



# Best of British

*There's a lot of Italian and American in this fabulous 1960s GT recipe, too, but despite its mixed...*

WORDS Richard Heseltine // PHOTOGRAPHY Matthew Howell



*ancestry – and not a lot of luck – the Jensen Interceptor is a true great. Here's why*



JENSEN INTERCEPTOR

Jensen Car Club of Switzerland





**W**HAT'S IN A NAME? Carmakers fritter away millions on think tanks brimmed with chin-stroking thesaurus-wielders, but to what end? Most 'creatives' shouldn't be allowed to christen a pet hamster, let alone a car.

Scroll back to the 1960s and it was much simpler: you either opted for a name with military connotations – Avenger, Polaris and so on – or status-laced nonsense such as Celebrity, Diplomat and the like. Yet therein lies the rub: for the most part, the better the name, the more rubbish the car. Most exotics of the period had simple numerical designations, often shadowed by the legend 'GT'. Think 330GT, 350GT, 3500GT, 5300GT – and then stop thinking. It's all very confusing.

But that decade also saw Jensen Motors take a turn for the ambitious and target the exotica elite. What's more, this upstart from England's Black Country made a break from accepted protocol and gave its muscle-bound GT an actual name. Or rather, it reheated one that it had first used as far back as 1950. It was an act of unbridled genius. Even now, just hearing the name 'Interceptor' is enough to conjure images of glamour, intrigue and speed. Seeing this 1969 Series I example up close merely reinforces that sense of wonder. Few other cars we can think of are more redolent of their era than this sharply tailored bruiser. It might not be subtle, but it sure as hell strikes a chord.

The thing is, observers of sufficiently hoity-toity stature have long viewed the Interceptor as a bit of a mongrel, a receptacle for proprietary parts and with all the negative connotations that infers. Throw in a reputation for infirmity and middling build quality and you could be forgiven for thinking that the Interceptor isn't just a mongrel, it's also a pup. As such, popular perception has it that the Interceptor is somehow not a credible rival to vowel-laden exotica from Italy. It's just a try-hard, a wannabe that doesn't quite cut it.

This is nonsense. Banging on about what this car isn't is a surefire way to miss out on what it is: a highly capable *gran turismo* that is much – *much* – better than preconceptions will have you believe. Yes, the styling is the major draw, but that's not even the half of it.

Norms shift, and the Interceptor finally seems to be enjoying some long-overdue respect. Demand is on the rise, and how. Bob Cherry of Cropredy Garage, who has been involved in all things Interceptor-related for 41 years, is as surprised as anyone. 'Something must be going on, as prices have gone through the roof,' he says.

'Until recently, the most expensive car we ever sold was a Convertible at £55,000. I know →

## ‘Even now, just hearing the name “Interceptor” is enough to conjure images of glamour, intrigue and speed’

of one standard Interceptor III that sold for £75,000 last November and we recently sold a car for £100,000. In February, there was one for sale at a show for £110,000. I don't know if people are looking at them as investments, or whether the fact that James Bond drives a Jensen in the latest 007 book [Solo by William Boyd] has boosted the appeal. Whatever it is, they're selling as quickly as we can buy them. Sourcing cars is becoming a serious problem. The other thing, of course, is that 90% of parts are available brand new, and the other 10% can be found secondhand. You can't say that about a lot of cars of this age.'

The Interceptor was a radical departure for Jensen, that's for sure. Consider this: it took the firm 32 years – 1935 to 1967 – to make its first 1000 cars. The Interceptor changed all that. Unveiled at the 1966 Earls Court Motor Show, this was also the first offering from the Midlands concern not to be styled in-house. That in itself prompted more than a little consternation within the Kelvin Way factory.

The Interceptor as we know it was intended to replace the C-V8, a car that was, in every positive way, a bit weird. Quirky styling undermined the fact that this glassfibre-bodied coupé was comfortable and blisteringly quick – *Motor* described it as being the 'best long distance grand touring car we have ever tested' – so it always met customer resistance.

In fairness, it hadn't quite emerged as resident stylist Eric Neale intended due to outside interference. His follow-up, widely known as the P66 (it wore Interceptor badges in-period) was shown at Earls Court in 1965, and appeared set for production. However, some factions thought it too unadventurous and old-fashioned so nixed it shortly after its debut in London. That led to a major rift between Neale and the marque-founding Jensen brothers on one hand, and MD Brian Owen, chief engineer Kevin Beattie and members of the Norcross Group (which had acquired the firm in 1959) on the other. In 1966, Alan and Richard Jensen left the firm they had sired more than 30 years earlier. Feeling somewhat superfluous, the talented Neale followed suit. Jensen the marque now looked to Italy for its future styling direction.

