

When the RV8 came out, **Jon Pressnell** was part of a magazine team that spent a week with the car, as he recalls here

RV8 REVISITED

Good heavens. Can 2022 really mark 30 years since the announcement of the MG RV8? The car that was launched as a 'brand-new classic' is now on the cusp of being an officially designated historic vehicle in its own right – at least according to European criteria.

I well remember the time when the RV8 arrived on the market. Few cars so animated the *Classic & Sports Car* office. From Abingdon loyalists to still-jaded former MGB owners, we all had strong and not necessarily favourable views on Rover's resurrected roadster. Should the MGB have been left dead and buried? Could it – should it? – stand comparison with a TVR that cost about the same? Was it a well-executed update of a classic design or an over-padded piece of automotive kitsch? Was it, at the end of the day, any good?

We were, I suppose, reacting to a degree against the Rover press office's ham-fisted – or so it seemed – attempts to tell us how to judge the car. I still have the press release in my files. The idea, it said, was 'to recreate a classic British sports car' to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the MGB. The RV8 was 'a classic car without the drawbacks', to be bought because it 'takes the risk out of buying an old car'. Purchasers, we were told, would be 80 per cent male, in their late 40s or early 50s, with fond memories of the sports car they had owned when they were young, and really wanted a red E-type – that's what the release said – but were frightened of the hassle and cost. This was a coded way of telling the press not to compare the MG with other high-performance sports cars on the market, notably the V8-powered TVRs. For a car ticketed at £25,440 a pop, that rubbed our fur up the wrong way.

Eventually a press car became available, at some stage in 1994, and we decided that as many of the editorial team as possible would spend time with the car, to form a rounded opinion. As Deputy Editor, I fixed up a schedule that would take in calling on one or two MG V8 personalities, plus an early RV8 owner, and making visits to the British Motor Heritage body facility and the Cowley assembly plant.

Back in 1994, this was the RV8 the author had as a press car for a week (Classic & Sports Car)





An interesting exercise has been to look back, 30 years on, at the magazine's week with the RV8, a week in which we – as a bunch of enthusiasts – tried to look beyond the slightly tortured explanations of Rover's PR men, and beyond the brutality of the modern-car journalists who (as you may remember) had found the MG lacking.

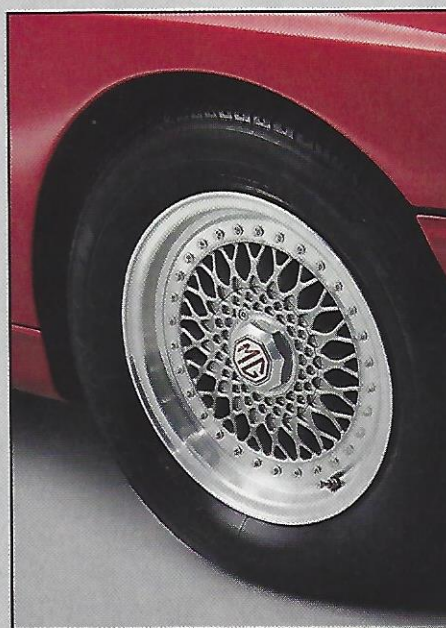
First impressions

We began with an appraisal of the car's fast-driving capabilities, with my colleague Mick Walsh taking the MG to the Chobham test track where motoring journalists regularly assess cars. Once it broke away, the RV8 couldn't easily be held, and it proved all too easy to spin. Matters weren't helped by the steering, which Mick found too slow – the RV8 having an unassisted MGB rack with lower gearing. This was something on which all agreed, that the steering could be quicker and thus more informative. For the record, an original MGB has 2.9 turns lock-to-lock, while the RV8 registers 3.1 turns for a much poorer lock.

After his turn at the test track, another of our hot-shoe drivers, Martin Buckley, offered a measured view. He reckoned that the wide and sticky modern rubber was at issue: if the car had narrower tyres it would have broken away at lower, more predictable and more easily-catchable speeds.

But is all this comment fair? In normal road use the fatter rubber gave adhesion far superior to that of the original MGB, everyone found. Looking back today on this, it has to be stressed that what's true on the track may well be irrelevant to the way the car is likely to be used on the road. Paul Hardiman, then our Production Editor, helped put the MG in perspective. "At first I didn't like it at all. But after a few miles it grew on me," he told me. "It's very relaxing, and I did 120 miles with the roof down, in the cold, in drizzle, and I stayed warm and dry. It would be a wonderful tourer if it had a decent boot."

