



PLASTIC FANTASTIC

Kellison's glassfibre kit cars of the late 1950s promised cut-price performance with stunning looks. And, as Mark Dixon finds out, they delivered on that promise

Photography Charlie Magee



It looks like something Pixar might have created for a *Cars* movie. There's something very cartoonish about this vehicle, with its exaggerated haunches, manic-grin 'face' and turret-top coupé profile. All the swelling and bulging hints at the hedonistic excesses of the 1960s, and yet this Kellison J5 dates from the previous decade. Next surprise: it's a kit car – but a kit car good enough that Goodwood's Duke of Richmond owns one.

Never heard of it? You won't be alone. The Kellison is one of those obscurities that had a big impact in its day but has since been largely forgotten. The irony is that, while the Kellison is as American as apple pie, it's a British classic car dealer who is now raising its profile. Alan Carrington is the man, and he invited *Octane* down to Kent to sample his just-restored Kellison J5.

FIRST, A BIT of background. As so often is the case with limited-production rarities, the Kellison was the brainchild of one very gifted and driven individual. Jim Kellison was a serial entrepreneur, who would own five different businesses during his lifetime, and who had a particular passion for both cars and aircraft.

Originally from Seattle but brought to California by his mother when his parents divorced, Jim got his driving licence at the age of just 14, thanks to a special dispensation for children like him who were brought up on a farm or ranch. In a 1947 photo, taken when he was 16, Jim is posing beside the family's Hudson with a high-speed model aircraft that he built himself. No surprise that after the pic had been taken, Jim drove the Hudson to Sacramento and set a new class record for his age group in the model flying competition.

Jim's mother and grandmother were both very religious, so it's almost a cliché that Jim found an outlet for his teenage rebellion by building a Model A Ford hot rod, complete with go-faster nosecone and grille. As his son Steve told *Octane* down the phone from California: 'He used to take it to the hot-rod races that were held at that time around Sacramento, and that's where his interest in cars and speed really developed.'

After a spell working as a mechanic and body man, Jim joined the Air Force as ground crew working on jet fighters. A myth perpetuated on the internet suggests that he served in Korea, and even that he was a fighter pilot, but Steve Kellison says there's no truth in that. 'At the time, my mom was turning out children like my elder brother and me, so he was allowed to remain at home for the family's sake.'

However, this experience maintaining fast jets surely fuelled Jim's craving for speed and excitement – which would result in him designing the first of his J-car glassfibre kits in the mid-to-late '50s.

Glassfibre wasn't a brand-new medium by then, but it had only recently been adopted for car bodies. The 1946 Stout Scarab is cited as being the first glassfibre-bodied car, followed by the Kaiser Darrin sports-car prototype in 1952. But the first mass-production car

with a glassfibre body was the 1953 Chevrolet Corvette – a car whose success Jim Kellison hoped to piggyback by offering kits that could be DIY-assembled for a fraction of the Corvette's price. In fact, the bigger Kellison bodies – such as the J5 featured here – were designed to fit directly over a Corvette chassis.

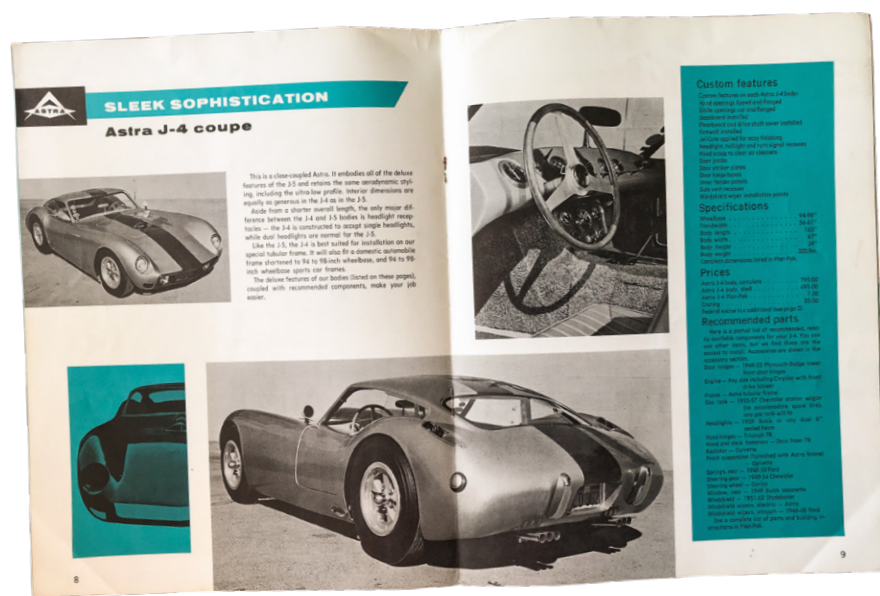
JIM LEFT THE AIR FORCE in 1954 to help his ailing father manage a farm up in Washington State but, when the farm was sold, he set-up in business as a body repair man. His one-man company soon foundered, and he was obliged to find work with a bigger garage, before landing a job as a civilian contractor at Travis Air Force base in Fairfield, California. It's likely that his first encounter with the new wonder material – glassfibre – was while working in aviation once again.