Most of the great design houses of the day were canvassed, with Carrozzeria Touring's

pitch being accepted. What's more, it also provided tooling for its patented Superleggera body construction. Ironically for a firm steeped in coachbuilding, Jensen commissioned the first batch of bodysHELLS – as few as 15, as many as 50, depending on who you ask – to be made in Milan in an effort to speed up the transition from prototype to full production.

Touring, however, was in no position to make anything. This once-proud firm had bolstered its production facilities after landing a manufacturing contract with the Rootes Group, only for the deal to head south. Touring was left holding the bag and, as such, tanked shortly thereafter. It was left to Alfredo Vignale's eponymous concern to bash out early Interceptor bodies.

See beyond the outer dazzle, however, and the Interceptor was really a re-clothing exercise, the existing C-V8's steel box-section chassis being retained largely unaltered, with a steel skeletal structure welded to it: at 1801kg (3971lb), the new strain was only 11% heavier than the car that bore it. Power, as before, came from Chrysler's iron-block 6276cc V8. That equated to 325bhp and an elephantine 425lb ft of torque. Power was fed to the rear wheels via a Power-Lok limited-slip differential, four-wheel Dunlop discs being another carryover from the C-V8.

It was an instant success, too. Jensen produced some 1074 Series I Interceptors, just 24 of them with manual boxes. The Interceptor II from October '69 featured suspension tweaks and a new fascia; the Interceptor III followed two years later, with vented discs and a contoured dashboard, the 7.2-litre SP arriving concurrently. Then there was the technical tour-de-force FF (see page 92), a handsome

convertible version and the inelegant Panther Westwinds-devised fixed-head coupé.

Unfortunately, it couldn't last. The Norcross Group sold out to Brandt's Bank in 1968, with San Francisco motor mogul Kjell Qvale acquiring an 84% stake two years later. Norwegian-born 'Mr Q' set about boosting production, his robust management style chafing against British sensibilities. Nonetheless, he instigated a major sales push in the USA, along with a raft of new developments, not least the Jensen-Healey and its GT stable-mate plus some very attractive styling concepts by ex-Aston Martin man William Towns, which sadly remained stillborn. The problem was, Interceptors weren't always the last word in reliability. However, the same can be said of most of its rivals from the period.

What really did for the Interceptor was the small matter of a fuel crisis, which extinguished demand for thirsty exotica at a stroke. Then there was a recession, the imposition of VAT, a three-day working week and, well, you get the idea. In 1972, Jensen Motors recorded a pre-tax profit of just over £200,000. Two years later, it was in the red and half of its 1400-strong workforce was axed as a consequence. For these reasons and many more besides, Qvale threw in the towel in 1976 and the Interceptor was no more. Except it never fully passed over to the other side, with several attempts being made to reanimate the model (see page 90). That in itself speaks volumes.

While later iterations were more polished performers, none had the delicacy of line of the Series I: no chintzy grille but oversized tail-light clusters and so on. The early Interceptor is a handsome car that, despite its Italian heritage, manages to look resolutely British. Certainly, the elevated bonnet line and bluff frontal treatment have a touch of contemporary Aston Martin, although perhaps the rear end was appropriated from Giorgetto Giugiaro's Bertone Testudo design study of 1963. Praise needs to be heaped on the often unaccredited Federico Formenti – Touring's chief stylist, whose prior efforts included the sublime Alfa Romeo 1900CSS and Aston DB5 – for creating an outline that continues to captivate.

