

features

Go Jensen go: a coupe of many parts

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By KEVIN NORBURY

Caution must be observed when making a "kick-down" change at speeds below 32mph (about 52km/h) in view of the sudden surge of power engendered.

THIS warning, in a Jensen Instruction Manual published more than 30 years ago, might sound like a wonderful snippet of British imagination, but from

what Stephen Corneille says, his Jensen CV-8 Mk III packs quite a punch. It's certainly no pussycat.

Corneille, 44, relates with youthful enthusiasm how he was once asked to demonstrate a handbrake turn in his brutish-looking British-built Jensen. He obliged, of course. But there was none of that namby-pamby handbrake stuff. "I just put the foot down and gave the wheel a pull," he grins. "Because it's got so much power, the back just slides out."

So that's why the Brits, in their own quaint way of explaining things, added the warning. After all, they didn't want some country squire caught unawares. For under the long, sloping bonnet of this 1966-model Jensen lurks a high-performance 6-1/2-litre Chrysler V8, complete with four-barrel carb and a claimed output of 330bhp – about 245kW in today's terms.

"If you are driving at 60kmh and put your foot down, it will kick down into first gear, which means you've got 330 horsepower on tap," says Corneille, pride in his voice. In other words, the Jensen, despite its weight and size, takes off like a Scud rocket.

Corneille loves to talk about the time a Ford Super-Roo (GT Falcon) next to him "flooded it" at the traffic lights. "That was a challenge I couldn't resist," he says, chirpily. "So I did the same, giving him five metres head start." Even so, Corneille claims he had surged three metres ahead before he "hit the anchors" and turned off. He reckons the other poor bloke probably thought he'd been "dragged off by a Humber Super Snipe", or some other British saloon equally as sedate.

Corneille, a computer consultant, saw the Jensen advertised in the Exchange & Mart (England's version of the Trading Post) in 1984, when he worked in London for a year with the BBC. He wanted something to tour Europe, then bring back with him. But, as he says, he didn't want just any sort of car.

"I wanted a high-performance car. In those days they were a lot cheaper in the UK than in Australia. I wanted an unusual, exotic sort of car, but not one that I'd

have to sell the house for if the motor blew up." His other prerequisite was that it had to have an aluminium or fibreglass body. He didn't want to buy "a rust bucket" eaten out by salted roads after winter snow.

But his bank balance was given a jolt when he went to ship the car. He paid £1400 for the Jensen (about \$2400), but just before he was due to return home nine months later, the Australian dollar floated and fell against the pound. To his dismay, Customs calculated import duty based on the exchange rate at the time, not on when he bought the car. "I ended up paying the Australian Government more for the car than I paid the person I bought it from."



He was not impressed.

Still, he wouldn't have been able to buy the car here anyway. As he has since discovered, his Jensen is the only CV-8 Mk III in the country. It is mechanically identical to its better-known brother, the Interceptor. The big difference is that the Interceptor has a steel body, designed in Italy; the CV-8's fibreglass body was factory designed and produced in Britain.

While Corneille is quite proud of his car, he is not blind to the fact that its styling is a little unorthodox. Even when he drove it around the UK, he never met anyone who recognised it for what it was. His candid opinion is that it must have been designed by committee because of its "cobbled together styling". Some people think it's a Jaguar, others think it's an Aston Martin, or a Citroen because of its headlights. One person even thought it was a Datsun. "Whatever gave them the idea it was a Datsun I don't know." He even reckons it looks like "a Hyundai S Coupe on steroids".

For all that, the Jensen is unmistakably uppercrust British inside: burr walnut dashboard, loads of dials – "all the English stuff", says Corneille – as well as Connolly leather seats – "the same as in the Rolls-Royce" – and 18-inch wood and aluminium steering wheel. "There's no power steering and the car weighs 28cwt (about 1.5-tonnes); that's to give you enough leverage to let you park it."

The speedo tops out at 160mph (about 257km/h), although top speed is said to be 140mph (about 225km/h), and the tach redlines at 5000rpm. Both are right in front of the driver, flanking temperature and oil gauges. In the middle of the dash are numerous other dials along with aircraft-style air vents and half a dozen toggle switches. All very impressive.

