

TAMING SUNBEAM'S MONSTER

This unique Tiger stunned onlookers on its return to the UK last year. **Julian Balme** tells its story and takes it for a wild drive

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**



Each year in the wake of the Goodwood Revival, YouTube is deluged with homemade videos. Shot on mobile phones, they usually feature a soundtrack of inappropriate jazz-age music or the dulcet tones of commentator Marcus Pye clearly audible above the sound of A-series engines being tortured. Few are particularly compelling – until last year.

As someone who has held a candle for Sunbeam Tigers for nearly 30 years, I was mesmerised by the in-car footage of American hot-shoe Tom Dyer ringing the neck of the unique Rootes race car known to fans as ‘The Monster’. As he sawed away at the wheel, the young driver was clearly not intimidated by the marque’s reputation nor this particular car’s moniker. In fact, he appeared oblivious to the significance of the occasion, this being the first time that the car had raced in the UK since 1966.

In little more than a lap, you are left with no illusions as to just how fast this V8-powered machine is, a special-bodied MGB being dispatched in the blink of an eye. I lost count of the number of times opposite-lock was required to keep the thing on the tarmac. And now I find myself sitting behind the very same wood-rimmed steering wheel looking out at a grey and overcast Donington Park.

The modified aluminium dash contains just four switches (electrics, fuel, ‘Accusump’ oil pre-lubrication, starter) and a rearranged set of instruments, the only large one being a Smiths tachometer centred above the wheel. For today, the rev limit has been set to 6000rpm, a figure beyond the manufacturer’s standard recommendation of 5250rpm, but quite conservative in today’s world of historic racing. Young Dyer had



Clockwise, from main: model’s often-tricky handling has been refined on this racer; stripped-out cabin; 15in wheels allow bigger brakes; oil cooler



Part of the team

John Wortley was 28 when he answered an advert for a mechanic’s job at Alan Fraser Racing. “When I got there, the ‘Marque car’ was just a white shell,” he recalls. “By the time we’d finished it really was an incredibly quick car. We only had one failure – a slipping throttle cable at Oulton Park. The brakes were the only real problem, even in a 10-lapper. After a race at Brands where Bernard had been door-to-door with Warren Pearce, I drove it from the pits back to the paddock. When I braked for the tunnel, my foot went to the floor.”

Backed by the factory, they wanted for nothing, as Wortley remembers: “Shop foreman Les Bennett and I would go up to Coventry and take whatever we needed. We were always looking at alternative bits from the Rootes parts bins, the oddest being the push-buttons from a Commer Cobb van, which I used after we changed the door skins to ally. My favourite mod was my venting of the cockpit. Bernard was always complaining of being too hot so I rigged up vents from the scuttle, one of which went into a piece of tubing under the dash aimed between his legs. I just loved working for those people, it was a very special time.”

been allowed 7500rpm for the Revival, a figure achieved thanks to the 4.7-litre small-block Ford having been subjected to an exacting rebuild by Tony Oddo, US ‘vintage’ racing’s go-to engine builder. Fed by a quartet of downdraught 48mm IDA Weber carburetors, the motor crackles into life with the minimum of fuss, settling into a high idle that sounds crisper than the usual cast-iron V8. The sharp clutch is either in or out, but isn’t difficult to use in the pitlane because the torque of the engine keeps it all afloat. Just how much torque, and power, is on tap only becomes truly evident once you’re out on the track.

The throttle response is sublime, your right foot unleashing somewhere in the region of 430bhp. The delivery from low in the rev range is silky smooth, though its application to the tarmac is anything but, the scramble for traction being felt through the backside of the occupant. A car doesn’t earn such a nickname by being slow, but the acceleration really is like being

catapulted from black and white into colour. On the uphill blast from Donington’s Old Hairpin to McLeans, The Monster effortlessly passes two Italian supercars and a Lotus Elise.

This is no doubt aided by the gearing, which is so low that, within two laps, I find myself having to feather the throttle to keep within the redline. In fact, drifting through the right-hander at Coppice, I have to grab fourth before the end of the rumble strip.

