

# SAVING THE BEST TILL LAST?



Is the ill fated SV MG's best ever sports car asks marque fan **Chris Adamson**

**T**he demise of the MG Rover Group in 2005 under the guardianship of the Phoenix Consortium has been attributed to many elements – one which has received plenty of bad press over the years is the ill-fated XPower SV sports car project. What should have been a dynamic halo supercar ushering in a new era for the marque ultimately turned out to be the wrong car at the wrong time.

It soaked up millions of pounds in development, was expensive to produce and with a price tag between £65,000 and £85,000 was up against established prestige brands with little realistic hope of commercial success.

At one time heralded as a return to the marque's sporting roots, the fastest MG so far built, was initially predicted to reach the dizzying heights of 5000 units a year but, history (depending on whose version you accept) records that only 82 were eventually made.

## THE SV STORY

The history of the SV takes some unpicking and rather than the pedigree supercar that many had imagined it would be – it turns out to be something of a mongrel, with origins that go back six years before it was unveiled at the 2002 British Motor Show to a gasping crowd.

We begin the story with former Ferrari and Maserati engineer Giordano Casarini who had

taken a fancy to a TVR Griffith and sold the idea of a front-engined, rear-wheel drive grand tourer to Argentinian industrialist and sports car maker Alejandro De Tomaso.

It employed the services of Lamborghini designer Marcello Gandini who came up with a concept car for the 1996 Geneva motor show. Next on board was ex-Formula One designer Enrique Scalabroni (Williams, Ferrari and Lotus) who developed the sophisticated box section chassis and double-wishbone suspension that was to underpin the car throughout its life.

De Tomaso had previous connections with Ford for many years and after a bidding war with other manufacturers MG eventually stuck with Detroit and a 4.6-litre all aluminium quad cam V8 lifted from the Mustang and the subsequent ZT sports saloon. The finished result was named the De Tomaso Mangusta and launched in America in January 2000 as a two-plus-two 160 mph coupé. With ambitious plans for large scale production, De Tomaso and Casarini settled on a scheme to create a purpose-built assembly plant in Italy and approached long-time American De Tomaso importers Qvale (had been MG distributors in the immediate post-war years) who were encouraged to invest.

But, even before series production had begun the two parties began to fall out and frustrated at the lack of progress Qvale bought

out De Tomaso and rebadged the project as the Qvale Mangusta exhibiting a right-hand drive version at the 2000 British Motor Show.

On this side of the Channel, BMW, who then owned the Rover Group (as it was then titled), sold off MG and Rover (but keeping Jaguar Land-Rover) in April 2000 to the Phoenix Consortium, led by former Rover Group directors John Towers and Nick Stephenson.

Phoenix was approached by Qvale in 2001 to distribute the Mangusta in the UK but instead the Phoenix board opted to purchase Qvale's Italian subsidiary facility (including the Mangusta), for a reported £7 million.

The main attraction was that the Mangusta already had US type approval so it would have been a relatively painless process to open up a fresh sales front across the Atlantic.

## FACE OFF

The first task, however, was to change the car's appearance. The quirky looks of the Mangusta had won it few plaudits but the chassis was highly rated and the Ford V8 a tried and tested known quantity. A subsidiary company, MG Sport and Racing Ltd, was established and put in charge of giving the project an MG spin was well respected and vastly experienced ex McLaren, Lotus and Lamborghini designer Peter Stephens – he had already been responsible for the 240mph McLaren F1 and facelifted MG Rovers.



As with the ZT 260, a Mustang engine provided the power and heart of the SV



A rear spoiler was optional, rear light came from Fiat's Coupé



The SV was a heady cocktail of famous supercar makers' ideas



X Power moniker came from MG's newly launched racing division which included an assault on Le Mans



The SV's racing aspirations are plain to see but it's fairly civilised on the road

The initial effort was the X80, shown to the press and public as a rather hurried concept in September 2001 and plans were announced for a five year production run of up to 5000 a year.

After several alternatives were considered – and rejected – the final design emerged a year later, one very different but a great deal of it eventually making it into production.

At the October 2002 British Motor Show, staged at the Birmingham NEC the Mangusta had morphed into the MG XPower SV – the XPower name had been registered in 2001 for MG's then ambitious racing division.

This was a much more aggressive looking vehicle featuring a muscular curved front nose, extended front splitter, rear diffuser, shark-like side vents (highlighted in contrasting black or silver) and an optional rear wing.

With its 4.6-litre Ford engine supplying 320bhp (302lb ft torque) power to the rear-wheels via a limited slip differential and electronic traction control, the SV claimed a top speed of 165mph and a zero to 60mph time of a hardly shabby 5.3 seconds.

Hardly unexpected from this new small company, economic constraints meant that some compromises had to be made and rather than bespoke components, elements were sourced from both the MG Rover parts department and Fiat – for example the headlights came from the Fiat Punto MKII and the rear lights from the Fiat

“There had never been a more audacious MG with a DNA as rich as any Italian supercar. Sadly it flopped but what a fantastic future classic the SV makes”

Coupé. Under the business plan the rolling chassis and suspension was to be fabricated by Vaccari and Bosi of Modena and assembled in Turin by the OPAC Group, with carbon fibre components being supplied by Italian firm Belco Aviva.

Here the engine and drive train, built in America including the five-speed Tremec manual transmission, was also installed along with the new-light-weight carbon fibre body shell which were created on the Isle of Wight by SP Systems.