In the small garage attached to his house, Jim started experimenting with steel tube, wire mesh and Plaster of Paris to develop what would become the J-car series, and circa 1957 he took out a lease on a cheap workshop in the old Gold Rush town of Folsom, California – home to the prison immortalised by the country/blues singer Johnny Cash.

Jim's genius was to offer something for everyone. From 1958 he quickly launched a variety of sporty, good-looking coupe and roadster bodies that would fit a huge variety of chassis. Which came first is debatable. There was a sequence of models, running from J1 to (eventually) J6, increasing in wheelbase as the numbers rose, but Jim's launch model seems to have been the J4, a sleek and ultra-low coupe with a V8 engine. Period publicity shots showed Kellison's own demonstrator, garnished with stripes and '905' roundels – a reference to the Kellison garage address at 905 Sutter Street in Folsom – next to a Porsche 356 coupé for comparison purposes. Jim was not lacking in confidence when it came to setting out his stall.

And with some justification. The '905' J4 appeared on the cover of *Sportscar Graphic's* June 1960 issue, having been photographed at the Riverside raceway the previous autumn. It was fitted with a fuel-injected Corvette engine and four-speed 'box, reputedly sent to Kellison by GM's Bud Cole for testing purposes. If true – for there may have been a degree of hype here – that would suggest a serious degree of faith on GM's part in the fledgling company. Unfortunately, a broken gear selector rod meant that Jim didn't complete his race. →

'Period publicity shots showed Kellison's own demonstrator next to a Porsche 356 for comparison purposes'



Above and left
Dramatic from any angle, J5 was a longer version of the original J4 pictured inside this 1962 brochure from Max Germaine's 'Astra' company.



This page and opposite
Transmission tunnel in civilised
interior is trimmed in leather;
cartoon profile could have
come from Pixar's room A113.

'If you're north of six feet tall, you have to accept that your head and the roof are going to become acquainted from time to time'

ALAN CARRINGTON'S opalescent gunmetal-grey Kellison J5 is basically a longer-wheelbase J4 (internet sources suggest the J5 was an inch taller and longer in the doors, but contemporary brochures refute that. As so often with the Kellison story, myth is often hard to disentangle from reality).

Whatever the J5's exact dimensions, one thing is certain: getting in and out is not easy. The deep sill and low-slung steering wheel mean that it's a case of getting your right leg in first, ducking your head under the roof and somehow sliding your hips across the seat squab. If you're on the tall or well-built side, this is never going to be an elegant manoeuvre.

The reward, however, is a fabulous view out, and one that's as cartoonish as the exterior. The wings and bonnet bulge form deep valleys in front of you, while the car's generally flat flanks provide good sightlines in the door-mounted mirrors. That's just as well, because the almost-horizontal rear window – sourced from a 1949 Buick Sedanette – is next to useless.

For a 1950s kit car, the interior is very civilised, although the credit for that must really go to Alan's painstaking restoration; any kit will only be as good as its builder. The 1959 Corvette speedometer is flanked by Stewart Warner gauges, and the transmission tunnel covered in quilted Nappa leather, with more black leather swathed across the dashboard and rear roll-over bar. The bucket seats look particularly funky, having a silver brocade trim that imparts a hint of old Wild West. *Yee-haa!*

Force down the heavy clutch pedal, check the chunky gearlever is in neutral and, even before you twist the key, you just know the Kellison is going to be one wild ride. With a hi-po 6.0-litre Chevy V8 under the hood, with 750 Holley, custom headers and dual exhausts, how could it be otherwise? The big, wood-rimmed wheel nestles in your lap, and you recline, arms outstretched, looking down that voluptuous bonnet, wondering whether this car is going to be driving you, rather than the other way round.

The apprehension is not lessened when the freshly rebuilt V8 roars into life with a bassy growl that's pure old-school muscle car. Trickle away tentatively in first, and you can already feel the live rear axle transmitting every zit in the tarmac to your own rear end.

Time to man-up. Give the engine a little more gas: the response is instant, and impressive. With literally zero miles under its belt since a total rebuild by local specialist D&A Auto-Engineering, the V8 needs a gentle right foot, but sticking to a self-imposed 3000-3500rpm rev limit is hugely frustrating because that's where you can feel it just beginning to come on song.

The car is also relatively low-g geared, which helps account for its ballistic acceleration. Needless to say, you can easily pull away from rest in second gear, or even third, and the soundtrack is always that of a gloriously deep-chested V8, with power oversteer available on tap. But the ride is definitely on the firmish side, and if you're anywhere north of six feet tall then you just have to accept that your head and the roof are going to become acquainted from time to time.

