

The other Alpine XK120

Who needs the fantastically valuable NUB 120?
So asks **Graeme Hurst** after an encounter with the
legendary Jaguar's Coupe des Alpes twin

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**



What tops your list of dream cars? Not a model, but *the* car – the particular example that fought off the competition to bring home the silverware. We all lust after the idea of having a 300SLR or a Type 35 in the garage, but which one? Perhaps it's the Benz that Moss and 'Jenks' took to victory in the 1955 Mille Miglia, or the Grover Williams Bugatti that stole the first Monaco Grand Prix? A Le Mans-winning C- or D-type would also do rather nicely, but there's only one Jaguar on my list: NUB 120. This famous number adorned the aluminium-bodied XK120 in which Ian and Pat Appleyard conquered the Alpine Rally in 1950 and '51, as well as the RAC and Tulip rallies. On display at Jaguar Heritage and regularly campaigned in historic events, this car's combination of enviable competition history and battle-scarred patina makes it the Holy Grail for XK fans.

The trouble is, it is also well out of reach and is unlikely to ever come up for sale. Even if it were to be offered, the figure on the cheque would resemble a telephone number. There is, however, an alternative. The 1951 example you see here is arguably the next best thing. Finished in the same Old English White hue as its revered sibling, this steel-bodied 120 boasts similar looks and patina. What's more, it competed alongside NUB 120 in period and has been in active service ever since, with current owners Mike and Gina Barker having regularly campaigned the XK in historic rallying over the past 35 years.

In a world where many 120s have been over-restored and subjected to substantial, expensive upgrades – from disc brakes and five-speed gearboxes to power steering and air conditioning – an XK that has been well used yet remains remarkably standard is a rarity. Which is why *C&SC* was keen to experience PPE 101, a car that is, to all intents and purposes, a steel-bodied NUB 120.

The origins of the XK120, the model that

pushed the Jaguar brand to new heights, lay in the marque's post-war development of a new engine to power a planned range of saloons that would ultimately be launched as the MkVII series. Unfortunately, the body maker Pressed Steel was not prepared to commit to production without a substantial up-front payment for tooling. The protracted negotiations that followed delayed the launch of the new saloon, which meant that Jaguar wouldn't have a debutant at the '48 Motor Show. Boss William Lyons, never one to pass up a publicity opportunity, decided to create a sports car to show off his new engine and, hopefully, make some money in the process. Known for his natural flair for styling, Lyons oversaw the creation of a curvaceous yet futuristic two-seater roadster whose shape reputedly borrowed heavily from BMW's 328.

Mild plagiarism aside, the result was an absolute gem that looked as if it was doing 100mph even when it was standing still. To expedite its development and minimise costs, the sports car was based on a cut-down version of the MkV's hefty box-section chassis, complete with state-of-the-art torsion-bar front suspension.

Developed in just six weeks, the new roadster was tagged XK120 – the X a nod to the engine's origins in the Experimental Department, the K because it was the 11th in an alphabetical series of prototypes. And the 120? That was the intended (and proven) maximum speed. There was also a stillborn four-cylinder version (referred to in sales literature, but never produced) known as the XK100.

Lyons knew that the chosen method of construction for the company's protégé was too labour intensive to make substantial production cost-effective, but steel was scarce and its supply heavily regulated in post-war Britain. That made aluminium the only alternative, which was no bad thing considering the tight timeframe. Plus, from his experience with the pre-war SS100, Lyons reckoned that demand was unlikely to exceed a few hundred. How wrong he was. The

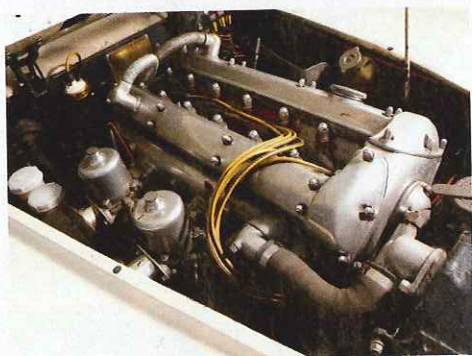
XK120 received a rapturous reception at Earls Court and interest in the car quickly led to it becoming a production mainstay. A Fixed-head Coupé followed in 1951, while the Drophead Coupé launched two years later gave the line-up a 120 to accommodate all tastes.

Early criticisms of a lack of interior space were addressed with the roomier XK140 in 1954 and a decade after the famous London launch the slender 120 had evolved into the wider, bulkier XK150. Additions such as wind-up windows (on all models), disc brakes all round and optional overdrive made the 150 a more comfortable and capable drive, but its performance and style were a far cry from the purity of the original.

