

Has Jaguar's '90s Supercar Been Badly Treated?

Editor - The XJ220 was big, fast and criticised. 30 years on, does that criticism still stack up? In the recent weekly edition of the British auto magazine Autocar, they carried the following feature story.

Autocar Feature

A machine whose sensuous looks were only exceeded by thumping twin-turbo performance. But the car is controversial, not least due to appalling bad timing and luck. But was all this unfair? Autocar's Andrew Frankel investigates....

Thrill

Say what you like about it (and plenty have), just looking at a Jaguar XJ220 provides a thrill you'd struggle to match driving most sports cars. A Lamborghini Aventador is visually madder but that was never what let the XJ220 pull jaws south on every pavement it passed. The Jaguar's still stronger draw is that to its sheer, size, Keith Helfet's design adds almost indescribable beauty.

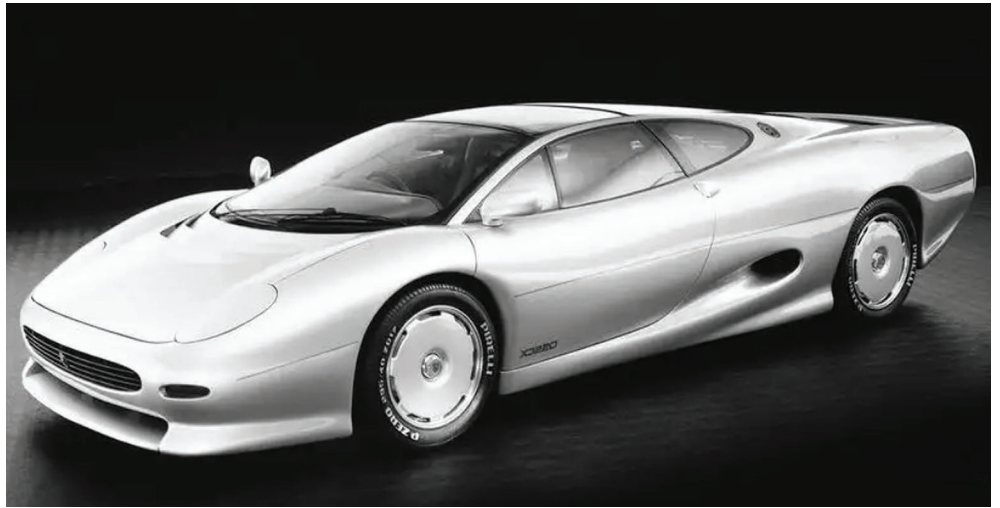
Rarity

Now mix in colossal power, success at Le Mans and astonishing rarity. Just 283 were made, making it only fractionally less scarce than that legendarily endangered species, the 272-strong Ferrari 288 GTO.

And yet despite its looks, power, pedigree and scarcity, despite even an engine that came straight from a Group C car just like the GTO, the XJ220 has spent most of the decades it has so far existed unloved by the public and something closer to an embarrassment to its creators.

Beginnings

Now is not the time to twist knives into old wounds but, briefly, Jaguar showed a concept of a car called XJ220



The original concept XJ220 with quad cam V12 and 4WD

at the 1988 Birmingham motor show (pictured). It was necessarily massive, to accommodate its four-cam V12 engine and four-wheel drive system. In the crazy final thrashings of Margaret Thatcher's bull market, the world went wild for it.

Jaguar asked Tom Walkinshaw (1946-2010) to see if it could be produced, who duly came up with the specification of the car we know today: a rear drive car with a bonded, riveted aluminium tub powered by an engine that had started life in the Metro 6R4 rally car, but developed by TWR into a formidable racing weapon used to win IMSA and Group C races in the back of the Jaguar XJR-10 and XJR-11 respectively.

Recession

A run of 350 cars was commissioned, for which 350 £50,000 deposits were not hard to find. But by the time the car was developed and ready to be delivered, the global economy had caught a very heavy cold. Some of the 350 turned out

to be speculators and tried to flee their commitment, while others were sincere customers who nevertheless found themselves lacking either the will or the way to pay for their new car.

Rather than take the hit, Jaguar sought to ensure its customers made good on their commitment, eventually winning in court.