There's a good inch-and-a-half of play in the steering around the straightahead, but strangely this doesn't seem to affect the way the car tracks or turns into corners; it actually steers quite nicely on its relatively skinny 205/75 x 15 tyres, and you get a hint of why Kellisons were popular with SCCA race entrants whose ambitions were bigger than their budgets. You could buy a Kellison to suit virtually any engine or chassis – from an 88in-wheelbase Triumph TR3 up to the 102in Corvette – and this J5 could, in theory, be fitted onto a Jaguar XK chassis. Or, if you preferred, you could buy a brand-new, custom-designed box-section chassis designed by racer (and aerospace engineer) Chuck Manning. Whichever route you took, the front suspension on the J4/J5 was stock Corvette, with a leaf-sprung live rear axle. Humble underpinnings, but they worked, and Kellisons were good performers on the racetrack.

Jim Kellison – who was an active racer himself – claimed his cars could reach up to 170mph at a fast circuit such as Riverside, and another racer called Nolan White took a K3 (one of the smaller Kellison models, with a consequently reduced frontal area) to 224.477mph at Bonneville in 1966.

CO-INCIDENTALLY, THIS J5 is also thought to have Bonneville history, although details are sketchy. But how did Alan end up with it, plus four other Kellisons too? 'I was first introduced to them about six or seven years ago when I bought a Monteverdi 375L from Frank, a dealer friend of mine in Hamburg. Then, in 2015, he got in touch to ask if I wanted the Kellisons because he was having a clear-out. I brought them all over in a big truck, in various stages of completeness. We've just finished a nut-and-bolt restoration of the J5.' Now Alan is working to build awareness of the marque in the UK, with Steve Kellison's blessing: 'We're taking moulds from the bodysells we have and I'm in discussion with a chassis builder, with the aim of continuing Kellison production.'

Jim Kellison himself had a rollercoaster ride in terms of producing his cars. Like so many one-man bands, he struggled to keep up with demand and, after producing →

Right and below right
From the driver's seat there's a voluptuous view and big decibels on the move; ample power comes from mighty 366ci Chevrolet V8.



1959 Kellison J5

Engine Chevrolet 366ci V8, 750cfm Holley carburettor Power 355bhp @ 5700rpm Torque 370lb ft @ 4800rpm
Transmission Four-speed Borg Warner T10 manual, rear-wheel drive Steering Corvette worm-and-sector
Suspension Front: Corvette coil-and-wishbone, anti-roll bar. Rear: leaf springs, live axle, telescopic dampers
Brakes Finned drums Top speed c120mph (est, dependent on gearing) 0-60mph c6sec (est)





‘You could buy a Kellison to suit any chassis, from 88in Triumph TR3 to 102in Corvette’

a few hundred J-series bodies, he was obliged to go into partnership in 1961 with Allen ‘Max’ Germaine, the proprietor of a major glassfibre firm. Max Germaine set up his own Astra Automotive Division and sold Kellisons as Astras; the Kellison name is totally absent from his plush 1962 brochure – pictured on page 112 – and his foreword gives the distinct impression that the cars were all Max’s idea. Such is business.

Jim was very far from down and out, however; indeed, the early ’60s saw massive expansion for Kellison, and Jim moved his company to a huge two-storey former grain warehouse in Lincoln, California, in 1964. Although Jim’s car design ethos was diametrically opposed from that of the other great champion of glassfibre, Colin Chapman, he was similarly ingenious when it came to devising other uses for the material, offering boat hulls, hot tubs and shower stalls, among other things.

But cars and car accessories were always the main breadwinners for Kellison. Over the next few years, the company offered a vast range – everything from Model T ‘buckets’ to a single-seater Formula Junior car to fastback hardtops for Austin-Healeys. There were dune buggies, a pre-war Austin roadster, a replica Jaguar D-type body, and even a copy of the Lotus Elite

bodyshell, which the brochure stated ‘fits Triumph and many small imports, or build your own chassis’. Heaven knows what Chapman had to say about that.

Perhaps inevitably, such intense activity led to burn-out for Jim, and the final straw was a run-in with the taxman. He folded Kellison in 1970, took a career break and then opened a book store. He returned to the kit car business with a Cobra replica called the Stallion in the late ’70s – one of which was bought by Hollywood agent Ron Samuels, then-husband of ‘Wonder Woman’ Lynda Carter – before selling up and going into the gold, silver and collectable coin market. The store he founded to deal in such items is still going strong and run by two of his children today.

Jim died on 30 September 2004. His legacy is remarkable and yet it’s strange how even hardcore petrolheads are mostly unaware of it. As US journalist Griffith Borgeson wrote about the launch of the J4 at the 1959 Los Angeles motor show: ‘One hipster summed up the general reaction. “That is the very wildest.” We couldn’t have put it better ourselves. **End**

THANKS TO the Holah family and to Steve Kellison for their help with this feature. See www.kellisonclassiccars.co.uk for more Kellison history and information on this J5.