


CLASSIC DRIVER



1964 Sunbeam Tiger

Lot sold	USD 411 549 - 548 732 GBP 300 000 - 400 000 (listed)	Lenkung	Links
Baujahr	1964	Zustand	Gebraucht
Chassisnummer	B9499999	Standort	
Zahl der Sitze	2	Kraftstoff	Benzin
Antrieb	Zweirad	Außenfarbe	Sonstige
Losnummer	22		

Beschreibung

1964 Sunbeam Tiger Le Mans Coupé

Registration no. 7734 KV

Chassis no. B9499999

The historic prototype offered here is one of only three fastback coupés constructed by the Rootes Group's Competition Department specifically for the 1964 Le Mans 24-Hour Race. The first of the three cars built, '7734 KV' served as the project's development 'mule', paving the way for the two actual race cars, 'ADU 179B' and 'ADU 180B'. Rootes already had experience of running the four-cylinder Sunbeam Alpine at Le Mans, winning the coveted 'Index of Thermal Efficiency' in 1961, and it was thought that the Alpine-based V8-engined Tiger might be capable of even greater things.

Inspired by Carroll Shelby's success in shoehorning a Ford V8 into the AC Ace to create the Cobra, Rootes had asked Shelby to perform the same trick with its Sunbeam Alpine sports car. The project was instigated by the company's West Coast, USA distributor, Rootes American Motors Inc, which was located not far from Shelby American. Ford's 260ci (4.2-litre) 'Windsor' V8 was chosen, and even though this had 'only' 164bhp on tap it was approaching double the output of the contemporary Alpine's 1.6-litre four. The transplant radically transformed the character of the car.

Code-named 'Thunderbolt', the Tiger was developed without the knowledge of Lord Rootes, who was said to be 'very grumpy' when he found out. Nevertheless, he had the good sense to get a prototype shipped to Coventry and was deeply impressed with the car when he drove it. Assembled by Jensen

Motors and introduced in 1964, the Tiger kept the Alpine's basic layout but featured a stronger gearbox and rear axle plus rack-and-pinion steering. Vastly superior to its Alpine progenitor in performance terms, the Tiger stormed to 60mph in under ten seconds and peaked at around 120mph. Tigers would go on to enjoy success in both racing and rallying over the years.

The Tiger was introduced in April 1964 with initial production allocated to the USA, UK deliveries not commencing until the spring of 1965. Ahead of the launch, the factory had embarked on a programme of developing the Tiger for racing and rallying, thereby generating much valuable publicity for this important new model. One of the events targeted was the Le Mans 24-Hour Race, with work on the project commencing during the winter of 1963/64. The racer's attractive coupé body was the work of Ron Wisdom, one of Rootes stylists. Up to the 'A' post the body was essentially the same as the production car's, while the raked windscreen created a lower roofline leading to the fastback rear section with its abruptly truncated Kamm tail. Extensive wind tunnel testing of a ¼-scale model resulted in refinements to the basic shape to ensure high-speed stability - the Le Mans Tiger's projected top speed of 170mph was well above the takeoff speed of some light aircraft - the principal alteration being the addition of a rear spoiler. Once the shape had been finalised, Williams & Pritchard were commissioned to make the aluminium bodies.

Construction of the Le Mans Tigers was contracted to Brian Lister, a man with a wealth of experience in building large-engined sports-racers. '7734 KV' had already served as one of the prototypes for the forthcoming Tiger road car, known as 'Project 870' or 'AF1' (Alpine Ford 1), and was despatched to the Lister workshops for use as the Le Mans project's development 'mule'. 'Tiger' had yet to be adopted as the model name, and so '7734 KV' was still badged as an Alpine when the work commenced. Supplied by Carroll Shelby, the 4.2-litre racing engines were tuned to produce 275bhp, some 111 horsepower more than the production car's but well short of the theoretical maximum in the interests of maintaining reliability over a 24-hour race. Power was transmitted via an aluminium Borg Warner T10 close-ratio gearbox.

Ensuring sufficient engine cooling had been a major headache during development of the production car, and for the racer Lister's project engineer Ken Hazlewood fitted an oil cooler and a larger radiator. Keeping the standard Alpine/Tiger 13" wheels would have seriously over-stressed the tyres, so 15" Dunlop magnesium wheels were adopted, a move that also enabled the accommodation of larger diameter brakes.

On 15th April 1964, '7734 KV' was given its first shakedown test at Mallory park, driven by Keith Ballisat, which indicated that there was still a lot to do before the suspension settings could be considered satisfactory. Unfortunately, there had been no time to address these issues before the Tiger was flown to France a couple of days later for the Le Mans test session. According to the factory's press release (copy on file): 'The lessons learned during these high speed endurance tests will be incorporated in the development programme for the new Tiger, which will go on sale in North American markets within the next four or five months.' In the course of the tests, works drivers Ballisat and Peter Procter both reported handling shortcomings, overheating brakes and low oil pressure in slower corners, findings that were confirmed when the car was tried by former Rootes employee Mike Parkes, present at the test in his capacity as one of Ferrari's works drivers.

