

ABCS Newsletter



February 2004

Volume 13 Issue 2

NEXT MEETING – THURSDAY, February 12, 2004 – RUSH STREET GRILL

Minutes of the ABCS Meeting For January 8, 2004

By: Greg Bowman

Gael Bright, President, conducted the meeting. 20 Members were in attendance. Two British cars were present, an MGB and a Jaguar XJ6.

Regalia:

Al Bradley has for sale:

T-Shirts	\$10
Caps	\$15
Sweatshirts	\$20

See Gael Bright if you would like to order a polo shirt or denim shirt with the club logo.

Program:

Al Bradley reported on his trip to the British Isles, "Where Am I and Why am I Here?" Al spent a week in Ireland and a week in England, taking in some wonderful sites such as Stonehenge. Of course, most captivating were photos from his tour of the Beulieu Motor Museum at Lord Montagu's estate. Al also took many shots of classic British cars he saw in Great Britain.



Upcoming Programs:

February: Dave Petke "Professional Vehicles" or "Hold Your Hearses"

March: Eddie Penland "Review ABCS 2003 in photos"

April: Paul Kern MGs and other experiences.

Upcoming Events:

Tech Session at Alleys Jaguar - January 24 at 10:00 a.m.

Drive Your British Car Week Gathering - May 26, 2004 at Gourmet and Co. in Johnson City.

All renewals for existing members are \$15

THE CASE FOR THE SP250

By: Gerry Mitchell

Jaguar Cars purchased the Daimler Company, Ltd. from the B.S.A. (Birmingham Small Arms) Group--- who had absorbed Daimlers in 1910---in May 1960, for the sum of three million four hundred thousand pounds. Of course, negotiations with Jack Sangster, then chairman of B.S.A., had been ongoing for some time by then. Jaguar bought Daimler in a pretty run-down state. In taking over Daimlers, Jaguar inherited the interesting Daimler sports car, which had been introduced to the world just a year earlier at the New York Importers' Auto Show in April 1959. An eccentric hybrid, the SP250 was the car that sank Daimler. The SP250 was introduced as the "Dart" but Chrysler, who had already copyrighted the "Dart" name for one of its cars, the Dodge "Dart," complained. So, the "Dart" name had to be dropped and the car was renamed the SP250 to reflect engine capacity. But actual assembly of the car did not begin until very late that year. So, the car was in actual production only a very short time—a few months at most--- before Jaguar took over. If Daimlers had continued under B.S.A. ownership, the SP250 probably would have continued in production for a much longer time than it actually did.

My interest in the Daimler SP250 began from this passage in the JCNA Concours d'Elegance Rule Book, Chapter II, Section 1, No. 3: "Only 1962-On Daimler motorcars, manufactured by Jaguar, sharing production Jaguar bodies and correct engines are eligible. Jaguar engined Daimlers, without production Jaguar bodies, are eligible for Special Division Class S3. Daimler SP250s are NOT eligible." I have long wondered, why, Since the SP250 was built by Jaguar for most of its production run, it has been excluded from competing in official JCNA Concours d'Elegance.

The Daimler Motor Syndicate, Ltd. was formed in England in 1893 by F. R. Simms to exploit Gottlieb Daimler's motor patents, intending to build the German cars under license. But it was not until 1896 that the Coventry factory became active, as part of H. J. Lawson's empire and manufacture of complete cars did not begin until 1897. Daimler himself was a director until 1898 but the English and German companies soon went their separate ways and by five years there was no connection between the two companies. So, "The Daimler" was an institution in Coventry and its roots went back to the very beginnings of Britain's Motor Industry. Daimler announced its first V12 (7.1-litre Double Six) in 1927 and it would build many more V12s up through 1938. By the time Jaguar took over, some families had served the Daimler Company for three generations.

