

Bodybuilders to the World: Part 1

by John Bentley, Reprinted from *Car and Driver*, Sept. 1961

It was the booming year of 1926 and one of those beautiful and balmy spring days such as only England knows. The two young men hightailing along the Great North Road between Coventry and Birmingham seemingly hadn't a care in the world. Driving their low, sleek roadster at a gait that outpaced other traffic, the brothers had good reason to feel pleased. The car, which was their own creation, excited admiring glances and no one could have guessed that its chassis and engine had begun life, three years earlier, as part of a humble Austin Seven, a midget shaped like a bathtub that sold by the thousands.

Suddenly Alan Jensen nudged his brother, Dick. Don't look now, old boy, but we're being followed by some highly excited type!

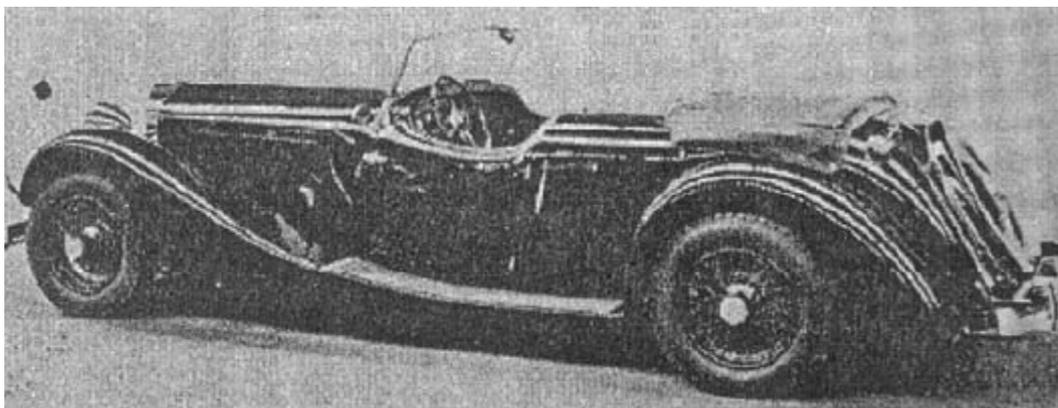
Well, at any rate, Dick grinned, it's not a police car. Wonder what's biting him? Alan half turned to stare back at their pursuer, who was now blowing his horn and flashing headlamps on and off in broad daylight, though without gaining much ground. Slow down, Dick, and let's find out. Dick Jensen pulled off to the side to give the pursuing sedan a chance to catch up, and soon an astonished and voluble gentleman hopped out. I say! he exclaimed, raking the Jensen creation with quick, admiring glances. That's pretty nice, you know. Never saw anything like it before. Mind telling me what it is? I'm the chief engineer of the Standard Motor Company, by the way.

The brothers modestly allowed as how there was an amusing little story connected with their car. About a year earlier, when Alan was 19 and Dick 16, their father had offered them a choice of birthday presents. Each could have a motorcycle, or on Dick's birthday in April, they could own a car between them. They chose the car and at once set about modifying it to their own design. I can tell you, sir, we didn't get much sleep the Saturday when the car arrived,' Dick Jensen recalled enthusiastically.

In fact, we hardly drove the thing at all before we started taking it apart."

You did a fine job, the Standard engineer congratulated them. I can see it's underslung. And, of course, longer. What about the body? Did you build that too?

You'd be surprised what can be done with plywood, leather fabric and glue, Alan told him.



*The 1934 Jensen featured windscreens for the rear-seat passengers.
A Ford V8 and a 2-speed rear axle gave it a 90 mph speed.*

Amazing, said the gentleman. Today's cars all look like carriages high and upright. But this I mean those smooth, low, horizontal lines it's a sensational ideal. Then came the bombshell. Think you could duplicate that body on our Standard Nine chassis?

Dick and Alan Jensen exchanged quick glances, then nodded in unison. Yes, indeed. No reason at all why it couldn't be done. Of course the Standard chassis, too, would need modifying, and that would take a little time.

