

Hands on with the elephant

Richard Sails & John Kenyon help with the task of removing the engine



The Elephants Holden V8 unit was unfortunately never stamped up with an engine number, so the block's '21 G7' and '5.0L' casting marks had to be used to help identify the lump. These marks tell us that the block, cast on the 21st of July 1987, is from a 1988 black V8 4987cc Holden Commodore VN unit, and one would suspect it to be one of the first they produced. The head casting mark '92060019' tells us that the engine must carry the Holden LB9 performance option, including; Crane roller rockers with uprated springs, larger hydraulic lifters, a revised camshaft assembly, flat top pistons to increase the compression ratio to 9.0:1, heavier and stronger performance crankshaft and conrods, longer pushrods, twin throttle bodies, a ram tube inlet manifold and high flow pintle type injectors. This gives the unit as it stands an impressive 288.10 bhp at 5200rpm with 283.96 lb.ft of torque at 4800rpm. It is worthy of mention here that in the summer of 1988, TVR flew in Holden's chief engineer from Australia to chip a custom ECM especially configured for the prototype and to set the car up. So it will be intriguing to discover what figures the chipped unit will actually return after its rebuild and run-in. I can't wait to see.

We now spend a fun Sunday afternoon removing the engine and stripping and logging the ancillaries. The manifolds have to be unbolted and then the engine lifted from the chassis, leaving the manifolds behind within the chassis, so refitting should be fun.

Upon removal the water pump showed obvious signs of wear, with wash marks visible in the casting. This is perhaps a little more wear than one would have expected to see, as the car has only travelled 24,002 miles from new. Perhaps this is something to keep an eye on in the future.

Most engine parts required should be available from Australia ex-stock. We shall wait for the unit to be fully stripped down before completing our shopping list and striking up a deal with Shacks Holden in Fremantle. All of the electrical ancillaries are Bosch Australia, with the exception of the Alternator which is Hitachi. All these items will be replaced with genuine Australian parts to keep the car as authentic as possible.

So with ancillaries removed, the engine was then taken indirectly to Knight Racing in Daventry. Knight Racing has a long history in preparing GT race cars and specialise in American V8s. They also currently prepare Lawrence Tomlinson's LNT Racing T400 GT2 engines which will be competing for TVR in Sebring and Le Mans this year. Here the Holden engine will be fully blueprinted and dyno tested. So when the unit is installed back into the car later this summer, it shouldn't need to be taken out again.

Knight Racing uses Alan Jackson at ATJ Transmissions in Chester for most of their gearbox work, so as advised I duly deposited the Borg Warner T5 unit with him. When the box is rebuilt I shall then deposit the diff with Alan for a complete overhaul too. Interestingly Alan did point out that this particular T5 unit is not of UK origin, but is a standard US spec box. One can only presume therefore that it must have been supplied to TVR by Holden as part of a complete package along with the engine and ancillaries. The US Borg Warner carries very similar ratios to the UK spec unit, with the most striking difference being that 5th gear on the UK box gives you a ratio of 0.795:1 whereas this US spec box gives you an impressive 0.727:1 – so Dave Cumming and his engineer hitting 180mph on the M55 whilst road testing the car in 1988 now appears quite feasible.

So with the engine, box and diff taken care of for the moment and the chassis having been re-deposited at RT Racing, we take a leisurely Sunday afternoon off and Heather & I drive down to meet Steve & Jenny Charlesworth for lunch. Steve drives the famous '450 TVR' silver Motorshow SEAC and being expert in all things stainless and a huge Wedge fan, has kindly volunteered to fabricate the Elephants new fuel tanks and straps for us. Several pints and a 12 ounce Sirloin later, Steve & Jenny disappear off with the leaky old tanks in the back of their pickup, whilst we drive home with a little less rust that we set off with.

It is now three weeks until Easter, at which time we shall be fabricating a full set of splash moulds for the Elephant – just in case. So the prototype bodysell, which we have largely ignored for the past three months, suddenly becomes the priority. We now have a deadline for stripping the remaining body ancillaries, cleaning the shell and painstakingly coating it with six layers of blue wax. We then have to line the shed floor with plastic and lift the body to a more central and workable position.

That done, other jobs to the end of April include taking the OZ Racing 16 inch Lattice Alloys and Toyo T1-R Proxes to Pristine Wheels in Woburn Sands for a complete refub and to have the new Toyos fitted and balanced. Also the Elephants clocks will be sent to Caerbont Automotive Instruments in Swansea for cleaning & recalibration whilst we dismantle the doors and investigate new lights and seatbelts.

Oh and if I get chance I'll take the 400SE out for a spin too – I very nearly forgot...

Howard Bryan
www.tvrwhiteelephant.co.uk