

# MOTOR SHOW PREVIEW

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The full story behind the new V8 roadster



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**MG RV8**

# **MG's new vintage**

**The new MG RV8 is launched today and goes on show at Birmingham next week. In the first of our motor show previews, Steve Croyley finds the reborn roadster quick, plush and full of MG spirit**



**R**each for the stringbacks and death to MG Montego. For the first time in more than a decade, Britain has an MG sports car which is worthy of the octagonal badge on its nose. This week the wraps come off the MG RV8, Rover's 3.9-litre B-based two-seater roadster, and a new era of MG sports car motoring begins.

A carefully orchestrated flow of Rover teasers and tip-offs alerted us, months ago, to the fact that the car was coming. Also that it would be based on the *new* MGB body which, four years ago, was put back into production for the benefit of classic car restorers. But none of that fully prepares British sports car enthusiasts for the MG RV8 as it stands today: it is fast, luxurious, roomy and well proportioned and, well, pretty convincing. Some had feared the RV8 would be an overdressed version of a rickety old car: it's far from that.

The idea of a 'new MG' has lingered since before the

old one went out of production in 1980. Plans became better focused when Peter Mitchell and his team at British Motor Heritage, Oxfordshire, began to build MGB shells again in 1988. But Heritage hadn't the resources to build complete cars and, anyway, it was doubtful that anyone would want an ordinary B, a car which passed its sell-by date in about 1975.

The MG RV8 was finally brought to fruition by Rover Special Projects, a team of 30 planners, engineers and designers based at Gaydon, Rover's test track in Warwickshire. RSP director Steve Schlemmer says that, starting at the beginning of 1990, his people formed the nucleus of a dedicated team drawn from all corners of Rover. Calling the project 'Adder', (in recognition of the Anglo-American Cobra of the '60s), their objective was to re-create the MGB as it would have been had it never left production.

The truth is that they've probably done better than that. The car has a wide-tracked chunkiness and a

level of luxury to which the tired old black-bumpered two-seater of 1980 could never have aspired. MG owners' groups have already given it the unconditional thumbs-up.

Yet, curiously, Rover's high-hats seem anything but overcome by the emotion of their latest launch. They are quite dispassionate about the great occasion, firmly denying that the car is any confirmation that modern MGs are on the way. They concede only that the RV8 will be a jolly profitable way of celebrating the 30th anniversary of the MGB's debut, and admit only grudgingly that the RV8's launch is a fine way of keeping the MG name warm.

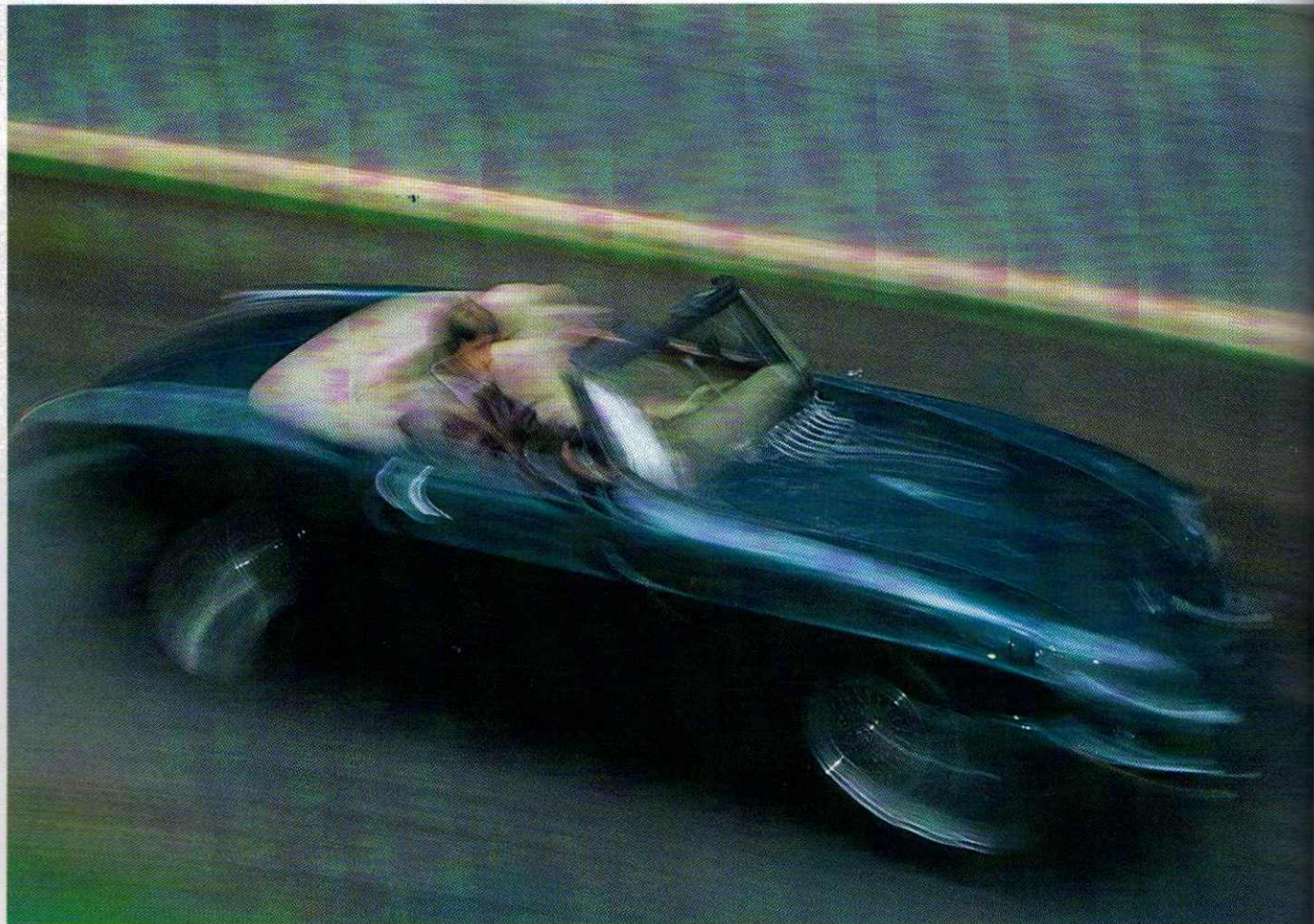
In fact, as we've made clear in past issues, Rover's management knows it would be plain crazy not to launch some new MGs, so great is the interest and demand. The company has two front-running projects: PR3, a mid-engined two-seater due in 1995, and a Stag-style four-seater, due a couple of years later.

