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LIFE CYCLE – THE LIFE STORY OF A TRIUMPH TR3

PR tool and pilot's chariot, rolled, lost in a game of Monopoly, restored over a decade – this TR3's led an eventful life

Words Sam Dawson; Photography Rory Game



1955 – Triumph TR3 SWK 772 sent to the teaching and PR section

'You're a 16-year-old apprentice – wouldn't you rather work on a TR3 rather than a Standard Vanguard or Eight?' says former Standard-Triumph competition manager Graham Robson.

The £970 TR3 was essentially the same technology packaged in a more appealing way. 'With a build date of October 26th 1955, SWK 772 would've been one of the first off the production line. It would've been a stripdown vehicle, so apprentices could demonstrate how to remove all its parts – you could give it to an apprentice and say "show me how you'd replace the radiator" and suchlike. As for the publicity department, Triumph had a fleet of cars for

the press, motor shows, publicity photos or to give to film stars to drive to premieres.’

Although it didn't get a starring role on the big screen, SWK 772 was used in a foyer display at the Gaumont Palace Cinema in Coventry to publicise the Stanley Baker motor sport-themed thriller Checkpoint in January 1957.



Promoting the film Checkpoint at the Gaumont Palace Cinema in Coventry

1957 – The TR3 is bought by Ken Cooper, who takes it to Germany

In 1957 Ken Cooper was a young 14th Squadron RAF pilot, flying Hawker Hunters out of RAF Chivenor near Barnstaple in Devon. Seeking some excitement on the road as well as in the air, he bought the TR3 from Triumph, which had chosen to offload its old publicity car through its dealer network.

Although he kept the car for less than a year, Cooper and his 'Tearfree' were synonymous enough to inspire a caricature by fellow airman Chris Golds.

In 1958 Cooper was transferred to RAF Alhorn, just west of Hanover in the British zone of the old West Germany. He brought the TR3 with him, but sold it within a few months to fellow Alhorn-based Hunter pilot Tony Netherton for £700.



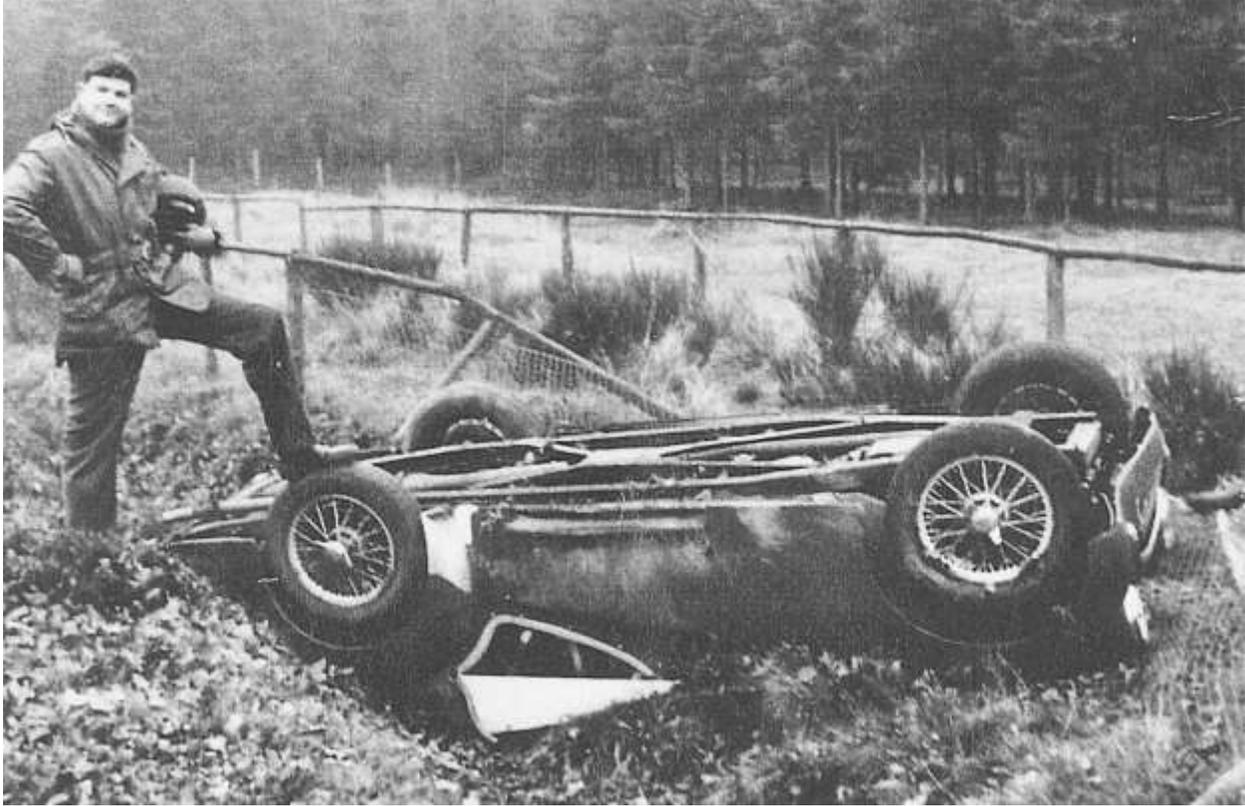
Ken Cooper bought the car secondhand from Triumph in 1957