The Interceptor isn't pretty; instead it's lantern-jawed and infused with testosterone. →

### 1969 JENSEN INTERCEPTOR SERIES I

**ENGINE** 6276cc V8, OHV, four-barrel Carter carburettor

**POWER** 325bhp @ 4600rpm

**TORQUE** 425lb ft @ 2800rpm

**TRANSMISSION** Three-speed auto,

rear-wheel drive **STEERING** Power-assisted rack and

pinion **SUSPENSION** Front: double wishbones, coil

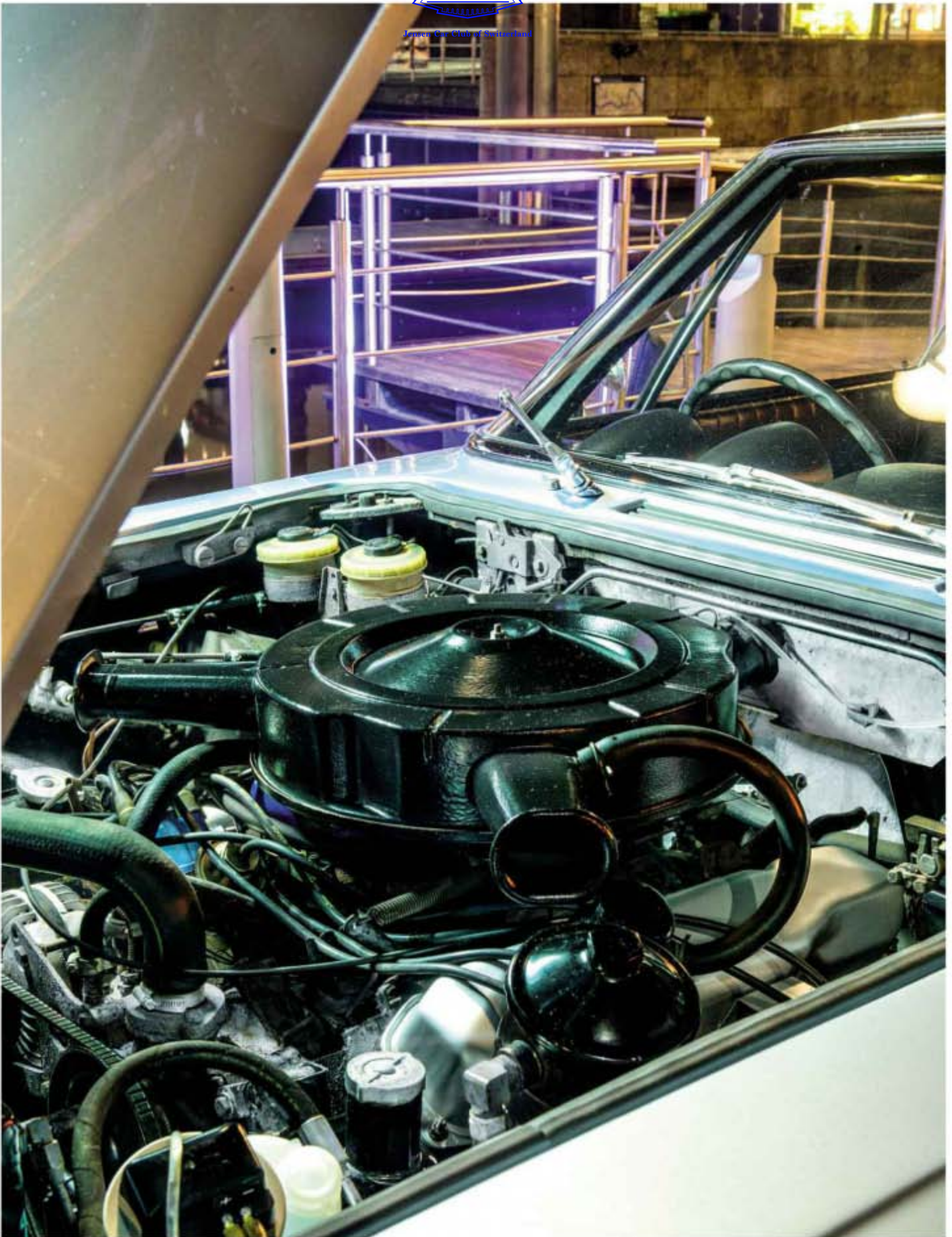
springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar.

Rear: live axle, dual-rate semi-elliptic leaf springs,

Panhard rod, telescopic dampers **BRAKES** Dunlop discs

**WEIGHT** 1677kg **PERFORMANCE** Top speed 137mph

(claimed). 0-60mph 7.3sec



JENSEN INTERCEPTOR

‘Though it was intended as discreet transportation for the well-to-do, it’s hard not to indulge in foot-to-the-floor antics’





## JENSEN INTERCEPTOR

**Right**  
Series 1 Interceptors featured a dual-cowled instrument binnacle and upright centre stack, subsequently replaced by a more overtly horizontal theme.