The MG RV8, to cost

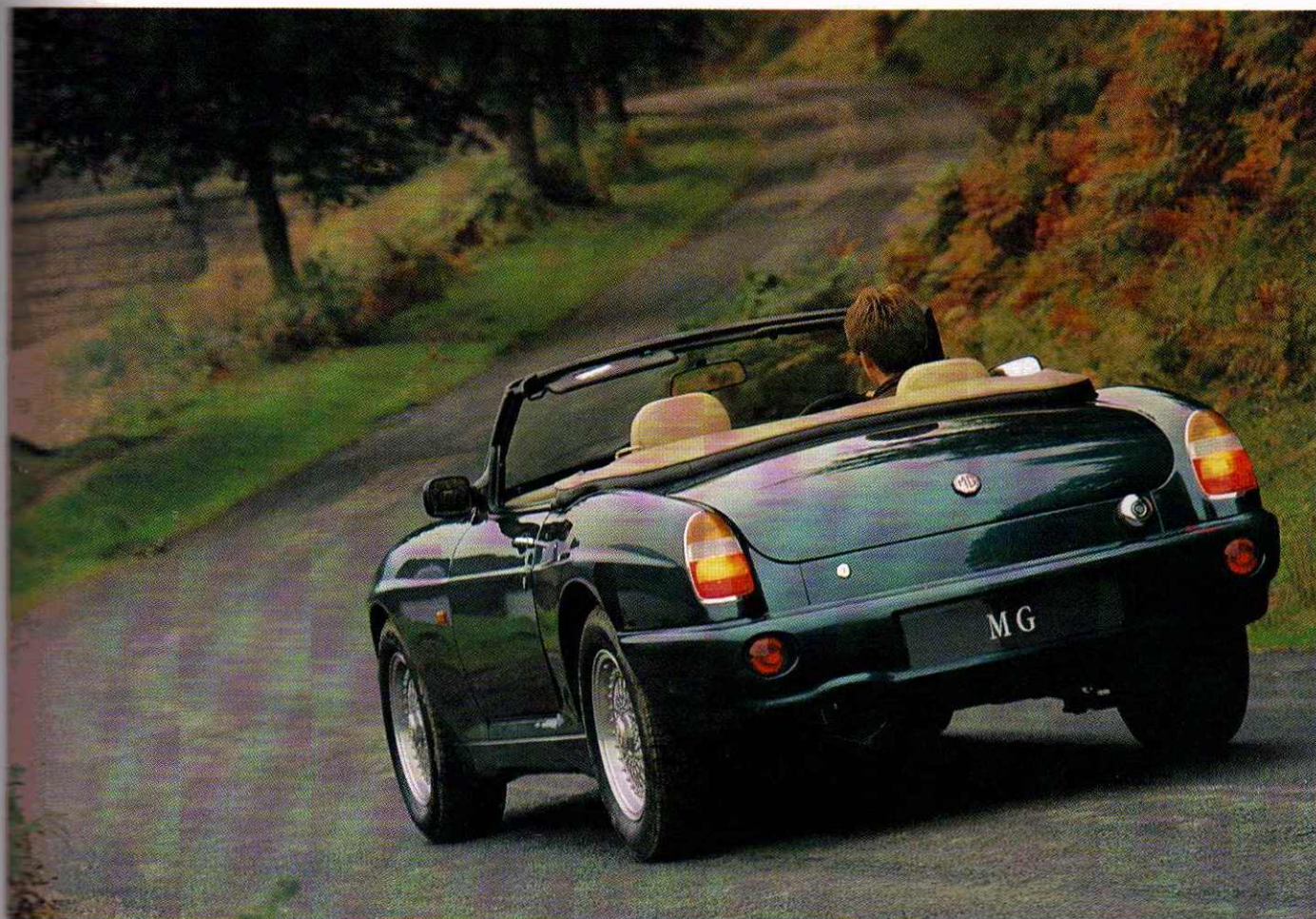
£26,500, will start going out to customers in April or May next year. Rover has started taking deposits of just under £3000 from customers, and quoting firm delivery dates in return. A couple of weeks before the Birmingham motor show there had been 1000 enquiries, 200 of which were serious enquiries that had turned into 100 firm orders. The motor show debut should produce many more. Rover says it plans a two to three-year life for the car (which is tantamount to admitting that there will be something else with an MG badge for the later '90s) and 20-odd artisans at Cowley, Oxford, will build about 15 cars a week. If demand is heavy, that can rise to 20 cars.

