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Jaguar D-Type : Fine Lines

by Malcolm Gunn , Auto123.com

Light, lithe and a treat for the eyes, the highly advanced D-Type was Jaguar's most successful racing car

The pristine D-Type Jaguar sits parked on the lush, green grounds of the Earl of March's estate. Its taugt aluminum skin, painted a sober shade of blue with large white dots (where a number or two could be added), glisten in the afternoon sun. Not an everyday sight, but the annual Goodwood Festival of Speed, a three-day time warp featuring some of the finest and rarest racing machinery ever built, isn't your everyday event.



Goodwood is the kind of place where the public--who visit from all over the world--can get up close and personal with untold millions of dollars worth of race cars, from turn-of-the-century horseless carriages, to present-day Formula One screamers. You also get to watch them zoom up the mile-long driveway in front of the Earl's stately mansion as their famous-name drivers, both active and retired, vie for class honours in the elapsed-time department.

The D-Type is here because it represents the pinnacle of Jaguar's success on the track. No other pure-bred competition-built Jag before or since has achieved its success. One look at this five-decade-old design, with its gently rounded bodywork and signature tailfin, and you know you're in the presence of greatness.

The very existence of the D-Type was the result of William Lyons (later Sir William Lyons), Jaguar's founder. This former motorcycle side-car manufacturer put much emphasis on improving and showcasing his cars through various forms of competition. Lyons achieved his first taste of fame in the mid-to-late 1930s with his SS 100, a two-seat roadster that achieved success in hillclimbs and rallies throughout Britain and the European Continent.

Following the Second World War, Jaguar engineers developed the C-Type, a rebodied and specially prepared XK120 that fulfilled Lyons' desire to compete in the most prestigious road race of them all, the French 24 Hours of Le Mans. Here, it proved its worth by capturing victories in 1951 and 1953 and went on to successfully compete in road races throughout Europe and North America for many years after.

As good as the C-Type was, it became obvious that the competition, represented by Ferrari, Maserati, Porsche, Aston Martin and

others, was beginning to threaten Jaguar's racing supremacy.



On April 13, 1954, Jaguar's newest prototype completed its initial laps at Silverstone, England. The D-Type, as the successor was logically called, was created by Malcolm Sayer, Jaguar's ace designer and a former Bristol aircraft engineer who had also worked on the C-Type. Applying his aeronautical background, Sayer came up with a monocoque--or unit-body--construction for the new model, with the independent front suspension positioned in place using a complex subframe consisting of tubular-steel rods.



However, it was the streamlined skin that caught everyone's attention. The car appeared virtually seamless, save for a single drivers-side door and a small opening at the rear that contained the spare Dunlop racing tire.

Initially, the D-Type's 3.4-litre DOHC inline six-cylinder engine was similar to that used on the C-Type, but the aerodynamic body and advanced suspension meant it was much faster overall.

In its initial Le Mans outing in 1954, a factory-sponsored D-Type finished second behind the Ferrari of legendary driving ace Juan Manuel Fangio. Despite the loss, the new Jag had proven it had the necessary endurance to match its good looks. It also managed to top 170 mph (270 km/h) on the two-mile (3.2-km) long Le Mans Mulsanne straight, 20 mph (32 km/h) faster than the old C-Type.

The following year, the D-Type returned to finish first, with the winning car fitted with a longer and more slippery nose and a fuel-injected engine.

As good as the D-Type was on closed circuits such as Le Mans, its delicate structure proved no match for Ferrari or Mercedes-Benz on real-world road courses. The only time a D-Type competed in the Italian Mille Miglia, the car literally came apart at the seams.

In 1956, Jaguar was back competing at Le Mans, but accidents and mechanical failures knocked all three factory entries out of the race. Fortunately, a privately entered D-Type saved the day by securing the victory. This same team also won in 1957 after Jaguar decided to cease all factory-backed racing.

That year, after assembling some 71 D-Types, the company began producing the XKSS, a road-going version of its now-famous race car complete with front and rear bumpers, full windshield, fold-up convertible top, and minus the rear tail fin. Due to a fire at the factory that destroyed most of the leftover D-Type parts used to build the SS, the project was abandoned after only 16 cars had been completed.

The fire put an end to the D-Type, but its legacy prevails. The E-Type (also referred to as the XKE) that began in 1961 was heavily influenced by the car that preceded it. However, it can never replace the original D-Type, nor will it ever earn a shady resting spot on

the Earl of March's grounds among the most successful competition cars of all time.

