## "Six" appeal: Triumph GT6, born under the sign of Venus

by Giancarlo Cavallini

A long bonnet with a sexy "bulge" that conceals but lets imagine the strength and power of her long six-cylinders engine, a cozy, almost intimate cockpit, and a streamlined tail drawn perhaps by the wind or, more simply, buy the magic pencil of Giovanni Michelotti, the artist. This is the Triumph GT6.

For a long time I wondered if the GT6 is a wonderful car with a beautiful engine, or a wonderful engine on a beautiful car. This paralyzing doubt found an answer when I firstly turn the ignition key, listened for a while to the symphony of her six-cylinders and engaged first gear that seemed to never end. The GT6 is a car to drive, a wonderful lady ready to be taken everywhere and to accompany you with her magic combination of sweetness and strength than only Ladies have and can express.

Big sister of the Spitfire, the GT6, so tells the story, was born from the umpteenth idea of Giovanni Michelotti and Herry Webster: in the wake of the Spitfire success, the Italian designer and the British engineer realized that a coupé version, that they from the beginning called *Spitfire Gt*, could have as many success as the open top version. It is also likely that Coventry had noticed the fairly good success of the glassfibre hardtops produced by some small businesses to turn the Spitfire into a coupé.



The hardtop produced by Fibrepair was available since 1963: sold at 57 pounds, it changed the Spitfire in a coupè. The Kamm tail was inspired to the one designed by Zagato for the Alfa Romeo, an idea that was not to be followed by Michelotti.

Webster proposed the idea of a coupé version to the Leyland Board in august 1963, but while waiting for a decision by the Company directors, on his' own initiative he asked Michelotti to start

working on this project, with the intention to have just a closed version of the Spitfire; the goal was to limit as far as possible the economic investment required for the tools and moulds for the production of the new car, adopting the same chassis, the whole mechanical and all the main body parts of the Spitfire.



Webster had one of the Spitfire prototypes, the one with chassis X691 and registered 4305 VC, sent to Turin to help Michelotti to work beyond just the drawings. Michelotti did not disappointed the British: the Spitifre was modified adding a streamlined hardtop, original in the idea of a practical rear door and in the shape of the rear windows: the design was so perfect, equilibrated and harmonic in every respect that nothing led to understand that the car was derived from an open top version. The bonnet had a visually impacting air intake, a solution that, in the sixties, was common to many Italian *Gran Turismo*.

The side was unchanged, crossed by the characteristic horizontal line that made it to appear even lower than real, thanks to an effect of lights and shadows, an optical effect sharply stopped before the rear fender that, with its curve, gave movement to the surfaces.

The Spitfire, turned into a coupé and painted red, returned to Canley in autumn 1963, just in time to be examined by the management that not only approved the project, but went beyond planning the presentation of the new coupé for the 1964 London Motor Show. The project approved was the original one by Webster and Michelotti, a coupé that was simply the closed version of the Spitfire, therefore this project never received a code name, as tradition in Standard Motor Company. Everything seemed decided and planned, no one then could imagine that three





A shot of the "Spitfire Gt" taken in Coventry at her arrival from Turin: the roof shape and the rear door will remain identical in the final GT6, while a different design was adopted for the drip, the door windows (in this shot still without quarterlights) and for the position of the fuel cap.

long years of work would have been required before the new coupé could be in display at a car dealer shop. The Spitfire Gt had already the line of the GT6 and its design had nothing wrong. It was attractive and elegant, proportioned and with well refined interiors. already in May 1964 the small 4 cylinders engine was removed and replaced by the Vitesse 1596 cc six cylinders. The Spitfire Gt proved infact to be better than the open version for top speed, but not for acceleration, due to the higher weight. At Coventry they were aware that it would have been very difficult to sell a slower car for a higher price, hence the pragmatic decision to fit a more powerful engine. The idea to develop a tuned or an increased version of the small

4 cylinders was rejected because of the long development time required. The engineers in Coventry therefore turned their attention to their proven 6-cylinders. The idea to install the longer engine on the Spitfire chassis was not frightening the Coventry engineers that had already developed a similar idea installing the same engine on the modified Herald chassis: the six-cylinders was a relative of the 4.-cylinders, having the same lateral size, general arrangement and location of all auxiliaries, with the exception of the starter motor.