The MG RV8 is a UK-only programme "at this stage", says Schlemmer. Building for other markets would have slowed the project and added to the cost which he describes as "miniscule" on a normal motor industry scale. Since news of the project has broken, it has become clear that the Japanese, who also drive on the right, would love

STAN PAPIOR



Refined cruising rather than race-track handling is the RV8's forte. It's much more than a dressed-up MGB



RV8 has wider tracks than MGB, hence flared wings. Foglights set in body-coloured plastic bumper

some RV8s, but Schlemmer will only say the company "will look at it" when the size of the demand crystallises.

If you read between the lines, it is probable that RSP will only turn its attentions to export markets if demand in the UK isn't as strong as exports. MG-loving nations other than Britain will have to exist on a trickle of UK-spec personal imports or possess their souls with patience until the new-generation MGs arrive, sometime around 1994

In the flesh, the MG RV8 has an obvious relationship with the old MGB, but is satisfactorily different. The basic structure is the Heritage body, built (Rover says with surprising candour) to slightly higher standards than when formerly made. The all-steel unitary chassis is deemed plenty strong enough to carry the 3.9-litre alloy V8, even though, in the car's heyday, there was never a factory-produced V8 roadster. (There was an MGC roadster powered by a huge iron six, which probably weighed 50 per cent more than a fully equipped V8).

In the MG RV8 every panel has at least a single-side zinc coating, and the car carries a six-year guarantee against corrosion, just like all other Rovers.

On to the Heritage shell go new flared front and rear wings to cover the wider track. The bumpers are formed in body-colour plastic, the lights front and rear are all-new and there's a new bonnet with a power bulge. The grille is derivative in style, but different. Even the distinctive windscreen frame is all-new, though it

looks the same. "The old frame was a particularly nasty mixture of castings and extrusions," says Schlemmer. "Ours is made from steel in a single piece." The doors are original MGB, though they have their quarter-lights



Hood revised from MGB

removed and have a new set of body-colour exterior mirrors. The hood, based on the old shape and frame, has been revised by Tickford but functions largely in the same way as MGB hoods.

The engine is the same pushrod 3950cc alloy V8 which Land Rover supplies to its other sports car customers, such as Morgan and TVR, and is very closely related to the 3.5-litre which was used in the 2500-odd MGB V8 GTs made between 1973 and 1976.

But whereas in the '70s it

was fed by carburettor and produced 137bhp, today's engine has 187bhp at 4750rpm and 231lb ft of torque at 3200rpm, is fed by electronic fuel injection and puts exhaust gases through a pair of closed-loop catalysts.

