

Feature: The rake's progress

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The classic-car spotlight is now trained on the Jaguar E-Type, 50 this year and often called the most beautiful automobile ever designed. The voluptuous, long-bonneted E has become a symbol of all the best bits of the “Swinging Sixties” and its shape is recognised the world over, even by those with only a passing interest in cars.

In its day, the E-Type was the motor for the sporting gentleman – so what, then, was available for the sporting hooligan? One option was certainly to be found in the Jensen

Interceptor, a car that was so “mad, bad and dangerous to know” that Lord Byron would probably have driven one had he been around at the right time.

The Interceptor was, to all intents and purposes, more mongrel than thoroughbred. Its practical, good-looking hatchback body was designed by Carrozzeria Touring of Italy, its huge Chrysler V8 engine could more commonly be found beneath the “hood” of an American truck, and the whole thing was screwed together – often quite badly – at the Jensen factory in West Bromwich, near Birmingham.

The rather dubious lineage did not, however, prevent Jensen models from becoming the cars of the stars during their late-1960s heyday, with owners ranging from Frank Sinatra to Clark Gable, Tony Curtis to Harold Robbins. Hard-drinking Led Zeppelin drummer John Bonham got through seven, despite dying at the early age of 32. (Lulu and Cliff Richard owned them too, but that rather spoils the raffish image.)

My abiding memory of the fabulously named Interceptor dates from the long, hot summer of 1976, the year Jensen went bust. It was very early on a sun-soaked morning, and my best pal from school and I had positioned ourselves at a top-floor window of his father’s Kensington home specifically to monitor the hoped-for arrival of an acid-yellow Interceptor with black vinyl roof which regularly parked in the street below.

The owner was Interceptor Man personified. On Sundays, he would invariably roll up at around 7am after a hard night of partying, always accompanied by a different miniskirted

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squeeze with whom he'd walk – somewhat unsteadily – across the road to his apartment, casually and stylishly leaving the Interceptor unlocked, probably with the windows wound down and a few eight-track music cartridges scattered in the passenger footwell. We were 12 years old and wanted his girls, his life, his Zapata moustache, his Ray-Bans, his flares and his wide-collared shirts – but, most of all, we wanted his Interceptor.

Fast-forward 35 years and eventually, finally, I find myself behind the wheel of one. The situation isn't quite so glamorous – it's the A303 not far from Stonehenge, and it's raining – but I'm at last going to get to drive an Interceptor, something that's somehow eluded me despite my work for *How To Spend It* having made it possible to sample all sorts of other four-wheeled exotica.

An extra frisson is added by the fact that this Jensen isn't merely a restored original, but one that combines the fabulous Interceptor look with the performance of a modern supercar. Instead of carrying one of the standard engines of either 6.2 or 7.2 litres, which offered a maximum of 390 horsepower (the E-Type 5.3 only mustered 299, incidentally), this car is equipped with a brand-new Corvette powerplant producing 429 horsepower and allegedly providing a top speed of up to 175mph, a good 40mph more than the original.

As I emerge from the car park of the Haynes International Motor Museum onto the main road, the merest whisp of throttle reveals that this Interceptor is what could only be described as "lively". It might carry a 21st-century engine, but it is devoid of 21st-century nannying equipment such as traction control, active suspension, air bags and other electronic gizmos, which, on modern cars, increase safety at the expense of allowing the driver to experience that delicious feeling of raw, undiluted engine power.

I press (not floor) the accelerator and, as the modern automatic gearbox rushes up through the ratios and the twin tailpipes release a savage growl, the Interceptor fishtails wildly down the road. Yikes! This car is an animal and one that very quickly commands the driver's total respect and concentration – nothing like a modern supercar, which can be docile or dramatic on demand.

My run in the Interceptor is relatively short, not more than 25 miles, but it's on a variety of different roads and is sufficient to show that this blend of old and new actually works – so long as you remember that you're controlling a modern-day engine in a 40-year-old chassis and that there are no microchips under the bonnet to correct things when they threaten to go wrong.

One of the men behind Jensen International Automotive, the firm that is building the cars at a projected rate of 12-18 per year, is accountant Steve Bannister, who runs a management consultancy business and sees the Jensen project as “a little diversion”.

Back in 2002, Bannister bought leading Jensen restoration firm Cropredy Bridge Garage, based near Banbury in Oxfordshire, but discovered that, while many people aspired to own an Interceptor, some balked at the model’s reputation for unreliability (mainly due to overheating), prodigious fuel consumption and the fact that, like most classic cars, it is not entirely suitable for daily driving. As a result, the restoration business returned to its original owner, the highly respected Jensen expert Bob Cherry, and Bannister established JIA last year.

“We came up with a design concept to make an Interceptor that looked, felt and performed to expectations, but which also worked under modern traffic conditions, returned reasonable fuel mileage and stopped and handled properly. Most of the people who have shown interest are not classic-car drivers – they are people who have an affection for the Interceptor, but who want a reliable and usable vehicle, too.”

One such person is Charles Dunstone, the multimillionaire co-founder and CEO of The Carphone Warehouse. He was so enamoured of the idea of creating 21st-century Interceptors that he invested a six-figure sum in JIA (he won’t say how much) and flies the flag for the firm by driving around in a white 1973 model.

“I realise that what I have invested in is really a cottage industry, but that doesn’t detract from the fact that Jensen was a very innovative brand during the 1960s and 1970s. The Interceptor FF, for example, was the first production car to be fitted with four-wheel-drive and anti-lock brakes,” explains Dunstone.

“Even now, the Interceptor just doesn’t look like a 40-year-old car, and many people still have huge affection for it. I had always wanted one, but I simply don’t have the temperament for classic-car ownership. I’m not interested in getting behind the wheel of something that might or might not start or might or might not break down, and I haven’t the time or patience to sit in car parks waiting for the AA. But I feel quite confident about using my JIA car every day because of its modern internals – it’s a classic car without the attendant aggravation.”

Dunstone’s car is one of JIA’s original “S” versions, but the firm has now significantly upgraded the finish for the new “R” models, the first of which is being delivered in May. The conversion begins with an unrestored car, which is dismantled, corrosion-proofed

and rebuilt with the Corvette engine and gearbox, Jaguar-derived independent rear suspension, AP Racing 6-pot road brakes and 17in wheels that are exact copies of the famous Interceptor “coffin spoke” design but 2in larger.

Customers can choose from a range of engine power options and either manual or automatic transmissions, and individual cars are effectively bespoke-built with any finishes, trim level or accessories the buyer specifies. Right now, the first convertible “R” is being created from one of just 267 “rag top” Interceptors originally built.

If you’ve always longed for a “modern” Interceptor, this must all sound rather tempting – the drawback, however, is that they don’t come cheap. While Cropredy Bridge Garage will supply a fully restored car with a warranty and all the standard components for around £35,000, a JIA Interceptor “R” starts at £110,500.

I have to say, however, that when you overtake a line of cars on the A303 and clock the looks of amazement as a 40-year-old vehicle sweeps past at a decidedly 21st-century speed, the price seems entirely reasonable... especially when the temperature gauge remains as cool as my Zapata-moustachioed Kensington hero of 1976.

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