

S.S. 90 (1935-1937)

Debut

It began in 1934 when S.S. Cars Ltd. cut 380mm (15 inches) out of a S.S.1 Touring Car chassis to build the company's first two-seater sports car, the S.S.90 prototype.

The result unveiled by managing director Sir William Lyons at Earls Court in March 1935 was the most beautiful to have emerged from S.S Cars Ltd up to that time, with many of its features carried over to the SS100.

The lightweight car was capable of 90 miles per hour (140 km/h) and the cars rapidly gained attention for their elegant sporting styling.

Design

The S.S.90 was a sleek roadster with rakishly low bodywork, wide radiator shell, huge Lucas headlights, long multi-louvred bonnet, supremely elegant wings and a folding windshield.

The car was hand-built from an aluminium skin over a wood frame. The car was 3.81 metres (12' 6") long, which by comparison is about 600mm or 2 feet shorter than an XK120 or an E-Type. When leaving the factory it was originally fitted with knock-off 18 inch Rudge-Whitworth wire wheels.



SS 90 prototype (ARW 395) seen here in 1935 at the Shelsley Walsh Hillclimb, where it caused a sensation by finishing third in class, driven by the talented Hon Brian Lewis.

Engine

The SS90 was powered by a 2,663 cc side-valve Standard six cylinder engine with an output of 68 bhp (51 kW). The engine differed from the one used in the ordinary cars by having an aluminium cylinder head with 7:1 compression ratio, and twin RAG carburetors.

Motoring Reviews

The motoring press was quick to laud the new arrival. "Naturally, the greatest interest attaches to the S.S.90," said

the Autocar issue of March 22, 1935, in the first report of the car's recent introduction.

Autocar went on to extol the car's sporting credentials, light weight and, of course, its good looks.

Performance and Racing

The prototype S.S.90 was prepared hastily by the factory at Coventry and publicly unveiled at the same time as the S.S.1 drophead coupe, thoroughly stealing the thunder from the bigger, more-traditional car.



S.S 90 Chassis 249482 was delivered in July 1935 and the first owner obtained registration number BUF 695. The car has retained that number ever since. After the war, it was used extensively in hillclimbs in England, then taken off the road in the late 1950s. The car was purchased in 1994 and then after a detailed restoration the car was brought to the U.S. in 2008 where the car is a regular at concours events and has recorded a perfect 100-point score.

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The plan was to complete the 90 in time for the 1935 RAC Rally, a high profile event that would serve William Lyons' intent to publicize the new sports car and show the world that SS Cars were serious about competition.

The plan backfired, however, when the 90, driven by the Hon. Brian Lewis, performed poorly in the event.

However the 90 made up for its failed first impression with a series of wins, as trials experts began using the new S.S. in competition. It proved itself strong in hillclimbs and agile on the road, although the side-valve engine was soon seen as the car's weakest link leading to more powerful and bigger overhead valve Standard engines and the SS100.

Prototype

Only the S.S.90 prototype had the distinctive rear tail treatment. A more conservative and practical squared-off rear deck with standup gas tank and spare-tire mount was designed for production, carrying over to the 100. The square design also allowed for a canvas hood, something for which there was no provision on the prototype.

In 1937, the prototype was owned by Hugh Kennard, a RAF pilot. In a 1993 letter, Kennard wrote, "I cannot remember from whom I bought it or

sold it to, but I can say that I still owned it in November 1940, as it was used at my first wedding."

Its chassis finally ended up in a Yorkshire market garden in 1961, where the prototype was purchased by David Barber, an avid SS historian and restorer.

Barber owned the car for more than three decades but never undertook the restoration. For most of that time, the S.S. 90 languished in a former pheasant coop attached to Barber's workshop.

In 1994, after decades spent amassing missing components, Barber began its rebuild. He died three years into his task.

In 1997 the car was purchased from Barber's wife by Swiss Jaguar collector Christian Jenny, who shipped the car to the United States to be restored. There it made sensational appearances in concours d'élégance at Pebble Beach where it was a Multiple Pebble Beach Concours Award Winner.

In 2002 it returned to Europe and spent life being frequently driven and enjoyed in Switzerland until it was recently sold for an undisclosed amount by Pendine Historic Cars at Bicester Heritage, Oxfordshire, UK. *(Pendine specialise in the sale of historic cars, focusing specifically on the immediate post-war period through to the 1970s).*

Production

Production of the S.S. 90 lasted 10 months, eventually eclipsed by the improved engine power and greater numbers of the SS100s. After construction of the prototype, 22 more examples were built, of which only the prototype and 15 survive.

Value for Money

One of the hallmarks of Lyons' vehicles, was the low price tag. Fully equipped the S.S.90 retailed at £395. This was considerably remarkable in view of the specification, especially when compared to say an Aston Martin C Model at something over £700.

Legacy

The SS100 by virtue of its vastly improved power unit and greater numbers has rather relegated the S.S.90 to a secondary status, but it remains the first sports car ever to have been built by Lyons and Walmsley, and now, given the fact that only a handful exist, makes the S.S 90 a very rare car indeed. ■



S.S. 90 Prototype showing the distinctive sculpted rear tail treatment. The factory decided that the complex sculpting was too expensive and time consuming and the production cars incorporated a more practical - squared-off rear deck. The Prototype was restored in the USA (Arizona) where it was a Multiple Pebble Beach Concours Award Winner before returning to its owner in Switzerland. The car was recently sold in the UK for an undisclosed amount.

S.S. 90 (1935-1937) - "Captain Black"

1935 S.S. 90 'Captain Black' - AVC 318

The first production sports car ever sold by S.S. Cars Ltd. was owned new by Captain Sir John Black, joint managing director of Standard Motor Company.

Black, however, is thought to have only kept the car for three weeks. Another notable early owner was the famous Autocar writer A.G. Douglas Clease, a close friend and vocal supporter of Lyons.

After a further decade, this SS 90 surfaced in the ownership of a Mr A. Tarney. With a new registration number of JOF 777, and a repaint in green.

Ownership is then unknown until its next owner, Mr Saunders of Tangmere,

UK. Less than two years later, the S.S. 90 had been shipped to the USA where for over 25 years it was enjoyed by keen SS and Jaguar enthusiasts, although it somehow avoided a restoration up to this point!

While all of these characters played a role in preventing this historically important sports car from falling into obscurity, the hero of the hour was Dr Hugh Palmer. Safely under his protection back at his Leicestershire home in the UK in 1988, he reinstated its **AVC 318** registration number with the help of Jaguar luminaries such as Paul Skilleter. He then oversaw a complete restoration over two years by Fullbridge Carriage Company of Waldon, Essex.

Once in magnificent form again, the SS 90 joined the hallowed Walter Hill collection of Jaguars back in the USA, Florida, reinforcing its unique place in British sports car history.

In 2006, it found a new home in Switzerland where the S.S. 90 was regularly used on historic car events, including the high-altitude Klausenrennen International Hill Climb in Switzerland.

However, like the prototype, 'Captain Black' was recently sold for an undisclosed amount by Pendine Historic Cars, Oxfordshire, UK. ■



1935 S.S. 90 'Captain Black' was the first production sports car ever sold by S.S. Cars Ltd. Owned from new by Captain Sir John Black of Standard Motor Company. The car was restored in the late 80s - early 90s and became part of the famous Walter Hill collection for almost two decades. Seen here in competition on a regularity trail in 2013 at the high-altitude Klausenrennen road race, Switzerland