



# TRIUMPH STAG

BY TERENCE MCKILLEN

*"A Likeable and Lively Car, Unusually Well Equipped" – Autocar 1972*

**A**s readers of Ragtop may by now have realized, I have a long-standing admiration for the Triumph Stag, colloquially billed in its day as the 'Monarch of the Road'. The interest goes back over 43 years to the release of the Mark 2 Triumph 2000 which was based on the impressive Stag styling exercise.

I have been seriously stalking an example of the species for some time. Next to the Triumph saloon cars such as the T2000/2500, T1300, Toledo and Dolomite, it is probably the least well known Triumph model to Canadian autophiles, principally because it was never officially imported to this country.



Mk 1 Stag in convertible mode with North American (Federal) specification wire wheels

The Stag was arguably Triumph's first attempt to enter the luxury car segment and although the term Yuppie wasn't coined until the 1980s, it was Triumph's hope that the Stag would appeal to the 'younger executive' who was ready to move on from a two-seat sports car to something more luxurious and refined that could also qualify as a family car or alternatively, to catch the fancy of the more affluent 'empty nester'

who might be persuaded to revert back to a sporty car. In a sense, Triumph had already tested this market segment through the Vitesse 6 convertible as early as 1962.

The Stag is perhaps one of those cars that is better appreciated today than it was during its short production lifetime. Its failure to conquer the North American market is reminiscent of Standard Motors' earlier attempt with the post-war Mayflower and is at variance with the success Triumph achieved in the same market place with its TR roadsters. There are many reasons for the failure of the Stag to penetrate the identified market niche including external factors such as escalating hostilities in the Middle East, Ralph Nader-inspired regulatory changes in the United States with respect to safety, fuel economy and exhaust gas emissions and a myriad of internal reasons related to availability of capital, engineering decisions and rationalization of model development during the late 1960s to mid-1970s within Standard-Triumph and later, in the expanding Leyland-BMC conglomerate, as well as issues that affected the wider British car industry at the time, such as labour union strife, government mandated factory locations designed to relieve chronic regional unemployment issues and currency exchange variances between Sterling and the U.S. Dollar which had a marked impact on export sales.

The Stag was initially conceptualized as far back as 1963 as an independent styling effort by Italian designer Giovanni Michelotti, who had collaborated previously with Triumph on several successful designs, including the Herald, Vitesse, TR4, Spitfire and T2000 models. Michelotti's



Michelotti's original prototype

idea was to create an open-top car based on the Triumph 2000 saloon. Harry Webster, Triumph's Engineering Director at the time, was seeking a car to compete with the Mercedes 280SL but using as many parts as possible from the existing T2000 to produce a contender for the Grand Touring market and open another channel for Triumph sales into the U.S. In 1971, Triumph's marketing material called the Stag a "beautifully and finely engineered 'Grand Touring' car noted for its high performance for long Continental cruising so that sportsmen can drive untiringly across the long European Autoroutes and Autostrada or be equally at home on the great cross-country turnpikes and expressways of America." It went on to state that the Stag is "rightly named after that noble animal, noted not only for its speed and grace, but fierce devotion. The 'Monarch of the Glen' is now a monarch of the road."

The name Stag was the code name given to the concept model but was later adopted as the actual name during development in 1966, although, for a short period of time, the TR6 name was assigned to the project. The prototype had a shortened wheelbase from the T2000, a roll bar and concealed lights. It was equipped with a 2.5 litre 6-cylinder engine from the TR which did not carry through to the production model. However, the final design



The Triumph 2000 Mk II was based on the Stag design

resulted in a very stylish four-seat (2+2) convertible with removable hard top. At the time, such cars were not particularly common among British or for that matter, European manufacturers and Triumph had not previously bothered competing in the luxury vehicle class. The Michelotti design received immediate approval from Triumph's board of directors who ordered that the styling lines from the Stag be immediately adopted for the revised Triumph 2000/2500 Mk II saloon and estate models being planned, which reached showrooms in 1969, ahead of the Stag, leaving many people to erroneously conclude that the Stag design was copied from that of the Mk II saloon. The same familial design concept was later carried over in turn to the Spitfire Mk IV and GT6 Mk III models as well as to the T1300/Toledo/Dolomite saloons.

