

# What happened to the works TR4 rally team cars?

BY SIMON RASMUSSEN



This would seem to be a simple question to answer: England has a licensing system in which the plate stays with the car, and not with the owner, so as long as the car has not been scrapped and the plate withdrawn and reissued to a different vehicle, the identity of the car should be easy to trace. Indeed there are three powder blue TR4s in England registered 3VC, 4VC and 6VC- these must surely be three of the four team cars?

### In practice it is not that simple...

First of all, these were competition cars in a sport which is extremely hard on equipment. One can readily imagine the three cars coming back from France after an event and being prepared for the next rally. One may need a new back axle, another needs a new bonnet, front wing and one door, the third has a bent chassis, and all need new clutches and brakes. (Jean-Jacques Thuner is reported as having said that the chassis of his TR4 was replaced five times in a period of two and a half years! This kind of damage is clearly visible in photographs of the cars after some of the events.) The quickest solution is to replace the car that needs the most work with a spare car that has already been repaired, and simply move the license plate over. Perhaps someone makes a handwritten note of the change in the shop log, perhaps not, perhaps the note is clearly legible, perhaps a cup of tea gets spilt on the log... the priority is to get the cars ready, not to keep perfect paperwork.

The concept of "originality" is a difficult one to square with the history of most cars used in competition. A more useful concept might be "authenticity"- in other words a car which is presented in historically accurate form or to the correct period specifications. If a race or rally car has had the chassis and many of the body panels replaced because of accidents, and all the



major mechanical components rebuilt or replaced because of wear, then it is no longer original, though it may still have the same serial number and license plate. It may be fair to say the car has a continuous history or good provenance, and that it is rebuilt rather than restored, but it is not "original" in the sense of retaining most of the original components.

Moving on 30 years or so we find that historic races and rallies have become popular and cars from the 1960s are now being used competitively again, prepared to the rules that were in effect when they were

originally homologated. This creates a market for reproductions of original works parts and for TR4s, for example, brand new alloy body panels, 18 gallon gas tanks, and other items can now be purchased brand new. Many enthusiasts purchase these items for their own cars, and even paint them the same powder blue as the works cars to make replicas.

The identities and histories of the actual four TR4s that competed as the Triumph rally team from 1962-1965 are quite difficult to trace and have been the topic of lively discussion.

### 4VC

One of them, 4VC, stayed in England and has a continuous ownership history. It was sold to Gordon Birtwistle, a Triumph employee initially. Ian Cornish then purchased the car from Birtwistle in 1969, unaware at the time of its history. He used 4VC as a daily driver for some years, having the engine, gearbox and back axle as well as some body panels replaced. In the 1990s the car was rebuilt by Revington TR - an article in Classic Car magazine stated "Neil carried out a lengthy rebuild on what was little more than a pile of rust". It is perhaps a "recreation" more than a restoration, and has had its commission number plate replaced, but this car likely has the best claim to being of historical significance. It is well known to members of the TR Register and is used on historic rallies in England.

The other three cars that made up the team, 3VC, 5VC and 6VC had all been converted to left hand drive and exported to the United States in 1964 prior to being entered in the Canadian Shell 4000 Rally. (The conversion to left hand drive alone makes it difficult to determine the "correct" version of the cars.) These cars were registered in the US with Oregon plates; it seems likely the port of entry was in Oregon. Kas Kastner says he does not recall the circumstances, but speculated that American registration was required to establish legal ownership.

After the rally they were apparently sold

to a US Triumph dealer in New York State. Mike Rose wrote on the Friends of Triumph forum in 2002, "When I was in high school my father was a Triumph dealer. Since we were so close to Detroit (in NW Ohio) we had to drive to Detroit to Standard Triumph the importer and bring the cars back to Ohio, The building where Standard Triumph was located was several stories high and an elevator was used to bring new cars from the upper floors to street level where we took delivery after the paperwork was completed. Once, when I was wandering about the building I came across all three of the Shell 4000 rally cars backed against the wall in the rear of the building. They looked, quite honestly, like hell." Two of the three cars may have been sold on and one kept for a while, parts of it possibly being sold to individuals wanting performance parts for their own cars.

