

CLASSIC DRIVER

Behind the wheel of the Jaguar Heritage Racing E-type

Lead

As is appropriate at year's end, Jaguar had arranged a bit of a family get-together. A snowy Goodwood would have been more seasonal — but we had to make do with torrential rain. Did we mind? Not for a minute...

The decision by Jaguar to support a team of classic racing Jaguars in European historic events this year was an inspired one. The British company is synonymous with success at the Le Mans 24 Hours, winning the race five times. Throughout the 1950s, as a method of promoting a relatively new brand to a worldwide market, the investment paid dividends.

First with the C-type (referred to originally as an 'XK-120C' – 'C' for 'competition') which won in 1951 and 1953, and then the D-type that triumphed three years on the trot from 1955 onwards, the day-long French race became Jaguar's own.

And that's without all the other victories worldwide, including the semi-official Lightweight E-type programme of the early 1960s.





Classic Driver dealer JD Classics ran the Jaguar Heritage Racing programme on behalf of the factory this year. So it was 'The Guv'nor', Derek Hood, and his two top drivers, Alex Buncombe and Wil Arif, who greeted a carefully selected group of journalists on a wet Monday at the West Sussex circuit.

Depending on experience, the options were to drive the cars or ride passenger with the experts. I'd decided to plump for the E-type. It has a roof... though I had made the decision weeks before, and was not wimping out from some rain on the day.



Having squeezed through the E-type's small door and safety cage, I settled under the traditional wood-and-alloy steering wheel. A perfect driving position in what is Buncombe's 2012 E-type Challenge-winning car.

Wil Arif sits next to me, an extra pair of eyes to spot standing water, apexes and exit points on what is now a totally soaked circuit. He's also there as a driver coach to make sure I get the best out of the car in such treacherous conditions. (I "get on the throttle too early," apparently – well, at least I'm trying.)



After thumbing the starter button, the highly tuned straight-six crackles away and, triple windscreen wipers whirring, we exit the pits.

All the controls are so, so positive. This is one beautifully prepared racing car – with a very powerful motor. The conditions being what they were, and with a perfectly reasonable (low) rev limit put on the JD Classics-built engine, it wasn't really possible to stretch the car's legs. One could feel, though, that with a dry track and another 1250rpm to play with, the metallic green roadster would really fly, using all of its 350+bhp.

And a special word here for the steering, something Hood says the Maldon-based company “has done a lot of work on”. He's a master of understatement. It is very direct, leaves the car running straight as a die - yet is not so heavy that really long periods behind the wheel become tiring (many of the rounds are two-driver, long-distance races).

Sadly, after a dozen or so laps, it was time to pull into the pits, my own stint over. What a terrific car, and what a race series, one that also caters for less-modified cars.



The day didn't end there. No sooner had I shaken myself down from the close confinement of the E-type, than Arif had the bronze C-type ticking over, ready for some high-speed passenger laps.

The ex-Fangio 'C' has been a front-runner in every event it has entered this year. With professional drivers Buncombe or Arif at the wheel, it's either led or won most of them. Arif soon has the car making use of every scintilla of grip on the still sopping wet track. Looking on from the passenger seat, he is the master of smooth driving; exploring every inch of Tarmac with constant, minute corrections on the big, plastic-coated wheel.

Compared with my own efforts, he's in a different league. There's grip to be had, and more power that can be applied - this time further down in the rev-range compared with the E-type - from another JD-prepared motor.

With two or three laps of that, it was time to call time. The Jaguar D-type, also on hand, would have to wait for another day.



As will the all-new-F-type, which we will drive in 2013. Looking at the generations of Jaguar sports cars in front of the famous Goodwood pits, it was a happy family reunion.

Photos: Jaguar

Gallery

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