Sports Car International - July 2005

LEFT HOOKER by Ian Kuah

Photography by THE AUTHOR

Steve McQueen would have been even more crazy about his beloved Jaguar XKSS had its steering wheel been in the left. Lynx Motors creates the world's first left-hand-drive XKSS.

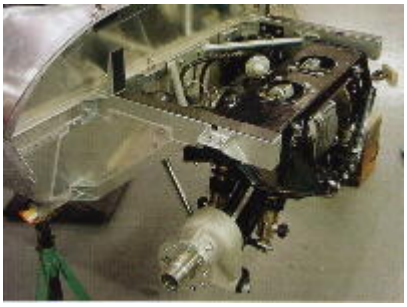
The very first Jaguar XKSS that left the factory in 1957 was right-hand drive, even though it was destined for America. The subsequent 15 XKSSs that Jaguar assembled were also RHD. In recent years, UK Jaguar specialist Lynx Motors has built seven XKSS replicas, all of which were RHD. The notion that original is best has dissuaded collectors from converting an existing XKSS to left-hand drive or having Lynx build one with such configuration.

Today, however, I am behind the wheel of a Lynx XKSS - and I'm in the left-hand seat! This is the story of how this automobile came about.

Given the novelty of this particular car, it's not surprising that is was commissioned by a slightly different enthusiast that the standard Lynx customer. "We are seeing a new generation of customer in their 30s, who do not remember the 1950s cars when they were new, but yearn for the simplicity and directness of such cars," says Lynx proprietor John Mayston-Taylor. "The feeling of freedom, the good power-to-weight ratio and less traction from skinny tires are all part and parcel of the attraction of a car that you have to drive"

In this case, the client is a computer consultant who designs Web cafes in the Czech Republic. Young but very knowledgeable, this car enthusiast was after a really special car that he could enjoy driving while not attracting as much attention as a new Ferrari would. He was also prepared to be the guinea pig. "We acknowledged the fact that we had never built a LHD XKSS before, but he was willing to be the first and to pay for the extra work this would entail," says Mayston-Taylor. The customer was also willing to wait the seven to nine months it would take to build the car.

The Process - The Lynx process begins with an E-Type donor car, from which major componentry such as the engine block, transmission and front and rear suspension members are scavenged. Not only is this easier than creating everything from scratch, it gives a Lynx XKSS an authentic Jaguar soul. Equally important, the use of a donor car allows Lynx to create what is ostensibly a new car without having to conform to current crash safety and emissions regulations; the British licensing system allows Lynx replicas to be registered as 1960s Jaguars, using the existing VIN number.



While the Lynx XKSS re-creations gain sophistication in ride and handling by using the E-Type independent rear suspension, their body construction is very much similar to the original's. The XKSS was the road-going version of a Le Mans winning D-Type racer, so naturally the entire body is made from lightweight aluminium. The front and rear body sections are welded or riveted together then attached to the central steel monocoque.

The front subframe is fabricated from rectangular steel tubing and bolted to the front bulkhead of the monocoque. The later Jaguar E-Types used this method of construction, albeit with a steel body. However, the Lynx tubing is 25 percent more torsionally rigid than the Reynolds steel tubing of the E-Type.

The body panels that give the XKSS its curvaceous lines have incredibly complex compound curves, which have to be hand-formed from flat sheets of aluminium. This difficult task is done using an English Wheel, a unique device that a skilled operator uses to shape the metal to exactly cover the contours of the wooden body bucks. This is a very labor-intensive process that requires a lot of experience and entails a huge amount of loving craftsmanship.

Designing and fabricating the LHD version added nearly four weeks to the XKSS build time, but it was substantially easier than converting an existing RHD car. However, the task was not quite as simple as mirror-imaging the standard RHD car. For instance, the XKSS's passenger-side footbox is shorter than the driver's side. Because the floorpan had to be modified, the exhaust system had to be rerouted; one change leads to another. This helps you appreciate what it takes for a major manufacturer to create a RHD version of a LHD car; it is clearly something best done at the development stage.

