

OUT OF THE ORDINARY

In the mid-2000s, PalmerSport used ten track-prepared XKRs at its Bedfordshire-based racing school. We drive one of these fearsome machines at Castle Combe

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THE FAMILIAR deep and melodic rumble of the XKR's V8 is a little louder than normal. Even if I didn't know how fast I was travelling, the tremendous noise would give it away.

The car feels much faster than any other 4.2-litre XKR I've driven. But so it should. Highly modified by PalmerSport in 2006 for its series of track days, this once-luxurious coupe has been transformed into

a pseudo-racing car. It's now in private hands, and I've been invited to experience this awesome machine at Castle Combe.

I arrive quickly at one of the circuit's tricky corners, change down a couple of gears, and nail the throttle out of the bend – an action that once again fills the cabin with the gravelly note of the car's V8. The car accelerates hard, pushing me backwards with an immense force and, not for the first time today, I think, this is no ordinary XKR.

The X150 generation of XK may not seem the most suitable candidate to transform into a track-day car. They are too big for one thing, and too luxurious for another. Jonathan Palmer thought otherwise, however, and he should know.

After originally training to be a doctor, Palmer competed in 83 Grand Prix between 1983 and 1989 for several teams, including Williams and Tyrrell. At the end of 1989, he joined McLaren to become the team's test driver, a job that also included developing

the F1 road car. He took a prototype to a then record-breaking 231mph at the Nardo test track in Italy. Palmer was also a regular in sports cars, a career highlight being a second place at Le Mans in 1985. So when he was impressed by the XKR shortly after the car's launch, he knew what he was talking about.

He arranged for ten pre-production models to replace PalmerSport's existing fleet of Nissan 350Zs, and its own technicians then transformed the cars into hard-biting track cars, with only a little help from Jaguar.

"We did correspond with them once to talk through some certain aspects of the car, but that was all," confirms Steve Kerr, who worked for Jaguar's Special Vehicle Operations at the time.

The interiors were stripped bare, the usual cosseting seats replaced with restrictive racing versions, and carbon fibre replacing the standard door cards.

Beneath the skin, the suspension was upgraded using Bilstein dampers and Eibach springs, while the removal of the car's ECU

speed-limiter device saw the car able to reach 60mph in just 4.5 seconds and top 185mph. Compare that to the car's road figures of 4.9 seconds and 155mph. So fast was the car, PalmerSport had to extend its circuit, the Bedford Autodrome, by 60 percent, creating a longer 140mph straight and new, fast-flowing corners.

To handle the sharper bends, the XKR's brakes were upgraded to the same 400mm front and 350mm rear discs as used on the limited edition XKR Portfolio.

TRACK TEST PALMERSPORT XKR

Sticky Yokohama tyres found themselves wrapped around 20in Senta alloy wheels, and a huge GT2-style rear wing added extra downforce.

Painted in grey with a huge leaper, they were formidable-looking machines – very similar to the XKR's that Apex Motorsport raced in the FIA GT3 European Championship during the mid-2000s. The cars were ready for the 2007 season, alongside the Jaguar-engined JP1 sports prototype and other machines.

Said Palmer in April 2007, "The PalmerSport event has earned a reputation for being the best driving event in the world. Part of achieving this is to continually evolve our programme with a new headline car each year. Inevitably it gets tougher to improve upon the best, but the Jaguar XKR has ticked all the boxes. Stunning looks, incredible performance, a beautifully balanced chassis, glorious sound and outstanding value. And what's most important, our customers think so, too."

The cars soon became popular with PalmerSport's customers, who enjoyed the grunt of the 4.2-litre V8. Wrote one online reviewer in 2009, "After some of the other cars I'd driven on the track day, I thought this one might be a bit lardy and unresponsive, but not a bit. It was

thunderously quick on the straights and really felt quite light and nimble around the bends." JW's former editor Matt Skelton, who drove one at the Bedford Autodrome for the July 2007 issue, was equally impressed. "Burying the throttle results in savage acceleration," he wrote.

After three hard years, the ten XKR's were put out to pasture, to be replaced by a fleet of BMW M3 GTPs. So, in late 2009, they were advertised for £18,000

each, or £145,000 for the lot. A few have subsequently come up for sale, three being bought by father-and-son track-day enthusiasts who entrusted them to the Bristol-based Swallow Independent Jaguar Specialists to prepare for track events.

