

SS Jaguar - Celebrating Eighty-Five Years (1935-2020)

Editor - The following article has been reprinted from the National Rally Magazine that was printed for the now cancelled event. It is informative and well written.

THE BEGINNING

To talk about the early years of Jaguar and to put its achievements into context, you have to first talk about William Lyons. One of the most astute motor industry businessmen of his generation, William Lyons, founder of Jaguar was an extraordinary figure. For almost fifty years he ran the company as an autocracy, making all the major decisions, and many of the minor ones, on a day-to-day basis.

In fact his grip on the purse strings at Jaguar was legendary, and he bought parts for cars at the lowest prices in the industry. Knighted in 1956 in recognition of his export successes, Lyons combined dynamism and energy with stiff and formal manners that bordered on the Victorian.

It was as a stylist, however, that William Lyons was perhaps his most brilliant. Although not a stylist in the traditional sense – he rarely put a pen to paper – it was his eye for style and line that set him apart from his contemporaries. His flair for what looked right made his SS – and later Jaguar – cars easily among the best-looking on the road, regardless of



price. In any roll call of all-time beauty his SS100 and XK sports cars, not to mention the svelte Mk11 and XJ6, will go down among the greats.

Lyons made no claim to being an engineer, but once he had assembled the right team around him – led by the brilliant William Haynes – he began to build cars that went as well as they looked. That process began with the SS Jaguars in late 1935, and in the post-war years his XK twin-cam sports car design, would bring exotic high-technology engineering into the realms of the affordable.

But we are jumping ahead of ourselves. The Jaguar story really begins in Blackpool, Lancashire, in 1921 when Lyons met an emigrant from Stockport, Cheshire, called William Walmsley, then quietly earning a modest living building sidecars in his parents' garage. Lyons, just 20 years of age, liked these stylish torpedo-nosed creations built by his new,

older neighbour and talked to Walmsley into setting up business with him.

In 1922, bankrolled by both sets of parents, Lyons and Walmsley began working out of premises in Bloomfield Road, Blackpool, under the name The Swallow Sidecar Company. Sales were brisk and soon Swallow had expanded into new premises in Cocker Street; it was here that they built their first Swallow bodied car based on an Austin Seven chassis.

Lyons had identified the need for a more fashionable and luxurious version of the little Austin, first as an open tourer and later as a saloon. He was proved right: sales quickly took off, and when Henlys put in a formal weekly order, Lyons and Walmsley decided that they would have to expand yet again, this time by moving to the heart of British motor manufacture, the Midlands.

SS stood for Swallow Sports (or for Standard Swallow according to Standard) and these low slung and well-equipped machines found immediate favour with buyers who wanted a car that looked expensive but could not afford the price of a contemporary Alvis or Lea Francis: champagne motoring for the beer-barrel pocket. Some of the bodywork was undeniably pretty – particularly the wonderful Art Deco Airline saloon, although Lyons did not like it much himself – and if the asthmatic Standard side-valve engines meant that the cars did not go as well as they looked, the buyers did not seem to care.

Lyons bought out the increasingly disenchanted Walmsley in 1934 – the latter's horizons had always been rather limited compared with the go-getting younger man.



Sir William Lyons and engineer William Haynes -1955

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The first Jaguars did not actually appear until a year later when, at their introduction at the Mayfair Hotel in London, Lyons stunned the industry with his new 2 ½ litre SS Jaguar saloon. This new car was not just beautifully styled and very fast for its day, being capable of nearly 90mph (145kph), but somehow Lyons had managed to produce it for an amazingly low £385, alongside a side-valve 1 ½ four cylinder for £90 less.

Here was a car, with its beautiful Lucas P100 headlamps, swooping wing-line and high class interior, that was fit to be compared with the likes of Alvis and even Bentley whose own 3 ½ litre models were certainly no more lively yet cost twice or three times as much. From a company that had only been making complete cars for four years, it was an amazing achievement.

Because of the World War 2 unsavoury connotations of the original initials, in February 1945 SS became Jaguar Cars and in September of that year went back into production with its pre-war saloon car range. Some 12,000 of these cars were built up to 1948, which is where the post-war history of Jaguar really begins.

This year, in 2020 at the Jaguar National Rally, we celebrate eighty-five years since the SS Jaguar was introduced to the world. Over the decades since the 1930s Jaguar would build the world's most desired sports cars, their cars would win Le Mans five times, and they would fulfil William Lyons' post-war dream of a 100mph (161kph) luxury saloon priced under £1000. From now on Jaguar would set the standards for the industry, not simply follow them and Jaguar is still doing it in 2020. ■

We acknowledge Martin Buckley, Editor-at-large for Classic cars and the book, Haynes Classic Makes Series, 'Jaguar Fifty years of Speed and Style' for this article, modified as appropriate for the Jaguar National Rally 2020 Magazine.



Sir William Lyons and Lady Lyons pose outside their Warwickshire home with an SS1 Coupe and a Series 1 XJ12. The revised SS1 Coupe was a more balanced shape than its predecessor with full length wings and running boards. Photo P. Skilleter.