Triumph's North American dealer network was also seeking an upmarket car, preferably with a V-8 engine, to compete with Mercedes and Jaguar and also the likes of Alfa Romeo and Porsche. Consequently, American consumer acceptance of the Stag was seen as crucial. Triumph

management wanted up-market trim with cast alloy and wire wheels as options, power steering, a 14-gallon fuel tank, plus manual with overdrive or automatic gearbox options.

It was originally planned to develop the car over a two year period for release in 1968. However, release was delayed by a further two years as a result of many issues, not least by financial constraints and establishing priorities and rationalisation for new model releases following the 1967 merger between British Leyland (Triumph) and Rover and engine selection for the final production car. Triumph struggled to get Stags into dealerships in the UK by late 1970. The cars didn't reach American show rooms until 1971 due to further compliance issues with U.S. regulations. Ongoing supplies to the home market were subject to severe delivery delays as emphasis was placed on supplying cars to the U.S. export market.

The choice of engine for the production



An early Mk1 Stag in convertible mode and dealer-installed side rub strip

model contributed to some of the delay in bringing the Stag to market in a timely manner. Two engines were originally considered. The first option was to use a 2.0 litre fuel injected in-line six cylinder which was Harry Webster's preferred choice with

an optional V-8 to follow. The second choice was a new 2.5-litre fuel injected 90 degree V-8 which shared some design similarities to the Slant-4 engine comprising an overhead camshaft with cast iron block and aluminium head which had been developed for the Triumph Dolomite as well as for the Saab 99 and which was subsequently used in the TR7.

A further option considered was a 3.5-litre V-8 unit brought to the mix through the Rover merger. Rover had acquired the Buick-developed engine from General Motors. It is often reported that prideful Triumph engineers rejected the Rover engine because it wouldn't easily fit in to the Stag, but likely Rover simply could not supply the number of V-8 engines needed to match the anticipated Stag production numbers. The T2000 saloon engine bay had been designed for an in-line engine, so substituting a V-8 resulted in considerable reworking, adding time and expense to the Stag's development. However, later Stag aficionados have successfully grafted the Rover engine into their cars without too much difficulty and the Rover V-8 actually provides more elbow room in the engine compartment.



Mk 1 Stag, this particular car has the Rover V-8 engine, 16 inch wheels and colour-matched trim on the T-bar brace. The brace was considered an advantage in meeting potential U.S. safety regulations for convertible cars

By 1969, the production engineers, now under the direction of Spen King, discarded any idea of using the six cylinder engine and opted for the Triumph V-8 but ordered that it be bored out to 3.0 litres (2,997 cc) to increase horsepower and low end torque (127/145 bhp SAE/DIN and 142/170

lb-ft SAE/DIN respectively) to cope with the extra weight added by the strengthening required by the convertible. Fuel injection was dropped in favour of twin Zenith-Stromberg 175 CDSE carburetors not only to meet U.S. emission standards but to avoid problems being experienced elsewhere with the Lucas PI units. A stronger gearbox and final drive, plus larger brakes and 14-inch wheels instead of 13-inch were specified to deal with the higher power output and all resulted in the final Stag production car losing much of the planned commonality with the T2000.

The Michelotti styling also created some issues. For example, the headlights on the prototype were hidden behind slatted doors that slid electrically on tracks. Cold weather testing indicated that the sliding mechanism was prone to freezing and was therefore abandoned for regular exposed lights. Although this saved some money, there was no way to economize through the sharing of body panels with the saloon models because of the unique front and rear ends and the two-door, short-wheelbase format. In the end very few body panels were shared although some of the mechanical parts were common to both models.

As part of the refinements in the competition with Mercedes, a fully adjustable steering column was added, which later led to difficulties in complying with U.S. safety regulations. More serious engineering problems encountered were structural floppiness and scuttle shake. The torsional stiffness of the saloon car body disappeared in the convertible and the only available solution was to join the A- and B-posts with a torsional box across the top, giving the Stag an effective superstructure "hoop" with a T-bar brace to the windshield header. Although an engineering necessity, it was also considered to be an advantage in meeting anticipated U.S. safety regulations for convertible cars.