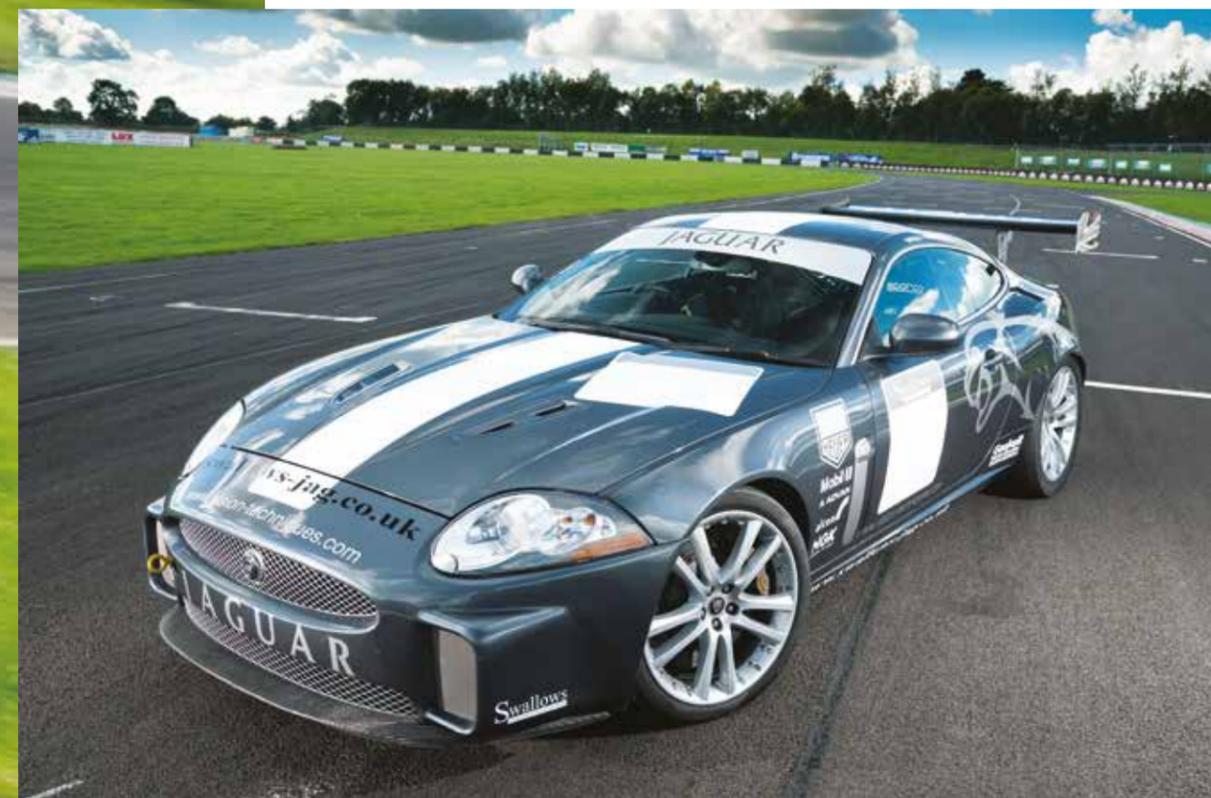
With a test day at Castle Combe organised, I am invited by Gary and Tom Robinson from Swallows to experience this formidable car for myself. I didn't need to be asked twice.



The XKR looks magnificent in Castle Combe's paddock. The handsome metallic grey coupe, with its huge wing and aggressive appearance, is surrounded by a variety of cars from a standard MX-5 to a track-prepared Ford Sierra Cosworth; a panther among a cage of domestic cats. The car has been transported to the circuit by Gary and Tom, who have been caring for the car on behalf of its owners, Michael Hanson Snr and Michael Hanson Jnr from Clitheroe, Lancashire, for a number of years. Gary tells me, "The Hanson's are highly experienced competitors and collectors of classic and historic racing cars. They purchased their first former PalmerSport XKR from an auction in 2011 and, realising its providence, another was bought in 2012 after an extensive search." A third has recently been purchased and is currently being transformed to the same speciation.

The cars – including the one I'm about to drive – were recommissioned to return them to a reliable and track-ready state once again. To begin with, Swallows removed their

Clockwise from top left: Formidable GT2-style rear wing; air filter behind the headlights increases air flow; standard XKR bonnet air vent; Swallows has added this A-pillar mounted oil pressure gauge; plenty of carbon fibre in the interior; stripped out boot shows fire extinguisher; standard dial pack but with gear change lights. Below: The XKR sits on Castle Combe's start line





fast left and a sharper right called Quarry. Although famous for unsettling cars (plenty became unstuck here during the day and are left stranded in the field), the XKR remains controlled and composed. With the huge wing pushing the rear down and fat Pirelli tyres sticking to the asphalt, the level of grip is phenomenal and I exit the corner facing the correct way. I find that's always a bonus in these situations.

A few who drove the car at PalmerSport have criticised its over reliance on driver aids, yet I can't feel the traction-control working at the limit. Even if I did, would that be a problem with such a beast of a car, especially when it belongs to somebody else?

As the left-hand corner gives way to the sharp right-hander, I brake, flicking the paddle down to second gear as I do to slow us quickly. With the calipers having six-pistons, the brakes are incredibly strong but also very progressive – I find I can control its sharpness with the weight of my right foot. Speed scrubbed off, I throw the car into the bend.

The steering is precise and beautifully weighted; its stability means I can get back onto the power early, blasting through the exit of the corner ready for Farm Straight.