The shadows

But victories were rarely more Pyrrhic than this: Jaguar had forced its investors to either to take their car or buy their way out of it, but not before dragging its name through the mud.

And, in the meantime the attention of those who could afford to spend such sums on a mere car was being drawn inexorably south from the Midlands to a Surrey town called Woking, where an intriguing little project from McLaren was rapidly taking shape.

Test Drive - Size

Sitting there in the watery morning sunshine, it seems altogether too outlandish for use on the public road. It is utterly intimidating.

Then you sit in it. The windscreen seems almost horizontal, its leading edge as far away as that of a Renault Espace. The driving position is actually very comfortable and the seats nothing less than outstanding, but in every direction it seems to carry on half as far again as most normal cars. And visibility behind and over the shoulder is not just limited, it's almost non-existent.

Start-up

But you can't turn back now so you still turn the key, thumb the button and hear the V6, all its chain-drive camshaft,



L-R: The architects of the XJ220 - Keith Helfet and Jim Randle

Has Jaguar's '90s Supercar Been Badly Treated? (cont)



It doesn't matter from what angle you look at XJ220 from - It is simply stunning.

turbo-whooshing, angry, ugly glory. The memory of sights and sounds two decades gone come back as if they'd left only last week.

Pure

Tentatively I prod the nose out onto roads made damp and greasy by light but steady rain. XJ220s have a reputation for being vicious in the wet and provide nothing – not even ABS – to help you. It is an entirely analogue car: Don' Law's race driver son Justin recalls a car that swapped ends on its owner in a straight line as he changed from fourth to fifth at 170mph in a straight line. Happily, XJ220s are also so strong you can destroy everything up to the A-pillars and the windscreen won't even crack.

Civil

At first it feels wide, sluggish and cumbersome. Everything from the steering to the brakes, clutch and gearshift is heavy. The ride is stiff but not the disaster I'd feared and while the engine and massive tyres mean noise levels in the cabin are quite high, this is not an un-civilised car. To this day the odd European eccentric still uses an XJ220 as a high speed, intercontinental daily driver and you can almost see why.

They need a seven grand service every other year, but if you look after them XJ220s are also exceptionally reliable.

On the road

So now it must be driven fast. Pick your moment, select third gear to minimise wheelspin and go. At 2500rpm it's not interested at all, but by 3000rpm you are absolutely flying. That is all the warning you get. Big turbos and fuel

injection with all the sophistication of a pressurised watering can compared to modern systems see to that.

And it goes without ceasing to 7200rpm. Twenty years ago, this car hit 60mph in 3.6sec, without four-wheel drive, traction control, launch control, flappy paddles or sticky tyres. So equipped there's no question it would have ducked under 3 seconds.

True grip

And suddenly you are in another world. I've been doing this job for a while now, but cannot recall another road car whose personality changes more with speed. As loads start to penetrate the suspension, this once truculent and clumsy car comes alive in your hands. The steering is a miracle, the precision with which this vast car can be guided something quite beyond your imaginings.

Grip in fast corners seems beyond anything mere tyres could muster and probably is: XJ220s have proper downforce. Horrible cliché though it is,

this car really does shrink around you.

Twitchy

Only once does it bite. Accelerating hard away from a tight corner I change into third and jump back on the gas just a little too eagerly. The turbos spool, ripping the grip of its massive 345-section rear Bridgestone's from the soggy tarmac, jinking the car sideways. There's a moment, little more than enough to raise the eyebrows of one occupant and twist the wrists of the other, before normal service is resumed.

But it is a reminder that this is a car from another age: in a modern supercar if it had happened at all, one electronic saviour or another would have checked it before you'd even noticed.

Injustice?

It seems to me that whatever the rights and wrongs of the spat between Jaguar and its customers 30 years ago, the one innocent party standing in the middle was the XJ220. In the right conditions it remains a superlative driving tool, a total sensory experience you'd need a McLaren F1 costing ten or twenty times more to substantially better or, at the very least, the relatively common F40.

Righting wrongs

One thing is at least clear: 30 years is enough for the wounds to heal. It is time the XJ220 took up its position as one of the great supercars of its or any era. For any other fate to befall it would be to perpetuate a travesty of justice that should never have occurred in the first place. ■

This story was reprinted from Autocar UK and written by former Australian automotive journalist Andrew Frankel.

