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OCTOBER 1993

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Greece Dra. 950.00
Holland Dfl. 10.95
Italy L. 7,500
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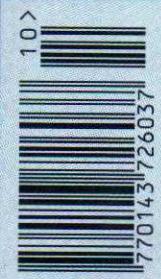


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R - ROVER

VROOM!

*...and other mature comments on the MG RV8 by
Jonathan Empson – who also drives a rather
significant MG TC*



NOW I know that an MG TC has about as much in common with an MG RV8 as does my cousin (once removed) Jack in Queensland. So why lump them together in the same test?

Sentimentalism, pure and simple.

For our 20th anniversary issue, we thought "Let's have a cover picture of an old MG TC with the latest MG", knowing full well that we've done it before. Might as well make a clean breast of it. The first time we did it, you see, was on the very first cover of *Classic Car* (as it was) back in October 1973. The MG TC then was GAD 518, which happens to be the very same car that you see here.

The latest MG then was the MGB GT V8, of course. It cost £2,294 – which, for statistics fiends, was 6,554 times as much as that copy of *Classic Car*, at 35p. This MG RV8, meanwhile, would cost £26,722 with its optional Pearlescent Nightfire Red paint and snazzy CD autochanger in the boot. That's 11,617 times the UK price of *Classic Cars* today. Which just goes to show you. What exactly, I don't know – that the extra 's' in the title comes free?

But I digress. Getting these two cars together proved to be something of an organisational headache. The RV8 was one of only two Press cars at Canley and was heavily in demand, so I could only get it for a weekend. The TC, meanwhile, was in Northern Ireland.

Fortunately the TC's owner, Ken Browne, was only too pleased to bring the car over to Liverpool on the overnight ferry, where I met him on the dockside in the RV8.

Ken bought GAD 518 from Mervyn Fuller, its owner and restorer in 1973, in 1977 and has done nothing to it apart from paint the wheels and renew the exhaust. It is absolutely beautiful – the paintwork's condition being particularly amazing, considering that it is approaching its 20th birthday too. Mind you, dehumidified



MG TC attempts the impossible – overtaking a car 3½ times more powerful! The TC, however, didn't need refuelling on the test – the RV8's range being around 200 miles

storage and very little use must help.

This RV8, on the other hand, has had pretty intensive use, and is approaching the 10,000-mile mark. It seems to be wearing well: the odd stone chip and a little scuffing of the leather gearknob are the only signs that this car really has been driven. Faults? A stiff window winder, and a door fit that is not quite what you'd expect at this price.

So what did I expect? It's easier to say in hindsight. This is not an MGB. You can go out and buy a concours MGB, in any flavour, for half the price. This is not a car that buyers will have compared rationally, feature-by-feature, with the competition. This is not the future of the British sports car. What it is, though, is an encapsulation of everything (price excepted) that the British sports car was ever about: wood, leather, drivability, sporty noises, and a few annoying aspects that you come to love-to-hate.

Before going any further with driving

impressions, I'll leapfrog all the po-faced, clinical, road-testy stuff and give you my conclusion: it's wonderful. I covered 400 miles in it in two days, and I could have kept on driving. It's just great fun.

OK, now for the po-faced bit. As I said, forget the MGB: we're starting from scratch here.

Having switched off the alarm/immobiliser with the remote button, you can unlock the door with the low-tech key – or lean in and flick back the catch. No central locking here.

There's only a manual aerial, too, for the rather wonderful – and, it turns out, audible! – six-speaker stereo. Sit down in that beautiful leather chair, and you find you're not as far down as you might have expected. It's well padded.

This proves to be no problem in the sunshine, but in a shower I find that water droplets splat into my forehead instead of being pushed over the top and, with the hood up, things get a little dark at eye level (I'm just under 5ft 11in). The quality, watertight hood can be dropped from inside the car by releasing two clips and six poppers, although the hood bag is a little fussy.

