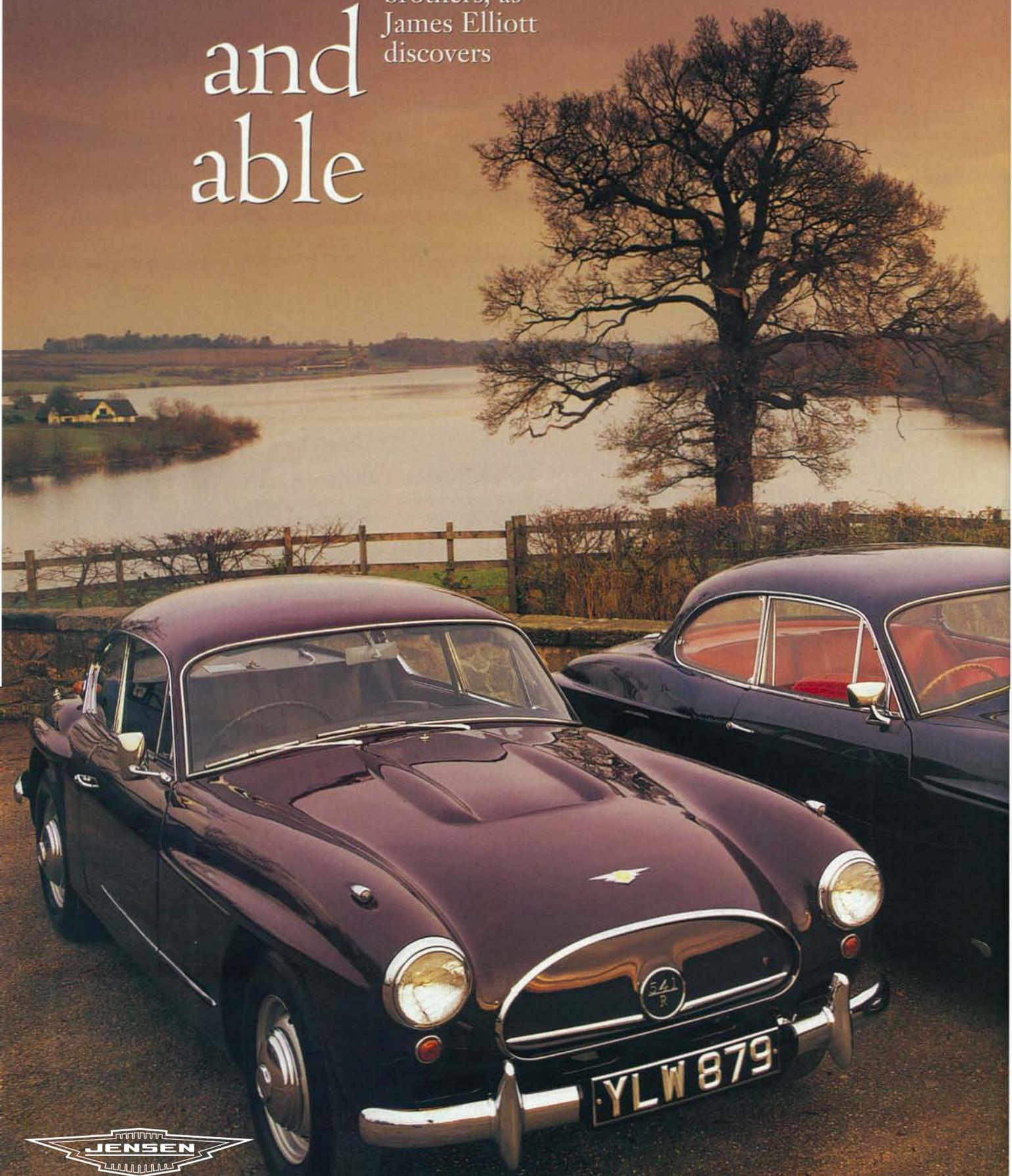