No matter. I'll have a new chassis sent to you tomorrow, said Standard's chief engineer. If you can duplicate that body, you're in business! I know it'll sell. Stake my reputation on it. Take your time and send us the bill. If you need any help with tools, let me know...

That was how the first Standard Avon two-seater sports model came into being, followed later by an equally radical and handsome Standard Avon coupe, also a Jensen brainchild. Both models were an unqualified success and soon appeared in large numbers on English roads. In the beginning the Jensen brothers got very little publicity; in fact they were not even working together at the time. While Dick Jensen was still serving an apprenticeship with Wolseley Motors, the elder Alan became designer and engineer for the Avon body company which brought to life the creations of the brothers. By 1930, however, what had begun as an avocation became a highly paid vocation, both for Frank Alan and Richard Arthur Jensen. They formed a partnership with W. J. Smith & Sons Ltd., of West Bromwich, and began building another model which for the first time bore their name. This was the Patrick-Jensen, a modified Wolseley Hornet chassis equipped with a Jensen sports body.

From then on there was no stopping the talented and softspoken but determined Jensen brothers. Soon they joined the West Bromwich Motor Carriage Works at Carter's Green near Birmingham, where the original premises (rebuilt after a World War II blitz) are still in operation. Jensen Motors was formed as a subsidiary, but by 1936 the subsidiary became the main activity and Jensen Motors took over the parent company.



*The fraternal customizing effort on a 1926 Austin boomed into a big business.
This Carter's Green factory is one of several Jensen units.*

Of the numerous modified chassis and custom bodies turned out by the Jensens in the 30's, one of the most interesting was a Ford built for Clark Gable. By the time the chassis travelled from Detroit to Birmingham, England, then (fitted with a handsome body) recrossed the Atlantic and made its way to California, it covered 11,000 miles before the owner ever took delivery.



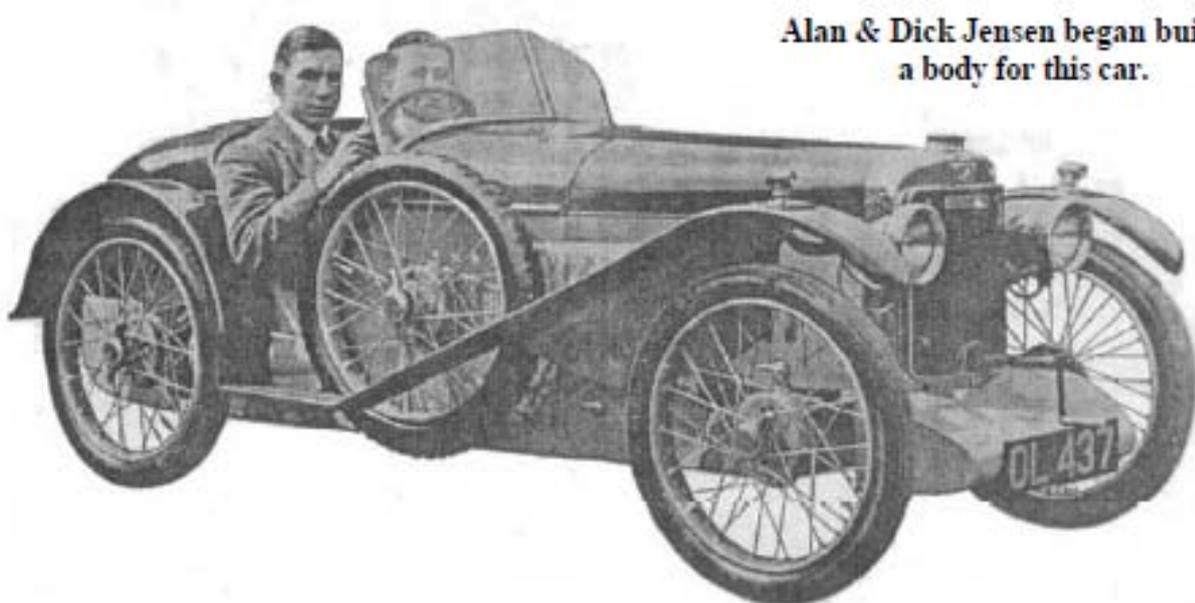
But by 1936 the inevitable happened. The Jensen brothers came out with a complete car of their own. It was Edsel Ford who gave final impetus to the idea during a visit. An earlier Jensen fancier was the late Clark Gable who had a special four-seater body built for his Ford in the mid-1930s. It covered 11,000 miles before its delivery to England, when he approved the use of a Ford V8 engine in the new Jensen car. Naturally this creation embodied many novel ideas and was not intended for mass production.