The Michelotti proposal for the interiors, elegant and well refined, with bucket seats inspired by the rally cars of the time. The dashboard is a modified version of the one of the Spitfire. The steering wheel, with aluminum punched spokes and the abundance of gauges confirms the idea of a "Gran Turismo".

With a pair of Stromberg carburetors and a twin exhaust the 1596 cc six cylinders was able to give 89 bhp, that were however reduced to just 77 if a more economical single exhaust system was adopted. In this latter configuration the *Spitfire Gt* made her maiden voyage in June 1964. Driven by Graham Robson, then manager of the "*Works Team*" and today well known historian of the Coventry brand, 4305 VC was taken first to Le Mans then to Paris to have approval of the roof dimensions by the organizers of the French race and to obtain the homologation fiche to participate to he "24 Hours" in the category "prototypes" for the four Works Spitfire already built and that had the fiberglass hardtop made on the design of the metal one of the Michelotti prototype.

The higher speed obtained, also thanks to adoption of a 3.89:1 differential, evidenced a series of problems, including an issue with the door windows, without quarterlights and with no guides, that at high speed developed vibrations and loose adherence with the seals. The increase in performances also required a thorough review of mechanical aspects, from the trim, due to the higher load on the front wheels and the different position of the engine, to the braking system

that was necessarily to be enhanced, to the cooling system that required a deep engineering study to cope with the radiator located more forward, and lower than the engine head.



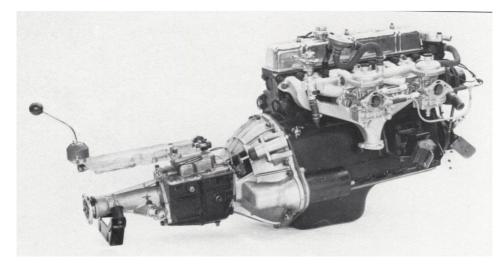
The first prototype of the Works Spitfire used for the tests before the participation to the 24 Hours Le Mans in 1964: the hardtop is the copy in fiberglass of the one designed and built in Turin by Michelotti for the Spitfire Gt and proved to have a significant aerodynamic efficiency, while the bonnet is still without the headlamp fairing.





In the following months some news on a new coupé by MG (the future MGB fastback) started leaking in the British press; these rumors did not left indifferent the Triumph managers and in Coventry the idea arose to adopt the more powerful and performing version of the six cylinders, the 2 liters version adopted for the Triumph 2000 saloon. Two prototypes with the new 2 liters engine, a stronger fully synchronized gearbox and a new 3.27:1. differential were therefore prepared.

The first prototype, X742 with plate EVC 375 C, was ready in April 1965 and the second, X746 with plate FWK 319 D, was made available to the testers in November the same year.



The six cylinders Triumph designed by David Eley in the second half of the 50s, here shown in the 2 liters version with double Stromberg CD 150 carburetors, ready for the GT6. Having a compression ratio 9,5:1, a power of 95 bhp at 5000 rpm and a torque of 16,22 kgm at 3000 rpm, it would allow the GT6 0 to 100 km/h in 11 seconds, reaching 75 km/h in first gear.

With the exception of few details in the interiors, and the lack of the reverse gear light, the styling solutions of the two prototypes were already the final ones, from the characteristic bulge on the bonnet, now also equipped with hot air exhaust louvres and a new radiator grill, new quarterlights and rear vent windows. If the Spitfire chassis was in practice unmodified, with exception of the front suspensions turrets, the suspensions and the braking system were modified, the latter maintaining the same disk/drum system but equipped with increased front calipers and disks and drums. Tests were performed by the test drivers headed by Fred Nicklin while a small batch of preseries cars was assembled: a LHD KC0007L was sent to Sweden to test the heating system, the KC0008L and KC0009L to California to test the cooling system and the emissions. KC0001, 0002L and 0003L were dismantled at the end of 1966 after completing the tests and their parts were reused at beginning of 1967 to produce two new cars having the same "commission number".