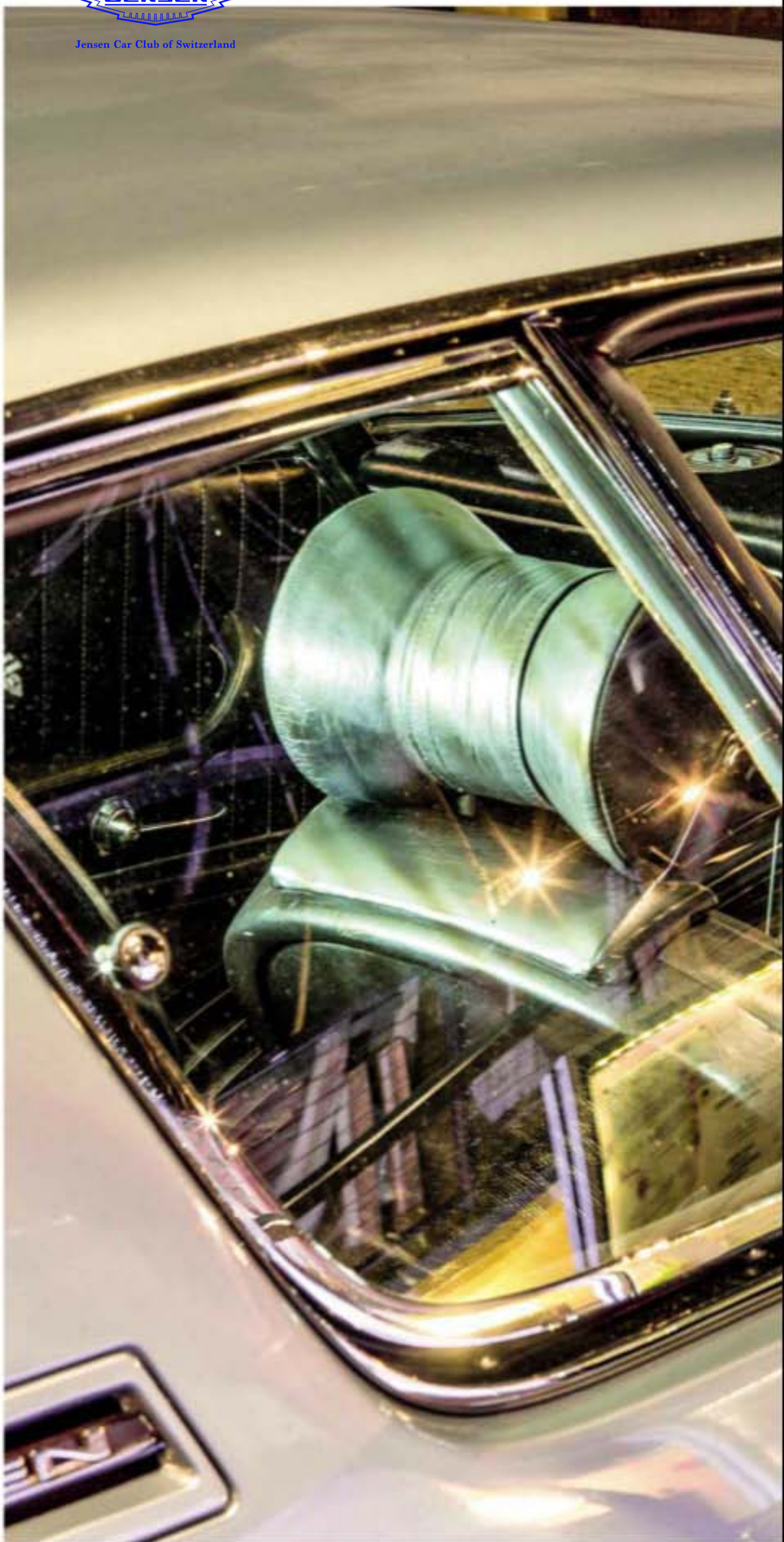
Inside, however, it's more Italianate chic than British bulldog. To some degree, the seating position is dictated by the slightly offset pedals. Separate hooded cowls for the speedo and revcounter, along with the centre console with its myriad toggle switches and lights, anchor the car firmly in the mid-to-late '60s. It's hard not to come over all Johnny Jet-Set and envisage crossing continents in a single bound (fuel stops permitting). And, as befits the GT ideal, it has a 16cu ft boot for those overnight bags. On the debit side, it isn't much cop as a 2+2, but then few 2+2s are.