Thankfully, the gearchange is not something that I need to worry about. Early Tigers have four-speed Borg Warner T10 ‘boxes’, but the majority of production cars had Ford’s own ‘Toploader’. Both shared the same woolly shift pattern, with a throw that seemingly toured the cockpit before finding the right cog. Not The Monster. It has a modified T10, the selectors of which have enjoyed considerable attention, eliminating so much play that the lever appears to move no more than an inch at a time.



American guru Tony Oddo rebuilt the 4.7-litre Ford engine. Fed by four Weber carbs, it produces 430bhp. Below: Unett laps Pearce at Castle Combe in '66

If the transmission is one revelation, the handling is another. Due to their short wheelbase and, in recent times, stickier rubber, Sunbeam Tigers can be unpredictable. The joy with this particular example is that, shod with Dunlop L racing tyres, it telegraphs what it is going to do well before it is too late. Larger 15in wheels (standard road cars wear 13in) enables the use of bigger brakes, these being the two determining factors in turning the Rootes point-and-squitter into a half-decent racing GT.

It's amazing, then, that this car should be the only competition Tiger built like this in period. Strictly speaking, the trio of ill-fated factory-backed Lister Le Mans coupes ('mule' and two race cars) built for the 1964 event wore the same brakes and wheels but they were also clothed in unique fastback bodies.

The story of The Monster is all about two men, Bernard Unett and Alan Fraser. The former had been at Rootes since the age of 15, working his way from apprentice to development engineer. With the encouragement of the works' competition manager, Mike Parkes, he took up circuit racing in 1961 armed with a prototype Sunbeam Alpine sold to him by the company. Not only did Unett possess a great deal of talent behind the wheel, he also had a keen sense of how to make the pale-green car go faster, developing XRW 302 into a championship-winning prospect. This he duly achieved in 1964 by claiming the Freddie Dixon Trophy, a domestic championship for production sports cars. His employers were obviously impressed because, presumably by way of a reward, he was



given ADU 180B, one of the Tiger coupés that had so publicly failed at Le Mans when the Shelby-built 4.2-litre engine expired.

Working in his spare time from a chicken coop at his parents' Warwickshire farm, Unett spent three months re-engineering the car to contest the 1965 Autosport Championship. One of the first things he did was fit a 289cu in (4.7-litre) engine fuelled by downdraught Webers, which at least gave him the same powerplant as the Cobras and TVR Griffiths.

Having been involved in some of the initial testing on the Le Mans entries, he decided to change the rear axle location, something he'd never been happy with, by installing parallel links either side and a Watt linkage. Apart from removing weight, he also added more cooling ducts and wider Dunlop tyres. His endeavours in the hen hut so nearly paid off – only a broken fanbelt in the last round denied him the title after 11 outright wins and nine second places during the season. All the modifications that Unett had

carried out on the car, and the majority of the non-production parts, were taken off the Tiger at the end of the year and put aside for a new project to be built for the following season.

That car would be built at Mountains Garage in Hildenborough, Kent, the premises of Alan Fraser. Born to Scottish parents, the garage proprietor was more than a bit proud of his ancestry, so much so that on signing a three-year deal with Rootes in 1966 to run a race team of Hillman Imps, his equipé's livery would include the cross of St Andrews on the cars' roofs, along with a crest-like badge featuring a stag.

In an amateur race and rally career that began with, of all things, the 1952 Alpine Rally, Fraser had long been a Rootes man, so managing a team of Imps was a logical move. Unett and Fraser had been on nodding terms in the paddock and, with both men enjoying factory support, logic again prevailed when the two joined forces.

Motor Racing magazine recorded that the team would run no less than five Imps, along with two Tigers – one in 'marque' sports-car events, the other in stricter Group 3 long-distance races. Though the emphasis was on the small saloons – Unett sharing driving duties with Ray 'the ex-policeman' Calcutt – no less attention was spared on the preparation of the Tigers. They still represented the company's most glamorous showroom offering. This was undoubtedly a factor in running a car more representative of something the public could buy, but the fact that it could be built lighter than the old coupé was more likely the reason for this final incarnation of a full-house, factory sanctioned, racing Tiger.

