

The Jensen Connection



Alan and Richard Jensen produced their first car in 1928 when they converted a five year old Austin 7 Chummy Saloon into a very stylish two seater with cycle guards, louvred bonnet and boat-tail. This was soon sold and replaced with another Austin 7. Then came a car produced on a Standard chassis followed by a series of specials based on the Wolseley Hornet, a popular sporting small car of the time. The early 1930s saw the brothers becoming joint managing directors of commercial coachbuilders W J Smith & Sons and within three years the name of the company was changed to Jensen Motors Limited. Soon bodywork conversions followed on readily available chassis from Morris, Singer, Standard and Wolseley.

Jensen's work did not go unnoticed as they received a commission from actor Clark Gable to produce a car on a US Ford V8 chassis. This stylish car led to an arrangement with Edsel Ford for the production of a range of sports cars using a Jensen designed chassis and powered by Ford V8 engines equipped with three speed Ford transmissions. Next came a series of sporting cars powered by the twin-ignition straight eight Nash engine or the Lincoln V12 unit. On the commercial side of the business Jensen's were the leaders in the field of the design and construction of high-strength light alloys in commercial vehicles and produced a range of alloy bodied trucks and busses powered by either four-cylinder Ford engines, Ford V8s, or Perkins diesels.

World War Two saw sports car production put aside and attentions were turned to more appropriate activities such as producing revolving tank gun turrets, explosives and converting the Sherman Tank for amphibious use in the D-Day invasion of Europe.

After the war, and in August 1946, Jensen launch their entirely new 'PW' model powered by a Meadows straight-eight cylinder 3,860cc engine, a car that was shown with some success at the London Motor Show that year. However, the Meadows engine suffered from excessive vibration and Jensen had to fall back on a stock pile of pre-war Nash engines to stem complaints from customers.

Shortly after the launch of the car, Richard Jensen saw what looked like another Jensen PW on the streets of London. The car, however, turned out to be the new four-litre Austin Sheerline. What had happened was that Leonard Lord of Austin, who would later become the producer of the Austin-Healey sports car range, had also seen the Jensen PW at the motor show and produced a car that was similar in appearance. An urgent meeting was called between Leonard Lord and the somewhat aggrieved Richard Jensen to discuss the issue and in an effort to placate Jensen, Lord offered the use of the Austin four litre six cylinder for Jensen's car. As Jensen was being backed into a corner on account of having a car with no suitable engine to put in it, accepted this offer, an arrangement that was to lead to an association between the two companies spanning twenty years.

Having now got his new engine for the PW, the Jensen brothers turned their attention to the production of another sports car, the Jensen Interceptor. Car designer, Eric Neale, suggested using Leonard Lord's Austin A70 chassis, a suggestion that Lord readily agreed to, but with the proviso that Jensen also produce a special sports body for Austin. The result of this was that the two vehicles that were produced looked very similar in style. At the 1952 London Motor Show at Earl's Court, it is alleged that Leonard Lord had set up an unofficial competition between Jensen, the Donald Healey Motor Corporation and Fraser-Nash. The Jensen was the stylish two-seater open-top sports car that had been commissioned by Lord to be built on the Austin A40 chassis. Unfortunately the car wasn't finished in time for the Motor Show and so it wasn't available for Lord to see, so he chose to offer a contract to Donald Healey to build his car.



Austin-Healey 100



Austin-Healey 100/6



Sunbeam Alpine "Tiger"

Later, however, the production of the car did go ahead and looked very similar to the Austin A40 Sport, as it was named, a car

that was also built for Austin by Jensen. Some 3,200 Austin versions were produced, with 643 being exported to the United States. The revenue from sales of the car provided the Jensen motor company with a healthy income, allowing them to bid for other projects such as the production of the body for the new Austin-Healey 100.

To read about the Austin-Healey story, click [here](#), or use the link at the end of this page.

Not having the capacity to build his car alone in the numbers required, Donald Healey had to find someone to help him. It would have been logical sense for the Austin-Healey 100 to be manufactured at the Austin plant in Longbridge, but Austin, like Healey, did not have the capacity to produce the car from scratch and in the volume required.