Technically, the car was very advanced at its launch in 1970 and was very well furnished in comparison to other models of the day. The Stag's rear-drive chassis was similar to that of the T2000, though the

wheelbase was trimmed six inches. Uni-body construction was retained, as was an all-coil independent suspension with front MacPherson struts and antiroll bar, and subframe-mounted rear semi-trailing arms. Brakes were servo assisted front disc/rear drum, steering was power-assisted rack-and-pinion and electric windows were standard. The Stag design team adopted new graphics for the instrumentation, replacing earlier 'whispy' style lines and numbers with cleaner, bold lettering that was easier to read at a glance. This instrumentation design would later be adopted on all subsequent Triumph models. With its refined styling, distinctive T-bar and hard/soft top options, the Stag received wide acclaim, and was quite literally, a "car for all seasons" as the Australian advertising brochures of the day proclaimed. The rear window on the hard top came with opening quarter lights and an electric demister.



Luxurious internal trim finish was ahead of its peers

However, it didn't take long for more ominous clouds to appear and Harry Colley, who was the senior engineer responsible for the development of the Stag from the first prototype until 1974, was, by the middle of 1971, solving a host of major problems particularly with engines overheating and cylinder heads warping. Some of the faults were due to poor build quality, endemic of the British motor industry at the time, while others related to design issues in the engine itself which had a cast chrome-iron block and aluminium-alloy cylinder heads.

It is reported that the prototype V-8

engine suffered from inadequately sized main bearings, but this problem was rectified in the 3.0 litre engine before going into production. Nevertheless, many U.S. imports required engine changes within two or three thousand miles, causing Triumph's warranty plan to dip into the red. Other problems occurred with stretching of the timing chains which were long, simplex roller link chains and often lasted less than 25,000 miles, resulting in very expensive damage when they failed. Other problems were related to inadequate engine maintenance due to a factory-specified 7,500-mile oil change interval. The aluminium heads often warped due to poor castings, and poor fitting head gaskets restricted coolant flow, leading to overheating. Retrospectively, Triumph engineers referred to the head gaskets as the Stag's Achilles' heel, blaming the Purchasing Department for securing a poor quality product.

The water pump, which was located between the V of the cylinders just under the air filter box, was mounted too high so even a small drop in coolant level left it running dry. Water pump failures also occurred because of premature wearing of the jackshaft bearing surfaces. In some cases, overheating was caused by clogged waterways in the cylinder block which were subsequently found to be filled with casting sand left over from manufacture. In addition, soft tops leaked and water was able to get into the boot/trunk.

British Leyland can be criticized for failing to invest the necessary resources into the development of the Stag or in more quickly solving the engine problems, but the car did evolve and many of the V-8 problems were ironed out by independent mechanics or restorers with alternative aftermarket solutions, if not by Triumph's own engineers.

The early cars, often referred to as the Mk I were manufactured between 1970 and February 1973 when the Mk II model was introduced. The Mk II had a number of mechanical and cosmetic differences. Although cars remained Mk IIs, as far as Triumph was concerned, until production ended in June 1977, the



The engine bay – not much working space. Surprisingly, the Rover V8 installation provides considerably more elbow room

1976 and 1977 models were sufficiently different to represent a third phase in the car's development.

The first Stags were offered with soft top, hard top or both. Manual transmission was standard. Automatic transmission was optional but a large number of cars were fitted with a Borg-Warner 3-speed automatic transmission (type 35). Early 4-speed manual transmission models could be ordered with an A-type Laycock overdrive unit and later ones came with a J-type Laycock unit on 3rd and 4th gears only. These first cars had their tail panels painted in the corresponding body colour. January 1972 saw changes including stainless steel sill trim strips, a thermostatically controlled engine air intake and re-designed cooling system.

