



Geoffrey Hancock on an ill-starred company

Historians will have no problems in recording what happened to Jensen of West Bromwich. It went broke to the tune of more than £3 million in 1975.

The real difficulty will be in explaining why it happened, when so many other floundering causes survived to flourish (like Rolls-Royce) or merely survived — like British Leyland.

To blame industrial troubles would be easy but would only be partially true. When Mr. Kjell Qvale, the American who took over the Jensen management in an atmosphere of high promise, returned home defeated, he said it was not his fault of the fault of the workers.

He blamed inflation originating with the oil crisis which he said, make it unpatriotic to drive a big car. Certainly the Jensen Interceptor was a big car with its Chrysler 7212cc engine but there was also the two-litre Jensen-Healey — and that failed to save the day.

The final history of Jensen Motors will not be easy to write. Historians will have some fine old arguments to contend with but what is certain is that a see-saw existence which nearly pulled Jensen through so many times became something of a classic in cliff hangers.

In 1973 things looked reasonably good. Mr. Qvale, a man of immense experience in selling British cars on the West Coast of America, seemed to have the tide really turning. Up to 25 Interceptors were made each week and meeting a ready demand as there were for the 100-a-week Jensen-Healeys in production.

No help

Then things went wrong. Not that it was an experience confined to Jensen. Everyone was feeling the pinch. Things went wrong for Aston Martin which has since pulled round. Both British Leyland and Chrysler UK were revived by Government money.

Alas, no aid was forthcoming for Jensen Motors. In sad and undignified scenes at West Bromwich which made men feel like crying, although they did not actually do so, everything went under the hammer. Lock stock and even the cutlery from the canteen. That was in August 1976.

Jensen cars join that unhappy band of lost causes. In particular the Interceptor deserved a better fate because it was quiet, comfortable fast and stylish. In 1974, it cost £8,500 or £10,000 for the convertible which were by no means outrageous prices for top, executive type cars.

True it was tarred with the American phrase of being a "Petrol guzzler" and it gave only about 15 mpg in most touring conditions. The anti-big car lobby was very strong but having an American engine, the Interceptor met the then ruling exhaust emission regulations and was certainly not a monster.

Before the fuel panic subsided the Interceptor had gone. Much regretted. Much sort after since, secondhand Jensens command big figures which are appreciating all the time.

Programme

Financial experts who have studied the Jensen story reckon that £5 million cash would have saved the day.

It would have seen the return to respectability of the big car and enabled an intensive development programme to take place with the Jensen Healey.

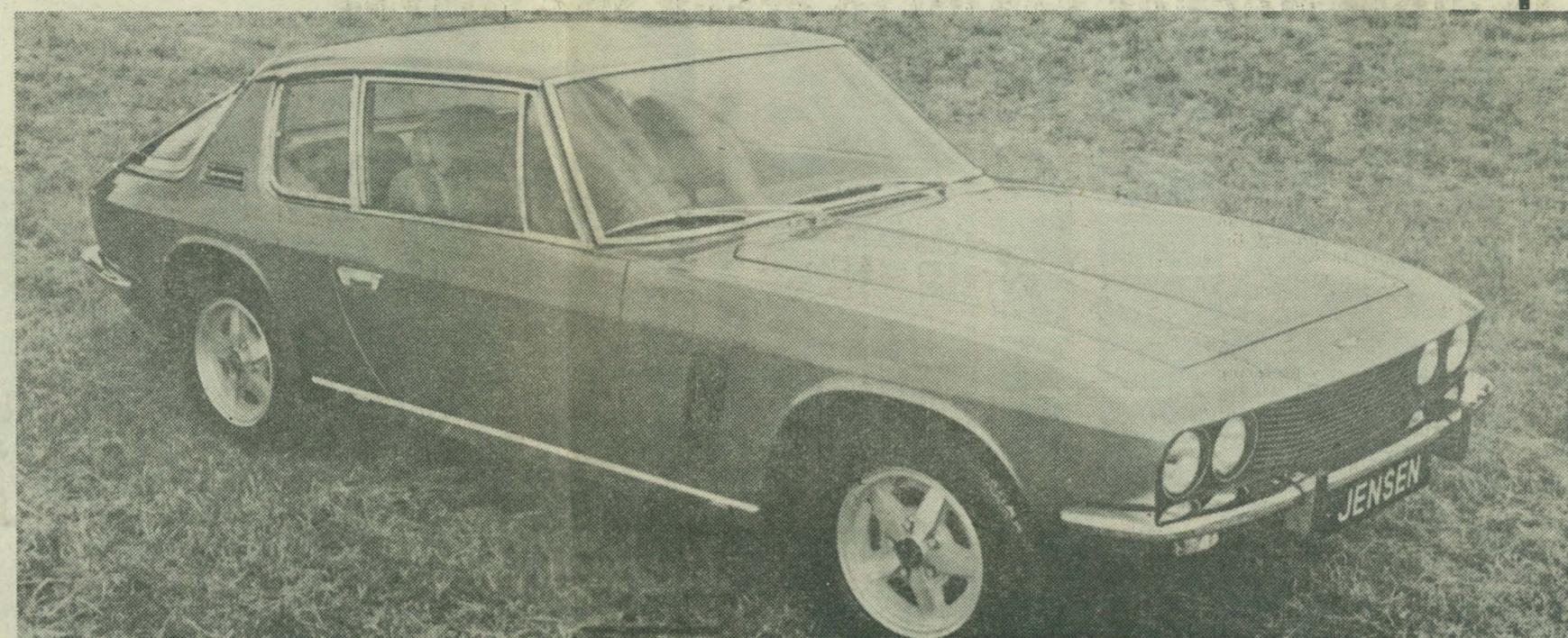
As a sports car, the Jensen Healey never really made it. It lacked flair and imagination in style. It was a reasonable runabout but never made a sporty appeal.

