

MY DREAM DATE WITH THE RED ARROWS



Bill Bradshaw next to his childhood favourite, a Jensen Interceptor

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By Bill Bradshaw

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As the RAF takes its share of defence cuts, the jewel in its crown defiantly flies the flag...

It HAS not been a good time for lovers of British icons. Everywhere we turn those things of which we have been most proud seem to be disappearing. HMS Ark Royal has sailed off into the sunset and the fabulous Harrier jump jets, a symbol of these islands' legendary inventiveness, have gone with her. Not so long ago sports car maker TVR closed its doors for the last time and Concorde, our supersonic jet liner bowed to 21st-century economies of scale and flew off to various museums worldwide.

So when the chance came for me to sample two of the finest examples of the best of British – both with roots in the never-had-it-so-good Sixties – I did not need to be asked twice. My wife Jill had inadvertently set up this piece of good fortune with a speculative bid at a charity auction to spend a day with the Red Arrows, the RAF's world-famous aerobatic display team.

As the date loomed, another slice of luck came my way when an old Formula One PR friend sent an email about one of her clients... Jensen International Automotive (JIA). Jensen made the car of my schoolboy dreams, the fabulous, dashing Interceptor.

Trips to my dentist David Robson in Gateshead were made bearable by walking by the new Interceptor on his drive, once, twice, three times just so I could peer through that ridiculously sexy, curvaceous rear window.

The Jensen company was mortally wounded by the first major oil crisis of the mid-Seventies and although it thrashed around and was occasionally resuscitated in the years that followed, the magnificent, big-engined Interceptor was its last glorious product. Until now. Jensen International Automotive is bringing the old girl back to life using donor body shells (old cars) but replacing virtually everything that makes them go, stop and change gear. It's a 21st-century car in Sixties clothing.

But these are challenging days for such British icons. The new Interceptor costs £100,000-plus, depending on customers' tastes and demands, a far cry from its £3,740 price tag in 1966. As for "The Reds" as they are known within the RAF, defence cuts are everywhere. Our sister paper The Sunday Express launched a campaign to save the team six years ago when their future looked to be in doubt. Now, the need for public spending prudence is omnipresent.



Not only that, the Reds are recovering from a crash on a training flight 12 months ago ahead of the 2010 season when two of the £20million BAE Hawks touched in mid-flight and one of the team, Flight Lieutenant Mike Ling, had to eject as his plane crashed into a Crete military airfield. His Hawk was destroyed but he escaped with a dislocated shoulder. So can the Red Arrows – who are based at RAF Scampton – and the Interceptor survive? I had to investigate.

From the moment I laid eyes on the Interceptor I was smitten. "My" car is actually owned by Charles Dunstone, co-founder of Carphone Warehouse, who has invested in the JIA project and is now a director. His Interceptor S, originally built in 1973, is the first version of the "new" cars, dressed in Old English white with several hides of black leather providing a sumptuous new interior. Having had several classic cars I knew to keep checking the water temperature gauge and oil pressure but I need not have worried.

The needles never strayed from position A, the 200-mile journey to Lincolnshire was a breeze and the car oozed class and performance. It was noticed. A Mondeo man decided to tailgate me on the M11. Or he tried for a while. Off the motorway on the A-roads to Scampton it was perhaps even more of a joy, the new independent rear suspension from Jaguar helped the car stick sublimely to the twisting roads. And then we were there. I already fancied the Jensen's chances of survival second time around. But what about the Red Arrows? I arrived just a few days before the Ministry of Defence announced 2,700 job cuts in the RAF.

What price their showpiece aerobatic squadron? RAF SCAMPTON would look familiar to graduates of brickbuilt secondary modern schools of the Fifties. Add to that a liberal dose of neglect and under-use and it's no surprise to learn that The Reds are soon to leave the base after a quarter-century for nearby RAF Waddington. The bricks and mortar are depressing and the only flying done at the base is by the famous team. But it is their very presence that invests the old place with a feeling of something special.

