



Side GLANCES

By Peter Egan, EDITOR-AT-LARGE

DRIVING THE JAGUAR

THIS PAST SUMMER, I WENT TO MY FAVORITE vintage racing event of the year, the Brian Redman International Challenge at Road America, and spent some time hanging around the *Road & Track* tent, talking to quite a few readers of this magazine.

Some who read this column said they were curious about the fate of my 1967 Jaguar E-Type coupe.

"You've done a bunch of columns about restoring it," was the comment, "but haven't mentioned whether it's done or what it's like to drive now."

I frankly admitted I'd done so many columns about the various stages of this three-year restoration and its vicissitudes and trials, that I was hesitant to mention it

even one more time, for fear of appearing to be squeezing yet another drop of blood out of the same old stone.

"If I say one more thing about the Jag," I told one guy, "I'm afraid that irate villagers with torches and pitchforks will appear in my driveway and burn the garage down, some bearing signs saying, 'SHUT UP ABOUT THAT STUPID JAGUAR,' or 'ENOUGH, ALREADY!'"

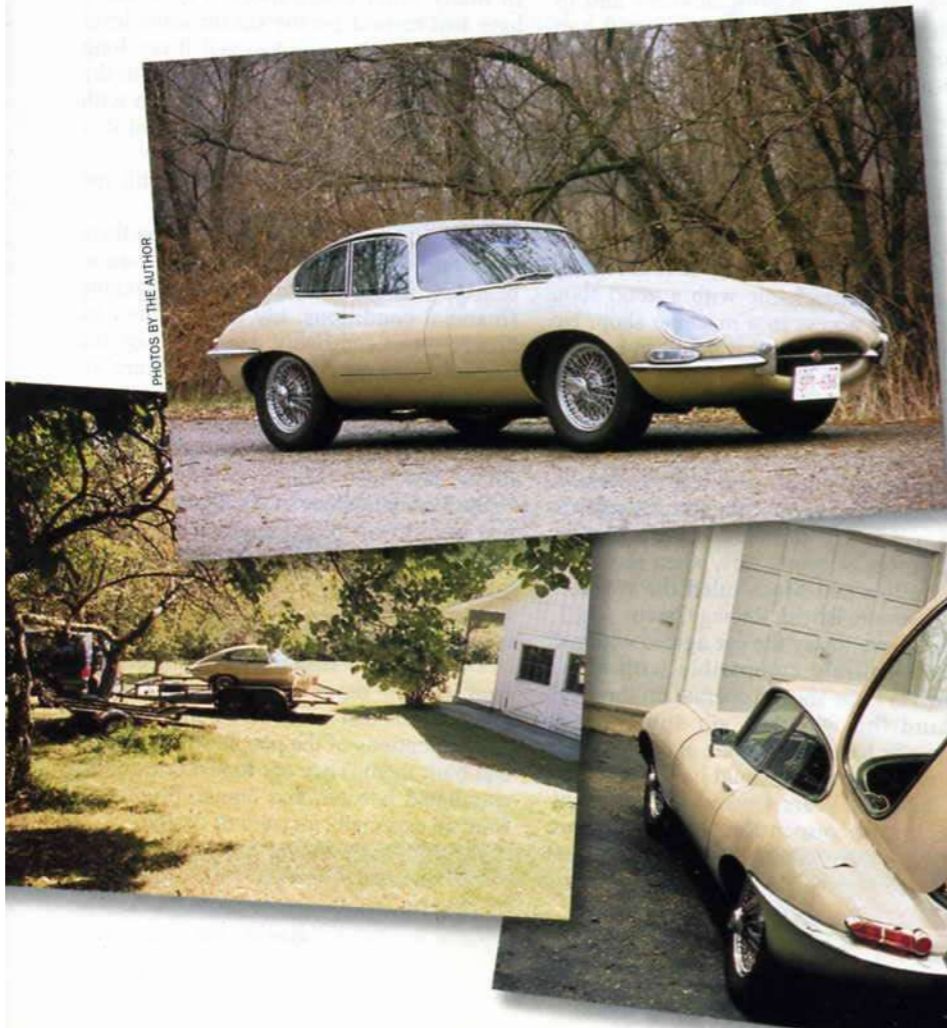
"Quite the contrary," a couple of hardy readers told me. "The E-Type is my favorite car, and I'd like to hear how it turned out."

