

TURNER SPORTS CARS

**Born in a Blacksmith Shop,
Brought Back to Life
by the Internet**



Denis L. Tanney photos

by Stephen
M. Agins
Photography by
Denis L. Tanney
and Robert Har-
rington

Unless you are a vintage race fan, the odds are that you have never heard of Turner sports cars. Race fans know Turners because they watch the diminutive fiberglass racers successfully battle with Sprites, Alfas, Porsches and other well-known, well-financed and extensively developed marques. It's pretty impressive performance for a car that was built, as its designer and builder Jack Turner says, "for the common man."

Nevertheless, with fewer than 700 of these cars ever built, the fact they are known at all is amazing. Two factors help explain the cars' growing popularity: their exceptional power-to-weight ratios and the efforts of two hobbyists, Dennis Kawabata and Russ Filby, to use the Internet to connect Turner enthusiasts into a global mutual-support group.

Jack Turner and His Cars

Following World War II, Jack Turner, who was born in Wales in 1916, established a small engineering business in Wolverhampton, England, subcontracting to Austin. From this base, he expanded into race cars and then developed and marketed the

sports cars bearing his name, before finally returning to his roots as an automotive engineer in 1966.

Turner built his first single-seat race car in 1949 and raced it through 1953. He also began building race car chassis for other drivers and began developing double-overhead-cam 500cc, 1500cc and 2000cc race engines by redesigning engines from other manufacturers.

With the idea of eventually constructing a sports car, Turner built a prototype chassis and body with a Vauxhall engine in 1950. That prototype was favorably reviewed by *The Motor* magazine in July 1951. Turner had put 10,000 miles on the car by the time the reporter drove it; he eventually clocked 50,000 miles in it, according to sources of the time, as a means of testing new developments and acquiring experience in chassis and suspension design.

Turner began building race cars in a former blacksmith shop known, of course, as "The Smithy," in South Staffordshire, though by 1953 he had moved to a larger building in Wolverhampton. Starting with six employees, he eventually expanded the work force to 25. With no research and development department, no engineering staff, and in fact, no factory until late in his car's production life, Turner built 673 sports cars, nearly all of basic two-seat roadster design, between 1955 and 1966.

The First Turner Sports Car

In late 1954 Turner designed his first commercial sports car, the 803/A30. He introduced it in 1955. It used a chassis and body of his own design but was built around the Austin A30 drivetrain, with other components from the Morris Minor. The first car was built with steel and alloy panels, but after that, with just a few exceptions, the cars sported fiberglass bodies. Since there were few other sporty two-seaters on the road, Turner soon had a thriving small business supplying largely hand-built copies in kit form in the U.K. and in assembled form in North America.



For his first commercial sports car, Turner dipped liberally into the Austin A30 parts bin for running gear and power, as many other small manufacturers were doing at the time. He ultimately expanded his sources to include Standard-Triumph, Coventry-Climax and Ford, in what might be called the "Heinz 57" approach to car building.

Jack Turner's real genius showed up in the unusual rear suspension, which located the Austin live rear axle with a combination of transverse torsion bars with trailing arms, tubular shocks and a Panhard rod. A simple but rigid tube frame kept the center of gravity low, and a fiberglass body assured an adequate power-to-weight ratio on early models, which used successively larger, but still under-one-liter, BMC A-series engines. As every enthusiast knows, these engines lend themselves to tuning, and many racing engines produce approximately 90 horsepower. With a total weight of only 1300 pounds, a quick calculation of the power-to-weight ratio will explain why vintage racers love Turners.

Outflanked by the Bugeye Sprite

There's a tale of early industrial intrigue surrounding the development of Turners. While Jack was building his cars in 1955, his major parts supplier, Austin, is said to have acquired and dismantled a Turner. Soon after, Austin commissioned Donald Healey, whose



company had designed the Austin-Healey 100, to design an entry-level sports car. The result, as we know, was the Austin-Healey Sprite, which was introduced in 1958.

"I find it curious that their car should come out on very similar specifications. They were very upset that I built this car using their parts," Turner recalls. "I've no doubt that Healey had a good look at ours one way or another." In a recent interview, however, Gerry Coler, the designer of the Sprite, said he hadn't been aware of the Turner when he designed the Sprite for Donald Healey.

950S Turners manufactured in 1958 and '59 had distinctive tail fins added at the suggestion of one of the U.S. dealers. This example is owned by Dave Lewis.

