Standing quarter mile	15.1secs
30-50mph in fourth	4.1secs
50-70mph in top	6.3secs
Mpg overall/touring	20.1/23.5
Mph/1000rpm in top	27.6
Kerb weight	935kg
Date tested	15.5.91

Porsche 968 Cabrio

★★★★ £37,175



Length 4320mm Width 1735mm Front track 1472mm Wheelbase 2400mm
Height 1275mm Rear track 1450mm Weight distribution front/rear 45/55



There are few convertibles money can buy that are as capable as this Porsche. Whether you wish to relish one of the best chassis around, cruise the open autobahn at an effortless 130mph or just admire the car as a piece of engineering, the 968 will not disappoint. A pity, then, that it looks strange and that, with the optional Tiptronic gearbox, its acceleration is unexciting.

Capacity	2990cc
Power	240bhp/6200rpm
Torque	225lb ft/4100rpm
Max speed	145mph
0-60mph	8.3secs
30-70mph through gears	7.1secs
Standing quarter mile	15.9secs
30-50mph in kickdown	2.9secs
50-70mph in kickdown	4.2secs
Mpg overall/touring	23.0/24.1
Mph/1000rpm in top	24.4
Kerb weight	1472kg
Date tested	24.6.92

*car tested with Tiptronic semi-automatic gearbox