The coupé did get one last outing at Brands during March, before The Monster made its debut at Oulton Park on 28 May, finishing sixth overall and second in class. After nearly 20 races the car, piloted by Unett, would end the year as class winner and overall runner-up in the Freddie Dixon Marque Championship, behind John Miles in the Willment-prepared Lotus Elan 26R. The cars had very similar performance, often battling together despite being in different classes. At a wet Castle Combe at the end of June '66, a young *Autosport* club reporter by the name of Simon Taylor witnessed 'another runaway win for the Alan Fraser team, Bernard Unett's Tiger leading from start to finish.'

Compared to the sleek lines of bigger-engined rivals such as Warren Pearce's E-type or David Piper's 250LM, the Tiger, with its upright 'screen and box-like hardtop, resembles a block of flats, yet looks are deceptive. By using aluminium for the bonnet, bootlid and hardtop (the only one ever produced, not even the rally cars had them), weight was reduced to 22cwt with 10 gallons of fuel by the time that John Blunsden – the only journalist to drive the car in period – did a track test for *Motor Racing*. By season's end, the doors and dashboard were also aluminium. The flared arches were formed from the existing metal in the bodywork so there were no additions, again helping to keep the weight down.

Although it didn't look like it, the car was lowered by nearly 3in. Further revisions were made to axle location and a 1in anti-roll bar was attached to the front. The Dunlop 15x7in magnesium wheels allowed the use of 11in front discs with 10in versions at the rear. During the course of the year, the car grew scoops on the rear wings to duct air to the brakes, along with grilles in the bootlid to release it.



Clockwise, from main: flared arches were formed from existing metal; with Group 3 car in '60s equipt; sweet shifts from T10 'box; boot-mounted tank



'WITH ITS UPRIGHT WINDSCREEN AND BOX-LIKE HARDTOP, THE TIGER RESEMBLES A BLOCK OF FLATS – YET LOOKS CAN BE DECEPTIVE'

By the season's finale at Snetterton, the Fraser Tiger had been developed into a potent machine. John Miles held a slight points advantage, but Willment didn't want to risk losing the championship so again entered Muir in the Cobra coupe as a 'spoiler'. Having won in an Imp at Brands Hatch earlier in the day, Unett flew up to the Norfolk track but, despite a valiant effort, he could only finish second.

With Group 4 regulations due to be enforced the following year, the Tiger was rendered ineligible. Chrysler was winding up production of the model and, buoyed by success with the Imps, the Tiger was mothballed until later in 1967, when Fraser was invited to take a team of cars to Tenerife. It was there that the car gained its *El Monstre* nickname (Fraser's team had always referred to it as the 'Marque' Tiger). Another Rootes legend, Peter Harper, drove it there in April '68, winning the grandly named 'TV Circuito Cuidad Touristica Puerto de la Cruz'.

Fraser and his team were an instant hit, not least because their cars' roofs bore the Scottish flag, which happened to be the same as that of Tenerife. Before long, the Tiger had been sold to the HH team run by the Hernandez Brothers, who continued to monopolise island events for a number of years with their driver Chicho Reyes, hence his name (wrongly spelt) and registration 'plates appearing on the car today.

The story might have ended there were it not for the vision of London stockbroker Ken Dalziel in the mid-1970s. Dalziel had rebuilt the ex-Unett Le Mans car, using a mixture of Jaguar and Tiger parts to replace those removed and fitted to The Monster. He ran it a couple of times in 1978 before it suffered engine failure, and the opportunity to acquire several ex-works race and rally cars from Tenerife prompted its sale. When Fraser had retired to the island in 1970, more Tigers and Imps followed him, and it was these that Dalziel was chasing. Amongst

the stash was The Monster, which was then moved on to the new owner of the Le Mans coupé, Chris Gruys. The American did the right thing by re-uniting ADU 180B with its original parts before he too sold it.

The remains of The Monster languished in Gruys' possession until 1988, when he started a restoration of the 'shell and, using the Jaguar running gear, the car finally returned to the track in 2003 at Laguna Seca. A further rebuild in 2009 returned the suspension to its 1966 specification with the Le Mans-style Dunlop wheels, Girling brakes and Lister pin-drive hubs, which is how it raced at the Revival. After the car had left these shores 45 years ago, Tiger enthusiasts, who had only read tales of this mythical beast, were delighted to finally see it in the metal – none more so than me.

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