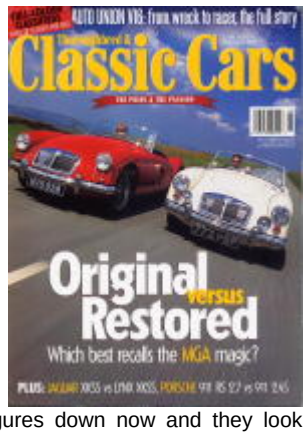
Classic Cars - September 1997



DOUBLE VISION by Martin Buckley

Incorporating later Jaguar technology, the Lynx XKSS is more than a replica - it's an impressive car in its own right. But is it good enough for Martin Buckley to go for it rather than the original?

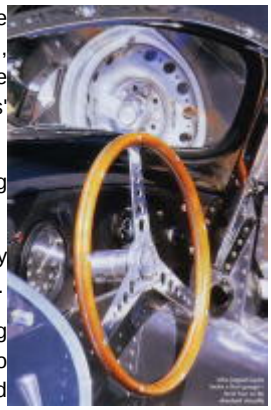
THE XKSS WASN'T SO MUCH A CAR AS AN ESCAPE ROUTE TO another dimension, beyond the reach of mortal Fifties motors. With 250 high-octane horsepower in a dainty, low-drag 2000lb aluminium monocoque, this was the McLaren F1 of 1957, direct descendant of a three-times Le Mans winner that hauled harder than anything on the road in the mid-Fifties.

Maximum speed l49mph, 0-60mph in 5.2 seconds. Write those figures down now and they look impressive; 40 years ago they were nothing but jaw-droppingly spectacular. They make even the Jaguar XKSS's Fifties contemporary, the Mercedes-Benz 300SL, look limp-wristed – and Browns Lane's own XI40 positively effete.

First gear was good for 66mph, second for 85, enough to trash most middle-ranking sportsters before their cloth cap-wearing drivers had time to clock the badge on the tail. Hit a ton in 14 seconds in third and you'd leave even the quickest series-produced roadsters dithering in your turbulence - and there' d still be one gear and another 40mph to go. This was no ill-mannered dragster but the perfect win-on-Sunday, drive-to-work-on-Monday all-rounder. Anyone with the requisite dosh - £2464 - could buy an XKSS, straight off the shelf.

Launched in January 1957 it was devised by Jaguar when 25 of the original batch of 67 production D-types remained unsold after the factory's temporary retirement from racing in 1956 The subplot motivation for the Jaguar XKSS was a way of making the D-type acceptable to the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) as a road machine: the SCCA decreed that 50 of these revised roadgoing models had to be built if the sports-racing Jaguar was to be eligible. Thus, by removing the head fairing and the central division between driver and passenger, adding an extra door, a full-width framed windscreen, a rudimentary hood (with side screens) and an exhaust cowling, the D-type became an XKSS.

The delicate, surprisingly diminutive aluminium body was protected on all four corners by slim bumpers cut down from saloon-car pressings, the faired-in lights emphasised by brightwork dressing around the edges.



Like the D-type that spawned It, the XKSS was so flexible and tractable you could use it for shopping (although there was hardly anywhere to put your bags - it was without so much as a glove box, never mind a boot) and on its tall, 16in Dunlop knock-on wheels it had all the poise and balance of its race-car sibling. All the power too: sporting triple 45 DCOE Webers, the XK engine was in full, uncompromising dry-sumped D-type tune, all part of a 'super sports' package that was only marginally heavier and less wind- cheating than the race-car original.

It was hardly any less beautiful either, with muscular tension in those full, rounded haunches hinting at the flowing grace of the E-type yet to come: the hungry look around the pouting mouth and faired-in eyes is unmistakable.

But If the later E-type was slinky and soft, the XKSS, standing belt-buckle high, was pumped- up aggression, stocky and uncompromising, its riveted and welded 18-gauge centre tub wrapped around a cramped and functional cockpit.

Jaguar planned an initial run of 21 XKSSs but only 16 had been built when the remaining five D-type shells - along with the tooling – perished in the disastrous factory fire of February 1957. Of the 16, 12 went to the U S, two to Canada and one to Hong Kong. Only one stayed in Britain, though a couple of D-types were converted retrospectively to XKSS specification.

All of which means that, if you want an XKSS, you need patience and deep pockets: owners rarely part with them, and seldom for less than £500,000.

