



Motor - March 1982

"A breath of fresh air" by Peter Dron

The car photographed on these pages by Peter Burn, is, say Lynx Engineering, what the XJ-S should have been like from the start - a drophead. If you can find a used XJ-S in good condition, and if you have an extra £6,950 plus VAT waiting to be spent, this could be the car for you. Peter Dron reports on how Lynx stop the bodywork falling apart when they take a torch to the roof.



Splendid car as it is in many respects, the XJ-S does not evoke unanimous praise for its styling. To my eyes the only wholly successful viewpoint is head-on, and elsewhere (particularly in the area where the roofline curves down towards the boot) it suggests an unresolved argument in a committee room. The XJ-S appeared in 1975, during a difficult period in Jaguar's history: Sir William Lyons had retired, and his brilliant stylist/aerodynamist Malcolm Sayer had died in 1971. Worse than that, Jaguar seemed to be choking in the corporate mire of what was then known as British Leyland.



If its appearance failed to please many observers, one aspect of its design caused a great deal of surprise: the fact that it was designed entirely as a fixed-head model, with no drophead version. The E-type, having first degenerated into its unlovely V12 form and then disappeared from the lists, thus had no direct replacement. To be fair to Jaguar, it was never their intention that the XJ-S should be regarded as such, and the decision not to build an open-top car was governed by a widely-held (though, as it turned out, ill-founded) belief that dropheads were to be banned by US legislation; and America, as far as Jaguar are concerned, is the prime market which has a profound effect on any decisions concerning either engineering or marketing.

In the years since the introduction of the XJ-S, Jaguar Cars have regained much lost pride, and much of their threatened autonomy has been returned to Browns Lane by Sir Michael Edwardes. The cars are better built, and they are better looking, thanks to careful details work. The bottom line is that they are selling in respectable numbers, and the company appears to have a very bright future, so long as it can get through to its new generation of models via the next, difficult couple of years without any major disasters such as an Islamic empire in the Middle East ruled by Colonel Gaddafi.

But the XJ-S is still not a drop head, despite a strong demand for open-air motoring, especially in California and Australia. There is an interesting development due from Jaguar in the not too distant future but in the meantime Lynx Engineering have stepped in to cater for this demand.

Lynx are probably best known for their replicas of C- and D-type Jaguars, but in fact the majority of the work carried out in their new premises in St Leonard's-on-Sea, Sussex, consists of restorations of the genuine articles. They also build, as we reported recently in our survey of the "replicar" business (Motor, w/e February 13), cars which are in that indeterminate area between a replica and a restoration: the C-type which we featured was built up from a mixture of original parts or exact reproductions. Similarly, a lightweight E-type, complete with full alloy monocoque, 3.8-litre aluminium block with dry sump and wide-angle head, is shortly to leave the Lynx factory; in effect it is the 13th of a series of 12. . .

Lynx, like Ladbroke Avon, have also cut the tops off the rare and attractive XJ Coupes. This strikes me as a poor decision on the part of the customers, as the Coupe is already, only three years after its premature demise, regarded as a modern "classic"; in years to come, it is a safe bet that those with roofs on will be more highly prized than those without.

However, Lynx's Coupe-cutting has "tailed off" after about 20 such conversions have been completed, and they now carry out far more work for XJ-S owners who wish to get the breeze in their hair. At the time of writing, 27 XJ-S dropheads had been built, mostly for export.

The idea of cutting the top off an XJ-S does not cause me the same twinge of disapproval that I feel about the drophead Coupe: there are far more XJ-Ss around, and in any case the conversion looks a lot better than the original. When converting a new car, Lynx take over the body warranty, while the Jaguar warranty on mechanical parts remains in force.

The difficult part in taking the top away from any car with a monocoque chassis, as may well be imagined, is to restore to it the stiffness which is thereby lost. In the case of a Jaguar, this is particularly important: not only is there a great deal of motor car all ready to flex and groan when deprived of part of its structure, but an essential ingredient of Jaguar driving is the absence of most of the noises that are present in other cars.



Derek Green of Lynx tells me that this was the biggest single problem with the XJ-S, and far more tricky than the actual design work to make it look attractive, or of finding somewhere to stow the hood. The main area to which attention is given is the sills; at each side a stiffening sill is welded to the existing ones, threading its way through each wheel arch to the corners of the car. The windscreen pillars and door posts are also reinforced, and there is a considerable amount of cross-bracing.

The original rear wings, which lead up into the "flying buttresses", are replaced rather than modified, and although the standard boot lid is retained, it sometimes requires some modification: because, in the original car, the lid is effectively "hidden", it does not have to be such a perfect fit as other areas of panelwork. In the drophead, the boot area becomes a focal point and must blend in exactly.



The extra metal involved in the reinforcement, plus the hood irons and electric motor, must involve a weight penalty in excess of what is removed. Lynx are not sure exactly how much this is, and we did not have time to investigate; in any case, with 5.3 litres of V12 under your right foot, this does not constitute a major problem.

Having chopped and stiffened the car. Lynx fit electrically- operated retractable rear side windows. In the original car the rear side windows are fixed, but of course this would not do for a drop- head. As a result of this, and the stowage of the hood, a small amount of rear shoulder room is lost, though headroom is increased and the rear legroom, sufficient for two people with absurdly short legs, is unchanged. Making room for the hood irons to retract also necessitates lopping off the top inch of the fuel tank, reducing its capacity to a mere 18 gallons.

All the structural work on the cars is carried out at the St Leonard's factory, and the bodies are resprayed locally before being sent off to a well-known Kensington coachbuilder to be retrimmed. Lynx's 22 workers possess a variety of talents from panel-beating and fabricating to machining, but there is not at present the facility to carry out upholstery and trim work there. Incidentally, one of the employees, now semi-retired, worked for Sunbeam in the 1930s, and was in part responsible for the body of Kaye Don's Silver Bullet record-breaker.

The car we borrowed from Lynx was the first one that they converted. It was done for Noel Edmonds, and against the advice of Lynx he specified the white PVC- type material for the hood. Lynx prefer to use mohair, which (besides giving a neater, more restrained appearance) has better wear qualities: the PVC tends to shrink, which makes the top rather difficult to clip closed, leads to what Lynx describe as "the appearance of a hungry cow" (with the hood irons sticking out like ribs), and has a detrimental effect on wind noise suppression.

As a result, we cannot fairly comment on wind noise in a properly hooded drophead XJ-S; the car we drove began to whistle loudly from 70 or 80 mph onwards, becoming almost intolerably noisy soon afterwards. My only advice, if you are interested in one of these cars is to test-drive a mohair version.



Certainly, the body finish is good, and the hood mechanism itself works very well. To lower the hood the procedure is as follows: first detach the two chunky windscreen top bar clips, then lower all the windows, especially the rear ones. The switch for the power mechanism is in the central cubby, and once the hood is lowered there is a cover for it attached by press- studs. Again, on the test car, this was of the dreaded PVC and had shrunk somewhat; the mohair ones should be easier to operate.

With the hood down, wind noise is not excessive, and keeping the side windows raised reduces buffeting to acceptable proportions up to fairly high speeds; nor, even in the rather ancient machine (XJV 12 has covered well over 70,000 miles), were there too many creaks or rattles.

I don't see that a convertible is a worthwhile proposition in this country, where we have weather in lieu of a climate, but there are quite a few people who disagree with me. If you are among them, have a good but ageing XJ-S, £6,950 plus VAT to spare, Lynx's telephone number is Hastings (0424) 51277.