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"THEY DO MAKE THEM LIKE THEY USED TO" - THE LYNX XKSS by Giles Chapman

Lynx, a little-known Sussex-based firm is building a doppelganger of the Jaguar XKSS. Giles Chapman gets a glimpse of the process.



Somewhere in the Czech Republic a successful young businessman will be rubbing his hands. But not because of the chilly autumn mornings in Prague. It's in delicious anticipation. The man, who insists on anonymity, has been promised to expect the fulfilment of his dream at the end of this month. That dream is a custom-built two-seater roadster like no other from Britain's least-known but possibly most fastidious car manufacturer. It's a Lynx XKSS.

Right now, his XKSS is drying off after receiving yet another coat of lustrous black paint, at the same time as a final audit of its precious, high-performance innards is being finalised. The project manager will be about two thirds of the way through chronicling the car's construction in pictures, which will eventually form a unique photographic record of its hand-crafted creation. That will certainly be something for the Czech client to show his friends but, then again, he is probably spending £200,000 on the venture.

You won't find a Lynx showroom on the edge of your town. The company operates from an unremarkable industrial unit in St Leonards on Sea in East Sussex, and people who want its incredible skills tend to seek it out. "More people know about us than we probably realise, especially because of our website", declares company owner John Mayston-Taylor. "People follow what we do and then get in touch after having tracked us for years. The gentleman who ordered the XKSS, for instance, was a completely out-of-the-blue customer but it was amazing how clued-up he was".

Established in 1968, classic car restoration firm Lynx decided in 1973 to build their own version of the Jaguar D-type, the sports-racing car that won the Le Mans 24-hour race three times for Jaguar in 1955, '56 and '57. The originals were available for about £14,000 at the time, but Lynx reckoned that driving enthusiasts would appreciate a roadworthy version with all the D-type magic, but none of its foibles - and that they would be prepared to pay for it.

Not for Lynx a plastic lookalike body and a Ford Cortina engine; the firm crafted its own solid wood 'bucks', all but identical to those Jaguar had used in the 1950s, so the cars' aluminium panels could be hand-beaten in the authentic way. Not only was this bodywork, taking months to complete, extremely faithful to the original in appearance as well as construction, but the drivetrain was appropriate too. It was taken entirely from the Jaguar E-type (then just a cheap second hand car) in itself a D-type descendent, anyway. After extensive refurbishment of engine, gearbox, axles and suspension, a Lynx D-type also drove and sounded like the real thing.

Despite a fantastic reputation for both car-building and for restorations, Lynx was in trouble by the early 1990s as the classic car boom petered out.

There was no question of Lord Bocket-like scams - unpaid bills from flighty customers and chaotic management drove it into insolvency. John Mayston-Taylor's family bought the company from its receivers in 1992. Both he and his father had had their Jaguars fettled by Lynx, and they could see the firm's truly unique asset.

"It was six or eight key people", he recalls, "amazing craftsmen. I'd been to the factory and seen what they could do with metal. There was also incredible loyalty - some of them hadn't been paid for months. We ended up with all the best people and I decided to run the company properly by establishing a trust among customers".

That is coded language for one of the biggest problems in the old car restoration world - doing the work on time. One-man band firms are notorious for missing deadlines and hugely under-estimating costs, whether it's renovating an entire body shell or stitching leather seats. Customer exasperation is a given.



Mayston-Taylor, however, claims careful project management means cars are delivered on budget and on time. Building this XKSS, for example, began in March and end-November is the delivery date, come what may.

But what is an XKSS? Strange to consider it now but Jaguar actually had trouble shifting the last of its D-type racers in 1957. So they decided to convert them into road-ready sports cars by removing the aerodynamic fin behind the driver's seat, adding a passenger seat, a hood, a proper windscreen and a luggage rack. It was named the Jaguar XKSS and was ready to set the sports car world alight when a fire ripped through Jaguar's Coventry plant in February 1957. Unfinished XKSSs were among the 270 cars destroyed. It was at this point Jaguar decided to abandon the voluptuous XKSS and develop the beautiful E-type. Only 16 cars had been sold and they are, consequently, very, very rare.





But they're also very, very desirable. Steve McQueen had one, and annoyed his neighbours by driving it furiously up and down Mulholland Drive in Beverley Hills. There simply aren't enough to go round for monied enthusiasts which is why Lynx, after making 40 D-types doppelgangers, has switched to the exquisite XKSS instead.

Legally, the car is a Jaguar E-type with a new body. A derelict E-type is the starting point, which Lynx dismantles in two days. The key things to recover from it are its legal entity, its chassis plate, its engine block and its rear suspension. If necessary, everything else can be junked, but the E-type's tiresome reputation as a prodigious leaker of oil works in its favour here - the more coated in oil its parts are, the better they're preserved. All E-types have a tubular chassis frame that only had a 20-year lifespan because of a propensity to rust; every E-type on the road should have had that replaced years ago, says Mayston-Taylor, so building a new frame out of modern tubing for the Lynx XKSS is hardly sacrilege.

Surprisingly, even an individually built car like this, one whose bumpers alone take 10 days to fabricate, comes with 'menu pricing'. A basic Lynx XKSS starts at £160,000 plus VAT, based on a 3.8-litre E-type and with any combination of paintwork and upholstery the company and customer deem mutually appropriate- you'd have to pay extra for something wilder than dark green with black leather. That is, if Mayston-Taylor would agree: "Everything we do has to be in good taste", he cautions.

With this latest car, the customer said: "I want power". And this he will receive, thanks to a custom-built 4.5-litre engine giving 350bhp and a five-speed gearbox. That's quite enough in a car with 5.5in-wide tyres. "You don't have to do 120mph in this to get the experience of speed - 80mph is fine, and there's loads of torque for overtaking", says Mayston-Taylor. "On those tyres it would be quite a slidey car if you drove it too crazily anyway. It's a bit like a Spitfire aircraft, a combination of great sights, sounds and smells".

The XKSS that will soon be shaking the earth in the Czech Republic also breaks new ground. It's the first one ever built with left-hand drive, for which the customer is paying a premium. It also has a more roomy cockpit, making it more relaxing to drive. Essentially, though, the car is identical to the near-mythical 1950's original - the eighth Lynx XKSS and so beautifully hand-built that even Jaguar itself has nodded its approval at Lynx's efforts. Actor Nicolas Cage owned one of them until recently. John Mayston-Taylor agrees a Lynx XKSS is a very expensive car. But he has an excellent justification for it.



"Don't look at it as an investment. If that's what you want, then go and buy gilts. Think of a car like this, or any old Jaguar, as the equivalent of an expensive boat. It costs a lot to buy and you're going to have to pour money into it. The pleasure is in owning it and, in anticipating owning it!"