For a lot less - £110,000 - Lynx of Hastings (which started out in the late sixties restoring factory D- types) will build you a Lynx XKSS. Visually it is a perfect reproduction but incorporates later Jaguar technology: 'As Jaguar would have done if the fire hadn't happened,' asserts Managing Director John Mayston-Taylor as we paw over the Jaguar history books in Lynx's posh boardroom. Here in Hastings, owners of historic competition Jaguars from all over the world come to have their cars fettled or have Lynx build them a replica.

Replica? Mayston-Taylor flinches: It suggests nasty glassfibre kits with Cortina engines, but I have yet to find a better word.'

Lynx has built 52 D-type replicas - long and short nose - but just five XKSSs. ‘It's almost the forgotten D-type: most people don't know it is because most of them went to the States.’

Look under the back end of a Lynx XKSS and you'll find Jaguar independent rear suspension where you'd see a live axle on the original, while under the bonnet a conventional brake servo replaces the uncompromising, unprogressive Plessey gearbox-driven pump used on the factory car which gave virtually no braking assistance at low speeds.

The handsome XK straight-six looks the same (complete with D-type cam covers with oil breathers) but it is a bigger 3.8 litre lump from a Series 1 E-type – the donor car – packing 285bhp, which means the Lynx should be a shade quicker than its 40-year-old doppelganger.

It's the patina that makes the 1957 Jaguar XKSS original so wonderful. The alloy is bruised, the leather distressed, the history colourful. This one was the first car to be converted from a D-type to an XKSS and went to a New York dealer as a demonstrator: it saw racing action In the southern states in the late Fifties and early Sixties and collected a Chevrolet V8 engine along the way, like many relatively low-value European exotics of its time. Lynx converted this car, chassis 701, to a D-type in the early Eighties at the request of its still-current Japanese owner, but put it back into XKSS form in 1992.

XKSS 701 is famous for its nose: the elegant snout was put out of joint in a racing shunt shortly after the car was exported, and a local bodyshop made good a new section working from photographs and sketches. It doesn't exactly follow the contours of the factory buck but the owner, quite rightly, regards it as part of the car's character and won't hear of changing It.

Open the dinky door, swing your legs over the wide, padded sill and slither down into a cabin that's as narrow and starkly efficient as the cockpit of a fighter aeroplane, dominated by a slightly askew wood-rimmed wheel with flat, drilled spokes and four handsome Smiths dials.

Where's the fuel gauge? There isn't one: you check the level of the massive 37-gallon tank visually by looking down the fuel filler.

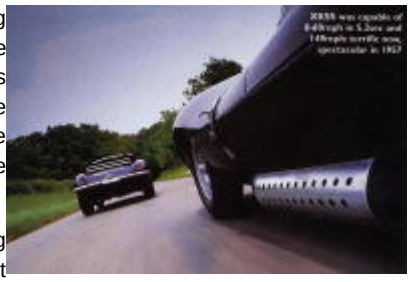
Seats are embracing but the backrests are fixed in a horizontal position, and if leg room for the driver seems limited then try the passenger's seat for size - there is nowhere for your knees to go other than around your ears. Still, the view out along the tumbling bonnet is glorious, a vista that's part sensual cleavage, part rolling country-side wrought in alloy.

Turn the ignition key, listen for the tick-tick of the fuel pumps and press the starter button which is almost lost among a gaggle of ambiguous black knobs borrowed from lesser Jaguars.

The engine catches on a clanking starter, booming from the side-exit exhaust on the passenger's side. The alloy-topped gearlever, gently quivering now, is a hand's span from the wheel, emerging from a wide transmission tunnel that wedges you nicely against the big sill.

I fretted about slipping the easily-fried triple-plate racing clutch but needn't have worried. The heavy, short-throw in-or-out pedal likes decisive action, as does the rifle-bolt gearchange, but practice soon brings proficiency and the engine's smooth throttle action and friendly torque means that getaways are rarely fluffed.

From here on, delivery is as smooth and seamless as it s super-strong and puppy-dog eager, lugging as hard from nothing speeds in top as it soars enthusiastically for the red line in second and third, pushing you hard and long against the green hide.



Seventy, 90, 110mph: the XKSS gathers pace like a jet-fighter, though the noise is more low- flying Spitfire than F1-11, the high- decibel guttural straight six here in its purest, undiluted form. On the overrun it barks like a hungry Rottweiler, the sharp triple-Webered throttle response and close ratios aiding decisive, baulk-free double- declutching downshifts. This gearbox, using only the casing of the Moss unit of ill repute, feels sweet, strong and purposefully macho just like everything else on the XKSS and is best treated with short, aggressive and fast punching movements into the other three synchronised slots.