Well, you don't have to ask me twice. Or, sometimes, even once. So, with this groundswell of plaintive supplication by

nearly three readers—and that's a conservative estimate—I decided to bring things up to date.

In fact, the E-Type is done and on the road.

I got it fully operational more than a year ago, in the autumn of 2002, just about two weeks before the first snowfall (and salted roads) forced me to park it in my workshop for the winter. Those first shake-down runs were surprisingly trouble-free. I had a stuck needle and seat in the center SU carburetor that flooded the engine compartment with gasoline and forced me to do a roadside repair by blowing a piece of grit out of the passageway, and I had a bad front suspension rattle that I eventually



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traced to a missing washer behind a lower rubber A-arm bushing. That, and every single cooling-system hose seeped antifreeze until I cranked down extra-hard on all the hose clamps.

Once these minor annoyances were cleared up, the car ran perfectly and has been essentially trouble-free through the entire past summer of driving. Barb and I have taken three or four long weekend trips in the car, driving to, among other places, the races at Road America and up to Wisconsin's Door County peninsula to Ellison Bay, where we now keep our new/used Com-Pac 27 sailboat in a slip. We use the Jag to drive into the city on nice evenings, and have taken many rides in the nearby hilly rural countryside, just for the fun of driving around. We've put about 4000 miles on it, so far.

We'd also planned a long, late-summer trip to New England, but that fell through when I was diagnosed with hepatitis C last May and had to stick around home to take six months of innumerable injections that make me feel as if I've either got the flu or been hit by a large truck. Or perhaps hit by a large truck loaded with 55-gal. drums of influenza virus. Which then backs up and runs over me again, for good measure. In any case, long trips have been out of the question, and, as of this writing, I have four weeks of this draconian, medieval drug therapy left to go.

When it's over, drinks will be served. But enough about my defective self; back to the Jaguar.

So now that this baby is done, how is it to drive?

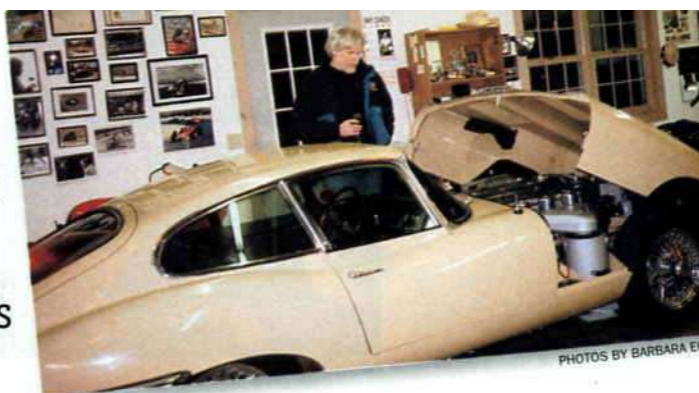
Well, I love it. A few observations:

1) The E-Type's mechanical sophistication is a big step up from the many other British sports cars I've restored, and everything about it is just a little nicer than it would have to be. The throttle linkage, for instance, rolls on real bearings instead of bolts shoved through holes. You can feel this when you drive. Sir William Lyons cheated out on a few components (the instruments and switches are only fair) to keep the price competitive, but not many. The car is a mass of high-quality engineering solutions that give it a wonderfully satisfying mechanical feel.