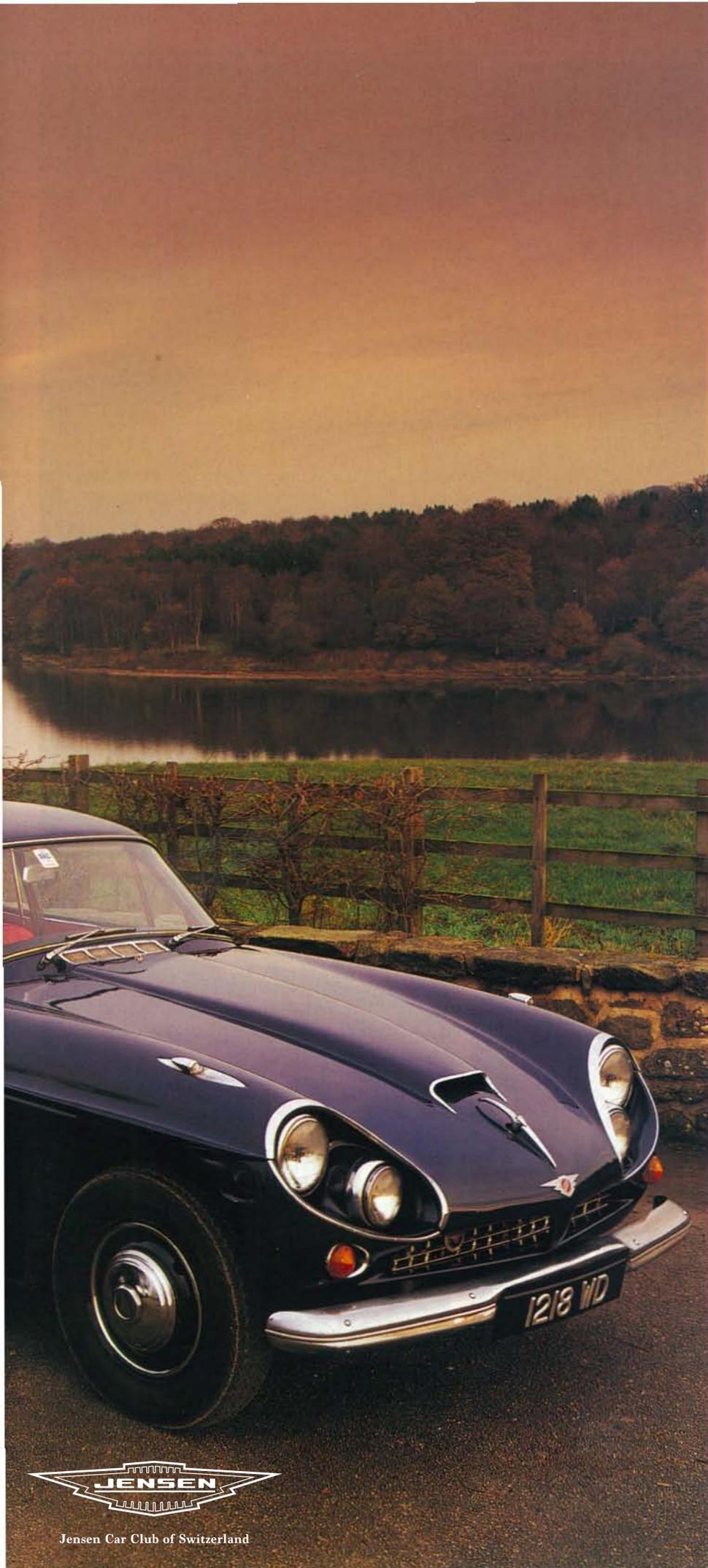


