



Classic Cars - January 1999

RESTORATION OF THE CENTURY - THE RESURRECTION by Dan Strong

Twelve Lightweight E-types were made, but until nine months ago only 11 were accounted for. This is the missing car - totally original, virtually unused and about to be reborn.



It's a dreamlike scene. Sitting among the glittering display of Jaguar race cars filling Lynx's Hastings workshops is a 1963 Lightweight E-type that's spent the last 35 years stored in a Californian garage. With the accumulated grime blurring its lines it looks like a giant 3D sepia photograph.

From the viewing balcony that's provided this first glimpse, we make our way down to the workshop floor and pass a potted history of Jaguar racing. On any other occasion the sight of a TWR-built Le Mans prototype, a low drag coupe E-type and an Ecurie Ecosse D-type would stop me in my tracks, but not now. The Lightweight is close.

Just nine months ago it was still stored in suspended animation beneath a mountain of crumbling cardboard boxes, hidden from the world in 1963 by its incredible owner, Howard Gidovlenko, a man as happy racing aeroplanes as cars. Had he not died, it's safe to assume the car would still be there, wrapped in its unorthodox time capsule rather than here in England awaiting restoration.

We're now beside the car. Up close it looks almost surreal. For a 35-year-old racing car its aluminium body is impossibly smooth, but then it has covered just 2663 miles since it was built in March 1963. Goodyear Blue Streak racing tyres are still fitted to the car's alloy Dunlop racing wheels, and the bonnet still bears the sponsorship stickers applied before a race at Sebring by its original owner and Jaguar's West Coast importer Kjell Qvale.



Looking closer I notice an almost ghostly aura of grease and dirt clinging to the red and blue striped paintwork, protecting the fragile aluminium body. For me that dirt and dust is as powerful an indicator of the car's incredible life as the reams of paper tracing its history. Neatly arranged next to the car is a collection of boxed factory spares that were found with the car. Incredibly, it includes two sets of new and unused Dunlop racing wheels packed in wooden crates, unground camshafts, brake kits wrapped in newspaper from the Sixties and a Borg and Beck clutch. The originality is almost beyond belief and in the case of the boxed wheels, priceless and almost certainly unique. As we're standing there, the E-type's bonnet is lifted by four uniformed Lynx mechanics to reveal an all-aluminium engine mounted on a subframe stained with exhaust fumes. Oil is poured into the dry sump, hoses and electrical connections are checked and double checked before the 3.8-litre straight



six is spun over on the car's electric starter motor. The mechanics deal with astonishing cars for a living, but I'm sure I'm not the only one holding my breath as they prepare to run the engine.

I'm standing next to Lynx's Chairman and Managing Director, John Mayston-Taylor. 'Gidovlenko,' he explains 'was an all American hero, a decorated fighter pilot and World War Two ace for the RAF. After the war he turned his hand to hot-rodding aeroplanes and won a string of races in a tuned up, clipped wing P51 Mustang. He was also selected as a USAF test pilot for the X2 and became friends with Chuck Yeager. The man could have come from pages of a Boys' Own annual.'



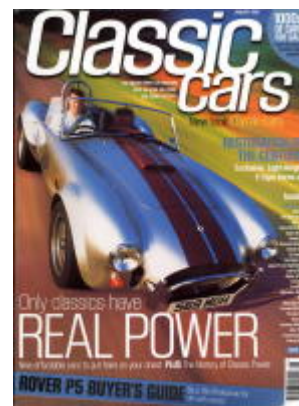
It's said those patches of bare aluminium were created after Gidovlenko took an angle grinder to the Jag's flanks during his divorce, cosmetically ruining the car and stopping it from being sold to pay off his wife.

Paint removal and panel polishing aside, Gidovlenko had also personalised this car for his own demands. He employed his intimate knowledge of aircraft technology, using aluminium box sections to brace and strengthen the car's shell, ensuring its longevity by spraying zinc chromate, an expensive aerospace etch primer, over the exposed and untreated aluminium inside the car.



But despite this preparation, and Gidovlenko's undeniable appetite for speed, he hardly used the car. Records show the car was raced by a team entered by Qvale at Sebring and Laguna Seca in '63 but though Gidovlenko obviously had big plans for the racer there's no evidence to show he entered it in

any race, which explains the huge collection of unused spares.





An intention to run the car in a race at Daytona is mentioned in correspondence between Gidovlenko and the Jaguar factory, but the details of his race preparation work seem a little vague.

It's also clear Gidovlenko had not left himself enough time to finish the race preparation for the event as his mention of it comes just three months before it was due to start.

The car was last taxed and insured in 1967, though whether it was used during that year is unlikely as the '63 registration plates issued to Gidovlenko when he took delivery of the E-type remain unused. It was around that time the car was dismantled for storage. Gidovlenko carefully dropped the rear suspension on its subframe, removed the engine and covered the bodywork in a film of duck oil to prevent it from the elements.



The Lightweight didn't move again until February 28, 1998 when it was publicly unearthed after Gidovlenko's death by a consortium that included American restorer Richard E Darnell. The group, which comprised Jaguar historians and specialists had been on the trail of the car for some time and from the moment it was 'found' its pace of life accelerated unimaginably.

