



WORDS PAUL MURRELL

REWRITING HISTORY

Through the passion and determination of a South Australian vintage car enthusiast, a Jaguar that never was has been brought to life in the Adelaide Hills.

HISTORY IS FULL OF “WHAT IFS” AND MOST OF THEM RESULT in nothing more than speculation. But for Australia’s oldest motor restoration company, “what if” was converted into reality.

Finch Restorations in the Adelaide Hills attracts car enthusiasts from around Australia. They bring their beloved classic cars and motorbikes, to be restored to a condition better than many of them could ever match when they were new.

But somewhere deep in the recesses of Finch principal Peter Roberts’ mind was a desire to create a range of cars that illustrious UK car company Jaguar may have produced had World War II not intervened.

William (later Sir William) Lyons was an inspired designer of beautiful cars, many of which looked far more expensive than they actually were. It began in 1922 when he founded the Swallow Sidecar Company. He quickly branched out, starting with a stylish little car, the Austin Seven Swallow, based on humble underpinnings but looking a lot more glamorous and a lot faster than it really was. In 1931, the company launched a low-slung, impossibly beautiful sports car, the SS1. Priced at £310 in the UK, it looked like a car worth three times as much.

Prior to World War II, Lyons was developing the SS90 and SS100 sports cars, but car production was replaced by aircraft

Above: The product of Peter Roberts’ obsession, the Finch SS120 combines 1930s styling cues with modern technology under the bonnet, making the car a breeze to drive through the Adelaide Hills. **Following pages:** The development and hand-build of the SS120 was a painstaking process, from shortening the chassis and fabricating mudguards to the finishing touches of a red leather interior and the leaping Jaguar mascot.

production and repair during the war years. After the war, the company was renamed Jaguar and development of the SS90/100 series was discontinued in favour of a new engine and another beautiful sports car to showcase it, the XK120 released in 1948.

Peter was obsessed with what might have evolved had the war not interrupted development and visualised a car that might have arrived on the market eight years earlier than the XK120.

Finch Restorations was originally set up by Ray Finch in 1965. Ray was a talented fabricator and, in 1990, he took on the challenge to build a replica of an SS100 Jaguar – perhaps one of the most admired cars of the 1930s. Such was the quality of his

creation, Ray won an Australian concours d’elegance, and even received a congratulatory letter from Edsel Ford III (at the time, the Ford Motor Company owned Jaguar). Ray retired in 1999, but still takes a close proprietorial interest in the company he established.

Before Peter Roberts set the SS120 project into action, he and his team conducted in-depth research into the SS100, including the back-story of the prototypes. One of these was a car built for Lady Greta Lyons (Sir William’s wife) and nicknamed the “baby Jaguar”.

It is not well known that SS Jaguar chassis were delivered to independent coachbuilders, including the flamboyant Jacques Saoutchik (a 3½ litre roadster, chassis number 39107) and Van



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den Plas of Belgium (chassis 49064). Peter's research suggested common design influences between the SS Jaguar 100 Coupe prototype and the Bugatti Type 57 SC Atlantic (1936-1938) and the Mercedes-Benz 540K (1936-1940).

Peter's developing concept was to blend 1930s styling cues from Sir William Lyons and draw inspiration from Saoutchik and others. It was a breathtakingly ambitious plan.

Finch's first design was a hardtop coupe and the design was then expanded to include an open two-seater roadster, a convertible with a removable hardtop, a Lyons Coupe and a Saoutchik roadster.

In car design, nothing is as simple as it seems. The chassis is a shortened Jaguar MkV item while the front and rear axles are period Jaguar assemblies. Finch's mechanical workshop supervisor, Shane Reynolds, explains just how much planning and fabrication has gone into the SS120. The boot lid is a MkV item but, with a completely different angle, guards have had to be fabricated, the front brakes are virtually built from scratch ... almost every part of the body has had to be fettled and fiddled until it looks just right. It's a long, slow, painstaking (and expensive) process.

With a great deal of trust, Shane hands me the keys and invites me to test the car for myself. Even after years of development (and only a few hundred kilometres of road testing), final details are still being attended to before the car is delivered to its anxious Queensland owner.

The first surprise with the Finch SS120 is how unlike a traditional pre-war car it is to drive. Where old cars tend to bounce around on their suspension, demand concentration when changing gears and need considerable forward planning when braking, the SS120 is remarkably undemanding.

The engine is a 4.2-litre Jaguar XK unit, delivering a smooth wave of torque and more than enough power and performance to keep up with modern traffic. Hugely improving the experience is the Tremec 5-speed gearbox that's as easy and unfussy to use as that in any modern hatchback; a huge advance over pre-war gearboxes.

Looking out over that long bonnet with the almost-obligatory "leaper" (the Jaguar mascot) atop the radiator shell, the large headlights wobbling gently, framed by swooping

mudguards with dinky little sidelights sitting proud on each (and doubling as unobtrusive indicators), this is a car that invites a relaxed driving style.

The view of the rolling Adelaide Hills is panoramic as we swoop up and down along Springs Road and over Mount Barker Summit and the engagement with the scenery is close and personal, as it can only be in an open-topped car. It is only after I return the car that Shane remembers to tell me that the speedometer is yet to be calibrated, so I suspect we were travelling at somewhat more than the indicated speed.

The shortened wheelbase makes the SS120 surprisingly easy to place accurately on the road. The side mirrors and central rear vision mirror aren't much use, but with no roof or pillars to obstruct vision, keeping a close watch on other traffic (especially those who just want to get closer for a good look) is easy.

All too soon, I have to return the keys, jealous of the new owner who will get to enjoy this "never was" Jaguar whenever the mood takes him. Of course, the Finch team would be happy to build another one to my own specifications. 🍷