# Caned and able

Jensen's 541R  
and C-V8 were  
very different  
brothers, as  
James Elliott  
discovers





Jensen Car Club of Switzerland

In the mid-'50s the UK was undergoing a radical transformation as a tidal wave of influence swept across the Atlantic. The first incarnation of the Jensen 541 was unveiled at Earl's Court, in 1953 when Mantovani and his Orchestra was number one with *Moulin Rouge*. By the time most customers received their cars Bill Haley and his Comets were causing wholesome British youngsters to upset commissionaires by dancing in picture palace aisles as they watched *Blackboard Jungle*.

And for cars it was no different. With the Atlantic, Austin had already proved the Brits couldn't make US-style cars to appeal to the Yanks on their home ground, but American styling influences were making an impact over here. And the 541 is a prime example. Overlook the 300SL strakes over the wheelarches plus that Aceca-esque front threequarter and veteran stylist Eric Neale provided a four-seater with a plunging roofline, winking back window *à la* Pontiac Chieftain, panoramic views and plentiful chrome. It was that opening cooling flap which really hooked the attention, however, when other cars had ladders of chrome.

After an aluminium-bodied prototype caused a sensation at Earl's Court, the public had to wait almost a year before it could get its hands on the 541. Even then, the metamorphosis from the PW and Interceptor was as profound as if Alma Cogan had released *Anarchy in the UK*. The 541 boasted big power, shrouding the triple-carburettor Austin 4-litre straight-six in a sleek – and then still innovative – glassfibre shell. Its predecessor, the Interceptor, had used the same engine, but was a lumbering hulk in comparison: top speed was 100mph, when the basic 541 could stretch 15mph further and later models added another 10mph on top.

The West Bromwich outfit, based on a foundation of building commercials, other people's cars (it had designed and was making A40 Sports shells at the time) and stock, visually archaic tourers, had gone into warp drive. And the 541 was relatively cheap, £1771 buying the racy mongrel while a similarly-paced pedigree such as the Aston Martin DB2/4 MkI (top speed 116mph) was a grand more.

The De Luxe model introduced all-round disc brakes, but it was 1958's 541R which stole best of breed. The 541R started with the 150bhp DS7 development of the Austin engine and twin carburettors, but after 53 cars had been built it reverted to the DS5 and triple SUs. When *The Autocar* tested it, the 541R was the fastest real four-seater it had experienced and praise was heaped on the model for its rack and pinion steering and disc brakes.

After the 541R came the 2.75in wider, over-refined 541S (limited slip diff) which proved the series' final bow. The wider track gave increased roadholding, but that was negated by being longer while the standard R-R Hydramatic auto 'box combined with a conventional grille and reversed scoop stole the character of the 541. The 541S ran for three years, until 1963, sold 127 units and is by far the least desirable 541 today.

For its follow-up act, Jensen stretched the boundaries even further, using a powerful Chrysler 5.9-litre V8 in a body with a distinctly Gallic feel and a viciously slanted quad headlamp arrangement which even today looks like a serious rebellion. The front end wasn't helped

TONY BAKER

by the fussy clustering of scoop, bonnet release and badge. The base for the C-V8 was the immediately post-war PW chassis, but 1962 Motor Show visitors could have been forgiven for thinking it was a Citroën DS-based concept car rather than the product of Kelvin Way. Now, like then, you either love it or loathe it. Then, most people loathed it, *Autocar* summing up that Jensen had disguised great underpinnings with 'the ugliest car in the world'. Kevin Beattie, chief engineer at Jensen, agreed. I don't, emphatically.

The derision belied the performance, the 5.9's 305bhp thrusting it to 60mph in 6.7 secs and putting it genuinely in the 130mph bracket... and even more when the 6.3-litre engine was introduced for the second series in 1964. Even the addition of reclining seats, improved brakes and a headlamp restyle (to make them equal size) couldn't endear the C-V8 to the public and it died in 1966 with 499 cars sold.

One of the problems Jensen experienced was defining where it fitted into the market. It preferred price comparisons with the likes of the Aston Martin DB5 (£4412 in 1965, against £3679 for the Series III C-V8) while the public, as it had with that other mid-'60s V8 hybrid, the Gordon-Keeble, tended to judge it in relation to the MkX Jaguar (£2339) or Rover 3 Litre (£1769). Both the 541 and C-V8 were valiant efforts, but it was only when the Interceptor multiplied production figures 10-fold that Jensen really leapt the gulf in public perception from specialist hybrid maker to genuine car producer.

The cars couldn't be more different to drive, the torquy C-V8 – this Series I car is fitted with the later 6.3-litre engine rather than original 5.9 – hauling from a standstill with immense brute force. The Chrysler Torqueflite three-speed auto 'box – driving through Powr-Lok diff – changes up late and corners are an approaching evil, but the wider track adds more stability than might be expected and reduces the demand for power steering. It irons out bumps determinedly and the ride is less trampolinish than other luxury GTs. Even the progressive brakes are effective, though you wouldn't want to be testing the top speed when something untoward happened in front.

