

historically speaking

Reliable Standards

From Bicycle to Acclaim

BY TERENCE MCKILLEN

It seems nowadays that in reading any corporate presentation material, one is invariably met with an up-front disclaimer of liability or a warning, usually in small print, that the document contains certain forward-looking information which involves known and unknown risks and uncertainties. Consequently, the reader is warned that the following account should not be mistaken for a scholarly or definitive history of the Standard and Triumph marques. It is merely a recounting of personal recollections and a commentary on some of the cars produced by both the Triumph and Standard companies during the lifetime of the author. At a different time and place, the author has experienced the joys of driving several Standard and Triumph models including the Standard 10, Triumph Herald (949 cc and 1296 cc variants), Triumph Vitesse convertible, Triumph Dolomite, Triumph 2000 Mk II, TR6 and the final production model, a 1984 Triumph Acclaim, as well as being the proud owner of a Triumph bicycle in the 1950s!

The Standard Motor Company and the Triumph Motor Co. Ltd. had been in business some 43 years and 61 years respectively when they finally merged in 1946, the year in which your scribe was born. It was an auspicious year, not only because of these two events, but also for the British car industry in general as factories began to make the transition from war time to civilian production. During the war years, Standard had converted to production of de Havilland Mosquito aircraft and making fuselages for the Bristol Beaufighter while Triumph made motorcycles for the Allied armies.

The Standard Motor Company had its beginnings in 1903 when Reginald Maud-

slay set up shop in Coventry in the British Midlands. In pre-war Britain, Standard was among the top selling car manufacturers and had been founded on Maudslay's desire to produce a car "composed purely of those components whose principles have been tried and tested and accepted as reliable standards" and went on to say that he would "name [my] car the Standard car."

The Triumph marque had its origins dating from 1885 when Siegfried Bettmann began importing bicycles and sewing machines from Europe and selling them under the Triumph name. A factory was opened in Coventry in 1888 and by 1902 a motorcycle division was added. In the early 1920's, the Triumph Cycle Company began to build cars based on licensed designs from other companies, but in 1923 the first Triumph model, the 10/20, was introduced and had the distinction of being the first British production car fitted with hydraulic brakes. By 1930, the company name was changed to Triumph Motor Company and in 1936, the cycle and motorcycle division was sold.

The two marques later became part of Leyland Motors Ltd. which subsequently became British Leyland Motor Corporation. BMW acquired the Standard and Triumph brands following its purchase of BL's successor, Rover Group, in 1994. Subsequently, British Motor Heritage Ltd. acquired the rights

The 1946 all-aluminium bodied Triumph Roadster was powered by an 1800 cc engine, surplus to Jaguar requirements

to the Standard brand in 2001.

In late 1944, the remnants of the Triumph Motor Company and the Triumph trade-mark were bought by Standard for £75,000 and the company renamed as The Triumph Motor Company (1945) Ltd. Triumph production was transferred to Standard's factory at Canley, on the outskirts of Coventry in 1946.

After the war, the fortunes of The Standard Motor Company never regained the pinnacles of success achieved during the mid-1930s. Despite the efforts of John Black and his long-time deputy, Alick Dick, the company failed to tackle the innate problems created by poor management and falling productivity. On the Triumph side of the ledger, the pre-war models were not revived and, during 1946, a new range of models was introduced starting with the Triumph Roadster. Because of post-war steel shortages, aluminium was used for body panels and the cars were powered by surplus engines being manufactured for Jaguar.

The short-lived Triumph

Mayflower was introduced at the 1949 Earls Court Motor Show making an instant appeal to those in search of comfort, full equipment, and a very distinctive knife-edged styling. The radical design and name with its Founding Fathers connotation, was a bold but ultimately futile attempt to appeal to the US market where John Black apparently thought it could be presented as a mini Rolls Royce. To my eye, its styling is still somewhat reminiscent of the present day London taxi-cab.

A one-model policy for the Standard marque alongside the range of new Triumphs was adopted during 1948 with the introduction of the 2 litre Standard Vanguard, which had a clear American influence on its styling (not dis-



The "knife edge" styling on the Mayflower was expected to appeal to American buyers



The Standard Vanguard with American influenced body styling (1950s) was a common sight on Irish roads in the 1950s and 60s

similar to the immediate post-war Fords and Studebakers) and replaced all the carry-over pre-war models. The Vanguard was actually the first true post-war design from any of the British car manufacturers. Later models included the Phase 2 released in 1953 and in 1955, the all-new Phase 3 was introduced which resulted in variants such as the Sportsman, Ensign, Vanguard Vignale and Vanguard Six. I have a recollection, though unverified, that the Vanguard was used as a patrol car by the Irish police force or Garda Síochána, in the mid-1950s.

