



# INTERCEPTED

**T**his car is unique. It is the astonishing survivor of a story that stretches back nearly 40 years, to when Jensen Motors was (as ever) facing up to a difficult future and saw this car as a route to security. There's a logical explanation as to how it came about, which makes it all the more surprising that it was never developed beyond this, its prototype stage. This car nearly carried the Interceptor moniker that went on to grace a bigger grand tourer, and it would have been aimed at a different (and larger) sector of the market. Instead, it caused ructions in senior management that severed the link between the company and the Jensen brothers, who had founded the company in 1936. Within a decade, Jensen stopped building cars.

Cast your mind back to the mid-Sixties. The Jensen of the day was the big, bold C-V8 grand tourer, but the company buttered its bread by building cars for others, like the Austin-Healey 100 and 3000, the Sunbeam Tiger, and the Volvo P1800. All three contracts were about to cease, which would have left the factory overmanned, with excess capacity and nothing to do but build its thirsty gentlemen's coupé – losing money on each one.

But the demise of the Big Healey presented ▶

This prototype would have become the Jensen Interceptor, but for a last-minute change of heart by Jensen management. Could it have spelled success for the troubled company?

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PHOTOGRAPHY: MALCOLM GRIFFITHS





Jensen Car Club of Switzerland

1965 JENSEN P66 PROTOTYPE





Jensen Car Club of Switzerland



a unique chance for Jensen to storm the lucrative American market with a new design of its own – an opportunity that wasn't lost on co-founder Richard Jensen, who asked designer Eric Neale how they might best exploit it. Neale remarked that many people over the years had asked him when Jensen would produce a more affordable car. This car, codenamed P66, and destined for volume production (25-30 per week; only 66 C-V8 Mk1s were built in a year) was designed to fulfil both requirements

DRIVE the P66 today and you wonder why it's the only one ever built. It's more compact and nimble than the Interceptor, more simply trimmed (vinyl rather than leather) but still stylish, inside and out; subtler in appearance but with heavy hints of the Mercedes-Benz SL 'Pagoda' and Ford Mustang notchback in profile, and a taste of Jaguar about the wheelarch lips. In a supporting role to the C-V8 it should have completed a fine cast – as Porsche's Boxster complements the 911 today.

Mike Williams has owned the car since 1988, and has gradually restored it, as well as piecing together its history. Says Mike, long-term Jensen enthusiast and owner of a rare manual Interceptor Mk1 for 26 years: 'I was in the right

place at the right time. My Interceptor has always been looked after by Jensen Parts and Service at West Bromwich. One day there I was approached by managing director Ian Orford, who told me there was an unusual car that I might be interested in. I expected it to be another early Interceptor and couldn't believe what I saw.'

That was the first Mike heard about the Jensen P66, but the car hadn't simply languished unloved at the factory all those years. It's actually the second of two cars built under the banner Project 66 (it should have gone on sale in 1966), the first being a convertible with distinctive wheelarch strakes – it even carried Interceptor badges – that caused a stir at the 1965 Earls Court Motor Show. Many orders were placed, which moved Jensen to prepare this fixed-head version (Jensen reckoned that American Healey buyers were looking for something more sophisticated) with simpler wings.

Richard Jensen and Eric Neale might have thought their problems were over, but Jensen was no longer an independent company. It had been taken over by holding company Norcross and the late Fifties and deputy chief engineer Kevin Beattie pragmatically performed a costing

exercise on the P66. He realised that it would have cost just as much to build as its bigger sibling, yet it would have gone on sale for £2394 – that's £1285 less than the C-V8, itself a drain on the company.

Jensen and Neale were over-ruled by Norcross-appointed managing director Brian Owen. Project 66 was shelved and resources were ploughed instead into replacing the C-V8 with the Touring-styled, glass-rear-hatch Interceptor. After this decision in 1966, Richard Jensen followed his brother Alan into retirement (Alan was forced to quit because of ill-health in 1963), and Eric Neale left to become chief development engineer for motor body supplier Widney. The old guard had gone.