Power goes through a Land Rover-built 77mm gearbox, basically a much-improved version of the old Rover SD1 gearbox. Top gear (in which the car will happily pull from 30mph) is a 0.79:1 overdrive, giving a top gearing of just under 29 mph/1000 rpm.

From there, drive goes to a live rear axle which has a Quaife torque sensing differential. Schlemmer says Rover's tests have shown this kind of diff is the only one which can cope with a long life of V8-sized helpings of torque.

The biggest suspension news is that the MGB's infernal lever arm dampers have been dropped in favour of tubular units. The front suspension now has a proper double wishbone system with coil springs and concentric tubular dampers (the damper arm used to ►



Thick-rimmed wheel

## ROVER SPECIAL PROJECTS

### The MG RV8 is the product of Rover's group of niche market specialists

THE MG RV8 IS ROVER SPECIAL PROJECTS' SIXTH COMPLETED project, even though this Gaydon-based group of 30 planners, engineers and designers was only formed at the beginning of 1990. Boss Steve Schlemmer says the group's job is to spot opportunities to produce low-volume niche products, to sell the ideas to management, and to bring them to fruition.

So far, RSP's products have included the limited edition Mini Cooper (the 1000-off version which preceded the car's return as a fully fledged production model), the two-door 'handling pack' Range Rover CSK, a specially equipped, old-shape



First return of Cooper...



...CSK Range Rover...

Rover 800 to speed that model's run-out, and a US-only limited edition version of the newly launched Land Rover Defender, to raise the model's profile.

"We draw the people and resources we need from all over the company, for the relatively short terms that one of our projects lasts," says Schlemmer. "That allows us to stay small and flexible. We have another four projects on the go at present, and at least one of them is a high-profile job like the MG RV8."

Schlemmer will say nothing about it, but one of RSP's key jobs must surely be readying the Mini Cooper S, slated for

full production launch quite soon. But there's always a bottom line to consider: RSP is always deadly serious about making its image cars into profit-earners, Schlemmer says. "It's easy to have exciting ideas," he comments, "but you have to ask yourself if there is a person out there who will buy it."

For the MG RV8 project, detailed research was carried out to prove that demand for such a car actually existed. The Special Projects team found a 'significant' number of well-off people who were very interested in the idea of an MG in the classic style, but weren't really classic car or DIY types.

"We found people who thoroughly understood the proposition of the MG," says Schlemmer. "They admired the competence of modern cars but wanted something with a little more character, though not for day-to-day use."

"They were looking for great performance, but not a car that would have to justify itself against a Porsche or a TVR Griffith. The first performance priority, they told us, was that the car should just roll along beautifully. That's the car we've given them."



...RV8: all work of Rover Special Projects team

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◀ be the top link), though geometry is not much changed. The RV8's steering, like the MGB's, remains unassisted rack and pinion.

Not much sophistication about the rear suspension either: it continues to use MGB-style semi-elliptics, but Rover chooses to describe them as 'twin-taper leaf' springs. Unlike a conventional semi-elliptic set-up, their two leaves are spaced apart to reduce friction and wear. Telescopic shock absorbers provide the damping, and twin lower torque control arms limit axle tramp. As at the front, there is an anti-roll bar.

The front brakes are large ventilated discs with twin-pot calipers; the rears are 230mm drums rather similar to the original MGB ones. They are power assisted, of course, but anti-lock brakes are "not a priority".

The combination of revised suspension and much chunkier wheels and tyres (205/65 VR15s on specially designed alloy wheels with 6J rims) means front and rear tracks are several inches wider. That helps both looks and handling.

Inside, the accent is predictably enough on wood and leather. RSP's planners reckoned a luxurious MG interior would do a lot to sell it, so they have given the car a burr-elm laminate across the fascia and on the centre console. The bucket seats are leather covered, as are the steering wheel, gearstick and armrests, while the tunnel sides and door panels are in leather-look vinyl.

The switch and control layout is modern, but very much in the spirit of a classic British roadster. The steering wheel is sporty in style, but thick-rimmed, there's a full set of VDO black-on-white instruments, and the steering column stalks are latest-spec Rover 800 items. In short, there's nothing revolutionary about the MG cockpit, but the effect is very pleasing, especially since the MGB cabin was always well planned and roomy.

Though everyone — both Rover and their potential MG customers — seems to agree that this won't be a high-mileage, day-to-day car, lots of trouble has been taken to make the car durable.