David J. Turner/Photo





Above: Turners manufactured between 1955 and 1959 shared in common an egg-crate grille, straight-forward interior with a full set of sports car gauges and a banjo-style steering wheel, and the Austin A30 engine. The identification plate shows the Pendeford Airport origin. This is Dave Lewis's Turner 950S, a good original example of 1958-'59 Turners. Below: The body style of the first production Turner, the 803, which was made from 1955 through '57, had the egg-crate grille and a rear end that sloped down like an MGA. This 803 is raced by Keith Lawrence.

The Turner and Sprite did share Austin components installed on a simple chassis, although the Sprite used a monocoque platform. Both were Spartan and, to be charitable, unusual looking. Stories differ, but at some point before the introduction of the Sprite, George



R. Harrington photos



Dennis E. Langley photo

Major Models: A Turner Chronology

The earliest Turner model was the 803, built between 1955 and 1957. It was an ungainly looking car with suicide doors, a too-large egg-crate grille styled after the AC Ace, a rear that sloped down like the MGA, and an Austin A30 cranking out about 39 horsepower. Turner manufactured 105 of these cars, and 20 are known to exist. Of those with locations listed in the registry, nine are in the U.S., one is in Sri Lanka and six are in the U.K.

The 950S, produced between 1957 and 1959, also had the egg-crate grille, but the car sprouted little tail fins in the fall of 1958. Jay Carano, a former employee of Tri-City Motors, a U.S. importer of Turners, says the tail fins were suggested to Jack Turner by Dale Smith, who owned the Ohio-based company, because tail fins were the rage on American cars of the day. An estimated 166 950Ss were built, of which 64 are known today. The model was offered either with the Austin 950S engine or the Coventry Climax FWA or FWE engines.

The Mark I Turners, produced between 1959 and 1961, represented a styling breakthrough. A wider grille opening and more pleasing body lines created the look that was maintained for the balance of production. About 159 of them were built, and while 23 initially came to the U.S., so many of the Mark I and II Turners have been imported by private owners for racing that the number must have at least doubled. The Mark I was offered with a number of powerplants, from the venerable 948cc BMC A series engine to the Climax FWA, Climax FWE and Alexander-modified crossflow BMC.

Mark II Turners, produced between 1960 and 1963, used essentially the same body shell as the Mark I, although the cockpit was a bit roomier. These cars were available with a far more potent range of power: BMC A 950/1098, Coventry-Climax FWA/FWE, and Ford 997, 1198, 1340, and the very robust Cortina 1500 engines all found their way into the 161 cars produced in this series.

Mark III Turners, produced from 1963 until the company's end in 1966, were mostly powered by the Cortina 1500 engine, although several had the Coventry-Climax FWA/FWE plant. An estimated 72 were built, and 50 are known today.



Harriman, BMC's managing director, refused to sell Turner the steering, brakes, engines and gearboxes at factory wholesale prices, and became his competitor. As a result, when the streamlined Mark I came onto the market in late 1959, it was priced several hundred dollars higher than the early Bugeye Sprites.

A Resourceful Designer

But Turner was resourceful and began buying engines and transmissions from Ford, and brakes and front suspension components from Standard-Triumph. Thus in late 1960, the Mark I began appearing with Cortina power in addition to other sources and many Triumph front suspension parts.

The Mark I and subsequent Mark II cars, powered by Cortina 1500cc engines, are easily tuned to produce 130 horsepower or more. In fact, distributor Fergus Fine Cars in New York built about 11 for racing, fitting them with oil coolers, limited-slip differentials, high-compression pistons, an aggressive camshaft and a pair of Weber DCOEs. They claimed a zero-to-60 mph time of 6.5 seconds on the skinny tires available in the mid-'60s.

In 1962, Turner introduced an attractive fiberglass-bodied 2+2 coupe built on a steel floorpan and powered by a 1500cc Ford engine. Ten copies of this car were built, of which five still exist, attesting to the quality of its design.

In 1963, Turner reduced his line to the attractive Sports Mark III. A quick little car generally equipped with a Ford 1500 engine, the Mark III easily outperformed the MGB. Approximately 72 copies of this car were



Dennis L. Tawney photos

built, a success by the company's standards. The 1966 *Car and Driver Yearbook* dubbed the tiny but sharp-handling Turners "unholy terrors in SCCA production racing."

