

THE HISTORY OF TRIUMPH

by Bill Rothermel

The name Triumph conjures up visions of the quintessential British sports car. Names like Southern Cross, Spitfire, and the ubiquitous TR-series are the very definition of the classic open-top roadster. Join us in celebrating the Triumph automobile as the ultimate expression of this notably British art form.

Triumph, as a company, was actually formed in 1887 by German, Siegfried Bettmann who had moved to Coventry, England, from his native country just four years earlier (at age 23). With the help of capital from the White Sewing Machine Company, he began by selling bicycles and within two years he was marketing his own product. Needing a simple and easily-recognizable name for the company, he chose the Triumph Cycle Company. The company produced its first motorcycle in 1902 and set up an affiliate company in Germany the year following to produce motorcycles there. Motorcycle production ran at a rate of 20 per week, a number that rose to 60 by 1909.

By 1913, Bettmann had become so involved in the business and cultural life of Coventry, he became the Mayor of the City for one year; quite odd considering his German ancestry and the approaching World War. Despite the interruption of everyday life caused by war, Bettmann succeeded in convincing Colonel Claude Holbrook of the British War Office to select Triumphs as the “motorcycle of choice” for the British military.

After the war, Colonel Holbrook joined the Triumph company as General Manager, with the goal of getting the company to produce a motor car. Triumph produced its first car in 1923, the 10/21 available in both saloon and two-seat roadster configurations. One year later the car was joined by a larger-engine version, the 13/35. It was the first British car to be built with hydraulic brakes all-around (Ford did not use hydraulic brakes until 1939 and Jaguar until 1949)! The replacement car, the 15/50 was introduced in 1926; two years later renamed the Light 15, the final being built in 1930.

Triumph’s first real foray into the highly-competitive “light car” market began with the Super Seven in 1927. Despite offering more features, style, power, and equipment (at a higher price) than its competitors from Austin and Morris, production remained low due to its higher cost and Triumph’s lack of financial reserves. The Super Seven garnered its share of fans and attracted a following of enthusiasts who raced and rallied the cars throughout Europe, Australia and the United States. One of those was Donald Healey, who began his career in 1929 with great success in European and British rallies.

After six years of production, the Super Seven was upgraded to a higher specification and renamed the Super Eight. The Super Eights were also renowned rally racers providing excellent publicity for the marque, later still improved to Super Nine and Super Ten status.

All this success led Triumph to build a factory-bodied two-seat sports car known as the Southern Cross starting in 1932. One year later, the four-seat Gloria chassis with four-

and six-cylinder variants began production. Then came the Gloria Monte Carlo, a high-performance tourer and Gloria Vitesse and Southern Cross Vitesse (French for speed) versions. The six-cylinder Scorpion and larger-bodied Twelve/Six were also introduced during the 1930's, although neither amounted to sales successes for Triumph.

Donald Healey was hired as chief engineer in 1935. While continuing to drive existing Triumph models in competition, he conceived the Dolomite. It was a supercharged, twin-cam lightweight sports car based on an Alfa Romeo design (with Alfa's permission) capable of 110 miles per hour. The car raced in the 1935 Monte Carlo Rally but met an untimely death in a train collision, leaving Healey and his navigator unhurt. The project was cancelled later that year due to lack of funds after three prototypes and just six engines had been built.

By 1936, Triumph was making over a dozen different models, yet production remained around 2,000 units a year. Financially things were not going well for Triumph. The model line was relaunched in 1937 with a new model range including a 1.5 litre Gloria, a Gloria-derived Vitesse, the Continental, and an exotically styled Dolomite featuring a unique and controversial "waterfall" grille. Two years later Triumph tried to reach the mass market with the new Twelve, but World War II intervened never allowing the car to get a start in the marketplace. Management had sold the profitable motorcycle and bicycle businesses to raise cash for the struggling automobile side of the company. Unfortunately the company went bankrupt, was put in the hands of receivers, and the assets sold. A 1940 German raid on Coventry, England, destroyed most of buildings of the car company, leaving little more than the name of the marque to survive.

In October 1944 the remaining assets of the company and the Triumph name were purchased by the Standard Motor Company. Chairman and Managing Director Sir John Black wanted to add a sporting line of cars to Standard's successful, but rather conservative family cars. Thus, the Standard-Triumph Motor Company, Ltd. was born. The first Standard-Triumphs were announced in 1946, the 1800 Saloon and Roadster. Neither car was a sales success and they were criticized for a lack of power. With the introduction of a new model in 1948, the Vanguard, things were about to change. Power was provided by a newly updated 2-litre engine that became the basis for Triumphs to come. The same powerplant also supplied motivation for Massey-Ferguson farm tractors through 1959 in an arrangement whereby Standard produced them in their Banner Lane factory outside Coventry. This helped provide much needed cash for Standard-Triumph car projects and to help launch Triumph's assault on the United States market.

The real change at Standard-Triumph came with the announcement of the TR2 first displayed at the Geneva Auto Show in March 1953. In racing trim, the car topped 124 mph, providing at last, a formidable contender to MG in the North American market. Unlike previous offerings, the car was competitively priced; made possible through the use of parts and components readily available in the firm's other offerings. And . . . it was fun to drive! The TR2 engine produced a respectable 90hp and a 0-60 time of just under 12 seconds all wrapped in swoopy bodywork evocative of the more expensive Jaguars of the era. More than 8,600 were sold throughout the production run.

