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A NEGLECTED TVR PROTOTYPE IS BEING BROUGHT BACK TO LIFE.

White Elephant was intended to be TVR's road car for the 1990s

As found at TVR, the rear window had been 'borrowed' for a customer

TVR's White Elephant

It might not have made it into production, but this forgotten TVR is coming back to life.

Words: Emma Merwood, Footman James **Pics:** Howard Bryan

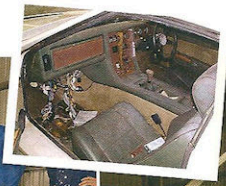
Just a week before Peter Wheeler sold TVR to Nikolai Smolenski, marque enthusiast Howard Bryan finally got his hands on this one-off prototype. After much careful negotiation, the 'White Elephant' was rescued from the back of the TVR factory, where it had been lying forgotten since the mid-1990s.

The rear window had been borrowed for a customer repair and the bonnet was somehow wedged under the front of the car. The result was a sad and neglected old TVR, with grass growing out of the carpet and a three-foot tree emerging from the lake in the boot.

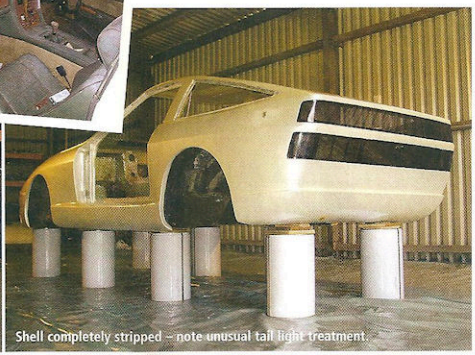
But Howard knew the history of the car and that it was worth saving. Towards the end of the 1980s, TVR were manufacturing the S-series and the Tasmin, with their characteristic pop-up headlamps and wedge-shaped body. With both models fast becoming outdated, the development team set out in search of the next big thing.

The S-series was to be used as the base for the factory's own Tuscan Challenge race car, so it was decided that the Tasmin would be a good base for the new roadgoing model. A fixed-head Tasmin was stripped of all its outer panels, and the entire bodyshell was sprayed with a

Heavy bodywork needs lots of helpers to move it around.



Once the body was removed, the chassis was revealed – note inboard rear brakes.



Shell completely stripped – note unusual tail light treatment.

generous coating of quick-drying modelling foam – or to be more precise, cavity wall insulation. Garden hoes and craft knives were then used to form the prototype's final shape. To finish, a layer of fibreglass was laid up over the top to complete and seal the job.

But that wasn't quite the end. The car was to be driven by TVR managing director Peter Wheeler so several very personalised modifications were made.

On the hunt

Peter was famous for his love of country pursuits and asked for a hidden compartment to be built into the car to accommodate a brace or two of pheasants.

The car also had to be able to accommodate Peter's faithful gundog Sam, so one of the car's two fuel tanks was removed and a fibreglass dog basket was fabricated and countersunk into the floor immediately behind the passenger seat. To make up for the shortfall in fuel, an additional S-series fuel tank was installed in the back of the car, just forward of the gun box.

It was also decided that the signature Tasmin pop-up headlamps had to go, so the car's nose was cut off and replaced with the front of a previous prototype – the 420 Sports Saloon – which was further modified to sport fixed-position twin Hella headlamps. After a topcoat of highly lacquered pearlescent white paint, the body was ready to go.

"TVR decided to try a prototype 5.0-litre Holden race engine"

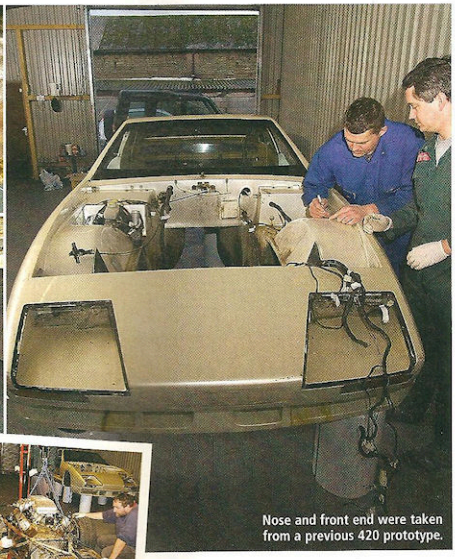
The shell now complete, the powerplant became the subject of much debate. At the time, Rover, who supplied all the V8 units to TVR, were regularly out on strike. Earlier in 1988, Tom Walkinshaw had taken over Holden Special Vehicles from Australian motorsport hero Peter Brock, and was looking for export customers to purchase his distinctive HSV race engines.

