

Autocar - The 20 Most Important Jaguars Ever Made

As Jaguar enters a new all-electric future, Autocar took a look back at the key models that made its name.

Jaguar's relaunch as an EV-only brand has shown that the company is not shying away from bold decisions, which is something it has done plenty of in the past. As we await the first all-new electric cars, in this story they look at the most important cars in Jaguar's history to date. It includes everything from seductive sports cars to mainstream saloons, supercars to SUVs and, yes, even an EV. Many of these cars have split opinions and gone on to become defining models in Jaguar's story. Here's their pick, arranged in chronological order:

Jaguar XK120 (1948)

The Jaguar name had been introduced prior to the Second World War and the SS100 sports had set the tone for the company's sporting output. However, it was the XK120 that really put William Lyons' company on the map.

The undoubtedly sensation of the 1948 London Motor Show when it was launched, the XK120 brought a brand new six-cylinder engine and styling that put even the best of Italy and France in the shade.

Performance was another area where the XK120 stood out – its name boldly described its top speed when most family cars struggled to wheeze up to 70mph.

As a keystone to the postwar Jaguar brand, the XK120 and its successors made the name as desirable as Aston Martin or Ferrari, and motorsport success cemented that image.



Jaguar MkV (1949)

An often overlooked model due to its short production run between 1949 and 1951, the MkV was important to Jaguar for establishing it in the upper echelon of luxury saloons.

If not quite on a par with Bentley, the MkV was a whole lot more affordable than its upmarket British rival. The engines were of pre-war origin, but performance was strong, especially the 3½-Litre model, and the styling gently brought the firm's large saloon into the modern era with integrated headlights.

Most importantly, the MkV's chassis provided the base that underpinned large Jaguar saloons, such as the graceful MkVII and all the way up to 1961 when the MkIX went off sale.



Jaguar C-Type (1951)

Jaguar's sporting prowess before the war had been largely limited to British events, but the 1951 C-Type had a very different intent. It was built with the Le Mans 24 Hours in mind, and it won the event first time out. That success was no fluke and the C-Type went on to be a formidable force in sports car racing all around the world, even if only a modest 54 cars were ever built.

A race-tuned version of the XK120's 3.4-litre straight-six engine powered the C-Type and another win at Le Mans followed in 1953. The C-Type's performance was helped by its early adoption of disc brakes. When the C-type began to be outclassed, Jaguar upped the ante again with the sleekly aerodynamic D-Type, while the exclusive XKSS sports car version hinted at the E-type that was to follow. With five Le Mans wins in the 1950s, the sports racing cars underlined Jaguar's performance credentials and encouraged the firm to revisit endurance racing in the 1980s.



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Jaguar MKII (1959)

Can there be many other cars with so many film and television appearances as the Jaguar MkII? In the 60s and 70s, it was the default choice for both onscreen villains and the police. Today, the MKII remains an automotive short hand for a car with a bit of edge to it.

All of those big and small screen appearances beamed Jaguar into the mainstream of car buyers' thoughts with the speed, handling, style and classy interior of the MkII.

Just as vitally, the MkII widened Jaguar's sales reach to the mid-market and reaped huge financial benefits as the company sold 83,980 MKIIs, plus a further 7242 of the pared back 240/340 range. That made the MkII the best-selling Jaguar model up to that point by a long way.



Jaguar XJ (1968)

If Jaguar's sports cars grabbed plenty of headlines for the firm, the all-new XJ arguably stands as the company's single most important model. Up to this point, Jaguar had offered a sprawling range of saloons from the compact MkII to the vast MkX and 420G.

At a stroke, the XJ replaced them all with a sleek, low-slung four-door saloon that was soon hailed as the best in the world.

That was no idle claim as the XJ's refinement, performance, comfort, and handling were other worldly. When the XJ gained the turbine smooth V12 in 1972, it only put the car even further ahead of the competition.

Two more generations of this XJ appeared, running up to 1992 in the case of the XJ12, and they improved in quality and reliability throughout the XJ's lifetime.

