



THE FLYING BUTTRESS

With the start of the 2016 racing season just around the corner, we drive an XJ-S that regularly competes in the JEC Saloon & GT Championship to discover what makes the car so competitive

IT STILL amazes me that planes can fly. Oh, I know the basics, of course, how the shape of the wing creates lift, but I can't help feeling awestruck when I spot a Boeing 747, an aircraft that looks to have all the agility of a combine harvester, soar majestically into the sky. I think the same when I see an XJ-S on a racetrack – how can a car that big, that cumbersome, be transformed into

a racing car? And yet it's one of Jaguar's most successful, and not just the TWR Group A racers from the Eighties – it remains an extremely popular car at club level, with several competing in the Jaguar Enthusiasts' Club's Saloon & GT Championship. And so, to discover what makes the XJ-S fly (hopefully not in a Boeing 747 way), I've arranged to drive an example at the fearsome Castle Combe circuit.

WORDS PAUL WALTON PHOTOGRAPHY ANTONY FRASER



I WONDER WHO THE CAR'S FIRST OWNER WAS AND THINK HOW SURPRISED THEY'D BE TO SEE THEIR ONCE-TREASURED CAR NOW

It's a beautiful day when I arrive at the track. The car I'm about to drive, a Cotswold Blue XJ-S, is already waiting for me. Since this is a classic Jaguar colour, the sort XK 150s come in, the big coupe appears more stately than racy, but the racing stripes bring about a more suitable look for the cut and thrust of the racetrack.

This particular example began life as a standard 1988 3.6 coupe, but independent Jaguar specialist Thomas Barclay transformed it into a Class A racer for JEC racing entrant Chris Pizzala, in early 2013. As the entry category, the class is for mainly standard six-cylinder cars, but it does allow for newer parts from later production Jaguars to be fitted. This meant Barclay could swap the original engine for a later 4.0 AJ6 unit and add the better outboard brakes from the car's 1992 facelift. Painted grey with bright orange wheels and trim, the car stood out in a crowded field, but more importantly, it was immediately quick. After an amazing season that saw six class wins, Chris was crowned the 2013 Class A Champion, finishing third overall behind Tom Barclay and Chris Palmer.

Richard Knott, who ran the circuit's rally school, was spectating at that year's Castle Combe round. After several years rallying, Richard wanted a new challenge and, impressed by the big Jaguars in the Saloon & GT Championship, decided this was it. When Chris Pizzala sold the XJ-S at the end of the season to make way for an XJ6 Series 1, Richard bought it, changing the colour to its current Cotswold Blue to put his own stamp on the car.

An important turning point for Richard came before the start of the 2014 season, when he contacted the Bristol-based Swallows Independent Jaguar Specialist. "I normally maintain my cars myself," Richard told me, "but leading up to my first track day with the XJ-S, I was busy preparing the rally school cars, so I took it to Gary and Tom Robinson at Swallows to do it for me." When Richard returned a few weeks later to buy a power steering pump, Gary made him a fantastic offer – Swallows would sponsor him in the JEC Championship and prepare the car. "That was the best power steering pump I ever bought," adds Richard, laughing.

It was a huge risk on an unproven driver; Tom Robinson from Swallows explains the reasons for signing him. "We liked Richard, simple as that. Plus my father, Gary, had a gut instinct about him, especially since he had an excellent proven record in rallying."

Because Barclay did such a good job preparing the car in 2013, all the team at Swallows needed to do was service the 4.0 engine, strip and service the shock absorbers and then set up the



OPPOSITE FROM TOP LEFT: racing fuel filler; bare metal handbrake; engine isolator switch; fuel tank
OPPOSITE BOTTOM: The XJ-S' interior has been stripped out and little remains of its luxury GT past



suspension to how Richard likes it. They've since developed the car further, with improved shocks and dampers and are currently fitting a 4.0 AJ16 engine ready for the first race in April.

Due to work commitments, Richard was unable to attend the first two meetings of the 2014 season, only making his debut at Brands Hatch in May. But what a debut – despite this being his first circuit race, the former rally man qualified a sensational second in class, eventually taking Class A honours, plus the coveted Drive of the Day. He was only able to compete one more time that season, at Donington Park, but it was due to Richard's performance when he did race that he was awarded (by yours truly, not that either of us can remember it) the John Dickinson Spirit of JEC Racing Trophy at the JEC Awards in January 2015. The club gives this beautiful trophy (in the shape of a piston) to the driver who is always enthusiastic about racing, but can't take part in every JEC event.

Sadly, work got in the way of Richard's 2015 season, too, and he was only able to attend three of the seven meetings. The first, at Snetterton, left an impression on him and the car in more ways than one. "I was runner up in Class A in the first race, but in the second, I was punted into the tyre wall," he explains. The twin headlights were fitted after this accident.

As for the 2016 season, Richard is hoping to race more but has realistic aspirations. "I'm not worried about winning the championship or the class," he tells me. "I just want to do as well as I can, but, more importantly, enjoy myself."

That's certainly my plan when Richard invites me to get behind the wheel of his XJ-S. As an open track day, there are a large variety of cars present, from standard classics to highly modified hot hatchbacks, and I know most of these will be going much faster than me. So I'm going to stay out of everyone's way and simply have fun.

As I try to get comfortable in the tight racing seat, and adjust the straps of the harness, I inspect my surroundings. Like a boxer's face after a big fight that has seen some action, it's just about recognisable. The familiar square binnacle of the pre-facelift cars remains, as do the famous barrel dials, and veneer still clings to the dashboard. However, all the carpet has been ripped out and the heater controls and auxiliary switches replaced with the engine cut off and oil pressure warning light. I wonder who the car's first owner was, the person who originally ordered it, and think how surprised they'd be if they could see their once-treasured car now.

