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STREET RACERS by Martin Buckley

Based on the Le Mans-winning D-type, the Jaguar XKSS was Steve McQueen's favourite road-racer. We drive this stunning recreation.

As well as being a gifted actor and a handsome sod, Steve McQueen could drive pretty well too, and when he began to earn real money in the early Sixties he could indulge his lifelong passion for fast cars.



He wasn't one for vast, vulgar collections but preferred to keep a few choice jewels: a Ferrari Lusso, a Porsche or two, even American rarities like a 'step-down' Hudson Hornet. But his favourite, the car that became suffused with the off-screen McQueen action-man myth, was a Jaguar XKSS that the lean,

blond, spiff-smoking and somewhat troubled action hero raced up and down the roads of Beverly Hills, annoying his film star neighbours.

Like McQueen, the XKSS was visceral, a macho road-racer and direct descendant of a three-times Le Mans winner that made even the Mercedes-Benz 300SL look insipid. With first gear good for 66mph, second for 85, the XKSS could hit a ton in 14 seconds in third and still have one gear and another 50mph to go. Anyone with the requisite wedge - £2464 in 1957 - could buy one straight off the shelf and drive it on the road.

It was the 993 GT2 of its day, savage but not crude, ferocious but ultimately controllable. It is probably the most exciting road going car Jaguar ever made - and I'm including things like the dreadful XJ220 because that was too big and unwieldy to be truly entertaining as opposed to terrifying.

The XKSS you see here, however, is not a Jaguar but a Lynx XKSS built by the Hastings-based company that has been producing its own version of sports-racing Jaguars since the early Seventies.

Lynx has built more than 50 long- and short-nose D-types (which are collectable in their own right) but only seven XKSSs. 'We built this one on spec,' says Lynx boss John Mayston-Taylor, 'which we've never done before, but these days, especially since September 11th, people tend not to want to wait for things...'

This one's found a buyer already and, as I write, he's taking it on a tour of Italy, but John will happily make another to order. The cars tend to sell to well-heeled enthusiasts who might even be able to afford a factory original but would rather own something that is a bit more driveable and less precious. Lynx also looks after a mouth watering selection of historic racing cars and actually restored the McQueen XKSS; the company still has the original windscreen for the car in its stores.



The car you see here was built up from a cancelled order for a Lynx D-type (the shell had been sitting as a display piece in the Lynx office for a number of years), so in a sense it is true to the spirit of the original. It's an exquisite thing, the red leather perfectly complementing the black bodywork. It is visually identical to the factory car, from its hand-rolled aluminium shell to the switchgear and instruments on the dash but, as with its D-types, Lynx replaced the live rear axle with later Jaguar independent rear suspension plus bigger XJ brakes and a five-speed Borg Warner T5 gearbox.

The XKSS is a curious footnote in Jaguar history. 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. It was also 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 road going 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 cowl, the D-type became an XKSS. Like the D-type that spawned it, the XKSS was so flexible and tractable you could use it for shopping, although the lack of a glovebox, never mind a useable boot, might have put some people off.

In the metal it's a surprisingly diminutive car, voluptuous and muscular but a nice size. There is pent-up tension in those full, rounded haunches hinting at the flowing grace of the E-type yet to come. The mean, hungry look around the pouting mouth and faired-in eyes is unmistakable. But if the later car was sleek and soft, the XKSS, standing crotch high, is stocky and aggressive, its riveted and welded 16-gauge centre tub wrapped around a cramped and functional cockpit.

The delicate body is protected at all four corners by slim bumpers cut down from a saloon, the faired-in lights emphasised by brightwork around the edges. There's no room in the boot to speak of - it's full of spare wheel and fuel tank - but you do get a luggage rack.

It's always worth popping the nose (held down with leather straps) to admire the architecture of the





XK engine, such a handsome thing with its polished alloy cam covers. It powered everything from XK sports cars and Le Mans winners to tanks, fire engines and Arthur Daley's Daimler Sovereign and here it is in its 3.8-litre prime, gas-flowed and balanced for an athletic 320bhp on triple Weber carburettors.

Open the dinky door, swing your legs over the wide, padded sill and slither down into the narrow cockpit. Practise your best Steve McQueen squint in the mirror. The cabin is dominated by a large, slightly askew wood-rimmed wheel with flat, drilled spokes, and pair of handsome Smiths dials. The seats are embracing but the backrests are fixed in an upright position, and legroom for the driver and passenger is limited, although Lynx can find a little more space for really tall drivers. As far as comforts go it has only the bare necessities — in fact not even those if we're talking 2003 standards. The hood is rudimentary and looks slightly bizarre when erected (as it always has) and

there's no heater, though you get all the warmth you need from the engine's ample heat-soak through the floor and bulkhead.