Jaguar E-type (1961)

If there is one car in Jaguar's history that stands out more than any other, it's the E-type. Ever since its launch in 1961 at the Geneva Motor Show, where a second car was hurriedly driven down to the show in a hurry to be on the stand, every sports car Jaguar has launched has been compared to the E-type.

When it arrived, the E-type offered a claimed 150mph top speed and looks that made everything else look a bit ordinary, and all at half the price of anything remotely as glamorous.

Like the C- and D-Type, the E-type went on to enjoy an illustrious racing career to back up its showroom allure. In time, it gained bigger engines, including the 5.3-litre V12, and was outgunned as a sports car in later life, but the E-type never lost its lustre.

This is why almost every Jaguar since has referenced the E-type in some way, shape or form.



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Jaguar XJ-S (1975)

The hardest act in the automotive world fell to the Jaguar XJ-S – replacing the E-type. In fairness, the XJ-S was not intended as a direct replacement for the era-defining E-type. Rather, the XJ-S was meant as a grand tourer to take on the Porsche 928 and Mercedes-Benz SLC.

Reception was lukewarm to begin with for the XJ-S, but Jaguar held its nerve and, slowly but surely, its coupe developed into a sales success. This was helped by adding the new 3.6-litre AJ6 engine to the line-up in 1983 to give a more affordable option to the existing 5.3-litre V12 model.

In time, the engines grew in size and a facelift in 1991 kept the XJS (now without a hyphen) selling in decent numbers. By the time it went off sale in 1996, Jaguar's faith in this model was rewarded with a total of 115,413 of all versions, and it was the longest running production model in the company's history.



Jaguar XJ220 (1992)

An absolute sales dud when new, the XJ220 is an important car for Jaguar as a warning of how not to over-promise and under-deliver. It also demonstrates how even a perceived failure when new can go on to become a halo model for a company.

When it was first unveiled, the XJ220 was set to have a V12 engine and four-wheel drive. The production came with a turbocharged V6 and rear-wheel drive, yet it could still easily brush past 210mph thanks to 542bhp from its mid-mounted motor.

A global recession, however, saw well-heeled buyers take fright and the XJ220 managed to eventually shift 281 units. However, posterity has been kinder to the XJ220 and it's now judged as one of the very best supercars of the era and a showcase for everything Jaguar could offer at the time of its launch.

Jaguar XJ40 (1986)

The XJ40 had a very long development period, taking 15 years from the original plan to replace the original XJ to the launch of the new model in 1986 due to a combination of global financial woes and industrial strife at Jaguar.

The XJ40 was a big leap forward thanks to its new engines, shared with the XJ-S, less weight, better aerodynamics, and improved performance over the old XJ6. It also provided more cabin space.

There were some reliability issues to deal with early on, but Jaguar showed admirable skill at sorting these and developing the XJ40 into a world class luxury saloon that evolved the XJ template for a new generation of buyers.



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Jaguar X300 XJR (1994)

Jaguar had offered an XJR version of the XJ40 between 1988 and 1992, but that car made do with only 251bhp, sports suspension, and a body kit. The all-new XJR of 1994 based on the latest X300 generation of XJ saloon was a very different animal.

A supercharged 4.0-litre engine gave this new XJR 321bhp, 0-60mph in 5.7 seconds, and a 155mph top speed to deal a very British rival for the BMW M5. At the same time, the XJR also retained all of the luxury saloon comfort of its sister models.

Fast car buyers lapped up the XJR, which had styling that was a very clear nod to the original 1968 XJ's and defined how the company's large car would look for the next 16 years.



Jaguar XK8 (1996)

While the XJS had carried the sports coupe torch for Jaguar with charm, the new for 1996 XK8 was a vastly better car in every respect. The sleek looks had an air of the E-type about the headlights, and both the Coupe and Convertible didn't have a bad line or angle. It was the same inside where Jaguar deftly mixed trad and modern.

