



WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY JIM PATTEN

NEVER HAS the term controversial applied more than when the XJ-S was announced in 1975. For Jaguar, this was especially unusual given that virtually every previous model had impressed in so many ways and often stunned the audience by its sheer beauty, such as the E-type. But, that glamorous predecessor had had its day and, like some ageing movie star, there was no role for it in the future; it was yesterday's news.

Initial sales of the XJ-S proved very disappointing, and following the worst year's figures of 1,075 units in 1980, it was in danger of being canned ahead of its time. Jaguar initially reacted by enlisting the aid of Swiss engineer Michael May,

who redesigned the cylinder head with his fireball combustion chamber to improve the previously dire fuel economy, and the HE (high efficiency) was introduced in 1981. Jaguar then further enhanced its range by offering an entirely new six-cylinder engine in 1983. Perhaps in a reflection of the market place, the manual gearbox was dropped for the V12 in 1979; take up of Jaguar's own four-speed unit had been minimal and, without a five-speed replacement, it was decided to discontinue the option. Due to problems with installing the ZF four-speed automatic gearbox in the 3.6-litre six-cylinder XJ-S, the unusual step was taken of releasing the new model with manual gearbox only – the Getrag five-speeder easily handled the 225bhp. Yet in spite of the possibilities of harnessing this

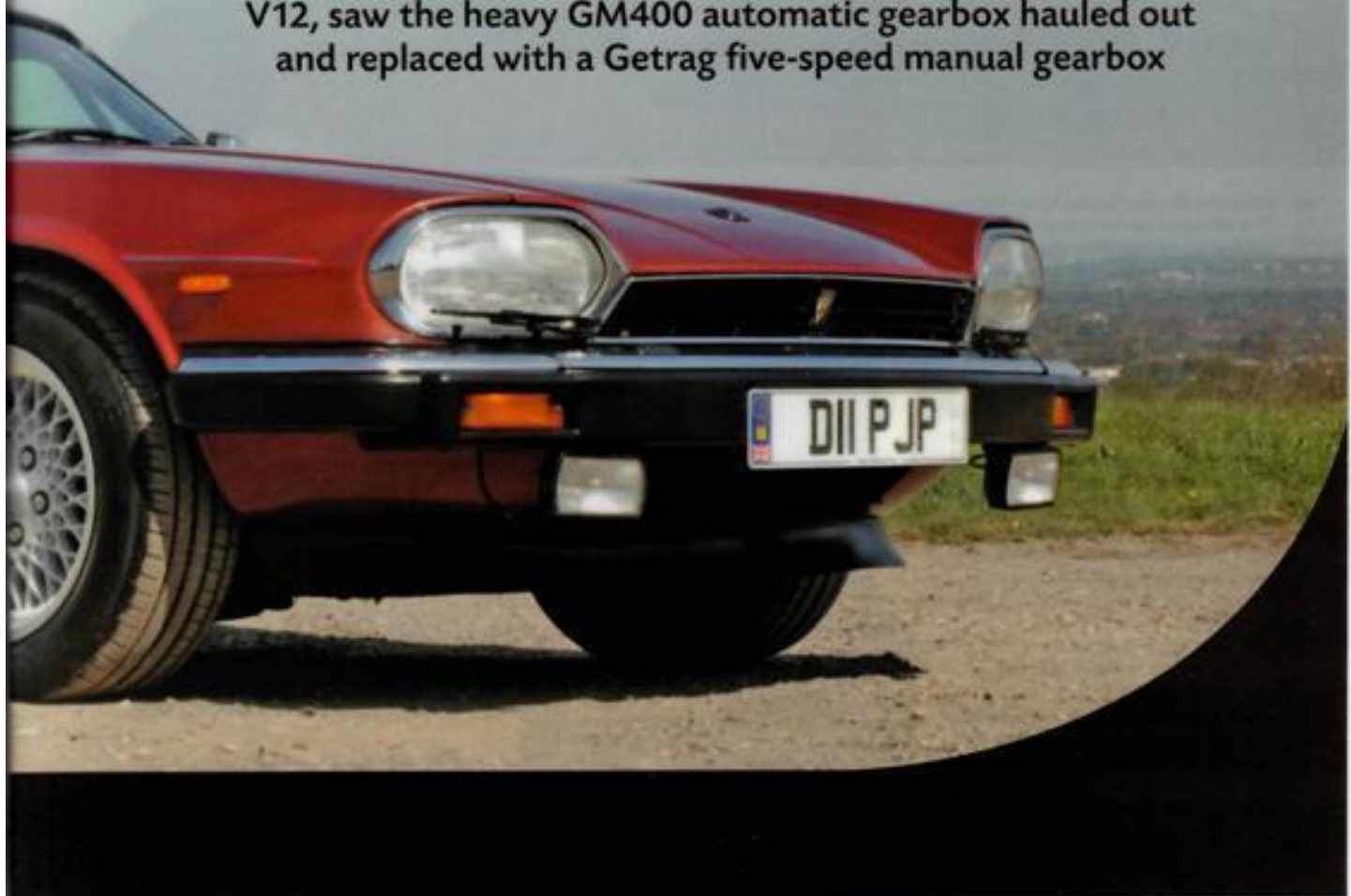
on the V12, that car was left in automatic guise only and would remain so through to the cessation of production.