Sixty-two years ago, the XK120 was groundbreaking. There was nothing in England that could match its pace or rival its captivating looks for the £988 (excluding Purchase Tax) price-tag. There was more competition across the pond but none so svelte or rewarding to drive – thousands of former GLs, weaned on British sports cars during their tours of duty, took to the Jaguar in a big way. Their interest was also fuelled by coverage in the press. Lyons was a master at maximising marketing opportunities and nothing made for a better headline than speed records and competition success.

Seven months after the launch, Jaguar invited the press to Belgium to witness a 132.6mph speed run on the Jabbeke highway. It was followed by an XK120 winning the Production Car Race on 20 August at Silverstone, then two further impressive victories a year later as Ian Appleyard and his wife Pat (Bill Lyons' daughter) won the 1950 Alpine Rally while rising star Stirling Moss led an XK 1-2-3 in the Tourist Trophy at Silverstone. Moss would add to the XK's honours in August 1952 as he and three other drivers piloted LWK 707 at an average of just over 100mph for 'Seven Days and Seven Nights' at Montlhéry, covering 16,852 miles.

Although Jaguar didn't have an official works team, media coverage of the 120's successes



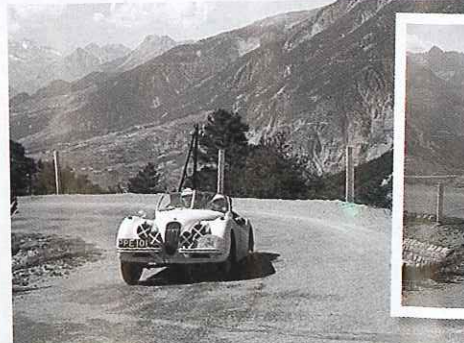
Fast-road cams sharpen the response of the 3.4-litre unit



Big cat badge meant high performance at a bargain price



Sidescreens for XK120/140; XK150 got wind-up windows



PPE on Coupe des Alpes, a few cars before (inset) NUB 120

'THE FRONT VALANCE STILL SHOWS SIGNS OF REPAIR AFTER IT TOOK A BEATING ON THE ALPINE RALLY IN 1951'

prompted a raft of privateer entries (many of which were unofficially supported by the factory), among them PPE 101. Built on 25 January 1951 at Jaguar's Foreshill factory, PPE was supplied by Henlys of London to a Mrs N Grant-Norton, who bought it for her son. He appears to have quickly appreciated the XK's abilities and, barely four months later, entered the car for the Alpine Rally, alongside the Appleyards in NUB 120. The latter team would clinch its second penalty-free Alpine victory, while Grant-Norton scored a creditable fifth in class.

The following year PPE 101 completed the Brighton and London rallies, then in 1953 it took a joint team prize with NUB 120 in the RAC Rally. When Barker began researching PPE's history, the works mechanics that fettled NUB 120 also recalled servicing his car. In 1958, PPE was sold on, then again a year later. Fast-forward to 1974 and the XK was bought by Barker for £1200 as a showpiece for his Midlands Motor Museum, which then included a Ford GT40 and a Ferrari 250LM. When that closed in the early '80s, the Barkers began campaigning PPE 101 in historic rallies, covering more than 40,000 miles while competing in events that included seven Classic Marathons, the Welsh International Rally and a couple of RACs. They've shared the road with some pretty high-profile drivers, too. "On one of the early Classic Marathons we were up against Stirling Moss, Timo Mäkinen and Roger Clark," recalls Mike, who was one of the founder members of the Historic Rally Car Register.

Those competitive miles have added to the car's enviable character. Like NUB 120, this XK has a delicious patina and aura of use. Last refreshed in the mid-'70s, the Old English White cellulose has been touched up in places to cover rally scars. The front valance has signs of repair, too, after it took a beating back in '51 on the Alpine. The interior is equally soulful, with the leather seats and dashboard cover bearing all the hallmarks of a hard-driven but cared-for car,

JAGUAR XK120

Sold/number built 1948-'54/7612

Construction steel body over steel chassis

Engine iron-block, alloy-head, dohc 3442cc straight-six, with twin SU carburettors

Max power 160bhp @ 5200rpm

Max torque 195lb ft @ 2500rpm

Transmission four-speed manual with synchromesh on top three gears, driving rear wheels

Suspension: front independent via double wishbones, torsion bars, telescopic dampers and anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, lever-arm dampers

Steering Burman recirculating ball

Brakes 12in (305mm) drums all round

Wheels & tyres 5Jx16in wires, 6.00-16in Dunlop Road Speed crossplies (195/75 R16 radials on this car)