Japanese-market cars have a 'Rover' badge on each front wing, an add-on lip around the front arches, and air-con vents in place of the front auxiliary lights



Wire-effect 15in x 6J alloy wheels are unique to the RV8; front brakes are AP Racing ventilated discs



Panel alignment was much improved on production RV8s; this car is in pearlescent Nightfire Red

Getting to know the car

As my own miles behind the wheel started to accumulate, I was forming my own opinion. Initial impressions were good – the meaty V8 performance you'd expect, a well-honed and tightly-gated five-speed gearbox you could slam through from gear to gear, and brakes that were perfectly weighted, nicely progressive, and with just the right amount of travel. For relaxed top-down cruising, the RV8 was perfect, and with the hood up the lack of wind noise up to 60mph was impressive and the engine very subdued.

The steering I found heavy at parking speeds, but on the move its weight suited me fine: better this, I felt, than the disconnected vagueness of a powered rack. I still recall a glorious moment of technicolour opposite-lockery on a slippery roundabout, but that was just silliness on my part. The ride, meanwhile, came across as relatively firm, but not to the point of harshness. I felt the bumps and thumps, but not uncomfortably – doubtless helped by the first-rate seats. My verdict was that the suspension was as soft as the engineers could get away with, or – alternatively – as hard as they could get away with, for everyday road use.

Considering that the RV8 has a leaf-sprung live back axle, my judgement, with hindsight, is that Rover did a pretty good job with such an old-fashioned set-up. The trick was to add carefully positioned anti-tramp bars and forward-angled telescopic rear dampers, plus a not over-thick anti-roll bar, with as a final ingredient an expensive state-of-the-art Quaife torque-sensing differential.

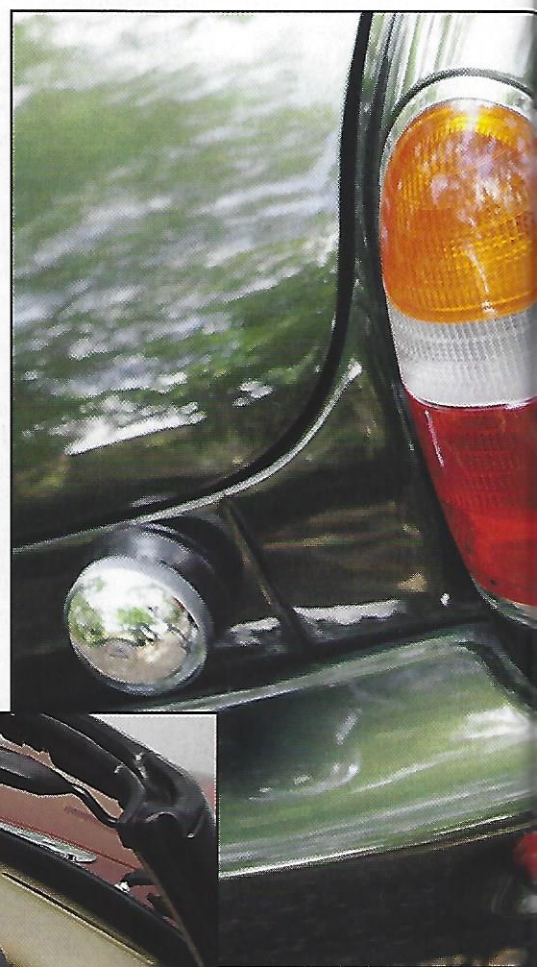
As someone who's short and slightly-built, the tight interior suited me, although I'd rather have had a more sober black trim than the mid-beige that was the only colour on offer. But I noted that bigger people might have felt less at ease: the thicker seats sat you higher and the swanky door-armrests ate up space. Talking of space, I found the boot pretty pathetic, thanks to the bigger spare. But there was a generous luggage platform, sensibly lipped, and the rear footwells offered further storage space.

The benefits of development

One thing we all became aware of was that although the RV8 was perceived as being part of the MGB family, in fact it was a lot more than just a gussied-up 'B' with a V8 engine: the development necessary to sell it as a new car in the 1990s had seen it move the game on from that.



