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Reviving a Stag



Bringing a Triumph Back to Life — Falling for a Gold-Digging Woman

Story and photos by Richard Truett

Yes, as a matter of fact, that is a Stag in my driveway.

And, yeah, I have some "splainin" to do to everyone who's ever heard me say there's no way I'd ever own this particular Triumph, surely one of the most star-crossed British cars ever to come stateside.

I know from my 22 years of collecting and restoring Triumphs that a Stag is not a car to be taken lightly. It's a brave person who drives a Stag. Like a gold-digging woman, a Stag will drain your wallet, break your heart and leave you standing helplessly by the side of the road. You see, wrapped in that gorgeous Michelotti-styled body are eight of the most fragile cylinders ever put in a car.

I am somewhat familiar with those cylinders and the myriad of pipes and hoses sprouting from that engine like arms of a deranged octopus. I owned four TR7s and two Dolomite Sprints — which share much of the same engine architecture and technology



This is the Stag at its most inviting. Top off and ready to hit the road.

as the Stag's 3.0-liter overhead-cam V-8. Not only that but, I've spent an afternoon or two with my friend Blake Discher wrenching on his gorgeous maroon 1971 Stag. A close look under the bonnet of Blake's Stag convinced me long ago that, no matter how much I love the car's classy and timeless looks, it would have to stay off limits. You see, I'm the kind of Triumph owner who can't sleep at night if so much as one nut or bolt isn't torqued down to factory specs. And so, in my obsessive zeal to keep a Stag running properly, it would probably drive me completely and irrevocably crazy. I'd just have to continue to admire the most luxurious Triumph ever from afar. And that's exactly what I did all these years, until one day in early June.

I turned on my computer one morning and found an e-mail from a man in Illinois who said he had a Stag in his garage that belonged to his late father. The car had not moved an inch under its own power, he said, since the early 1990s. The e-mail said car had

no rust, came with the factory hardtop and had just 25,760 original miles. Was I interested?

Just out of curiosity, I asked him to e-mail me a few pictures. When I opened them on my computer, there was no question that I would break my sacred covenant and buy the car — even if it meant the Stag would probably torture me mentally, physically, emotionally and financially.

From the pictures, the car looked immaculate, despite its incarceration in a garage. Mechanically, it appeared never to have been messed with. All its original parts were in all their original locations. And cosmetically, the car was a beautiful original, looking almost as nice as it did the day it left the factory in Coventry, England, in June of 1973.

We negotiated a price via e-mail and then had one brief phone conversation. On Friday, June 23, I left my house just north of Detroit at 3:30 a.m. in a Ford F-350 diesel pickup pulling Blake Discher's car-hauling

Two examples of classic design: Michelotti's Triumph Stag and a well-executed American Diner. A drive in one, a meal in the other, a satisfying experience.

trailer. I was headed for a small town in Illinois near Springfield, some 424.4 miles to the west.

By 10:30 a.m. I was in the driveway of Stan Nevins, owner of the Stag. The car was everything Nevins promised it

"... yeah, I have some 'splainin' to do to everyone who's ever heard me say there's no way I'd ever own this particular Triumph"

would be: clean, complete and totally original. I handed him a bank check for \$4,500 – an astounding price to pay for a non-running Triumph. The car was a beauty. I would somehow find a way to deal with its congenital mechanical defects and keep my sanity.

As we were pushing the car out into the sunlight, Nevins' teenage daughter said that she'd never heard the car run or seen it any other place but in the corner of the garage.

At around 1 p.m. Stan and I finished loading the Stag onto Blake's trailer, and I headed home. Two massive, broiling traffic jams on Interstate 94 added three extra hours onto a very long day. But adrenaline kept me going. All the way home I was thinking that I may well have just landed one of the nicest and lowest mileage original Stags left on the planet. After all, only 25,939 Stags were ever built from 1971-77.