The story of the prototype FWK 319D, white with blue interiors, that appears in many brochures is wrapped in mystery: it was sent to Lucas to test their mechanical injection system and never return to the factory.

It is difficult to believe that the big roof was supplied to Forward Radiator of Birmingham building the body by Pressed Steel of Oxford, owned by the competitor BMC.

In summer 1966 the pre-production begun: nine GT6 were built in July, seventeen in August and 120 in September: the production line was able to produce 25 to 30 cars per day, a value remaining constant in the following years and able to fully satisfy the demand.





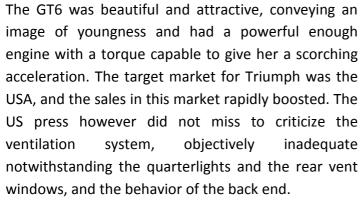
The official presentation was at the Earls Court Motor Show in London, taking place from 19 to 29 October 1966 and where the new car, in display with a white livery, was the protagonist of the Triumph stand and achieved a good success.





Earls Court, 19 - 29 October 1966: the GT6 is unveiled. The sale price in Great Britain was 985 Pounds, with spoke wheels among the few optionals. With a weight of 864 kg opposed to the 712 kg of the Spitfire, the GT6 claimed 42% more power.









The GT6 in display in New York.

In extreme and peculiar conditions the "swing axle", inherited from the Spitfire chassis, made the GT6 to be hard to control because both the rear wheels could take an excessively positive camber angle. This was very well known in Coventry where since years a new an improved version of the "swing axle" called "swing spring" and designed by Ray Henderson from "Experimental Department" was available, but not put into production.

What happened was that the set of the bumpers in the cars for the US market was made softer, following a precise request by the American Commercial Direction of Standard Triumph. This modification emphasized the limits of the "swing axle" in conditions of a fast double change of direction, limits that however could be overcome adopting a conventional camber compensator. Sales anyway did not suffer from these criticism, took off fast and remained constant for all 1967 and 1968 thanks also to the quality that the GT6 could express and that were well perceived and appreciated. The "Road & Track" magazine concluded the article on the GT6 test writing" *GT6* [...] is something fairly new and distinctive... there is no comparison, and she is worth the money"; "Motor" magazine underlined in the test drive that the GT6 was accelerating with "fierce serenity" and that a 2000 cc engine on a Spitfire could create nothing else that a "supersonic Spitfire".













Above: six photorgaphs (neveer published before) shot during the test of the GT6 by "Motor" magazine.

Below: GVC 562D and GHP 432D, two of the GT6 used by Triumph for promotional pictures.









The GT6 internals were carefully desinged and highly refined; she was spacious, the dashboard was in wood, the well refined seats took inspiration by the rally models while being comfortable and restraining. Good also the trunk capacity thanks to its regular shape and the wide rear door.





Left. The GT6 displayed at the Geneva Show in march 1967. Right the red FKV 83D, another of the GT6 used by the Triumph advertising dept.







The coupé in a drawing by Giovanni Michelotti where the name "Spitfire GT" is replaced by "GT6" considered more appropriate to express the car high performances and her suitability to long distances, and the adoption of a six cylinders engine.







Left: GT6 at Daytona 24 Hours in February 1968 driven by Cline and Pickering.

Below: GT6 driven by Jean Jacques Thuner and John Gretener at Montecarlo Rally in 1967, and in an advertising shot for Castrol oil.





In Coventry all comments, both positive and negative, were given consideration, as if all the review of the car magazines have been read, being well aware that what done was the maximum achievable in that moment, with overlapping of the work to prepare the third series of the Spitfire. 1967 turned out to be even more challenging, with the engineers working full time on the projects for the renewal of the TR and that of the other models, while rumors on the negotiations between Leyland and BMC in view of a fusion did not contribute to a quiet working environment. In January 1967 Triumph delivered the Sptifire Mark 3, with a different positioning of the front bumper with respect to the two preceding series, a modification required to comply with the new US safety standards and that caused the new Spitfire to be nicknamed "bone in the teeth".