After another quick dose of acceleration I weave my way through The Esses, the ideal place to showcase this car's incredible agility. The XK isn't a small car – at 4,790mm long and 1,892mm wide, it's as large as a current Ford Mondeo – but thanks to the X150's aluminium construction and strict PalmerSport diet, this example is more a light and nimble sports car than a luxury grand tourer.

Castle Combe is famous for being one of the UK's fastest circuits and another long straight section follows where I again push the car hard. Half a lap in, the acceleration is no softer, its ferocity still taking my breath away. At Tower Corner, a tight right-hander, I balance the throttle and, by rumbling over the kerbs, take the corner faster than I thought imaginable. It's here that the oil pressure gauge gets in the way, completely

blocking my view as I turn right. Why it was placed there remains a mystery to me.

I use the full width of the track at the final corner, Camp, to achieve a fast line, catapulting me down the long start/finish straight. Despite a kink in the track, it's foot down all the way until I'm back at Quarry. During such a long blast of acceleration, the car sounds at its best, the engine note a long, hypnotic growl that becomes higher and higher... until I have to back off ready for the corner.

Over the subsequent ten laps I dare to go faster and faster. Yet the car, despite its tremendous speed and power, is actually easy to drive and very forgiving, no doubt due to its road origins. I even get to overtake, out-braking and out-accelerating the car at Quarry. (Admittedly it was an original Mini, but it was still a euphoric moment.)

After 20 minutes, the chequered flag is waved, it signifying the end of the session. I've had an electrifying time – easily the best fun I've had on a circuit. The XK doesn't seem like an ideal track car, but as Jonathan Palmer knew and this car still proves, looks can be deceiving. 

Thanks to: Michael Hanson Snr and Michael Hanson Jnr, and Swallows Independent Jaguar Specialists for preparing and allowing us to drive this fabulous car (tel: 01934 750319; www.swallows-jag.co.uk).

From left to right: The 20in Senta alloys are wrapped in sticky Pirelli P-Zero tyres; the 4.2-litre supercharged engine; the air filter behind the left-hand headlight; carbon fibre gear selector

EVEN WHEN TREATED GENTLY, THERE'S A FEROCIOUSNESS TO THE CAR'S ACCELERATION

dual controls and installed all-new safety hardware to the latest FIA standards.

Gary and his team then carried out various upgrades and development work such as overhauling the supercharger, including adding larger intercooler pumps and intercooler, and adding upgraded supercharger pulleys.

The engine management system has been upgraded with Swallows' own system following extensive dyno power runs.

The front and rear Bilstein suspension has been totally overhauled, while steering upgrades include complete power flex bushes. The Senta alloys are now shod with Pirelli P Zero Trofeo R race tyres and the braking system totally overhauled to match.

Little wonder then, that the Hansons use these fabulous cars regularly, for which Gary and his son, Tom, also provide full trackside support for both vehicles at British and European circuits. Today, it's the turn of Castle Combe.

The car in front of me has undergone extensive panel and bodywork restoration

before it was painted in its original livery, complete with the white transfers. The only addition from its PalmerSport days is Swallows' own logo.

Even with aerodynamic additions, the X150's handsome lines prevail, but it's no longer discreet. Wherever it goes it extorts attention. This interest, this feeling that whoever is driving must surely know what they're doing, doesn't put me at ease.

After a safety briefing by the clerk of the course, it's time to hit the track. I open the lighter-than-normal driver's door, clamber ungracefully over the rollcage in my racing helmet, and fall into the tight racing seat. As I attempt to fasten the four-point racing harness, it's clear to me that this is no modified example of a boulevard cruiser: its now a full-on racing car. Even in its most extreme factory guise – the XKR-S GT [see *JW*, July 2015, p38] – the XK has a sense of luxury, but not this one. The interior is bare, stripped out and basic. My feet rest on cold metal instead of thick

carpet, while carbon fibre has replaced the beautiful leather door cards, and also covers the gearbox surround.

One area that hasn't been ripped out or changed is the central console. Because it is needed for the car's ECU to continue working, all the buttons, the touch screen and air vents remain the same as any other early XK. The screen has the familiar, if now dated, graphics that control the still-operational ventilation. So, there is still a touch of luxury, afterall – the bliss of having cold air on my face in what is, in effect, a racing car, which are never usually the best-ventilated of machines.

I punch the red starter button and the V8 engine bursts instantly into life, filling the cabin with a deep, menacing growl. I pull the gear selector down to realise there's no drive position; it goes straight into sport mode. This car has few compromises. I weave my way through the paddock towards the holding area where I'm waved straight onto the track. Here goes.

I slowly squeeze the throttle pedal to find that, even when treated gently, there's a ferociousness to the car's acceleration, the power coming the moment I ask for it. With steering column-mounted paddles, the gears arrive in quick succession. Second, third, fourth... They bang into place faster than a bullet from a Heckler & Koch rifle.

I'm soon confronted with Castle Combe's trickiest section, where the track dips down before rising again towards a