Length 14ft 5½in (4407mm)

Width 5ft 2in (1575mm)

Height 4ft 4½in (1334mm)

Wheelbase 8ft 6in (2591mm)

Weight 2919lb (1324kg)

0-60mph 12 secs

Top speed 126mph **Mpg** 17

Price new £1263 3s 11d (1948)

Price now £120,000

Old English White paint and rally spot-lamps are an evocative combination for an XK, and this car has the history to back up its rally-bred looks





Smaller wheel means XK will accommodate taller drivers



Steel body is hefty, but the Jaguar feels strong and solid



Radial tyres give a less tiptoed stance, and also improve the XK120's turn-in; PPE boasts a lovely patina

such as a hand-written sticker denoting engine revs by gear and speed, and a stretch of gaffer tape to cover a section of worn leather on the driver's door-pull below the cockpit rail.

That distinctive, wraparound leather rail and the lack of interior space mean that getting behind the wheel is akin to climbing into the cockpit of a Tiger Moth – XK120 enthusiasts are the first to admit that their cars will be a squeeze for anyone of a larger stature than Stirling Moss or Jaguar test driver Norman Dewis. Fortunately, Barker has fitted a small three-spoke steering wheel in place of the 17in Bakelite-covered four-spoke original. Other upgrades include an alternator, a modern pre-engaged starter motor and an electric cooling fan, but they are relatively well hidden and have only been done to ensure reliability on the couple's many forays across Europe. The essential bits – those that chiefly affect the way the car feels from behind the wheel – remain delightfully original.

Which means that this XK120 retains its Burman steering box, drum brakes and Moss gearbox. Ah yes, the infamously recalcitrant Moss 'box. With a straight-cut first gear (the source of its characteristic whine), and limited synchromesh on the remaining three ratios, it doesn't appreciate being hurried, but the short, precise action is rewarding. Shedding speed in a car weighing close to 3000lb is less enjoyable: braking always was the 120's Achilles' heel. Over-use them and the heat build-up in the 12in drums can lead to fade, so in serious driving it's best not

to rely on the brakes when cornering anywhere with limited run-off – better to scrub off speed well before a bend and power out. Quite how Ian Appleyard coped as he roared over the Alps is a humbling thought – although in 1988 the rally ace confided to *C&SC* that he carried a quick-lift jack so that he could adjust the stoppers before each control point, to ensure he didn't roar past the stop line in a cloud of brake dust.

The slow-in, fast-out approach encourages you to indulge the twin-cam's taste for revs. The early 3.4-litre unit with its small-valve head was always sweetest, and piling on the power is a pleasure. Barker has uprated the camshafts to fast-road spec, which gives PPE 101 a slightly schizophrenic exhaust note. From 2-3500rpm it has the deep bass of a Lancaster bomber on take-off, but past 4000rpm the combination of valve overlap (thanks to the cam timing) and the straight-through exhaust makes for a fearsome howl that's more akin to a Junkers Ju87 Stuka. That might sound a little tasteless, but it's an appropriate metaphor because Jaguar lore has it that the long-lived twin-cam 'six' was developed while the talented engineering team was on factory firewatch during the Luftwaffe's nightly bombing raids on Coventry.

With its steel body and substantial chassis, this XK is no lightweight and you can feel its heft when you throw it into a corner. Having that big straight-six up front means that there's a natural tendency to understeer, but not to the same degree as the 120's younger siblings, which had

the engine positioned further forward to improve interior space. PPE's turn-in is also slightly sharper than standard, thanks to radial tyres, although the steering box lacks the precision of later models' rack-and-pinion set-up. Where the 120 excels is in the quality of its ride and rigidity of its chassis. The live-axle rear can get jittery over rough terrain, but the compliance of the torsion bars up front dampens the excitement and most of the time the car feels solidly planted and tremendously strong. It only takes 10 minutes behind the wheel to appreciate why these XKs were so durable on and off the track.

After three and a half decades spent enjoying historic motor sport aboard PPE, Barker now feels that "someone a bit younger should carry on enjoying its history". The £120,000 asking price might be dreamland territory to most of us, but remember that this is a car with enviable competition history. Half that figure would buy a good standard example and a little more could secure the keys to a show queen that you could trailer around the concours circuit, yet no amount of showground silverware can make up for genuine patina. Just feeling the rifle-bolt action of the old Moss 'box and hearing the glorious exhaust bark transfers you straight to the Furka or Stelvio passes. This is surely the closest most will come to being Ian Appleyard, thundering over the Alps to victory.

Thanks to Classic Motor Cars: 01746 765804; www.classic-motor-cars.co.uk