The same modification was adopted for the GT6 in autumn 1968, when Triumph disclosed the second series of the coupè, named "Mk2".



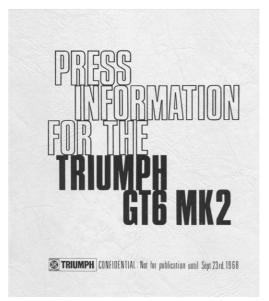
From the external the differences were very limited, but in the mechanics the upgrades were more significant and were answering to the criticisms that the GT6 had received: the engine had more power thanks to the adoption of a new head, and the rear suspensions were completely redesigned to allow a better control of the camber geometry thanks to new lower arms and "Rotoflex" elastic

connections on the drive shafts If the GT6 was maybe losing a bit its original pure shape, she certainly gained performances and handling. In the interiors the changes were limited to a new steering wheel and a dashboard with a new graphic of the gauges, more rational switches, more functional controls and, above all, new air nozzles.



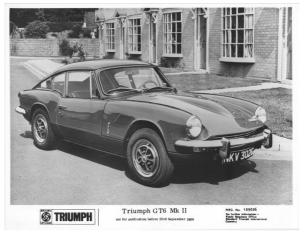


Above: the new GT6 rear suspension with the lower arm, the adjustable strut brace and the Rotoflex joints on the dirve shaft, whose purpose was to manage the changes in length of the drive shafts. This system, not too sophisticated but efficient, was adopted since the fifties by Cooper for its Grand Prix.











Kas Kastner, the man that made the Triumph successful in the US motor racing and founder of the "Triumph Competition Department" in the USA, and the Bob Tullius' Team Group 44 Inc. did not take long to throw the new version of GT6, named in the USA "GT6+" (GT6 Plus) in the ring of the American racing circuits and victories were not late to come.

GT6+ was powerful, stable, reliable, fast and in a short time became so competitive to win the National SCCA Championship in the E Production category.







The second series of GT6 gained the competitiveness needed to make her a winner in the SCCA Championship. In the preceding page picture it is shown with the driver Bob Tullius, in the photo below left with the driver Karl Swanson, talking with "the myth" Kas Kastner in the shot on the right.

It has to be remembered that since autumn 1967 Michelotti had started to work on a complete restyling of the GT6, which led to a prototype whose distinguishing features were a new bonnet with retractable headlights and without the typical GT6 bulge.

Triumph directors liked the idea, but did not dare to follow the way. There were rumors that retractable headlights could be forbidden by new US rules that were about to be released and the risk, for a Company exporting in the US most of its production, was too high. However, if Triumph followed a more conservative and economical way for the Mk2, some of the idea of the Michelotti prototype were later included in the third and last GT6 series, the Mk3. She will present, among others, the new shape of the rear windows, the style of the tail and the idea to underline the tail with a finishing chrome frame.





Left, the GT6 prototype with retractable headlights, in a shot dated February 1968. Right, the artist drawing that anticipates the style of the rear section that will be adopted in the folloging series.

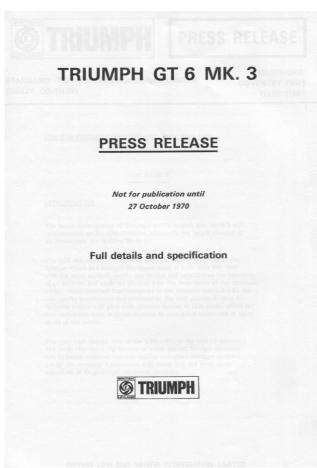
About the end of 1970 the new version was ready, but curiously the announcement was given only after the closure of the London Motor Show. Similarly to the Spitfire MkIV, the GT6 had a deep restyling of the bonnet and of the rear section, while the side was in practice unchanged. The rear