The phrase "shortage of working capital" has a familiar ring about it and Jensen Motors was hard pressed at various times, particularly in the off season for car buying when some stocking was inevitable in readiness for the spring demand.

When money was available it was borrowed at high interest rates apparently. There was crisis after crisis and then the final one.

To make matters worse, customers of early prototypes were very disappointed in what they had bought. Particularly one Birmingham motorist who painted a derogatory slogan on his car and it stayed there for months as he drove about the city and elsewhere.

Before Mr. Qvale there was Mr. Carl Carlson, an extrovert even by American standards. He breezed in at the end of



Above: The Jensen Interceptor III — one of the last of the line which died with the company. Right: An alloy-bodied 1953 prototype. Right, below: The Jensen-Healey — the sports car that never quite made it.

What

made

Jensen

crash?

"They join that unhappy band of lost causes ... the Interceptor deserved a better fate..."

1967 and breezed out again in 1970.

Duerr was a self confessed "turn-around" man who specialised in giving the doctor treatment to an ailing firm, getting it on its feet again and then leaving for the next patient.

Duerr claims that Jensen Motors was in sound shape when he left. In his book "Management Kinetics", about communication, he said he failed to get certain ideas across to the then majority shareholders in Jensen and its main source of other finance, the merchant bank.

"Mind you," he writes, "the communication breakdowns were mainly within the walls (or rather interior partitions) of the bank but I'd hold that it's the manager's job to blast holes in other people's walls if he has to."

Low credit

Duerr complained that Jensen's credit limit was frozen at much too low a figure. He went as Qvale arrived.

Whatever the cause there was not to be a rescue operation. Jensen Motors was to die.

