



Out of this world

PANTHER 6

Inspired by the Tyrrell F1 car, the Panther 6 was conceived to shake the Italian supercar establishment – and it still shocks today

Words: Keith Adams Photography: Paul Harmer



Cars such as the Panther 6 don't just arrive on the scene. They break cover, cameras and film crews in tow, creating a maelstrom of media attention that threatens to overwhelm and overhype. The buzz is often short-lived and, away from the motor show glitz, what we're left with can sometimes be a bit of an anti-climax. In the case of the 6, there was little chance of that – how could a machine with an 8.2-litre twin-turbo V8 and six wheels fail to astonish?

Visitors to the 1977 London Motorfair were certainly astonished when they cast their eyes on the Panther for the very first time. Most were stunned into silence; those who weren't stuttered in single syllables. The car's sheer scale – 16 feet long and nearly seven feet wide – made it impossible to miss. Here was the ultimate supercar, courtesy of Robert Jankel, founder and managing director of Panther Westwinds.

Jankel clearly had form when it came to outlandish vehicles. Initially a designer and businessman, after a few years working as a car tuner he came to the conclusion that his chosen field just didn't pay. He left to join the textile industry with the intention of earning a good living, and achieved →



‘After seeing the Tyrrell P34 Formula 1 racer Robert Jankel at the 1976 British Grand Prix, was inspired to build a six-wheel supercar’

Above
Blame the scuttle bulge on American regulations, which called for a concealed windscreen wiper.



Above
Vauxhall coils and wishbones support the four front wheels. Front compartment is dominated by heater and air-con unit.

exactly that within only a few years, making his fortune and becoming self-sufficient. In his spare time, he started building bespoke cars – one a year – and aimed them at deep-pocketed enthusiasts. The model he created in 1971, the Panther, was so well received that it proved the catalyst for him to leave the fashion industry. He sold his interest in textiles, and used the windfall to set up Panther Westwinds at a facility next door to Brooklands in Surrey. Jankel was in the car business full-time.

From 1972, the marque started building the SS100-inspired J72. Over the next few years Panther Westwinds earned a reputation for building fantastically expensive, outlandish and beautifully-finished specials, such as the Felber Ferrari, DeVille and Lazer. During the brief boom of the mid-’70s the firm found success but, as the decade wore on, sales dipped and Jankel had time to begin to dream up his next creation.

Finally, after seeing the Tyrrell P34 Formula 1 racer at the 1976 British Grand Prix, he had his inspiration. He’d build a six-wheeled supercar! As soon as he returned from Brands Hatch he started on the Panther 6 – in a separate workshop, away from the rest of the company’s staff.

Vauxhall’s Wayne Cherry and Geoff Lawson styled the new model under the guidance of Jankel himself. The droop-snoot wedge design was a Cherry speciality, and the 6 took that fashionable concept to the absolute extreme. Thanks to the four front wheels, it was already off to a flying start in terms of

wooing extrovert customers. The Tyrrell P34’s victory in the 1976 Spanish Grand Prix only served to make the six-wheel concept look like a winner. In truth, on a road car, the technical advantages of this layout were far from clear-cut.

When Tyrrell pulled the plug on the P34 in early 1977, any marketing advantages for the Panther 6 should have been wiped out. Yet that didn’t matter to Jankel – his dream still looked shockingly good, and it still had the ability to deliver plenty of wow! A liberal dose of standard production parts went into its suspension set-up. The front end featured Vauxhall wishbones (also found in the Lima), while the Cadillac Eldorado’s double-wishbone set-up (with the steering arms locked-up) kept the back end off the ground.

Jankel had planned to use Mini-type 10in wheels up front, but no tyre of that size could come close to handling the 6’s hoped-for 200mph maximum speed without failing. So he settled for two pairs of 13-inch rims at the front, and persuaded Pirelli to make P7s especially to fit.

To get the car up to that ambitious 200mph target, Jankel selected the largest engine in production at the time – the 8.2-litre Cadillac Eldorado V8. It was an astute choice, too. Because the Caddy was front-wheel drive, its engine/gearbox package could be reversed and installed in the back of the Panther 6 for a mid/rear configuration. In truth, the massive powerplant sat slightly behind the axle line, and its high



Above
Twin fuel tanks sit behind the axle line and the engine looms above it. Promises interesting handling.



'Robert Jankel claimed a maximum of 600bhp, which blew away the sub-400bhp outputs of the Lamborghini Countach and Ferrari Boxer'



Above and right: Scale model sculpted by Vauxhall's Geoff Lawson. The real thing was fashioned in aluminium and took shape in secret.



mounting made for a less-than-desirable centre of gravity. In standard form, the huge lump of Detroit iron put out 365bhp. This was nowhere near powerful enough to give the Panther 6 Lamborghini Countach-busting performance, but coaxing more muscle out of it wasn't difficult. American hot rod guru Ak Miller developed a neat-looking forced-induction arrangement, using two turbochargers, each fed by the exhaust from one bank of cylinders, supplying air into a single Holley carburettor. It was a simple and elegant arrangement.

Jankel claimed a maximum of 600bhp, which – in theory – blew away the sub-400bhp outputs of the Countach and Boxer. In fact, the one car Panther built didn't come close to that, but the figure made great publicity at its launch. The 6's power-to-weight ratio wasn't helped by its massive chassis. This hefty and structurally rigid unit had been built up from welded square-section steel tubing. Panther's claimed kerbweight of 1302kg compared unfavourably with those of the Lambo and Ferrari; in reality, it was probably even heavier than this.