The interior door catch is as on Jaguars, and the armrest is borrowed from another car too. Manual-only windows were criticised at the time



The tail lamps were tooled-up specially for the RV8; it was said that just 8 per cent of parts were original MGB items



The plush leather-trimmed interior is a tight fit for larger drivers; Stone Beige was the only colour offered

Brian Galipeau, who had built a fine Heritage-shelled V8 roadster, testified to this, when I paid him a visit and he tried the RV8. Compared to his car, Brian found the power delivery smoother, the suspension more absorbent, and the adhesion better. Wife Beth, meanwhile, commented on the easier gearchange and the reduced wind noise. That's the difference, of course, between a private individual building a car in his garage from existing components and a sizeable motor manufacturer expending engineering time honing a design before it enters production.

Could do better...

My next visit was to Kent-based specialist V8 Conversions. The RV8's re-thought front end, with telescopic dampers and upper links, ball-joint swivels and a beefy anti-roll bar, met with approval, I remember, as did the twin-silencer exhaust and how Rover had cut a hole in the inner wings for the exhaust manifold, and dropped the manifold down through it. Details such as a proper fusebox and a decent heater also pleased, and the elimination of the quarterlights.

The most memorable part of my trip to Kent, however, was when I visited a chap called Simon Brock, who did bodywork for V8 Conversions and had several concours gongs to his credit. Blimey. Simon was not impressed, as he walked round our press-fleet RV8. The under-sill skirts were flapping freely at the front, and didn't align with the wheelarches. The fit of the front wings to the headlamp housings wasn't too clever. One of the doors stood well proud of the rear wing. The boot-lid's alignment with its aperture was all over the place, in all planes. There were various 'lows' in the panels, visible when the light caught them.



The hood design makes for reasonable levels of wind noise, but rear three-quarters vision is not good



The 3.9-litre Rover V8 develops 190bhp, making the RV8 good for 136mph and 0-60mph in 6.9 seconds, according to the Autocar test



There's sudden breakaway if you play the fool, but in normal use the RV8 handles securely and rides firmly but not harshly

OWNER'S VIEW: DEREK SQUIRES

Derek Squires has owned his RV8 for approaching 17 years and covered 55,000 miles in it, including extensive touring in Europe and a trip to Morocco.

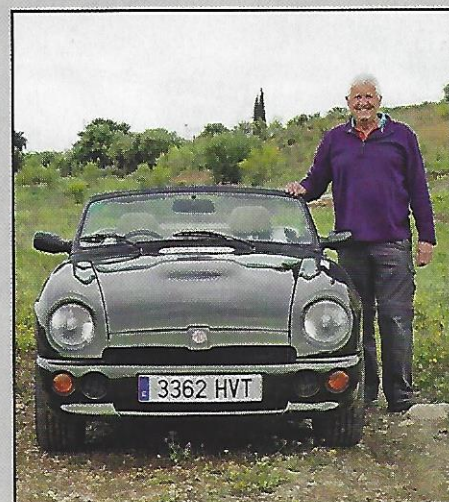
"I have a love-hate relationship with it. I've experienced all the things that go wrong on an RV8," says the former airline pilot. "They are a plumber's nightmare, because of the number of coolant hoses. There are continual dribbles and leaks, which are difficult to trace, and when you drain and refill the system you get airlocks the whole time. I've also gone through five fuel pumps, and had to replace a noisy back axle.

"The standard dampers aren't good, and I've changed to adjustable Spaxes. Another mod has been to have the engine re-chipped. The original set-up used a Land-Rover ECU, and at lower speeds on wider throttle openings it ran too rich. Now it's a lot smoother and has better fuel consumption.

"On the body, the windscreen frame rusts at the bottom corners, and I've had to have this repaired, and after an argument with a gatepost I needed a new rear light unit. These are virtually unobtainable. I've seen them at £1000 each on e-Bay, but Maidstone Sports Cars had one on the shelf for rather less...

"It's quite a complicated car. People think it's just an MGB on steroids but underneath it's a semi-modern car, with all the sensors, stepper motors and so on – lots of little bits and pieces that can cause problems.