And, despite the mix of leather and vinyl – the striking red interior offsets the Indigo Blue paintwork beautifully – it is luxurious, as well as spacious, tasteful and symmetrical, though the Series I is let down only by the Melamine dash which was replaced by real walnut on the Series III. On the up-side it has the most accommodating dipswitch in the world, a full organ pedal which doubles as footrest when other car owners of the day were playing footsie with a button hidden on the bulkhead. Plus the 1/4in thick glassfibre is supremely high quality, there are tasteful chrome grab handles



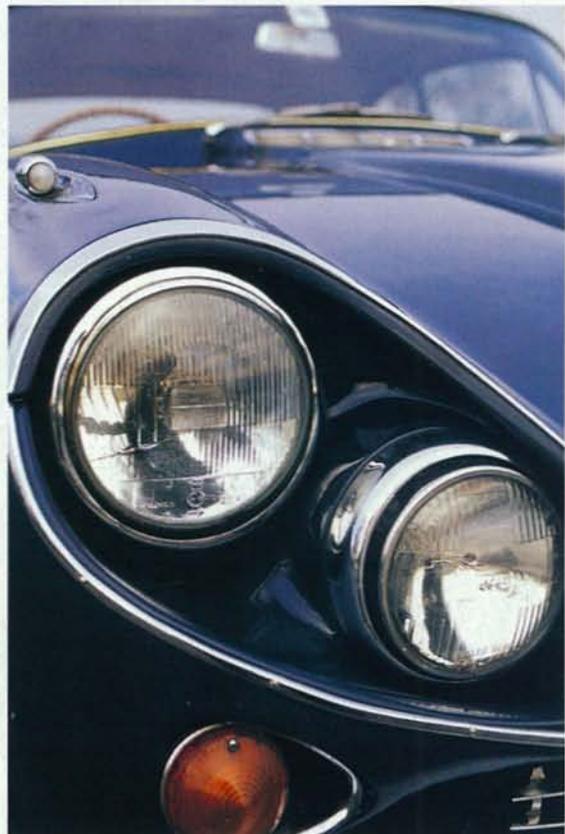
Melamine dashboard on Series I C-V8 replaced by walnut on SIII, mix of vinyl and leather



Above: bonnet handle clutters air scoop. Right: sidelights are anachronistic. Below: this car is fitted with a later 6.3-litre unit



Interestingly angular rear end is studded by round tail lights and C-V8 script. Raised border echoed in headlamp surrounds





17in Bluemels steering wheel dominates driver's side. Leather-style covering on dashboard



Above: bonnet catch. Left: Motorola radio with 'Jensen' sign. Below: DS5 engine fitted with three SU carburetors



Above: the R, from 1958, is the most desirable 541. Left: all four stylish wheels hide disc brakes - 541 had rear drums

## JENSEN MILESTONES

**Richard and Alan Jensen** build a special on an Austin Chummy and join Patrick Motors, leaving in 1931 to take over truck and coachbuilder Smith and Sons.

**Richard Jensen** establishes a car body department just prior to the company becoming Jensen Motors in 1934. Work on Wolseleys and Singers followed, but there were already plans for the first Jensen proper.

**Backed by the** success of the commercial arm, the company built a reputation for turning out quality Nash and Ford V8-engined hybrids.

**Post-war, the truck** business (the Jen-Tug and JNSNs) supported the building of the PW (only seven built between 1946 and 1952) and Interceptor (88 built between 1949 and 1957) while more contract work came in for Austin (A40s and Healey 100s starting in 1951).

**1953 - 541** introduced at Earl's Court. Production starts mid-'54 and the famous West Bromwich works (Kelvin Way) opens in 1956. Sunbeam Tiger project starts in 1962.

**1965 - Interceptor** launched, followed the next year by the FF which, in 1967, was Car of the Year.

**1966 - Eric Neale** resigns from Jensen Motors Ltd. Richard and Alan Jensen announce their retirements.

**The late 1960s** saw merchant bank William Brandt, Sons & Co buy Jensen Motors (from the Norcross Group) with US car importer Kjell Qvale taking over as majority shareholder in 1970, two years before the introduction of the Jensen-Healey which was followed in 1975 by the Jensen GT and the company going into receivership.

**1976, the company** Jensen Motors Limited closes down, but Jensen Parts and Service and Jensen Special Products grew out of the ruins.

**Ian Orford** acquired all rights in 1982 and announced the Series 4 Interceptor. Two years later Jensen Cars Limited is formed and lasts five years before being sold yet again and

relaunched - yet again - as Jensen Car Company Limited. Within three years - despite the launch of the Interceptor EFI, the company has gone into voluntary liquidation.

**In March 1998** the Redditch-based Creative Group - run by Robin Bowyer and Keith Rauer - bought all rights to the company.

**October 1998:** the International Motor Show sees the launch of the all-new 'Jensen', the 4.6 litre S-V8, costing just shy of £40,000 and with production due to start in 1999.

