Jensen-Healey Prototyp

There was a Birmingham J-H owner who bought one of the pre-production prototypes as a 'special deal' and with the clear understanding that it was such and that no warranty of any sort was given. I don't know who sanctioned the sale, it certainly wasn't me, and it led to a lot of trouble. A yellow car, he had the words 'Death Trap' painted on it and parked it, or tried to, in front of Earls court one Motor Show. He came on to the Jensen stand creating a fuss and had to be removed by the security people. When they reported a successflu ejection to us afterwards, one of them said that it was such a pity that the man had somehow tripped going down the stairs at the front entrance. That was the last we heard of him, I believe.

Jensen-Healey 10001

Edgar Schwyn has at last been able to track down the first J-H which, after duty at Geneva in 1972, was the type approval car for Swiss regulations and was then sold to Edgar. Rumours of it being destroyed were incorrect and it is now in the hands of, and used by, a very proud owner.

That is the good news. The bad news is that mine is no longer the oldest survivor - a very short reign indeed! Edgar is going to try and persuade the owner to join the Swiss Jensen Club, and maybe we will see the car in Holland next year.

...I am pretty sure that this is chassis number 10001, the LHD car which was used for display at the 1972 Geneva show and technically the first production car, following pre-production prototypes. Swiss importer Edgar Schwyn went to see the car some four or five years ago and told me that the owner had painted the stainless windscreen surround red and also the chrome windows on the doors, as you can see in the picture. Edgar also reported that the car was in pretty bad condition, so I would recommend a very thorough examination if you are interested in buying it, preferably by one of the Swiss JOC experts. At that time the owner would have sold it for SF 13K, in Edgar's opinion much too much for the condition, despite being an historic car.

I drove the car to Switzerland some time after the Geneva show for testing by the type approval authorities in Zuerich and then drove back to England for some modifications and preparation for sale to Edgar Schwyn. Apart from many such journeys in Interceptors, that drive in the J-H was one of the best I ever had in any car!

...When one of our Engineering Department staff and I were returning from the type approval test, we had caught the last ferry from Ostende and were therefore driving through London in the early hours of the morning. We had reached Swiss Cottage when we were faced with a police road block where they had decided to check all vehicles. We were asked for the registration number, which neither of us could remember, and then the make of car. When we told the policemen what it was, he replied that he had never heard of such a car. "No problem, Officer, this is number 1!" "Good night, gentlemen, drive carefully" was the reply.

The first J-H was UK registered despite being LHD. UK trade plates are not valid for overseas use. With Interceptors, they were registered using export home delivery numbers, which is why all the cars I used had

Birmingham numbers and not West Brom ones. If I was delivering a car to one of the dealers, not a very common event other than to Switzerland. it had been known for me to use the same number more than once!

Jensen Healey, Motor

Anybody 'playing' with a Jensen-Healey could not do better than fit this engine (BMW 2002tii) into it, thus replicating the car we really wanted to build but were prevented from doing so by badly over estimating our production forecast and by BMW not wishing to supply engines in anything like the numbers we were forecasting.

One engine was fitted to a J-H prototype over a weekend, apparently a very easy project, and the car went very well indeed.
Had I not got HEA I would do this.

... The history of the search by Jensen for an engine is well documented in the various books covering the company's history. By 1970/71, three years into the design of the car, there was still no engine available to Healey/Jensen which would fulfil Qvale's and Donald Healey's requirements, ie power and long term USA anti-pollution requirements. The original engine chosen by Healeys was the Vauxhall twin cam, too slow and bad emissions, and when it was 'discovered' that Lotus were developing firstly their own cylinder head version and then full engine design based on this engine, the attraction for all parties became irresistable. The trouble was that Lotus were not ready to meet Jensen's urgent need and this was why the deal was done to take early production engines without warranty, and to carry out development work on pre-production units to hasten things along. As far as trickery goes, it is a litttle hard to blame Chapman entirely when Jensen were so desperate to get themselves out of a very big hole. By this time Qvale was in trouble with his US dealer network, having promised them a replacement for the Austin Healey and making them take Interceptors to ensure the granting of a Jensen-Healey franchise. Further, cashflow at Jensen was getting serious and reaching crisis point unless production could be started quickly.

Where the 'trickery' bit really came in was when promised deliveries of engines from Lotus failed to appear, not just in the quantities promised, but any engines at all. I remember Dick Graves going over to see what the production state was, well after supplies were supposed to have regularised, to be met with the sight of an incomplete engine production line and no chance of deliveries, despite legions of promises by Lotus, and this was well into 1972. And it was these promises which led Jensen to base ordering of all bought in components, practically everything else apart from body panels and engines, and once these supplies started to roll in and no J-H cars rolling out, the result was inevitable.