Mk II models can be differentiated externally by emblems changing from light



A home market Mk 2 Stag recognisable by the black rear panel and badge background as well as the lack of rear quarter lights on the ragtop

grey background to black; sills and tail panels being in matt black rather than body colour as with the TR6, twin pinstripes were added and 5 spoke alloy wheels became an option. The clear side panels in the soft top were removed to avoid creasing and splitting problems. Internally, instrument dial designs changed along with the removal of the map reading lamp fit-

ted to the glove-box lid and also interior lights moved from 'B' post to the centre of the T-bar. The engine had a higher compression ratio (but not U.S. models) along with redesigned domed pistons and combustion chambers.

By 1975, the tail panels were back to body colour again and in October 1976, the last major change was the fitting of a Borg Warner type 65 gearbox on cars with automatic transmission. The Stag shared body colours with other Triumphs models and through its short production run as many as 40 different colours were offered - more than for any other Triumph model.

U.S. destined models comprised unique combinations of features specifically designed for compliance with regulations of various States (particularly California) and other marketing requirements, and were designated by Triumph as "Federal Specification", which included such things as U.S. Federal Department of Transportation compliant lighting, air conditioning, side impact beams in the doors, laminated windshields and tinted side glass, front seat headrests, various warning lights and buzzers, a lower compression engine, and a wide range of emissions controls not found on vehicles exported to other markets.

Troubled by far too many warranty claims, Stag sales in America, the prime target market, were abysmal. Further sales were lost following the 1973 oil crisis which also impacted other so-called gas-guzzling models, although to be fair, the Stag clocked in at a respectable 30 MPG in standard transmission format, closer to 20 MPG with three-speed automatic. To Triumph's management it must have seemed somewhat like déjà vu all over again, reliving the failure of the Triumph 2000 to penetrate the American market place eight years earlier, although in the latter case, it wasn't reliability issues that were the problem.

Triumph's aim was to have sales of 12,000 Stags a year but this was never achieved. The best year was 1973 when sales peaked at 5,508. Even the introduc-

tion of the Stag to Australia didn't reverse the trend although Australia went on to become the Stag's best overseas market. In total 25,939 Stags were built over the seven year production run. Of this number, 8,120 were export models, of which only 2,871 went to the United States. Triumph did not introduce the Stag to the Canadian market although some dealers may have imported one or two, from the U.S., as a special order. Sales in the home market were also affected by long delivery waits which could be up to 12 months or longer and to reliability issues, but UK sales outnumbered exports by about two to one. It is estimated that approximately 9,000 Stags still exist in the UK which represents about 36% of the production total. According to Michael Coffey, founder of the Triumph Stag Club USA, as many as 950 to 1,000 Stags may still be in existence in the U.S. and Canada out of what he estimates was 3,500 cars imported. Tony Fox believes that there are currently about 35 Stags in Ontario. Whatever the actual number of exports to the U.S., the global survival rate appears to be around 45% which is not bad for a so-called failure!

The Stag was originally manufactured at Triumph's Speke factory in Liverpool with the completed body shells being transported to the Canley plant for final assembly with the addition of the drive line and chassis. In 1975, with the introduction of TR7 assembly at Speke, full assembly of the Stag was moved to the Canley plant.



Factory-built Stag Fastback Prototype

There have been a number of special Stags created through the years, most of which were by specialist converters and individual enthusiasts, but at least two variants were factory conceived and designed but which never progressed beyond the prototype stage. One was a rath-

er attractive fastback and the other used the Ferguson four-wheel-drive transmission similar to that later adopted on the Jensen Interceptor FF.

Although not a race contender, the Stag did apparently join the Triumph competition program for a limited time in the U.S. as a rally car in the 1971 SCCA National/Regional championships and British Leyland often supplied a Stag for use as a pace car at racetrack events. In the U.K., Tony Hart of Hart Racing Services built a Stag to Modified Sports cars regulations and competed in Modsport championships until 1983. The engine was the original Stag V-8 with special four branch manifolds and custom exhaust. Carburetors were replaced by four 40DCOE Webers. Car & Car Conversions magazine recorded a 0 to 60 mph time of 4.8 seconds (against 9.3 seconds for the standard Stag) and a top track speed of 160 mph.