The TR3 was released in 1955, largely in response to the new MGA. Power was increased to 95hp; outside door handles were added; and in 1956, the TR3 became the first mass-produced roadster to feature front disc brakes as standard equipment. The TR3A evolved in 1957 with more creature comforts, 100hp, and the now-familiar signature chrome “wide tooth” grille. 1961 brought about the TR3B offering Triumph’s first synchromesh 4-speed manual transmission. In all, 58,236 TR3’s were produced; the TR3A being the most popular in the series produced from 1955-1962.

Next came the introduction of the TR4 in September, 1961. The chassis was a modified version of its predecessor with coil springs and wishbones in front and semi-elliptic springs in the rear, yet the new body was styled by famed Italian designer Giovanni Michelotti. The car offered more driver and passenger interior room, a fully-synchronized 4-speed manual gearbox, and rack and pinion steering. This was Triumph’s first use of roll-up windows in lieu of side curtains. A further iteration, the TR4A appeared early in 1965 with independent rear suspension (identified by an “IRS” script on the boot). Numerous detail changes on the car accompanied the upgraded suspension. Over 40,000 TR4’s were produced through 1967.

To compete with the Austin-Healey Sprite and the MG Midget, Triumph released the Spitfire Mark I in 1962. The basic running gear and all-independent suspension with rear swing axles came from Triumph’s small Herald family sedan. Also designed by Michelotti, the car was an immediate success offering front disc brakes and better performance than its competitors. The entire hood hinged at the front making routine maintenance an easy task. Three years later it evolved into the Mark II with more power and better interior accommodations. Mark III and Mark IV versions arrived in subsequent years; with the final version, the 1500, introduced in late-1973. Remarkably, 314,000 were manufactured during a lengthy 18-year production run.

In 1968 Triumph replaced the 2.1 litre four-cylinder engine in its lineup with a 2.5 litre straight six. In Europe the car was known, logically, as the TR5, while it was dubbed the TR250 in the United States. The name was thought to be more in keeping with the names of the muscle car-era than the fancy of U.S. marketers. It brought about a distinctive hood bulge to accommodate the bigger motor and racing stripes over the hood. Little else was changed over the TR4A that preceded it, relegating it to somewhat holdover status until the introduction of the new TR6 in the final quarter of 1968.

Many critics feel that Triumph saved the best for last with the TR6. Actually a facelift of the TR5/250, it was styled by Karmann of Osnabruck, the German coachbuilder. An excellent road car, it was powered by a torquey 2.5 litre in-line six producing 104-106 hp. Originally the base price was \$3,275 which crept up to \$6,050 toward the end of the model’s life. More than 90,000 were built during a production run that lasted from 1969 through 1976. Perhaps its most distinctive features are the wheel arches filled with fat red-line radial tires and distinctive Union Jacks emblazoned on the rear quarter panels.

Perhaps the biggest change for Triumph was taking place behind the scenes. Triumph had been under the control of the British Leyland umbrella since the early sixties, all of the holdings of which were absorbed into one large conglomerate in 1968 (including Triumph, MG, Jaguar, Rover, Land Rover, Austin-Healey, Morris and Austin). By the mid-70's, however, BL was in dire financial straits suffering from a lack of cash, mismanagement at all levels, and poor quality control in all its factories. Introduced in 1970, the Stag was Triumph's entry into the burgeoning high-end GT market. It offered 2+2 seating, a powerful V-8, and more luxurious appointments over the TR6. Rushed to the marketplace, the car suffered from poor quality control and reliability problems reflective of the parent company. The Stag lasted until 1977 with just 26,000 having been produced.

Like all manufacturers, Triumph had to deal with the barrage of U.S. emission and safety requirements, and as such, set about designing a dramatic new car to meet the ever-increasing requirements in what had become its most important market. 1975 saw the introduction of the TR7, the first all-new car under the direction of British Leyland. Production overlapped the TR6 for nearly a year. Not only was the car a total break from tradition with its rather stubby, wedge styling, but it was offered in just one body style, a hardtop coupe. A roadster was not even offered until four years after the introduction of the first TR7, perhaps more than a bit late considering the company's heritage of building sporting roadsters. Fitted with a 2 litre, four-cylinder engine offering just 90hp, the car was underpowered, yet comfortable and an excellent handler. Plagued by reliability and quality control problems, the reputation of the once-great marque suffered.

Leyland conceived the TR8 as the car to win back its sports car credibility. By dropping a small-block Rover V-8 in the TR7, the car offered 0-60mph in just 8.4 seconds with a top speed of 120mph. In 1978 and 1979, just coupes were produced, with a roadster joining the lineup in 1980. Only 2,825 were produced with the majority going to the U.S. market. Had the car been introduced a few years earlier, things might have been different.

The company vanished from the landscape in 1981. Faulty management and poor marketing and business decisions caused the final blow for beloved Triumph. Yet today, the name still rings magic among enthusiasts and collectors alike. Quite a fitting "triumph" for a once-proud company.