

The XK Engine & the Rise of Jaguar

The Jaguar XK's were arguably the greatest post-war production cars in the world. In that decade they were without parallel ... striking lines, innovative, and very fast. The inline 6-cylinder XK engine was the first dual overhead cam production engine ... credit the vision of Jaguar cofounder William Lyons and the prowess of Jaguar Chief Engineer Bill Heynes. In 1948-49 Jaguar produced 242 hand-built, aluminum over ash-frame, XK120 OTS (open-two-seat) cars with no greater ambition than to showcase the XK engine. On the success of that engine Jaguar rose to prominence. The XK engine was in production for 38 years ... initially 3.4-liter, in the late 50's bored and sleeved to 3.8-liter, and later 4.2-liter. Daimler even had a chopped 2.4-liter block with a short throw crank.

Race Performance

The race pedigree was evident from inception ... easily the fastest production car in the world at the time, clocking a record 132 mph in the late 40's. In 1950, three privately-owned, substantially-stock XK120's competed in a field of 60 cars in the 24-hour Le Mans endurance race.



Car #15 (Peter Clark / Nick Haines) – 12th overall

Car #18 (Ivan Walker / Peter Whitehead) – 15th overall

Car #17 (Leslie Johnson / Bert Hadley) – reached as high as 2nd place but withdrew after 21 hours with a clutch failure.

After the very competitive showing in 1950, more aerodynamic C-Type & D-type bodies were fitted on lighter chassis with the XK drivetrain to compete in subsequent Le Mans races ... which Jaguar won in 5 of 7 years between 1951 and 1957.



1951 Le Mans winner in a Jaguar C-Type
(Peter Walker / Peter Whitehead)

1957 Le Mans winner in a Jaguar D-Type
(Ron Flockhart / Ivor Bueb)



XK120 and XK140 Production

The cars were so popular that Jaguar began a 5-year production run of pressed steel XK120's in 1950 ... available in three body styles (a roadster, drophead, and coupe).



XK120



XK140

The XK140 superseded the XK120 in late 1954 and was in production through 1957... similar lines with a heavier chrome package, but a much more drivable car. Three inches more leg room was achieved in moving the engine forward, and rack & pinion steering greatly improved handling. Engine output was boosted from 160 to 180 bhp.

Roughly 40% of the XK140 OTS's delivered were special equipment or 'MC' (modified competition) cars ... denoting wire wheels, fog lamps, dual exhausts, stiffer torsion bars, windshield washer, and a collection of engine refinements & a high performance 'C-Type' cylinder head (further boosting output to 210 bhp on standard SU HD-6 carburetors).