From its suburban restoring place it headed for the summer auctions at Monterey where it sold for \$872,050 (£540,671). Interestingly, the original bill of sale, a hire purchase agreement, confirms the car was originally sold as a 'demonstrator' by Kjell Qvale on October 29, 1963 for \$5000.

Immediately after the auction at Monterey, arrangements were made by Lynx to have the car shipped back to the UK. Endless paperwork was required for the move as the US authorities refused to believe an E-type could be worth such a huge amount of money, suspecting a complex money crime.

One they were sure everything was as it should be, the car headed for London on a 747 and then on to Lynx's Hastings workshops.

This is the beginning of the car's resurrection, and the start of a project that will turn a timewarp into a competition car that's reliable and safe. In some ways some of the magic will be lost as the Lightweight is recommissioned, but Mayston-Taylor is adamant the aim is to preserve its originality, rather than create the kind of facsimile of it that can be seen in concours cars around the globe.

I'm jolted from my reverie by the chatter of a starter motor. The exquisitely detailed engine sneezes through its fuel injection trumpets. After just a handful of seconds it snarls into life. The engine note from the twin straight-through exhausts has an almost physical quality, an edge you can feel in your chest as the revs rise. Three mechanics surround the growling engine, oblivious to the cacophony that's making me want to cover my ears. They slowly run their hands over the cam covers and complex mechanical fuel injection system, feeling for rattles and knocks that could signal trouble.



Fingers carefully turn the spring loaded throttle arms and the revs climb, apparently unhindered by inertia or friction. It's a tantalising taste of the unit's 315bhp-plus performance and one that sends goosebumps up your arms.



All too soon the ear-splitting bark of the engine is quelled and the workshop falls silent. No one says anything, we just stand there inhaling the rich petrol aroma that's still seeping from the exhaust pipes, marvelling at the integrity of a 35-year-old engine that can still run on its original parts.

Eventually, the mechanics roll the car back towards the ramps, and with the engine checked, tools, labels, boxes and cameras are arranged around the car, ready for the stripdown. Everything will be kept during the rebuild, every part photographed and catalogued, right down to the little plastic cable ties holding the wiring loom together. The aim of the rebuild is to keep as much of the car's original character as possible.

It's raining as the Lightweight E-type is wheeled out to be washed. A bucket of steaming soapy water is brought from the workshop and with a sponge the mechanics begin to wipe away 35 years of dirt, grime and the protective covering of grease the car was treated to by its owner. It runs off the car in muddy rivulets.



As the water drains away, the rain eases and a watery sun shines through the cloud, creating reflections on the wet paintwork. At the rear though, the reflection is broken by the matt outline of the number 423. It's the mark left by the glue of race numbers from the car's second and final race at Laguna Seca.

There's more than a fleeting glimpse of the car's history in that number. As it's cleaned away it symbolises an end of an era for the car, and the beginning of a new life, one very much in the public eye, and in stark contrast to the years it spent under an assortment of boxes in a garage in a quiet Los Angeles suburb.



The Lightweight at Sebring: Cobras, GTOs and a suitcase on the trunk

SEBRING'S LITTLE AIRFIELD has hosted the Sebring 12-hour race since the Fifties. It's one of America's highest profile sports car events and a mecca for manufacturers keen to prove their cars' speed and reliability. Four E-types contested the 1963 Sebring 12 hours, two of them new Lightweight Competition versions. One (S850659) belonged to long-time Jaguar entrant Briggs Cunningham, the other (S850660) to Kjell Qvale's British Motor Car Distributors (BMCD), Jaguar's West Coast importer in San Francisco.

BMCD had run an MGB in the '62 event and chose one of its drivers, Ed Leslie, for the E-type. Second driver was Frank Morrill. There was little time to prepare for the race so, Ed Leslie remembers, Qvale's chief mechanic Joe Huffaker directed his efforts at saving time in the pits. To avoid opening the bonnet, Joe calculated the amount of oil needed at stops and built a long cylinder with a plunger at one end. A hole was cut in the bonnet over the dry sump so when the car pitted, all the crew had to do was and dump oil into the tank.

Competition was fierce, not only from the Ferrari GTOs but from the powerful AC Cobras too, which might have won had they been reliable. But they weren't, and it was left to the Cunningham E-type driven by Bruce McLaren and Walt Hansgen to challenge the Ferraris. A top-five finish was on the cards until a brakeline failure allowed Leslie and Morrill to take 7th place. Their run was uneventful, recalls Ed Leslie, except 'I had a tyre go, right down below my right hip - it made a hell of a bang!' The flailing carcass damaged the wheelarch and moved the rear suspension sideways several inches, but thanks to Huffaker's pit stop efficiencies, they finished ahead of the Cunningham car in 7th spot. Post race, Leslie drove the E-type to nearby Miami for its flight to San Francisco with racing numbers, open exhausts and a suitcase strapped onto the trunk lid! Between practice and race they'd commuted in the E-type between the track and motel.



The E-type was destined to complete only one more race, Qvale entering the car at Laguna Seca, California. Ed Leslie ended up behind the wheel and finished 8th, the event being won by Charlie Parson's Lotus 23. Then the car was sold to Gidovlenko and after that came the long sleep... Paul Skilleter