Lynx's engineers go to a lot of trouble to get details like the switchgear correct and raided the hallowed pans bins of original XKSS components to make this car the best and most authentic in detail they have ever produced. Modern drivers wouldn't recognise some of the controls: the horn is a separate push button near the door and looks as if it's best operated with the right knee, while the indicators are on a clockwork switch on the dash - all very authentic.

Turn the ignition key, listen for the glug-glug of the fuel pumps as they prime the Webers' float chambers and press the starter button, almost lost among a gaggle of black knobs borrowed from lesser Jaguars. There's something self-conscious about a starter button in a modern car, but in a



Fifties Jag it gives things the correct sense of occasion.

The engine catches instantly, booming from the side-exit exhaust on the passenger's side. The alloy-topped gearlever is a hand's span from the wheel and the pedals feel close together, too close if you're driving in clumping shoes. Move off and it's instantly clear that the weighting of all the controls is harmonised to put you at ease.

Gear changes require real skill in an original Moss 'box XKSS, but the Lynx shift is much more forgiving - meaty and precise without being obstructive, and matched to a smooth, easy semi-competition clutch. The lever is curved slightly, just like the original. I miss the howling straight-cut first gear of the Moss, but that's just a perverse weakness of mine.

The engine is just wonderful. Low down it grunts and bellows like a Routemaster pulling away from a bus stop - a meaty, guttural noise. It will chug about in fourth and top as happily as your grandad's XJ6.

From here you can choose between a seamless rush of energy that simply gathers the car up and flicks it up the road - or an explosion of acceleration that sends the rev-counter swinging for the six-grand red line and pins you against the seat for as long as your nerve holds out.

With 320bhp to shift just over a ton, the XKSS devours the straights like a bulimic supermodel with a box of Mr Kipling's apple pies. It hoovers up the scenery between the ample cleavage of its bonnet, touching primal buttons and unleashing primitive urges. Wrapped in its muscular alloy body, wedged between its chunky sills and fat transmission tunnel, your senses are assaulted by a barrage of noises, vibrations and smells that nine you in immediately to the essence of what the car is all about,



hacking in to that combination of fear, anticipation and pleasure that makes your neck hairs bristle and your loins stir and makes you believe, for just a second, that the world can't be such an awful place.



The engine picks up so sharply, so cleanly that your gear changes can hardly keep up. On even the shortest straights three figures come up over and over again. You could easily get hooked on this kind of power. What it all means in hard figures is difficult to say but Mayston-Taylor talks of 170mph and 0-60 in less than 5 seconds.

Modern supercar owners might recognise this kind of urge, but they would probably feel less immediately familiar with the handling, which puts the emphasis on feel and feedback rather than ultimate

grip.

The steering is light and accurate, writhing on bumps and cambers as you adjust the attitude on the throttle in endless variations, feeding in just as much power as it will take without breaking away. The disc brakes are epic in power (though the pedal felt slightly soft) and where an original D-type or XKSS would hop and skip a little over bumps, the quad-damper double-wishbone rear end of the Lynx pushes the rubber down harder to make it do more work when you dish out that huge energy. The original Jaguar IRS, as fitted to E-types and XJs, always suffered from





rear-wheel steering as Jaguar strived to find a compromise between compliance, ride and grip, but Lynx's own rear wishbone location and geometry gets rid of a lot of the rubber so the whole thing isn't trying to move on its mountings when all you want it to do is put power on the road. As well as shrugging off mid-corner bumps, it gives a decently supple ride too.

The word 'replica' makes you flinch instinctively. It makes you think of nasty plastic contraptions with Cortina engines and Austin 1800 doors. The sort of vehicles people who haven't got a clue have as wedding cars.



The Lynx XKSS is a replica, but a deeply superior one that celebrates the idea of the original car but isn't afraid of improving on it in ways Jaguar's engineers would probably have done themselves if production had continued. It's eye-wateringly expensive at £175,000, but these things are strictly relative...

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.



Funnily enough Jaguar probably wasn't that fussed about losing the cars, which were proving difficult to unload. Of the 16, 12 went to the US, 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 £700,000. Or you buy a Lynx.