Shut the door with a clunk – this does feel a very solid car – and you find that your elbows fall naturally onto armrests either side, bringing your hands into the perfect boulevardier 'twenty-five-past-seven' driving position on the chunky wheel, which is offset to the left. Things are a little – well, very – squashed for your left leg, between the (non-adjustable) steering column cowling and the padded centre console. The handbrake is also against your leg, and your knuckles may even brush it as you steer.

Pedals are offset to the right, and the sill interferes with your right foot as you press the accelerator. The seatbelt



Sidescreens are fussy but effective. They stow in a special compartment in the back. Despite appearances, headroom is quite good with the hood raised!



Beautiful burr elm and a deal more leather and padding than on the original MGs – but make sure you fit the cabin before you buy! Neat VDO instruments suit the car

similarly interferes with your neck, but is not so annoying when removed from its seat-top channel.

When the engines starts – without fuss, without choke – there's no doubt that it's that Rover V8, here pushing out 190bhp from 3,946cc. It's unbelievably quiet, though. It still sounds gorgeously vroomy, but someone turned the volume down. At speed, it's the wind and road that make the noise.

The steering certainly feels traditional – heavy at low speeds as you pull away. You won't notice though. Turning out of a junction, the roar of the exhaust and the sheer accelerative urge make squeaking the tyres irresistible, every time. From the first time you stomp from rest to 60mph, punching your way up through the gears, you'll be hooked.

The five-speed SD1 box has, strangely enough, the same awkward, two-handed reverse detent as the original 'B. The stick is rather oversprung and it's easy to select fifth rather than third. Mind you, first and fifth are about all you need with this much torque – 318Nm. You may also need brakes, of course, on a 135mph car – these are effective and nicely weighted.

On the move, the ride is a good compromise. There's a little tub shudder over the bumps but nothing serious. The car is nice and easy to place through corners, it holds the road beautifully and the handling is so neutral you'd never believe there was a V8 lump up front. The seats could use more lateral support, but the cockpit padding means there's nothing to bash yourself against round the corners. Your left hand falls naturally at the height of the gearknob, which in fifth is less than a hand's span from the wheel.

The rear switchgear is another plus

point in the ergonomic compromise. Oh yes, and the heater works.

Heater? What heater? No such luxury on the 1947 TC. You're altogether more at one with nature, especially with the sidescreens off those low-cut doors. With the hood up, though, it's surprisingly roomy. The extra four inches in width compared to its pre-war ancestors obviously helps.

You have to get in first, though: you sit down first, then swing your legs in through the suicide door and under the huge, upright, sprung wheel, where space is limited – some things don't change, then. And there's wood on the dashboard,

although cockpit trim is Rexine rather than leather.

Pull the starter button and that sweet little 1250 springs into life. Release the fly-off handbrake – buried, Old Number One-style, in the passenger footwell – and you're off.

Driving requires a little concentration. Every corner feels fast on those tyres – which would look skinny on a modern motorbike, even – and with the shared backrest and short doors providing little bracing. The gearbox is nice enough, although long between first and second gears. The clutch bites high on its long travel and the brakes, hydraulic Lockheed drums, are of the press-and-hope variety. The little roller accelerator is smooth to use, though.

Like the RV8, the TC always was a compromise, retaining Vintage looks but with a few post-war luxuries. You expect to have to work hard at the wheel and to have your teeth jarred out, but you're pleasantly surprised. Steering lock is terrible, but 54.4bhp is pretty respectable and the ride isn't *that* bad either. It's got synchromesh on second to fourth gears and the interior equipment stretches to symmetrical map and 30mph warning lights, the actual speedo being over in front of the passenger. No fuel gauge, though: just a low-fuel warning light.

And there's that priceless view down the bonnet: all curves and chrome. With the sun and blue sky dazzling you off the backs of the headlights, the wind in your hair, and a terrified passenger clutching the grab handle...is there a better feeling?

TC and RV8 alike retain the essential elements of sports car motoring. The terror has gone, but the MG lives on.



Updated body styling is very attractive, but the RV8's beauty is not just skin-deep. Exterior chrome is limited to the original 'B door handles and bonnet vent