

A requiem for...

Stag

By: Graham Robson

QUIETLY, and without ceremony, the Triumph Stag has disappeared from the new-car scene. The last of all was built at Leyland's Coventry factory at the end of June 1977, and this most intriguing of all Leyland's sporting machinery now slips into oblivion. But do we now count Stag as a success, or as a failure? Should we allow it to be quickly forgotten, or should it now become an "instant classic"? Will there be a Stag replacement someday soon?

Perhaps I should recap a little. The Stag was announced in June 1970, and though there were obvious family links with the Triumph 2000 and 2.5 PI saloons, little actual component engineering was shared. It hadn't been meant that way at first, but as development progressed things had got out of hand.

Most exciting of all, at the time, was Stag's advanced-looking vee-8 engine, a 2997cc unit with single overhead cam cylinder heads, and a very understressed 145bhp power output. Paradoxically, too, the engine has been the source of most of the Stag's problems.

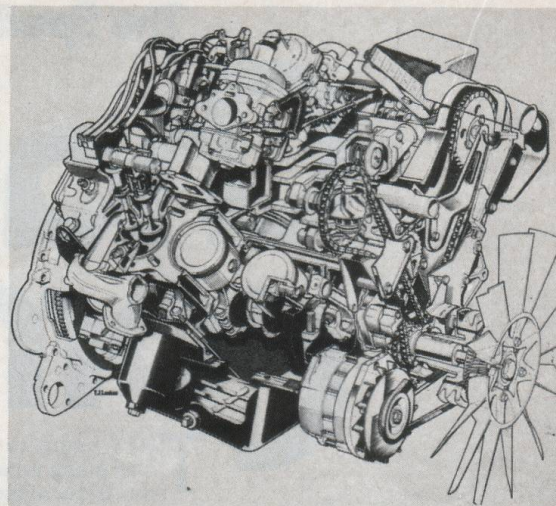
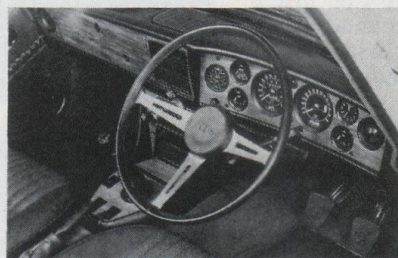
Stag, of course, was conceived before British Leyland was founded – even before Leyland took over Rover at the beginning of 1967. This explains why Stag's vee-8 engine was one of several new units being developed and tooled at the same time. Rover, of course, had their own light-alloy 3528cc unit (re-designed from the GM unit whose rights they had purchased), while Jaguar had a vee-8 version of their new vee-12 which was subsequently cancelled (and they *still* won't let me publish details of it!).

British Leyland, its implications, and the rationalisation which had to follow, all had their effect on Stag, even before it was announced. The Stag engine, loosely described as being two Saab/Dolomite engines set at 90 degrees, though designing a vee-formation engine is *never* as simple as that, could only be justified if it could be used in other cars. It is true that Triumph wanted to market a 3-litre vee-8 version of their Mark II 2000/2.5 saloons, and it is also true that the engine was offered to Morgan before they chose the Rover alternative for their Plus 8, but there were no other obvious applications. If the engine had not been able to use some of the Dolomite's production machinery, then it would certainly have been cancelled even before announcement. Triumph engineers have always assured me that Rover's vee-8 could have been squeezed in to the Stag engine bay if it was absolutely necessary – we must never forget that such a decision could have been taken in 1967, in plenty of time for the design to be changed before tooling orders were placed.

Performance of the Stag engine (right) was not allowed to match its impressive-looking design. Open or closed looks (below) have dated already. Nave plates imitate Rostyle type wheel. Hood was extra with hard top Stag.



Cockpit (below left) is a comfortable blend of sports car and saloon; steering wheel can be tilted but not adjusted for reach. With hood up (below right) rear quarter vision is not too badly blocked by average convertible standards.



But in the beginning, British Leyland's product planning was not renowned for its logic. The Stag was allowed to go into production – more than two years after the merger of Leyland and BMC – its engine was never used in any other car, truck or stationary application, and it stayed in production for seven years (and nearly 26,000 examples) without major improvements. The result was that Stag was never properly supported, never given the significant improvements it craved, and somehow it was never loved. Almost from the first year, Stag was something of an orphan.