Tony Netherton buys the TR3 for £700 – and rolls it

‘He sold it because he was getting married,’ says Tony Netherton of Cooper’s brief ownership of the TR3.

‘I used the car to attend the Italian Grand Prix in 1958 and the Monaco Grand Prix in 1959. In between, in November 1958, I spent the weekend in the Eifel mountains with a group of fellow enthusiasts and indulged in some timed laps of the Nürburgring.

‘In an excess of enthusiasm over talent, and misplaced confidence in the Michelin X rear tyres, I spun the car on a fast left-hander, hit the grass verge backwards at about 70mph and flipped upside down. The windscreen was swept back flush with the bonnet, so I was fortunate to crawl out unhurt. In the photo taken afterwards I appear to look pleased with myself – I was probably suffering from shock.



Things go slightly awry for Tony Netherton at the Nürburgring in 1958

‘The following day – a Sunday – we towed the car into Cologne and left it outside the local Triumph agent with a note saying ‘Please Repair!’ on it. British forces in Germany had BFPO numberplates and were insured by German companies whose policies at the time didn’t exclude speed-testing, so they reluctantly paid up for the repair. Six weeks later it was back on the autobahn, now sporting a TR3A nose.

‘When I returned to the UK in 1959 to RAF Abingdon I had modifications done to improve its handling – uprated springs and dampers, a brake servo and a Panhard rod. This helped control the sharp breakaway at the rear when the Michelin Xs finally lost adhesion. It worked well – I never somersaulted the car again!

‘I then entered a number of sprints and hillclimbs but as I hadn’t increased the power output I achieved nothing more than honourable mentions.



Tony Netherton with the new German numberplate in 1958

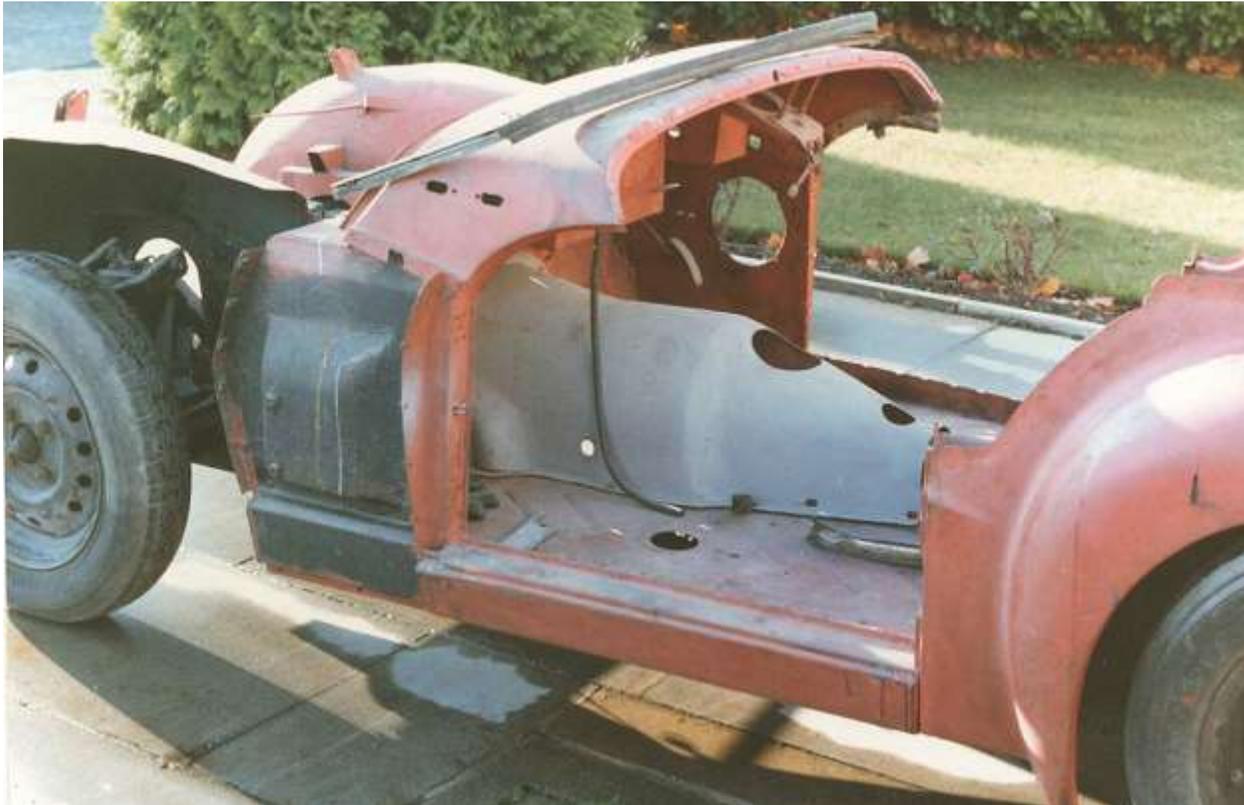
'I drove into Chiswick one Saturday afternoon in 1960 and sold the car to Graham Warner at The Chequered Flag, coming away with £650 stuffed in my hip pocket. I returned to Oxford, missed the last train to Abingdon and had to walk seven miles. Shortly afterwards I took delivery of a Mini – different, but just as much fun.'