Under the bonnet was a new V8 engine that would soon be shared with the XJ. It delivered a blend of pace and refinement that was a trademark of Jaguar's sports cars and put the XK8 into contention with the likes of the BMW 8 Series and Porsche 911. Jaguar moved further into Porsche's territory with the XKR that used a supercharger to deliver as much as 400bhp and 0-60mph in 5.1 seconds.

The next generation XK range moved to an aluminium frame and body to save weight while retaining a similar restrained elegance that kept it in the running until it was replaced by the F-type in 2014 that further distilled this formula.



Jaguar XJ X308 (1997)

A lesson in don't fix it if it ain't broke was superbly delivered by the X308 generation of Jaguar XJ. There were apparently few changes to the exterior looks, though this belies just how much work was done, so it appeared very similar to the previous X300 model. Buyers were happy as the handsome lines stayed but with subtle updates.

Much less modest was the new engine range under the bonnet of the X308. Jaguar's latest 3.2 and 4.0 litre V8s delivered, respectively, 240 and 290bhp. A 370bhp supercharged XJR was also a key part of the line-up.

The X308 was a sales hit and earned Jaguar newfound honours in reliability and satisfaction surveys, which made both buyers and dealers very happy.



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Jaguar S-type (1998)

Aware it needed to broaden its appeal to bring in more sales, Jaguar released the S-Type in 1998 to compete against the Audi A6, BMW 5 Series, and Mercedes-Benz E-Class. Tough crowd. Banking on customers wanting something different to the German's style, Jaguar harked back to its MkII for inspiration.

It worked to an extent, though the lines were contrived to allow for passenger and boot space. Inside, the S-type was more successful in its looks, if not initial build quality. However, this improved greatly with a facelift in 2004, and the S-type was also fitted with a 2.7-litre V6 turbo diesel to give it more company car appeal.

The S-type R was a worthy BMW M5 rival thanks to its 400bhp supercharged V8 motor. While a qualified success, the S-type is perhaps more important in Jaguar history for paving the way for the XF that really did give the Germans a scare. Ford had purchased Jaguar in 1989, and this car shared its platform with the Lincoln LS.



Jaguar XF (2007)

If the S-type's looks were a pastiche, the 2007 Jaguar XF showed exactly how Design Director Ian Callum wanted the company's cars to forge a new path. There were hints of Jaguar's past saloons, but the XF was a thoroughly modern take on an executive saloon to take on rivals from Germany.

A range of V6 petrol and diesel engines, plus petrol V8s that included a supercharged option (for the XF-R), were available to begin with.

In 2011, Jaguar added the four-cylinder 2.2-litre turbo diesel when it facelifted the XF and took the fight to the heart of this sector. It's telling that Jaguar's annual sales tally went up noticeably when the smaller diesel became available.

A Sportbrake estate arrived a year later and rounded off a superb range that was then replaced by the second generation XF in 2015.

Jaguar XJ X350 (2003)

There were those who felt the traditional look of this new XJ saloon made it feel outdated at launch. However, beneath the looks lay a bang up to date full aluminium core that made the XJ as much as 400kg lighter than key rivals.

With much less weight to lug around, the X350 generation of XJ was more fuel efficient, faster, and rode poor surfaces with sublime ease. It also handled in a way no other luxury saloon could match.

Plenty loved the way this car looked outside and inside, but others wanted a more up to the minute big Jaguar, which demonstrated the dilemma Jaguar's designers have faced for decades.



Autocar - The 20 Most Important Jaguars Ever Made

Jaguar C-X75 (2010)

Even more than the XJ220, the C-X75 remains a massive “what if” for Jaguar. The achingly pretty supercar introduced the idea of an electric drivetrain to the brand, albeit one powered by twin gas turbines rather than a battery pack.

With help from Williams Advanced Engineering, it was every bit as attention-grabbing as the original launch of the E-Type.

Four electric motors, one for each wheel, gave the C-X-75 a total of 778bhp, 0-62mph in 2.9 seconds, and a 199mph top speed.

Potential customers were desperate to get their hands on one of the planned 250 production cars, but the project was shelved after a mere five prototypes had been completed. A C-X75 did appear in the James Bond film Spectre – powered by a conventional V8 - but that was as far as the Jaguar supercar got to road going reality.