On the contrary, it was aimed at a limited number of connoisseurs who could afford a hand-built machine. Known as the 3 1/2 litre Jensen, this highly original newcomer was the world's first production automobile to feature an overdrive as standard equipment. As a result it could maintain 90 mph indefinitely at 3000 rpm, cover 20 miles on a gallon of gas, yet go from zero to 60 in only 13 seconds. Featured were a modified Dubonnet-type suspension in front and a Columbia two-speed rear axle. This, in conjunction with the three-speed gearbox, provided six forward speeds with nicely spaced ratios. Roadability was so good that a reporter could read newsprint without the least effort while occupying the rear seat at 80 mph."

The Ford V8 engine of the Jensen was, of course, rather better than stock and boasted aluminium cylinder heads, magneto ignition, dual SU downdraft carburettors and two separate mufflers. The brakes were vacuum servo-assisted with cast iron drums of large size, and centre-lock wire wheels were used. The complete car weighed 3360 pounds and the chassis cost \$2625. A sporty four-seater phaeton listed for \$3225, while the sedan was \$250 more. There was also a \$3825 drophead coupe built by Salmons & Sons, another well-known body firm.

Wrote the late Sir Malcolm Campbell, world's speed record holder, I have nothing but praise for it. There is something about the car which is difficult to describe, something out of the ordinary, particularly noticeable to anyone like myself who is continually driving all kinds of different makes.

The 3 1/2 litre Jensen was just the first step. The Jensen brothers did not plan to get rich on it. They had other ideas along the lines of commercial vehicles. During the association with Smith & Son, one of their jobs had been the building of an aluminium underframe for the British Bedford truck chassis. Reynolds Tube Company, the suppliers, already had suggested that a complete chassis could safely be built from aluminium tubing.



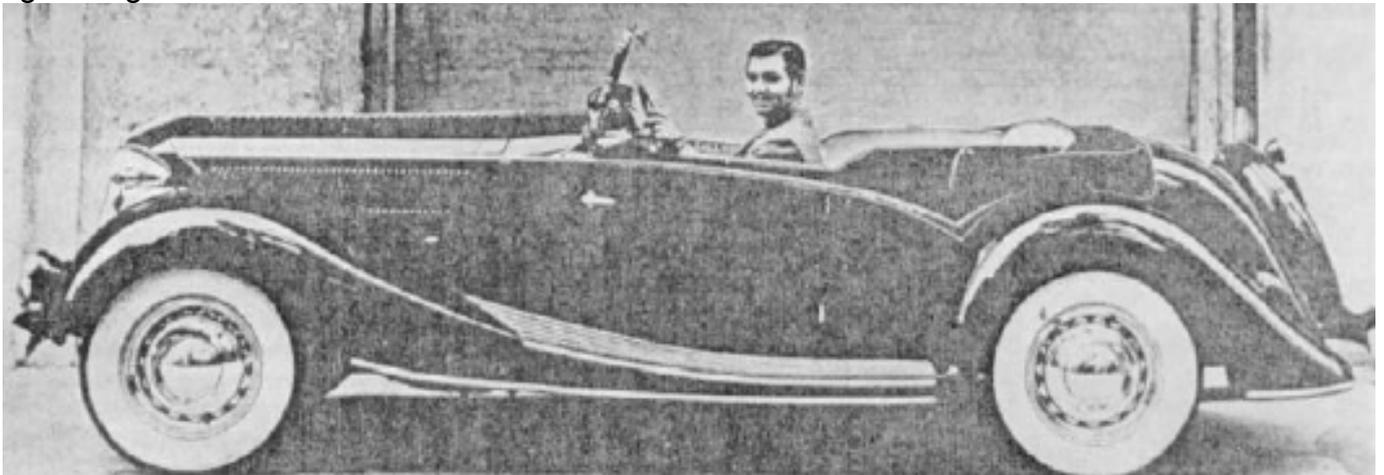
Alan & Dick Jensen began building a body for this car.

