

## Analysis

# British sports cars go electric

Niche manufacturers are trying to follow Tesla by making involving battery-powered cars

When it was first introduced in 2008, the Tesla Roadster proved that electric cars didn't have to be economy-biased. Real performance, it seemed, could be extracted from batteries and electric motors.

Now innovative British firms Westfield, Ginetta, Caterham and Radical, all known for building lightweight track day sports cars, are at various stages of developing their own Tesla rivals.

Westfield's electric programme is perhaps the most interesting. Back in 1999, BMW closed MG

Rover's hybrid and electric R&D department. This was acquired by Potenza Technology, which went on to buy Westfield in 2006. Potenza's MD, Paul Faithfull, worked at the defunct MG Rover department. He says the research there was "the most advanced in the world at the time".

Rover projects included the Highlander, a short-wheelbase Land Rover Defender which had an electric motor powering each wheel. It could get from 0-60mph in just 4.5sec. Other projects included two electric Metros and a military-spec

Defender hybrid that was partly powered by batteries from on-board army radios.

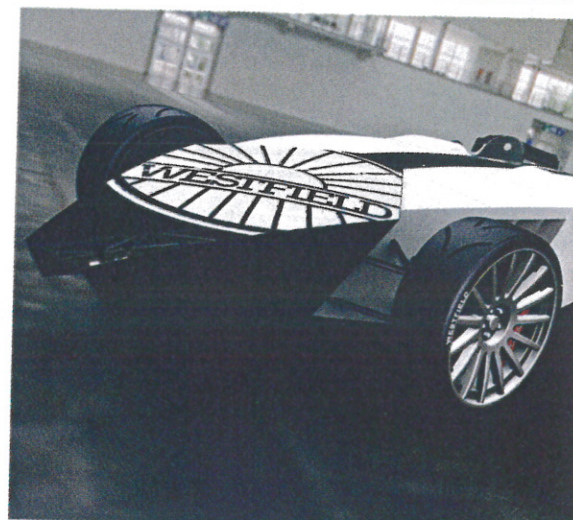
"Rover was doing stuff people didn't think of," says Faithfull, "so when Potenza acquired Westfield, we could go back to all our previous work. BMW took most of the patents, but our electric Westfield is a direct result of some of our old MG Rover work."

Westfield's first electric car is the iRacer, which has been developed with a budget of £250,000 (half of that figure has come via a government grant).

This radically styled electric race car is the first of five different electric models planned this year (one more than Renault, as Faithfull is keen to point out) and signals the start of a new image for Westfield.

"I don't want us to be compared with Caterham any more," he says. "We want a whole new style and look. We want cutting-edge, radical design and this is a real market opportunity."

One car that won't be on the roads any time soon is an electric Caterham Seven. Caterham chief Ansar Ali says the firm is still in talks with partners about developing an electric race car,



**HOW WILL THEY SOUND?** Paul Faithfull says his electric Westfields will not try to emulate conventional engine sounds. Rather, they will feature noisier electric motors and tyres, while the aero will also be refined to contribute to a "unique" sound. The inspiration? The pod racers from Star Wars Episode One. Yes, really.

and an announcement will be made within six months.

Ali believes electric cars are here to stay; he says he wants his firm to take a thorough approach to the idea. "This is not something that's going away as volume manufacturers have now embraced it," he said. "With this momentum it's inevitable."

"We want to do it properly and with the right partners; we don't just want to stick some batteries in a Seven."

While Caterham and Westfield plan to test their electric cars in motorsport events, Radical is taking a different approach to changing the image of electric cars. The firm's SRZero has been developed with mechanical engineering students from Imperial College London under the Racing Green Endurance banner.

The track-focused SRZero has a claimed range of 340 miles. Racing Green aims to prove that electric cars are viable as everyday transport by driving the car the length of the 12,000-mile Pan-American Highway from Argentina to Alaska, on roads and through climate conditions not normally suited to a lightweight sports car.

"There is a notion that electric cars are slow and boring to drive and more like milk floats," says project manager Alex Schey. "We are now seeing companies like Tesla changing that image. We want to take it further and show that electric cars are viable as normal cars."

Will Brown, Radical's marketing manager, says the firm's batteries and electric motors are the most

advanced yet in an electric car. He says the technology could become realistic for volume production as it is more readily adopted, driving costs down.

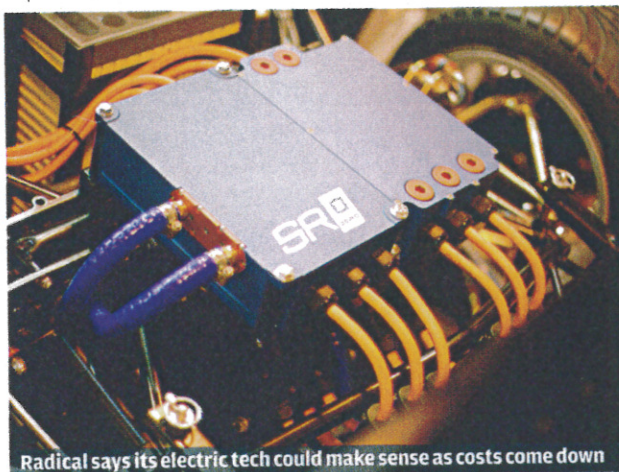
Despite being the first of these four British firms to produce an electric sports car with its G50 EV Ginetta has been unable to secure the £1.7m of government funding required to put the car into production. Chairman Lawrence Tomlinson is disappointed at the lack of interest the government has shown in his electric car.

"I drive it regularly and charge it up on my windmill. What could be greener than that?" he says. "We've developed an electric car with a true range of 200 miles, but we've been turned down as it's considered too niche."

Tomlinson says the project could be restarted again once the funding had been found. "It's just on hold," he said. "We can be busy in other areas. If we got the money, we'd pursue it. It's a real pet project of mine; we'll get there in the end."

MARK TISSHAW

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Radical says its electric tech could make sense as costs come down



**'Radical is going to drive its SRZero the length of the 12,000-mile Pan-American Highway'**