

From the land of the Skoda, a 130 mph housebrick for executives

By Eric Bailey
Motoring Editor

SELLING Czech executive cars costing around £30,000 to British executives sounds like the motor industry's most nightmarish job, but Mr John Marriott is not dismayed—yet.

At the headquarters of Tatra (GB) Ltd, a modest house with showroom and workshop in the tiny village of Fosters Booth, Northampton, he pulls out a buff file fat with inquiries about their new car, the Tatra T613 Type 5 Sports Saloon.

The car from the land that gave us the Skoda sits outside and is unmissable. It looks as if the designer couldn't draw a curve, and consequently it appears to have the aerodynamics of a housebrick.

Under the bonnet there is nothing at all—but at the rear is a huge 3.5 litre air-cooled V8. £30,000 buys a decent BMW or Jaguar with a water-cooled engine at the traditional end, so what kind of people have letters in the buff file?

"They have already had the usual BMWs, Jags and Mercs," says Mr Marriott, Tatra's sales director. "Now they want something different. But they will be enthusi-



Tim Bishop says of the Tatra car he developed: 'It doesn't have to sell many and it won't'

Picture: Paul Grover

asts—for instance, we have a member of the Williams racing team coming to look at one. Tatra were one of the first motor manufacturers and their heritage is tremendous." Tatra made a series of stunning streamlined cars before the war, but 50 years of isolation during the Communist era caused chronic stagnation—now, like other East European manufacturers, the newly privatised company is desperately trying to catch up.

The idea to make the car came from Mr Tim Bishop, a

British engineer who was helping Tatra add catalysts and fuel injection systems to their engines. He had worked for Saab and Jaguar before forming his own company based at Fosters Booth. His strategy was to take the body of the previous version of the T613, the Type 4, and add Western technology. "It became very obvious that this sow's ear could be made into a bloody good car," says Mr Bishop. "We cajoled them into giving us a car, then we spent £100,000 developing it into a decent European ma-

chine. It doesn't have to sell many and it won't. But it will appeal to people who appreciate interesting engineering, and who want to make a statement."

The body style is 18 years old, but suspension, steering and brakes have all been reworked.

But the key to its individuality is the position of the engine—just forward of the rear axle for optimum weight distribution and, says Mr Bishop, an unbeatable ride and handling compromise. "Every car has its fail-

ing, and you could argue that in the Tatra it's the body style. But it has as good a ride as a Jaguar XJ40, it will out-brake and out-handle a 7-Series BMW, and it has the feel of a Porsche 911."

Tatra (GB) aims to sell 35 in Britain next year and, says Mr Marriott, the price is negotiable.

But is there really a market here for air-cooled Czech housebricks?

With cars looking more and more as if they were born in the same wind tunnel, there just might be.