Aussie muscle

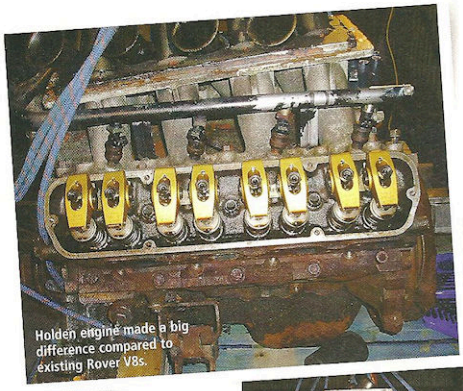
TVR decided to try a prototype 5.0-litre V8 Bathurst race engine, complete with US-spec Borg Warner T5 gearbox, as a possible alternative to the Rover unit. A widening and raising of the chassis rails to accommodate »

Enthusiasm runs high during this resto.

New moulds were required as part of the bodyshell renovation.



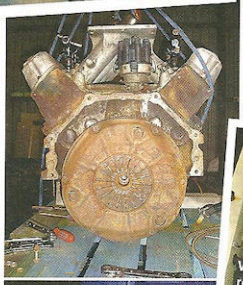
Nose and front end were taken from a previous 420 prototype.

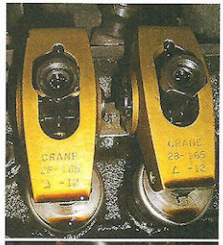

Holden engine made a big difference compared to existing Rover V8s.

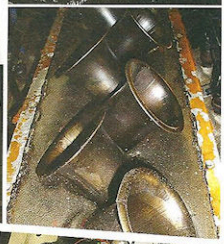
the broader and taller Australian unit was needed, while a bespoke manifold and exhaust system completed the engine swap.

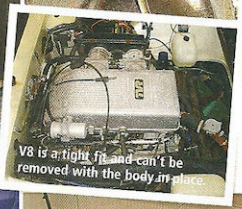
The result was remarkable – a fire-breathing monster that could hit 185mph. And despite the heavy prototype body, its acceleration was astonishing. The Holden engine's torque curve was a revelation and the powerplant appeared to tick all the boxes – apart from one…

Parading this new and exciting prototype around the TVR dealer network, much of the feedback centred around two points. Firstly, if they were struggling with supply of engines and parts from Rover in Coventry, a mere two hours' drive away, how were they going to guarantee supply of similar materials from the other side of the world? Secondly, it was respectfully pointed out that while the prototype was striking and reasonably streamlined, it was still a reworked Tasmin – too boxy and angular, and not modern enough for the next generation of TVRs. It really was a bit of a 'white elephant'. And that was the name that stuck.

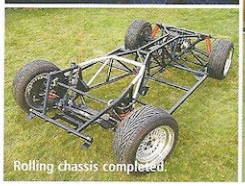


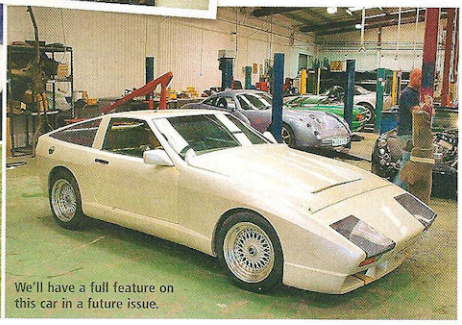





V8 is a tight fit and can't be removed with the body in place.

Engine parts will be polished.


Rolling chassis completed.


We'll have a full feature on this car in a future issue.

Start again

The design team decided to take a fresh approach. Sometime later, a Rover-powered V8 S-series car had its body removed and an all-new shell created. Popular legend has it that Peter Wheeler worked on one side of the model while John Ravenscroft, TVR's chief designer, worked on the other. The result was two new models – the Griffith and the Chimaera, cars that paid TVR's bills for the next decade or so.

As for the White Elephant, after a year or two touring the country it returned to Blackpool to be used as the factory hack before being abandoned behind the factory and left in the open, which is where we started.

With several industry stalwarts assisting in the project, Howard's intensive nut-and-bolt restoration is due to be completed this summer. You can keep up to date with progress at **www.tvrwhiteelephant.co.uk**, and we'll be featuring the car in full once it's finished. So, for now, watch this space…

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