1953 JAGUAR
XK120 FHC
I have always had a soft spot for Jaguar XK120s, particularly the Fixed Head Coupes (FHC). To me, they are very beautiful, elegant body shapes, comparable to the “Phony and Flashy” (Figoni and Falaschi) bodied Delahayes, Delages and Bugatti Type 57S Atlantic bodies of the 1930s and I’m sure Sir William Lyons (or just plain Mr. William Lyons as he was in 1947) used these cars as an inspiration when he designed the Fixed Head Coupe. Or was it Malcolm Sayer, who designed the D and E Type? I’ve never been able to really discover. Whatever, William Lyons certainly had to be personally satisfied with a body shape before he would allow it to be produced, hence we can say that he was responsible for the shape. I certainly believe that they will, in the future, be seen as far more collectible than they currently are.

My first ride in a XK120 was in my friend Roger Platt’s example. This was in about 1962, when XKs of all sorts could be bought for between $75-$450.00. Yes, you read that right, seventy-five to four hundred and fifty dollars! I was living in England then, near to Stratford-on-Avon and, as the World-beating E-Type Jaguar had just been introduced, XKs, including the 140 and 150, were worth next to nothing then.
Roger’s XK was, what shall we say to be polite, a “beater”. Old, well used and dented but it was still an XK, made all the right noises and went well. I do remember that it wasn’t so hot in the braking department with those drum brakes but then again these were old drum brakes!

At that time, there was a magazine that came out every Thursday, called the “Exchange and Mart”, which was like the “Hemmings” of today over here. The Exchange and Mart was full of just about everything for sale including, of course, cars. The smart boys in London would get it on Wednesday afternoons, hot off the press, so to speak and, therefore, beat everyone else in the country to getting the bargains. I also remember that Exchange and Mart had a motto: “Just remember, most people are honest or business cannot take place”. I’ve always remembered that because it’s true!

I was perusing the “Jaguar” column in the Exchange and Mart one Thursday morning and spotted an advertisement for a 120 FHC in London, which seemed to imply that the car being advertised was in excellent nick and could be had for £125.00. I called the number and Art Langrish, who answered the phone, said the car was indeed very nice. I then asked him what was wrong with it. “Nothing” he replied shortly. After arranging to meet him at his
house to take a look that evening, I took a walk to the bank, withdrew £125.00 and went back to work, after having asked Rene, my then business partner, to take me down to London, a distance of some one hundred miles, after work that evening.

I don’t remember much about the trip to London but I do remember that it was dark when we finally found the street that the owner of the 120 lived in. We cruised down it looking at house numbers and passed an FHC in beautiful shape. “Wow” I remember saying. “Be great if the one we’ve come to see is anything like that one.” Of course, it was that very car. The owner (Art Langrish, who now lives in Texas and has had an XK150 since the 1970s) showed us around it, started the engine (on 2 inch sand-cast SUs, with a “C” type head, I remember) and it sounded great. I didn’t bother haggling, just happily handed over the £125.00, accepted the logbook and a receipt in return and the XK was mine. “Tell me”, I said as we were leaving, “why is it so cheap?” The owner smiled. “I’m emigrating to America next week” he said.
Two things from that trip home I’ll never forget; one was the action of inserting the ignition key, twisting it to “on” and then pressing the black starter button. The other thing was passing a well-lit Hyde Park and seeing the distinctive image of the framing around the passenger side window. “It’s really mine” I remember saying to myself.

NDU 905 (for that was the registration number) served me well for a year and 12,000 miles. Only the battery let me down in that time. I never tired of the view through the flat windshield pane on the driver’s side of that bonnet curving away and the shapely fenders too. She went well too, especially for those days. I can remember seeing an indicated 132 mph on the Bicester to London Road (not so much traffic around then) and, given a probable 10% optimism, it was probably still some 116 mph genuine. Years later, long after she was gone, I found a photo of her racing at Brands Hatch, and have often wondered who owned and drove her at that time.

