

Sir William Lyons, “Mr. Jaguar”

By Bob Vitrikas



Photo courtesy of E-Type UK

Starting off the New Year, I thought I'd begin a series of articles on British car industry personalities. Let's begin with Sir William Lyons who is considered the father of the Jaguar marque. Sir William was born on 4 September 1901, the son of an Irish immigrant, and died on 8 February 1985, so perhaps it is appropriate that we begin this series on the month of his death.

Lyons began his automotive training as an apprentice at Crossley Motors in Manchester. He left Crossley in 1919 to work as a salesman at Sunbeam dealers Brown and Mallalieu in Blackpool. Like many motormen of the early 20th Century, Lyons was a motorcycle enthusiast who coincidentally lived across the street from another motorcycle man, William Walmsley. Walmsley made a living converting Army surplus motorcycles to civilian use and building sidecars as requested. A motorcycle provided a convenient and economical means of transportation for young couples after World War I. Lyons admired Walmsley's work and bought one of his sidecars. Lyons and Walmsley hit it off and soon borrowed 500 pounds from their dads to start up a business. Swallow Sidecars opened their doors for business on Lyons 21st birthday with a staff of "three men and a boy." It wasn't long before they expanded from sidecars to making coach built bodies for small cars such as the Austin Seven. Perhaps they were inspired by Cecil Kimber of MG car fame? The Austin Seven Swallow gained popularity sparking several moves to larger factories. Eventually in



William Walmsley at the controls of a Brough Superior SS80 motorcycle while William Lyons sits comfortably in Swallow sidecar Model No. 1. A 1927 Brough Superior motorcycle (sans sidecar) was recently advertised for \$65,000! Photo courtesy of Wikipedia.

1928 they moved from Blackpool to Coventry where a burgeoning motor industry was taking root. Lyons dreamt of building his own car from scratch and in 1931 he began building the SS1. In 1933 the company name was changed to SS Cars Ltd. That proved to be a most unfortunate moniker. In 1934 Walmsley left the company leaving Lyons in charge. Lyons quickly introduced a new model called the Jaguar and a legend was born! It is worth noting that following World War II the company name was changed from SS Cars Ltd to Jaguar to avoid the stigma of being associated with the Nazi SS.



The beginning of the Jaguar line. “Grace, space and pace” indeed!

During the War the factory was converted to aircraft manufacture and repair but automobile engineering development continued, presumably after hours. Arguably the most significant development to come out of those dark days of WWII was the magnificent and long lived XK in-line six cylinder engine developed by a team headed by William Heynes. This double overhead cam power plant was introduced in 1948, showcased in what was supposed to be a one-off concept design known as the XK120. That XK120 led to a succession of powerful XK Jaguar models until 1971 when the Jaguar V12 was introduced. The XK 6 cylinder continued, alongside the V12, to power Jaguars until 1992.

In addition to the XK engine, Jaguars were known for their beautiful styling for which Lyons was responsible for the styling of every Jaguar saloon model until he retired in 1972. He wasn't a formally trained designer or engineer but he knew a good design when he saw it. Using 3-D full scale models, Lyons would instruct his designers to mold the model to his taste which resulted in exquisitely beautiful shapes. No car company exists without a team of talented designers and engineers. Lyons had a knack for identifying talent and kept a loyal team of enthusiastic and dedicated engineers happily beaver away at the Coventry works. Importantly in 1956 he sanctioned The Jaguar Drivers' Club which continues to this day. Also in 1956 he was knighted for his services to the British motoring industry and the strong export record of Jaguar cars. The mid-sixties were a time of turmoil in the British motor industry and Jaguar was absorbed into the British Motor Corporation (BMC) to form British Motor Holdings which in turn was absorbed into British Leyland. This resulted in a loss of independence for Lyons and Jaguar resulting in Lyons' retirement in 1972. Lyons continued to advise Jaguar until shortly before his death in February 1985.



Sir William considered the XJ6 Jaguar one of his best designs. Has there been a more beautiful four door sedan design? Photo courtesy of NetCarShow.com

Jaguar plans to transition from selling a mix of SUVs, sedans and sports cars using internal combustion and electric means of propulsion to an all-electric lineup. To accomplish this Jaguar has ceased production of all vehicles for about a year starting in Dec 2025. The last F-type was produced on 19 Dec 2025. This has resulted in a 97% collapse in sales. The only cars Jaguar dealers have to sell are remaining inventory on their lots and lease returns. What does Jaguar's future hold? Jaguar's press release says they will release their first electric model in late 2026 with delivery expected in late 2027. Price is expected to be a lofty \$140-165,000. Ouch! I wonder if Jaguar has a future at all...