

THE DAIMLER “DART” AND SP252



By Neville Barlow

In May 1960, the Daimler business was purchased from BSA by Jaguar Cars for £3.4 million. William Lyons was looking to expand manufacture and wanted the Daimler facilities so he could increase production of Jaguar cars that had become extremely popular. One immediate problem was, what was he to do with the existing Daimler cars. Jaguar stated publicly that it would continue production of the existing range of Daimlers and would continue normal research and development of future Daimler products.

However, the so called, at that time, “The Daimler Dart” posed many problems. It seemed that the tail-finned 122mph two-seater was the last thing most people expected the very conservative Daimler company to have produced. In fact, Lyons was known to reserve the least affection of all for the SP250 Dart, a model that had already bombed embarrassingly in the North American market. Daimler was a virtually unknown marque in the USA with next to no service back-up. The Dart’s creators had also forgotten to check if any other car manufacturers had the same name and were surprised when Chrysler threatened to sue.

The Jaguar’s management were unimpressed by the SP250, and Lofty England said “It has excessive scuttle-shake and the body flexed enough for the doors to open when driven over rough ground. The resin content of the glass-fibre was 75%, whereas Jaguar worked on 40% maximum.

In a 1960 letter to Lyons, the Jaguar’s North American Importer wrote that the cars were arriving in terrible condition and weren’t selling. Only 61 cars out of 366 had been sold.

The Daimler's price was more than the Austin-Healey and the Triumph TR3A and in America it was practically the same price as the popular Chevrolet Corvette. The saving grace was its compact 2.5-litre V8. The engine was said to be the smoothest around and the car was sensationally fast.

However, Jaguar were not prepared to produce any more cars they considered not up to standard and set about correcting what they saw as not fit for purpose. Jaguar's Experimental Department investigated ways to improve the SP250. It wasn't very pretty and their main concern was its unrefined chassis.

Also, a three-piece hoop under the dashboard connected to the sill beams strengthened the scuttle and helped steering column rigidity. New sill beams were bolted to the extended outriggers and more steel all around the chassis made it a saleable product. This model was known as B-spec. Many of these modifications were made to existing cars as well as the 130 shipped back from the States.



For many, the SP250's biggest downfall was its looks. With a prominent radiator grille and bulbous headlights, it wasn't as pretty as its contemporaries and of course it now had to compete with the E Type. Production of the SP250 finished after just 2,654 had been made.

The SP252

Sometime between 1961 and 1963, Sir William Lyons, as Jaguar's chief stylist, gave the car a serious facelift. He replaced the large grille with a smaller and more discreet opening and raised the front wing and added E Type headlight scoops. The sidelights were placed

above the headlights. He then removed the flared wheel arches and added new slimmer bumpers with E Type over riders. Fred Gardner, who was in charge of Jaguar's prototype body shop was instructed to build three bodies from glass-fibre at Browns Lane. To improve handling, rack-and-pinion steering was fitted over the standard Daimler steering box and the E Type's torsion bar was fitted. The car was still said to be unstable.





Chassis 005 was a fully finished example. Painted maroon with a grey interior, the car, like most other Jaguar prototypes, was transported to Sir William's home at Wappenbury Hall so he could assess it in natural light. Lyons apparently liked the car, now called the SP252 and asked for a viability study to be completed.

It was soon discovered that due to the labour intensiveness of the fibre-glass body, the SP252 took two and half times longer to produce than the E Type.

Consequently, the SP252 project was abandoned.

The maroon car was pushed into a corner of Browns Lane and forgotten about. In 1967 it was spotted by Peter Ashworth, who was involved with the entertainment industry and a regular Jaguar customer.

He wanted it for his wife, but she found its steering was too heavy, so it was returned to Browns Lane.

It was later sold to Tom Sweet for £750. He kept this sole SP252 for 26 years before selling it in 1994 to Brian Peacock who gave the car a thorough, nine-year restoration.

Many people who view the car today say what a pity the Daimler SP252 never reached production.

Neville