## Factfile

### MG RV8

#### How fast

0-60mph	5.9secs
Top speed	135mph
MPG: urban	n/a
56mph	n/a
75mph	n/a

All manufacturer's claimed figures

#### How much?

£26,500 On sale in UK spring 1993

#### How big?

Length	4010mm (158ins)
Width	1694mm (67ins)
Height	1320mm (52ins)
Wheelbase	2330mm (92ins)
Weight (claimed)	1280kg (2822lb)
Fuel tank	51 litres (11 galls)

#### Engine

Max power	187bhp/4750rpm
Max torque	231lbft/3200rpm
Specific output	47bhp/litre
Power to weight	155bhp/tonne
Installation	longitudinal, front, rear-wheel drive
Capacity	3946cc, 8 cyls in vee
Made of	aluminium alloy
Bore/stroke	94mm/71mm
Compression ratio	9.35:1
Valves	2 per cyl, single cam
Ignition and fuel	breakerless electronic ignition, Lucas multi-point fuel injection

#### Gearbox

Type	5-speed manual
Ratios/mph per 1000rpm	
1st	3.32/6.9
2nd	2.09/11.0
3rd	1.40/16.4
4th	1.00/22.9
5th	0.79/29.0
Final drive ratio	3.31

#### Suspension

Front	independent, double wishbone, coils springs, dampers, anti-roll bar
Rear	live axle, twin taper-leaf half-elliptic springs, dampers, control arms, anti-roll bar

#### Steering

Type	rack and pinion
Lock to lock	n/a

#### Brakes

Front	270mm ventilated discs
Rear	230mm drums Anti-lock n/a

#### Wheels and tyres

Size	6x 15ins
Made of	cast alloy
Tyres	205/65VR

#### Made and sold by

Rover Cars, Canley Road, Canley, Coventry CV4 9DB Tel: 0203 670111

Besides the rustproofing and the hood revisions, the MG RV8 has a completely new wiring harness using 1993-spec cable, fusing, connectors and relays. The system, which includes a similar alarm system to that recently introduced in the Rover 200 cabriolet, now runs inside the car, not underneath it as the MGB's did.

To finish the package, Rover has made a special effort with paint choices. There are six standard Rover colours — two solids, two metallic, two pearlescent.

## MG RV8



Cabin is well planned, roomy and luxuriously appointed with elm and leather everywhere. Steering is unassisted

But the highest demand, Rover predicts, will be for four new colours specifically designed for the MG RV8 and offered for £750 extra: Le Mans Green metallic, Willow Woodcote Green, Oxford Blue pearlescent and Old English White.

Production MG RV8s will be distinctly thin on the ground until delivery begins in four to five months' time. Most current testing has been conducted on two prototypes, 'Red Adder' and 'Black Adder', though Schlemmer says the proto-

type count will total about 12 by the time RV8s are in the hands of customers.

The car was never expected or planned to have the highest levels of race-bred handling, says Schlemmer. "It handles very predictably," he says, "and tracks as straight as an arrow at motorway cruising speeds. Besides, if you corner it hard, it will still hang on much longer than most drivers expect. It's a forgiving car, and we think that's the main thing."

The steering has very good



Modern control layout

centre-feel, points out Schlemmer, which is one benefit of its lack of power assistance. It isn't the lightest of cars to manoeuvre into parking spaces, he says, but effort levels are acceptable.

If Rover didn't see race-track handling as a priority, they certainly put effortless performance high on the list. And the RV8 has got it. Though it weighs about 2800lb at the kerb, which is plenty for a two-seater, its copious low-end power gets it swiftly off the mark with 0-60mph claimed to take just

5.9secs, and, according to early estimates, the 100mph in about 14secs. Top speed is conservatively estimated at 135mph, at which stage it's only pulling 4600rpm.

The MG's other side is as an effortless cruiser. Owners who like autobahn touring (work for which the car seems ideal) will soon discover that a genuine 100mph requires only 3500rpm in top. The touring range might be a problem, though; at 22-24mpg, the car will only do about 180-200 miles comfortably. Knowing it isn't a truly modern car, buyers may excuse the foible.

Throughout the project, Rover has insisted that the MGR V8 is "not the new MG", merely a convenient way to celebrate 30 years of the MGB, keep the MG name warm, and turn in a profit — all at a same time.

In the flesh, it doesn't look or feel new. But the RV8 is a fast, good-looking and engaging car, which is well built and should be long lasting. If not the new MG, it is certainly a real MG. That, many buyers will think, is a more important accolade. ■



Land Rover's 3.9 V8 gives 187bhp, 231 lb ft torque