What happened to her? I hear you say. Sheepishly, I have to admit that I part-exchanged her for an XK150S that was well past its prime. Stupid me.
Just recently (2011) I started looking for NDU 905 and found her, courtesy of XK data. She appeared to be alive and well in New Zealand and looking gorgeous after a five year restoration, five speed gearbox, 3.8 engine. But then things became very strange... I discovered that this particular XK was not NDU 905 (chassis number 669045) but a car built up from parts, and that someone had given it the same chassis number as NDU!

I then found NDU 905 for real. She has been in the collection of a New Zealander for eleven years and is in need of a complete restoration. However, from the photographs, I can see that the original 2 inch SU carbs are there, as are the strange hubcaps she always wore, so I’m hoping she is more or less intact.

Martin Cutter, who owned NDU 905 from 1960 to 1965 (he sold her to his friend, Art Langrish) has been in touch and is going to visit NDU in a few week’s time. I’m encouraging him to buy it back and restore her, and then I can have a drive in her too!
Martin remembered NDU very well: “The seller presented it to me with some serious but repairable front end damage. He was a commercial traveler and needed a car to conduct his business and we did a deal where I gave him £30 together with my 1932 J2 MG. Quite how he fared with that car I do not know but before he left he gave me some interesting information about the XK, which I have never forgotten. He told me that it had been heavily modified and raced by a previous owner - the name Lumsden stuck in my mind but you have identified that Peter Lumsden did not race an XK. I was told that this racer then bought an XK 140 and changed out some of the goodies from the 120 including the engine. The engine in NDU 905, therefore, would have been carrying a 140 number. The engine carried 2 inch sand-cast SUs and the photos the seller sent me indicated they are still there. Disc brakes had been fitted and then transferred over but he left the vacuum servo, which is non-standard to 120s. Adjustable Koni shock absorbers were on the car. I had the front end damage repaired at a body shop in north London, attached to a gas station where I used to have a Saturday job while at school. The headlamp nacelles were beyond repair and I got a friend of mine at Jaguars to ‘obtain’ a couple of replacements. He told me they were the last two in stock and, unfortunately, they were of the same hand. The body shop did the best
they could but the left (passenger) side pointed slightly inward giving the car a slightly cross-eyed look. I felt the tiny lamps on the wing tops were insufficient as turn signals and I fitted the amber ones as later fitted to 150s. This was in the days before speed limits on the motorways and also before the days of hazard warning lights. I did a little bit of trick wiring using a relay and second flasher unit to operate the front turn signals as hazards when charging up the M1 at night. It was amazing how quickly people moved aside to let me by at over 100mph! There was a small switch under the dash to operate the system. I fabricated a rear parcel shelf from an old piano top and I think I fitted a speaker into it. That would also have been covered by the same green vinyl. I had the car painted after our Dubrovnik trip in a gorgeous metallic BRG. This was done by the same body shop that did the panel repairs, including more damage done during the trip! I doubt if they stripped the car down to bare metal so there should be evidence of those broad red racing stripes. If there is then that, together with my 1963 photos, would be irrefutable proof that the seller’s car is in fact NDU 905 and, therefore, chassis S669045.”
After the XK150S, which I honestly don’t remember much about, except that it was a 3.4 liter engined thing (and rapidly went rusty!), I fell into a few years of family car motoring but the XKs lured me back to more interesting cars and I remember a black 120 FHC, that I bought from that great dealer/character Jeremy Welch, which again was a very enjoyable driver. I can remember doing a couple of races at Mallory Park with that and she survived quite well. In the 1990s, I bought a “project” from John Pearson, of an XK120 FHC with aluminum fenders. My great friend Allen Goodall built it for me, with wider than standard Aston Martin wheels, disc brakes all around, a louvered bonnet, leather strap, rack and pinion steering and a 3.8 engine on Webers. We managed to get her street-registered as “WSU 738”. That was an impressive motorcar to drive. I took her to the Isle of Man and enjoyed a great run in the “Manx Classic” before I sold her. She’s still (I think!) with the man who has had her since then, I believe.
And finally... after WSU 738, I bought an old Modsports 120 roadster, THS 120 that had a 3.8 on Webers and disc brakes. Also had a roll bar, which seemed a very good idea! She too sounded great through the twin exhausts and went really well. I used her for fast touring and a few hillclimbs before selling her as I was coming to America to live. Happy days!