Mere roads, as distinct from circuits, seem inadequate for a car of the Jaguar's long-striding appetites. It devours lengthy straights on just a whiff of throttle in top gear and slashes through fast corners with minimal roll and little pitch as the slender, hard-walled Dunlop L-section racing tyres telegraph messages that couldn't be clearer if they belled you on your mobile phone: oversteer if you push too hard on the exit, understeer if you brake too deeply into a bend. Somewhere in between you'll find merely well-mannered neutrality.

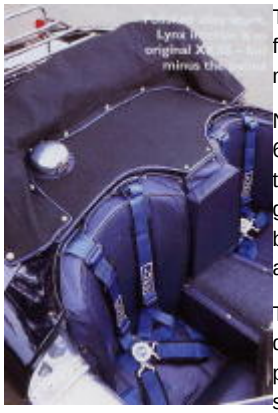
With such ample torque, deliciously sharp throttle response and good old-fashioned progressive breakaway characteristics, the attitude is endlessly predictable, endlessly adjustable. High-class steering, light and accurate, adds to a feeling of compact agility and faithful manoeuvrability not far removed from the early E-type. Such compact poise and monster power must have made this the ultimate road-rocket.

The brakes felt great, too: the pedal was hard responding to pressure rather than movement, but you couldn't argue with the strength of their bite which felt more 1990s than 1950s.

The D-type genes show strongest in the ride, in the lively body movement on anything less than a pool table surface. The whole car dances, demands more concentration as the unsprung mass of the live axle begins to make itself felt with disquieting skittishness through bumpy curves.

And that's where the Lynx ‘replica’, so supple and forgiving, shows its strongest hand. Inside, apart from the fact that the owner has specified a polished alloy finish for the sills, doors and floors. It is the same as the original car, even down to the proper period switchgear. Fire up the Lynx and its voice is a shade or two softer, less angry than the factory car but still powerfully vocal.

The feel of all the controls - steering, brakes, clutch, gearchange - harmonise nicely In the Lynx. The clutch is almost as heavy as the original's but it bites with more forgiving progression, as do the conventionally servoed brakes. In fact, they haul the car down with stomach-churning strength and inspirational pedal feel.



The gearbox is the all-synchromesh transmission used on all Jaguars post 1961, and while it lacks the purposeful flick-switch feel of the original, and the satisfaction that goes with it, it's more willing to be handled lazily, demanding much less input from the driver who's switched his or her brain off and just wants to potter.

Not that the Lynx is some effeminate boulevardier. Mayston-Taylor quotes rough-and-ready brochure Figures of 0-60mph in 4.7 seconds and 0-100 in 12.1 seconds, and this freshly minted XKSS, still running in, certainly felt up to the task. Squeeze the throttle hard and the Lynx storms away with the same nerve-tingling vigour - any time, any gear - as its inspiration, be it slogging or revving. Strength and sweetness are assured by balancing and blueprinting but with the Lynx engine there is no need to fret about expensive factory wide-angle heads at 12 grand a throw: the bits are all competition E-type.

The quad-damper double-wishbone rear end smothers surfaces that unsettle the 1957 car, squatting the rubber down harder to make it do more work when you dish out that huge energy. Yet it is handy and predictable, retaining period Dunlop rubber for the same easy- to-find breakaway characteristics. Less money, less grief. The Lynx makes sense in every department the original XKSS doesn't. It's so good, in fact - and the original article so rare - that comparisons are superfluous: to pitch the Lynx as an alternative to the real thing is to miss the point and to do both cars an injustice.

No, the great thing about the Lynx XKSS – or the Lynx D-type for that matter - Is that it's a cracking car in its own right, as achingly beautiful as its inspiration but better built and more 'driveable'. Can you name me a modern car with this level of urge that lets you explore and step beyond its limits so playfully?

I see the Lynx XKSS more as an alternative to a modern supercar in the Porsche/Lambo/Ferrari mould: indeed, the occasional hot-shot supercar owner is beginning to get that message.

'We had one young lad in here with an F40, says Mayston-Taylor, 'who traded it in for a Lynx. He realised there wasn't much point to a car you can't get to grips with unless you are doing 150mph. In one of these you'll reach the car's limits long before you reach your own.'

The bottom line, though, is that it would be original or nothing for me, and I suspect many of you too, if such exalted rarities were dangled within your reach. You can reproduce patina but you cannot pull history from thin air, and it is the presence of the one-time-only XKSS – and the greater effort required to drive it - that gives the original its magic No wonder Steve McQueen, as butch off-screen as he was on it, drove an XKSS. He knew his motors, liked his driving: and as hardcore driving enjoyment goes, it doesn't get much more raw and visceral than this.