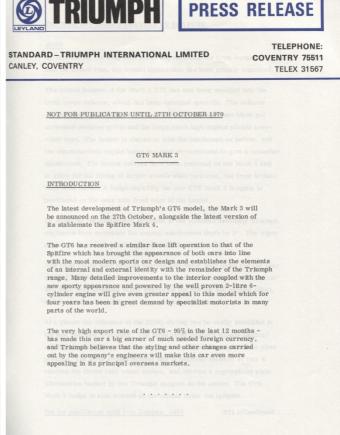
vent windows had now a smoother design and the typical fuel cap on the rear was moved to the left side. In the cockpit, there was a new steering wheel, the overdrive switch was now on the gear level knob, the seats were reclining, as the ones already installed on the last examples of the Mk2.

With these and many other upgrades, the Mk3 should have been the most successful version of the GT6, after the 15.818 and the 12.066 examples sold for the first and second series, respectively. The first comments in the specialized press were gratyfying: "Autocar" approved the design and, incredibly, recorded a top speed of 112 mph, well above the one of the two preceeding series. "Motor Sport" and "Car" magazines concluded there tests with equally positive conclusions: the former defined the Mk3 "good Value from British Leyland", the latter noted that she had a peculiar "charm, mainly thanks to her compact structure and handling quality".

Despite this, the Mk3 in the three following years stick to around 13000 cars built. The production was aimed mainly to the US market where the increasingly strict limits of the anti-pollution regulations forced Triumph to reduce the power of the Gt6 engine to comply with the legal limits, down to 79 bhp of the versions sold in 1972 and 1973.











BRITISH LEYLAND MOTOR CORPORATION LIMITED

In 1973, to reduce the costs of production and the sale price, the rotoflex system was abandoned in favor of the "swing spring" system adopted in the Spitfire Mk IV. The GT6 was at the end of her story: in the last two weeks of October only 34 cars left the Coventry factory, 36 in the first two weeks in November and just 15 in the last half of the month. With 40.926 cars built, the GT6 was a success for Triumph both because 80% of the production was exported, and because she was a car with reduced production costs and high profit margins.





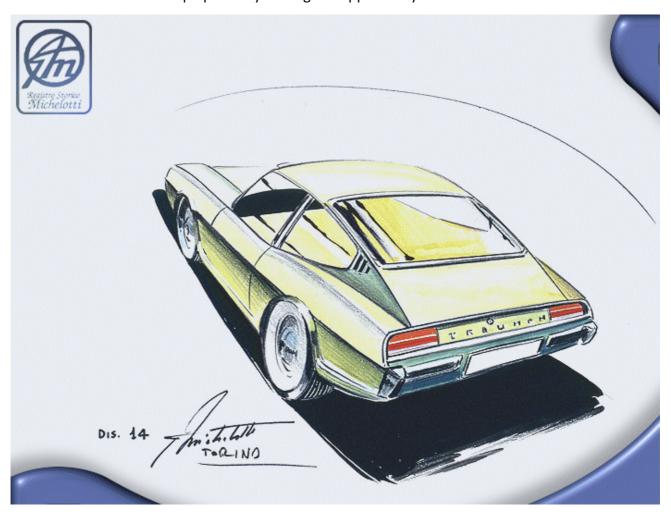


GT6 MK4, THE DREAM THAT LIVES IN ALL OF US

The Michelotti archive in Turin keeps various style studies of what could have been the Mk4 version of the GT6: among the drawings, dated between end of the sixties and the beginning of seventies, we choose this one, where the fastback design of the rear section and the discontinuity in the side confirms that Michelotti had a valuable proposal for the new series of the coupè ready, in continuity with the preceding three.

This drawing is focused to define a proposal for the style of the rear part of the car with a solution aesthetically valid, modern and well balanced.

Michelotti would have probably hit the center with this proposal, but much was changed in Canley in the seventies and Triumph probably lost a good opportunity.



**GT6** IN ITALY

The story of the GT6 in Italy can be told with just one statement: it was an unsuccessful car.

