

The GT Sunbeam Tiger

During August 1964 Jensen Motors completed a unique batch of 15 GT Tigers for the Rootes Group. The truth of why no more were built is a mystery. But maybe there is an explanation.

The 'Gran Turismo model', to give it its proper name was introduced with the Sill Alpine in 1963 and in SIV form was distinguished from its Sports Tourer brother by a slightly detuned engine, several interior fittings enhancements and the absence of a soft top. The interior was fitted as standard with several 'optional extras' including: a walnut veneered fascia to the dashboard a matching wood rimmed steering wheel, clock, ammeter, cigarette lighter and glove compartment courtesy light.

over to the SIV and three SIV GT's were among the pre-production 'AF' (Alpine Fords) cars that Jensen developed into Tigers in early 1964.



'AF' GT with deeper rear 'jump seat' enlarged by lack of bins.

Rootes launch two models

Rootes had clearly intended to offer the market a GT spec Tiger alongside the 'Sports Tourer' since publicity made this plain, as indicated by early media reviews such as the *Autocar* on 10th April 1964.

"In GT guise the Tiger's hardtop is fixed but a detachable one is optional for the roadster", which is strange in itself as it implies the GT's hardtop would be immovable!

Come what may, it is of course understandable that Rootes would do this. After all Ryton

was assembling GT Alpines without hood bins and as the GT was a popular choice among British and European buyers why wouldn't it be as popular in the USA and Canada? Notwithstanding, the GT with its interior refinements and lack of soft top did not go into production immediately as evidenced by the Jensen production ledgers which shows that some 200 tourers predate the batch of GT's.

So the interior specification of early production Tourers reflected the spec of the SIV Alpine and they left Jensen sporting vinyl (non-reflective black) dash boards and black steering wheels. Although most items standard to the GT were available as Rootes optional extras such as the clock, cigar lighter etc.



ADJUSTABLE REAR

QUARTER-LIGHTS

These are fitted to the Hardtop model. Both models have wind-down side windows designed for draughtless ventilation and doors with draught-proof seating.

OVERDRIVE

Laycock-de Normanville overdrive on top and third gears is available as an extra.

RALLY-TYPE CONTROL PANEL

The Alpine control panel was designed by rally experts. Both Alpine models have identical fascia layout with a padded surround, a padded

grab rail for front passenger, map light and a full range of instruments. The heating, ventilation and de-misting system is standard on the Gran Turismo model.

The *Gran Turismo* instrument panel has a walnut veneered fascia and matching wood-rimmed steering wheel.

Sport's Tourer is finished in non-reflective black, (illustrated) with black steering wheel.

The Alpine has wide doors which open to a full right angle. Windows wind down quickly. Winding handles are now re-positioned for greater ease.

Easy-to-read instruments, with 'Daylight' red

pointers, include speedometer with clear markings, fuel, oil pressure and water temperature gauges designed for accurate readings, and an impulse-torque revolution counter. Instrument dials are of improved design, with vertical markings.

ELECTRICAL CONTROLS include: a headlamp flasher, separate warning lights for headlamp main beam and direction indicator (which can be dimmed individually) and ignition; switches for the map light, 2-speed windscreen wipers, and the panel lighting. Provision is made for clock, ammeter and cigarette lighter as extras.

The all important difference being the supply of a hard top in matching paint as standard and the enlarged 'jump seat' space allowed by the absence of the soft top frame and stowage bins. Reading period Alpine promotion material today can but bring a smile to your face – "The GT is a magnificent Alpine with elegant hardtop and exclusive features. Light and easy to handle, the hard top locks in position as weather tight coachwork. It can be quickly unlocked and lifted off, for converting the car to an open tourer. Refinements include a large backlight and quarter light ventilators".

These 'refinements' and some others were carried

Sunbeam Tiger GT Production

In late August 1964 some two months into production the Jensen 'ledgers' record a new batch order numbering system (Rota) as a result of a Rootes Order for 15 "GT" Tigers. These were all to be North American specification (LRX FE) and comprised of the following chassis numbers:

- B9470185 to B9470186 + B9470200
- B9470203 to B9470213 + B9470215



Distinctive chassis plate of a GT



This GT failed to find an EBay buyer at US\$44,500 !

The decision to build a GT couldn't have been taken lightly since even minor changes to the Tiger bodies by Pressed steel and production bureaucracy had attaching costs. Proof of this can be seen by the unique body numbers fitted to the GT's prior to shipment to Jensen. Their JAL tags were 575 series (575001 – 575015), as opposed to 550 series for the Tourer, which correspond with the 375 body series of the Alpine GT.

So why was this initial (and final) batch the sole production effort? Well I have spent a few hours picking Norman Miller's brains and I have to agree with his belief that US dealers soon discovered there was no appetite on the West Coast for the 'either or' hardtop configuration of the GT. What's

more, Norman adds, US dealers were having a hard time getting US\$3,695 for the standard Tiger when the newly launched Mustang was available for less money. It would seem the cry was soon heard from US dealers "dress it up" and make more of the Tiger's optional extras, standard.

It is perhaps no coincidence therefore that pretty soon after this feedback was received by Rootes, the Tourer received an interior upgrade by way of some of the GT's refinements. Notably the Walnut veneer dashboard fascia and wood rimmed steering wheel. But the ribbed padded door linings and roll tops didn't supplant the flat sided door linings of the MK1 Tourer until the revised MK1 (MK1A) was introduced. See below.



So production of GT Tigers amounted to little more than an enforced market research exercise but at least it meant the Sports Tourer benefited by getting a few more fittings as standard.

This all happened several months before the Home market Tigers became available and consequently we Brits were only offered the single model. Over time the 15 US 'GT's' slipped into anonymity until the Jensen Motors production 'Ledgers' re-surfaced 20 years ago.

Norman Miller reports that The International Registry of Sunbeam Tiger (T.I.R.O.S.T) records 11 known survivors in the U.S.A. which makes the Sunbeam Tiger GT a pretty rare machine?

Graham Vickery (2006)