Finally, the body in white with its running gear was shipped to Longbridge in the UK for final assembly including the leather interior trim which featured lots of bits from the MG Rover parts bin, such as Rover 75 components. In hindsight this wasn't the most economical production line and certainly did nothing for MG's carbon footprint, let alone being a logistical nightmare.

Having released the first production example in May 2003, the first customer car was delivered in March 2004 with a price tag of £65,570 (against a previously announced cost of £75,000).

The SV initially kicked off with a normally aspirated Ford 24 valve 4.6-litre V8 mated to a five-speed manual transmission but a larger 5-litre

32 valve V8, tagged as the SV-R, was shoe-horned under the bonnet, boosting power to 385bhp and then a supercharger was added boasting a claimed 520bhp. The resulting SV-S was planned to be the ultimate XPower machine and the task of carrying out the heart transplant was assigned to the Rousch company in Michigan.

It had hardly started work when in April 2005 the MG Rover Group famously and contentiously went into administration with just four SV-S emerged. Despite the demise of MG Rover, the SV story didn't quite end there. In 2008 Will Riley based in Worcestershire purchased the remnants of the XPower SV project from the administrators – this included several complete cars. Having formed MG Sports and Racing Europe Ltd, Riley planned to re-launch the XPower SV under the name MG XPower WR and produced six a month with plans for a soft-top, a glassfibre bodied entry level model, a V6 and even an electric version.

Alas the lawyers stepped in and China's Nanjing corporation, who had acquired the assets of the MG Rover Group in 2005, blocked anyone else using the Morris Garages trademark and in February 2010 the dream of reviving a small part



“Although doubling its road mileage to more than 20,000 miles, Bill says that the supercharged SV-S can only be truly appreciated on a test track”

of the marque under British ownership died with less than 100 SVs completed.

### SAVOURING THE SV

With its four point harness, snug rear seats and minimal luggage space, the SV isn't the most practical of modern MGs – but then it was never conceived as a shopping trolley or for visits to the DIY store. Its brutal looks, impressive performance, much-praised handling and rarity value, not to mention its role in MG's colourful history, means that the XPower SV is assured iconic status in the future for those lucky enough to own one.

Because so few were made they rarely come up for sale but currently you can find them going for around £40,000. For the 5-litre SV-R you can add a £4000 premium and as for the SV-S (only two are in the UK) it's a sellers' market.

Because the SV was made mainly from parts sourced from existing manufacturers (including Fiat) most components are readily available.

Retro Sports Cars acquired all the remaining SV stock and parts from MG Sport and Racing when it went bankrupt and are a good source.

The major problem for owners is identifying the origins of many of the parts but the SV club can assist and advise.

Maidstone Sports Cars are among the leading SV service and repair outlets and have acquired the equipment to create the composite body panels which are going to be among the more expensive replacement parts.

Being a well recognised power plant, the Mustang engine is relatively easy to work on, sourcing parts for and to service (*see our special Mustang guide elsewhere in this issue-ed*), so most competent garages should be able to keep it running and get it through its MoT easily enough.



Bill Rockstro and his SV-S of which he is in no hurry to sell...

More information and advice on purchasing and running an SV can be found on the owners' club website: [www.mgsv-club.com](http://www.mgsv-club.com).

### ROCKING WITH ROCKSTRO

Of the 82 built, just four models featured the supercharger, one of these, finished in solar red with black interior, eventually ended going up for sale at auction.

The successful bidder was Bill Rockstro who was already a committed MG enthusiast having owned a variety of examples over the years, including an MGB, Midget and MGTF.

“I first became aware of the SV when a fellow member of Bournemouth & Poole MGOC acquired one as part of the original factory sale. I was very impressed and when I spotted this one up for sale at the Barons Classic auction at Sandown Park in April 2009 I couldn't resist,” explains Bill.

Although carrying a catalogue guide price of £26,000 (the original supercharged target price was closer to £85,000) Bill only had to go as high as £23,000 to become the top bidder. His offer was accepted and BX54 AXH with just 11,000 miles

on the clock moved to the south coast where it still lives today.

It turned out that this car had something of a secret past. “It was the original factory test car and still has the test wiring on it,” confirms Bill. And it was at one time registered as B4 MGX when it was used as a press test car appearing in the pages of several motoring magazines including the June 2008 issue of *Auto Express* when it described it as: ‘definitely worth a drive for supercar-with-a-difference thrills.’

Bill is delighted with his purchase and it lives in his garage alongside a 2003 MG TF as well as two other classic British models: an E-type Jaguar and a Mk2 Jaguar. Consigned to the role of a Sunday car and more especially a track car (all run under a classic car insurance policy) the SV fits the role perfectly with its head-turning credentials and mouth-watering performance.

In the last nine years, Bill has doubled its mileage although at 21,000 miles it's still hardly run-in and he says that it will return between 23 and 24mpg if the revs are kept to their optimum.

Despite its functional limitations as a ‘family friendly car’ Bill says he can still happily drive it all day although he admits that the independent coil spring suspension can be hard and unforgiving over rough surfaces and the clutch requires plenty of muscle.

However, Bill says that the car can really only truly be appreciated on the track where the supercharged V8 can be let loose. “It's great fun when you can run it flat out and that exhaust note is just music to the ears.” Originally credited with an optimistic brake horsepower figure of 520bhp, Bill suspects it is more like a respectable 450 to 500bhp at most, which is still sufficient to leave hot hatchbacks standing in its dust and he has no plans of selling it soon. Who can blame him?