hadn't had so much sheer fun in years.

Autocar: "The first real blood and guts sports car to come from this side of the Channel in ages". The ride was generally perceived as firm but not harsh. Criticisms included pitching over the top of crests in the road, and a tendency to bash the exhausts on the deck during heavy landings. However, the TVR absolutely begged to be given a real caning, so quite a lot of the road testing it got was probably fifty miles an hour faster than anything else that was under test. The Press were unanimous in thoroughly enjoying playing with TVRs, and this comes through almost unconsciously in the sort of language they used. The engine would be described as "exploding into life" rather than merely "starting up". Also notable among the Press reviews generally was a tendency to compare the TVR with such cars as the Porsche 911 Turbo and the Ferrari Boxer, and to report with a certain amount of glee that the TVR was both faster and a hell of a lot cheaper than either of them. The 390SE had exhausts that sounded like Matabele war drums, apparently, and the same reviewer said that to describe the TVR engine as "torquey" was like describing Goliath as "tall". The bonnet shut lines were a bit rough, but the overall finish - even under the spoiler – was good. The particular car then under test was brand new, but the red sticker on the speedo limiting the permissible revs to 4000 still left 90 mph to play with. The compression ratio led to pinking if anything less than the best quality petrol was used, and despite very sticky Yokohamas and the £5400 Torsen differential option, the writer still thoroughly enjoyed his "Banzai" oversteer slides in the wet.

There was, however, a genuine problem approaching with the rear end. The big metalastik bushes that secured the trailing arms were fine with the V6 or with a standard Rover engine, but if you upped the power significantly and then gave the car some real stick, the bushes would distort and you would get some rather unwelcome additional steering from the rear end. The introduction in 1895 of a triangulated four point wishbone, combined with torque reaction arms, stabilised the rear end and solved the problem.

Some companies at this point might have said, okay, 150 mph is fast enough: but not TVR. Suppose we bored it out a bit more and tuned it up just a bit further, they wondered, and started playing with the engine again. They bored it out to 4258cc, installed a new long-throw, tuftrided steel crank, Cosworth pistons, a wild cam, stronger valve springs and solid tappets, then turned to the injection system and made everything bigger. Bigger air flow meter, bigger injectors, bigger plenum chamber. The sump got bigger as well, and a high pressure oil system was fitted, with a dry sump as an option. The result was 300 BHP at 5500 revs, with 290 ft/lb of torque at 4500 rpm. With the rear end at 3.06:1, giving 30.86 mph per thousand revs, the 0-60 time was 5 seconds, and the top speed was 165 miles an hour.

The bodywork in the meantime had come in for some fairly radical rethinking in order to be able to cope with the very high speeds of which the car was now capable. The front became shorter and stubbier, and the dam was blended into a generally more rounded and more slippery body. The arches flared out to cover the bigger 8½" wheels, and a plexiglass panel covered the front number plate and lights.

The rear apron was bonded in, and the bootlid sported a whale tail big enough to serve as a helicopter landing platform. It wasn't the most gorgeous item ever sported by a TVR, but it worked. The Bilstein gas shocks were now adjustable, and the suspension was partly rose-jointed. The front crossmember tubes were beefed up a little, and the tyres were now Bridgestones. The interior had been redesigned to use the space better and to allow bigger, grippier seats. The dashboard now began to get away from the squarish functionality of the earlier TVRs, and showed a hint of the increasingly radical and organic shapes that would come later.

The 420 SEAC at £29,500 continued the rise of TVR into the supercar

The development plug for what was to be the 420 body shape. Serious muscle and curves, a more waisted body shape and a softer and more aerodynamic front end.

420 SEAC Convertible. Now an extremely fast car, with over four litres of tuned V8 and a lightweight composite body. The whale tail spoiler shows Porsche how the big boys do it.

bracket. SEAC stood for Special Equipment Aramid Composite, and this meant that the GRP body was largely constructed with carbon fibre and Kevlar materials, which resulted in a weight saving of 300 lbs. The racing version of the 420SEAC produced 364 BHP. and was apparently an absolute animal. One driver said it felt like being a frightened mahout on top of a runaway bull elephant. However, animal or not, it was extremely fast, and it wasn't really fair to the rest of the field to enter it in production class racing. In its final 450SEAC form, it was even faster. The car only had time to break five lap records before it was banned.

Even though the company was now doing rather well, there was no money wasted; when TVR needed a race transporter, they simply painted "TVR RACING" in huge letters on the side of the truck they normally used to deliver export cars to the docks, and made sure it was left empty on Friday nights so it could be used for transporting racing cars at the weekends.

Top right: The interior of a left hand drive export 420 SEAC. Just because it was virtually a road/racing car didn't mean it couldn't have the full walnut and hide treatment inside. Below: The 450 SE didn't have a composite body, but it did have the engine bored out to 4500cc instead. The wild spoilers are there for a serious purpose rather than for looks.

The sort of people who were buying TVRs now included those who were used to spending serious money on their toys; a good example is a chap who had gone through Lotus Elans, Esprits and Excels before deciding that Lotuses, or Loti, were no fun any more, and changing over to TVR. He started with a Tasmin, and graduated through a 350 and a 390 to a 450SE.

The 450SE had a power to weight ratio of 309 BHP per ton, and its 0-60 figure was 4.7 seconds. Top speed was 160 mph, and the 0-100-time was 21.8 seconds. More fun than an entire car park full of Lotuses, and practical too. Even in this format, the TVR would pull from 15 mph in top gear. At this point someone in the company realised that they'd omitted for some years to observe an age-old TVR tradition, so the instruments were duly changed to VDO.

Gerry Marshall was invited to compare an earlier maniac TVR with the current ones, and put a 420SEAC up against a 1967 Tuscan with a 4.7 litre hi-po Ford V8, a T10 toploader gearbox and a Salisbury rear end. He found that the essential character of the cars was pretty similar; they both had short chassis and minimal overhang, and they both had similar power. The main difference was that the 420SEAC had some brakes, whereas the Tuscan had Triumph Herald front uprights with saucer-sized Triumph TR4 discs.

In effect, this meant that after the first corner on a racetrack, the Tuscans had no brakes at all, and Marshall dealt with this while racing TVRs in the Sixties by simply turning the cars sideways when he wanted to slow them down. As far as he was concerned, both cars could still be chucked sideways, with a smooth transition from neutral to power oversteer. Both of them still bump-steered, and both of them still had tremendous traction out of corners. Most importantly, Gerry Marshall had the same amount of pure fun playing with a TVR on a track twenty years on, and if that weren't proof enough, he could be seen elbowing his way to the front of the queue as soon as the next generation Tuscan racing series was announced.

Above: It was a little ungentlemanly to unleash this monster amongst the sports racers, as it wiped the floor with them until it was banned. Left: A Tuscan racer in fairly lurid livery. Quite apt, really. Below: Colin Blower's successful Tasmin convertible racer, sponsored by Indestructible Socks.