While waiting in one slow-moving mess near Gary, Indiana, a man in a white van pulled up on my left and said, "That's a beautiful Stag. I haven't seen one that nice in years. Did you just get it?" he asked. He said that he was a former MG mechanic and asked me if I knew how rare Stags are. I do. Triumph exported only about 2,500 Stags to the USA from late 1971 to the summer of 1973.

The last few hours of the trip home were a battle to keep the truck and my precious cargo on the road. I rolled into my driveway, eyelids at half-mast, at 11 p.m., after having covered 935 miles in nearly 20-hours. My good friend Dale

Jewett, also a reporter at *Automotive News*, helped me unload the car and push it into the driveway behind my 2500S.

The long trip home gave me plenty of time to work out a strategy for bringing the Stag back to life. I've owned 15 Triumphs, but never have I bought one that had been dormant so long. So exactly how do you awaken a car from a 14-year slumber? Surely, you don't just put fresh gas in it,

charge the battery and hit the key.

My plan was to start with the engine. I knew that if the engine turned over, the job of getting the Stag back on the road would probably be a lot easier. Nevins took out the spark plugs sometime in the 1990s and put oil down the cylinders. But he forgot which wire went to which spark plug and that was the last time he'd had anything to do with it.

Luckily, the car was stored properly. The coolant was removed from the engine, the oil was kept full and the car was parked over several planks of plywood to keep moisture from rotting the undercarriage. I put the car in fourth gear and rocked it a bit. The engine turned over easily, a promising sign.

The first order of business, then, was to clean the car inside and out very thoroughly. Fellow Detroit Triumph Sports Car Club member Pat Barber helped me take off the hardtop, probably the first time it has been



Don't bother asking the Michigan Motor Vehicle Bureau for the "Triumph" plate. Richard Truett has it and he's keeping it! Michelotti's inspired horizontal front and rear styling for Triumph works best on the Stag.

Richard Truett carefully removes the rodent abode from the Stag before getting down to the real work.

removed since Gerald Ford was in the White House. Barber looked over the car and pronounced it in fine shape. Barber also has a '73 Stag built in June of '73. A check of the VIN plates shows his car was built just 30 vehicles before mine.

In the years the car sat stationary in Nevins' rural garage, it was a mouse condominium. Pat and I discovered that mice had made a comfy little bed under the tonneau, munching on the car's original mohair top for snacks and keeping warm in a blanket made of insulation culled from the garage walls.

I used bucket of warm water mixed with Simple Green, a soft nylon scrub brush and a wet/dry vacuum to clean the years of mouse waste and rid the car of its awful smell. The carpet and upholstery were in good shape. And the car cleaned up extremely well. Only the antenna wire was chewed.

Next up, it was time to size up the bright yellow Stag mechanically and electrically. I hooked a charger up to the ancient battery. Two items were dead, the SU electric fuel pump and the starter. But, shockingly, all other electrical components worked fine, even the windshield washer.

With the car clean and the engine free, I could proceed with the plan I devised on the long ride home. Instead



"...like many of the other new replacement Stag parts I bought: the (water pump cover) fit was poor."

of a patchwork job where I would be constantly tearing the car apart and fixing individual parts, I decided to attempt one massive, comprehensive repair operation – the automotive equivalent of the D-Day invasion.

I would:

- Replace the water pump and all coolant and heating hoses.
- Have new and more efficient radiator made.
- Replace the oil seals.
- Rebuild the carbs and replace all the fuel lines and filters.
- Rebuild the entire brake and clutch hydraulic systems.
- Change the oil in the transmission and top up the differential.
- Remove the timing cover and inspect the timing chains, guides and tensioners, replacing any suspect parts.

- Install an entire new exhaust system.
- Buy a new set of tires.
- Rebuild or replace the starter and fuel pump.
- Replace the front struts and rear shocks.

If my plan was successful, the Stag would be roadworthy the moment I fired up the engine. So in the following days I tore into the car after work and on weekends. Off came the intake manifold, radiator, water pump and exhaust manifolds. Out came the fuel tank, dead starter and fuel pump. Finally, the rotten exhaust system was removed.

