

## The Birkin Story

This brief history has been compiled from various web sources and my own records.

Birkin Cars was founded by John Watson in 1983. John was Born in Wales, son of a Veterinary Surgeon, but the family emigrated to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) when he was four months old. He completed his schooling at St Georges College and, after three years in the Rhodesian special forces, went on to study engineering at the Technicon in Salisbury. From an early age, he had a passion for sports and racing cars and in particular the Lotus Seven. During military service he found a dilapidated Lotus 7 S2 which needed total restoration and became a project that consumed all his spare time.

In 1978 due to imminent political change in Rhodesia he moved to work in South Africa but emigration laws meant he had to leave the Lotus behind. He soon hankered after another and the search for a replacement included the possibility of importing a Caterham replica. That was a non-starter because of prohibitive import duties (around 110 %) He even approached Graham Nearn (Caterham) with a proposal to build the Caterham in South Africa but that met with a flat refusal. His determination to have a Lotus turned into something of an obsession and, armed with every book he could find on Lotus 7s and encouraged by friends and family, he set about building my own.

He had no intention of turning the hobby into a business but, as the project progressed, it became two cars, one for him and another for a friend, then three, then four as the word spread and more se7en enthusiasts came out of the woodwork. So, in 1982, he started Birkin in his small workshop of about 50 square metres at the back of a service station. His full name was John Birkin Watson, his father choosing Birkin inspired by his passion for motor racing and admiration for Sir Henry "Tim" Birkin, who was a distant relative. When the business needed to be named, his mother suggested that "Birkin" would be most suitable considering its British heritage and the family connection.

He was building cars to order and the business evolved rapidly as the potential of the opportunity revealed itself. The South African Lotus dealer Status Cars heard about the car and offered Birkin a contract to build cars for the sale through the South African Lotus dealership. The car 001, in John Player Special livery, was delivered on time to coincide with the South African Formula 1 Grand Prix of 1983. At the launch, the car was unveiled by Hazel Chapman, widow of the late Colin Chapman, Nigel Mansell and Elio de Angelis.

Business boomed in the 1980s with the 200<sup>th</sup> car being produced in 1988 and Birkin expanded markets into Australia and the United States with Birkin Australia and Birkin Direct USA. The growth rate produced challenges of resources being outpaced and there was always the constant requirement for development and product improvement to keep up with the industry and environmental legislation changes. However, over the years Birkin earned an enviable international reputation for craftsmanship and quality and thousands of cars have been sold.

The production methods were also continuously researched and developed to maintain optimum efficiency without compromise to build quality. In 1986, a new factory and assembly arrangement was set up, moving from 'island building' of individual units to a sixteen-stage production assembly line. Factory technicians were separated into teams and trained to specialise in selected areas of expertise, with each team dedicated to a specific

stage of the S3 build programme. In 1989, Birkin bought their own premises. The new facility allowed both the assembly line and the manufacturing departments to be accommodated under one roof with space for further expansion if necessary.

Birkin came to the UK in 1998 in the form of Trade-Link International based at Silverstone and run by John Watson's son Stephen. They moved to Buntingford and became Birkin Europe Ltd in 2002. However, Stephen left for a new venture and a year or two later the UK operation closed. There have been a couple of attempts to get back in the UK by appointing an agent but they did not succeed.

Jon Watson sold the manufacturing part of the company to Birkin Performance Cars owned by Ralph Smith and Dean Knoop in 2015 but it ceased trading in 2018. The web site for Birkin Direct USA indicates they are still live but nothing more is known and I have failed to make contact with John Watson.