

# The Fire at the Jaguar Factory in 1957

*By Neville Barlow*

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 1957 a fire ripped through the Jaguar Factory at the Browns Lane, Allesley plant. How it started has become a mystery and even an extensive investigation could not reveal and locate any reasons. Perhaps it was arson (rejected), a small heater used for workers comfort or an electrical fault somewhere. However, 270 cars just off the assembly line or nearly completed were destroyed.

An employee who was working overtime recalled what he saw happening. "About 5.30pm I was walking back to my workstation I heard what sounded like a minor explosion, followed by a roar. I could see flames licking across the roof above where I had just been working. The Tyre Bay was alight with black smoke and flames were everywhere. The insulating panels in the roof which were covered with bitumen- based material was on fire and the roof was melting.



I smashed the glass on the nearest fire alarm, which seemed, to only add to the chaos. Lofty England was soon on the scene and organised people to drive out as many cars as possible that were completed. The cars in the road test were not yet fitted with seats as each tester carried his own seat. Young girls were trying to drive cars sitting on the floor and it was like dodgems at a fair".

The company Fire Brigade arrived and were faced with a huge task. The roof was alight and about to collapse and tins of white spirits were exploding. Paint on the car bodies was burning and the petrol in fuel tanks were exploding. Fire Brigades from all around arrived and began a futile effort to extinguish the flames which saw the factory floor flooded. However, the fire was stopped in its tracks short of some underground fuel tanks.



Most of the workers were sent home for 2 days, so a small group could get on with clearing out the debris. Amazingly two days later they were able to produce a few cars again. Conditions were very primitive with a large area of roof missing and workers having to work in the cold winter temperatures.

Ten days later William Lyons declared that all the damaged cars were being cut up piece meal with oxy-acetylene torch cutters. Engines, gearboxes, axles, springs etc were also cut up and hammered

through, making them useless for anything but scrap metal. This was in effect to tell the world that no parts that had been fire damaged would ever be used in any new car

One of the major problems of the fire concerned Jaguars earlier decision to convert a surplus of racing D Types into 16 road going versions they coded as XKSS. The fire destroyed two D-Type chassis and nine complete D-Types and the special tooling and jigs were also lost. In 2016 the 9 that were destroyed were reborn as the "Continuation" XKSS and one was purchased by Giltrap Motors in New Zealand. Some of us were lucky enough to see this car when it was on show at Duncan and Ebbett in Tauranga.



*Neville*