The Honorable John Scott-Montagu became the first British driver to compete in a continental race on a vehicle of British manufacture when he drove a Daimler in the Paris-Ostend race in 1899. The present Lord Montague of Beaulieu says, "My father's first car had been a Daimler which he acquired in 1898. It was the first car ever to enter the House of Commons Yard, and he gave the first ride in a motorcar to a member of the Royal Family in this machine. As a result of the Prince of Wales—later King Edward VII—sampling the delights of motoring in this way, the Daimler became the Royal car thereafter." Thus began a relationship between Daimlers and British Royalty which lasted until the 1950s; four sovereigns—Edward VII, George V, Edward VIII, and George VI—rode in Daimlers.

After World War II, Daimler limousines continued with vehicles such as the straight-eight 5.5-litre DE39 of 1949, but there were also the smaller Lanchester, the Conquest drop head coupe, and Majestic, which came in 3.8-litre Majestic Major form among many others. But, the real departure came in 1959 with the SP250 sports car, powered by a free-revving 2.5-litre V8, representing a complete change in design policy for the long-established Coventry concern. This came in atypical, brash, modern, fiberglass bodywork. The typical Daimler, up to this time, had been a limousine used by the aristocracy, or even for Royal duties. There was also a 4.5-litre version of this same engine used by the more staid Daimlers.

By the mid-1950s, the British Motor Industry generally was in a severe recession and The Daimler Company was no exception and in very bad financial condition and a necessary cataclysmic change of management was undertaken. Edward Turner, who had come from Triumph and was a brilliant designer of Triumph motorcycle engines, became the managing director. Daimler needed some exciting new offering to bring it back into financial solvency. So Edward Turner decided that a new sports car, designed to appeal to the lucrative American market would be the instrument for pulling Daimler back into "the black" and directed that such a car would be designed and built. Percy McNally who had also styled the famous FX4 London Taxi designed the Dart's oddball shape. He was obviously given free reign by Edward Turner.

Turner designed a brand-new engine for this car. It was a 2548 cc, short-stroke, two-and-one-half-liter, five-main-bearing, ninety-degree V8 with cast-iron cylinder block and interchangeable aluminum heads, whose valve gear owed much to Turner's previous experience with Triumph motorcycle units. It had inclined valves in hemispherical combustion chambers operated by pushrods from a single camshaft in the "V" of the cylinder block. It had two SU carburetors and developed 140 BHP at 5800 RPM, allied to a close-ratio four-speed manual gearbox (no synchromesh in first gear) with rear-wheel drive and single dry-plate clutch. It developed 155 lb/ft of torque at 3600 RPM. At the time it was Britain's only V8 engine except for Rolls Royce's Silver Cloud II unit. It gave the new car an impressive top speed of 127 MPH if you were brave enough and "The Autocar" found that it would also accelerate from a standing start to 60 MPH in 9.5 seconds and to 100 MPH in 26.3 seconds. The SP250 was light (2090 lb), nimble, and surprisingly fast. So, the SP250 with its smooth, torquey, free-revving engine soon developed a reputation as a fine performer and the engine refinement was never in doubt. Although its guppy-style front could never be called handsome, when 1960s drivers caught it in their rearview mirrors, they knew to move over. The drastic, plastic "Dart" was seriously quick.

The V8 unit gave the new Daimler a degree of top-gear flexibility worthy of any Jaguar but the bodywork was not to everyone's liking on grounds of styling and lack of rigidity alike. But, at its low price, it was an inviting little car and would have sold admirably from the start, had Daimlers been in a better position to manufacture and market it in quantities. None of Daimler's products competed directly with Jaguars. The SP250 filled a gap midway between such offerings as the Triumph, MG, Austin Healey and the XK-150. "The Daimler" was a large factory, which was not being utilized to capacity. Jaguar, therefore, elected initially to carry on the Daimler tradition, retaining all the Daimler products. It was announced that no changes would be made to the Daimler line for 1961 except for body improvements on the SP250. Jaguar showed no sports cars at Earls Court in 1960 but Daimlers compensated for this by providing a fine display with the SP250.