During long stints of fire-watching at night, when they often had to duck enemy bombs, the Jensen brothers harnessed their active imaginations to a new project a postwar model to be known as the "Straight-Eight."

Once more the accent was on luxury and effortless high-speed cruising; once more this policy paid off. Its Meadows-built engine was a straight-eight, four-litre "square" unit with inclined valves and pushrods and an aluminium block and head. Its output of 150 bhp would theoretically cruise the car at 109 mph for a piston speed of 2500 rpm. The four-door sedan body had a front seat wide enough for three, but its high basic price of nearly \$5600 (without British purchase tax) again limited the market.

In 1954, however, though the public at large was unaware of the reason, the Jensen fortunes took a big upward turn. What actually happened was that the brothers were awarded a contract for the basic production of the new and highly successful Austin-Healey, destined to win the hearts of enthusiasts the world over. Today, six years and many thousands of cars later, Austin-Healeys are still being built at the Jensen plant, which maintains a steady output of 200 units a week. At first the cars were assembled in the original Carter's Green plant, but soon the available 50,000 square feet of covered space proved inadequate for the growing tempo and volume of Austin-Healey production, besides other Jensen activities. By 1958 an additional 70,000 square feet were provided in a new factory known as Lyttleton Hall and located at Kelvin Way, a mile or two from the original factory. Since then, this space has again been enlarged by new buildings which now provide a floor capacity of 200,000 square feet with a further 100,000 square feet of modern buildings on the way.

When I visited the Lyttleton Hall plant recently, dozens of Austin-Healey 3000s were in various stages of assembly, from bare shiny metal to elegant two-tone paint jobs. This was besides the fibreglass tops for these cars and for Sprites which are also being turned out by Jensen. The main stampings for Austin-Healey bodies are brought in from outside and mounted on jigs, ready for welding. Smaller stampings are produced on the spot. Once welded into a single unit which includes all outside body panels, the raw body and chassis undergo the usual dipping and degreasing.



Each unit also gets a Porterizing bath that provides efficient rust-proofing, even inside the chassis channels. Instruments, upholstery and all fittings are put in, after which the units go to the MG factory at Abingdon-on-Thames, Berkshire where the engine, transmission and axles are installed.

To an outsider this carefully unpublicized facet of activities at the Jensen plant comes as a big surprise, but there are other surprises still in store.

For instance, when Sweden's Volvo decided to build substantial numbers of its handsome new P1800 model in England, several British firms made bids, including plants much larger than that of Jensen Motors.





It was the brothers, however, who got the contract, two and a half years ago. Once again, the job is principally one of assembly. Bodies are made by Pressed Steel of Scotland, then shipped by rail to Jensen for painting and trimming. Instruments, wiring, hardware, trim and leather all come from British suppliers, while the British firm of Girling provides the (front) disc brakes. The engine, transmission and axles, however, are sent over by Volvo.

The monocoque (unitized) construction of the latest Volvo an attractive and well-proportioned sports-type sedan lends itself readily to assembly and production at the Jensen plant, but a brand-new factory building is already nearing completion at the Kelvin Way site, partly for this purpose. With these added facilities, the Jensen brothers expected to be turning out 150 to 200 units a week by mid-1961.

