

A day celebrating an rEVolutionary engine

What do a Range Rover, 2 Rover saloons, a Westfield, a Morgan Plus 8 and a Griff have in common (apart from obvious 4 wheels, seats, steering wheel etc)? Answer? Rover's V8 engine of course. And it was because of this engine (or more precisely, the impending demise of the manufacture of this engine) that led me to Gaydon Heritage Centre at the invitation of EVO magazine.

The mag had decided to do a feature on 6 vehicles that all shared the same lump to coincide with the last production run, and when Ralph Dodds called me one evening to ask whether I was willing to have my car in an EVO vehicle comparison report, it took less than the fastest TVR's 0-60 timing for me to say: "where do I sign?"!

But – a split second later, I was having second thoughts. What about insurance? Are they going to thrash it? Will I end up with a well maintained but totally knackered Griff?

Ralph assured me that they carried their own £100k insurance (that should be enough to replace the Griff if they did damage it), and that they would only drive it on the roads, and wouldn't ruin it. I was convinced (in truth it didn't need much to convince me anyway!)

"Exactly what is this comparison with?" I asked, innocently, hoping it was a Ferrari, a Lambo, perhaps a Porsche and maybe a Jag or Aston Martin.

"Oh it's not really a direct vehicle comparison," he replied, "more a look at six vehicles that all share the Rover V8 engine – that is what they are celebrating."

My heart sank. "Does that mean they'll want to photograph the engine?" I enquired nervously (for those of you who haven't read my earlier Mutterings you'll not know that I don't shine in that department – and neither does my engine! It takes me all my time to remember where the bonnet release catch is!).

"Of course," he said, "why, is that a problem?"

"No!" I answered, "maybe I should find out how much it would cost to steam clean it"

"Oh I wouldn't do that," he replied, "TVR electrics don't handle steam cleaning very well! You'll have to clean it yourself!"

Clearly Ralph doesn't know me very well. Me – clean the engine? Now that would be a first! But after I had the call from John Barker (the journalist) to set it up, confirming Monday March 15th at Gaydon Heritage Centre, I decided that maybe I should give it a try.

It wasn't much of a try! A little bit of elbow grease, a quick polish of the more shiny bits, and a wipe down with a wet rag to remove the dust, and it did look better – marginally!

On the day in question, it was up early, to give the car a final clean, and then, loading the boot with 3 litres of clean water, a bucket, a sponge and chamois leather, sundry rags, cloths and other cleaning materials, and of course, my trusty camera – I set off for Gaydon.

I was last to arrive – which was a bit embarrassing as I lived the closest – with 4 other vehicles already there, which were a blue 1969 Rover P6 3500S, a '74 Morgan Plus 8 in British Racing Green, a very smart Silver '85 Rover SD1 Vitesse 3.5, and a 1994 Westfield, with a 4.6 litre engine, and an exhaust that ran into what looked like sidewinder heat seeking missiles on either side!

The photographer was soon into his stride and had all five cars lined up on the gravel, together with the Range Rover from the museum, with bonnets lifted, lids off (or doors open for the tin tops), and insides devoid of all usual paraphernalia and rubbish that we always seem to collect in our vehicles.

I tentatively walked up the row of cars and immediately realised my engine wasn't the dirtiest – in fact I would go as far as to say it wasn't bad at all – I held my head up high – at least for 5 minutes, until Mr. BRG Morgan Plus 8 started asking me all sorts of technical questions, to which I had to answer, "Eh?", and "I expect so!" not really knowing what he was talking about.

It was so windy that I was really concerned about the way my bonnet was swaying, so dropped it off the bonnet stay until the photographer was ready. As I looked at the Vitesse, I realised he had a unique bonnet stay on his vehicle. It was a weird shaped piece of highly lacquered and polished wood! Novel – but it seemed to do the trick.

Once the engine and interior shots were completed it was time for the group shot – this is the one you either get on the front cover or at the start of the article (or if you're lucky – both!). Out came the biggest tripod I have ever seen – must have been nearly 10 feet tall, together with a set of steps so the photographer could see through the viewfinder. Then he took on a role that looked like he was a cross between an air traffic controller and a bookie on a racecourse, directing the parking until he got what he really wanted.

From the ground it looked rubbish – just a group of cars all parked at different angles – but when he invited us to climb the ladder and look through the viewfinder you got to realise why he took such good pics, and ours were always "ordinary". Either you have an eye for a photo or you don't – and he does!