The amateurish, hastily designed, frog-styled bodywork was in resin-bonded fiberglass on a light steel chassis frame that passed under the rear axle. Front suspension was by coil springs and wishbones; rear suspension of beam axle by semi-elliptic leaf springs; telescopic front dampers and lever-arm rear dampers. Steering was old-fashioned "cam & lever" which required a large steering wheel for effective leverage. Wheels were standard 15-inch steel disc or optional center-lock wire wheels with 5.90 X 15 tires. There were Girling disc brakes on all four wheels, a rarity at the time. Because the SP250 is so light, this means highly effective braking and Daimler made full use of this in its advertising. But, the SP250 was not the first production car to have four-wheel disc brakes, however, as the Jaguar XK-150, introduced in May, 1957, also had four-wheel discs and is believed to be the first production car in the world so-equipped.

Even though the British Motor Industry was in a recession, this was not true of Jaguar who had unimpaired sales and actually needed additional space to accommodate its expansion. But, they did not want to manufacture their specialized product in an area divorced from the main motor industry.

An extension or addition to the existing Browns Lane factory was contrary to local British government policy at that time, so they proceeded to purchase an existing midland company, Daimlers, only two miles from the main works, to accommodate their needs.

When Jaguars took over Daimlers, the SP250 sports car, the last independent Daimler, had been in production for perhaps six or seven months. The company had wanted a car that would appeal to the car-crazy Americans and had designed the light two-seater open fiberglass body with pop-eyed headlamps and large tail fins---fashionable in the U.S. at the time---finishing off the fenders at the rear. Some sources state that this was a 2+2 body and some claim that there were "occasional" rear seats. The nose had a wide, guppy-like mouth similar to today's Ford Thunderbird. On the broad, egg-crate front grille was a large "V" motif hinting at that wonderful V8 power lurking behind it. The styling was at least controversial and considered outright ugly by many so found few friends. Daimlers felt that it could not afford to tool up for a steel body at that time so it opted to create the body in fiberglass. Therefore, in trying to seduce the Americans, Daimler alienated the conservative British market as a result.

The SP250's frame and gearbox were unashamedly and admittedly copied from the Triumph TR3A (some parts were even shared). The resulting frame and body were excessively flexible with inadequate stiffness. When turning corners or driving on uneven surfaces the doors tended to fly open and the fiberglass bonnet had a nasty habit of springing open at speed. The first models also were sold without such amenities as cigar lighter, windscreen wipers, heater, and bumpers to keep the price low. This first pre-Jaguar version was later termed the "A-Specification" version. Eventually development of the SP250 had three phases: A, B, and C specifications.

After Jaguar took over, Jaguar engineers created better body and frame stiffness and some of the heretofore-missing amenities were added and these later Jaguar-created versions were termed "B-Specification" and "C-Specification" cars. The main differences between the early versions and those that came later under Jaguar-inspired engineering modifications such as the great improvements to chassis and body stiffness and much better ride quality and road holding, were that the later cars incorporated refinements which had previously been options; things like cigar lighter, heater, windscreen wipers, and bumpers as standard equipment. The point here is that Jaguar greatly improved the car after gaining control of it and literally made of it a vastly different car from what it had been in the beginning. This literally made a "Jaguar" of it rather than leaving it a bare bones Daimler as it had been in the beginning. Jaguar toyed with the idea of rebodging the SP250 to improve its esthetic appeal, but cost projections showed that the redesigned car would have to be priced at virtually the same as the new and vastly superior E-Type. So, the project was dropped. Sadly, only 2644 examples of this fascinating car were produced with only 1200 being left-hand drive and shipped to the U.S. With this effective and valuable beginning framework to build upon, it's really a shame that this redesign wasn't actually accomplished and produced as then Jaguar would have really made the car its own and would have continued to have a very appealing sports car accommodating this very fine V8 engine which was really much too good in many ways to abandon. In the beginning the car had a four-speed manual transmission without synchromesh in first gear as standard equipment. Later, under Jaguar, either a Laycock-de Normanville overdrive or a Borg-Warner automatic transmission was offered as optional equipment. The automatic reduced its maximum speed somewhat but the London Metropolitan Police liked the automatic version well enough to run a fleet of thirty black automatic SP250s thinking they were fast enough to catch almost anyone.