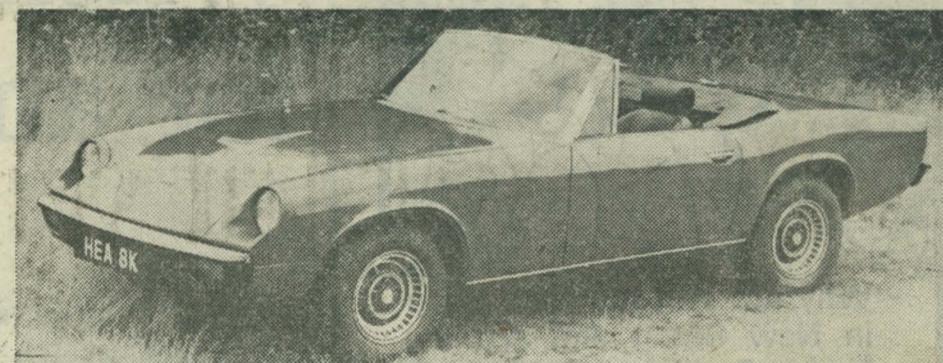
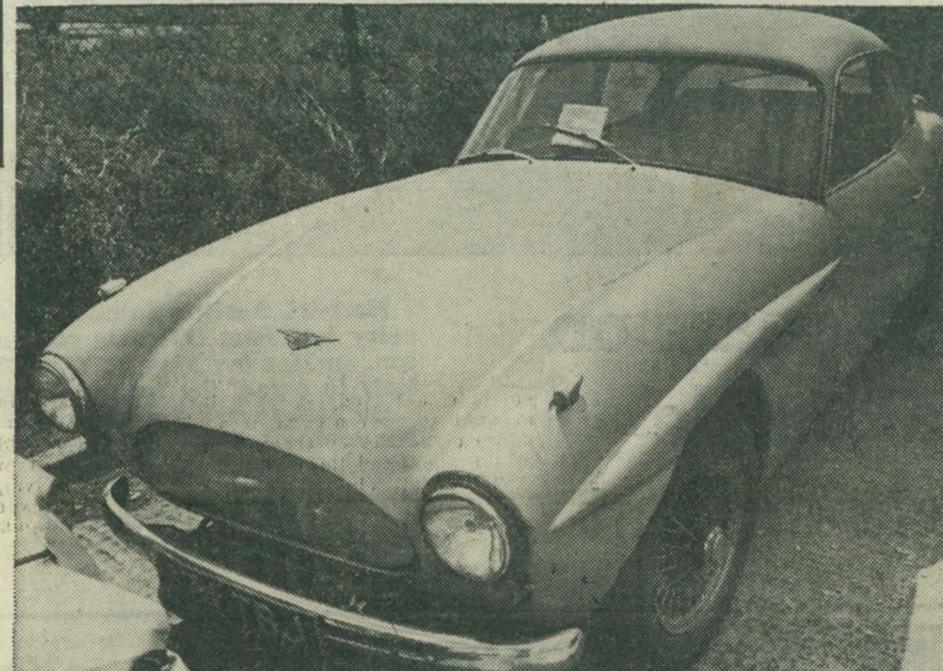
All these coming and goings with a changing pattern of financial control were worlds away from the origins of Jensen way back in the early 30's. It was then that the brothers Allan and Richard Jensen made their names as body stylists.

Responsible

They were responsible for the Avon Standards as well as for coachwork for chassis like the Wolseley Hornet and the Ford V8. After the war an Interceptor used the Austin four-litre Sheerline engine. In 1954 the glass fibre bodied 541 was a big success while three years later Jensen became one of the first to fit disc brakes all round as standard equipment.

Jensens were responsible for the bodies on the bigger Austin Healeys and (for a while) on the Volvo P1800 coupe. An American power unit came back in 1963 with a 5.9 litre Chrysler engine, later succeeded by a 6.3 litre version.

All this time work was done for commercial vehicles and there was sub-contracting for models like the Sunbeam Tiger.



Jensen Parts and Service does just what its name suggests plus renovations of Jensen cars and buying and selling secondhand models which are fast becoming choice collectors' items.

This company keeps the right to use the Jensen name in cars but at the moment the chances of a new line barely rate above wishful thinking. The name could come back in custom built bodies on established lines which would be ironic since that is how the Jensen brothers started.

An associated company of Jensen Parts and Service is involved in plans to market Japanese Subaru cars over here.

Slim chance

Jensen Special Products provide engineering design and development services with Rolls Royce and Volvo among the customers. In its specialised field it is reported to be doing very nicely.

But a new line of fine and glorious Jensen cars? The chances are slim. There is enormous nostalgia but you don't get very far with just that.

Name lives

Many people deplore the fact that the cars have gone. They felt Jensen was worth a rescue operation because of the potential which grew in spite of economic problems.

From the ashes of the deceased Jensen Motors two new businesses came into operation, both operating in West Bromwich.

Not when JSP has been a popular abbreviation since the company was formed and it should help to avoid confusion with the other offshoot of Jensen Motors — Jensen Parts and Service.