2) Suspension compliance and steering feel are superb. Most Jags have always had these almost magical qualities of civilized ride and body-roll-free handling combined, and the E-Type has them in spades. No coal-cart British suspension here; just real road-holding through refined geometry and motion.

3) It's the first old British car I've owned (or old car, period) with real horsepower. When some yahoo with an elevated pickup truck starts tailgating you on the highway, you simply depress the accelerator and

"So now that this baby is done, how is it to drive? Well, I love it..."



leave said rube gasping in a light tan cloud of unburned 1960s' hydrocarbons, wondering where you went. It has both a high top speed and scintillating acceleration equal to nearly anything on the road.

4) The engine is unbelievably flexible. The old road test comments about leaving the E-Type in top gear as you drive through a village are true. That 4.2-liter twin-cam-6 pulls like a truck from idle on up, with never a sign of ping or bucking, even breathing through those three big SU carburetors. It's simply the finest engine I've ever had in a car. Also the most beautiful to look at. I often leave the bonnet tilted up in my workshop, just so I can contemplate it.

5) It's English, with all that implies to a British car buff, in both sickness and in health. It has a certain sense of craft and finish in parts that most car companies blow off as too mundane to bother with, and a quietly tasteful and understated charm to many of its interior appointments. The cockpit is a wonderful place to be, and it smells like leather and old wool. It's like driving your grandfather's library.

6) There is almost nothing on the car that is not repairable by a reasonably skilled home mechanic with a good shop manual—or access to a machine shop. No black boxes. This is a car that can be kept running forever by one person. No diagnostic computers will ever have sway.

7) The Jag is perfectly poised between the modern and vintage eras. It has disc brakes, fine handling, independent rear suspension, a twin-cam engine and plenty of performance, yet is just old enough to evoke the Golden Age of sports cars, when Hawthorn and Collins and Moss ruled the world in cars that were British Racing Green.

So, I have to say the car agrees with me. It feels entirely compatible with how I think a GT car should operate on the road. Behind the wheel, I am somehow at home—or have come home at last.

I wasn't sure this would be the case during the three years I was redoing the engine, brakes, suspension, clutch, U-joints, cooling system and so on, with the entire front subframe disassembled and piled in

parts around the garage. There was one bad night, two winters ago, when I went out to the workshop, looked around at the mountains of parts to paint, replate, rebush and reassemble, and I simply shut out the light and went back to the house.

"What's wrong?" Barb asked. "I thought you were going to work on the car all evening?"

I sat down in a living room chair and sighed deeply. "If I could arrange for God to lift the roof off my workshop and reach in with a giant shop-vac and vacuum that car and all of its parts out of my life and into the cosmos, I'd do it in a minute. I am worn out."

But then I had a big cup of coffee and went back to work.

I think it was the exquisiteness of the pieces that kept me going, and just the looks of that body shape; the will to see it in once piece again and back on the road. In many other restorations I've done, I have lost respect for the car on some level and have quietly vowed to sell it not long after finishing the project. Always on to the next big thing. But this didn't happen with the E-Type. I knew if I ever finished it, I would want to keep the car.

And the will to move on hasn't hit me yet, either.

I have discovered in late middle age there is no one thing I have to have any more to be happy. Under need or duress or changing financial conditions, my heart cannot be broken—or even badly damaged—by the loss of some material thing. There are always cheaper replacements for anything, just as enjoyable and intriguing. The world is full of fun old cars that are virtually free for the asking—or hauling away.

But I am protective of the Jaguar. If someone were to hit it in a parking lot and do serious damage, or total out the car, I would be a very sad guy, indeed. The only other thing I own that's like this is my old walnut-colored Gibson ES335 electric guitar.

They are only manufactured objects, but their like will never be seen again. They do things for us that could only come from the good intentions of the people who designed and built them. They are repositories of accumulated wisdom and human brightness, from an especially nice era of design.

If Sir William Lyons were still alive, I'd write him a letter and say, "Nice work." ☺