In the early 1950s a decision was made to apply the Standard name to saloon models and the Triumph name to sports car offerings. Standard's one-model policy changed in 1953 when a new small car, the Standard Eight, was added and promoted as the cheapest four door saloon available on the UK market, yet it boasted independent front suspension, hydraulic brakes and an O.H.V. engine. During 1954 the



A 1955 Standard 10 – a similar model belonging to an aunt was the first and only Standard model driven by the author as a teenager

Eight was joined by the more powerful Standard Ten, the first and only Standard model, belonging to a maiden aunt, that I had the opportunity to drive.

The Phase 2 Vanguard was powered by a 2,088cc 4-cylinder engine rated at 68 HP. The output could be raised up to 90 HP through a modification of the intake system and the addition of two carburetors. Standard Motors at the time supplied many of these engines to Ferguson Tractors for distribution in the United States and the motor became the precursor of the four cylinder engines used in the early TRs and ultimately the six cylinder variety used in the TR5/250s, TR6s and 2000s.

A two-seater sports car was introduced at the London Motor Show in 1952 based on a modified Standard 8 or Standard 9 chassis, Mayflower front suspension, and powered by a Vanguard wet liner engine (1,991 cc), with a Roadster gearbox and twin SU carburetors. Its serious lack of luggage space, however, resulted in production being delayed until the following year when the tail was restyled to incorporate a gener-



Originally designed as a Standard model, the TR2 entered production in 1953 as a Triumph



The Michelotti-styled Triumph Herald, first introduced in 1959 was the successor of the Standard 10

ous boot and the chassis stiffened. That production car was badged as a Triumph and the TR2 became an immediate success.

Following Standard's acquisition of Triumph, Harry Webster's design and chassis engineering abilities helped the revival of the Triumph marque through the 1950s. By the end of the decade, however, the small Standards were losing out in the UK home market to more innovative competitor designs, and the decision was made to continue only with the Triumph brand. Consequently, the 1959 replacement for the Standard Eight, Ten and Pennant was introduced as the Triumph Herald, but with substantial mechanical components still carried over from the small Standards.

The Herald's rack and pinion steering was light and manoeuvrable, affording a tight turning circle. Coil and double-wishbone front suspension was fitted, while the rear suspension, a new departure for Triumph, offered independent springing via a solidly mounted single transverse leaf-spring bolted to the top of the final drive unit and swing axles which was horribly prone to wheel tuck-under, reportedly as much as 20 degrees, that made for sudden, usually alarming, oversteer, a problem also known to Spitfire owners. I have a vivid memory of being on a geology field trip in Connemara, in the west of Ireland, watching a fully loaded Triumph Herald Estate dealing with the very bumpy roads. The car became airborne going over the crest of a bridge and I could swear that the rear wheels momentarily touched each other before splaying out almost to

the inner edges of the rims when the car hit the road again, not unlike our Irish Setter skating over hardwood floors, legs going in all directions! I was following in a Lotus 7 which was not exactly suited to those road conditions either, but for different reasons.

Webster continued work on the design of the Triumph TR series roadsters and brought in Italian stylist Giovanni Michelotti, to work with him on many of the Triumph models including the TR4/4A, TR5/250, Herald, Vitesse, 1300, Dolomite, Spitfire, 2000, and Stag. The TR6 body style, although based on Michelotti's TR5/250, was actually a Karmann-modified design. In 1967, Webster became chief executive engineer at Leyland Motors where he succeeded the renowned Sir Alec Issigonis as BLMC's technical director.

Problems with the early fuel injection systems in some export markets resulted in undeserved criticisms of unreliability of Triumph products although poor quality control was also an issue. The injection system lacked the ability to compensate for the mixture adjustment at altitudes greater than 1,000 meters. One of the reasons advanced for the Lucas system's unpopularity was a lack of follow up in research and development and, apparently, the unwillingness of Standard-Triumph dealers to attend training courses for the maintenance of the equipment.



The Triumph 2000 introduced the author to automatic transmission in the early 1970s



The TR7 was the only all new Triumph introduced under Rover-Triumph

Standard-Triumph was eventually acquired by Leyland Motors in December 1960, catching industry watchers off guard as Leyland were better known for building commercial vehicles, an observation not lost on the Guardian newspaper when it announced "A surprising merger between Standard-Triumph International and Leyland Motors was proposed by both companies." The all-share offer by Leyland was worth £20 million. The Triumph or Rover Triumph BL subsidiary used the former Standard engineering and production facilities at Canley until it was closed in 1980.

