



## Classic & Sports Car - August 1999

THE ORIGINAL by Mick Walsh



Mick Walsh glories in the world's most unspoilt Jaguar XKSS . . . and asks how such a wonderful beast could have been stashed away for 32 years

Twelve thousand, one hundred and ninety four miles. How could a motor car as fantastically desirable as a Jaguar XKSS - one of just 16 road-equipped D-types - have been driven so few miles? Think about it. That's less than a mile a day for its mostly

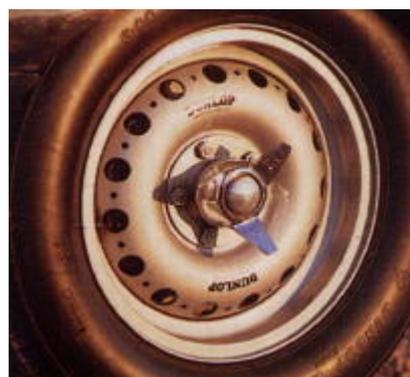
sheltered 42 years.

So many XKSS survivors have had chequered, occasionally tragic lives that few remain how they were finished at Brown's Lane. But this time- warp machine would bring back memories for the Coventry team that converted it from a D-type in the newly rebuilt factory after fire halted official production in February 1957. Walk around XKSS 728, formerly XKD 547 and its authentic presence is totally captivating to anyone who loves 'real' old cars. The chipped paint, minor dents and cracked trim all add to 728's marvellous allure. Too often a machine's soul is wiped away by over-restoration to the point where it's indistinguishable from a faithful replica, but the curves of this beauty are just as Jaguar's artist in metal Malcolm Sayer designed it. This car's originality goes beyond the precious patina of mellowed BRG paint and cracked tan trim. Under the bonnet every hose, lead, clip, seal and rivet is as Jaguar fitted it. Some features, such as the tool roll, rear deck cover, and jack have never been seen by top specialists on other D-types, and the rear chassis had no paint – proving Jaguar was frugal in finishing.

Views are divided about the appeal of the XKSS. Most prefer the race purity of its Le Mans legend source with its wraparound screen and racy head fairing. The addition of full-width screen, bumpers, cabriolet-style hoodbag and custom bootrack just cluttered the purity of Sayer's original masterpiece. For me, those road-going additions just add to the machine's romance.

Rarity gives the XKSS a special magnetism. Any historic race paddock has a selection of D-types but what are the chances of coming across an XKSS in the car parks? Classic images of ice-cool Hollywood due Steve McQueen gunning his prized XKSS up Mulholland Drive add to the roadgoing model's exotic appeal. Sure, those 'production' extras over-dress one of the ultimate sports car profiles, and the upright screen kills its sleek lines, but in the metal any preconceptions vanish. The scale stuns. Park the XKSS among most road cars and this automotive legend seems to shrink. Next to a slippery Lotus 11 in a race group it's a giant but out on the road with a wing profile that would slip under most window lines, the XKSS looks delectably devilish with its mean mouth and faired-in eyes.

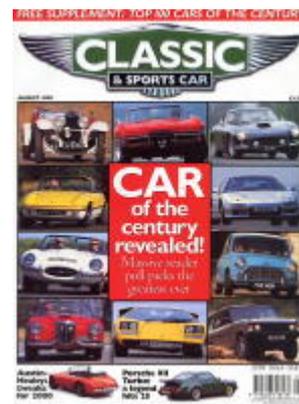
The sleepy way the car wakes always entertains. Turn the key, thumb the button and the starter rattles noisily before the engine sluggishly comes to life. Then, in an eruption of sound, that throaty big 'six' barks out from the rude sidepipes under the passenger. Flex the accelerator and the noise pours out like water from a Alpine hydro station. Few engines notes are as fit, fierce and fluid as a race-tuned Jaguar.



By the first corner it's clear that this XKSS is factory fresh. Never has a '50s design felt so taut and incisive. The steering is light and direct, the clutch heavy and progressive and the throttle super-responsive. Even the gearbox is tight, the lever requiring a firm pull to release from the lower gears. The trim may have hardened and cracked in this snug cabin but, guiding 728 around urban routes, the feel of the controls is just as Norman Dewis experienced. The pedal layout is perfect for heel and toeing and for me the driving position feels personally tailored. Thankfully my short build almost exactly matches development jockey Dewis, but anyone over 6ft would definitely feel cramped.

Out on busy East Sussex roads, this cat's performance feels very caged today. Even the standard 3.54:1 diff ratio (Le Mans racers used 2.79 and 2.69) feels tall and its long-legged punch runs out of space very, very quickly. Road & Track chalked up 0 Omph in 4.7 secs and 0-100 mph in 12.1 secs which is razor-sharp even by '90s standards. In 1957 such road car performance must have been awesome, eating up rows of Vanguards and Victors in one easy helping. But best of all is the lack of temperament. With no fuss 728 just gobbles up the straights and guns out of the turns with addictive, raucous punch. On the tighter lanes, the sharp steering, flexible power and limited grip make every bend a dramatic tussle. It's easy to get carried away trying to emulate Ninian 'Sideways' Sanderson but 728's originality continually nags at the conscience. If it was damaged the culprit's name would live long after the metal had been reshaped.