So much of the car's character is forged by its powerplant, the lazy big-block V8 being the antithesis of the peaky, highly-strung units found in more thoroughbred fare. Though intended in period as discreet transportation for the well-to-do, it's all too hard not to indulge in brutal foot-to-the-floor antics on the straights. The Chrysler motor barely burbles when cruising, but kickdown on the superb TorqueFlite 'box prompts a rapid rise in both volume and speed. It sounds more down and dirty muscle-car than gentleman's express, but in so many ways that's part of the appeal.

This isn't a car that (metaphorically) shrinks around you. Drive one hand and it won't feel particularly nimble, but that isn't really the point. It is in no way a sports car, but it is a great mile-eater. When pressed, the rear end doesn't like mid-corner bumps and it will wriggle a little when provoked. It's best to take the slow-in, fast-out approach to corners, clicking down on the gear selector into second to exploit engine braking and harness the elephantine torque for when it's all pointing in the right direction. The Jensen is a docile old thing, even if the lack of power-steering on early cars ensures a certain physicality at pottering speeds.

There is so much to like about the Interceptor. If you want to be cruel – and many have been – you could say it lacks sophistication; that it's all pushrods and leaf springs rather than quad-cams and independent rear ends. Yet equally you could argue that these are plus-points. The Jensen has a body to die for and a heart that can be fixed with a hammer. It's such a winning combination: the Italians brought the style, the British the pomp and the Americans the circumstance. And while there are a great many Yankee-engined hybrids, few work so completely – so compellingly – as a properly sorted Interceptor. →

**THANKS TO** Stuart Turner for his superb Interceptor, and Paul Lewis of the Jensen Owners' Club, [www.joc.org.co.uk](http://www.joc.org.co.uk).





## What happened next...



ADAM DUCKWORTH

**THE DEATH OF JENSEN MOTORS** in 1976 didn't spell the end of the Interceptor. Strictly speaking, it was in stasis. When the receivers were originally called in, the main factory was subtle and ultimately sold off, but Jensen Parts & Service (later JPS Engineering) moved into the building next door. It was a viable business, one that did a nice line in repairing and refurbishing Interceptors, plus other projects that ranged from the construction of William Towns' Hustler utility vehicle prototype to armour-plating Land Rovers for the RUC in Northern Ireland.

The firm's prosperity was heightened when it became the Subaru concessionaire for the UK, replenished coffers giving the firm's then-owner, Ian Orford, the confidence to remortgage his home to finance a long-nurtured ambition: he introduced a new strain of Interceptor in time for the '83 London Motorfair. Except the 'new' version was built on the footprint of an original '72 car to get around Type Approval regulations. This was a toe-in-the-water exercise, but it led to complete immersion with the Interceptor S4.

Gone were the big-block V8s, in their place a 5.9-litre Chrysler unit. The Touring-penned, Vignale-productionised outline remained much as before: the car's styling was the big draw so why change it? There was, however, one slight problem. It cost £39,950, and most period reports concentrated on the thumping pricetag rather than the car's actual worth.

Predictably, sales were dismal and the Jensen Car Company was sold to Hugh Wainwright's Unicorn Holdings in 1989, by which time the S4's price had ballooned to £106,000 (£118,000 for a convertible). The new broom promised fresh production lines, presses, paint and trim shops, in unison with a big sales drive. The

objective was to raise production to a giddy 12 cars per year and turnover from £1.2m to £4m. High-profile dealer West One of Baker Street, London, led the charge.

Sadly, ambition was one thing, success something else entirely. Only 15 S4s were made up to '93, when the black veil descended on the Interceptor for the final time. With it died a thoroughly new Chevy V8-powered 'Series 5' GT that was never shown publically. The man tasked with creating the prototype was John Mangoletsi, who near-concurrently helmed the ill-starred BRM marque revival in Group C racing. There was also a Saudi-funded coupé, penned by Ariel Atom man Simon Saunders,



Top, middle and above  
Chevy-engined Interceptor S of 2010, and its '80s-style interior; the world awaits this new 'Interceptor' by CPP.

which remained just a model before the much-vaunted S-V8 arrived in 1998 under an entirely different regime. That too failed. The S4 was, in effect, a bridgehead between the original Jensen brothers' concern and the final renaissance.

