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MONSTERS INC by John Barker

This Virage has a turbocharged 7-litre V8 and more than twice the power of the original. Scream if you want to go faster.



We could play a game, I could ask you to guess how much power this Aston Virage has. We could start the bidding at 310bhp, the rating of the standard car, and you'd guess much higher, knowing that we're featuring it because it's not standard. But it's pointless because the figure is so unfeasibly high you'd only get it right by pure fluke.

So, let's get the headline numbers down as a matter of fact. This Virage develops a truly monumental 720bhp. A respectful pause is due ... thank you. That's more than any current supercar, more than twice what a Virage should have, and also significantly more than the most muscular Virage-based Aston ever to roll out of the Newport Pagnell works, the 600bhp Vantage V600. That's not all - it develops an even more extraordinary 1100 lb ft of torque at 3500rpm.

Take another look if you haven't already. There aren't many clues, are there? Bigger alloys and that's it. The wealthy customer who commissioned it from Lynx Motors International wanted it as regular-looking as possible and even resisted the subtle up-sizing of the wheels, relenting only when he was convinced that they were necessary to accommodate brakes massive enough to stop the thing.

It has taken Sussex-based Lynx, better known for its exceptional D-type and lightweight E-type replicas, almost two years to create this extraordinary Aston. Standing beside it in the Lynx's workshop a hundred questions are ricocheting around inside my head but two are more insistent than the rest - why and how? Why would anyone want a 700bhp Virage that looks standard, and how on earth do you find that sort of performance and make it useable?

The why is harder to answer because the owner wishes to remain anonymous. Boss of Lynx, John Mayston-Taylor, provides an enigmatic answer: "Why not?" There aren't many companies that could take on such a project, he explains. The Virage owner already had a relationship with the company and felt confident that they were the right people to turn his dream into reality. Talking generally about Lynx customers, Mayston-Taylor describes them broadly as successful people aged between 45 and 65 who have gained a sense of their own mortality and decided to enjoy their success. That's an eloquent, long-hand translation of the phrase "mid-life crisis", I think.

Our Virage owner knew exactly what he wanted and it wasn't a Vantage. "He specifically said no flared wheelarches and no bonnet vents — the body had to remain completely standard," explains Andrew Parkinson who, along with Stuart Carre, is chief architect of the project. An absence of vents made things potentially tricky because the owner was also insistent that it had to have a single turbocharger, like a Bentley Turbo, and turbocharging generally develops a great deal of under-bonnet heat.

"Aston Martin were very interested in the project and gave us a few pointers along the way," says Mayston-Taylor. "It's the sort of project the Service Department at Newport Pagnell might have got involved with in the past," he adds, "but since they became part of Ford there are product liability issues to consider..."

Finding the power, monstrous though it is, was in some ways the easy part. The Virage had already been to Aston specialist RS Williams and been upgraded from 5.3 to a full 7 litres, with steel conrods and a steel billet crankshaft, so it was deemed more than capable of handling a turbo. Finding a blower with the right characteristics was the first task and here the internet proved to be very useful for comparing specifications of the various units available, as it would when it came to building a drivetrain capable of transmitting the resulting torque.

By this time last year, Lynx had hit on a turbo that gave the desired boost characteristics; on the dyno the V8 showed peaks of 720bhp at 4500rpm and 1090lb ft of torque at 3500rpm running 14psi boost. "We would have liked to have lowered the compression ratio from 8.8 to one," says Parkinson, "but it does mean that there's less turbo lag". Too right. The dyno graph shows that the engine produces 700lb ft at just 2500rpm, way in excess of the 550lb ft/4000rpm peak of the supercharged Vantage V600.

The bonnet hinges up to reveal a packed yet tidy engine bay that shows surprisingly little in the way of heat-containing lagging. This is because the exhaust piping and turbo housing are coated with a clever heat-resistant ceramic finish inside and out, "When it's really hot it goes an odd mouldy green colour," muses Parkinson. As on a TVR Griffith, the exhausts from each bank of the V8 are routed to the front of the engine bay and spliced together into a single pipe that dives down and delivers its hot breath to that one huge turbo, tucked down between the engine's front pulley and the radiators. On the impeller side, the compressed fresh air passes through an intercooler before being fed into the engine via the original plenum chamber, which required new seals since previously it was under vacuum. Meanwhile, the problem of heat build-up in the engine bay was neatly solved by fitting two small but very efficient thermostatically-controlled fans in the inner wings.

The original front engine mounts are supplemented by a further pair higher up the engine and a gearbox mount that is rated at 1500lb ft - it came from the US where it is more commonly used on drag racers. The gearbox itself started life as a four-speed GM automatic of the type used in the Bentley Turbo. It's now about 80 per cent new - more internet research by Parkinson turning up Kevlar clutch plates - while the





torque converter is a beautiful handmade one-off. As an added touch, the 'box is now controlled by an ECU which can be plugged into a laptop, allowing the shift points to be adjusted and set.

