

Revival of the fittest: Wayne Westerman's Triumph GT6 MkIV concept

By Wayne Westerman

With the current revival of MG and an industry-wide tendency to boost brand values with retro styling and pastiche versions of classic models (think Audi's TT, BMW's Z3, Z8 and MINI, VW's new Beetle, Jaguar's S-type and so on), it was surely only a matter of time before someone looked at the almost forgotten British marque of Triumph.

As a designer working in the auto industry and the owner of a Triumph GT6 MkII, I felt compelled to undertake the project myself. The GT6, a hard-top, two-litre development of the Spitfire sports car, might at first appear an unlikely choice to revive the Triumph brand; in its seven years of production (1966-73) it was never as popular as the Spitfire, nor was it as spacious as the Stag. However, in its first three iterations, the GT6 offered fun, practical motoring at an affordable price. This is an empty niche in today's market and one a GT6 MkIV would fill perfectly...

But what does the customer really want? Should the manufacturer create a modern interpretation of an icon (such as Nissan's new 350Z), something more retro (BMW's Z8 is a stunning example), or even a carbon copy of an original? I recently read a journalist's account of his road trip across Europe in a classic car and what a great idea he thought it would be to shoehorn modern engineering and reliability into a replica classic body. I think he was missing the point. Aside from driving the illusion, the most rewarding part of owning a replica has to be the satisfaction gained in building and maintaining it. The type of car he was alluding to would appeal to the more affluent motorist, someone with a penchant for retro-chic, not replica-chintz.

When redesigning a classic, it is inevitable that things will change; how much or how little depends on the design route chosen. To clarify, we should consider motoring legends that have recently undergone a "motorover", the car industry equivalent of a makeover. Nissan's handsome 350Z succeeds because it retains the driving spirit of its Z-car predecessors as well as their styling cues. On the other hand, original VW Beetle fans were disappointed to find the engine of the new model at the "wrong" end of the car. Clearly, for the heritage of the restyled icon to be recognised, it is essential that both the driving characteristics and key design features from the original are updated. This way, manufacturers not only appeal to new customers, they welcome back those with fond memories of the original. This design principle and marketing strategy was fundamental in the development of my GT6 MkIV concept. After all, good looks are only skin deep.

Triumph purists will be pleased to know that the one-piece front-end/bonnet is still evident and conceals a straight-six engine, albeit with increased power and capacity. The power bulge and air vents on top of the bonnet are design cues that have also been carried over from the original. The vents have been simplified aesthetically, but as chrome decor pieces they are now a more prominent feature.

Perhaps a more radical change is the treatment of the chrome finishing strip, which now runs the entire length of the car. On the original GT6, this was a functional trim piece that protected the exposed panel seams on top of the wings; there was therefore no reason for it to continue across the top of the door, but the car always felt slightly unfinished because it didn't. This has been rectified in the MkIV proposal. Turning this functional trim piece into a design feature allowed both bonnet and door handles to be integrated with the chrome strip, creating a much cleaner look to the car's side. The door handles pop up when the central locking is activated and close automatically when the door is shut. The bonnet handles would also be released automatically by pressing a switch inside the car.

Although the original car's proportions have been maintained - a short rear overhang and a long bonnet - the MkIV has grown considerably. Modern safety legislation and motoring comforts such as airbags and air-conditioning make it almost impossible to package everything into a car the same size as the original: just

look how much the MINI has grown. Comparable in size to a BMW Z3, the GT6 MkIV concept offers more room, comfort and practicality than the original ever could.

Triumph was once a direct BMW rival, with a range of pretty, sporty and innovative cars that were popular in America. The prospect of relaunching an entire brand is without doubt a daunting one for any manufacturer, but given BMW's success with the MINI, one can only hope the Bavarian company might recognise the strength and potential of the Triumph marque, which is currently gathering dust in its brand portfolio. Perhaps BMW could take a leaf out of Ford's book; the blue oval's "Living Legends" studio is dedicated to capturing the essence of past motoring icons such as the GT40 and stunning Ford 49 (Motoring, August 24).

These images are my design fantasy and are purely speculative, but give a clear impression of how a new Triumph GT6 could look: a blend of svelte, classic lines stretched taut over modern proportions and fused with clean, simple details. Now could be the time for the triumphant return of a much-loved British brand. If BMW is listening...