Having previously established contact with Tickford, a company now owned by Ford, Donald Healey made an approach asking them to help. Tickford's capacity to build the car was of only about 40 cars per week. In the end a meeting was arranged between Leonard Lord and Richard Jensen, during which Jensen gave assurances that they could produce up to 150 cars per week. Lord was interested but wanted first to see the Jensen prototype Austin A40 based sports car as an example of their work. However, Lord was impressed by the vehicle and the contract to build the bodies of the New Austin-Healey was awarded to the Jensen Motor Company. All subsequent styling and body engineering of the Austin-Healey 100, including the production of competition vehicles, was undertaken by Jensen in partnership with Donald Healey and BMC.

Aided by the immense popularity of the Austin-Healey 100, and with the order books for Healey bodies full, Jensen had sufficient financial resources to develop a new GT model as a successor to the Interceptor. This vehicle car was the Jensen 541, and went on sale in 1954. The car, a very attractive coupe, had a chassis that was designed by Jensen, but still with the Austin drive train and A70 suspension. Donald Healey was certainly impressed as he placed an order for one - without an engine! When that car was delivered, Healey equipped it with a small block Chevrolet V8 engine, making a very fast and mechanically robust motorcar that he used on a daily basis. The Jensen 541 was the first British production saloon car to be fitted with disc brakes to all four wheels.

While Jensen continued to build the Austin-Healey 100, they discontinued the use of Austin components for their own cars, and in 1962 the Jensen CV-8 was launched powered by a Chrysler V8 engine that had been supplied direct by Chrysler, complete with their excellent Torqueflite automatic transmission. The same equipment was also fitted to the Italian styled Jensen Interceptor that introduced later in 1966, a car that remained in production until 1975.

From the late 1950's, the Jensen Motor Company became the property of the Norcross Group, a tetchy relationship that lead to the premature retirement of Alan and Richard Jensen, the original founders of the business. In 1961 however, prior to their departure, the Jensen Motor Company won a contract to assemble, paint and finish the new Volvo P1800 coupe, the bodies of which were produced by Pressed Steel in Scotland. After completion the bodies were shipped to Sweden to be made into the competed car. The arrangement didn't work out as the Pressed Steel body shells were not of the required high standard, and the cars were arriving in Sweden often with substantial damage. Pressed Steel were producing 130 bodies per week until Volvo bought themselves out of the contract and finished the vehicles on their own.

From 1963 to 1967, Jensen built the Sunbeam Tiger for the Roots Group. This was a stylish two-seater using the body of the standard Sunbeam Alpine, but with a Ford V8 engine squeezed in under the bonnet.



Tiger Engine (Ford V8)



Jensen FF



Jensen Interceptor



Jensen C-V8

7,067 of them were built until Rootes were taken over by Chrysler, at which point the car was discontinued on account of Chrysler's refusal to allow a Ford engine in what was now one of their cars.

During the late 1960s and into the 1970s, Jensen produced the highly

successful Jensen FF, the FF demarcation standing for 'Ferguson Formula,' a four-wheel drive system, this being somewhat of a revelation in saloon car design. The same car was also fitted with the Dunlop Maxaret breaking system, which prevented the wheels locking up under braking by use of special mechanical sensors, making this the first ever car to be equipped with ABS (anti-lock braking system).

The Austin-Healey contract that was the main source of income for the Jensen Motor Company, which relied upon a working relationship being maintained between Donald Healey and with BMC, but in 1965 Donald Healey was having a battle with George Harriman of BMC over the distribution of finances earned from the manufacture of the Austin-Healey 100/6. Harriman made it known that it was his intention to end the production of the car and replace it with an MG model, the MGC, which was intended to be sold as the Austin-Healey 3000 Mk IV.