1975 – The TR3 is lost in a game of Monopoly at a gliding club

The ownership trail goes cold in the Sixties, but this TR3 has a habit of attracting pilots. In the Seventies, as a scruffy, cheap and very secondhand sports car, it was owned by Judith Holmes, who with husband Douglas and brother-in-law Brian, were members of the Derbyshire & Lancashire Gliding Club at Camphill near Tideswell. 'Neither I nor Judith have any recollection who she bought it from,' said Judith's nephew Mark Holmes. 'Judith sold the car to Ken Blake, another member of the Club, who then lost it in a game of Monopoly to my father, Brian Holmes.'

Brian only owned the car for a short while before selling it on to another glider pilot, Ted Gorman. 'My mother recalls Gorman saying he'd sold it to someone in Italy,' adds Mark. But did it really go abroad? The next development suggests not.

1988 – Brian Lofts buys car and starts a ten-year restoration project



Brian Loft's restoration took 12 years – here it is halfway through

The late Brian Lofts, a self-confessed 'restoration anorak', bought the TR3 from a fellow member of the Derbyshire & Lancashire Gliding Club in 1988 as a box of bits, according to his widow Sue. The ensuing restoration would last ten years. Lofts compiled a small book's-worth of longhand restoration notes, photographs and hand-drawn diagrams of the TR3's unique mechanical quirks.

The previous owner had reconditioned the engine 15,000 miles earlier, but when Lofts stripped the block he found rust-pitting on the crankshaft and broken piston rings, suggesting water ingress. The restoration began with a crankshaft regrind and new pistons, but the rest of the engine was in good condition. Lofts fired up the engine and kept it oiled when it wasn't in the car,

but it would be rebuilt to accept unleaded. An 87mm set of pistons and liners increased displacement to 2.2 litres.

The differential seems to have caused Lofts some bother. In his notes he attests to its 'excellent condition', but at the bottom he's scribbled 'during the debugging period, it became evident that the diff unit was whining. The axle was removed and sent to Moss Europe for a rebuild.' Lofts never explains the cause of the problem in his notes, but Moss's 1989 bill came to £294.

"Is there any filler? You know I would be telling porkies if I said no" — Brian Lofts

The chassis seemed to be in near-perfect condition with no evidence of repair work, despite its accident in Netherton's hands 30 years earlier. The bodywork hadn't fared quite as well. 'Is there any filler? You know I would be telling porkies if I said no,' Lofts confessed to himself in his notes. 'It has not been used to replace metal, but metallic filler has been used for cosmetic purposes to perfect panel contours, indentations etc.'

Lofts explains there were filled-in dents, ground and smoothed-over welds and aftermarket lead-loading on nearly every body panel. During the ensuing bodywork restoration only the bonnet, bootlid, spare wheel cover and a section of the floorpan could be re-used without extensive repair.



Brian used marine industry-derived rustproofing when he re-did the chassis

Lofts also removed the TR3A nose and replaced it with a correct TR3 item, but this was problematic. 'The first of three nose panels was purchased as a reproduction from Cox & Buckle,' wrote Lofts. 'It was rejected as there was virtually no curvature on the headlight nacelles – they looked like two tin cans! The second nose cone was rejected as the air intake was an inch and a half off-centre and the aperture was an inch higher on the offside than the nearside.' Happily, the third nose cone fitted perfectly.