Returning to the UK, the development team made extensive changes to the suspension of '7734 KV' prior to the next scheduled test at Snetterton. As a result, further changes were made to the spring rates and anti-roll bars, and in this form the Le Mans prototype was tested at Silverstone on 14th May by Keith Ballisat and Bernard Unett, another long-term Rootes driver. The handling was deemed to have been significantly improved and the stage was set for completion of the two race cars, which were flown to France from Hurn Airport on Monday 15th June.

In the race, 'ADU 179B' (competitor number '8') was driven by Keith Ballisat and Claude Dubois while 'ADU 180B' (competitor number '9') was entrusted to Peter Procter and Jimmy Blumer. The cars' hasty development, in particular the lack of time to carry out any serious long-distance testing, would prove their undoing as both succumbed to engine problems, 'ADU 179B' going out after three hours with piston failure and 'ADU 180B' after nine hours with a broken crankshaft. During the race 'ADU 180B' had run as high as 18th place and been clocked at 162.2mph on the Mulsanne straight, but in

truth the Le Mans Tigers, running in the prototype class against much more powerful opposition, were never in the hunt for overall victory.

In early 1965, '7734 KV' and 'ADU 179B' were sold on while 'ADU 180B' was purchased by the works supported Alan Frazer Racing Team, for whom it was driven by Bernard Unett with considerable success in club racing over the next few seasons. The story of '7734 KV' and its sister cars is covered in depth in the chapter on Rootes' 1964 Le Mans programme in Graham Rood's *The Works Tigers 1964 to 1966* (Mercian Manuals, 2007).

'7734 KV' was disposed of via dealer Andre Baldet of The Sports Car Centre, Northampton, its likely purchaser being Alan Eccles. In April 1965, Roger Eccles (Alan's son) was reported by *Autosport* magazine as driving a Sunbeam Tiger Le Mans - 'last year's practice car' - at a BRSCC Mallory Park sprint. The Eccles last raced '7734 KV', which by now had been fitted with a 289ci (4,727cc) engine, at Brands Hatch on 28th November 1965, this being the only known occasion that all three Le Mans Tigers competed in the same race.

The ownership trail immediately post-Eccles is unclear, as the car was not registered to a new owner until it was purchased by Peter Wynn Jones in April 1968. In the intervening period, '7734 KV' is believed to have been raced by Gerry Marshall and in June 1966 was advertised for sale in *Autosport* by racer/dealer Jack Alderson as 'Sunbeam Tiger Le Mans. 4.7 Cobra engine. Suspension fully modified as advised by Alan Frazer, bringing this car to the same specification as the current "Unett" Tiger.' In a letter on file dated August 1970, Peter Wynn Jones states that he had 'purchased the car from John Scott Davies, who in turn had taken it in part-exchange from a customer in South Wales.' Peter Wynn Jones did not race the Le Mans Tiger but did compete with success in sprints and hill climbs, setting a couple of class records.

The accompanying original logbook records the next owner as Richard Norman Wright of Gedney Marsh, Spalding, Lincolnshire, who registered the car on 26th February 1970. This logbook, which shows that '7734 KV' was first registered to Humber Limited, also records changes of colour scheme from the original green to red and then to purple. The last owner recorded therein is Ron Kambourian, who purchased the Tiger from Richard Wright in July 1970. A New Yorker living in London and working in the advertising industry, Ron Kambourian despatched the Le Mans Tiger to coachbuilders Wood & Pickett for a full interior and exterior refurbishment, while Richard S D Miles Engineering attended to the mechanical side of the restoration. A couple of years later he advertised the car for sale in *Road & Track* and *Autoweek*, and by April 1973 '7734 KV' had found a new owner in San Diego, California: well known Tiger aficionado, the late Dick Barker.

Its custodian until 2003, Dick Barker thoroughly researched 'The Mule', as it has become known, and carried out a remarkably accurate restoration to original specification, an exhaustive process that was not completed until 1997 when the car made its first public appearance in the USA. The occasion was that year's 'Tigers United' event in Eureka, California where '7734 KV' appeared alongside the two Le Mans cars, 'ADU 179B' and 'ADU 180B'.

In 2003, '7734 KV' was sold to Chris Gruys of Healdsburg, California, who the following year brought the car back to Le Mans where it was co-driven in the Le Mans Classic race by Claude Dubois, one of the original works drivers from 1964. The Tiger also competed in the Goodwood Revival Meeting's RAC Tourist Trophy and the Spa 6 Hours in Belgium before being placed on display for six months at the Gaydon Motor Museum. For the 50th anniversary of the works Tigers' appearance at Le Mans, Chris and Lorraine Gruys brought 'The Mule' back to the Circuit de la Sarthe where it successfully completed the Classic event driven by Julian Balme, Gordon England and Rich Wall. Sold to the current vendor shortly after the 2014 Le Mans Classic, '7734 KV' was raced by him at the recent Monterrey Historics meeting and won 'Best in Class' and 'Best in Show' at this past Road America Concours d'Elegance in Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin.

The Tiger is fitted with the correct 260ci Ford V8 engine, just rebuilt by Cobra Automotive in the USA, and will have fresh FIA papers by time of sale making it eligible for the best events worldwide. The car also comes with an extensive history file of documents and photographs. 'On the button' and ready to be enjoyed, '7734 KV' represents a possibly once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to acquire one of

these exceptionally rare Sunbeam Tiger Le Mans works prototypes.

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