A well-heeled friend of mine summed up Stag very well recently: "Somehow it was never glamorous enough, never fast enough, never all that exciting, and it wasn't *exclusive* either..." When Triumph launched it, Stag was aimed at the Mercedes-Lancia-Alfa Romeo market, and it was hoped that it would be a great export success, particularly in the United States. A look at the year-on-year production figures shows that this was never achieved, and that Stag was essentially a home-market car. But here in Britain it has to count as a considerable success. Compared with the TR6 with which it was mainly current, it was much more costly (£550 more in 1970, £1200 more in 1975), yet it sold in greater numbers. Stag was a very important machine for the trendy businessman who didn't want a Rover or a Triumph saloon, and couldn't persuade his bosses or

his accountants to let him have a Jaguar.

If nothing else, Stag was a good idea. It was almost a four-seater, and in hardtop form it was almost a saloon, yet it could also be thought of as nearly a Grand Touring car, and nearly an out-and-out sports car. More than this, if built correctly, it could be silky and satisfying, fast and exciting, but comfortable and surprisingly economical. What a pity that it didn't have a Mercedes badge, or an Alfa Romeo image.

The styling has to be described as controversial. It dates from 1964, when Giovanni Michelotti asked for a Triumph 2000 saloon from his employers so that he could produce a one-off "show special". Harry Webster discovered that result on a subsequent visit to Turin, realised that it might just fill a niche at Coventry, and demanded it for Triumph's own use. "Then we got it back to Coventry, and kept it on ice for some time. It was the usual problem of priorities, and money to tool it..."

Between 1965, and 1970, too, its specification changed several times. The original machine had a short-wheelbase Triumph 2000 underframe, and a six-cylinder Triumph 2000 engine, hidden headlamps (behind swivelling grille panels), and no sign of that distinctive T-profile roll-protection brace. From then the engine became 2.5-litres, with petrol injection, then the vee-8 engine was substituted (it had not been intended for Stag when first con-

ceived) in 2½-litre petrol injection form, and the last development to 3-litres was not made until 1969.

In the meantime Triumph decided that their big saloons would have to be restyled. Michelotti therefore remodelled the nose and tail sections, and the fascia layout, exactly as he had already proposed for the Stag, and the irony is that this revised Mark II saloon (coded "Innsbruck" by factory planners) was revealed first, even though Stag had been its inspiration.

By the time Spen King had wielded his considerable influence on Stag it had a bigger engine, stronger gearbox and axle, bigger brakes and 14in. wheels. The body shell, too, was tooled by Standard-Triumph Liverpool, and finished up with very little indeed in common with the saloons. The suspensions and drive arrangements, however, were not significantly changed. The T-brace, incidentally, come about as a result of the burgeoning United States safety legislation regarding roll-over protection. But did you know that this T-brace is bolted on to the rest of the shell, and could be removed if you so wished?

Production got under way, finally, in 1970, but was temporarily stopped for some weeks in the autumn while some pressing quality problems were eliminated. Originally Stag got a good, if not a wildly enthusiastic reception in the press, but there is no doubt that it was not the export success that Triumph would have wanted. Even the styling, by 1970, had begun to date a bit, and somehow the shape was never thought to be as attractive as that of – say – a Mercedes 350SL or an Alfa coupé.

Even so, the car was Triumph's flagship, even though they lavished very little development attention on it, which meant that spares, service and support were always priced accordingly. Nobody bought a Stag as a budget GT car, but on the other hand the buyers were usually able to look after the expense. At first a Stag cost about £2000; in summer 1977 that had rocketed

to £6908 for the soft top car, £7231 for the more popular hard top version.

The big problem, however, was that Stag engines were never all that reliable. Most of the original batch sent to the United States were faulty, and this did the car's export reputation no good at all. It wasn't just the fault of the vee-8, however. Dolomites (particularly Dolomite Sprints) and even TR7s have all suffered from the same Achilles heel, which was that cylinder head corrosion seemed to set in at a relatively early mileage, and overheating for any reason usually led to a warped cylinder head. There was also talk of crankshaft bearings being too small, and of the need to replace timing chains before the 25 000 mile mark had been reached.

Repair and renovation is expensive, but there is now one London-based firm which makes the cossetting of sick Stags its speciality. Hart Racing Services (run by Anthony Hart, and his brother Roger) now does much work for Triumph distributors, and for private owners who know of their services. Having done more than 100 complete rebuilds, including dealing with export orders to four European countries, Hart Racing reckon to be *the* experts on the Stag engine.

