



## Classic Cars - October 2001

FLUID LYONS by Mark Dixon



The SS100 that once belonged to industrial designer Brook Stevens has just been restored by UK specialist Lynx Engineering - we were there to drive it.

To be seen at the wheel of an SS100 can be faintly embarrassing, like walking arm-in-arm with Pamela Anderson or Madonna. The car seems too beautiful, too glamorous to be real, and unless you have the chutzpah to live up to the image, it'll give you something of an inferiority complex. Suffice to say that former Classic Cars columnist, bon viveur and self-confessed womaniser the late Alan

Clark, owned two SS Jags in his younger days, although he never seemed too keen to mention them in print.

Time has, rehabilitated the SS Jaguar, at least in part, and the main qualification you need to own one now is lots of money rather than sheer bravado. This particular car - the subject of a ground-up rebuild by Lynx Motors International - is worth well over £150,000. Admittedly, it's one of the best in the world, but that's an impressive return on a car that you could have bought for spare change in the Fifties. There are stories of down-at-heel SS100s being scrapped then for their tyres.

It's a remarkable comeback for the car that was once nicknamed 'the Wardour Street Bentley' after a notoriously seedy street in Soho. In America, this peculiarly English snobbishness would have had little if any meaning, and it certainly didn't deter industrial designer Brook Stevens, who bought this actual car shortly after World War Two and kept it right up to his death in 1995.

The SS Jaguars were the creation of Jaguar boss William Lyons, in every sense. He founded the company, he managed it and he styled the cars. Lyons was originally co-partner in a motorcycle sidecar business called Swallow Sidecars, before diversifying into making car bodies and launching his own SS car marque in 1931. No-one's yet proved what SS stood for: Swallow Sidecars? Swallow Sports? Or Standard-Swallow? The latter is probably what Standard's John Black - who supplied Lyons with chassis and drivetrains - thought, and Lyons may have diplomatically let him go on thinking it.

The first SS coupes were handsome if modestly performing cars, while the SS90 sports car of 1935 displayed the extravagant lines that would characterise the later SS100. As it happened, there wasn't long to wait: the SS90 was announced in March and superseded by the SS100 in September. The changeover happened because tuning expert Harry Weslake had developed an overhead-valve conversion for the SS90's sidevalve engine, boosting power from the 2.7-litre Standard straight six to more than 100bhp.



For the first two years of SS100 production, it was only available with this OHV version of the so-called '2 1/2'-litre engine (actually 2664cc) but from autumn 1937 you could order a 3 1/2-litre SS100.

The bigger block gave the SS100 real supercar performance by the standards of the day. The Motor recorded a 0-60mph time of 10.9sec; The Autocar shaved that down to 10.4sec; while both magazines achieved more than 100mph.

Not much chance of emulating those performances today, in this freshly restored and still-tight concours restoration. The engine still has to be fully run-in before the car is shipped overseas to its new owner, an ex-pat car collector who lives in the States. As a present day SS100 owner, he's in good company: McLaren's F1 technical director Adrian Newey also has one.

Doubtless Newey, with his background in Formula One engineering, appreciates the feather-light feel of the alloy-panelled door every time he gets behind the Jag's steering wheel. As with so many pre-war sports cars, feeding your legs past the A-pillar and under that big, four-spoke wheel isn't easy, but there's adequate legroom for a late-20th century human once you're there. The wheel itself is appropriately macho - it's the size of a dustbin lid and has a centre boss getting on for six inches in diameter - but the fascia is as curvaceous as a Warhol blow-up of Marilyn Monroe's lips. Beautiful, saucer sized speedo and rev-counter are complemented by a sprinkling of much smaller ancillary gauges, all of them bar the ammeter sporting the SS logo.

Press the starter button and the engine catches easily, burbling into life with a lazy beat that sound more straight-eight than six - possibly something to do with the curiously squashed profile of the exhaust tail pipe. Push the delightfully stubby gear lever into first and here's a curiosity: The lever's topped by a practical, and authentic, knob made of rubber instead of the expected Bakelite.

For usability's sake, Lynx have fitted a modern clutch so the take-up's light and progressive as we edge cautiously into the traffic on Hastings seafront (an ironic place to start, given the verdict in a 1947 book, British Sports Cars, that 'Vintage enthusiasts are still apt to regard [the SS] as particularly suitable for promenade work.') For the First few hundred yards I have a tussle with the gearbox, which produces noisy crunches however carefully I time the changes. Until, quite by accident, I discover the secret: rev the engine comparatively hard





and make the change quickly. It may seem illogical but it works and now I know how those Thirties road testers achieved such snappy 0-60 times.



As we move inland, the road opens up, the traffic thins out and we're able to let that Weslake-tuned engine do its stuff. It will pick the Jaguar up and hurry it along from any speed you like in top gear, long-stroke torque making a nonsense of the cars not inconsiderable 1200kg-or-so kerb weight. In fact, the 3 1/2-litre SS100 will accelerate from 30 to 70mph in fourth gear nearly a second quicker than a 3 1/2-litre MGB GT V8. There's no need to exceed our self-imposed 3000rpm running-in speed which gives an easy 65-70mph in top, and in any case you'll be taking unwarranted liberties with the brakes if you attempt to go much faster.

