

Jensen Revival

THE NEWS of the rebirth of the Jensen, with the production running initially at about one car a month, sent me to West Bromwich with memories of driving, a long time ago, impressive Interceptors and that last-thing, the Jensen-Healey with its Vauxhall-based, Colin Chapman-devised, twin-cam engine. Promising as the latter seemed, it was perhaps the development and warranty problems engulfing this sports Jensen-Healey that put Jensen Motors Ltd into liquidation in May 1976, after, I believe, 11,000 had been built, of which some 7,000 to 8,000 went to the USA.

The Jensens, elegant Ford-powered cars the keen coachbuilding brothers, Richard and Allan Jensen (remember the Avon Standard?) introduced in the late 1930s, evolved into impressively fast and quiet sports-coupés, which still have a warm following among members of the Jensen OC. Now this make is in small-scale production again. Ian Orford is behind the venture, at the old Jensen Spares and Service depot off Kelvin Way in West Bromwich, although the factory which was opposite, across the road, has been demolished and re-developed into various small industrial sites. When Jensen Motors failed 10 years ago the spares for the earlier models were given to the Jensen OC but, using the aforesaid Service depot, overhauls of the more recent Jensen models were carried on, and spares supplied for them. It was the continuing interest in this highly individual car that encouraged Ian Orford to revive its production.

I was impressed with the extent of the restoration work that was going on at West Bromwich. I did not count the Jensens in for this treatment, but there must have been some 20 or more, from places as far afield as Norway, America, etc. Ian emphasised that they start by completely dismantling such cars and building them up with such new parts as are required, and as they have all the correct ones, and know-how and even the original Jensen drawings, this is no doubt easier for them than it would be with a specialist rebuilder unaccustomed to the make. The Series-1 Jensens are now rare but there was a Series-2 in for treatment, and a curvaceous CV8. Spares can be supplied back to the latter model, before which it is over to the Jensen OC.

The New Cars

Although the revived Jensen is only being made at the rate of about one a month, I was told that seven have been supplied to UK customers since the rebirth began. One of these, a smart blue convertible, was standing outside the works, there was a completed car within, its trim matching the colour of the steering-wheel leather and dashboard, and another nearly completed, and I was able to take a short run in the demonstrator, soon due for more testing in speed-limit-free Germany.

So what is this new Jensen like? The answer is, virtually the same as the car was when the former production ceased, although not with four-wheel-drive or the Maxaret brakes. There is a very good reason for this. Small-scale manufacturers find the burden of losing their first complete prototype in the MoT crash-test a terribly heavy financial burden, which can even render ideas of making cars impossible; apart from which I hate to think of such destruction of, say, a Rolls-Royce, Ferrari, Maserati, or whatever. In Jensen's case they were fortunate, in that the microfilm of the 1972 American crash-test of the former car survived and that satisfied the MoT in 1984, providing the structure, including the front-end, wasn't altered.

Thus the 1986 Jensen looks the same as those I last tested back in 1968 — fast, very quiet, luxuriously-equipped saloons. I remember two stories about those days. One concerns the eminent motoring journalist and racing driver, Tommy Wisdom, who was trying a Jensen FF at one of the motoring-writers' test-days, when he was seen to have abandoned it. "Tommy's blown it up", spread the rumour. But it wasn't that. He thought the brakes had failed, so drastic was the kick-back from the anti-lock brakes pedal... ABS has come a long way, since then! The other story is against myself. For something to say at the bar when I was collecting a road-test Jensen I remarked on the great strides made in roadholding, thanks to radial-ply tyres. There was an



UNCHANGED from its last incarnation, the Jensen's Vignale lines remain clean and striking.

awkward silence, and I realised I had committed a gaffe, because, in the interests of quiet running, Jensen, with Rolls-Royce, were then still fitting cross-plyes...

A new chassis-forming jig has had to be made for the revived Jensen, because the old one had been destroyed, but the car still has what is really a separate chassis-frame, to which the body is welded, making a very strong structure. Since the old Jensen days the big-block American vee-eight engines have ceased to be made, so the new Jensen uses the biggest of the available small-block engines, the 5.9-litre Chrysler. As before, it is coupled to the Torqueflite automatic gearbox, which it shares with the modern Aston Martin, but if the rumoured four-speed Torqueflite box or a five-speed Chrysler manual box become available, these might well become optional extras for the new Jensen. It has updated suspension but otherwise the chassis is like that of the 541/CV8/Interceptor models of earlier times, and the body is a steel structure, although there are thoughts of using an aluminium bonnet etc, in the future. The braking system embraces all-round ventilated discs. The interior equipment of the Jensen S4 is as comprehensive as one can visualise, about the only item not standardised being a cruise-control. The Recaro front seats have electrical adjustments and heating, using switches conveniently located on the centre console.

Everything is made "in-house", even to trimming and upholstery, the latter a blend of Connolly and softer Italian leather. The sumptuous interior has veneered-wood decor on the central console. Seven hides are used to trim a saloon, eight for a convertible. Five undersealing coats are used, with final wax-oil anti-rust protection. At present Dunlop D7 tyres are fitted but Ian Orford has been very impressed by the Goodyear Eagle covers he tried in America. The final-drive ratio remains at 3.07 to 1, as on the former big Jensens, giving relaxed 100 mph cruising at around 3,500 rpm.

Future Plans

At present the plan is to lay out stocks for building a batch of 10 to 15 cars, of which, as I have said, the first seven have been delivered, with six more "in-system". With some 40 restoration jobs in hand, production of the new S4 has to take second place to such work, which covers not only Jensens back to the Series-2, but other American-powered makes — for instance, at the time of my visit a Facel-Vega was amongst those cars being worked on.

It is good that the Jensen is in production again, and very smart the new cars look, with the Inmont system paint-finish, which I understand is used also by Rolls-Royce, with Jaguar taking a hard look at it. The Jensen S4 is intended to appeal to Company Executives and Managing Directors who want a fast, very comfortable and quiet, business express, which also is highly individualistic, which the car now being made in part of the old factory site at West Bromwich in the English Midlands certainly is. The price has been fixed at £48,285 for the Interceptor S4, and at £53,500 for the convertible. Sales are direct from the factory without the intervention of dealers. — W.B.