Over the years, some auto-journalists labelled the model as the "Triumph Snag". However, Maurice Smith of *Autocar* who was in charge of two long-term test cars and wrote test reports in June 1971, February 1972 and February 1977 had nothing of substance of which to complain other than the delivery delays, but praised the Stag as "a likeable and lively car, unusually well-equipped."

Likewise, a 1973 road test published in *Motor* could only find minor complaints like limited luggage space, difficulties in erecting the hood (soft top) and the weight of the hard top and described the Stag's standard equipment as lavish. Admittedly, removing the hard top is a two-person job unless one has rigged up some sort of sling from one's garage ceiling, but the soft top operation is far simpler than that of the TR6 as there are no button clips to contend with on the lower edges. The article reaffirmed *Motor's* initial impression that the car was "not only unique in character and a highly desirable property, but that the standard of finish makes it a world-beater at the price."

However, U.S. commentators honed in



The author's recently acquired 1972 Jasmine Yellow/Saddle Tan interior late Mk 1 Stag

## Stag Stalk Ends

As I indicated at the beginning of this piece, I had been actively searching for a Triumph Stag for some time and in the summer of 2012, with the assistance of Toronto Triumph Club Stag guru, Tony Fox, I am pleased to report, to the lasting gratitude of O'Rua, our Irish Setter, that the stalking mission is over and that a fine specimen of the Monarch of the Road - a mid-1972 late Mk 1 in Jasmine yellow now has pride of place in our newly completed garage workshop.

I have done some delving into the provenance of the car through the British Motor Heritage Trust and the Ontario Ministry of Transport and feel I now have the complete ownership history of this car sorted out.

The car was first registered to Dr. Anthony (Tony) Barringer, a British-born geologist-geophysicist who came to Canada in the mid-1950s and established a geophysical instrumentation research company in Toronto during the 1960s and 1970s, a gentleman that I actually knew professionally in the 1970s although I did not know of his ownership of the Stag at the time.

It appears that the car was shipped directly from the UK to Canada as a personal export delivery through Henly's Limited dealership in Coventry and not through a U.S. dealership as were the few other Stags that were imported to Canada. The BMHT were able to confirm my car had been allocated a local Coventry number plate (AWK 970) prior to shipment to Canada.

Dr. Barringer owned it from 11 October 1972 until 6 July 1977, when ownership transferred to Dr. Geyza Dekenedy, a Hungarian-born urologist, living in Barrie who kept it for 33 years until his death. Tony Fox acquired the car in May 2010 and passed it on to me in June 2012.

This car is therefore probably the only Stag (or one of a very select few) that was imported directly from the UK to Canada. Neat, eh?



The author's 1972 Mk 1 Stag

on the indifferent build quality, so-called gutless automatic transmission and unresponsive steering. They complained that the optional hard-top was heavy and awkward to fit and the lack of leather upholstery placed the Stag outside the realm of the Mercedes SL.

Russ Smith, writing in the May 2012 issue of *Thoroughbred and Classic Cars* referred to the Stag, together with the Lancia Gamma, Alfa Romeo Montreal and Citroën SM, as the 'four classics of the Apocalypse' renowned for overheating engines, snapping and jumping cam belts and self-destructing gearboxes - tales he goes on to admit may largely be rooted in folklore rather than reality.

In 2010, *Classic Cars for Sale* magazine in the UK awarded the Triumph Stag the best classic Grand Tourer award and second-best overall, after the Jaguar E-Type and went on to note that it has never looked better.

The Stag can be considered a brilliant state-of-the-art design success, but unfortunately its transformation from drawing board to show room was a flawed exercise at many steps along the way. In the end the Stag did not achieve the success Triumph was seeking, the reasons for which are numerous, with at least some being beyond the control of the Triumph car division.

One is left to ponder what the outcome might have been had the original fuel injected in-line six or the Rover V-8 engine been adopted or if Triumph had remained outside of the expanding BLMC conglomerate and the ensuing inter-marque fratricide.

The Stag was nevertheless a car ahead of its time with a modern but classic design that has, 42 years on, more than withstood the test of time, allowing enthusiasts the opportunity of easily coping with long-distance touring while comfortably mingling with today's traffic.

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