

The Bird that Begat a Cat

Alan Stott

If I had a dollar for every mile that I have travelled in a Swallow sidecar then I'd be better off than I am. Swallow sidecars were still very much in evidence when I was young in the 1950's. Ours, a single seater, was a lovely thing and hooked to a beautiful chrome and yellow 600 single cylinder "Panther", it looked magnificent. It was so black that you felt that you could bury your hand in the paint. The company Swallow Sidecars, possibly the initials of which made up the SS of SS cars, later became the Jaguar Car Co. Swallow was the start of it all eighty years ago. In 1921 in Blackpool in the north of England 20 year old William Lyons bought a sidecar from a friend William Walmsley. Walmsley had not long arrived in Blackpool with his retired coal merchant parents from Stockport, and had started a small business refurbishing ex world war one motorcycles and building sidecars for them. Both families lived in the same street King Edward Avenue and knew each other well, well enough for Lyons to suggest to Walmsley that they should join each other in business. Lyons was no fool, he could see that what Walmsley was doing had huge potential in the period of austerity following the war, and that with his drive and Walmsley's skills and experience, they would be on to a winner. Just a short time later on the 4th September 1922 the two mates signed on the dotted line and the "The Swallow Sidecar Company" was formed, it was William Lyons 21st birthday.

Lyons was absolutely right, constantly larger and larger premises had to be found to cope with the volume of business. The motorcycle and sidecar business was booming. But Lyons was already looking ahead, and the first seeds of the Jaguar Car Company were about to be planted. In the winter of 1926/27 Lyons obtained a chassis of an Austin 7 and the very first Austin Swallow was born. Today it is not possible to easily understand what an impact this diminutive car had on the market. Always two toned in bright colours with a distinctive rounded body the Austin Swallow hit the market like a bomb. Henlys, still to this day Jaguar agents, placed a huge order with Swallow for the new car, an order that took even

the usually supremely confident Lyons by surprise. But the partners were up to it. With a quick decision they uprooted from their Lancashire home and moved south to industrial Coventry in the heart of the British midlands, hub of the motor manufacturing industry, The year was 1928. Already by then Swallow had given Morris, Standard, Fiat, Swift and Wolseley their unique facelift. Much of the success of the Swallow Sidecar and Coachbuilding Company as it was now called, came from the visual sportyness of their cars. Split and lowered screens, seats lowered between the chassis rails, lowered radiators and bonnets, etc. They probably didn't go much better than the original cars, but boy they certainly looked the part. By 1931 Lyons, now the driving force of the company had a new ambition, a car of his own make. A car that had to be beautiful and had to be sporty, (the formula after 70 years has never changed.) He did a deal with John Black of Standard Cars to supply special 4 and 6 cylinder engines and chassis with Swallow paying part of the tooling costs.



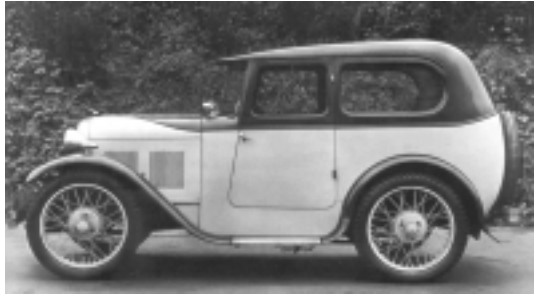
The resulting cars were known as SS2 for the 4 cylinder and SS1 for the 6. Nobody said what the SS stood for then, and nobody ever has since. Standard Sports? Swallow Sidecars?, Super Sports? or significantly in its correct trademark form the SS is written almost exactly like the SS of the notorious SS (Schutzstaffeln). This was the German "Protection Squad" responsible for the atrocities of the German slave labour program in World War II, an organisation formed just three years earlier in 1928. Reportedly this visual connection to this horrifying organisation prompted Lyons to drop the SS name. Attractive as this

idea is, in the 1938 catalogue for the SS100, that is one year before the start of the war, the car was only referred to as a Jaguar 100. However, for whatever reason the company was renamed, after the SS100 model, Jaguar, and SS did not survive the second World War.

The SS1 was quite a car, in styling it lead the field, in performance it outperformed the equivalent Standard car by at least a third, and in price at £310 against an equivalent vehicle from any other manufacturers of about £1,000 it was an amazing bargain. In 1935 (that is 67 years ago) you could specify your SS with such modern features as metallic finish, built in jacks and a radio. Although SS had been amazingly successful with the SS1 it was just not up to competition use, or at least it was never particularly successful. This was the period when commercially successful companies had to be able to foot it, in what we now know as motor sport.

