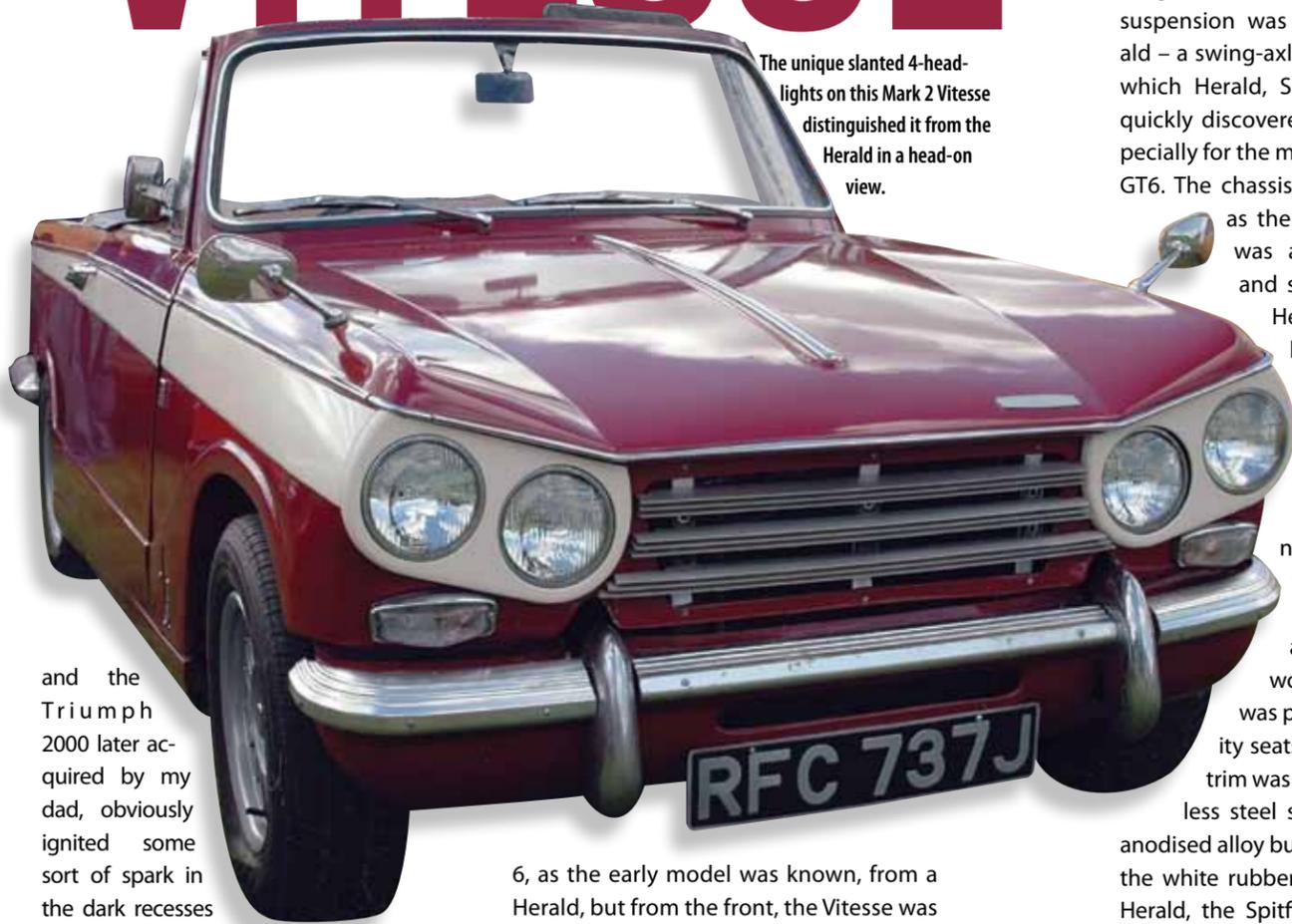


TRIUMPH VITESSE

by Terence McKillen

The Vitesse celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2012 and had a nine year production run from 1962 to 1971. It was another spectacular design success by Giovanni Michelotti who raided the existing parts bins at Triumph's Coventry plant to create essentially a new model out of thin air. The Vitesse was conceived as a sportier, roomier and smoother Triumph Herald and was produced in saloon and convertible variants. The Vitesse was equipped with an in-line six-cylinder engine which started life as a 1.6 litre displacement growing to 2 litres in the 1966 and later models, giving it a considerable edge over the rather mediocre powered Herald. The in-line six was similar to the power plants later used in the contemporary GT6 and Triumph 2000 models and which went on to evolve in to the 2.5 litre motor used in the TR6.

As a 17 year old in the summer of 1963, I could hardly believe my good fortune when I was offered the keys by a family friend to her brand new Vitesse convertible for a week during the school holidays. There was only one catch; I had to show her 16 year old nephew, on a visit from the United States, something of the Irish countryside and life style. Well, we took that car on every twisty back road we could find in the Wicklow Mountains and we drove up the Enniskerry hillclimb circuit so many times we could likely have done it blindfolded! Although the term 'chick magnet' hadn't yet been coined, the convertible Vitesse certainly worked its charms whenever we pulled up at a corner store, coffee house or whatever passed as a teenage haunt in those days. It was a sad day when I had to return the keys and revert to my regular daily transportation – a Honda 50! That Vitesse,



The unique slanted 4-headlights on this Mark 2 Vitesse distinguished it from the Herald in a head-on view.

and the Triumph 2000 later acquired by my dad, obviously ignited some sort of spark in the dark recesses of my psyche for things Triumph which has only recently been fulfilled, fifty years later, through ownership of a TR6 and earlier this year through the addition of a Triumph Stag.