At the end of the sixties the GT6 was an unknown car in Italy and not advertised. She was expensive (2.090.000 Lire) and penalized by the high custom duties and the high road taxes that affected all cars with a six cylinders engine.

The competition of the Alfa Romeo coupè, synonym with sporting attitude, and of Lancia, synonym of elegance and quality, gave the final blow.



Ducati Meccanica first and British Leyland then, proved not to believe in the GT6, such that it is well known that some of the few cars imported stayed unsold for years in the car dealers shops. Also the car magazines, starting from the leading one ("Quattroruote") never devoted a complete test to the GT6 and were not even invited to do so. Very few are the articles published in Italy, and always very short and not in any detail.

## TRIUMPH « GT 6 »

Benché l'abitacolo sia un po' troppo contenuto rispetto alla cilindrata (e l'abbiamo precedentemente già notato) questa automobile è soddisfacente sia per il suo aspetto che per le sue prestazioni.

E' molto compatta, ha un volante decisamente sportivo, e una strumentazione tipicamente inglese. Elastico e abbastanza potente il motore (un 6 cilindri di 1998 cc.), efficienti i freni (il freno a mano si blocca solo premendo il pulsante, particolare che noi apprezziamo molto). L'overdrive non è pronto nel passaggio alle marce alte.

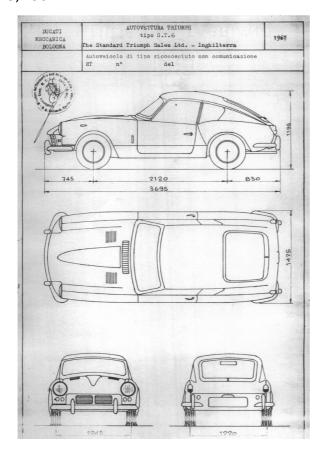
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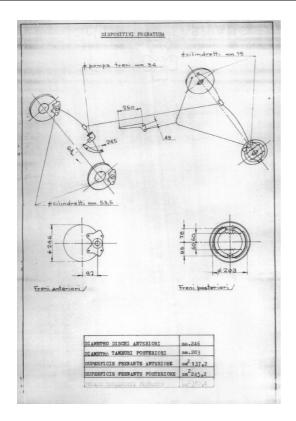
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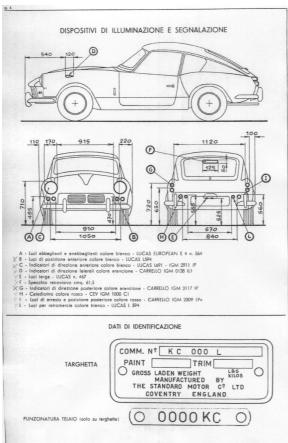
Quattroruote, october 1968

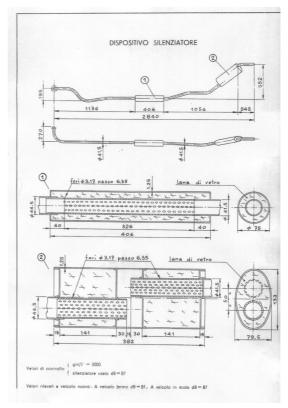
The first GT6 imported in Italy by Ducati Meccanica was KC 369L that passed all the tests required to obtain the Italian homologation in Bologna, in January 1967. Homologation was issued in March 9, 1967.



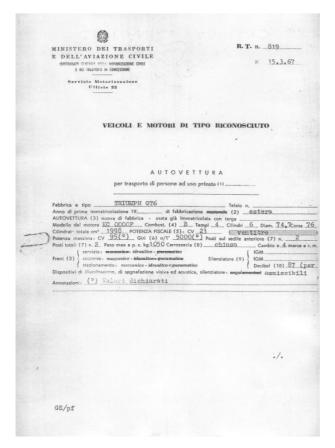
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This article is dedicated to Marco Alberghini that passed, but I am sure that somewhere he is enjoying driving a red bright GT6.

## **CREDITS**

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