More recently, there have been several attempts at reviving the concept. V Eight, in association with respected Jensen specialist Cropredy Bridge Garage, began offering the Interceptor S in 2008 with Chevrolet LS2 power. It also produced renderings of a heavily customised Interceptor, dubbed the SX, which never materialised. Fast-forward to 2010 and Jensen International Automotive began its re-engineered Interceptor S, complete with 6.2-litre Chevrolet LSA V8 power, a six-speed auto-box and a bespoke independent rear end. The firm has since begun offering a wealth of further upgrades, including a supercharger.

Hot rod builder Valley Gas Speed Shop also offers its own take on the theme, having created an 8.3-litre Chrysler Viper V10-engined car dubbed 'Segrave' for a customer before offering the conversion for general consumption. The styling makeover, however, has divided opinion.

Last, but not least, there's an all-new 'retro' Interceptor - if it ever emerges, that is. In 2012, CPP Global Holdings - a company that's well-known in the design community for its prototyping skills - announced plans to make an all-new car along Interceptor lines, complete with an all-aluminium chassis, having acquired the rights to the name from HSCS (Healey Sports Cars Switzerland). It would operate from the former Jaguar plant in Browns Lane, Coventry, although as yet the new Interceptor exists only as a series of computer-generated renderings.

# The FF: a Jensen too far?

IMAGINE THE planning meeting. Item one, let's build a technically daring super-GT. Item two, let's then sell it at almost twice the price of the car it's based upon. Item three, let's not lose our shirts. Well, two out of three isn't bad. Jensen's mighty FF was one of the most advanced cars of its era, and also one of the priciest. It was doomed to failure.

The FF came about as a result of meetings in 1962 between former Le Mans winner Tony Rolt, then of Harry Ferguson Research, and Jensen's top brass. The original plan called for a four-wheel-drive C-V8, an example of which was shown at the Earls Court Motor Show three years later. Rolt was eager to see Ferguson's technology reach a broader audience, while the suits in the Kelvin Way boardroom were just as keen to shake off the firm's new-money, parts-bin thievery image.

Unveiled at Earls Court in 1966, the prototype FF (for 'Ferguson Formula'; the Interceptor tag was never adopted) was far from production-ready. Jensen's chief engineer Kevin Beattie, assisted by future Tyrrell designer Derek Gardner, worked around the clock adapting the Interceptor to four-wheel drive. While the regular car had its main chassis tubes running down the middle of the car (as on the C-V8), the addition of a hefty transfer box meant they had to be moved to the outside and run through the sills. These acted not only as structural members with the steel body welded to them, but also as vacuum tubes for the Dunlop-Maxaret anti-lock brakes: if there was an engine failure, the driver had reserve vacuum to safely stop the car. The 4in increase in wheelbase meant a longer bonnet, while the front valance and wings were subtly reworked, with an additional row of slatted vents behind the front wheels.

There was another issue: Ferguson wanted its logo on the car, but Jensen did not. The two parties eventually agreed on discreet 'JFF' and

'Jensen FF' badges being added to the car's grille and tail, respectively. Early examples featured brushed stainless steel roofs but, for reasons of cost, Jensen then changed tack and simply painted them silver.

And the press heaped praise upon Jensen's bold new baby. *Motorsaid* of the car's aviation-inspired anti-lock braking: 'The system could be a life-saver, as it is possible to brake, steer and corner at the same time in a way which would be impossible in an ordinary car.' And the motoring media conspired to make it Car of the Year in 1967. The FF unquestionably raised Jensen's standing as a serious player. It was a trendsetter, but Jensen was in no position to reap the benefits of its trailblazing.

The FF went on sale in 1967 and immediately gained an unenviable reputation for frailty. It cost £6017 in 1968, so only the seriously rich could apply, and captains of industry and showbiz types tended to be vocal when their cars misbehaved. Warranty claims piled up and Jensen threw in the towel in 1971 after 320 FFs had been made. This move followed minor upgrades with the Series II (pictured below) and III, with changes being largely stylistic: different bumpers, revised badges and so on.

