

The Rise and Fall of the British Motor Car legend, Sir William Lyons and the iconic Jaguar Cars. - Part 4

By Geoffrey O'Connell

(Continued from Part 3 – May magazine)

Between March and October 1935, the SS 90 was built based on a shortened SS 1 Rubery Owen frame. The 2-seater sports car was powered by a six-cylinder, side valve, 2663cc capacity Standard Motor engine but with modifications that included duralumin connecting rods, an aluminium cylinder head giving a higher compression ratio and twin RAG carburettors. The price was £395.00 and the model was admired for its elegant sporting styling, but a detraction was its lack of true performance – ‘more show than go’. Only 23 of the model were produced.



SS 90

The SS 90 was replaced by the SS Jaguar 100 which earned rather more longevity being manufactured from 1936 through to 1941, WW2 having been declared on the 3rd of September 1939. Apart from some alterations to the SS 90 such as new headlamps, a different radiator, a Le Mans style petrol tank and a leaping Jaguar mascot mounted on the radiator cap, the main modification was to the car's engine unit. The Standard Motors power unit of 2663cc was fitted with a crossflow, overhead valve cylinder head designed by William Heynes and Harry Weslake which increased the power output from 70bhp to 100 bhp. Furthermore, twin SU carburettors were fastened directly to the cylinder head.

The four-speed gearbox had synchromesh on the second, third and fourth gears. The prototype SS Jaguar 100 was exhibited on the Company's London Motor Show at Olympia which was held between the 17th and 26th of October 1935. In 1938 the engine unit was increased to a capacity of 3485cc raising the available power to 125 bhp which increased the car's top speed to 101 mph.



SS 100

The 2½ litre SS Jaguar 100 cost £395.00, the 3½ litre model £445.00 and the fixed head coupe £595.00. I understand only one of the latter models was constructed. In all 198 of the 2½ litre cars and 116 of the 3½ litre cars were built, making a total of 314. In 1938 all SS Jaguar manufacturing was changed from coach-built wood frames, to which were affixed panels, to all steel production.

In 1936 Thomas 'Tommy' Henry Wisdom and his wife Elsie Mary won the 'Coupes des Glaciers' in their SS Jaguar 100 in the International Alpine Trial. In 1937 Jack Harrop driving an SS Jaguar 100 won the 1000-mile RAC Rally in which Tommy Wisdom won the over 15hp Open Cars class and the Fastest Time of the event.

In addition, towards the end of September 1935 SS Cars introduced an SS Jaguar 1½ and a 2½ litre model both available as a 2 door drop

head coupe or a 4-door sports saloon. The 1½ litre model was initially a four-cylinder side valve engine, which became an overhead valve unit. The 2½ litre power unit was the six-cylinder overhead valve unit. An SS Jaguar 3½ litre, six-cylinder model appeared in 1938. The 2½ litre saloon car was selected as the exhibit at a Mayfair Hotel (Stratton Street, London W1) lunch for the newspaper press on the 23rd or the 24th of September 1935. Take your choice as to the date of the event. The car received very favourable comment and the guests were asked to write down what they individually considered was the price of the vehicle. It appears the average speculation was £632.00. The price was £395.00! The 1½ litre saloon was priced at £298.00 and when the 3½ litre appeared the drophead coupe cost £465.00. Apart from the WW2 years, in respect of the 1½ litre car some 10,980 vehicles were manufactured. The 2½ litre SS Jaguar was manufactured until 1949 by which year some 6,777 had been built of which 3,444 had been constructed in the coach-built fashion. Another source puts the overall number at 6,281 cars. As to the 3½ litre, its production was numbered at 3,162 vehicles.

On the 1st of April 1935 William Munger Heynes (1903-1989) was appointed Chief Engineer of SS Cars initially working on chassis and suspension matters and on improving the power output of the Standard Motors engines. Another to be key employee was Walter Thomas Frederick Hassan (1905-1996) who began work for SS Cars as a development engineer.

With WW2 looming it foreshadowed the total loss of motor car production which Lyons realised he would have to replace with government department contracts. As early as November 1938 he visited a Ministry of Aircraft Production office who proposed that he called on the Rochester works of Short Brothers.



Thomas "Tommy" Henry Wisdom

Within a day or so Lyons made the suggested visit and came away with an agreement to build wing components for the forthcoming Short Stirling, four engined heavy bomber which had the distinction of being the first of its type to be deployed by the Royal Air Force (RAF). It has been reported that Lyons at that time was confident that further wartime contracts would result so he purchased the nearby building of the then liquidated company Motor Panel (Holdings) Ltd., in order to be able to cope with the increased workload. At least it showed bravado! Fortunately for 'our man' he obtained a deal to repair battle-damaged Armstrong Whitworth (A.W.38) Whitley bombers, which have been described as both medium and heavy bombers. Early in the war Lyons was compelled to guarantee the companies overdraft with the bank by placing his SS Cars shares, his home Wappenbury Hall, Wappenbury, Leamington Spa, and other personal belongings at the bank's disposal. The old maxim is that *'Banks will lend you an umbrella when the weather is fine but on the first sign of rain will request its return'*.

Very fortunately thereabouts the Ministry of Supply (MoS) began ordering Swallow sidecars, which was then a subsidiary of SS Cars, for use by the various wartime departments. Some 10,000 of them were built for the MoS during the wartime. That *'saved the bacon'* for Lyons and placed the SS Cars company onto a much better financial footing. As an aside, I suppose the bank returned *'the umbrella'* and all the deposited goods supporting the guarantee of repayment? Later in the conflict SS Cars received another deal for the supply of assorted trailers. By the war's end SS Cars had manufactured some 55,000 trailers of all sorts, from two wheeled units for transporting



Wappenbury Hall



Armstrong Whitworth Whitley Bomber

stores and goods to very substantial components used to move about aircraft fuselages.