1995 – The TR3 is reunited with its original SWK 772 numberplate

Once the restoration was in its final stages Lofts submitted photo-evidence of the complete-looking car to the DVLA, so it could be reunited with its original SWK 772 numberplate – lost since the car was re-registered on British forces plates in Germany. In 1995, once the car was really complete, but before the unleaded-head conversion, it was chosen by TR expert Bill Piggott to feature in a lavish six-page spread in his book *Triumph TR2/3/3A in Detail* as a perfect example of an early TR3.

1999 – Edward Fitzpatrick pays £15k, spends another £50,000

'I'd been suffering from bipolar depression, and when I emerged from treatment, I found solace in a classic car maintenance course,' says Edward Fitzpatrick. 'The course instructor told me that I must find a car to do up, and I got looking for an XK140, but prices suddenly shot up, so I started looking for something similar. Brian Lofts was selling SWK 772 for £14,750, which seemed reasonable, to fund another project.

"Where's your trailer Ed?" he said when I arrived – because we were hit by a blizzard, in April. I had to drive it from Cheshire to Basingstoke. My son said it looked like Noddy's car, my daughter wanted to know where the sound system was, and my wife drove it a quarter of a mile and hated it. However, I bought it because of the wonderful tours run by the TR Register. On the first one I did, in France, I saw 118mph before the engine's bottom end went just as I was crossing a péage. Ten hours later I arrived at the destination hotel in a Ford Focus to a standing ovation – I was in tears.

'Then I got more ambitious, taking on Country Lane Tours' rallies to places like Norway and Croatia. On the first trip we ran out of puff overtaking a lorry, ending up three-abreast. My navigator said, "You'd better soup this car up, Edward". A Danish chap suggested the Revington handling kit, which transformed the car with its anti-roll bars. I also rebuilt the engine with Omega pistons, a new-old stock crankshaft, Triumph TR6 clutch, and a Girling back

axle instead of the old Lockheed one. Its leaking castings were arc-welded by a railway engineer who worked with rolling stock. It was expensive, but bomb-proof.



Edward Fitzpatrick lavished £50,000 on the TR3 – it’s just a pity his wife despised it. Here it is pictured in about 2008

‘Revington’s springs made my teeth rattle, but acceptably softened after 10,000 miles. The rack-and-pinion steering from Revington, with three-degree caster-angle trunnions, added much-needed self-centring.

In the end, though, I got rid of it as I’m 6 foot 2, and with age parts of me that used to bend don’t any more. A few years ago, in Croatia in a storm with hailstones the size of tennis balls, I had to get my wife to check a junction was clear as I just couldn’t lean over that far. Then we nearly got sideswiped on a French autoroute at 80mph. A few weeks later I was driving to Brooklands with the roof down and no seatbelts, and thought, “This is just an accident waiting to happen”, so I decided to sell it.

'It'd just had a £5000 engine rebuild too, but I never got to have any fun with it, I just drove it straight to Hurst Park Automobiles after Trevor Wooding made me an offer. However, the souvenirs it left with me involved tearing up mountain passes with the exhaust blaring away behind me, and being well-received wherever it went. I bought a Jaguar Mk2 3.8 with overdrive. I still do long tours in that; it's much more comfortable. But I'll never forget that TR3.'

2013 – SWK 772 replaces an Aston, and is reunited with an old friend



Left: Tony Netherton is reunited with SWK 772 at the Goodwood Revival in 2013

'I love anything with an engine,' says former air-freight business owner Roy Parmenter as he gestures to the marine outboard motor, DKW bike, remote-control helicopter and Alfa Romeo Alfetta (seen in Classic Cars September 2013) sharing space with the TR3. 'I fancied something raw again. I've had Caterhams, and I hired an Ariel Atom for a weekend but my wife didn't like it.

The TR3 replaced a 2007 Aston Martin Vantage Roadster, which was a great car but I couldn't play with it – it's too fast to take liberties with. Also, it was too precious to park anywhere, and I like opening the bonnet and getting to know my cars. You can't do that with a modern car.



Roy Parmenter owned a TR3 when young – he’s fulfilled a dream by getting another one

‘There are no more modifications needed. The interior needs a good clean, and I may fit an original-style cream-coloured tonneau, but Brian and Edward spent a fortune.

‘I bought one of these when I was very young – 25 – with the intention of restoring but never got round to it. I ran it for a bit, but it was in a very bad way with a rotten chassis so I sold it. It feels like I’ve come full-circle now. I’ve always liked Minis, and there is a similar sense of small-is-beautiful about the TR3. But it has a different driving style, and such beautifully balanced lines.’

Before Parmenter collected the car Hurst Park Automobiles displayed it at the 2013 Goodwood Revival, where it attracted the attention of a visitor. Tony Netherton was reunited with the car he’d left on Graham Warner’s forecourt back in 1959. The car that made him miss the train to Abingdon.

The Triumph isn’t heading for retirement – it’s off to the south of France



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