

Review - Classic & Sports Car - Feature XK8/XKR

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Now 25 years old, Jaguar's XK8 and XKR (X100) have finally realised its classic potential.

Somehow, somewhere – probably deep in a dark attic at Jaguar's Gaydon headquarters, or maybe Geoff Lawson's loft – there must be hanging a slowly deteriorating portrait of the XK8. It's the only possible way to make sense of how Jaguar's seemingly timeless grand tourer has remained such an object of desire for more than a quarter of a century.

The decade's defying shape is even more remarkable when you consider that the styling took inspiration from the E-Type. Amazingly the X100 barely changed in the 10 years it remained on sale.

The X100 has endured as one of Jaguar's most attractive, capable and commercially successful models of the past 30 years, but following privatisation the company was in a parlous financial state.

As 1991 drew to a close the company was facing losses of £221m – more than three times the previous year's results. But for Ford adding Browns Lane to its portfolio in November that year, Jaguar would likely have been found upside down, bobbing at the top of the tank.

Jaguar X100

The unlikely saviour was none other than the X100, better known as the XK8. Despite its obvious promise, the X100's gestation wasn't easy, coming amid a global recession and a time of economic strife for Jaguar.

Ford invested £100m in the Bridgend plant. This in turn ensured that the grand tourer would be powered, not by an engine parachuted in from North America, but by the all-new 4-litre AJ-V8 unit of Jaguar's own design.

That was, it must be said, a rather good decision. Instead of soldiering on with old technology, the coupé got a gem of an engine with four camshafts and four valves per cylinder. Good for 290 bhp in normally aspirated guise and with 290 lb ft of torque, the XK8 is quick enough to trouble 60 mph inside 6.5 seconds and has to be electronically reined in as it reaches 155 mph. But, despite the impressive power figures, there's something stately about the early car that makes driving it more about the experience than the performance.

Give it a prod and the XK will kickdown as smartly as a contemporary Mercedes-Benz, lifting its skirts enough to raise an eyebrow, but you find you rarely have the urge, such is the smooth delivery, supple suspension and a softer-than-silk ride. A cynic may say the gargantuan kerb weight has something to do with that, and if the XK8 went on a diet it would deliver more of the sports-car experience promised by its rakish styling.



In 1998, two years after the XK8, came the XKR which featured an Eaton supercharger, mesh grille, larger wheels and bonnet louvres.

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Look at it through the lens of a traditional grand tourer and it makes a lot more sense, that prodigious weight steamrolling flat humps in the road and ironing out cracks and potholes as if they weren't even there. While its more glamorous Aston relative made do with a variant of the XJ-S rear end, the Jag benefited from the more modern set-up designed for the upcoming X300 XJ saloon.

The XK8 draws admiring glances in a world of bland and homogenous Japanese imports, plastic-bumpered shopping cars and even its slab-sided BMW 8 Series rival. The sleek XK cuts a particular dash, an organic and aerodynamic sloop that screams sexy – or at least a middle-aged golfer's idea of it.

Geoff Lawson's sublime design undoubtedly forged its own identity, but the ancestry is clear to see from the fish-mouthed front grille to the rounded flanks, with wheels set back behind generous overhangs.

Jaguar XKR

A full decade separates the first XK8s to leave Browns Lane and the last-of-the-line XKR convertible, and it's hard not to be struck by quite how similar the two cars are. The overall shape barely changed, the only major facelift arriving in 2002. That brought with it a lightly restyled front bumper, jazzy jewelled rear lights with chrome finishing and forward-facing Xenons, not to mention the revised 'growler' badging and an array of huge alloy wheels.

Bigger changes went on beneath the bodywork, and though a raft of electronic safety equipment ranging from Electronic Stability Control to Emergency Brake Assist was added, along with much more comfortable front seats, it's the engine that puts clean air between the two iterations.

Across the board the old 3,996 cc V8 was updated with an increase in capacity of 200 cc. That might not sound like a lot- combined with continually variable camshaft phasing, power was only increased by 3.5% in the XK8 and up to 8.1%, to 400 bhp, in the hotter XKR – but boy does it feel like more. In real terms the update added a hefty dose of usable



The XK8 was updated again in 2004 when it received a new nose, rear bumper and sills.

torque to both models, adding lead to the glove and resulting in a heavier punch as you plant the throttle.

With the roof off you not only feel the thump of acceleration but hear it too, with a shrill Eaton supercharger whine almost totally drowning out the V8 and its quad-pipe roar.

Inside, the bijou cabin of the earlier car is still intact and just as cossetting, but some of the classiness is undoubtedly lost with the addition of carbon fibre where once there was walnut.

The updated and supportive seats are great, and fortunately the optional infotainment system hasn't been added.

It always looked somewhat anachronistic dropped into the middle of the dash in place of the classic round analogue dials. Look down at the centre console and the familiar Jaguar J-gate remains, albeit now controlling a six-speed ZF gearbox – the first auto with half a dozen cogs outside of stepped CVTs. Not only does it give the big cat longer legs, but it also irons out an irritating driveline thump when taking up drive from a near stop.

Summary

Experiencing the full range of X100, from early to late fills me with nostalgia.

Tastes change, but I loved the XK8 when it broke cover at Geneva in '96 and despite a gradual estrangement as fewer seem to remain on the roads. I love it just as much today.

The 2006 XKR convertible impresses more than expected, doing its best to roll back the years beneath that supercharged howl, but visually I can't help but feel that something of the launch car's class got lost along the way. The original coupé is a car in its prime, while the soft-top tries to hide its years behind mesh grilles, and chrome light-surrounds.

The XK8's sensibly sized alloy wheels with fat tyres and the sea of burr walnut and soft hide, give an old-world sense of comfort; a British Heart Foundation charity-shop vibe that suits the cars so much better than carbon fibre. The longer spent behind the wheel of the 1996 model, the more you feel at home.

Maybe, Jaguar might just have got it right the first time around. ■

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