There's also a fuel-flap release lever close at hand. "That was for the days when you didn't have to get out of the car and they put the fuel in for you." The steering wheel even has reach adjustment. "You just loosen this collar and slide it in and out," says Corneille, demonstrating.

Then there's that "selectaride" switch on the console for adjusting the shock absorbers for either a soft or hard sporty ride. But there's no sporty floorshift. The shifter is a conservative three-speed auto on the column. There are bucket-style seats in the back (as well as in the front), with a glove compartment in each armrest. One contains a first-aid kit with its original contents.

The Jensen was hand-built, of course, and all the interior panels hand cut. In fact when Corneille took the car off the road in 1988 to do some restoration work on it, he found the chassis number 112/244 chalked on the back of each panel.

"I've since found out that it was one of only three Jensens that came with two-tone paint," he says. It was originally silver with a sage-green roof – "which explains the green leather interior". It was all silver when he bought it, but he plans eventually to restore it the way it was.

Corneille re-veneered the dashboard about seven years ago, but, as he says, restoration has been slow. The car was moved five times during the process, the wrong parts arrived from the UK, and when he took the car to be resprayed, some bits, such as tail light lenses, were thrown out with the rubbish.

To make matters worse, the carport he was building fell on the car, on to the windscreen, but miraculously didn't break it. As he says, the Mk III has a different windscreen to other Jensens and would have been hard to replace.

What Corneille found extraordinary was that when he went to source bits for his car, he discovered all manner of parts from other British makes fitted it. While his Jensen might be an exotic species, he came to the amused conclusion that "there was a bit of a parts bin approach to it".

For instance, the tail lights were from a Hillman Imp, the reversing lights were off a Rover 90 and mounted upside down – "which explains why they always fill with water" – the bumper ends are off a Sunbeam, "cut in half and a bit added in the middle", the door handles are from an Austin Princess. "It looks like they've got a lot of ideas from other cars and put them all together."

The Jensen comes with 15-inch wheels and large, truck-like crossply tyres, which, he says, don't transmit the road vibrations like radials so the fibreglass body lasts longer – "although they are probably the best fibreglass bodies in the world".

"Everything's fibreglass except the door skins, which are aluminium. But it's pretty solid fibreglass," he says, tapping the roof with his fingers.

While the car was built by Jensen, the company used engines from other makes. Corneille reckons Jensen could just have easily used a Dodge V8, but drew the line at that. "That would have made it a DV8," he grins. "They probably didn't want to name their car a deviate."

Jensen's CV and beyond

Brothers Alan and Richard Jensen started re-bodying Austin 7s in the 1930s and then built bodies for the Austin Standard.

The first car bearing the Jensen name appeared in 1936 with a modified Ford V8 engine. The brothers continued to build cars using other manufacturers' engines.

After World War II, Jensen built special bodies for the Austin A40 sports and in 1949 introduced the Jensen Interceptor, which had a 4.0-litre Austin engine.

In 1953 Jensen introduced the 541, pioneering fibreglass construction for production cars.

In 1962, the CV-8 was introduced with a 5.9-litre Chrysler V8. This was superseded in 1963 by the Mk II with a 6.3-litre engine.

This car, with only minor styling and interior changes, became the Mk III in 1966.

During the early 1960s, the company also built the Volvo P1800, commonly called "The Saint" car. as Roer Moore drove one in the TV series of the same

name.

During the '60s, Jensen built the bodies for Austin-Healey and fitted Ford V8 motors to Sunbeam Tigers.

In 1966, the CV-8 model was replaced by a new incarnation under the Interceptor name, a car mechanically identical to the CV-8, but with a steel, Italian-designed body rather than British fibreglass.

This car has a distinctive bubble-shaped rear window and is the one most people recognise as a Jensen because many were sold in Australia.

A special model of the Interceptor was introduced in the same year called the Jensen FF (short for Ferguson Formula) and had all-wheel-drive and anti-lock brakes.

About this time, the Jensen brothers sold their interest in the company, and in 1973 Jensen produced the Jensen-Healey, a sleek convertible powered by a 2.0-litre Lotus engine.

The company ceased production in 1976.

A new consortium has since bought the rights to the Jensen name, working on a new car to be powered by the same Ford V8 engine used in the Jaguar XK8.

Compiled with the help of Stephen Corneille, with material from The Complete Catalogue Of British Cars by David Culshaw and Peter Horrobin.

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