The previously referred to damaged Armstrong Whitworth Whitley aircraft bombers were delivered to the SS Cars Foleshill works on trailers described as 'Queen Mary's' due to their bulk.

The excellent quality of the SS Cars workforce enabled not only the repair and rectification of aircraft to take place but subsequently the reassembly of the bombers and preparing them for flight testing at Bishops Tachbrook aerodrome, Royal Leamington Spa. To facilitate the latter operation, the airfield which was 26km/16.2 miles distant, was taken over during WW2 by the Air Ministry for its use by SS Cars. The company's skills resulted in additional commissions to make parts for the Avro Lancaster heavy bomber, the de Havilland Mosquito multi role aircraft and the single seater Supermarine Spitfire fighter aircraft.



Armstrong Siddeley Cheetah Radial Engine

A further work commission was granted by the aircraft manufacturer Hawker Siddeley for SS Cars to make parts for the Armstrong Siddeley Cheetah, seven-cylinder, single row, supercharged, air cooled (aircraft) radial engine.

Incidentally between 1935 and 1948 some 37,200 of these Cheetah units were constructed.

On the evening of the 14th and into the morning of the 15th of November in 1940 Coventry suffered particularly badly from a German blitz or *'lightening war'* caused by bomber attacks by 515 aircraft. The 14th century Cathedral was left a ruined shell with only the tower, spire and the outer wall left standing. It was probable that around 568 inhabitants were killed, about 863 seriously wounded, with 393 not so badly hurt. Some 4,300 homes were demolished and around two-thirds of the city's buildings were despoiled. The Germans code-named the operation *'Moonlight Sonata'*.

In all that destruction the Foleshill works of SS Cars was damaged. Fortunately, it appears that Armstrong Siddeley heard of a disused shoe factory at the large village of South Wigston, which was 7.7km/4.8 miles south of Leicester City. Accordingly, the factory was requisitioned and SS Cars organised a machine shop and engineering works, managed by Jack Beardsley, so that they could become more involved in the aero engine business.

A possible Ministry of Supply wish to have a range of lightweight vehicles that could be dropped alongside airborne troops failed to materialise as the Army and RAF had managed to overcome the difficulties of parachute landing the Willys Jeep. The latter was an American, light military utility vehicle of which some 650,000 were manufactured during the war, mainly by Willys-Overland Motors and the Ford Motor Company, and used by the USA and Allied forces during WW2.

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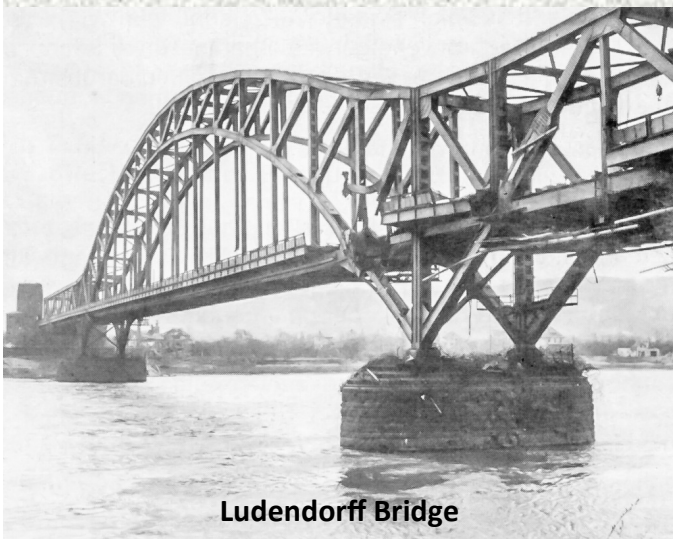
After the hostilities were over Beardsley and his team completed their contract work at the South Wigston plant and returned to Foleshill with Beardsley as the machine shop superintendent.

On the 23rd of March 1945 a meeting of the SS Cars shareholders voted to change the company's name to Jaguar Cars Ltd. The reason was that during WW2 'SS' or 'Schutzstaffel'

was a major paramilitary group under the patronage of Adolf Hitler and the German Nazi Party. It was the group mainly to blame for the mass murder of some 6 million Jews as well as other groups, such as political opponents and the 'Roma' (Gypsies), during the Holocaust, firstly in Nazi Germany, then throughout German held territory in Europe as well as German occupied sectors of the Soviet Union. William Lyons proclaimed that '*Unlike SS. the name Jaguar is distinctive and cannot be connected or confused with any similar foreign name*'. It has to be pointed out that WW2 in Europe did not officially end until the 2nd of September 1945.



Willys Jeep



Ludendorff Bridge

On the other hand, on the 7th of May a force of the 9th Armoured Division's 14th Tank battalion and the 27th Armoured Infantry Battalion crossed the River Rhine into Germany on the Ludendorff Bridge, a steel railway bridge at Remagen some 24.1km/15 miles south of Bonn. Incidentally Lyons contacted John Siddeley, the Managing Director of Armstrong-Siddeley, who had used the name Jaguar for a series of aero engines but they were no longer in production. Siddeley confirmed they had no plans to

reuse the name and agreed that Lyons could use it which he confirmed in writing.

Geoffrey

Continued as Part 5 in July magazine