It's a crying shame that it ended this way. Drive an FF today and you'll be amazed at how such an old car – and at nearly 1800kg, a heavy one at that – can move so quickly. Some 63% of the torque is transferred to the rear wheels so lightning starts are not only possible but predictable. What's more, the sound of the 383ci Chrysler bent-eight being made to work is worth the price of admission by itself.

The simple, unvarnished truth is this: the FF was too brave and too expensive to succeed. It foretold many features that we nowadays take for granted when driving a supermini or a supercar, yet Jensen Motors failed to see out the '70s. But then innovators rarely succeed. It's usually the copyists that make hay.



## INTERCEPTORS ON THE BIG (AND SMALL) SCREEN

AS A RULE of thumb, the better the movie poster, the worse the movie. A case in point: *Speedtrap*. It's far from a celluloid gem but the poster features a Jensen Interceptor S1 being horribly mistreated. This 1977 flick starred Joe Don Baker as an investigator for an insurance company looking for clues behind a spate of car thefts, aided by a policewoman (and former girlfriend) played by Tyne Daley. The movie starts with a garage door opening. It reveals a burnt orange US-spec Interceptor III that, in seconds, morphs into a right-hand-drive (and English-registered) S1. In a different colour! Spoiler alert: Daley's character is the thief. Now you don't have to watch it. Be grateful.

Closer to home, the Interceptor was something of a constant on ITC TV shows of yesteryear, not least as Robert Vaughn's wheels in *The Protectors* (below). The oft-photographed S1 demonstrator TEA 4G also appeared in an episode of *The Saint* starring Roger Moore. Its left-hand door was already rusting...

Fast-forward to the late-80s, and the rebooted adaptation of Leslie Charteris's hero employed a Brienz Blue S4 in a prominent role alongside actor Simon Dutton (top). Except that the car in this risible and mercifully short-lived series of TV movies was in fact a 1976 Interceptor merely dressed up to look like the latest variant.

In 2002 an Interceptor III starred alongside Nathaniel Parker in *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries*, although it made way for a Bristol 410. And since then? Well, three heavily customised Jensens were destroyed during the making of *The Fast & The Furious 6*, but we cannot pass judgement as we haven't seen it. Nor are we ever likely to.



# The CV of the British GT

*The Interceptor had a surprisingly long career, with various diversions along the way*

**1965**

The P66 Interceptors, sadly stillborn, were a pair of aluminium-bodied cars (roadster and coupé) styled by Eric Neale. Neither was put into production.



**1966**

The first-generation Interceptor debuted with 383ci Chrysler V8 and Vignale-made bodywork. 1074 built to '69.

**1966**

Jensen FF: the daring four-wheel-drive version of the Interceptor emerged in late 1966 – predating the Audi Quattro (launched in 1980) by almost 14 years – and was Car of the Year in 1967. 320 were made to 1971.



**1969**

Jensen Interceptor II first seen at the 1969 Earls Court Motor Show. Featured a light restyle and William Towns-designed dashboard. 695 RHD and 493 LHD cars were made to 1971.

**1967**

Jensen Nova was a one-off concept car built by Vignale in 1967-68 and based on a left-hand-drive experimental chassis shortened by five inches.



**1971**

Jensen Interceptor III: the first model introduced under Kjell Qvale. Wider Kent Alloys wheels and the latest Girling vented disc brakes. Revised interior with Recaro seats and 440ci V8s from May 1972. 1437 RHD and 808 LHD built to 1973.



**1971**

Jensen SP. Known as the Six Pack due to its three twin-barrel Holley carb set up, this 7.2-litre model emerged in late 1971 and could nudge 150mph. 219 made in RHD plus 13 in LHD.

**1972**

FFF100: one-off Interceptor-based coupé styled by William Towns and built by GKN, which had purchased manufacturing rights to the FF system. Featured a Keith Black-built 620bhp 'hemi motor.



**1983**

The S4: reborn Interceptor was first seen at 1983 London Motorfair, complete with 360ci Chrysler V8. Convertibles and a lone Coupé were also made to '92.

**1975**

The Coupé: last-gasp Interceptor was essentially a Convertible with fixed-head roof devised by Panther Westwinds. Just 47 made (including two prototypes) in 1975-76.

**1974**

Interceptor III Convertible: lidless version made its debut at 1974 Geneva motor show. 413 LHD and as many as 94 RHD cars were made to '76, customers including Frank Sinatra, Cher and Lynda 'Wonder Woman' Carter.