Jankel wanted the 6 to be easy to drive, and its American-derived mechanicals helped achieve that goal. As well as having the Eldorado's automatic transmission, the 6 sported feather-light power-assisted steering, plus an air-conditioning system lifted straight from a Mack truck. This car might be a convertible, yet its occupants would remain cool in the hottest of climates – it was designed with the Middle East in mind, after all. The right-hand-drive cockpit would have impressed the richest and most discerning customer. It was a luxury environment dominated by

1977 PANTHER 6

ENGINE

8193cc V8, SOHC per bank, four-barrel Holley carburettor, twin Garrett turbochargers

POWER

600bhp @ 5500rpm (claimed)

TORQUE

600lb ft @ 2000rpm (claimed)

TRANSMISSION

Three-speed GM automatic, rear-wheel drive

STEERING

Power-assisted rack and pinion

SUSPENSION

Front and rear: unequal-length wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar

BRAKES

Front: four 10in discs. Rear: 11in discs

WEIGHT

1302kg

PERFORMANCE

Top speed 200mph. 0-100mph sub-8.0sec (both claimed)

electrically adjustable leather Cadillac seats, but it also had a digital instrument panel similar to the Aston Martin Lagonda's. There were telephones in the armrests, a dashboard-mounted TV, combination locks for the gloveboxes, electric windows and – the *pièce de résistance* – a hydraulically operated engine cover.

And it was in this form that the Panther 6 appeared at the London Motorfair in October 1977. Robert Jankel was bullish about his amazing creation: 'I am very serious indeed about it,' he said at the time. 'We don't build motor show gimmicks, and this car will be in production by the early part of next year.' At £39,950 (when a Ferrari BB cost £26,000) finding buyers was going to be tough, yet by the end of the show Jankel claimed to have taken 15 orders. These included Alain de Cadenet, who intended to run the 6 in the unlimited class in the 1978 Le Mans 24 Hours.

For those who wanted the ultimate, the Panther fitted the bill: it had been built to stop traffic and go like hell. The claimed 200mph top speed and sub-eight-second 0-100mph time seemed largely irrelevant, and Jankel himself alluded to this at the Motorfair, commenting: 'Of course our customers won't be able to drive it at 200mph. But they will want to say they have a car that's faster than a Ferrari, a Lamborghini or a Porsche.'

However, the Panther 6 was far from ready for production. Jankel drove it back to his factory from Earls Court, but didn't enjoy the experience. He later recalled: 'The suspension hadn't been sorted and it kept threatening to stop.' But despite that, he'd made his dream come true. 'What I remember was the reaction.





'I remember the reaction. Driving around Earls Court, it was unbelievable' – Robert Jankel

Below

Six wheels. 600bhp. A twin-turbo V8 in the back. Hmm. Not much in the way of competition there.

Driving around Earls Court, it was just unbelievable. I can remember sitting in the cockpit, feeling so chuffed.'

Things went quiet after that. Promised production was delayed and, as the second energy crisis of 1979 took hold, Panther's finances ran dry and the receivers were called in. South Korean investor Young C Kim took over, but the 6 wasn't part of the deal. Jankel then left Panther to become a design consultant. He died in 2005, having never seen the car again.

As for the 6, only one complete example was built by Panther – the show model – yet a second, left-hand-drive version was subsequently finished with parts sold by the receivers. From here, things get a little misty. The current owner of the Panther 6 in our photos – which starred at the recent Salon Privé concours – believes this is 'probably' the second variant.


'It's had an amazing life, spent mostly in the USA and Canada,' he explains. 'I bought mine from a Canadian doing solitary in a Bulgarian jail for embezzlement. He claimed this is, in fact, the first car and that it had been converted at huge cost from RHD to LHD. However, I think that was untrue. I think it is the second, and so does the Panther Car Club.'

The car had spent most of a decade in storage in Greece when our man bought it in 2005. It was in a bedraggled state,

having been regularly dragged about by a forklift. 'Every aluminium panel was dented or gouged,' says the owner. 'The paint shop had never seen such damage. Making the 6 decent took six months.'

The car looks different from Panther's original because it was made road-legal for North America. It received an E-type-style forward-opening bonnet and, more alarmingly, the scuttle line at the base of the windscreen was raised using glassfibre. Running lights were also fitted in the grille.

The owner hopes to return the bonnet to a style that matches the original car's solid casing – which should have a small panel to access the radiator – that would fit flush with the base of the windscreen. He explains: 'I'd also like to fit the fire extinguisher system and a new interior with all the original's gadgets. Yet it all costs.'

But then, the Panther 6 is an astonishing car that deserves an amazing restoration – to complement its incredible life. Robert Jankel would be proud that his dream continues to make just as big a splash now as it did back in 1977. 

The Panther is for sale at Kidston SA (www.kidston.com) for £150,000. Thanks also to Terence Borton (www.panthercarclub.com).



Driving the Panther 6
OCTANE JOINS AN EXCLUSIVE CLUB



THE ONLY BRITISH motoring writer to drive the Panther 6 in period was *Motor's* Jeremy Sinek. Having tried all the finest supercars of the 1970s, he had great insight into its comparative ability. He concluded: 'With weight distribution similar to the Porsche Turbo's, you don't take liberties... the performance takes some getting used to.'

And it *is* quick, with massive torque even before the twin turbos spool up and kick you

even harder in the back. There's huge front-end grip too, as you might expect of a six-wheeler, but the shockingly over-light steering means your only real feedback is through the seat. You can get used to that. What you won't get used to is the reactions from other road users. They don't just stare, they swerve across the road!

See video clips of the Panther 6 being driven at www.octane-magazine.com.