



1966 Thunderbird

Eleven years after introduction, the Thunderbird had become a world famous symbol of status, luxury and success. Little remained of the clean, fresh look it had worn for the first three years of its existence, but if many people missed the little two-passenger "early birds," it wasn't apparent in the sales figures for that year.

The body used in the 1966 cars had been introduced in 1964, so a styling update was called for. Little was done to the already crowded passenger compartment, which has enough gauges, dials and switches to make an airline pilot blanche. Weighing over 4,500-pounds, the car packs plenty of weight on its short 113-inch wheelbase — and a few customers complained about the somewhat sluggish performance and handling — but the 1966 Thunderbird really didn't handle badly at all.

It could slip over the century mark, but barely, turning in an honest 105 mph in a two-way average. Still, that was ample performance in the mid-1960's, and it is exactly 50 mph faster than one is allowed to drive today. The weight factor, which held the speed down, offered an advantage of great importance in cross-winds.

Even at speeds upwards of 80 mph, the car held the road with a rock-steady stance, and we rated the car excellent in directional stability. Brake fade was rapidly apparent when the car was brought to a stop several times in a row from 50 mph, and the weight certainly accounted for most of this, but under normal driving conditions, the brakes pulled the car to a quick stop without effort.

Gas mileage on the road was reckoned to

be around 14 mpg, but around town and in traffic, it dropped to a little over 8 mpg. In 1966, gas mileage wasn't anything to worry about — but today, it is a serious consideration with fuel at 58.9 a gallon in certain parts of Southern California.

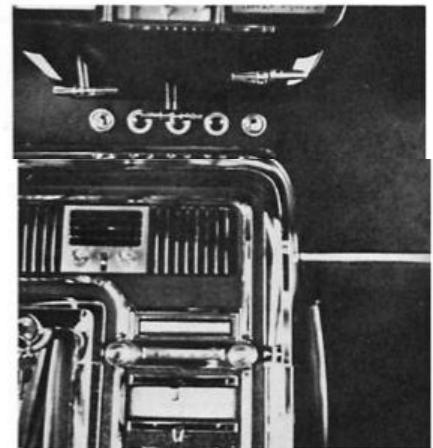
One of the innovations that Ford introduced in the Thunderbird was a full-length air vent under the back window that changed the air every few seconds when traveling at 50 mph. The car shown in these photos is a convertible, so it didn't have the vent — but with the electric rag top, it wouldn't have been really necessary.

We gave the electric top high points. Many of the parts used in it were developed for the retractable hardtop of the 1957-59 era and at the time of our test were still giving good service. Once in a while a relay switch goes out and this will cause problems, but nothing is perfect, not even Thunderbird!

The rear seat, sometimes referred to as a "lounger," is comfortable as well as easy to reach, but leg room becomes scarce if the front seats are slid backwards to make more leg room for the driver or front passenger.

Even though our test car was eight years old, it was still being used for everyday transportation by the owner, who incidentally has three Thunderbirds ranging from a 1955 to a 1972 model. The normal body squeaks that convertibles seem to have were non-existent — but we have noticed squeaks and even rattles on earlier models of Thunderbird.

We decided that the reason the car didn't have the usual old-age creaks and groans



CONTROL PANEL — The driver had all the instruments necessary for driving and operating the luxury options at his finger tip.

was the fact that it used a unitized body with reinforced side rails and crossmembers instead of a separate body and frame.

Overall, even though the 1966 Thunderbird no longer thundered and roared, it was still a fine road car, and the excess weight it had gained over the years since 1955 seems to have been pretty well distributed. Because large numbers of these cars are now turning up in the hands of collectors, we predict they will become another segment of the collecting syndrome that affects those dedicated people who like Thunderbirds above all other cars — no matter what year they are.

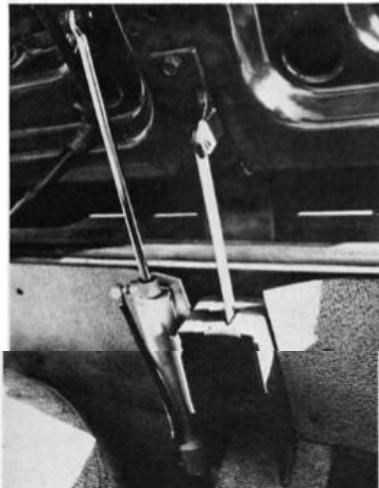
This is one Thunderbird that still has a lot to offer in its old age.



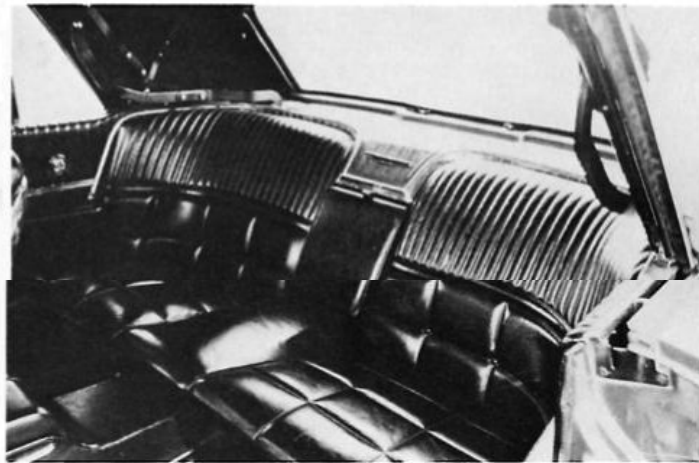
THUNDERBIRD LOOK – The driver could look back on traffic with this special Thunderbird mirror.



PASSENGER VIEW – The cockpit of the 1966 car looks like this when viewed from the passenger side.



HYDRAULIC RAMS – The rear deck and parts of the top are operated by hydraulic rams such as these.



REAR SEAT – The pleated leather seats and chrome trim divider can be seen.



FAMOUS LIGHTS – As can be seen in this sequence of flashing tail light photos, the 1966 Thunderbird had one of the most distinctive turn signals ever devised for an automobile. This same bank of lights also doubled as brake and tail lights.

HARD CORNER – The Thunderbird Illustrated team tries the car out in a hard corner.