The Vitesse name had previously been used by Triumph on a car made in the immediate pre WWII years (1936-38). However, by the early 1960s, thought was being given to a sports saloon based on the successful Herald, but using an existing 6-cylinder engine from the Standard side of the business. Michelotti devised a design that used almost all the body panels from the Herald. From the rear, it was almost impossible to distinguish a Vitesse

6, as the early model was known, from a Herald, but from the front, the Vitesse was quite distinctive as it had been given a re-worked bonnet/hood that was flatter and which sloped up at the sides, together with a distinctive slanted 4-headlamp design. The initial engine was a 1596 cc version of Standard-Triumph's traditional straight-6 derived from the engine used in the Standard Vanguard Six, but with a smaller bore diameter of 66.75 mm (2.628 in), compared with the 74.7 mm (2.94 in) bore on the Vanguard. It was aspirated through twin Solex B32PIH semi-down-draught carburettors, later replaced by B321H carburettors. The Herald gearbox was strengthened and offered with optional Laycock De Normanville 'D-type'

overdrive. The rear axle was changed to an uprated differential. Front disc brakes were standard as were larger rear brake drums, and the Herald fuel tank was enlarged. The front suspension featured uprated springs to cope with the extra weight of the new engine, but the rear suspension was basically standard Herald – a swing-axle, transverse-leaf system which Herald, Spitfire and GT6 owners quickly discovered to be inadequate, especially for the more powerful Vitesse and GT6. The chassis was basically the same as the Herald, and the Vitesse was available in convertible and saloon forms. Unlike the Herald, a coupé never got beyond the prototype stage and only a handful of Vitesse estates were assembled to special order.

The interior was significantly improved over the Herald models with wooden door cappings added to match the wooden dashboard and it was provided with better quality seats and door trims. Exterior trim was also improved with stainless steel side trim and satin-silver anodised alloy bumper cappings replacing the white rubber Herald design. Like the Herald, the Spitfire and GT6, the Vitesse was designed with a large forward hinging bonnet which included the wheel arches, providing full access to the engine and front suspension.