"But they are fantastic cars. They don't handle like an MGB or go round corners as nicely. They feel heavier. But they are a fantastic touring car. On winding roads in Sardinia we were driving the RV8 like an automatic, using third gear from near-standstill to 70mph, and of course it's very long-legged on motorways. With the resources Rover had, they produced an amazing car."



But Simon's most serious criticism was over the doors and the wings – not just their alignment one to the other but the incompatibility of their profiles. The wing swage line had a different profile from that of the swage on the door, which was much sharper, he pointed out. Not only that, but the profile of the rear edge of the front wing was different from that of the forward edge of the door. It was all shades of old BL days, when apparently you could tell if the Allegro you were following was built on the day shift or the night shift: one shift was said to gap the boot-lid to the left, the other to the right, and neither seemed capable of gapping it centrally.

...and better they did

It was with some awkwardness, therefore, that I remember finding myself the next day in MD David Bishop's office at the British Motor Heritage factory in Faringdon where the MG's shell had been made. David was disgruntled. Here was some bloke criticising the RV8 from the sidelines, and – worse – judging it by what he felt were unreal concours standards.

It turned out that ours was a pre-production car, and that production RV8s were going through a separate unit set up for quality-checking and rectification of the shells. Honour saved. David showed me how the bodies were coated with highlighting oil and put under bright lights to show up imperfections, and 'lows' and 'highs' then teased out.

I was told that a lot of time had been spent on improving the profile of the wings and the door-skin pressings. Sure enough, the wing and door swages did indeed blend in neatly, on the shells I looked at, and the edge-profiles married more tightly. The doors fitted better, and the boot-lid lay consistently in its aperture. Looking underneath, the welding was tidier, too.



The assembly line, in part of the old Pressed Steel works at Cowley, photographed during the author's 1994 visit. (Classic & Sports Car)

Inside the RV8 factory

This was a prelude to my last stop for the feature I was writing: a visit to the RV8 assembly facility at Cowley. This is a day that remains graven in my memory, for a completely non-MG reason. I wasn't at the wheel of the RV8, but – appropriately enough – in my Cowley-built Morris Minor Traveller. As I approached Oxford, I heard astonishing news on the radio: BMW had just announced that it was buying Rover Group. A moment in history, to be sure...

Inside the small unit, announced by a sign reading 'MG Manufacturing', RV8s were being hand-assembled by 18 'associates', the cars pushed from station to station as they used to be at Abingdon. Bodies were painted at Cowley alongside those of the Rover 800 and 600, and arrived in the RV8 facility plastic-wrapped. They were then wax-injected and all joints sealed, before moving to the seven-stage assembly process.

It was an intimate facility, with none of the bustle of mass-production. Time was taken to make things fit, and I was told that members of the workforce spent up to 2.5 hours on each car, against something like three minutes for each car on the 600 or 800 line. There were no inspectors – "the associates are their own inspectors," the plant manager told me. I even recall meeting one chap who had been on the lines at Abingdon, and who told me that at Cowley he was responsible for much more of the car. It genuinely did seem like a happy little operation.



An RV8 bodyshell being finished at the BMH Faringdon works; these really were hand-built cars, every step of the way. (Classic & Sports Car)



The White Gold Metallic of this former British Motor Show car was a rarely-chosen shade



Final adjustments being carried out; in the foreground are two Japanese-market cars, wheelarch extensions taped in place. (Classic & Sports Car)

Conclusions then, conclusions now

So what were my final views, after our week with the RV8? I was sorry to see it go. 'It's friendly, competent, and – despite its pumped-up looks – fundamentally honest. It's also worthy of the MG octagon: you don't feel ashamed to see that proud badge on the steering-wheel boss,' I wrote. 'Maybe the RV8 is no TVR, but that argument can be over-played. After all, nobody has ever criticised a Morgan for not being a TVR. People will be attracted to the RV8 by the fact that it's an MG, and will buy it out of loyalty and affection towards the marque. Those might not be rational responses, but shouldn't buying a sports car be just a little bit irrational?'