A full engine rebuild (which includes skimmed cylinder heads if needed) costs £525, a "short engine" job £225, and replacement cylinder heads cost £120. In Britain each of these prices attracts VAT, of course. Hart are great believers in electronic ignition, which they say transforms the car's behaviour. You find them on 01-580 6716.

Another London firm, May Engineering of Epsom, specialise in doing Stag transplants – replacing the entire engine by the Rover 3528cc vee-8, but as this makes the car a non-classic we doubt if *T & CC* readers will be very interested in this engine swap. The cost, too, is horrifying at £1800.

All this, of course, suggests that the Stag was a bad car, which it most emphati-

cally was not. It was apparently neglected by Triumph, and it was under-developed in later years, but this was more a result of Leyland's policies rather than of the car's individual failings.

For the classic car enthusiast, Stags have several attractions. They are fairly readily available (most, as my statistics show, being in Britain), they are still well supported by factory know-how and spare parts stocks, and they are fast enough and exclusive enough never to be boring. Many of them, on the secondhand market, are in very fine condition indeed, and in general their level of equipment is very high. Naturally it is advisable to look for a late-model car, which has most original options standardised. A post-1972 Stag has an overdrive, and various little extra styling touches, while many have the expensive cast alloy wheels which were optional until the beginning of 1976. The hard top version is most desirable, for it will probably have the folding hood equipment stowed away as well. Many cars were supplied with automatic transmission, which takes the edge off performance and fuel economy. Power-assisted steering and electric windows were always standard. Some Stags have air-conditioning, if you like that sort of thing.

Why Stag? That name was not found after months of careful product planning, or used in some Freudian way to make an owner feel more aggressively male than usual. It was actually Triumph's development code name (they tended to be four-letter words at that time – no, not *that* sort of four letter words – Barb was Triumph 2000, Bomb was Spitfire, Ajax was Triumph 1300, and Manx was the Toledo with Wasp reserved for the TR5), which would normally have been dropped before announcement, but which Triumph's sales force found to be irresistible when they planned their advertising.

Stag Details – year on year

Deliveries
in the year
Home Export

Year	Home	Export
June 1970: Stag announced. Available in soft top or hard top form, manual or automatic. From chassis number 2BW.	700	40
1971: No significant changes.	1990	1911
1972: Overdrive (on manual version) standardised from October.	3505	999
1973: From February, style changes included matt black sills and tail panel, plus restyled instruments. Start of new chassis number sequence – from 20001.	4472	974
1974: Hazard warning and "fasten seat belt" warnings fitted from start of year.	2606	836
1975: Optional air-conditioning withdrawn from March.	1986	912
1976: From beginning of year alloy road wheels, tinted glass and laminated screen standardised.	2466	644
1977: Production finally ran out at end of June. Final chassis number: LD 45722.	1372	464
Totals:	19097	6780

Grand total of production: 25 877

Performance Data

	Overdrive version 30-7-70	Overdrive version 10-6-71	Automatic version 10-6-71
Road Tested in <i>Autocar</i> of:			
Mean maximum speed (mph)	115*	116*	112
Acceleration (sec)			
0-30mph	3.9	3.5	4.1
0-40mph	5.8	5.1	5.8
0-50mph	8.1	7.1	7.8
0-60mph	11.6	9.3	10.4
0-70mph	15.1	12.7	14.2
0-80mph	19.6	16.5	18.6
0-90mph	25.7	21.8	24.9
0-100mph	36.9	29.2	34.5
Standing ¼-mile (sec)	18.2	17.1	17.9
Top gear acceleration (sec)			
10-30mph	–	–	–
20-40mph	10.8	11.0	–
30-50mph	11.1	10.4	–
40-60mph	11.3	10.5	–
50-70mph	11.6	11.6	–
60-80mph	13.2	13.1	8.6
70-90mph	16.1	14.4	9.9
80-100mph	21.9	17.1	14.8
Overall mpg	20.6	20.7	17.2
Typical mpg	25	25	20
Dimensions:			
Length		14ft 5.7in	
Width		5ft 3.5in	
Height		4ft 3.5in	
Unladen weight (cwt)	25.1	25.1	25.3
*In overdrive.			