Of the 30 or so British cars I have owned, the Stag is far and away the toughest Triumph to work on. Mostly because of the required North American emission equipment and optional air conditioning, there's very little room under the hood. Some of the components, such as the starter, are not easily accessible. I spent nearly an hour removing one exhaust manifold bolt because there is almost



The distinctive Stag upholstery pattern with its multiple perforations is shown in the rear seat. Despite small critters making nests, the interior was basically in excellent condition.

no way to get a wrench on it.

This will give you some idea of the Stag's degree of difficulty: To take out the starter, I had to remove the radiator overflow tank, the air conditioning compressor and the exhaust manifold, all because there is no access to the top starter bolt.

The radiator looked clean inside. But the car was last run without

So I replaced the front timing cover seal. The inside of the engine was spotless. It looked every bit as nice as engine with 25,000 miles should. The timing chains were tight, the guides and tensioners showed no excessive wear, so I decided to leave that alone, even though I bought a replacement timing chain kit with the improved non-stretch German chains. I may need

car. This can be easily corrected with a set of 1980-81 TR7 exhaust manifold gaskets.

While waiting for those parts to arrive from England, I rebuilt the carburetors. That was a good move. The floats and needles were frozen stuck from 14 years of inactivity. Once I had the carbs apart, I knew I did the right thing by not trying to put gas in the car and start it. The Stag never would have run.

Next came the starter. It would not turn because the bushing and the motor spindle were frozen together from inactivity. For \$16, I replaced the bushings and the starter was fixed.

I installed the uprated radiator, but found some of the replacement hoses from Rimmer Bros. did not fit well. But another British source for Stag Parts, James Paddock, did have the proper hoses, and a week later the cooling system was all buttoned up.

Next it was time to attack the brakes and clutch. Rectifying the brakes required no serious planning. I just rebuilt or replaced everything. It makes no sense to take chances here because a brake failure most certainly will result in damage to the car – or

"... unlike other Triumphs, the Stag engine has almost no tolerance for an indifferent owner."

a thermostat, so I concluded that it must have been running hot, no surprise there. We know the Stag has a chronically weak cooling system. The upgraded radiator was just half the plan to boost the cooling system's efficiency. Next, I bought a 12-vane water pump, to replace the original six-vane pump, and a modified pump cover from British Stag specialist Tony Hart. Then I installed a thermostat from a 1975 TR7 that opens at 160 degrees.

There was evidence of an oil leak coming from the front of the engine.

that stuff someday.

Next I took the intake manifold and some other bits over to Blake's house. Blake lent me his media blasting set up. I got the parts ready for a fresh coat of paint. After the cleaning and painting the area between the cylinder heads, I installed the new, more efficient water pump and modified pump cover and the intake manifold.

Next it was time to fix a factory gaffe. Triumph never installed gaskets between the exhaust manifolds and the heads. That creates exhaust leaks and makes the Stag sound like a crappy

Left: From this angle, the complexity of the Stag engine compartment is readily visible. A maze of emissions control gadgetry connects the carburetors. Once you get below the cam covers, the exhaust manifolds and other plumbing restrict the access. **Center:** Full instrumentation gives the Stag driver all the data needed and lots of satin-finished walnut makes the view attractive. The column is adjustable but the wheel could stand to be more vertical. **Right:** The Stag center console area, showing desirable 4-speed stick with OD, US original equipment Bendix AM/FM radio, heater controls, electric window switches, etc.





Maybe it's the angle, maybe the lens but this side view makes the Stag look very long and low. It's probably the best photo angle for the car with no suggestion of the frequent "nose-down" attitude.

much worse. So, I rebuilt the master cylinder and calipers, installed new rear wheel cylinders and braided steel brake lines on all four corners. Then I had the rotors turned. Finally, I replaced the front brake pads. Getting the clutch working required a new slave cylinder, a rebuild of the master cylinder and a new hydraulic line.

With my list of things to do rapidly diminishing, the day of reckoning was fast approaching. Would it run? Would it drive? The last major job was installing the new exhaust system. That proved to be a major pain in many muscles. Without the benefit of a lift, I had to do the job with the car on jack stands and me underneath it. The Stag's exhaust system comes in three sections and is a complicated affair. I learned the hard way that the rear section goes on first, then the center section and lastly the two front pipes.