A number of significant things happened at SS Cars in 1935. Firstly the starter of it all William Walmsley retired with his part of the company fortune. He was not as dynamic or as ambitious as Lyons, a difference that caused many an argument between the partners, but without him there would be no Jaguar cars today.

Lyons needed a two seat sports-touring car that could be used for competition work. The SS90 a first attempt at an open two seater was rushed into production in early 1935 so that it could be entered in the RAC rally in March of that year, but it was a commercial failure, only 24 ever being produced. Then came the breakthrough, in April of that year William Heynes, father of the all time great XK series of engines, joined the company as Chief Engineer, and in October the very first SS100 Jaguar, the first proper production sports car was released for the London motor show. The SS100, similar in many ways to the 90 but with a purpose built chassis and revised backend body work, hit the spot. Although all makes of the cars were produced in low volume prior to the second World War, 314 SS100's (of both 2.7 and 3.5 litre models) was still a very low number. There



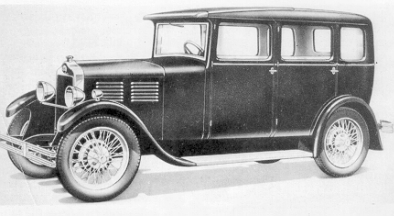
When an Austin 7 chassis met a Swallow body, the ancestor of the Jaguar was born



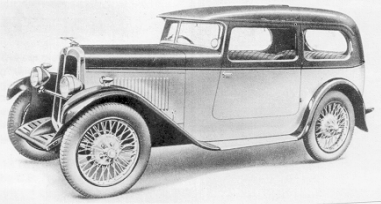
'Beautiful and sporting'. Well it looked good anyway. Bill Lyon's first car the SS1

were production and other reasons for this, not the least being the start of the second World War. The last car was produced in 1940 and then it was all over until peace returned and the amazing XK120.

When I was 19 I was in the Air Force based at RAF Waddington near Lincoln in the UK. One afternoon I was in Lincoln when I passed a car dealers window and there it was, alone and magnificent. What I thought then, and probably still to today was here was the ultimate sports car. All shiny, black and chrome. Stone guards over the huge chrome headlights, a fold flat windscreen with racing aero screens behind, a louvered bonnet as long as a football paddock, huge wire wheels and a steering wheel big enough to guide an ocean liner. All this was set off with vast front guards which swept down into large footboards and up again over the rear wheels in one glorious flowing swoop. The sports car to end all sports cars, a SS100 Jaguar. Even when I saw it it must have been 15-20 years old, but it was magnificent. The price on the screen was £450 (\$1,400), I was earning £4.50 (\$14.00) a week at the time, it would never be mine.



1930 Standard 9 before and after the Swallow treatment



Well almost half a century has passed and I have finally got one, well really a brilliant and very accurate replica. Build in Christchurch in 1978 by Bill Cockram, it took years for him to collect all the correct SS parts and those that he couldn't find he made. In many cases carving the patterns and having the parts cast. He made just about everything, badges, body, windscreen, etc. The five beautiful 18" wire wheels took pieces from 12 old wheels to make. He painted the car himself, made the upholstery, the hood and the sidescreens himself, (the sidescreens being Bills idea as no self-respecting 1930's sports car driver would have used poncy things like that). When I first saw the car it had been well used and

was fitted with the only non original looking part, a Mark II Jaguar engine. Bill agreed to take it in case he had engine problems with his XK150 coupe. We finally sourced a 1948 Mark V Jaguar engine and Moss 4 speed gearbox in Sydney to replace it. The Mark V is almost identical to the prewar SS100 engine, 3.5 litre, OHV pushrod. Almost a year after it arrived the whole thing has been completely reconditioned and we are half way to putting it together again. After that and much other reconditioning of the completing stripped car it will be time for the great reassembly. Why does it all sound so simple, because it hasn't quite worked out like that. Alan Price has straightened and welded the chassis, Ian Macrae has made lots of small missing parts, while Ken Rogers has been into everything including rebuilding the engine itself. On top of this I've had help and advice from many other club members making me feel either slightly redundant or a little lacking in mechanical skills



1937 SS100

But we will finally get there and one day (I'd like to think that by the upcoming mega car show in August) there it will be "complete" just as Mr Lyons wanted it to look, an all time classic straight from the last century. Sixty seven years ago the SS100 was shown for the first time. (Mine only feels as if it's taken that long.) But we're progressing, you can't rush toward the past too quickly, you must savour it.



Three great sports cars: XK 120 1949-54, Austin Swallow 1927-32, E Type 1961-75