Russ Moore, a well-known Spitfire racer, added the following: "About 10 years ago there was what seemed to be a Shell TR-4 in a body/restoration shop in Syracuse NY. It had alloy panels and the fancy venting that gave it the identifying character." Pat Onions, who entered his TR4 in the 1965 Shell 4000, mentions in his book that the roll bar of his car was purchased from a Triumph dealer in Rochester. "He had bought one of the "works" prepared TR-4s that ran in the previous Shell 4000 and invited us to use anything off the car we would need." With these confirmations from primary sources we can be pretty sure of this part of the story. But there are gaps of several years when the cars were not licensed for the road and may have changed hands without documentation, so the history is untraceable.

Here is what we can piece together of the history of 3VC, 5VC and 6VC:

### 3VC

3VC was apparently sold to a Rochester area Triumph dealer and then to a dealer in Ohio, (probably Mike Rose's dad) who sold it to one of his customers. This customer apparently parted out the car, and many of the original components were sold. The

remnants were found when the dealership closed in 1980, and were purchased by the owner of a race preparation shop in New York, a Mr. Julien. He supplied the necessary parts and rebuilt them into a complete car, which he sold in 1992, apparently taking a Mini in part payment.

This car was later sold and returned to England. It has been rebuilt to original works specification by Neil Revington of Revington TR, but the fact that its commission number plate is not original casts some doubt on its authenticity. The car now belongs to a group, or trust of five individuals who share in its use, one of the five being Tony Sheach, who has competed in historic rallies with the car.

### 6VC

In an article titled "Three of a kind" in Issue #27 of Triumph World, Graham Robson, who was the manager of the Standard Triumph competition department from 1962-1965, stated that "there were only ever four cars, and no fiddles with registration numbers". But he also wrote "after the 1963 Alpine Rally, 6VC got a new bodysell and a new chassis identity". This car was also heavily damaged in the 1964 Shell rally in Canada, and was rebuilt again with another new chassis. The car was restored by Revington after being purchased in Wisconsin, but lacked the alloy body panels and longer, Vanguard boot hinges it should have had. Though this car may have the "heritage" of 6VC it is difficult to say in the normal sense of the word that it has the "identity" of 6VC! This car is owned by Neil Revington. Given the number of chassis that have carried this registration it is possible one of these will be found and built up into a car, possibly with some period works components, and its owner may claim it to be 6VC.

### 5VC

5VC was apparently retained by the Rochester dealer for his own use until about 1970 when it was sold to a friend of his named Dick Zwitzer, who continued to drive it until about 1976. It was then sold to a German

buyer in 1994 and exported to Germany. In 1998 it was purchased by the current owner Carsten Conrads, who claims that about 60-65 percent of the car is original, including the engine and Salisbury type rear axle with a 4.33 ratio differential. No less an expert than Anders Ditlev Clausager, the archivist of the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust, is on record in an article he wrote (refuting some of the points made by Graham Robson), that based on the percentage of original parts in each car, he felt that 5VC had as strong a claim to being "the real thing" as 4VC. (The Trust is the organisation which can research the original production data for cars built in Britain, and issue a certificate showing the date of manufacture and original specifications.)

Marcel Chichak from Edmonton has done a huge amount of research into the Shell 4000 rally and has built a fascinating website detailing the history of the event. Several years ago he received an email from Germany asking him if he had the registration documents on 5VC, "You

Rally cars received rough treatment throughout their lives. Photo shows BMC 1100s being muscled through a muddy field



know, the ones with the commission number?" Alertly, he invited the sender of the email to provide the commission number of his car so Marcel could check it for him. Though there was further communication this information was not provided.

It seems that having rebuilt three of the cars, Neil Revington is now acknowledged as the foremost expert on these cars. This enhances the credibility of the cars restored by him, and now based in the UK.

We can only hope that Triumphs will not reach the value levels that have caused so much attempted fraud in the Shelby Cobra and Ferrari markets! **RAGTOP**

Sources:

- Forum of the TR Register, U.K.*
- Friends of Triumph Forum.*
- Revington TR website.*
- Shell 4000 Rally website- Marcel Chichak*
- Photo collection of Jason Chinn.*

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