The Newport Pagnell engineers wouldn't recognise the underside as that of a Virage. The transmission tunnel is caged, just in case the bespoke propshaft should ever get free, while the whole rear end has been re-made to provide solid location of the Vantage-sourced Salisbury differential and the suspension. Parkinson is particularly pleased with the diff mounts, which are all in compression under power.

Much of the suspension is from the Vantage, which is a good thing except for the fact that the Vantage is three inches wider than the Virage. All of that is clawed back by the offsets of the tailor-made magnesium alloy wheels which, as you'll already have noticed, fit comfortably inside the standard arches. Lynx wanted to use the Vantage V600's incredible brakes but for some reason Aston Martin wouldn't sell them, so they created their own version with the expert and enthusiastic help of Alcon.

I can't imagine how much it has cost to re-engineer the Virage to this level over the last two years, and Mayston-Taylor isn't about to tell me. Probably just as well, I think, as I slide behind the wheel. From the passenger seat Parkinson points out a few non-standard items - the owner stipulated no additional dials so a couple of non-essential minor gauges have been replaced with LCD dials showing fuel and boost pressure, post-intercooler air temperature and battery voltage. There's traction control with an intermediate setting that allows just enough wheelspin for the optimum 0-60. There's also a discreet button that switches boost pressure between eight and 14psi. I go for eight to start with. "To be honest, there's not much difference between them," says Parkinson. What does the owner think of it, I ask. "Oh, he's only driven it at 4psi boost so far - he was impressed."

I'm pretty impressed, too, before I've even had a chance to spool up any interest from the turbo. The reason is the chassis. My abiding memory of the Vantage V600 is of a huge car with huge performance that made a wide A-road feel like a kart track. The Lynx Virage tips the scales at 2100kg, so it's even heavier, yet it feels remarkably wieldy. The steering has good weight, the suspension is obviously quite firmly controlled but there's compliance where it's needed. "We deliberately stuck with a tyre with a generous sidewall so the ride would be good," says Parkinson, adding that the owner wanted the effortless feeling you get with a Bentley Turbo. Seems to me they've done better than that.



We're drifting around the clogged outskirts of St Leonards on Sea, heading for the coast at Dungeness, so there's no chance yet to feel 1100lb ft of torque get its shoulder in behind 2.1 tons of leather, aluminium and, er, carbonfibre? "The dash was finished like this in five special edition run-out Virages," explains Parkinson, "this one is number three. Mind you, the carbon is stuck to wood."

The V8's voice clearly hasn't been emasculated. The plumbing of a turbo normally mutes the induction bellow of an engine, but this 7-litre whirrs and rumbles like a good 'un. "We could quieten it down - it depends what the customer wants," says Parkinson, before advising me that there's a tasty straight coming up.

The pedal hits the carpet, there's a low, steady whistle from the turbo and we're soon reeling in the road like we're riding a huge elastic band nailed to the horizon. It's not neck snapping, more an insistent force gradually ramping up to the point where you're accelerating very hard. And it stays that strong, for as long as your right foot remains planted, the greenery either side blurring more and more until it seems that the only point still in clear focus is the very end of the straight ... which is suddenly rushing to meet you at extraordinary speed.

It's not like normal car acceleration, this. The low whistle brings to mind an Inter-City 125 hauling out of a station under full power as massive torque gradually gets the better of massive inertia. The auto 'box slides one gear into the next, shifting smoothly and with no discernable interruption in the out-pouring of urge, the revs seeming to stay around 4,000rpm, as if you're driving the CVT-equipped car.

It's a fraction stronger when you push the button for full boost but, as Parkinson hinted, the effect is the same whatever. This mesmerising, relentless, deceptive acceleration is the preserve of hugely powerful and, it seems, heavy cars. The appeal of this bespoke Aston runs deeper than that, though.

With due respect for its considerable inertia, you can enjoy it through the turns, too. Guide it into a corner and it's keen, willing even. You can string sequences of bends together with satisfaction, leaning on the front end with confidence and spooling up a modest amount of boost early to adjust the balance for the exit. It has plenty of mechanical grip, and the cushioning effect of the torque converter takes the sting out of abrupt throttle openings so that, in the dry at least, that power isn't a liability. Except to your licence.

It was only when I was driving home in our latest Fast Fleet addition, the fizz-bang 320bhp Mitsubishi Evo VII RS Sprint, that the Virage's monumental performance pulled into clear focus. Straight up, the Evo felt sluggish...