



# MG SV LONGBRIDGE'S LAST STAND

Can this wildcard concept come up trumps? We test-drive one to find out

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# WHAT'S THAT COMING OVER THE HILL?



It's a monster; its parent's brain was fried through misuse. Time to see if the MG X-Power SV can be domesticated...

Words **Joe Breeze** Photography **Jordan Butters**

**W**e shouldn't be here today. Not because we miraculously avoided a *Final Destination*-style wipeout on the way here, but because the car we're here to drive arguably shouldn't exist.

Not long after the Phoenix Consortium had relieved BMW of its MG Rover burden for a token tenner, work began on a supercar that would signify the company's tardy arrival in to the new millennium. Armchair anoraks will forever bemoan this misdirection of funds when the company so desperately needed to replace its garden offerings, but there's no denying the MG X-Power SV got jaws dropping and chins wagging. With caricature-like proportions and

details, its brutish appearance was enough to instantly emasculate any Porsche 911, while at the same time possessing a whiff of comedy kit-car about it. But any mocking grins were soon straightened out – that body structure was entirely carbonfibre, concealed a potent V8 and sat on underpinnings developed by a former Ferrari F1 chassis man.

I'm no businessman but that's a compelling enough case for me, so with the curiously unnamed road between Broad Hinton and Marlborough spooling out at the end of the SV's snarly snout, it's time to undress it of prior convictions and see which of its common reputations are most deserved – frivolous flop or shot-down-in-flames hero.





## GREAT DRIVES



Press to access a surprisingly revvy V8.



Profile view benefits from SV-R's spoiler.



Fiat Coupé tall-lights tarted up with chrome bezels.



Cabin carbon left delightfully exposed.



Flat-cornering yet smooth-riding, the SV has an impressive dynamic range.



SV's squint is borrowed from the MK11 Punto.



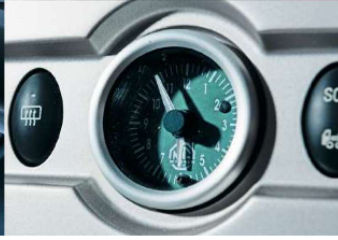
The SV picks off the fast, open sweepers of Incognito Pass.



Bought-in Brembos measure 324mm diameter up front.



Mesh for bonnet vents another off-shelf item.



Lairy gills aren't just a styling feature.



4.6-litre Ford V8 provides a baritone backing track.

**I BOUGHT ONE** COLIN BECKWITH

I co-own this SV with my son Darryl – we bought it in one of the MG liquidation auctions, where the remaining SVs were sold at a rate of two a month. 'This is chassis 107, and was used as a company car by one of the Pheonix Four, hence the many factory upgrades – red interior, SV-R spoiler, Scorpion track exhaust and Becker sat-nav. It was also modelled by Codemasters for the TOCA: Race Driver series. Parts are obviously difficult to find, but we stockpiled some – including a set of suspension turrets and a spare gearbox. Off-the-shelf items such as brakes are easier to find. But we've been looking for a tail-light bezel for years!'

to sit far closer to the windscreen than feels natural, and far more upright than the roofline is willing to allow. But then the bloodline of the SV can be traced back to the mid-1990s DeTomaso Biguá via the Qvale Mangusta, and what self-respecting pre-millennial sports car prided itself on a particularly comfortable driving position?

The V8 is another Biguá/Mangusta legacy and makes all the right noises, both in literal and figurative terms. Hammer down and the guttural throb stretches out into cold-blooded howl while 320bhp and 302lb-ft vie for your attentions; it's fairly revvy considering its genetic make-up, but it's hamstrung by the clutch. The long travel slows the cog-swapping process to the point that it's actually more enjoyable to surf the torque wave than wring the V8's neck. On the long, sweeping sections of our anonymous road just south of Swindon, the rewards come not from

## 'THE V8 IS FAIRLY REVVY CONSIDERING ITS GENETIC MAKE-UP'

bouncing it off the limiter, but from taking advantage of the open landscape's sight lines to predict the single most suitable gear for the sequence of bends ahead and using the SV's torque spread to surge between them. The big cross-drilled and vented Brembos, also an off-the-peg item, are equally adept at knocking off speed when the corners start to tighten.