After lunch we moved out onto one of the side roads around Gaydon, with loads of bends and corners, not much traffic, and the opportunity to "burn some rubber"! (I've always wanted to use that phrase!)

Due to time and logistical constraints, the Morgan and the Range Rover had to be road tested on the Gaydon site, so we were denied the opportunity of seeing them put through their paces (Gaydon has a maximum speed limit of 15 mph – although sometimes you wouldn't believe it – I saw a Tuscan doing close on a ton going down the main entrance at a Supercar Sunday event a few years ago!)

First out on the real roads were the two Rovers. Initially it was the photographer hanging out of the back of his own hatchback, with someone else driving and John Barker following in the Rover – to get some genuine road shots. Then John was let loose on his own. The Vitesse sounded good as it went past us doing at least 59 mph (well I'm not going to suggest anyone broke any laws am I?), and then he took the P6 off for an extended run. In fact he was away so long, we started to wonder whether there was a problem.

But whilst he was away the photographer had time to set up the Westfield shots. He wanted an "over the roll bar" series, so, using large suction caps, with attached clamps, he managed to attach the enormous tripod to the rear of the car, slightly off set to the nearside. I'm not sure I fancied having that thing attached to the Griff, but he assured us it wouldn't damage the paintwork – and he was right!

However, he hadn't allowed for one thing – start the 4.6 litre engine up and the whole earth shook – especially his tripod and camera! There was absolutely no way he could take photographs like that. I thought his idea was to take automatic pictures from a cable shutter release, but in reality he said he would follow the car so he could see the picture he was getting through the viewfinder!

As he was saying this whilst perched on the second step of his ladder, I had a mental image of him adding some wheels to the ladder and attaching it to the back of the car, so he could be towed along! But no, he was meaning he would RUN after the car, taking the pictures! If this guy could keep up with a Westfield throwing out 300-360 bhp, then Linford Christie move over!

I was somewhat disappointed, therefore when he talked about the Westfield going at walking pace, and even more disappointed when I realised that because he couldn't have the engine running due to the vibration, that meant that some mug would have to push it! Guess who that mug was!

Now you would have thought that the owner would have helped wouldn't you – yes – you – who used to be a TVR man with a Cerbie – but no – he decided he should stand at the corner to slow the traffic coming up our rear end! So with John Barker again in the driver's seat, me and Mr Westfield's mate started to push – uphill!

The photographer was helpful – he had one hand pushing whilst taking pictures with the other – did I mention his arms were as long as a Gorilla's? At least I thought he was being helpful – until when we had finished he calmly admitted that he thought he had his hand in every shot and we had to do it again – and again – and again. My legs were like jelly!

Finally he was satisfied, and John roared off in the Westfield to take it through it's paces – trouble is he was soon back – he had forgotten that the tripod was still sticking up at the back like some misshapen gigantic aerial!

Now it was my turn. For the Griff it was a lot simpler – we were at the centre of several very nice bends, so John took it up and down the road half a dozen times, whilst the Photographer snapped away with an enormous 200 mm lens. It was the first time I had seen my car driven well but hard and it sounded and looked great.

On his return John was very complimentary, saying that it was in good nick, had been well looked after, the engine was “sweet” and it was as good as he could remember. I wondered what he meant by that, but was to find out later that evening.

Whilst at Gaydon I bought the TVR Performance Portfolio 1986-1994 from the gift shop – I know I should have ordered it from the car club – but it was an impulse buy. In it, there was a 1992 article comparing the 4.3 Griff with a Porsche 968 and a Spyder – and the writer? John Barker! He liked the Griff then as much as now.

Whilst we were doing the runs, the big Aston Martin Lagonda reg no 1 AML came past a couple of times (a bit too quietly and slowly for our liking) as did a prototype from Range Rover, obviously in disguise.

Eventually it was time to go home, and whilst we were packing up, the local Gendarmerie called to say that John’s Renault Clio V6 Sport, which we had left parked by an MOD site rear exit, had been spotted and reported as a “suspect vehicle”! So it was a quick dash from one lay by to another to see whether the armed forces had blown it up! They hadn’t!

Finally, just to finish off a very interesting day, I called in at the services on the M40 and found myself parked next to the factory press Tuscan S - S6 TVR. So, a most enjoyable day, which left me feeling quite pleased with what was said about the car, a magazine article to look forward to, and an aching back from pushing the Westfield. Oh! And several quid out of pocket as I forgot to claim the lunch and coffee costs back – still it was worth it.

Now – where’s the phone number of Classic Car magazine.....?

David G10 TVR Morgan