Don't get me wrong, the Jaguar's 13-inch diameter drum brakes work as well as they ever did, but deceleration is steady rather than sudden and is accompanied by a gentle weaving from side to side. Imagine trying to stop something that weighs as much as a top-spec Ford Sierra, doing 80mph

with rod-operated drum brakes - get the picture?

Lynx's Derek May, who did much of the mechanical work on the restoration, confesses that the steering box is rather more worn than he'd prefer but I can't find anything to worry about even on these fast B-roads. Okay, there's slight play around the straight-ahead position but it doesn't seem to bother the car, which is reassuringly steady as we howl along some satisfyingly lengthy straights. Enter a corner with a little enthusiasm and you'll need to adopt the 'Brooklands racer' position, arms braced at quarter-to-three to hold the car firmly on course, but the steering doesn't load up to the point where it's hard work.

At sensible speeds the handling never gives any cause for concern. In its 1937 test of a 2 1/2-litre SS100. The Motor reckoned it was fairly easy to induce a rear-wheel skid 'which can be controlled very easily by an experienced driver.' But, as they admitted, tyre adhesion was the limiting-factor. Likewise the ride quality is well suited to fast touring. Hydraulic dampers are fitted all round and the front axle is further controlled by transversely mounted friction dampers; the result is a firm but never harsh suspension that keeps the car tied to the road even at high speeds. In fact, if you had the money and the commitment, I reckon you could do surprisingly well in historic rallying with an SS100. Just watch those brakes.



From a sensory point of view, the 100 delivers in every respect. The engine feels smooth, but then it could be rattling away like a weaving loom and you'd never know it, such is the blare from the exhaust and the roar of the wind as the SS cuts a brick-shaped path through the air. (Aeroscreens were supplied as standard fittings on the SS, and lowering the windscreen certainly made a difference to its top-end performance, provided you had a pair of goggles handy.)

There's very little gear whine - something that can't be said of the post-war XK Jags - and the change itself with synchro on the upper three ratios (nominally, at least) is sweeter than most Moss-box cars I've driven.

harder you push it. And it can hold its own in the looks department with just about anything you care to mention. By the late Thirties, though, its style was passe; other manufacturers had flirted with streamlining and were settling down to the more conservative compromise of rounded front grilles, enclosed wings and faired-in headlights. The last SS100s were made in 1939 - including the Lynx car - and the model wasn't revived post-war.

Thinking about it, there's one other Jaguar whose image and early career mirrors the SS100. Will enthusiasts be commissioning 100-point restorations of their treasured XJ-Ss in 40 years time? If so, I'll be the old boy reminiscing about how you could once pick up a usable XJ-S for the unbelievable sum of a few hundred pounds.





## 1939 SS JAGUAR 100

### Engine

3485cc, ohv straight six, all-iron, twin SU carbs

### Power

125bhp@4250rpm

### Transmission

Four-speed manual

### Brakes

Rod-operated drums

### Suspension

Semi-elliptic springs, Luvax hydraulic dampers front and rear, Hartford friction dampers at front only

### Weight

2687lb (1220kg)

### Performance

Top speed: 101 mph 0-60mph: 10.9sec The Motor,

1938 Cost £445 Value now £120,000

## PAST DAMAGE A SAVING GRACE

ALTHOUGH this SS100 spent most of its life in a museum, it was hardly in museum condition when acquired by Lynx's chairman John Mayston-Taylor at auction in Florida early last year. Or rather, it was. Recalls John: 'Engine, brake drums and suspension were daubed in red paint. It was a typical museum car - dressed up to look good.'



When Lynx's craftsmen stripped the car down for a chassis-up restoration, they uncovered a catalogue of horrors. The chassis had suffered front and rear impacts, twisting it into a corkscrew shape. However, as Lynx craftsman Erik Staermose explains: 'That probably did the car a favour long-term, because it wasn't used much later and kept all its original fittings as a result.'

Those original fittings included the engine, which was soon persuaded to run - amazingly, because it turned out one of the pistons was cracked in half! There were five cracks in the block and head, too, which were repaired by cold-stitching, while the cast alloy water rail above the carbs had rotted through and had to be remade from scratch.

The car's body had problems of its own - someone in the past had made welded repairs and burnt the underlying ash frame - but all the panelling was savable with the exception of the door skins. Amazingly, Lynx completed the project from start to finish in just one year.

The first owner of this SS100 isn't known, but during its museum incarceration it wore a brass plaque claiming participation in a number of pre-war events - the 1938 Belgian Grand Prix and the 1939 Grand Prix de Moracco (sic) among them. Soon after World War Two it was bought by Brook Stevens, the American industrial designer who would go on to style the Jeep station wagon, the 1962 Studebaker Hawk and the Excaliber. Photos suggest he campaigned the SS in the Fifties before retiring it to his Milwaukee Automobile Museum, where it remained until his death in 1995.

The car is now back in the States, where the owner is enjoying driving it and entering it in concours events, including the New Hampshire Speedway Vintage Festival and Concours, where it won Most Important European Design.