The flow of Incognito Pass, as I've decided to call it, is broken up by a switchback that drops down Hackpen Hill while circumnavigating the ancient White Horse. This provides a perfect opportunity to test the integrity of the chassis, initially developed at DeTomaso by ex-Scuderia Ferrari man Enrique Scalabroni and refined over several years at both Qvale and MG Sport & Racing by lead engineer Giordano Casarini. Driving northwest towards Broad Hinton, the Hackpen complex takes the shape of a right-hander that drops down into a long, sweeping left that opens out into a tightening right, whose braking zone starts just as the SV's weight shifts from the rear-right to front-left wheels. This is where the shortcomings of an unresolved chassis would be exposed, but the SV remains unruffled. It's also here that the use of a carbonfibre body structure pays off beyond PR fodder. It doesn't just help keep the curb weight down, but more crucially minimises upper-body heft to keep the centre of gravity usefully low.

## GREAT DRIVES

Approaching the SV from the rear gives you that feeling of in-the-metal unfamiliarity that occurs so rarely in today's world of wearisome corporate-design clones. The rear lights are suspiciously 'off-the-shelf' in appearance – albeit not quite as readily identifiable as the Punto MkII headlights you'll encounter round the front – but a chunky rear wing demands your full attention. Optional on this model (but standard on the later SV-R), this is one of the blue-moon occasions where a road car actually *needs* a wing for better aesthetic balance because of the epic arch/gill/vent/splitter embellishments going on elsewhere.

The SV's overt theatre is apparent from any distance, but it's on close examination that the SV starts to show reel genuine credibility. After examining the five-spoke OZ wheels, your eyes skip to the wheelarch innards, lined with the unmistakable pattern of carbonfibre rather than nondescript plastic. Open the door – using a handle unceremoniously pilfered from an MGF – and there are more monochrome crisscrosses to be found in the door shuts. Take your place in the leather-and-Alcantara-

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UK cars left

Wing and arches look like GT3 leftovers.

festooned driver's seat and clock the weave on the A-pillars. Today, the marketing literature for even the humblest performance cars is seemingly peppered with the c-word, but back when the SV was launched the only carbonfibre-heavy (or not) precursors either carried F40 nameplates on their rear wings, gold in their engine bay, or Le Mans homologation papers in their history files.

Not a bad start then, but before prodding the aluminium starter button in front of the gearstick to wake the V8 I must turn the traditional key... whose housing still bears the Blue Oval. For some, this could ruin the immersion of the experience before it's even begun, but those who'd be genuinely bothered by such things would probably have felt more at home wrapped in the feminine, organic curves of a 996 Porsche anyway.

Stuttgart snowflakes sent on their way, it's now destination Detroit as the quad-cam 4.6-litre Ford V8 – which it shares in varying states of tune with the MkVI Ford Mustang, Panoz Esperante road car and the first Koenigsegg – fires into a throbbing gargle, one that the



An odd mix of exotic and parts-bin.

SV's designer Peter Stevens says was specifically tuned to sound like a Riva powerboat burbling away in harbour.

Giving it some time to warm its cockles, I belt up. By the time I've adjusted the four-point harness – whose top straps locate through the rear bulkhead in proper competition-car style – and secured the traditional clasp across my chest, the whole process has heightened my trepidation. Stevens carried this belt design forward from his time working on the McLaren F1. Oddly, MG's period press gumpf didn't mention that it also conveniently meant the car wouldn't require costly airbags.