Turner was among the first small manufacturers to offer an optional automatic transmission, in 1963. The Hobbs Mechamatic transmission was a \$290 extra-cost option on the Mark III. Emphasizing the basic nature of Turners, a heater would add \$58 to an initial purchase price of \$2995 for the Mark III.

The End of the Road

Despite his successes, in January 1966—suffering from poor health, prob-

In 1959, Turner created the Mark I, with a very different style that featured a sleek front tapering down to a narrow grille, and more graceful fins. Mark IIs, built in 1960-'63, and Mark IIIs, offered 1964-'66, used the same body shell, though the cockpit was roomier. These cars were offered with a variety of powerplants. The 1964 Mark III shown here belongs to the author, Stephen Agins. The hood scoop was added to the Mark IIIs to accommodate new engines. Agins has mounted alloy knock-off wheels, a style that was available in the period, since he autocrosses with the car.

ably worn down by the stress of running his company as a one-man operation, and with thin finances exacerbated by nonpayment of some U.S. orders—Turner put the company into voluntary liquidation. Once he recovered, Turner returned to the automobile industry as a consulting engineer. He

continued as a consultant to various companies until his retirement, but never himself made another car.

As with only a few other designer-builders of classic marques, Jack Turner is still very much active and, until sidelined by hip problems in 2003, had attended Turner reunions every year since 1986. He communicates regularly with owners and consulted on the preparation of this article.

Reaching Around the World: Turners on the Internet

The health of this little niche in the old-car hobby is in large part due to two enthusiasts and the reach of the World Wide Web. The Web site that Dennis Kawabata established with the assistance of Russ Filby has contributed significantly to the growing interest in Turners and the number of recent racing events featuring these fast, light, little cars.

Owner Seeking e-Mail Contact

The Turner site started as a modest effort. In 1999, Dennis Kawabata, who has owned car No. 65-646 since 1968, joined the U.K.-based Fairthorpe Sports Car Club. The FSCC is a club for owners of small-production sports cars, especially those with fiberglass bodies.

Within the club are registers for each of the club's marques. The Turner Register of the FSCC had been maintained with devotion for more than 32 years by David Scott, an encyclopedia of knowledge about the cars. But as with clubs for many other obscure marques, the only communication among far-flung owners was by snail-mail newsletters and the telephone.

Having received a few of the monthly club newsletters, Kawabata, who lives in the Pacific Northwest, realized that prior issues of the newsletter would contain additional information, but he had no means to access it. He thought a Web site might be a way for information to be gathered and made always available for other Turner owners and enthusiasts.

After creating a simple site with modest Turner information, Dennis made a request through the club newsletter for photographs and information on other Turners. One of the first owners to contact him via e-mail was Russ Filby of North Somerset, England.

Filby had grown up in and around his father's Turner and was restoring one of his own. Filby and his father had cartons of old pictures, news clippings and other memorabilia. From this trove of material, within a year Kawabata and Filby had built a Turner Web site that included separate sections for technical information, historical material, and a collection of magazine articles and early advertisements about Turners, as well as an active message board.

The site can be accessed by Turner owners and other classic-car enthusiasts at www.turnersportscars.com. One of the site's most compelling aspects is a Turner family album that features pictures of nearly 150 Turners, listed by chassis number, including five of the 10 rare Turner GTs that featured fiberglass shells on steel monocoque chassis.

Unknown Turners have been found around the globe: Sri Lanka, South Africa, Australia and, of course, in the U.K. and the U.S. Of the original 673 cars built, 294 have been located, indicating a healthy survival rate. Even more impressive, 25 missing or lost Turners have been traced and identified through the Web site in the past three years.

The growing online network of Turner owners now is vigorously seeking clues to the existence or demise of the as-yet-unaccounted-for 379 cars, and the support of the network is making it possible for many of the survivors to be put back on the track and the street.

The New Wave for Old Cars

The fact that two enthusiasts—computer-users in their careers but anything but computer jocks—can create and maintain an electronic community of owners around the world in their spare time should inspire owners of other obscure marques.

The Turner site has made possible the sharing of previously unknown information. Wally Hicks in Virginia had made a set of body-shell molds for the early model 9505 that, through Web site publicity, are now being used by other restorers.

Jay Carano, who worked for one of the larger importers in the U.S., Tri-City Motors in Akron, Ohio, was able to shed light on a series of "half and half" Turners—cars that had the front end of one model and the rear bodywork of another, later model. The backgrounds of these hybrid cars had been almost unknown to the Turner community.

