
The incredible story of Norman Dewis

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Two years ago, at the Goodwood Festival of Speed, I found myself chatting to Norman Dewis during one of those lengthy delays while something broken is removed from the hill. He was waiting to drive a C-type, I was there to write, but we had each nabbed a chair in the same section of tented paddock.

The name Norman Dewis is inseparable from the development of the Jaguar brand between 1952, when he joined the company, and 1985 when he finally retired, so you might think that making light conversation on subjects other than Jaguar would be... challenging. Not a bit of it. For the best part of an hour, Norman talked enthusiastically and without the slightest hint of self-importance, on subjects ranging from Jaguar, to tackling the Goodwood hillclimb at speed, to the hat worn by a glamorous race-goer tottering past on high heels. I now find that this self-effacing good humour is mentioned by almost everyone who meets him but, according to his biographer Paul Skilleter, it was not always that way. "On duty all those years ago... he was often businesslike to the point of brusqueness," writes Skilleter in the introduction to his book, 'Norman Dewis of Jaguar'.

When you consider the responsibilities facing the young test driver and engineer, it's hardly surprising.

From rear gunner to test driver



Having survived the war years – no mean feat, given that he was a rear gunner in the RAF – Dewis became chief tester at Lea-Francis, before joining Jaguar in January 1952. Here he was given the responsibility of developing all the race and road-going cars – and over the next 33 years he was crucial to the success of the XK140 and 150, the C-type and D-type, Mk2 saloon, the E-type, XJ13, XJ-S and many more, not to mention being instrumental in the development of the disc brake.

No days off



You'd think that would be enough to take up every waking minute, but no, as a works driver he also raced a D-type at the world's top events, his skill behind the wheel proving useful on the track as well as in assessing a car's handling and performance. His life has been too full of achievement even to summarise the major achievements, so we'll pick just one anecdote to convey the essence of Norman

Dewis. It's well known that, in 1971, Dewis was driving an XJ13 at the MIRA test track (for a publicity film on the V12 E-type) when a rear tyre went suddenly flat, resulting in a serious accident. The car rolled two or three times and, needless to say, it was all but destroyed. And Dewis? Well, that's the most remarkable thing - he was back at work the following day.

Decades of dedication



His dedication to hard work hasn't changed in all the decades since. On that day at Goodwood in 2012, Dewis drove a C-type up the hill and, straight after the Festival, mentioned that he was jetting off on a lecture tour of America. Not bad for someone of 91.

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