When Jensen general manager, Ray Clark a handsome, debonair, sun-tanned individual right out of the pages of a Leslie Charteris novel showed us around the two plants, there was some active hush-hush testing of the new Volvo under way, though not yet any production line.

Since World War II the Jensen brothers, famous for hiding their light under a bushel, have been involved in several other activities related to automotive production. One was the Jen-Tug, a small tug for short-haul trailers carrying big loads. Using the Austin A55 engine as a power unit, the Jensens produced 1500 of these tugs for British Railways and various commercial firms. Then, two years ago, an agreement was reached to manufacture the German Tempo commercial vehicle under license. Among other types, quantities of the compact, 12-passenger Tempo bus were required in the Dominions," Mr. Clark explained. The idea was to overcome import tariff problems by shipping out a British vehicle. Jensen engineers carefully duplicated all the components of the Tempo, with the exception of the ZF differential and the engine, for which they substituted the ubiquitous A55 power unit. Better than 150 of these one-ton, front-drive vehicles have so far been produced, with 70 chassis already exported to New Zealand, where customers build their own bodies.

Meanwhile, back at Carter's Green, production of the now famous Jensen 541S fibreglass coupe continues at a leisurely pace. Introduced eight years ago by the Jensen brothers, this was the first 100-mph closed car ever offered to the public with a fibreglass body. A dozen of these machines stood end to end in a bay, each in a different stage of completion; and certainly there was no undue haste about getting them out.

In this respect, said Mr. Clark, we're in a unique position in the industry, because every Jensen we produce is sold beforehand. Quite often the purchaser may request some small change to suit his particular needs, and if at all possible we try to meet his wishes. When an item is already sold, production can afford to be a little more flexible. Present output of the Jensen is only three cars per week, but this will be stepped up to 10 units when the new factory is completed.

About a year ago in spite of their publicity shyness the Jensen brothers got the full glare of the spotlights. That was when a Jensen 541R won the London-Paris by any means race in two hours,



27 minutes, 17 seconds. The Jensen sped from London to Lydd Airport, was driven straight into a Silver Cities Airways flying boxcar which alighted at Le Bourget, then made a wild dash for the finishing point at the Arc de Triumphe to capture the honours.

I can personally vouch for the fact that the driver had an easy ride, because I drove one of the latest Jensens all the way from London to West Bromwich on my visit to the factory. Much of the run was along Britain's new M1 northbound superhighway, and the general driving impression gained was extremely favourable.

The 4-litre Austin Princess six-cylinder engine is no ball of fire, but it does not need to be. So much torque is available that with the smooth 4-speed gearbox and overdrive (which deliver a whopping 30 mph per 1000 rpm) a cruising speed of 100 mph is absolutely effortless. Steering is light and accurate and the Jensen's all-round disc brakes can toss you right through the windshield if you'll let them! As for luxury, the pigskin upholstery, contour seats and elegant fibreglass bodywork are beyond criticism. It was this handsome 2-door coupe which won the 1959 silver medal for bodywork at London's Earl's Court Motor Show. Noise level is extremely low and the Jensen certainly gives you a feeling of arrogant ease, perpetually sustained by the envious glances of mere mortals in ordinary automobiles. The last time I recall feeling that way was when I was the proud owner of a 300SL gullwing coupe, six years ago.

As for the Jensen brothers who started it all, they are as interesting and unusual as their remarkable products, for though their kinship is obvious, their personalities are in marked contrast.

Both are tall, husky men, alert and keen-eyed, but whereas Alan (the elder) is soft-spoken, retiring and affable, Richard has a more blunt, decisive and direct approach to life, booming out his views without mincing matters and regarding you the while from under bushy eyebrows. Yet no greater compliment could be paid these two men than a cross-section of opinion taken from among the 1200 employees at the Jensen plant, most of them staid Midlanders. "They're wonderful, are the bosses. They treat you like a human being. You couldn't wish to work for anyone finer!"