As a result of the feud between Donald Healey and Harriman, the Jensen brothers decided to build a new model of their own to replace the Austin-Healey 3000 for the US market. Two prototypes were built and called the P66, powered by a 4.5 litre Chrysler V8 with a top speed of 140 mph. Jensen planned this new car for the US market and thought the appeal to the Americans would be great as on account of it being British built, but with the familiarity of a home-grown engine.

However, the P66 caused monumental arguments between the Jensen Company and the Norcross Group. The Jensen Brothers had seen the car as the natural successor to the Austin-Healey 3000, but the Norcross Group wanted a replacement for the Jensen C-V8. The new P66 would be priced at £2,200 in the UK against £3,500 for the C-V8. As the Norcross Group was the controlling force over Jensen, and controlled the purse strings, and the P66 project was abandoned for a different car - the new Jensen Interceptor. Within weeks of this squabble Eric Neale, Jensen's chief designer, resigned, as did both Alan and Richard Jensen, although they referred to it as retirement.

In the closing years of the 1960s, the Jensen Motor Company was in a deep financial difficulties. The Austin-Healey 3000 had been discontinued and with no other model to replace it the contract they had with Donald Healey, together British Leyland Motor Corporation, had come to an end. Compounded with that there were build quality problems with the Interceptor, a factor that was putting off many potential buyers for the car. To get away from this heavy financial burden, the Norcross Group sold the company to merchant bankers, William Brandt. Sons & Company limited, and through careful management the production of the Interceptor was increased to try and improve sales - and then decreased later to improve build quality.

However all of this was futile as the Jensen Motor Company looked like it was going nowhere and seemed it was destined for collapse. However, having been severely battered by his experience with the new



The Jensen GT

British Leyland Motor Corporation, who had pulled out of the

production of Austin-Healey sports cars, Donald Healey once again formed an association with Jensen and went on to build a new sports car together with a San Francisco businessman, Mr, Kjell Qvale. Qvale operated a very successful company selling Jaguar, Rolls-Royce and other British cars in the United States. He too was dismayed at the discontinuation of the Austin-Healey 3000 and learning of the role played by Jensen in the construction of the big Healey, he was interested in Donald Healey's plans to build a new sports car.

The Jensen-Healey Sports

Before long Qvale became a majority shareholder within the Jensen Motor Company and took control, appointing Donald Healey as Chairman, with Geoff Healey as one of the directors, an event that completely and finally severed all involvement between Donald Healey and British Leyland.

From the newly formed relationship there came a new car with a new brand name, the Jensen-Healey. This was a whole new vehicle that promised much, but turned out to be very disappointing. Right from the outset there were problems with the build quality and with engine reliability. First the car had a Vauxhall engine, and then one from BMW was considered, before an untested and under developed Lotus unit was used. This engine seemed a wise choice as not only did it satisfy the new US exhaust emission regulations, but it was designed to be fitted at an angle of 45 degrees, which meant it was not very tall providing the opportunity to use a low profile body. However, Qvale was impatient and insisted upon the engines being delivered early, way before they had been fully developed and the finished car made its debut at the Geneva Motor Show in March 1972 to the initial approval of the press.

It wasn't long though before the faults in the car became apparent, something, which cost the Jensen Motor Company, a considerable amount of money, money they could not afford to spend. In August 1972 the Mk11 version was released. This was a vastly improved car and was shortly improved again in November 1974 with the fitting of the German Getrag five-speed gearbox. However, Donald Healey had become totally disillusioned with the whole Jensen organisation and left the Jensen Board, refusing to allow his name associated with the fixed-head, hatch-back GT version of the Jensen car that was introduced in July 1975.

With the connection between Jensen and Austin, as well as the relationship between Donald Healey and Austin, being a distant memory, Jensen lurched from one crisis to the next, but it was the energy crisis of 1974 that carried Jensen to the brink of total collapse. A plea to the serving Labour Government at the time was rebuffed and in May 1976, Jensen Motors Ltd ceased trading forever.

Following the demise of Jensen, Kjell Qvale purchased the company assets from the Receiver and went on to form another company that specialised in servicing and renovating Jensen cars, a project supplemented by the importation and distribution of Subaru and Hyundai cars.