MIKE Williams shuffles through a thick sheaf of paper. It's not the usual stack of MoTs and service bills kept by many classic car owners; instead, period black and white photographs of the soft-top P66 catch my eye, as does a colour-rendered 1965 Motor Show handout. But it's the photo-copied factory memos that make the most interesting reading.

It seems that Brian Owen is both the villain and the hero of this story: he commandeered the P66 as his personal transport and ran it from



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## 1965 JENSEN P66 PROTOTYPE

Despite being a lone prototype, the detail and finish – inside and out – is very high. Only wind noise at relatively low speed is a giveaway that the car had not been fully sorted



# GUN THE BIG V8 AND P66 FIRST CROUCHES THEN RAISES ITS NOSE AND SNORTS TOWARDS THE HORIZON



early 1967 until late the following year. He may well have saved this sole example from the ignominious fate of the earlier convertible, which is said to have been destroyed on the orders of Richard Jensen on his last day in charge. Details are logged for work carried out on the P66 during Owen's tenure, including repairs to the rear differential carrier, which became a recurring theme.

Towards the end of 1968, Jensen's marketing director Richard Graves authorised the sale of the P66 to the Kent-based dentist of the company's public relations consultant Tony Good. The sum? Just £1400 for a car which, according to a letter from Graves to the new owner, cost £9000 to build. The same letter contained a warning that, as this was a prototype, it might be susceptible to 'the odd water leak, rattle or squeak'. Jensen also sold him the remaining parts from the convertible for £100, plus £10 for the labour involved in dismantling them.

The dentist kept the car for two years, then sold it to a nearby surgeon who had work done on the rear differential mounting. In 1972, the P66 left for America (the intended homeland for a production version) and a life in the hands of two more owners.

A New Jersey registration document shows it still had fewer than 17,000 miles on the clock in 1980, but the colour was changed a few years later from the original California Sage Green to white (like the convertible), which it still wore when it was repatriated in 1988 and bought by Mike Williams.

'Even now, it's done fewer than 30,000 miles, so I haven't had to carry out much mechanical work,' he says. There was rot underneath, which was repaired by Jensen Parts and Service to make the P66 roadworthy again, and Mike has since replaced both lower rear wings (there's a join designed-in above the wheelarch), replaced the rear windscreen (a Perspex panel, as on the C-V8), uprated the previously marginal engine cooling and returned the bodywork to its original green shade. It suits the P66's understated style.

GUN that big V8 and, rather like the Pagoda Merc it faintly resembles, the P66 crouches over its rear wheels, raises its nose and snorts towards the horizon. A V8, in a British sports car that was meant to sit below the C-V8? Bear in mind that the P66 was designed for America, so the locally-produced 6.3-litre Chrysler V8 would have been easy to service and cheap to feed. It makes its

Mr. C. Bates  
G.J.V. Powell  
2nd January 1967  
GJVP/MS/306

MS/MS/112 - 274 578 B  
The above car has been taken into use today as a works car and will normally be used by Mr. Owen.  
Please arrange the issue of a Job Number to cover the work which will be done on this car in the Service Department. The Engineering Department number will be kept open but will not be used for normal day-to-day maintenance.

G.J.V. POWELL

### MEMORANDUM

1. ENGINEERING DEPARTMENT  
From Dr. R. HILLARD, 30th January, 1967.  
088/21/727  
Cephalon to MR. R. A. GRAVES

P. 66

You will no doubt be aware that this car is being used by Mr. R. C. Owen. Following my inspection of this vehicle, the following items require attention.

1. Rear Axle pinion shaft flange fast differential carrier.
2. Damaged panel work on driver's door.
3. The heater does not operate correctly.

In view of the fact that this car is a prototype I should be grateful if you could attend to the items listed above. You will agree, I am sure, that this one is a source of danger. Whilst repairs are being carried out Mr. Owen is using the Red C-8B Mark III - being offered for sale your speedy action would be much appreciated.