## OWNER'S VIEW

**R**on Smith's Jensen 541R set him back £695 in 1968 and, remarkably, some 30 years on it is in as good condition as it has ever been. After a Triumph Tiger T100, Sunbeam Talbot and Sunbeam Rapier the examiner was attracted to the Jensen by the fact that it wouldn't rust – the body at least.

Since then it has covered more than 165,000 miles with Ron doing virtually all the maintenance himself. The reason the mileage is relatively low – though still 5000 a year – was that it was only his daily driver for the first 10 years. In 1978 Ron and wife Thelma bought their £2000 C-V8 which has covered 300,000 in all weathers. It has had to – the Jensens are their only transport. Ron says: "The C-V8 has covered more miles because the 541R is now my show car." Indeed the 541 was recently in the Autoglym concours final at the International Classic Motor Show at the NEC, Birmingham. While other cars were being delicately unloaded from their trailers, Ron drove his Jensen into the arena having travelled from home near Burton-on-Trent. He says: "We live down an unadopted road which is very muddy, full of potholes and hardly the ideal place for a concours car."

In 1971, Ron helped to set up the Jensen Owners' Club. He and Thelma have been stalwarts ever since.

Thelma prefers driving the C-V8 to the 541. She says: "It isn't really laziness, but it is so easy to drive and sophisticated for its year. If you're driving you get the best of the heater." Ron, on the other hand, prefers the 541: "There's not much in it, but I find it such an involving car. It will always be special to me."



running down the insides of the B-pillars, cubbyholes everywhere and the wood-fronted cylindrical ashtray emerging from the back of the oddsments box is sheer class.

The Colin Reikie-engineered 541 (this Cassis example is the R with all-round discs and DS5 engine) is completely different, but so much more satisfying for the driver. The cockpit, though roomy, is far more snug than the C-V8. The clutch is tricky and the Moss 'box as slow and cagey as any other – getting into overdrive at 60mph can be a real relief. But it is immensely rewarding, the proximity of everything is not claustrophobic, but merely well tailored.

Even on crossplies it swings around corners deftly, the steering becoming the greater the speed, and – though it won't pull with the same Olympian tug or quiet efficiency as the C-V8 – has torque in abundance. Shove the button throttle and first will get you moving but no more: top will cater for everything from 20mph upwards and chug along at motorway speeds without stressing 3000rpm. The foundation for all this power is the fantastically long stroke (111mm) of the all-iron pushrod engine which usually hauled barges



**Clockwise from top: Steve Forrest, TV's *The Baron*, with his C-V8; FF with C-V8 body never produced; Eric Neale**



such as the Austin Sheerline and Princess saloons.

The suspension, modified A70 with live axle and half-elliptic springs, is remarkably good, while the 7cwt engine is set well back giving a perfect 50-50 weight distribution when laden and superb balance. For a hand-built car there is hardly any wind noise and the 0.39Cd rating (the lowest recorded at Longbridge at the time) emphasises the driving pleasure. In terms of road manners, this car is a fully paid-up member of



C-V8 and 541R are both torquey and powerful but have individual road characters. The 541R's front-end looks more tidy than the C-V8's

## FACTFILE

### 541R

**Construction:** 5in tube chassis (steel pressing and crossmembers forming a platform) under three-moulding glassfibre body

### PERFORMANCE

**Top speed:** 123mph **0-60mph:** 10.6 secs

**Fuel consumption:** 18mpg

### ENGINE

Austin 3993cc pushrod straight-six D57 fed by twin SU carburettors (first 53 cars) and then D55 and triple SU arrangement

**Max power:** 140bhp @ 3700rpm

**Torque:** 210lb ft @ 2500rpm

### SUSPENSION

**Front:** independent; wishbones and coil springs

**Rear:** live axle with half-elliptic leaf springs

### TRANSMISSION

Moss four-speed 'box with Laycock overdrive

### STEERING

Rack and pinion (cam and roller on 541) 2.33 turns lock-to lock

### BRAKES

Discs all round (541 had drums at rear) with Dunlop servo

### DIMENSIONS

**Length:** 14ft 8in **Width:** 5ft 3in

**Height:** 4ft 5in **Weight:** 3259lb

### PRODUCTION

541 production from 1955-'59 (226)

541R production from 1958-'60 (193 cars built)

541S production from 1960-'63 (127)