The 4.0-litre straight-six bursts into life the moment I turn the key and, due to a lack of sound deadening, the engine's gruffness



FAR RIGHT: Richard during his first JEC race at Brands Hatch, in 2014. After a great qualifying session, he won Class A

JEC SALOON & GT CHAMPIONSHIP REGULATIONS

The broad principle of the class structure is that Class A is based on factory production specification with very little modification permitted. Classes B and C allow a limited amount, while Class D is given more latitude with modifications. Parts must be standard Jaguar production specification items, though, unless stated otherwise in these regulations.

Class A – Standard, steel-bodied saloon and GT cars of no more than six cylinders.

Class B – Modified/standard steel-bodied saloon and GT cars up to six cylinders, plus V8 and V12 automatic saloons

Class C – Modified steel-bodied saloon and GT cars up to six cylinders, plus V8 and V12 automatic GT cars

Class D – Modified steel-bodied saloon and GT cars of six, eight and 12 cylinders; V8 and V12 steel-bodied manual saloon and GT cars (excluding Type R)

Bodywork – All body panels in Class A must be steel and to original Jaguar specification, and the inner wings and inner bodywork must be retained in their entirety. In Classes B, C and D, the front inner wings may be modified to accommodate mechanical changes. Any bolt-on panels can be manufactured from alternative materials (permitted in MSA regulations), but the car's external profile has to mirror a production car's in plan and profile.





AT FOLLY THE XJ-S REALLY STARTS TO MAKE ITS PEDIGREE FELT



Richard (standing) gives some last-minute advice to Paul



fills the cabin – it’s like there’s a lawn mower in the back. It’s also unbearably hot inside. With the ventilation no longer operational, the interior has all the freshness of an oven and I begin to feel claustrophobic inside my full-face helmet. Thankfully, the electric window motor hasn’t been removed – the only luxury that’s still there – and I manage to crack them open a fraction for a little air.

I manoeuvre the car slowly through the crowded paddock to the trackside, where a marshal waves me straight onto the circuit. With clear tarmac ahead of me, I push the throttle as far as I dare and the car responds accordingly. Looking down that long bonnet, I feel a thrill as the speed starts to grow, the acceleration crisp, the engine note becoming even louder. It might not have the force of a supercharged V8, but the car is gaining speed quickly and easily.

At Folly, a fast right-hander, the XJ-S really starts to make its pedigree felt. Even with the car’s growing speed, there’s no need to back off and, although there’s a little body roll (it is a heavy, steel-bodied coupe, after all), I am able to balance the car perfectly through the corner. The car still feels stable and composed at Avon Rise. A slight crest followed by a fast left-hander is notorious for unsettling cars, but the XJ-S passes through without problem. As I exit the corner, I immediately squeeze the brake pedal to scrub off speed ready for Quarry, a slow right corner. The car shudders dramatically under braking, but the firm, precise steering offers so much feedback that I feel connected to this car like no other.

On the short Farm Straight after Quarry, I accelerate hard, changing through the five-speed Getrag gearbox. It doesn’t have the precision of today’s transmissions (for the first few changes I could do with a map to locate the gears), but thanks to the short travel between each one, once I know my way around the ‘box, my changes become sharp. At the Esses, I blip the throttle, dip the clutch and drop down to second, the long gear stick sliding into place with little effort. After balancing the throttle while weaving

2016 JEC XJ RESTORATIONS/TOYO TYRES SALOON & GT CHAMPIONSHIP DATES

April	9-10	Snetterton, 300 circuit
June	4-5	Brands Hatch, Indy circuit
July	23-24	Anglesey
August	13-14	Thruxton
September	3-4	Donington Park
September	17-18	Cadwell Park



LEFT: The Snetterton race in 2015 saw Richard punted into the tyre wall, breaking the original headlights

through the chicane, I give it the beans down Hammerdown; with my foot to the floor, the XJ-S again accelerating easily and smoothly – albeit the cabin is now a cacophony of noise and vibration, making driving this car even more of an experience.

At Tower, a slow right-hander, the XJ-S decelerates so hard that the racing harness comes into play to stop me shooting forward, becoming tight on my chest and shoulders. I line the big car up for the impending tight corner. Turning in at the last minute, the car scampers through the bend with all the grace of a mountain goat skipping across a manicured rockery. This might not be a small car – and its size and weight can always be felt – but the XJ-S responds to forceful driving with surprisingly agility. As Richard reminded me before I set off, “The XJ-S was designed more for comfort, but once you uprate the springs and dampers, it really does handle very well.”

After Bobbies, another slow chicane, comes Camp, a long, fast, right-hander that, by using the width of the track, the XJ-S takes flat out; I fly past the start/finish line with tremendous pace. Other than fighting the steering wheel a smidgen, the drive feels stable and I’m ready for more. During the subsequent five laps, XJ-S thrills me with decreasing lap times.

What I like most about Richard’s XJ-S is that it is quick in an old-fashioned, analogue way. The way it vibrates, shakes and shudders is chalk and cheese to today’s super-smooth, highly refined sports cars; for the sheer driving experience, it’s all the better for it. I’ve never felt so connected to a competition machine before, and that’s comparing it with the various C- and D-types I’ve driven. And this is a Class A car, don’t forget. The more modified examples in Class D must really fly.

Which brings me back to the Boeing. I might never be any clearer about its uplifting performance, but at least I can say I have a worthier understanding of why the XJ-S is one of the greatest Jaguar racing cars of all time. 🏁



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