

FINDING JAGUAR XK120

HISTORY



Finding Jaguar XK120 History



Some reader's of this occasional blog will know that I find previously unknown histories of cars, usually racing cars and you might be interested in how I go about finding these histories. I'm engaged at present on trying to discover the history of my latest acquisition, a 1953 Jaguar XK120 SE, which is fairly typical of how I find histories, except that racecars don't have titles, so they can be even tougher to trace!

This car had no known ownership history, when I bought it from its previous owner, a doctor in Melbourne, Florida, in November last year. I'd seen it in a simple, two line advertisement in "Hemmings" and, as it was the closest XK120 to me, it was a simple matter to call up the owner to talk to him about it and then go visit him to inspect the car, which turned out to be everything I'd wanted; a well-kept, never restored driver. I really don't like concours cars, far too shiny for me and I would be forever worried that something might happen to it. Since then, on and off, I've been digging back into this XK's past, so here's what happened when I started looking into its history....

The Doctor from whom I bought the car told me that he'd bought it from Kirk F. White, the noted classic car dealer in New Smyrna Beach, Florida, so that was my first call. Kirk told me that the 120 was: "The XK with the most integrity that I've ever owned", which I took to mean the less messed around with!

Kirk could only tell me that he'd bought the XK from a Mr. Bruce E. Desoe, and that very little paperwork, except for a Jaguar Heritage certificate, came with it. That Heritage certificate proclaimed the XK to be a special equipment, matching numbers car, which must be something of a rarity these days. Despite several attempts looking on the Internet and looking in White Pages, I've failed to find Mr. Desoe, which is odd, considering his ownership of the XK was so recent and that he had lived in Florida as recently as 2006!

So okay, Su and I decided to proceed and see who else we could find from the XK's past. There is a site called "XK Data" on the Internet, which gives whatever is known about XKs to the general public. Looking at that, I found the car had been sold in 1996 at Christie's auction in Tarrytown, New York but for some reason, Christie's didn't give a result for that sale. I emailed them but to date have received no reply. I guess they are very busy people....

In the cockpit of the XK, there was a badge, proclaiming "California Mille 1992", so I wrote to the organizers of this well known rally and they came back to me to say that sorry, in those days they didn't keep entry records and couldn't tell me who had entered and driven the XK. This was getting to be frustrating!

Then we got a break. Bruce Carnachan of the Classic Jaguar Register emailed me to say:

"Dear John: Congratulations on your purchase of a 120! It is indeed a beautiful car. This is the information I have concerning it: 1996 is the last information I have.

Chassis #S673482
Engine #W7266-8S

As of 1994, owner was Charles Gambil of Hinsdale, IL.
Comment: "believe since sold"
Address of car location in 1996 was Tarrytown, NY"

Ah! So now we had a lead. I quickly found Charles Gambil in White Pages and called him. Was the Jaguar dark gray? I confirmed that it was. "Then that's the car I owned for several years. Did a lot of work on it, including rebuilding the engine, gearbox and rear axle and raced it once at Road America. That engine should have some good compressions. I sold it to a Doctor Irwin Ginsberg of New York. He put the chrome wires on it." I asked Charles if he could remember who he bought it from. He couldn't, but thought that it was: "Someone from Wisconsin".

I wrote to the DMV in Wisconsin requesting a title search in their records but that drew a blank as they came back to say that they had no record of it in their files. However, I then received an email from a Howard Ginsberg.

I had looked for Doctor Irwin Ginsberg but found that he had died in 1996, which was when Christies auctioned the XK. I had found that Dr. Ginsberg's practice was still in existence in New York and had called them, hoping that they could put me in touch with a relative. The charming receptionist had asked me to send an email and she would pass it on to Dr. Ginsberg's son, when he returned from a business trip. Sure enough a week later, Harold Ginsberg emailed me back to say that yes, his father had indeed owned the XK and Harold had persuaded him to do the 1992 Californian Mille with it.

"We drove that Jag on the California Mille in 1992 – we were one of the few cars to finish without mechanical problems, to the surprise of the "Jag bashers" in the group. I have a video somewhere of my Dad driving that car hell bent for murder thru the wine country!" I called Harold back and we had a very pleasant conversation about how his father had owned some beautiful cars in his collection and that his father: "gave it new chrome wire wheels and carpets but that's all it needed". Then Harold threw me a real curve ball. "My Dad bought the car from a lawyer in New York." He told me. "The lawyer had it from new." That really threw me. Surely Charles Gambil of Hinsdale had sold the XK to Dr. Ginsberg?

I called Charles back. "I can remember having the car shipped to Dr. Ginsberg." He told me Harold must be thinking of another of his father's cars but, I've been thinking". I waited. "There was a man who helped me a lot with the rebuild, maybe you should call him to see if he can remember anything. His name is Tom Caulfield and his telephone number is..." I called Tom Caulfield. "Yes", he said, "I remember that XK". Could he remember who Charles Gambil bought it from? "Well, yes", he replied. "Me!" "What was it like when you bought it?" I asked Tom. There was a pause... "Pretty tired" he replied.

Tom remembered rebuilding the engine with Charles Gambil. "That engine's got C type camshafts in it" he told me "and 9:1 compression ratio". "It does go well", I told him. "Can you remember who you bought it from?" "John Doman" Tom replied. "He used to live in Janesville but I think he's in Madison now". I pushed my luck further. "I don't suppose you can remember who he bought it from?" I asked. Tom replied without hesitation. "The airport manager at Rock County Airport in Janesville" he told me. Wow! What a memory. I thanked Tom and asked Su to see if she could find John Doman. It turned out that he wasn't in Madison after all but then Su found a John Doman in Wichita, Kansas, who worked in the aircraft business.

I called the number and John answered. After we had exchanged pleasantries, I asked John: "Did you ever own a Jaguar XK120?" John confirmed that he had. "I was just in college, must have been about twenty. It was great for taking dates and friends for rides! I sold it to Tom Caulfield and I have some photos of it in a scrapbook, which I'll scan and send to you."

Next day, there were the photos in an email. The car had been light metallic blue then with painted wire wheels, and wore an XK140 grill and the bodywork under the left front looked somewhat crumpled, which might tie in with crease in the underside of the front chassis later on. Something had happened there in the past!

John and I exchanged more emails and we have arranged for him to see the XK again, when he comes to Lakeland on business in April. And that's where we are now. John is sure he bought the XK from "Someone in Janesville", but can't remember who.

I called and emailed Rock County Airport (now South Wisconsin Airport) and Cynthia there was very helpful and gave me the names of three managers of the airport in the late 1960s and early 1970s but John Doman doesn't recognize any of those names. So if there is anyone out there who remembers this XK120 in the 1950s/1060s, please let me know....

I've now started looking from the other end. I've written to the DMV in New York to ask them if they have a record of who Max Hoffman, the East Coast Jaguar dealer in 1953, may have sold the car to. Watch this space!

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