Jaguar left the enthusiast in no doubt that its new GT was intended as a luxury cruising car with its three-speed automatic gearbox any thoughts of sports car aspiration were left dead in their tracks. So it must have been frustrating for an enthusiastic public to watch this luxu-barge demolish all opposition on the race track both in America with Group 44 and in the UK under TWR.

And still, despite these sporting successes, Jaguar would not capitalise on it in the showroom in the way that perhaps BMW had; it wasn't really necessary, as sales were boosted anyway. In 1988, Jaguar entered into a partnership with TWR to

Liberation front

A bid to unleash the formidable power of the XJ-S's mighty V12, saw the heavy GM400 automatic gearbox hauled out and replaced with a Getrag five-speed manual gearbox



produce the JaguarSport range, quite a few years after the XJ-S stopped racing but in the same year that Jaguar won Le Mans with its XJR-9LM. Modifications were modest, but the package did enough to at least give the car an overtly sporting feel and, with the Peter Stevens styling, the skirts and rear spoiler certainly provided the Jaguar with an aggressive stance.

For more radical upgrades it would be necessary to look outside Jaguar, with Lister offering a ferocious 7.0-litre option or even twin-superchargers and 604bhp, where a manual gearbox was a favoured choice. But this car, and the offering from Lynx Motors International, proved hugely expensive and its bespoke components would not be easy to live with as the car aged.

Soon the XJS slipped into the hands of

the enthusiasts. Although the majority were happy enough with the standard offering, others wanted more – and a burgeoning industry developed to help the situation. One such company was Jon Thomson's Simply Performance, who has been involved with Jaguar in one way or another since 1984. Originally, it supplied secondhand Jaguar parts from a small number of cars that it was breaking for spares. Inevitably the business grew and found its own direction, probably formed by a relationship developed with Lister XJS cars and former Lister head mechanic. Using this experience to introduce a range of Jaguar performance parts, it was just the stimulation needed.

Today, at Simply Performance, the supply of good, guaranteed used and new parts (including XK8) continues and works

alongside a service-and-repair area and the performance sector. An early development was to supply a much-needed five-speed gearbox conversion for most models. After extensive testing, it was realised that the original Getrag manual gearbox – as fitted to the 3.6 XJS – was so robust it could handle everything that even the 6.0-litre V12 engine could throw at it.

That was some 15 years ago and, since then, well over 150 conversion kits have been sold worldwide from Australia to the USA. Others have found their way into hard-driven race cars. Since the 'box was designed solely for the six-cylinder XJ-S AJ6 engine, it was never going to be a direct fit on the back of the V12. Simply Performance developed and fabricated a substantial adaptor plate where the Getrag bellhousing bolted to the

MODIFIED XJ-S MANUAL



Always controversial, the rear buttress is now considered a virtue

plate and the plate bolted to the V12 engine. The torque converter is removed from the original starter ring drive plate and replaced by what effectively would be the flywheel. Jaguar's production clutch assembly is more than adequate to transmit the power, although a high-performance version is available for competition work or track days.

As the ensemble is slightly longer than the outgoing automatic gearbox, the propshaft has to be shortened by around 26mm (1in). Obviously, a third pedal is needed to operate the clutch and, in the case of the XJS and XJ saloon, a donor pedal box can be sourced from a manual car. Proprietor Jon Thomson has a good supply of these. Although the gearbox will fit in most models, things become tricky for the short-wheelbase E-type. It is, however, a worthy conversion on a 2+2 in either six- or 12-cylinder guise.