### PRICES (541R)

**When new:** £2866 **Now (AI):** £27,000  
**(Rough):** £8000

### C-V8

**Construction:** separate perimeter chassis (4in parallel tubes) clothed in glassfibre body

### PERFORMANCE

**Top speed:** 129mph **0-60mph:** 6.7 secs

**Fuel consumption:** 13.2mpg

### ENGINE

5916cc V8, fed by single, four-barrel Carter downdraught carburettor

**Max power:** 305bhp @ 4800rpm

**Torque:** 395lb ft @ 3000rpm

### SUSPENSION

**Front:** independent, unequal length wishbones, Armstrong lever arm dampers, coil springs, anti-roll bar

**Rear:** live axle, half-elliptic leaf springs, Armstrong telescopic dampers

### TRANSMISSION

Chrysler Torqueflite three-speed auto with torque convertor or three-speed manual with synchro and Laycock overdrive on second and top.

**Final drive:** Salisbury Hypoid with Powr-Lok LSD. Ratios: 3.07:1 (auto) and 3.54:1 (manual)

### STEERING

Rack and pinion, 3.3 turns lock to lock

### BRAKES

Discs front and rear with vacuum servo

### DIMENSIONS

**Length:** 15ft 4 1/2in **Width:** 5ft 7 1/2in

**Height:** 4ft 7in **Weight:** 3360lb

### PRODUCTION

C-V8 Series I produced from 1962-'63 (68 built)

C-V8 Series II produced from 1963-'65 (250)

C-V8 Series III produced from 1965-'66 (181)

### PRICES

**New:** £3491 **Now (AI):** £22,000 **Rough:** £9000

The Polite Society. Push it and there is slight understeer, but it is more often a wallow-free, neutral delight.

The driving position is more upright than the C-V8, the vast 17in Bluemels wheel almost resting on your legs and the pedals too close for effective heel and toeing. But the pleasure of the cockpit lies in its sumptuous leather, a thick roulade on the dashboard, a fitting backdrop for the disorganised mass of unmarked 'plane-like switches. Then there's four genuine seats and a marvellous armrest on the passenger door which exudes thoughtful design. It is a very nice place to be.

Jensen was gambling with both of these cars, borne on Richard Jensen's obsession for creating more than the commercials which balanced the company's books. The fruit machine wheels spun and came up with only cherries for Jensen, with just a few more than 1000 sold of all types of 541 and C-V8 combined. It was the next yank on the one-armed bandit that turned up the jackpot with the Interceptor from 1966. Have no doubt, the spacious V8 flying goldfish bowl may have been styled in steel in Italy, but its debt to both the 541 and C-V8 is massive.

Then again don't overlook them as great cars, great pieces of luxurious history. As an example, both these cars boast an original Motorola radio which, when switched on, illuminates the Jensen name behind the dial. Pure Americana, but spiritually that is about all they share. Thrum versus burble, 5in tube perimeter chassis versus 4in inboard parallel tube, even a yellow versus red badge – as brothers they're as similar as Cain and Abel. ♦

Thanks to the Jensen Owners' Club. Contact membership secretary Keith Andrews on 01625 525699

## JENSEN LIVES ON

**C**reative Group – the company behind the new Jensen S-V8 which took the 1998 British International Motor Show by storm – is set to launch a coupé version of the car (reviving the C-V8 name) at the 1999 Motor Show. The £40,000 S-V8 uses a 4.6-litre 325bhp Yankee V8 and the Creative Group has been in communication with the Jensen Owners' Club since the project began. This recognition of the marque's past glories has been rewarded with the new offering receiving a very enthusiastic response from marque devotees.

Jensen Owners' Club membership secretary Keith Andrews says: "The new car has been received exceptionally well by the club and it has coincided with an upsurge in membership.

There's no doubt I'll consider it a 'real' Jensen eventually and it's a very good start. The marque has a very strong following and we welcome anything that helps keep the Jensen name out there."

Former Jencraft boss, marque author, owners' club magazine editor – and Creative Group technical writer – Keith Anderson adds: "The Creative Group is very like Jensen was in the 1950s and 1960s surviving on contract work for major manufacturers with car production almost as a sideline. You have to consider that, if JML was still going it wouldn't still be building Interceptors, to be marketable it would have to be something completely different.

"I think the car embodies the spirit of Jensen: the engine ensures that rather than being just another sports car, it is something a bit special – and you don't get more Jensen than that."



Striking rear 'screen on 541R. A C-V8 bumper is four Ford 105E items welded together