That seems a reasonable summing up, and funnily enough it found an echo in the views of an owner whom I talked to at the time. Retired RAF pilot John Halstead fitted Rover's RV8 buyer profile to a 'T'. He had a TC and an MGB GT V8, and had owned various other MGs over the years. He'd bought his RV8 not because he wanted a V8-powered British sports car but because it was an MG, and because he felt inclined to indulge himself. "For £26,000 of course you could buy a car that is as fast, has better roadholding, and is probably a better car," he said to me. "But you can't buy an MG like that."

We now know that there weren't enough people like John Halstead, and that Rover had miscalculated hugely. Nostalgists prepared to pay that sort of money for something, just because it was an MG, weren't numerous, especially with Britain emerging from a recession. To make the sums stack up, Rover had been obliged to go up-market, out of MG marque's comfort zone. Deprived of traditional MG buyers, the RV8 couldn't hack it in the UK against those seductive and infinitely more contemporary TVRs. That the same thing happened with the Phoenix Consortium's delusional SV project, which had an even more fancy price, and was busy falling flat on its face when MG Rover crashed, simply underlines that reality.

Just 324 RV8s found buyers in the UK. The project's saviour was the Japanese market, which had gone bonkers for 'Brit Cool' and was being sold Minis by the boatload – taking over a quarter of Mini production in 1992, to the point where without Japan the Mini would almost certainly have been discontinued. The Japanese, who are a right-hand-drive nation, accounted for 1581 RV8 sales, with the balance of 91 cars going to Germany, Belgium, Holland, France and Australia.

As Japan's stringent MoT régime kicked in, the cars started to be exported back to Britain, and today there's a reasonable choice of low-mileage well-looked-after cars. Would I be tempted? There were a few cars for sale at last year's NEC show. If I could get over my reservations about beige ruched-leather interiors, I think I could weaken, if I were looking for a few years of V8 fun without taking a financial hiding on re-sale... 🐼

Unless stated otherwise, all photos courtesy Magic Car Pics; studio images by John Colley

THE EXPERT: CLIVE WHEATLEY

Clive Wheatley has specialised in V8 MGBs for over 20 years, and he's the go-to address for RV8 expertise, offering a wide range of replacement parts and upgrades.

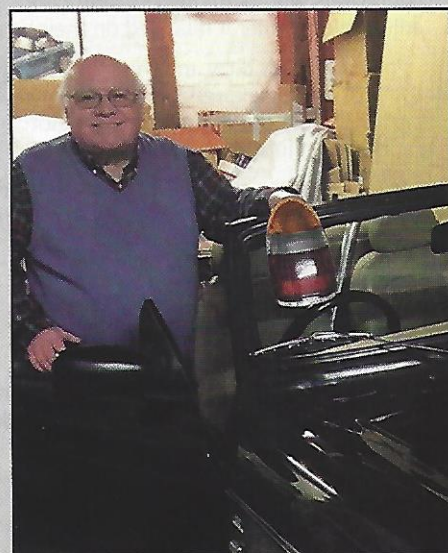
"The worst thing is how the steel windscreen frame rusts out, and it's a swine to replace. We offer a frame made of composite. We also offer glassfibre headlamp cowl. The originals are in plastic and they develop holes. In the interior, the wood deteriorates – the lacquer cracks. We offer exchange sets of wood, but fitting is a time-consuming process.

"Where you're in the mire is if you break a rear light – you won't get an MoT. They're unique to the RV8 and the tooling was thrown out some years ago. We hope shortly to have the units re-made, using 3D printing.

"On the mechanical side, chipping the engine is worthwhile – the RPI Tornado works well. Fitting a pre-amplifier to the ignition is good, too: it gives a brighter, longer spark. The back axle is a problem. They lose oil, so you have to make sure it's kept topped up. Check the axle is quiet if buying a car – they can lose up to three-quarters of their oil.

"The poly bushes we offer are made to give a better ride, and they do. You can tell the ride is different. Upgraded Spax dampers are a superb mod. They completely transform the car. It's chalk and cheese. The ride is so much more compliant that you can drive with one hand on the wheel. I've never known a car feel so different.

"We also do a 17in wheel, which takes 205 x 50 tyres. With those and a set of Spaxes you can drive that car anywhere and you'll enjoy it. It's beautiful. It turns in better on the 17in wheels. It's just a pity it hasn't got another 50bhp!"



The dash and door cappings are in elm-burr veneer; the main dials are relatively small. The gear knob seen here is not original