In spite of its many shortcomings, the Daimler SP250 was raced successfully for several seasons, both in Great Britain and in the United States where it was twice raised into a higher class by the SCCA because it so dominated its equals.

A Daimler catalogue in 1959 proclaimed: “Nimble as a kitten in town traffic, the highway is the true domain of the SP250. To feel its eager response as it opens up is to know a new motoring adventure.” The “Dart” sales brochure, however, was total misrepresentation. The superlatives (“feather-light handling,” “impeccable cornering”) betrayed the truth. Today, the SP250 is quaint and distinctive, and that gorgeous V8 engine really redeems this rather eccentric device.

On March 16, 1961, the new Jaguar E-Type was officially unveiled at the Geneva Auto Show. The last XK-150 had departed the production line in January 1961. There were no major changes in the Daimler program. Even the SP250 continued in production and might have had a long-term future—a replacement body style was already being considered in the early 1960s—but when Sir William Lyons’ Jaguar concern took over Daimlers in 1960, its future became seriously in doubt. Sir William Lyons never liked the “Dart” because the styling offended him and also because it would have been seen as low-level competition for the E-Type. Jaguar made a half-hearted attempt to restyle the car, but it was never really on and Lyons pulled the plug on the sportiest car Daimler had ever made with no regrets in 1964.

However, Sir William was smart enough to see the potential in the SP250’s excellent and reliable V8 engine so that, since 1962, it had been installed in the Jaguar Mk II body shell with a badge less, fluted Daimler grille, creating the popular and highly successful Daimler 250 V8 saloon. This lovely, powerful, turbine-like V8 engine ceased production when the 240 saloons were discontinued in 1969. Jaguar was not to offer another production V8 engine until many years later with the introduction of the XK8 and XJ8.

After only 2644 of these individualistic two-seater SP250s had been produced, assembly ended in 1964. Jaguar eventually killed it off as not being refined enough or well enough built according to its own standards. Jaguar was too committed to the far superior E-Type to consider persevering with any other two-seater. Today, the many flaws of the unhappy Daimler SP250 are seen as endearing and full of period character and are a positive aspect in today’s classic market. Survivors are highly prized.

The “Dart” was a 1950s concept born too late to compete with the new wave of monologue sports cars headed by the stunning E-Type. It stands as a memorial to both the haphazard 1960s British motor industry and its self-destructive love affair with all things American.

Since Jaguar Cars manufactured the SP250 much longer than it had been produced by Daimlers prior to the Jaguar take-over and since Jaguar had made a number of much needed improvements and modifications to this interesting motor car, thus making it more or less Jaguar’s own creation, I feel it deserves to be included in the overall list of cars produced by Jaguar and therefore eligible to be entered in JCNA-sanctioned Concours d’Elegance in its own class. In this way it would not compete with any of the other Jaguars entered in their respective classes.

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Reminder: YOUR DUES ARE DUE!!!!

Check the enclosed membership list to see if you have paid your dues. The rest of us need to give Al Bradley a check for \$15. Make the check payable to Appalachian British Society (ABCS) and bring it to the next meeting or mail to Al at 143 Stonewall Heights, Abingdon, VA 24210

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**DUES ARE PRORATED ACCORDING TO
THE MONTH IN WHICH YOU JOIN:**

January-March	\$20.00
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All Renewals	15.00 (due February 28 of each year)

Enclose payment with application and mail to:
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All meetings are held at 7:00 PM on the second Thursday of each month at the Rush Street Grill in Kingsport, TN

ABCS / Eddie Penland
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TO: