

TRIUMPH STAG

The adaptable drophead that made its own niche market makes a great classic, as **Malcolm McKay** explains on its 40th birthday

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**



The Stag is a great-looking, great-sounding car that can be picked up for reasonable prices and that most owners adore. Yet many people wouldn't touch them with a bargepole due to their poor reputation.

Some swear by Rover V8 conversions, others claim that the Stag engine's problems are over.

So let's cut to the chase. If you buy a Stag whose engine has been neglected, it will probably bite you, so be prepared to spend to put it right. Buy one with a properly rebuilt V8 and look after it, and it will not let you down. It's not rocket science: replace the timing chains every 30,000 miles and make sure the engine and radiator do not silt up, keep the water circulating and it will be reliable and a joy to own. The engine is not fundamentally flawed. Its water circulation wasn't the best design, the water pump was poor and low-grade aluminium alloy was used for the heads, but it was fine provided sufficient corrosion-inhibited antifreeze was used at all times, the cooling system was overhauled regularly and the timing chains were replaced when specified.

The Stag would never have been built had it not been for Giovanni Michelotti and Harry

Webster. Stylist Michelotti built it from a 2000 saloon as a show car. Webster liked it so much that he persuaded the Triumph board to build it, and to fit the overhead-cam V8 that was planned as part of the slant-four engine design already seen in the Saab 99 and later the Dolomite and TR7.

Sadly Leyland's acquisition of Rover in 1967 put Triumph alongside another marque heavily promoting a V8, as a result of which the Stag engine was never used in another car and not developed. Despite its small numbers, however, parts and specialist back-up are excellent and prices fair.

Stags bracket the UK Vehicle Excise Duty exemption date: the last free-tax car is LD21086. Early cars have long been bargains: they're built from better steel and last much longer, but rust can be a big issue on all ill-treated examples.

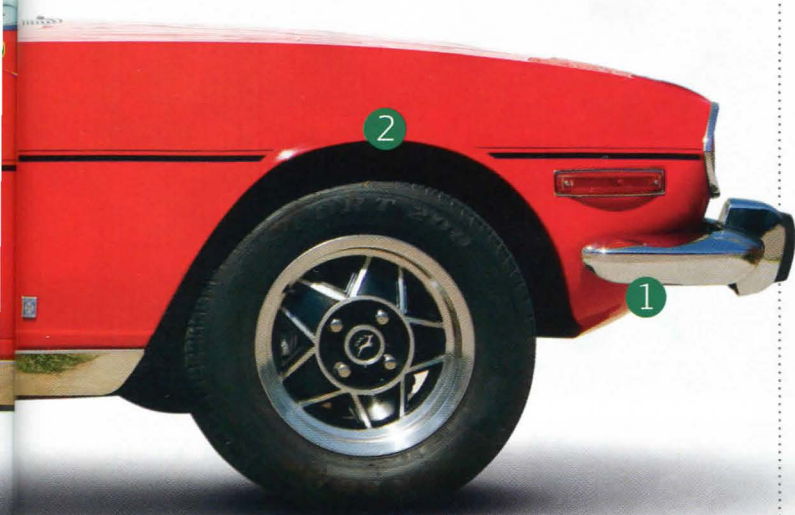
Most cars were sold with hard- and soft-tops, but some only had one or the other. If buying one with the hard-top on, take it off and check there really is a hood in the well and that it works as it should. Almost all manual cars had overdrive; they're undergeared on the motorway without it, as were the popular Borg Warner autos.



Ads always put car in exotic locations



Racer of Tony Hart, who set up Stag Owners Club in 1975



Rot spots

- 1 Valance and lip panels above; lower rad support
- 2 Front wing, especially arch and front/rear corners
- 3 Lower corners of 'screen pillars and top of A-post
- 4 Sills, inner and outer
- 5 Footwells over 'chassis' legs
- 6 Door skins and shells, particularly lower edges
- 7 Rear strut tops (view in hood well), under rear seat
- 8 Wings: wheelarches, lower corners and top deck seam
- 9 Boot floor and rear valance
- 10 Bootlid back edge



Wayward rear set-up may be caused by worn trailing-arm bushes, which should show a gap between bush and cover plate. Probe for rust here, too



Electrolytic corrosion can rot through rear mounting/axle casing. Driveshaft splines lock up without lubrication, which could throw you off the road



A correctly rebuilt and serviced V8 is a delight, but many aren't. Check history, use of antifreeze with corrosion inhibitor, timing-chain replacement (every 30k miles is safe) and signs of leaks, overheating or poor maintenance. A neglected engine will probably need a costly rebuild; well looked-after, they'll do 150,000+



Corrosion in the aluminium cylinder heads silts up them and the radiator in no time. The radiator should be replaced or re-cored every 10 years



Vinyl seats are comfy, durable and not too costly to rebuild; early cars had smooth trim. If they're uncomfortable, you need to replace rubbers and foam



Most were sold with hard- and soft-tops. Look for rust around edges and check it matches. Removal or fitting is a two-man job without a hoist



The soft-top should be a good fit and seal effectively, but many don't. Look for distorted/broken frame, splits in the hood and ineffective catches



Stag came in vivid colours; many early cars have been fitted with later alloys

On the road

Raise the hood or fit the hard-top before going for a drive, to see how well they seal and to make noises easier to hear. Go on a long drive, extend the engine without going silly and then let it idle for a good few minutes. Watch the temperature gauge like a hawk. Once it's cooled down, look for signs of oil in the water or water in the oil and see if the coolant level has dropped since before the run. Overheating when stationary may just be down to a weak viscous-fan coupling, but you need to be sure it's done no more damage before you buy. Also listen for rattles and knocks that may suggest a worn bottom end, tapping from the cam covers indicating worn camshafts or rattling from the front that means new timing chains and tensioners are urgently needed.

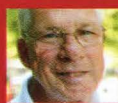
If the car is a manual, check for bearing noise – dip the clutch when ticking over in neutral; if it gets quieter the layshaft is worn – and weak synchros. A non-operating overdrive may just be a connection, relay or solenoid, but budget for a full rebuild. If it's an auto, check the oil for level and colour (black is bad). Make sure it changes smoothly and that the kickdown works.

Listen for rear-axle rumble and whine, and check for oil leaks. Driveshaft splines should show signs of lubrication; without it they can seize, causing severe handling problems. Soggy handling is likely to be down to leaking dampers, weak or broken springs and worn bushes in the front wishbones, anti-roll bar and steering rack mountings – not too costly to sort. Over-light steering means a faulty spool valve, requiring an exchange rack; it should be precise and light.



A modern four-speed auto, as here, transforms the Stag

OWNER'S VIEW Bill Fannon



Retired Jaguar development engineer Fannon has owned his Stag for 24 years and keeps it in superb order: "I bought it in '86 and rebuilt the engine the next year when I was working at Browns Lane. It's given no trouble since, but I did replace the head gaskets 12 years ago with the latest Payen type that seal around the outside; they're much better. Over the years, I've had just about every nut and bolt off and rebuilt the bodywork myself. It's a great tourer but it's not meant to be a sports car. I've replaced the Borg Warner auto with a four-speed conversion from Monarch using the ZF gearbox from the Jaguar XJ6 3.2, which gives a much nicer change and locks up in overdrive: 70mph was 4000rpm, now it's 2500!"

The knowledge

WHAT TO PAY

Show/rebuilt	£15,000
Average	£4500
Restoration	£1000

PARTS PRICES (EXAMPLES)

Front wing	£275
Rebuilt engine	£5000
Timing chain kit (top quality)	£80
Water pump (recon exch)	£77
Mohair soft-top	£340-400

ON THE WEB

www.stagbytriumph.co.uk; www.triumphstag.net; <http://stagownersclub.mywowbb.com>

CLUB

Stag Owners Club www.stag.org.uk

BOOKS

Triumph Stag Essential Buyer's Guide Veloce
Original Triumph Stag Motorbooks **Triumph Stag Complete History** Crowood

SPECIALISTS

Enginuity 020 8993 7737 **EJ Ward** 0116 279 9060 **Faversham** 01795 539163 **James Paddock** 01244 399899 **Justriumph** 01260 224743 **LDpart** 01869 220364 **Monarch** 01536 763778 **Rimmer Bros** 01522 568000 **Robsport** 01763 262263 **SOC Spares** 01580 292828 **STS** 01202 423687 **Tony Hart** 07836 202347 **Wins & Co** 01342 836060

TIMELINE

1970 Jun: Stag launched
1971 Mar: improved hood catches, bonnet release to left, larger fuel tank, engine temp warning deleted; Jul: US market launch, lower compression, 127bhp @ 6000rpm, wires, rear wing marker lights, headrests, rear lap belts; Nov: Sanction 2 cars (from LD10001), with detail changes inc separate front belt clips
1972 Jan: narrow stainless sill trim, cooling system modified; Oct: overdrive standard
1973 Feb: MkII (LD20001), changes to engine combustion chambers, overdrive and trim; matt-black sills, black badges; Jul: US MkII cars get lower CR, revised seats, alloys. Late in year, withdrawn from US market (2871 to US spec)
1975 Oct: stainless sill covers, body-coloured tail panel, alloys and tinted glass (LD40001)
1976 Oct: BW 65 auto replaces 35. Smaller rad, altered steering ratio, detail changes (LD41994)
1977 Jun: production ends (LD45722)

FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1970-'77/25,939
Construction steel monocoque
Engine front-mounted, iron-jul, alloy-head sohc/bank 2997cc V8, twin Stromberg carbs; 146bhp @ 5700rpm; 167lb ft @ 3500rpm
Transmission four-speed manual with optional overdrive on third/top or three-speed Borg Warner automatic, driving rear wheels
Suspension: front double wishbones, anti-roll bar rear semi-trailing arms; coil springs, telescopic dampers front/rear
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes discs front, drums rear, with servo
Length 14ft 6¾in (4440mm)
Width 5ft 3½in (1613mm)
Height 4ft 4¼in (1327mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 4in (2540mm)
Weight 2675/2835lb (1215/1289kg)
0-60mph 9.3/10.4 secs **Top speed** 118/112mph
Mpg 20-26 **Price new** £3599 (1974)

INSURANCE

£112 for a 30-year-old London driver with full no-claims and a clean licence on a garaged '74 Stag as a second car, agreed value £5000, 5000 ltd mileage. Lancaster: 01480 484848.

THE ALTERNATIVES



MERCEDES SL R107
 It's said that the Stag forced Mercedes to put a V8 in the SL, but it was little threat so

the 280SL returned later. The R107 SL was expensive and only a two-seater, but quality was superb. Early ones rot appallingly, however.

Sold/no built 1971-'89/300,175 **Mpg** 18-22
0-60mph 8.1 secs **Top speed** 128mph
Price new £6868 (350SL, '74) **Now** £6000+



RELIANT SCIMITAR GTC An oddball built in the '80s with '60s underpinnings; lighter than a Stag so as fast

and more rot-proof (apart from the outriggers). A well-preserved GTC is a good buy, but a poor one is unreliable, frustrating and costly to sort.

Sold/no built 1980-'86/443 **Mpg** 24-28
0-60mph 8.9 secs **Top speed** 119mph
Price new £11,360 (1980) **Now** £5000+

One to buy £11,995

Year of manufacture 1973 **Recorded mileage** 67,268 **Vendor** Epping Motor Company, Essex; tel: 01277 365415 **For** an outstanding rebuilt example; everything done **Against** wires won't suit everyone

This dazzling Guards Red car was rebuilt from a bare-metal bodyshell. Its finish is flawless bar a tiny area of bubbling at the front bottom corner of the driver's door, minor pitting in the door-handles and a missing nearside sill-trim clip. A fresh mohair hood has been fitted and the car's factory hard-top has been refurbished to match.

There's no visible rust anywhere; if you lift the carpets, the floors look and sound solid. Underneath, if anything, it's even better, with all-new front suspension parts and powered steering rack. Everything has been properly sealed.

The respray (from dark blue) included the engine bay, which complements the just-rebuilt V8. Its oil is fresh, and to level, while the coolant is clear as well, with plenty of antifreeze.

Inside, the Ambra vinyl has been replaced with leather: even on the doors and T-bar. The engine starts instantly (it has Lumenition electronic ignition) and settles to an 800rpm idle with an addictive burble from the stainless exhausts. The clutch is nicely weighted and the gearchange slick – with working overdrive – while the steering is light and precise. The free-revving V8 responds instantly, even with barely 100 miles covered. The car stops well, too. On a hot day, the temperature gauge only reached about a third of the way up and didn't budge from that. The Stag will be sold with 12 months' MoT and three months' warranty, but is not tax exempt.



Wires new, as are bumpers; plenty of life in 185/70x14s



New carpets and full leather retrim; dash in good nick, too



Freshly rebuilt engine has new viscous and Kenlowe fans



Well-proportioned car looks good with hood down or hard-top on

Our verdict

A good Stag is a superb touring car that will delight with its soundtrack, comfort, sophistication and practicality. A bad one will let you down and cost you a fortune, so look long and hard to find a good example: a properly rebuilt and maintained engine in a correctly restored bodyshell. Engine conversions are going out of favour, so avoid unless well done.

FOR

- Four-seater luxury open motoring
- One of the best-sounding engines ever
- Cosy hard-top for inclement weather
- Excellent parts and specialist back-up

AGAINST

- Engine dear to fix if not properly done already
- Rust is an issue, especially on post-'73 cars
- Poor engine conversions can be dangerous

TRIUMPH STAG DROP-TOP FAMILY FUN



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Ferrari 550 Barchetta
Daytona Spider reborn?