With the exhaust system in place, it was time to fill the cooling system and fire her up. It was August 23, eight weeks to the day that the Stag

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arrived in my driveway. I turned the key and within a minute she was running. But not well. There was an intermittent popping noise and smoke was everywhere.

I shut it down and started checking my work. I narrowed the problem down to the firing order. I did everything by the book, but it still wasn't right. My good friend, Chris Holbrook, a former Standard-Triumph employee, member of the Detroit Triumph Sports Car Club and current Stag owner, came to the rescue.

By phone he reminded that although the firing order is 1-2-7-8-4-5-6-3, the first plug wire you install is #2. That isn't spelled out in the Haynes repair manual. So at least two of the

wires on the distributor cap were in the wrong order. In any case, I changed the wires and she started right up, and this time ran smoothly. But still not quite good enough for a roadtest.

The carbs and timing needed to be set. But let's not forget we are dealing with a Stag. Nothing comes easy. Even the most meticulous plans are bound to go astray. Mine did and I didn't get to drive the car that day.

Not long after the engine reached operating temperature, a nasty water leak sprouted from underneath the intake manifold near the water pump cover. This was a crushing blow. I deliberately went slowly and carefully putting the car back together so that I wouldn't have to redo the same work. Removing the intake involves an incredible amount of back-breaking work.

The culprit was the uprated water pump cover from England. I could not get a hose to fit it properly and it was leaking from underneath. That meant tearing down the top of the engine again. The new and supposedly improved water pump cover is a lot like many of the other new replacement Stag parts I bought: the fit was poor. So I reverted to the original six-vane cover and water pump.

This time there were no leaks. And it was time for a few trips around the block. The first few miles of Stag motoring left me amazed and confused. This Triumph was like no other I have ever driven. This is a mature, sporting



It's rare to see a Stag parked at the curb just like any old car but Richard Truett likes to drive his Triumphs. This view shows the T-bar clearly and demonstrates the car's modern lines. In 2007, it still doesn't look like "an old car."

car for drivers who have outgrown TRs and Spitfires. It has too many thoughtful touches to mention here. But let's just say that Triumph engineers really worked hard to make the car special. The attention to detail in the packaging of the components is exceptional.

I drove the car daily for a few weeks and gradually began to uncover a few additional faults. The brake and clutch master cylinder rebuilds didn't take. Fluid was getting past the seals in both cylinders making the brake pedal soft and affecting the shifting. So, I ordered new master cylinders. The carbs and linkage needed additional tweaking. And I revisited the exhaust system twice in order to silence leaks. Lastly, I replaced all the engine breather hoses and

fittings, which had gotten either brittle or soft over the years.

Going over the receipts for the parts, I see I spent just about \$3,000, bringing my total investment in the Stag to right around \$7,500. I devoted much of my free time all summer bringing the Stag back to life, but it was worth it. I think that it just may end up being my favorite Triumph ever.

So, what's it like to drive? Well, the Stag is not fast. But it is quick, and extremely smooth. The 127-horsepower engine is nearly noiseless, but the exhaust has the most wonderful deeply muted growl. The interior is roomy and the seats are soft and comfortable. The four-wheel independent suspension is much softer than a TRs, but the car

holds the road wonderfully. The brakes are fast-acting and strong. In short, the Stag is a joy to drive. I often go about 35 mph in second gear and let the engine run at about 3,000 RPM. The sound of the engine and exhaust is glorious. No radio is needed.

Now that I am more familiar with the under-hood workings of a Stag and know how to maintain it, I see now that most of my fears all these years about the car were pretty much unwarranted. Here's the thing about a Stag: Like any Triumph, it will tell you, either with strange noises, funky smells or poor running, if something's wrong. You can't ignore these warnings. Because, unlike other Triumphs, the Stag engine has almost no tolerance for an indifferent owner. 🛠️