However, what of those defence cuts and that 2010 crash? At the Red Arrows briefing room block, where we were introduced to the the team by Air Commodore Gordon Bruce, it didn't seem to faze this bunch who oozed charm and efficiency, none more so than this year's leader, Red 1, Squadron Leader Ben Murphy. As he led his colleagues through the airborne drill they were about to undertake his manner was calm, authoritative and inspiring. Within moments we were outside again to watch Murphy and two colleagues, Red Five – Flight Lieutenant Kirsty Moore – and Red Nine, Flt Lt Zane Sennett, perform one of the elements of their display: rollbacks.

This involves three Arrows in a mini diamond formation (part of the famous Arrows nine-strong diamond) with each in turn

flipping up to the left, rolling over and then rejoining the other pair. We made our way up to the Scampton control tower to get the best view of the choreographed display, the trio soaring and swooping over the flat Lincolnshire countryside, roaring into view with a thunderous balletic display, Murphy's voice crackling over the radio to give his commands. By 10.30 we were back in the debrief room with Murphy leading the inquest.

He talked the talk, coolly, measured and assured with reference to "closure and escape", "variables" and "lollipop slides" not to mention "lateral separation" and a "bit of an unload". I really couldn't understand the specifics but I got the gist: here were a man and his team searching for the split second, split degree exactitude that would make The Reds what they are – and have been since 1965 – an RAF institution that is a credit to the nation, worldwide.

There was then time to join The Reds' unseen team, the back-up crew of mechanics who keep them in the air as we toured the hangar where one red Hawk stood semistripped for maintenance. Here we were shown the workings of the ejector seat, very much a last-resort necessity but a necessity that saved Mike Ling's life last year. Then it was back outside to watch the next flying session, this time the jets performing the "corkscrew", manoeuvre that does what it says on the tin with the jets producing twisting plumes of coloured smoke as they roll over one another's flight path.

And there was time for the thrilling head-on meeting of two of the jets which, during a display, looks for all the world as though the pair are dead-set on a collision course. Still there was more. We were invited to join the chaps, and Kirsty, for their Friday ritual... fish and chips. The now-recovered Mike Ling was there too to see old pals and fly one more time with them. What was the best thing, I asked Kirsty, about being the first woman to be a member of the famous Reds? "I find it difficult to answer that," she admitted. "For me, it's all about the flying and being a part of the team. I don't think about the 'first woman' business. I just love it."

NEXT stop is Cyprus for their final 2011 rehearsals for the summer display season and all too soon our time was up but the the thrills were not over yet. For as Gordon Bruce waved us off, the Interceptor was waiting in the Scampton car park. After the volume-10 rumbling in the sky came the street-level thunder on tap in the Jensen. It really is like having a sonic boom, or John Bonham's drum kit, under your right foot, the 6.2litre engine providing a symphony of interwoven bass notes. We cruised back to London before we knew it and my final job was to deliver the beast back to Steve Bannister in Princes Risborough in Buckinghamshire. As much as I've always wanted an Interceptor I wondered who really had a spare £107,000 to spend on a car.

"We aren't selling cars. We are selling dreams," Steve told me. "We hope to sell 12 this year. If we sell eight, we're into profit. If we sell more – whoopee! "The people who are buying them are not going to use them every day. Many of our cars go straight into collections. One customer, a banker, got his car from us the day after he collected a new Aston Martin Vanquish. "Why? He had simply always wanted a good-as-new Interceptor. I heard so many people ask me before we started the company: why can't we have a Jensen Interceptor that drives brilliantly, reliably, rides well and stops as it should? We are fulfilling that dream."

Ah yes, dreams. He's right. Just like every little boy who has watched the Red Arrows through the generations since 1965 when the British Empire was coming to an end but post-war realities were just starting to bite. The Reds gave the baby boomers something to be proud of, to aspire to. So can these two icons survive, the Red Arrows and the Interceptor? Well, we can dream. I once dreamed of flying, of being a Red Arrow, and I still dream of owning an Interceptor. On one bright, wintry weekend I got as close as I possibly could to making both dreams come true. Don't wake me..

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