

THE JENSEN HEALEY

by Rick Feibusch

These racy little Jensens are fast, well balanced and nimble. These also are a very low production car with quite an interesting international story. The original intention was to make a high level of technical spec and clever engineering available to a larger market at a more reasonable price. It was not to be.

That is not to say that this isn't a rare and collectable car. The four trailing-link rear suspension and great steering geometry make the car extremely fun to drive on backroads yet supple enough for comfortable highway cruising. The Jensen Healey is a car that bridges the gap between volume production roadsters, like an MG or a Triumph, and hand-made specials from Lotus or TVR. The bodywork was simple and elegant as it could be with the US light and bumper standards of the times.

The Jensen Healey was produced at a time in history, when building such a car should have been considered borderline madness. US Government regulation was just flexing its, Nader inspired, mandated muscle and American auto insurance companies lobbied anti-sports car laws based on statistics that proved fun cars kill! Then there was a rising Pound Sterling, and labor unrest in the UK, so severe that it nearly put the entire British auto industry out of business. And that was just for starters

.....

The roadster began life as the marketing brainchild of San Francisco automotive dealer/importer Kjell (pronounced Shell) Qvale. Qvale had built his British Motor Car Distributors Ltd. from a small garage on California St selling British cars and bikes just after WWII to becoming the western States distributor of every British made marque but Ford at one time or another.

Qvale had just purchased the financially ailing Jensen firm in the UK, builders of the large, fast, and well appointed Chrysler powered Interceptors. His concept was to add a more ³mass market,² yet somewhat exotic, sports car to the Jensen line - a notch or two above the popular entry level roadsters, competing more with the TR6, Alfa Romeo, and Datsun 240Z. Continuing Jensen's policy of building fine sporting machines using outsourced components, Qvale went to the master of this sort of wizardry, Donald Healey.

Healey had crafted surprisingly competitive sporting machines out of readily available saloon bits from a series of wonderful Riley-based specials with names like Westlands, and Silverstone, through the Austin Healey 100-4, the 100-6s, the Bugeye to the 3000s. Healey's cars, along with the MGs and Triumphs were the mainstays of the imported sports car movement in the US during the 1950s and 1960s.

Healey was just winding down a long association with BMC, then Leyland, and had a new roadster on the drawing board. Primarily designed by Donald's son Geoffrey, this cleverly conceived car would use standard contemporary Vauxhal (GM in the UK) components to keep the car at a reasonable price and, parts, easy-to-find.

Qvale went to look at the new roadster project. Jensen management approved and the Jensen-Healey was born. While they liked the general design, Jensen engineers were less than enthused about the Vauxhal running gear and had issues with the front and rear styling. Not only were the GM/UK mechanicals mundane, there were no US smog spec engines available, as Vauxhal had not been in the US market since the early-1960s.

Qvale discovered a slick twin-cam four that was under development at Lotus for their new mid-engined Elite. The problem was that the powerplant was nowhere near tested or production ready. Over Donald Healey's objections, Jensen management made arrangements to have some built, as soon as possible, for the new roadster. The car would use the same gearbox fitted to the Sunbeam Rapier. Donald was also not happy with Jensen's insistence that Geoffrey Healey's unusual front and rear end treatments were not commercially acceptable, and designed their own.

By late 1971, the Lotus engines were still not ready for delivery. Lotus said that they ran great but really weren't properly tested. Jensen insisted. Lotus said that they would provide the engines, but would not issue a warrantee until they were satisfied with the performance. Jensen needed to get the cars on showroom floors ASAP and decided to take a chance and cover the warrantee in-house

(remember, warrentees were only a year at that time). This was a first fatal step, as a number of the earliest cars had annoying mechanical problems. The automotive press amplified the car's shortcomings so its reputation lingered long after the problems were sorted and improvements were made.

The Jensen Healey also suffered from always being just a bit too expensive. When the car was introduced in 1972, the \$4,000 price tag was about a grand over an MGB and right up with popular six cylinder Sportscars. By the end of roadster production in 1975, the car had acquired a German made Getrag 5-speed gearbox, more upmarket trim and big rubber bumpers. A strong British pound had pushed the base price up to almost \$9,000!

Then there were the delayed deliveries and dismal quality control due to the labor problems in the UK at that time. Often, cars sat on the assembly line for days waiting for components to arrive from strike-torn subcontractors. At this point, one begins to understand why so few were made. In the end, the Jensen Healey never went into full scale production. Only 10,485 roadsters were built, most exported to the US.

By 1976, the Healey family had become so disenchanted with Jensen because of the early quality problems, continuous back-ups and a festering frustration about the fact that Jensen had overruled the Vauxhal components and redesigned both ends of the car. The Healey name was removed from the car and the unpopular roadster was replaced with a slick sportwagon called the Jensen GT. It was similar in concept to the Volvo 1800ES. Again, a really sweet touring sportster with great lines and better-than-ever quality. Unfortunately, the GT was burdened with an \$11,000 price tag that made it uncompetitive in the US market. Only 511 GTs were built!

Intentional or not, these are very low production cars - Just under 11,000 built between 1972 and 1976. They are rare, collectible and historic, as well as fun to drive.. The bad reputation generated by the earlier cars tainted the whole production run, though the car was continuously improved. The 140HP Lotus engine will propel the J-H from 0 to 60MPH in 7.8 seconds. Parts are relatively easy to obtain and the J-H is sturdy and solidly built, though the interior trim is a bit flimsy on earlier models. The construction is very basic and the car is relatively simple to work on by any reasonably competent home mechanic. Prices ARE reasonable but restoration can be a killer. Look at as many as you can and buy the best you can afford.

The weakest point on the car is the timing belt, something that should be changed religiously every 18,000 miles. If one comes off under power, the valves will get bent and if at speed, the pistons are also at risk. There is a Lotus retrofit crate engine that lasts three times longer but costs three times as much.

Another thing to consider in states where they smog test cars (like in California, where they test and expect all smog gear to be in factory fresh condition back to 1975!), that everything is there and operates to spec. These cars must be considered a labor of love, considering that the cost of restoration could put your investment cost well above the value of the finished product.

The Mk.1 model, built between 1972 and 1973, were known for the infamous quality problems that have usually been corrected by now (If the car is in running condition). These still came with the 4-speed gearbox though a number have been updated to 5-speeds. The big advantage is that they are smog test exempt in many states and can be tuned to European spec. Though the first 1974 Mk.2s have uprated trim, most still retain the 4-speed gearbox. In mid-1974, roadsters were fitted with the 5-speed and some styleless but unobtrusive rubber bumpers.

Modifications can actually enhance the value. Simple upgrades like wider wheels, anti-sway bars, Spax shocks, and an electronic ignition can make this competent sportster a real back road charger. Engine changes are becoming more common but only on the Mk.1 cars that are smog exempt. Engine changes and heavier modifications might change the value but should be valued as an unusual J-H based hot rod rather than a collectible sports car. It's odd, but the ultra rare and best built Jensen GTs, are priced less than a roadster in comparable condition.