



# Homage frais

After a blast in the beautifully built MPH-Jaguar, **James Elliott** is convinced by one man's vision of the ultimate roadgoing sports-racer PHOTOGRAPHY TONY BAKER



It's every schoolboy's dream – and every grown-up schoolboy's – to design his own car. It starts as an amalgam of details from the icons of the era, cars so exotic that for most children they dashed only across the pages of the motoring weeklies. The same doodle would then migrate to schoolbooks, folders and everything else for years, being constantly developed on its journey towards adulthood. Then, if the childhood fantasy ever came to fruition, it would be utterly compromised in order to accommodate the proprietary running gear that the dreamer was forced to use. In the 1950s and '60s this was still a highly achievable ambition, though rather less so nowadays. In fact, to build a bespoke classic sports car from scratch, especially one on classic underpinnings, is pretty much unheard of now, not to say expensive lunacy.

All of which makes this intriguing mystery car even more alluring. This is not just a makeover, a slight restyling, or a plucky reshelled special, it is a brand new car built to the highest standards, just like in the old days. And it is stunning. Remember that game you played as kids, when you folded a piece of paper and took it in turns to draw a section of a person: one doing the head, the next the trunk and the third the legs? 999 times out of 1000 the unfolded results would look ridiculous, which was the point after all, but just once the parts would flow perfectly into each other, as if a well-conceived whole. This dramatic, pugilistic monster is like that.

Indistinguishable from a 'real' classic muscle roadster, to these eyes the MPH-Jaguar appears part Porsche RSK, part Cobra, part XKSS and part Healey. Not quite, according to arch-enthusiast Mike Hughes (hence the MPH) who conceived, created and bankrolled the project. He came up with the idea in 2004 and his partner in crime was Jag specialist Classic Motor Cars of Bridgnorth. "I'd had a couple of cars restored by CMC and got to know the guys there and what they were capable of," Hughes explains. "After a while I was itching to do something different and, rather than build a replica, I dreamed up a concept to create something unique in the idiom of a 1950-'60s sports-racer, using Jaguar running gear... like something from HWM or Alta."

The project took shape over the ensuing 18 months – "I've had restorations take longer," says the owner. Hughes turned to Rob Beere for advice on the chassis, which is why the project ended up using as its base a Reynard tubular item familiar to C- and D-type reps, albeit heavily revised. "The biggest modification was introducing a removable section so that the gearbox can be dropped out easily," says Hughes. Beere played a hand in the engine, too, which is also heavily tweaked. Having started life as a 4.2-litre Jaguar 'six', it is now bored out to 4.7 litres and specced up in myriad other ways to make an awesome fast-road 300bhp. Continuing the theme, Jaguar contributed the running gear for just about everything else, but the more you investigate the more you realise that nothing is just bolted on. The suspension may be Jaguar all-independent, but it's two different, altered specs front and rear. The steering wheel looks like an XK item – it is, or was, actually – but it has been ingeniously 'shrunk' by an inch in diameter for a more sporting response. Likewise, the custom-made rack-and-pinion steering gives a direct, pin-sharp 2.5 turns lock-to-lock, while

drilled discs all round harness all of that power.

What makes this project so special, however, is the bodywork. Glassfibre has made almost anything possible, thrown open the dark arts of coachcraft to anyone with a lock-up and a trowel, but this car was both devised and built in a rather more traditional fashion. Not quite back-of-a-fag-packet design, but not far off it, and a million miles away from a computer. The naked eye, an innate sense of form and human creativity rather than microprocessors and wind tunnels shaped the MPH. Hughes says: "I'm a car fanatic and a particular period really appeals to me, so I just got a lot of photos of cars from that period and highlighted features that I did and didn't like. The strongest influences came from the Maserati 300S, some Astons and the XKSS.

"The process was: I sent these pictures and notes to Pete Southan at CMC, he would do a sketch, I'd comment on it, then we just carried on like that until we had a complete car." The pictures and sketches went back and forth for some six weeks before the project could go the next stage, which was for Southan's artist sister to come up with a final full-car drawing.

After that, a full plywood buck was built and Southan could start on the panelwork proper. "Pete was amazing," adds Hughes. "One day he would send me a picture for approval, just a

mocked up piece of cardboard on the buck, and once I had agreed or suggested amendments I'd get another the very next day, beautifully made, perfect in every way, except in aluminium."

This perhaps explains why this shape seems to work so well, where so many recent production EuroRetroRoadsters fail, their styling influences a little too obvious. Even if elements of the MPH are not to your taste, it just feels organic and

## 'IT'S SHAPED BY EYE AND A SENSE OF FORM, NOT MICROPROCESSORS AND WIND TUNNELS'

comfortable with itself. Yet it is not solely because it is unique – and likely to remain so, even though the bucks are there if you have the bucks – that the MPH avoids that horrible pitfall of being a pastiche, but a thrilling entity in its own right.