Although the Standard brand finally ended in 1970, the last Standard car, an Ensign Deluxe, was produced in May 1963, but the name lived on for a further 24 years on models manufactured in India. At the same time, the final Vanguard models were replaced in the product line by the new Triumph 2000 models. I recall the 2000 Mk II, introduced in 1969, as a very comfortable family saloon which provided me with an early introduction to automatic transmissions which weren't a commonly available option in British cars of that era. The front end of the Mk II followed the lines of the well established Triumph Stag. As the last big Triumph car, production of the 2000 ceased in 1977, when it was supplanted by British Leyland's then corporate executive car, the Rover SD1, some models of which continued to use engines derived from the Triumph 2000.

For most of its time under the ownership of Leyland or BL, the Triumph marque resided with the Specialist Division which went under the names of Rover-Triumph and later

Jaguar-Rover-Triumph, other than for a brief period during the mid 1970s, when all the BL car marques were grouped together under Leyland Cars.

The only all-new Triumph model introduced as a Rover Triumph was the TR7, which was manufactured at three different factories, each of which ended up being closed. The first was at Speke, the strike-prone Leyland-era Standard-Triumph works in Liverpool, then the original Standard works at Canley and finally the Rover works in Solihull.

Plans for an extended range of models based on the TR7, including a fastback variant with the product name "Lynx", were ended when the Speke factory closed. The four-cylinder TR7 and its short-lived, Rover-engined, eight-cylinder derivative, the TR8, were terminated when the road car section at the Solihull plant was closed in October 1981, although at just over 115,000 units, the TR7/8 outsold all other Triumph models.

The last Triumph model was the Acclaim, introduced in 1981 for a three year production run, which I had the opportunity to drive on several visits back home to Ireland, courtesy of my father who had a long-standing, but almost equally divided loyalty to the Triumph marque as well as to the Roots Group (Humber, Hillman, Singer, Sunbeam etc.). Although I suspect deep down, he was actually a Jaguar aficionado.

The Acclaim was essentially a rebadged Honda Ballade-Civic built under licence by Triumph at the former Morris Motor Company factory in Cowley, Oxford.

The Triumph name was not used after 1984, when the Acclaim was replaced by the Rover 200, a rebadged version of Honda's next-generation Civic model.

At its peak, BL (or BLMC) owned nearly 40 different manufacturing plants across the UK and operated some 10 brands including the vast majority of the well-



The Triumph Acclaim based on the Honda Ballade/Civic was introduced in 1981 - the last model in the historic Triumph line

known British motor trade names, some dating back to the very start of car manufacturing. Such brands included Austin, Morris, Riley, Wolseley, MG, Jaguar, Daimler, Rover and of course, Standard and Triumph. British Leyland was intended to be a conglomerate to rival General Motors in the worldwide market and at the time, was viewed as the only way for the British motor industry to remain competitive. Rivalry between the individual marques, which had previously been competitors prior to the merger, resulted in a product range that was full of duplication and inconsistencies. BL eventually became unmanageable and financially crippled and inevitably entered bankruptcy.

The demise of British Leyland and its successor, the Rover Group, together with the famed Triumph marque, mirrored that of many other once famous British industrial institutions and fell victim to a number of cumulative causes including serious undercapitalisation, failure to grasp innovative changes being made in car design and engineering, production over-capacity, increasing foreign competition in the UK market, poor reputation for quality, pompous and ineffectual management on the one side and hard-line, socialist-leaning, self-destructive and politi-

cally motivated trade unions on the other side.

Over the 38 year span of the Standard-Triumph marques during my lifetime, my fondest memories are of driving my father's Triumph 2000 Mk II during the early to mid-1970s but as a 17 year old, I really enjoyed a few days of top-down driving in a Triumph Vitesse around the Wicklow Hills while dreaming of one day owning a TR roadster.

I was recently able to satisfy that long-held dream with the acquisition of a 1973 TR6, although I have to admit that the Stag remains my all-time favourite Triumph model and ensures my continuing interest in the BBC television series New Tricks, currently showing on PBS, where detective Gerry Standing, played by Denis Waterman, owns a green, 1977 Triumph Stag roadster.

The fact that the TR6 and the Stag can still hold their own against many current car designs as well as being reliable drivers 38 years later, is a testimony to Webster's brilliant engineering and the timelessness of the Karmann and Michelotti designs, and I suppose, to those misguided and possibly maligned, British trade unionists of the 1970s - a Triumph of Reliable Standards indeed! **RAGTOP**



The author's 1973 TR6 Roadster