This conversion is aimed at the enthusiast who can do as little or as much as they want. Every component is available separately, allowing the buyer to source some parts independently, such as the gearbox and pedal box. It is important to know which gearbox to use, as only the earlier units are equipped with a speedometer drive; the later gearbox has an electronic instrument. Most prefer the whole kit; for the XJS, this includes a new ski slope (gearlever surround) to match the original wood. Perhaps the most convenient method for most is to have Simply Performance carry out the entire job in its workshop. Many customers also add the exhaust conversion where the centre boxes are removed, to be replaced by straight-through pipes.

Paul Phillips had always yearned for a V12 Jaguar, all the way back to the Series 3 E-type, but the usual constraints of work



THE HYPHEN

From inception, the XJ-S always had a hyphen between the XJ and S. The car's first serious upgrade came in 1991 and, to mark the significance of the facelift, the hyphen was dropped to simply read XJS.

and family precluded any ventures into such exotic motoring. Then, ten years ago, he and his wife drove by a showroom where they saw a gorgeous 1989 XJ-S. The colour and shape acted like a siren, luring them into the rocks of no return.

Ownership did not disappoint and they began to use the XJ-S, taking it on trips to Scotland. One day, they were approached by what they took to be an admirer of their Jaguar, but the gentleman turned out to be a previous owner who had had to sell it when he went abroad. They chuckled when he reckoned the XJ-S knew its own way to Scotland as it had been used many times for the trip, the same one the Phillips had recently made.

Now the car could be held through the gears and, without the drag of the torque converter, it flew

Although very happy with the car, Paul felt it was a tad sluggish and wasn't keen on the wallowing ride, so he set about living things up. Sports steering rack bushes sharpened up the steering while Koni dampers eradicated some of the roll and added more confidence in the handling. The centre exhaust boxes were replaced by straight-through pipes. This all worked very well, but the three-speed automatic gearbox and heavy torque converter stifled the performance. Paul did some serious thinking and realised that what his car really needed was a five-speed gearbox conversion. And that's when he discovered Simply Performance.

By then, Jon had been joined in the business by his son, Ben. Paul recalls how friendly they were and how easy they were to deal with. There was no question of doing the work himself so he handed the whole thing over to the team. Not only was it done to price, but it was also turned around in the promised time.

The difference the conversion made was simply sensational. Paul knew that unleashing the V12 from the constraints of a lethargic automatic gearbox would allow

MODIFIED XJ-S MANUAL

access to more of its power but he didn't realise just how much would be available. Now the car could be held through the gears and, without the drag of the torque convertor, it flew. Paul finally had the car he had always wanted.

Spirited race horses are being walked around Epsom Downs as I arrived on a beautiful sunny spring day. I've arranged to meet Paul Phillips at the tea hut adjacent to the course. The XJ-S pulls into the car park with the sun reflecting off the polished red coachwork. It looks stunning on the lattice alloy wheels, a 16in upgrade shod with Pirelli P7 tyres. After we introduce ourselves, I have a moment to look over the car. I am intrigued by how well the



The complete kit, as supplied by Simply Performance




V12 engine remains unchanged, but the power is now released

conversion has been done, but then, this gearbox was sourced from an XJ-S so the gearlever should pop up in the correct spot; the so-called ski slope matches so well that there is no evidence of the addition.

The doors are wide allowing easy access and, despite the GT connotations, the driving position is very sporty. A turn of the key wakes the silky smooth V12 engine, only this one has an edge. Those straight pipes give the exhaust note a subtle and very pleasant rasp. I'm ready to select first and am surprised at how light the clutch feels. The powered steering is light enough, with any slop taken up by the revised JaguarSport bushes. Conscience slightly restricts my desire to floor this car, but, with a couple of decent long straights, I am

able to get a feel of how this liberated V12 would perform, and am not disappointed.

From the roundabout, I hold first gear until the revs hit the red-line before changing up, and only just manage second before the next roundabout looms up. The standard brakes confidently haul the speed off this heavy car before tipping into the turn. Roll is minimal and, as I accelerate out to the next straight, there is meaningful support from those straight-through centre pipes. So light are the controls that this car will be just as happy in heavy traffic without incurring any discomfort.

At the end of my brief drive it is apparent that this conversion is one of the best available – the car is transformed. That the chassis is in harmony with the unleashed power just makes the driving an even better experience. Not only that, but Paul tells me that fuel consumption has improved to an impressive 24mpg. It sounds like this could be the ultimate win/win. 

Thanks to: **Simply Performance**
(07796 002321;
www.simplyperformance.com)



The five-speed gearbox allows the potential of the V12 to be unleashed