The client for the LHD car is quite tall, so Lynx installed a dished panel for the footwell, increased the room behind the seatback by moving the panel aft three inches within the monocoque and added a modern, fully adjustable pedal assembly. To facilitate this last change, the brake master cylinders were moved from their position behind the pedal box onto the bulkhead. The owner also wanted a speedometer calibrated in km/h, so a new dial was silk screen- printed as a one-off. This particular car is very much a bespoke creation.

However, now that Lynx has created a LHD XKSS, it has the patterns and experience to do it again. It had a few inquires from the U.S. for LHD cars in the past, but potential customers were hesitant to commit when they learned that the company had never built one before. Now that it has, Lynx can offer its XKSS and D-Type re-creations to other drivers who feel happier sitting on the left.

An XKSS, especially the Lynx version with its hand-built engine is not a slow car, but this buyer wanted more power and torque. Lynx applied all its engine-building experience to the project. First, the block from the E-Type donor car was thoroughly inspected then strengthened before work began to enlarge the displacement from 4.2 to 4.5 liters.

The engine was fitted with a new fully balanced forged steel crankshaft, lightweight competition-grade steel connecting rods and forged pistons. The reciprocating parts were individually balanced to within a one-gram tolerance. The gas-flowed cylinder head is a new item, machined to accept larger valves, uprated springs and lighter, higher quality cam buckets. The twin-cam straight-6 was then fitted with high-lift camshafts ground to Lynx's specified profile. Because the larger displacement mitigated the potential peakiness of a high-lift cam, Lynx was able to go after more top-end power without worrying too much about tractability.

Lynx designed its own inlet manifold with an integral water rail. The engine breaths through triple Weber 45 DCOE carbs. For the ultimate in driveability and improved fuel economy, Lynx can equip the Jaguar engine with fuel injection, but the owner of this car wanted a brace of Webers under the bonnet. Despite the high-performance parts, the compression ratio of this engine is a relatively modest 8.79:1 to cope with possible poor fuel quality. Nonetheless, the motor produces 320 horsepower at 5,400 rpm and 350 lb-ft of torque at 3,800 rpm.

The Experience - Compared to today's supercars, the XKSS is a relatively small machine, which makes it easy to place on country roads. Its compact and nimble form, coupled with an almost scary power-to-weight ratio, makes it deceptively rapid on the open road. With 250 horsepower on tap, the original XKSS could reach 60 mph in just 4.7 seconds. The Lynx car has an additional 70 horsepower to motivate roughly the same 2,000 pounds of curb weight.

Lynx senior engineer Derek May built this car and is really proud of it. "Even though it has no heater, he is quite happy to go testing in winter weather," Mayston-Taylor tells us. "He says the car is such a joy to drive that he looks for every opportunity to road test it."

A car that has been put together so lovingly by one person for another to enjoy is more than just a driving machine. "For many of our clients, the project is the pleasure," explains Mayston-Taylor. 'The process of choosing the specification and watching a car being built just for you has an appeal for some people that goes beyond simple ownership once it is finished. For some, the experience is like watching your child grow in its mother's womb. Ironically, this car took almost exactly nine months to build."

The current price of a Lynx XKSS is £170,000 ($323,000), depending upon final specification plus local taxes. The LHD version adds £5,000 ($9,500) to that. This first LHD Lynx XKSS (Number 8) ended up at about £185,000 ($351,500) plus taxes because of its various bespoke extras, including the larger 4.5-liter engine.

That's an awful lot of money, but the Lynx XKSS is a truly special sports car. It gives the driver a level of feedback, even at normal road speeds, that exceeds that of any modern supercar. Plus, it's only about a third the price of an original XKSS. Having seen more than one such Jaguar, we can confirm that a Lynx reproduction far exceeds the build quality and detail finish of the 1950s original. In fact, in those respects as well as the resulting driving experience, Lynx cars feel like how the original would had it been developed over a longer period and constructed with far greater precision.