Through the site, Carano also was able to locate one of the race cars he prepared for the 1960 Sebring race.

Just recently, the group heard from Porsche Pierson Ashford, daughter of A. J. Pierson, an importer of Turners and other exotic cars in Orlando, Fla. Ashford wrote to provide the correct business name of her father's firm, "A. J. Pierson Sales and Service." She also confirmed that her dad named her after the other car he imported.

Friendships, even among staunch racing rivals, have grown as a result of the easy communication. The site has provided help for members in emergencies. When racer Keith Lawrence damaged his front suspension and needed to replace a drum brake and wheel hubs, complete with shoes, cylinders, springs, rotors and backplate, he placed a message on the Turner site. He immediately located replacement parts in Texas, but offers of help came to him almost overnight from Canada and overseas as well.

There have been some heartfelt reunions of owners with their former cars, thanks to the site. In 2002, a former Turner owner, Andrew Sealey, wrote to Filby from the U.S., "I sold my Turner (HAY 3D) to a garage in Dunstable in 1969." This year Filby spotted Andrew's car for sale in England and notified him. Later Sealey wrote to Filby, "Thanks to you, I spent the afternoon with HAY 3D. It's been 34 years since I've seen her.... I was under pressure to sell from my parents, who were living in the U.S. (I came back, as I was called up for Vietnam!)." And Ray Brown in Australia was able to reunite with car number 63/575, which he had owned 20 years earlier, via the Web site.

The site is now instrumental in organizing events such as the recent VIR Reunion.

Russ Filby from North Somerset, England, contributed initial material for the site, and now collaborates with Kawabata.





Top to bottom: The first North American Reunion of Turners was held at Mosport in 2001, attracting more than a dozen cars. The most recent gathering brought nine race cars out to Virginia International Raceway in October for the SVRA race weekend. A highlight of the 2001 Lime Rock Reunion was a parade lap led by Skip Barber and his wife, in Doug Fraser's '57 803.

Barber began his career in a Turner. John Master in his '59 Climax-powered Turner took second in the small-bore production car race at VIR (behind him is Fred Leib in his early Turner); Jim Southwood in his 1959 Mark I taking a tight corner at VIR.



Doug Fraser photo
www.dougfraser.com



R. Harrington photo



R. Harrington photo

Virtual Exchanges Spawn Physical Events

With the Turner Web site as the hub of information on events, the first-ever Turner reunion in North America was held at Mosport during the summer of 2001. Organized by Canadian racer Philip Soden, it attracted 13 Turners, including a number of daily drivers, one from as far away as Pennsylvania, plus a New Jersey owner who flew up just to be with the others. To put the turnout in perspective, the 2003 Turner reunion in England drew only nine examples of the marque, about an average attendance at recent U.K. Turner get-togethers.

With owner support organized through the Web site, Turner was one of the honored marques at the Lime Rock Park Vintage Fall Festival in the fall of 2002. Despite torrential rains throughout the Northeast, which spared the festival but discouraged six owners from coming, eight Turners made the event. Skip Barber, the track's owner, led parade laps in a Turner nearly identical to one he had raced to victory decades earlier.

Turners continue to race vintage circuits with great success. Seven took to the streets of Pittsburgh in July 2003 for the 21st Pittsburgh Vintage Grand Prix. Spread through three different race groups, the seven cars all finished in the top 10 of their grids.

In the U.S., the 2003 Turner reunion was held in October at Virginia International Raceway in association with the SVRA's last race weekend of the season. Nine examples of the marque came out for the weekend, most of them in racing trim. Among the attendees was an extremely rare—one of three—steel-bodied Turner that had been driven from Rochester, N.Y.

There's no question that the support of the tight Turner community, which could not have happened without the Internet and the Web site, has made it possible for more owners to restore their cars and for more enthusiasts to locate and adopt their own Turners. What had once been a little-known oddity, with knowledge and support hard to find, is now becoming a viable classic-car choice. Small-bore vintage racers and sports-car hobbyists who want something a little out of the ordinary can be very grateful to two enthusiasts in two different countries who took advantage of new technology to build a community around this lovable old car.

More information about Turners is available from www.turnersportscars.com or by contacting Russ Filly in England at Turnersportscars@blueyonder.co.uk or the author at ajmcum@mindpring.com. 