Jaguar XJ X351 (2010)

The XF had laid the groundwork for the arrival of Jaguar's new luxury flagship in 2010 when an all-new XJ arrived. Described as a sport limousine, it fulfilled its brief to perfection, even if it was not quite as roomy in the rear seats as some rivals.

The small inconvenience didn't deter Jaguar's loyal XJ customers nor a lot of new-to-the-brand buyers. The mix of traditional materials and modern lines in the cabin was coupled with top drawer refinement, plus the XJ was superb fun to drive. The expected petrol and diesel engine line-up was on offer, yet this is where Jaguar may have missed a trick by not giving customers a hybrid option when so many of its competitors were going down this route.

Sales of this final generation of XJ (so far) ended in 2019 with sluggish sales. It was supposed to be replaced by an all-new, all electric XJ but that car was cancelled in 2021.



Jaguar XE (2015)

The X-Type of 2001 failed to challenge cars like the BMW 3 Series in the compact luxury car space, and it died in 2009. In 2015, the XE returned to the class. The handsome four-door saloon was the first in its class to come with an aluminium base as well as using this lightweight material for its suspension.

Inside, it was similar in style to the second-generation XF, which meant good looks and comfort. The XE was the first Jaguar to make use of the firm's Ingenium engine in petrol and diesel forms. It was a clever and efficient engine, but reliability issues cast a shadow over the XE as time moved on. From 2020, Jaguar also offered the XE with mild hybrid power.

Where the XE missed out on really upsetting its German rivals was not adding estate, coupe, and convertible versions to the range. In the end, the XE never achieved its hoped-for sales 100,000-plus units per year, managing less than half that in its best year in 2016.



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Jaguar F-Pace (2016)

It might have been so late to the large SUV party that most rivals were on to their third generation by 2016, but the F-Pace was nonetheless a great addition to Jaguar's range.

Good looking, roomy inside, and very good to drive, it was exactly what you wanted a Jaguar SUV to be. It was ably assisted by a range of petrol, diesel and hybrid engines that were a good match against rivals and what buyers wanted.

The rapid SVR with its 542bhp supercharged 5.0-litre V8 added some glamour, too.

With its launch in 2016, Jaguar's sales figures broke the 100,000 barrier for the first time. It was no coincidence this was the same year the F-Pace arrived and showed how crucial SUV sales were, which encouraged the addition of the E-Pace in 2017 and the all-electric I-Pace a year after that.



Jaguar I-Pace (2018)

The future was very bright for Jaguar in 2018 when its I-Pace all-electric SUV was launched. The press loved it, the car won European Car of the Year in 2019, and sales were good in a market still coming around to the idea of EVs.

There was a huge amount to like about the I-Pace as the way it drove and performed were what you'd want from a Jaguar. It also came with a decent EV range and looks that shared the same handsome design cues as the XF and XJ saloons.

Importantly, Jaguar was ahead of a lot of the competition with its EV model. It should have put the firm in a good position, but its rivals caught up fast and now the I-Pace has been consigned to history like all of the company's other models as it heads in a new direction. The I-Pace is the main car used by Waymo in its autonomous-taxi trials being carried out in California and Arizona.

Editor - An obvious exclusion from the 20 cars was the SS100

SS100 Jaguar (1936)

Produced between 1936 and 1939, the SS100 marked a significant shift for Swallow Sidecars earlier focus on saloons and tourers. It was one of the first sports cars to bear the Jaguar name, and its design combined elegance with performance, featuring a sleek, aerodynamic body and a powerful engine capable of reaching a theoretical top speed of 100 mph—a remarkable feat for its era.

The car's engineering innovations, such as its overhead valve engine and lightweight construction, made it a competitive choice for motorsport enthusiasts. Despite being built for the road, many owners tested its limits on the track, showcasing its versatility and durability.

The SS 100 quickly gained a reputation for its speed, style, driving dynamics and aesthetic appeal, solidified its status as a legend in the annals of automotive history and one of the most iconic sports cars of the 1930s.

