

Having boldly assured Peter Wheeler that upon completion, the White Elephant would be driven to every regional TVR Car Club meeting in the UK, entering a few classic races and possibly even gracing the paddock at the Goodwood Festival of Speed, I started to feel just a little apprehensive as to the possible consequences of my audacious statement. Thrashing the 400SE around Three Sisters and ripping off the chin spoiler is one thing, but the possibility of having a knock, even something quite minor, in a unique, hand-carved, fibre and foam concept car, fills me with dread.



The White Elephant

Turns Red & Mouldy!

The inner body is modified Tasmin FHC and shouldn't pose too much of a problem. The outer shell though is the one-off brainchild of John Ravenscroft, with input from Neill Anderson and PW himself and is totally irreplaceable. As the custodian of the old girl it is impingent upon me to protect her as far as I can. A set of splash moulds therefore had to be fabricated to assure us of Nelly's longevity, to give me some peace of mind and to help with future insurance premiums.

To start the ball rolling I enlisted some West Lincs help. Jim Edwards was roped in for a couple of days to help strip the final items from the shell and smooth over a few minor imperfections with the mouse, then Nelly was carried outside for her bath. Sitting her on a stack of pallets topped with a layer of dense foam, the guys set to work with the shampoo, whilst John and Gus prepared the shed. Neil and Adrian Ashworth decided it would be more thorough (or perhaps hilarious) to balance Nelly on her side to enable them to wash her bottom properly. "She's on her balance point now" shouted Adrian, "I can hold her with just one finger!" I didn't dare to look.

Having dried her off we returned Nelly to the shed. A total of 15 splash moulds were to be fabricated which could be used to manufacture complete new body panels, or repair patches, if ever the worst was to happen. The longest moulds would capture the complete side of the car from front to back, including the sill. The nose and rear would be made as a complete mould each, as would the bonnet and the doors. The four wheel arch returns, two door recesses, fuel filler recess and front nose return would complete the set.

First job was to cover the body with six coats of blue release wax, to ensure the finished moulds would actually come away from the shell. It is essential to cover the panels thoroughly with the release wax and polish off carefully, leaving at least an hour between coats to prevent drag. Each coat took over half a day to apply and ate through a brand new set of rubber gloves. Lovely job!

Next task was to hot-weld the returns and flanges onto the body. Locating the flanges correctly is paramount, as they will form the edges of our individual moulds and afterwards allow us to bolt them all together to create one complete snapshot of the entire vehicle; essential for the manufacture of straight and accurate panels. It is also worthy of note here that if the returns are located in the wrong position, the finished moulds might never come off at all. Much care and attention must therefore be taken at this stage.

The flanges properly placed, we can now proceed with two applications of red pigmented gel-coat. Red was chosen as a contrast to the Elephant's pearlescent white paintwork, allowing us to see where we had been. Next, over a period of several weeks, each panel is laid up with a single layer of polyester resin coated tissue-mat, to give the finished mould a smooth and even face, followed by two or three double lay-ups of 450 gram resin coated chopped strand-mat. Key areas are given an extra layer of mat or are well overlapped, building inherent strength and rigidity into the field.

Extensive or larger flatter areas always benefit from staying in situ for longer. It was therefore decided to keep the splash moulds on the car until the last minute. Better for them to cure on the car than on the shelf...

Four months later, having trimmed the flanges back and drilled the location holes through, we set about releasing the moulds. Soon the red mouldy Elephant was white once more. The splashes had been a success and another chapter was complete. An important investment in the old girl's future.

A number of quirky facts did arise from our four month fibreglass fest. On attempting to remove the radiator, I discovered that it wouldn't come out at all. The aperture was just too small. Having sought help from John Ravenscroft, he confirmed that the complete nose section was cut from the old 420 Sports Saloon prototype, following its outing at the 1987 Motorshow and grafted onto the front of Nelly - with the radiator

still in place. The 420 nose now being bonded rigid by John to complement the Elephant's design, the horizontally installed radiator was there to stay. John has now very kindly advised me as to how to modify and re-fit the rad', making life just a little easier in the future. He also confirmed that the famous pearlescent white paintwork was no mistake, but was chosen to hide any possible ripples in the foam based, fibreglass clad body. After all this was TVR's first attempt at building a prototype using modelling foam.

Neill Anderson has also confirmed the origins of the Kevlar bonnet. Apparently Chris Schirle had commissioned the bonnet for a Tasmin race car he was building. Neill & John decided to 'liberate' it from Chris and modify it for use on Nelly. I wonder if he ever found out where it disappeared to?

I appreciate the Elephant is a custom car built especially for Peter Wheeler, but I wonder if the driver's door was made 12mm longer than the passenger side's just to assist him in getting in and out more easily? I'll let you decide that one...

So splash moulds complete, we can now start work on the body proper. Some strengthening will be added to the shell and then she can be prepared for a visit to the Bristol Avenue spray shop. The engine has been deposited with Jamie at TVR Power, who is giving the Holden lump his personal attention & RT Racing have now re-sprayed the chassis ready for re-assembly.

More updates to follow later in the year as we now start the exciting task of re-building the beast.

Quote of the month:
Howard Bryan "How long did it take you to build the Elephant, John?"

John Ravenscroft "Not quite as long as it's taking you, Howard!"

Enough said...

Howard Bryan
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