The remarkable original condition of this car is down to one man's foresight. At the '57 Chicago Auto Show a young engineer John Norsym was completely smitten by the road-going D-type on display: "Its engineering and beauty really knocked me out. That great British tradition carried up from WW2 aviation manufacture was clear in the car and Italian machines just looked sloppy in comparison. I'd owned a old Ferrari 375 Mexico and, although the big VI 2 engine was fantastic, the rest of the car was so inconsistent. The dime-store wiring was a joke but I could see the





XKSS's beauty went beyond its skin." Norsym had owned a string of exotic cars starting with a Bugatti Type 35C which he imported from England in the early '50s: "I was lucky to get into these great cars early and bought them when an ordinary individual could save up his pay cheques. In 1961 I traded a Ferrari 410 and cash for the XKSS with its first owner, Don Perkins from Winnetka, Illinois. Amazingly at one point there were three XKSSs in the Chicago area but I never met another on the road."



For the next six years Norsym used the car sparingly but savoured it when he did get behind the wheel of his British Beauty: "I used to drive it on Wisconsin back roads including trips to Elkhart Lake for the races. I drove the track but never competed with it. But my best drive was on the East Coast. One early spring I headed up the Adirondacks. The roads were empty and driving solo the XKSS just screamed on. It was the most memorable drive I've had in any car and, although I've never owned or driven a GTO, the XKSS is for me the finest road car ever made." By 1967 Norsym had new priorities and his enthusiasm for great cars took a back seat to his family and a successful career as a sculptor. The XKSS with 12,000 miles on the clock was put into storage on Chicago's South West side where it remained for the next 31 years. Being an engineer, Norsym carefully prepared 728 for its long sleep. Although few knew of the car's existence until last year - both the D-type registers of Andrew Whyte and Philip Porter inaccurately stated the car was believed to be owned by John Norcross' - Norsym maintained a keen interest in the fate of the other 15 XKSSs: "I

strongly feel originality of any automobile is important and modifying is criminal. I heard stories of other cars being converted back into D- types and then back to XKSS spec which seemed obscene. "The XKSS is the rarest and I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to modify one. As the years passed I realised how unique the originality of my car was. To my knowledge only the fan belt had been changed and even the tyres, which had never deflated, still had factory air."

The area of Chicago where Norsym had stored the XKSS also became a problem for the noisy British road racer: "Back in the '60s nobody knew what it was but gradually the neighbourhood changed and I didn't feel comfortable about taking it out."

The successful 1997 auction of another lost D-type, XKD 537, by Christie's at Pebble Beach prompted a phone call to the company's LA- based Motor Car Department. Sales director Miles Morris, whose father has owned and raced the works team car OKV 3 since the '70s got very excited about the mystery call regarding a 'missing' XKSS and when he visited Chicago to see the car, was amazed by the car's originality. He says: "Unlike the D-type 537 which was a real barn discovery, this car was beautifully preserved. The only damage appeared to be minor dents in the nose caused by the careless first owner who opened the bonnet near a step. There were a few stone chips, slight cracking on the leather upholstery and flaking varnish on the steering wheel, but



that all added to the car's special patina."



Prior to the auction, Norsym carefully recommissioned the engine. The oil passages were blown out with air and the oil pre-warmed before the engine was started: "I didn't drive it because the brake system really needed to be checked." In August Norsym flew out to Pebble Beach for the sale where he felt apprehensive that the car's new owner might not appreciate its original condition. Thankfully, the hammer came down at just over \$1 million to a stunned Gary Bartlett of Indiana (many thought the high price was a 'snip' for such an important car). Norsym needn't have worried. The new owner of 728 was fanatical about the car's unique originality and had no intention of turning it into a concours show car. The sensitive recommissioning of another historic timewarp Jaguar, the ex-Gidovlenko Lightweight E-type, by Lynx encouraged Bartlett to despatch 728 to the respected British specialist and last April its arrival at Lynx's Hastings base stopped work. For hours John

Mayston-Taylor and Derek May examined its untouched features. Mayston-Taylor says: "We knew this one was going to be a challenge. The owner understood the situation but it was a problem re-educating our team. A craftsman's work is like his signature. There's great pride in the job and the instruction 'don't touch it' takes a little adjusting to. Early on the response 'but it will look awful' was heard around the stripped XKSS but quickly the responsibility became clear to the team."

Since the car's fastidious refurbishment, Bartlett has driven the Mille Miglia retrospective and to Jabekke in Belgium for the Jaguar reunion speed trials. Its only British outing was the Louis Vuitton Classic where it won Classic Sports Car's trophy for best open post-war sports car.

Having clicked up 1/7th of its total mileage in the last two months, Bartlett has decided to retire 728 from active events and preserve it. "The Mille Miglia was a fantastic experience," he says, "but nagging at the back of my mind was the risk we were taking with this special car." Luckily Bartlett has a second D-type to enjoy to the full when he craves playing Hawthorn, Flockhart, Hamilton or Bueb. Escapism in a car as irresistible and romantic as a D-type doesn't come much richer. Lucky man.

