

ESCAPE ROAD

Jaguar 3.5 liter drophead

The car Gable wanted when he came home from the war

By Roger Barlow

To get back into the market as quickly as possible following World War II, most European (and American) car makers simply cranked up their assembly lines to produce what was on them when the war had shut them down. (Armstrong Siddeley was the exception, with a completely new car ready in mid-1945.)

Like the rest, Bill Lyons went with his pre-war model Jaguars...a sedan and a drophead coupe but, for no good reason, did not continue with the potent Jaguar SS100 sports car which was unquestionably one of the best looking traditional British open two-seaters ever made. And it was two seconds quicker 0-60mph than the XK120 when that car finally came out. Though about 15mph slower in top speed, it was the car that Clark Gable wanted when he came back from the wars. It would have sold by the hundreds, if not thousands, here in the

US and provided a secure financial base for the struggling Jaguar dealers before the XK120 arrived. I, for one, would rather have one today than an XK120.

Still, the Jaguar 3.5 liter sedans and dropheads, looking so much like Bentleys, were good performers, reasonably comfortable despite their conventional leaf springs and solid axles front and rear, handled better than any American sedans and, with opulent wood and leather interiors, looked and smelled so very British.

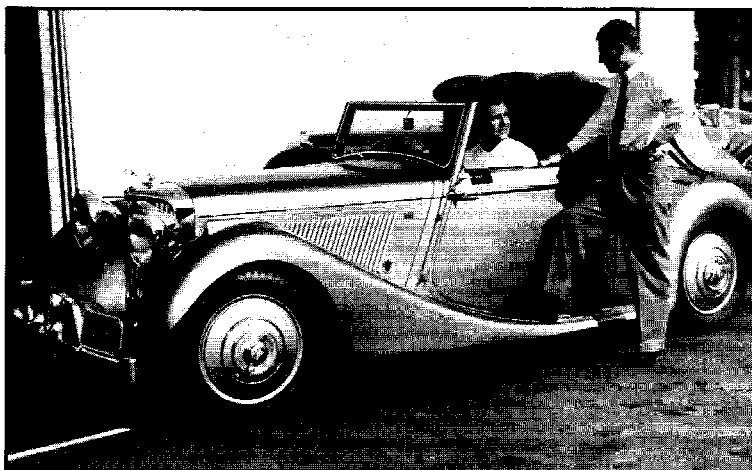
The Jaguar name was given to the sedan and convertible at their debut in 1935, and before World War II the cars had built an extraordinary reputation for being affordable and sporting. In fact, the price was under \$2000 before production was halted for military reasons, and this made them an obvious choice for export to the US after civilian production resumed.

The pushrod ohv 6-cyl engine had been refined by W.M. Heynes, an engineer Lyons hired away from Humber in the 1930s. In 3.5 liter form (smaller versions were available as well), it would produce over 120 hp and was capable of moving the cars over 100 mph.

Though Lyons was against entering the cars in competition under factory Jaguar

colors, privateers did well with 3.5 liter SS100s before the second world war, winning several major trophies. Circuits where the Jaguars shone brightest were the International Alpine Trials and both the Monte Carlo and RAC rallies. This competition helped the cars' image.

Gable, wanting a real sports car, and only



Gable and Barlow: Author's flip of a coin gave the King of Hollywood the Jag

a new one, had bought nothing at all, American or foreign when he went back to work at MGM in 1945.

The actor familiarized himself with our "foreign car" showroom (set up to pay the bills while I pounded the pavement for film directing jobs), which we shared with Tommy Hamilton's Nash dealership in Beverly Hills. He'd noticed a sexy, but incomplete Figoni et Falashi Delahaye V12 we had strategically placed up front near the window, for the sole purpose of attracting his attention.

When he first stopped by in early 1946 he gave us the phone number of Mrs Garseau, who looked after his business affairs, and said, "Call her whenever you have something I should see. I'm going to be too busy to enjoy a car anyway and if I need one, I can always use a studio Chrysler." He dropped by to visit and talk cars a couple of times during the next few months but was away on location when our first small shipment of Jags finally arrived—five sedans and two dropheads, as I remember. A week went by and no Gable. The next Saturday afternoon there were only two sedans and a single drophead left.

Hastings Harcourt, of the publishing family, had come down from Santa Barbara and

was slowly making up his mind about the drophead when in walked Mr G who took one good look at the same car and said, "Roger, I could live with this till a real sports car comes along... if Mrs Garseau sends over a check on Monday, can I drive it away now?"

Before I could answer, Harcourt interrupted to say, "Mr Barlow, I've been here half an hour making a decision as to which car I wanted to drive home...and I'd like to have that drophead." What a delightful dilemma, two very important customers for the same car! But how to resolve the situation without losing or antagonizing either of them? I did what King Solomon would have done. I said the only fair thing to do would be to flip a coin. "Heads, Mr Gable gets it and tails, it's yours." The 50 cent piece in my pocket did not have two heads, but there was no way it was going to come down tails to prevent the most famous man in the film industry from getting behind the wheel of his first Jaguar. The gods, luck and possibly some sleight of hand put Mr G into that silver gray Jag with the red leather seats.

I forget now whether Harcourt drove back to Santa Barbara in a sedan or waited for a convertible out of the next shipment of cars. A week later Gable came in with a parking lot ding in a rear fender and had decided the original metallic silver was not really to his taste, so we went over paint colors to arrive at what became known as "Gable Gray"—a dark gray with which all his subsequent Jaguars were repainted; a Mark V drophead and two XK120s.

Jaguars were never noted for their build quality, though they were a pretty good value for their very reasonable cost, but Gable never had a bit of trouble with any of his Jags. And we never had a moment's trouble with him. He could have made a hell of a deal on any car of his choice with any dealer or importer, but he always paid full price for the cars he purchased from us.

When his second drophead (a Mark V) was in the paint shop for the right shade of gray, he couldn't accept a loaner but had a studio driver drop him off at the shop every afternoon to talk cars until Murray Nichols, one of our mechanics who lived in the valley near Gable's little ranch, was ready to go home and then rode with him in Murray's tiny 4 CV Renault...much to the astonishment of other commuters on Laurel Canyon who found it hard to believe their eyes: The King of Hollywood a passenger in the most plebian car on the road. Gable said he had never had more fun in traffic. ■