From the driving seat it's all XKSS, with the bonnet scoop and wings forming three peaks in front of you. Even the glasswork is reminiscent of the Jaguar rarity, with the sidescreens wobbling on top of the doors when you enter

and exit. The pedals – clutch and brake floor-mounted, throttle hanging – are perfectly placed for racing, but it is the details that impress most. Barring the ugly modern voltmeter, the instruments are delightfully period, the badge on the steering wheel boss could have been made 50 years ago, while the kinked, tunnel-mounted handbrake, pull-string doors and the beautifully finished gearknob all help to create the illusion. The switches are reconditioned originals, naturally, the wiring harness is wrapped in braided cotton, there is a period Breitling Wakmann rally timer, and even a WW2 eight-day clock. Not everything is to my taste, such as the body-coloured bullet mirrors and the registration letters and numerals, but then this car wasn't created to meet my taste.

Neither was the driving position. Sitting low in the comfy bucket and craning to see the road over the cardiology chart bonnet, it is a bit of a let-down, but Hughes can explain: "From the beginning, we decided to get the 'screen on the car very low to maintain the proportions [the top of the 'screen is only 39in off the tarmac]. Because I am long in the body, that meant setting the seat very low otherwise my head would be in the airstream. It's just a squab and can be changed for other people." The seat itself is fixed, however, the pedals instead being adjustable.

Squat, aggressive shape hints at the MPH-Jaguar's potency: with 347bhp per tonne the performance is scintillating on the road



WW2 eight-day clock is typical of the attention to detail



Even the MPH badge (the owner's initials) could be 1950s



Unique hood fashioned over modified MGB folding sticks

There's no key: just turn the hidden lock-switch, push the button and the MPH fires up with a cacophony of Jag straight-six, highly strung and eager yet with a rumbustious bellow. The gushing side exhausts exit under the passenger seat – with cooling fins to keep the heat down – and spit venom into the evening.

Select first in the five-speed Tremec 'box – the sole concession to modernity, even fuel injection has been eschewed in favour of a trio of Weber 45 DCOEs – and the MPH-Jaguar takes off like a rascalion caught scrumping. It is quick, fear-somely so: with that light chassis and all-ally body it weighs in at a mere 865kg, yet in a flash every one of the 300-plus horses are coursing through the drivetrain and squirreling the car down the damp tarmac on Borrani-esque wires shod with 225/60 R16 tyres.

Tickle the throttle to experience the immediate response, work your way through the taut and purposeful 'box – another delight is the way the neutral plane leaves the lever sitting slightly forward, giving a real racing feel – and the acceleration is breathtaking, a visceral rumble accompanying you as you dance on the pedals in the narrow footwell, feeling like Durand-Durand frenzied at his organ in *Barbarella*.

The accompanying ride is surprisingly good, the result of much development to make it more

roadable, and the handling is superb. The short, pliable wheelbase whips the MPH-Jaguar through bends with an assurance, arrogance even, that can rapidly turn to a thoroughly corrupting, intoxicating dose of oversteer.

The steering from that quick rack is light and precise as you explore the MPH's astonishing pull from walking pace. Bury it from 30mph and it still rockets away, its overgrown go-kart feel


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emphasising the balance and excellent roadholding. You are only at threat if you try to abuse this awesome power at the wrong times, chasing the rev counter round to the 5500-6000rpm redline or the speedo round to the indicated 180mph on the Smiths dial when you should be watching the road rather than the fascia furniture.

It starts to rain. The MPH-Jaguar usually wears just a tonneau, which doesn't leave much space in the 1 in 10 gradient boot when both it

and the spare wheel are in there, but it also boasts full weather gear, cleverly stashed in a hinged compartment behind the seats. "We decided we would need a two-section stick system like an early MGB," says Hughes, "so we got one in just to work out how we would have to engineer it, then found out that the MG item was already close enough that it only had to be modified." Serendipity in action.

The MPH has been seen at quite a few shows now and always garners the same reaction. "Other enthusiasts are always very positive," says Hughes. "Everybody asks what it is, then they see the badge and assume that it is a classic sports-racer, so it has achieved exactly what we hoped to when we embarked on the project."

It's difficult to disagree. Having driven – and owned – plenty of lookalikes with manners supposedly more suited to the 21st century, it is immediately obvious to me that this is no exercise in neoclassicism. It feels like a proper classic car, offers the same character and thrills, yet can cope admirably with modern traffic. Where such an experiment fits into the classic world is harder to ascertain, but if all schoolboy dreams were to be realised with similar panache, there would be an awful lot of us living with Bardot and/or Loren in sundrenched Deco beach houses... with an MPH-Jaguar on the drive. 

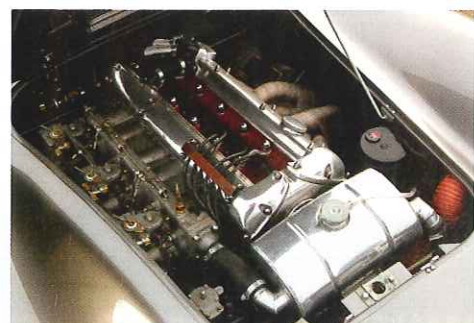
Glimpse of C-type Jag in the tail, with hints of RSK Porsche, Aston DBR1 and XKSS elsewhere, yet the MPH is a coherent whole



Snug, well-crafted cabin awash with beautiful period details



Cooling fins over side-exit exhaust stop passenger baking



Jaguar 4.2 straight-six updated to 4.7-litre fast-road spec