Driver firmly embraced and V8 now lolloping richly, I make my first contact with the controls. The clutch pedal is heavy and has a surprisingly large window of travel. Pulling away gingerly and working through the lower ratios of the ubiquitous Tremec gearbox is a surprisingly smooth process. The steering is fairly feelsome and communicative if not a little dead on-centre, but the bigger nuisance in this area is the non-adjustability of the column. It requires more generously proportioned drivers



### WHERE WE WENT HACKPEN HILL, WILTSHIRE



There's not exactly an abundance of 'destination' driving roads in this neck of the woods, just south of Swindon. But should you ever find yourself nearby it's certainly worth a detour, particularly if you're in control of something with a higher-than-average cubic capacity and/or cylinder count.

Long straights flow from one sweeper to the next, and good sight lines allow you to trim your radii. Then you've got the little squiggle that is Hackpen Hill, which will give the chassis a good workout. Your passenger can check out the famous horse painted on the hillside too, if they're not feeling too nauseous.



## GREAT DRIVES

Monster it may be, but the SV is by no means rabid.

# 'YOU EXPECT TO BE IMPRESSED BY ITS CORNERING ABILITIES, BUT NOT ALSO ITS WILLINGNESS TO COSSET YOU'



### WHAT TO PAY

**Concours**  
£50,000  
**Good**  
£40,000  
**Usable**  
£35,000  
**Project**  
£25,000

Revisiting the Hackpen Horse sequence in the reverse direction, that long downhill left is now a tightening uphill right. Reluctant to trouble the clutch to change down for the sharpening of the corner, I instead maintain speed while throwing on additional lock. The SV grips, obeys and remains composed enough to accelerate out through the subsequent left-hander without a hint of protest. But perhaps more impressive is the way it soaks up the undulations as I pick up speed along straights. You expect to be impressed by a carbonfibre supercar's cornering abilities, but not also by its willingness to cosset you. The seats are not only supportive, but genuinely comfortable.

From this I'm left with a tinge of disappointment. Put simply, the SV is Kanye West: it happily polarises public opinion with its very existence, but behind the swagger is a conflicted personality. Even with the traction control system's laissez-faire approach, the SV never feels intimidating enough to justify a 'supercar' label – on a dry road it'll only throw a tail-out tantrum with flagrant provocation. But then it's not quite well-resolved enough to convince as a traditional GT either. Given the madcap, make-no-mistake exterior styling, this internal conflict dulls the lustre of the SV's twinkling eye a little.

That said, our generation has witnessed the likes of the Jaguar C-X75 and BMW M1 Hommage remain tragically stillborn for failing to make a sound business case, so realistically we can have no complaints about the SV being a jack-of-all-trades. It might not be the rabid hound we secretly hoped for – even in SV-R form – but it's a go-down-with-guns-blazing tribute to its creator that can be savoured today without any misplaced resentment.

**THANKS**  
To Joanna  
Deal of the  
MG Owners'  
Club.

### The Modern Classics view

With 82 cars built from a £28m project, each SV technically costed MG £340,000 to make. Today, they fetch a tenth of that on the rare occasion that they do come up for sale, and you'll be hard-pushed to find better value in today's classic market. Take into account its rarity, theatrical styling, exotic construction and place in history and the package is more convincing now than it ever was.

Most fast-car experiences leave you wanting to drive for longer, trying to wring out every last drop of performance potential. But the SV leaves you wanting to drive it further. Set the archaic single-DIN Becker satnav for some far-flung mountain region, settle down into your squidgy Sparco quarters and enjoy the V8 at its best: exercising in its Isaac Hayes baritone vocal range.

Mile-munching proclivities might not be what the SV outwardly promises, but settle into that mindset, ignore the partsbinnery and it can be just as enjoyable. We're glad it does exist, just not for the reasons we expected. [www](#)

#### 2003 MG X-POWER SV

Engine	4601cc, 8-cyl, DOHC
Transmission	RWD, five-speed manual
Power	320bhp@6000rpm
Torque	302lb-ft@4750rpm
Weight	1540kg

#### PERFORMANCE

0-60mph	5.3sec
Top speed	165mph
Economy	20mpg