In mid-1963, just over a year after the car's launch, the Vitesse received a modest facelift when the dashboard received a full range of instrumentation instead of the large single dial, and from September 1965, the twin Solex carburettors were replaced by twin Stromberg CD 150s. Power output increased from the original 70 bhp (52 kW) at 5,000 rpm to 85 bhp, enough to provide a useful performance boost and making the car a much more flexible performer. Contemporary motor road tests indicated

a top speed of 91 mph (146 km/h), with the 0 - 80 mph (0 - 130 km/h) time decreasing from 46.6 seconds to 33.6 seconds.

The Vitesse 6 sold extremely well for Triumph, and was the most popular Vitesse variant sold during the model's lifetime with 31,261 units produced over its four year production run (22,814 saloon models). The car was favourably received for its performance as well as its fuel economy, and the interior was well-appointed. The Vitesse had few rivals in its price range and it was able to perform as well as many sports cars of the day, but had the advantage of being a four-seat family car. The convertible, in particular, was virtually unique in the marketplace and it wasn't until the advent of the Stag in 1970, that another 4-seater sporting convertible became available.

The Vitesse 6 convertible was exported to the U.S. in LHD format as the Triumph Sports 6, from 1962 until 1964. It was marketed as a "limited edition car", but had very "limited" success with only 679 being sold before Triumph called it a day and focussed on its two-seat roadster models. Although the Sports 6 was better suited to American highways than the Herald, it faced competition from local cars such as the new Ford Mustang convertible, particularly in regard to pricing and general panache. The Vitesse was also offered in Canada in Vitesse 6 and Sports 6 formats, but sales volumes are not readily available.

In 1966, Triumph upgraded the engine to 1998 cc, in line with the new GT6 coupé, and relaunched the car as the Vitesse 2-Litre. Over the two-year production run, 10,830 units were produced (7,328 saloons). Power was increased to 95 bhp (71 kW). In addition to detail modifications, a stronger all synchromesh gearbox and uprated brakes and an improved, stronger differential were added. The performance increase highlighted the excessive understeer deficiency of the original rear suspension, which wouldn't be corrected until the launch of the Vitesse Mk 2 in 1968.

The Mark 2 was the final update to the Vitesse range. Essentially intended to be Triumph's answer to growing criticism of the

rear suspension, the Mark 2 was fitted with a completely redesigned layout using Roto-flex rear couplings. This system, also shared with the new GT6 MkII and the early GT6 MkIIIs, (GT6+ in the US market), tamed the wayward handling somewhat and gave the Vitesse a firmer, progressive road holding.

Other improvements included tweaking the engine to provide 104 bhp (78 kW), cutting the 0 - 60 mph time to just over 11 seconds and providing a top speed over 100 mph (160 km/h). The main changes were to the valve timing, to give earlier opening of the inlet valves compared with the earlier 2 litre engine through a re-profiled camshaft and the use of the cylinder head from the TR5 allowed for increased inlet valve diameters and better porting. The exterior featured a new grille, wheel trims and rear panel and the interior was upgraded once more in order to share parts with the newly revised Herald 13/60. Additional colours were offered for the Mark 2 models. 9,121 cars were produced over the final three year production run (5,649 saloons).

Although it took six years to finally achieve the necessary refinement of the original design, the Mk2 was the ultimate Vitesse variant, a saloon or convertible with performance superior to that of its contemporary MGB, Sunbeam Alpine or TR4 roadster models, but with four proper seats and a good sized boot/trunk. Over the nine year production cycle, the Vitesse sold 51,212 units of which 15,421 (30%) were convertibles, until it was withdrawn in July 1971, even though sales in the U.K. were still respectable and the Dolomite and Dolomite Sprint replacement models were still respectively 12 to 24 months away from showrooms. All-in-all, not a bad little Triumph to add to one's collection! **RAGTOP**

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