EDWARD...  
R. A. GRAVES



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## 1965 JENSEN P66 PROTOTYPE

Today, the P66 has been restored to its original California Sage Green. When it returned to Jensen from America in 1988 the car had been resprayed white (below with Williams' red Interceptor Mk1)



### 1965 JENSEN P66 PROTOTYPE

**Engine** 6276cc Chrysler V8, ohv, single Carter four-barrel carburettor **Power** 330bhp @ 4600rpm  
**Transmission** Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **Brakes** Dunlop discs all round, servo-assisted  
**Suspension** Front: independent, double wishbones, coil springs, lever-arm dampers. Rear: de Dion tube, semi-elliptic leaf springs, telescopic dampers **Weight** 2800lb (1270kg) **Performance** Top speed: 140mph; 0-60mph not tested  
**Cost new** £9000 to build; production sale price £2394 **Value now** £30,000-50,000 (est)



appeal for European markets different to the Big Healey's – it's more soft compact, GT than raw racer – but the performance is there to satisfy Aston owners, let alone those used to Big Healeys. The convertible – fitted with automatic transmission – was factory-tested to a top speed of 140mph; this car feeds power to the rear wheels via a hefty but short-throw four-speed manual and offers the choice of gathering momentum on the V8's burbling torque, or charging hard enough to pin you to your seat while assailing your ears with muscle-car music.

The steering is heavy and takes sweat-inducing sweeps at the broad wheel when parking, the clutch is positive but very firm and the brakes work well if you stamp on them. This is a physically involving car, one that Jensen marketing man Richard Graves warned Mike Williams will wag its tail if you try hard. Drive smoothly and you're rewarded with a balanced, neutral gait, and a comfortable ride that rounds off the bumps without wallowing too much. It's no rough, tough Healey, but neither is it quite the boulevard cruiser or continental stormer that the Interceptor became.

Thanks to Healey-style aluminium panelling and a glassfibre hardtop, the P66 weighs just three-quarters of an Interceptor, and it employs a de Dion rear axle (all other Jensens were live at the rear). It also feels surprisingly complete – the P66 is a prototype but no lash-up, with a well-finished interior in stretchy tan vinyl, a full

set of dashboard dials, and a radio that lights up 'Jensen' when you switch it on. Graves may have had misgivings in selling the car, but it's obvious that sophistication is at work, and only the early onset of wind noise heralds a lack of honing.

So does owning a unique and experimental car cause problems for Mike Williams? 'Finding the right parts can be difficult. It's as good to know what they're not from,' he says. 'Along with the job lot of parts from the convertible that came with the P66, I got a dozen rear half-shafts from the factory.' The differential mounting is still prone to failure (it's an adapted Ford engine mount), but the front quarter-lights come from the MGB, the brakes are the same as early-Sixties Jaguars, front suspension is the same as the C-V8, even the hub-caps are adapted from Jaguar ones. Mike has had a new rear-screen made and fitted alloy bumpers from the convertible – the originals were plainer steel – but Eric Neale planned this type for production.

As with so many enthusiasts, Williams has come across acts of great kindness. The P66's front sidelight/indicator combinations were originally supplied by Britax, so he approached them for a replacement set. He was out of luck, but a salesman there remembered the original order and re-commissioned a new pair. Two months later, and without warning, two new lamp plinths arrived by courier complete with 50 lenses and free of charge.

It's not just Mike who's happy with the result.

His car was runner up for Best in Show at the 2001 NEC International Classic Car Show. The winner? A 1929 Grand Prix Bugatti.

SO could the P66 have saved Jensen from eventual collapse? The P66 is certainly distinctive and could have played an effective counterpart to the larger, traditional Jensen. But the point of a volume seller is to make money, and the P66 was never going to be profitable. In the end the winner is Mike Williams who's ended up owning a unique piece of motoring history. **CC**

**Thanks to:** Owner Mike Williams, and to Milton Keynes Museum (01908 316222 or [www.mkmuseum.org.uk](http://www.mkmuseum.org.uk)) for the photo location.



#### GLEN WADDINGTON

**'IF JENSEN HAD DONE ITS CALCULATIONS THE P66 PROTOTYPE PROBABLY WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN BUILT'**

Glen has always been fascinated by prototypes, styling exercises and concept cars and relished the opportunity to drive this one.