What Car? - September 1980

COME TO THE CABRIOLET

Many think that Jaguar's XJS should always have been a roadster. A professional conversion has arrived at last .

To understand the thinking behind the Lynx Engineering Jaguar XJS it is necessary to delve into Jaguar history and trace the big V12 coupe's ancestry.

Even ten years after its rapturous 1961 introduction the E-Type was still enormously popular, and the addition of the technically magnificent V12 powerplant only served to give a further boost to status of the curvacious coupe and roadster. Yet there were signs of age: the E- Type had mellowed considerably since its earlier out-and-out performance youth; despite the superb V12 engine and its 250bhp, the Series 3 car was little faster than the initial 3.8, six- cylinder model, and the provision of luxury items such as automatic transmission and power steering had softened the car's image significantly.

Everyone knew that a replacement was on the way, but when the XJS was finally presented in September 1975 it was the first new Jaguar model whose styling — coincidentally the first not to show the direct influence of the gifted Malcolm Sayer's work — failed to capture the public imagination. Performance and refinement it had a plenty — even at 150 mph the big coupe was almost silent — but though the XJS undoubtedly played the part, it was the first Jaguar whose looks did not match its performance. The styling was bulky and particularly awkward at the rear, where ungainly 'flying buttresses' trailed unfashionably from the edges of the rear window.

Worse still, in many eyes, was the absence of an open-topped roadster version, suspicions that Jaguar were abandoning the performance sports car market having been confirmed by the discontinuation of the E-Type in December 1974. It seemed a tragedy that the effortless but nevertheless extremely rapid performance of the V12 engine could only be enjoyed in the cocooned isolation of the coupe's air-conditioned, leather-clad 2x2 cabin, and that its sound would only be heard by passers by.

When it became clear after some years had elapsed that Jaguar were not intending to produce the car the sports world was waiting for, several private specialists turned their hands to satisfying the demand. First to come up with an effective conversion were an American firm, Royal Carriage Motors, of Washington State, with London-based Lynx Engineering's highly professional XJS Spyder following a matter of months later.

TWO YEARS DEVELOPMENT - The prototype XJS Spyder is the result of nearly two years' development work, for as everyone knows the removal of a unitary construction car's roof deprives the vehicle of much of its rigidity. Additional strengthening panels are welded in the sill and door pillar areas, as well as behind the rear seat, though despite the presence of a bulky, power-operated hood, rear-seat shoulder width is only fractionally reduced and both headroom and legroom (what there ever was of it, at least) are unaffected. Much of the credit for the neatness of the XJS conversion must go to Lynx's experience with their convertible Jaguar XJ6 and XJ12 coupes, production of which was halted not because of any problem with the conversion but because of the contracting market inevitable once BL had discontinued coupe production.

Even with the hood up few would argue that the Lynx Spyder is considerably better-looking than the standard XJS; release the two locking pins on the screen header rail, open the glovebox and operate the concealed switch controlling the hood-retracting rams and the XJ is immediately transformed into one of the most elegant and stylish roadsters ever seen.

Gone are the awesome flying buttresses: Lynx have cleverly sliced off the roof at the top of these structures, removed their inner skins and folded the outer layers over and down into the boot recess, thus ingeniously eliminating any seams on the top of the rear wings. In place of the narrow tunnel leading to the coupe's miniscule rear window is uncluttered rear deck, much in the style of the Alfa Romeo Spider, and all-round vision is significantly improved. From the side the car has a much more balanced profile — even hood-up — with none of the coupe's tail heaviness, and the rear aspect at last gives some hint of the stylishness Jaguar so obviously planned for their prestige express.

SUPERB WORKMANSHIP - Lynx have taken the opportunity to operate the rear quarter windows electrically (they rotate, rather than rise or fall), providing an instant pillarless coupe or convertible at the touch of the respective switches. The standard of workmanship and design is superb — just about the only aspect of the XJS Spyder that can be criticised from an aesthetic viewpoint is the rather thick windscreen header rail — so obviously a left-over section of the coupe's roof.

In our all-too-brief test session we were clearly unable to test the Spyder at anywhere near the XJS maximum of some 150mph: at just over half his speed, normally considered the tolerable long-distance maximum for open- topped driving, the Spyder gave remarkably little turbulence or buffetting. Some scuttle shudder occurs — this is sensed rather than felt — but some loss in rigidity has clearly come about somewhere along the line. With the velour-lined hood up the Spyder becomes, to all intents and purposes, a coupe, but again, we cannot vouch for the soft-top's behaviour at the very high speeds that the XJS's smoothness and silence encourages.

Silence with the roof up, that is. For with the top retracted the splendour of the vast V12 — which many prominent engineers from reputable rival firms consider the best production car engine ever designed — is able to delight the ears as well as please the parts that no other engines can possibly reach.

To Lynx's credit, the rest is pure XJS. Lavish, long and low, 12mpg being the penalty for 100mph in less than twenty seconds. It's so deceptively silent and fast that it needs a warning buzzer to sound off speed limits as they are successively and contemptuously demolished.

The power steering is still too light, the wheel too big and thin, and the controls too cheap-looking — but that's how Jaguars have always been, and one soon becomes accustomed.

Lynx have managed to come down on their initial £8950 estimate for the conversion job, the cost now running nearer £6500 and taking approximately ten weeks to complete.

With the fuel crisis hitting hard at XJS sales, new cars are being heavily discounted. The recipe for today's most magnificent roadster is thus simple: a £14,000 coupe, plus 50 percent for the conversion, plus VAT, equals £21,425 — as always with Jaguar, a price at which it knows no rivals.

As with all conversions, the vexed question of safety and approval rears its ugly head. At present Lynx are converting only used XJSs — exempt from Type Approval regulations — but cars for the German market will need TV certification, whereas those destined for the antipodes are to carry a special certificate giving the body's deflection under certain stresses.

According to Lynx's Guy Black — responsible for the design work — his firm are confident that the Spyder does not infringe any construction and use regulations, and even BL were prompted to say that they wished they were doing it themselves.

Although Jaguar have not given the XJS Spyder full factory approval, they have followed the project with great interest despite officially not going beyond supplying 'encouraging noises'. Perhaps that's because Jaguar's new chairman is, to quote one source, "moving things along more quickly." Could this mean that he has plans of his own.