

Triumph Stag – A classic comes good

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Julian Leyton reflects on four decades of knowledge and experience of these fascinating grand tourers...



[Julian Leyton at the wheel of his own much-loved Stag.](#)

For my sins I had the, perhaps dubious, pleasure of working in all three divisions of one of the largest British Leyland dealer groups throughout most of the 70s, meaning that I saw Stags from Sales, Parts and, toughest of all, Service perspectives.



Launched a couple of years before I started my lifelong career in the car industry, I remember, as an avid teenage car fan, reading excitedly about the arrival of both the Triumph Stag and the Range Rover within just a couple of weeks of each other and both just a shade under £2,000. How history has treated those two cars so differently!

My first exposure to Stags was as a trainee mechanic and often involved the car's infamous overheating problems. It has been said that some of the Stag's early woes were related to workshop personnel unaccustomed to such, relatively, advanced technology. In some ways, that's true. After all, overhead camshafts were still pretty unusual back then as were, to a lesser extent, aluminium alloy heads, whilst V8 engines in relatively mainstream British cars were very rare.

However what that accusation misses is that garages were neither charged with, nor had the time, skill or resources to do, BL's development or troubleshooting work for them.

Accordingly, when a Stag came in with overheating that had led to a warped cylinder head (or heads), then we would simply exchange the head or heads and send the car back out, in the belief that it was purely poor quality heads that were the cause of the problem.

Often it would return some time later with similar issues and in those cases BL would usually authorise the replacement of the engine.

Other than advise to use of the correct coolant, BL provided few, if any, guidelines to overcome the Stag's overheating issues and relatively few changes were made in the model's life to effectively deal with the problems.

Bringing things up to date, it is not altogether unsurprising today to hear of Stag owners with engine numbers that have an 'ESS' suffix – that was utilised solely on exchange units.



The V8 engine used in the Stag was unique to the model. Diligent, sympathetic attention is key to reliable operation.

At the sharp end...

Back in the 1970s, on being 'promoted' from the shop floor to reception, I discovered what being at the sharp end really meant.

Stag owners were, understandably, annoyed that one of the most expensive BL cars made was giving them problems, often repeatedly, and BL was represented by just one person – the poor receptionist.



That was one thing within the warranty period, yet a completely different matter once it had run out – then, they had to pay!

As we had had so many difficult situations, I recollect our service manager instructing us that, whenever a Stag owner brought in a car with signs of overheating, we should forewarn them that the repair might be in excess of £1000. That wasn't easy to say, however it did take a little of the sting out of the situation upon collection of the vehicle by the customer.

However, despite being the largest Rover Triumph dealer in South Wales we did have a not insignificant number of Stag owners who had few problems and who loved their cars. To be fair, and perhaps contrary to common misconception, we didn't see a vast number of Stags in our workshops, although that may have had more to do with the poor sales history rather than their reliability.

Today, all of the Stag's former woes can be resolved and the car can be seen for the great vehicle that it always promised to be. If only BL had been able to apply themselves fully to dealing with the problems back then – even now there are Stag owners who are finding significant quantities of casting sand still left inside their engines – that shouldn't have been too hard for BL to diagnose back then.

I own one...

Today I have my own Triumph Stag, that I have used for six years on continental and other long trips, and which I enjoy immensely. Not once, in over 20,000 miles, has it failed to get me to my destination and I firmly believe that the Stag can be as reliable as any other similar classic car.

I have just a couple of upgrades to my vehicle, that I would recommend to others for ultimate reliability, and these include a high level header tank with a coolant level sensor and electronic ignition. That apart, mechanically, my car is pretty much as it left Canley nearly 40 years ago.



Given 'sympathetic' maintenance, which requires time and patience, but which can be carried out at home, a Stag can be a thoroughly enjoyable and rewarding classic to own and drive. Indeed, utilising the hardtop really does make the car feel different in so many ways - it virtually gives you two classics in one!

Julian Leyton

There's more... To read more about the Triumph Stag and the crucial involvement of Giovanni Michelotti in its elegant styling (also that of other Standard-Triumph models), please click [HERE](#).



Hood up (or with hard top fitted; please see below)... The Stag is a snug, elegant and refined grand tourer. This is Julian Leyton's very tidy example.



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Top down... The Stag becomes a fine classic in which to enjoy comfortable open-top motoring.



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With hardtop fitted, a Stag still looks the part but truly becomes an 'all weather' classic.