Sure Colin Chapman was a very smooth operator and excellent salesman - but so is Qvale, it was just that the gamble he took did not come off. Add to these woes the appalling early build quality and the Lotus reliability, and for good measure the collapse of the big engined cars after the oil crisis, and it is easy to understand why the company went under. It is highly unlikely that a futher cash injection to tide things over would have made any long term difference, but that will always be open to speculation.

For what they are worth those are my views, but I know that they are the same as at least three surviving

JML directors. In any case, by mid 1975 Qvale, aided by Edmiston, were taking active steps to ditch Jensen for the Subaru franchise.

Jensen-Healey

Contrary to one view, we did not just pick parts at random which resulted in some spec changes; what actually has happened is that many cars have been modified on the forty years since they were built, particularly MK1 cars which have received MK2 parts in their lives.

When the Donald Healey prototype was received at the factory, as most will know from various publications, the front end bore a striking resemblance to a TR6. Shortly afterwards the USA authorities started legislating to bring in more safety regulations, and included among these were rules for controlling front end low speed impact damage (not to be confused with the 30 mph tests). As a result, the front of the J-H had to be redesigned, and so tight was the timing to get the car into production that is was, to say the least, a compromise and resulted in the dreadful assembly of wings and headlamp cowlings that is the main difference between MK1 and MK2 cars. In short, the MK1 car was never finished properly and had to 'go down the line' in order to try and salvage some sort of cash flow.

Against this background we were receiving a fraction of the number of engines promised by Lotus, resulting in early production figures way below forecasts. And all the while the stocks of bought in parts including gearboxes, wheels and tyres, exhausts, screens and glass etc etc were pouring into the factory each week as originally scheduled from suppliers until the 'taps' could be turned down to match production. Not only was the Lotus engine supply disastrous, but they also came out of sequence and with an alarming number of design and build faults; and Qvale had done the deal with Chapman with no warranty 'given or implied'!

When the MK2 body redesign was nearing production I got together about half-a dozen or so competitive cars and lined them up on one of the car parks, with a MK1 in the middle. I rang Brian Spicer and asked him and some of the design team to go and have a good look at the cars to get some ideas as to how we could brighten up the Jensen-Healey so that we could introduce a MK2 version. Most of the cosmetic changes have already been mentioned above; others included a finishing strip to the rear of the bonnet and front indicator/bumper aperture, a plastic (not stainless) side moulding and black finish to the headlamp surround. The MK1 did not have a clock, so that was a straight addition. I am not qualified to enumerate all the mechanical changes, but many of these came in as they were made rather than being purely MK2 mods.

Going back to the front end damage limitation regulations I can recount a somewhat bizarre story which may give some hope to those who believe that we were a bunch amateurs. Dick Graves, myself and my colleague Mike Chambers were walking across from the admin offices to the service department one after noon when we were hailed by Brian Spicer and a couple of his team, who were standing by one of the prototype cars, facing the loading bay in front of the old Tiger production building. Apparently their intention was to push the car to approximately 5 mph into the concrete wall to simulate the US regulation test. So we all pushed, someone called 'Enough!' and the car duly slammed into the wall. Minimal damage, job done! Obviously an official test at MIRA followed!

The square number plate recess was, as already said, to fit US plates, and I believe also Japan, but I do not

have my parts book to hand to confirm this. I think that the differences in rear outer wings was to allow for side marker lights, again primarily for the US market.

Had the oil crisis not decimated the market for thirsty cars in 1974 I think Jensen might have survived, but there was a very big question mark over the Interceptor replacement, model F, or Concord to give it its most likely name. One thing is sure, as told to me by Dick Graves about three years ago,the availability of the Subaru franchise convinced Qvale not to throw any more money into Jensen.

... With a fully sorted Lotus engine the car would udoubtedly have been much better received. Read the first Autocar road test again to see just how good it was for its time. The Vauxhall engine was available, but the emission standards and performance were not up to scratch. One of the problems with engine choice was the numbers we wre predicting. When you think that the original spec for the car was a really neat 2 seater sports, with 'one hand' hood operation and costing no more than xxx£1500 including UK purchase tax, is it any wonder that we predicted potential sales in excess of 200 cars per week?

The build quality was obviously a very big problem to begin with, but without mechanical problems the facelifted MK2 should have restored public confidence; that is providing the paint problems were handled properly which I think was the case. Had Jensen done a 'Lancia' there would have been no chance at all. In the prototype stage I was on record as having enquired why we were building a car without seperators between rear outer wings and body tub, where there is always movement, when BMC found out with the MGA that to do so would lead to body problems. Nobody ever listens to the Sales Department! HEA will have them, unsurprisingly!

Survival? I think not, at least without a lot more money and determination. I think the big problem next to be faced would have been the F type, or Interceptor replacement. I tell you now that Sales were seriously worried about those huge doors and the ensuing parking problems! Someone clever could probably work out the length from the available pictures and therefore the space needed to get out of the car; from memory I think we calculated it at about 5ft! Either side!