



# From container to concours

**Ron Reeve** explains how he went about restoring his XK 140 drophead coupé

**T**he story started in 2016 when my wife Jenny decided to go to university to study Fine Arts. She said to me, 'While I am at university, what are you going to do?' My response was, 'Well, I go to the Airforce Museum workshop two days a week as a volunteer playing with old aircraft, and I will have the house and garden to look after.' Jenny then said 'you need another project', meaning another car.

The cogs in the brain began to churn and it became clear that because we had previously restored an XK 140 DHC, perhaps a second one wouldn't be too hard (joke!). We first became aware of this potential project car, S817263DN, back in early 1996 when a friend had purchased it out of the USA and had it shipped to New Zealand. He began work on the car and made some good progress. The years went by, and he had sustained a back injury. The car was then stored in a shipping container, in a stripped-to-parts state, where it sat for 12 years.

I called the owner, who I have known for a long time. We discussed the possible purchase of the car and, after several months, a deal was done. In May 2017 the XK was brought back home to our garage and the fun began.

We then searched for some history and details





- Left: loading up the XK ready for the journey home and the restoration process to begin
- Bottom left: the decision was made to lift the body off the chassis, after first making some careful notes...
- Right: getting to work on the interior. The woodwork was refurbished by a specialist in Hamilton

about the car. Among some paperwork, we found some original registration documents and determined who two of the previous owners had been; at one point it was owned by the President of the San Diego Jaguar Club.

The research also proved it to be a rare car because when it left the factory in March 1955 it had a C-type cylinder head and an overdrive gearbox fitted. The majority of XK 140s did not have a C-type head or an overdrive gearbox. Also, the combination of a Pacific Blue exterior colour and a Red interior again made it rare, with only about 50 cars being produced that way.

Our previous Kiwi owner had done some work on the car and had purchased a number of new parts on the journey of a full restoration. The gearbox, differential, starter motor and generator had all been fully overhauled by a marque specialist in Christchurch. He provided a list of new parts, which was quite extensive – new wiring looms, front and back suspension bushes, suspension ball joints, some new chrome items, a new stainless steel exhaust system and mounting hardware, an interior trim kit in Biscuit colour, plus packs of new nuts, bolts and washers of various sizes. So, a good start but one always needs more.

At this time, we believed we had a complete car but, alas, that was not the case, so a search for missing and/or otherwise correct parts was then under way. Although our two XK 140s were built only about 18 months apart, the differences between them started to become apparent. Some electrical components, doors, interior trim, seat frames and even where the redline on the rev counter begins (5,200rpm not 5,500rpm) – all different. The radiator became an issue because the one that came with the car was beyond repair and it was the incorrect type. Very few of the correct-type radiators used on these early 140s were produced but, after checking the options available in NZ, one was found in the UK albeit at considerable cost. But we like to do things right and were not willing to accept incorrect parts being fitted to the car.

At one time the car had been painted red. During an early inspection, we found an area of original Pacific Blue paintwork on the underside of the fuel filler flap. Once cleaned up, this blue was to become our datum point for the new paint scheme.

After due consideration the next big decision was made – the removal of the body from the chassis and to do a detailed rebuild of each. While taking the body off the chassis is not a huge task, it is complicated in that during production there are differing thicknesses of round aluminium spacers and red fibre washers located at the chassis-to-body mounting points. This is done to ensure the correct fit of the doors, bonnet and boot lid and



means that the car sits straight and square on the chassis and everything is aligned. Patience is needed to record and document the various thicknesses at the specific locations to ensure a more efficient chassis-body marriage during future assembly.

With the decision having been made, work on the body proceeded, with panel beating and panel gaps being sorted, and the necessary work carried out on all the sheet metal in the car. Only then, once we were happy with the bodywork, did the body come off the chassis and it stayed with the specialist body/paint shop while the chassis came back home with me. The chassis was fully sandblasted, primed and finished with a black two-pack paint system, which will give greater long-term protection. All the sections of the chassis' internal surfaces were spray-treated with a corrosion preventative compound.

While all this was happening, with the help of our daughter Laura, we stripped the engine completely. The cylinder block water jacket areas were cleaned thoroughly to remove years of grit and deposits that had built up in the lower areas, a common problem with the early XK cylinder blocks due to the lack of water flow. This issue was resolved in the later XK engines. The engine items were all delivered to a specialist Jaguar engine builder for the total recondition and rebuild of this original, matching-numbers powerplant. Fortunately, the cylinder block did not need reboring or the crankshaft ground, so it is one of the few early XK engines still with its original bores and stroke of the crankshaft. It did need a significant amount of cylinder head work. The carburettors needed some serious work due to corrosion in some parts of the alloy housings, but we had success. With full rebuild kits for the moving parts and gaskets, and some metal polishing carried out, the carbs looked fantastic when completed.

The rest of the engine parts were cleaned, painted or plated to an as-left-the-factory standard with one exception: the exhaust manifolds. They are a



story in themselves. After I sand-blasted and hand-finished them, they were sent off to a baking enamel specialist in Dunedin. After four attempts at re-enamelling and a heat treatment process, the company manager called me saying sorry, but no go. They were not happy with the finish that could be achieved due to 'gassing'. This happens once the refinishing product is applied and the manifolds go into a very hot oven to get the metal almost red hot. The surface finish was being affected by gasses escaping from within the cast iron of the manifolds. So back to square one, what to do? The choices were: a complete set of new manifolds at considerable expense or having the existing ones ceramic-coated here in Christchurch. The ceramic-coating option won the day and, although the finish on the manifolds is not as glossy as baked enamel, it will last for years with no degradation in the finish – so far so good.

Meanwhile the body was making good progress, with the painting process of the underside and engine bay completed, an underseal applied to the front and rear mudguards for stone chip protection, and it was finished with the correct body colour.

Next on the agenda was the interior woodwork, a lovely feature of the drophead and fixed-head coupé models, with a beautiful gloss walnut veneer finish. The original wood was OK but certainly not up to a concours standard. The choice here was simple. We had used a specialist in Hamilton to do our other 140 woodwork so, after a phone call, the woodwork was sent to Hamilton for the same expert attention. The old veneer is removed, the wood prepared, and new veneer applied using specialist tooling. This is followed by applying multiple coats of the gloss finish and lots of hand finishing and polishing. This process took a several months to complete.

While the engine and body were away at the specialists, I continued to complete the chassis: painting, then, with a big effort, installing all the

- Above: fitting-up begins after reuniting body and chassis. Two attempts were needed to get the correct blue

overhauled suspension components with fully overhauled brake items, new fixed and flexible brake lines, hoses and a pair of reset rear springs. The fuel tank required internal chemical cleaning followed by an internal sealing process, exterior painting and installation in the chassis, with all new mounting points. The engine returned home on a trailer looking magnificent. To me, a feature of an XK is to lift the bonnet and see that great-looking twin-cam six-cylinder engine.

The engine and gearbox were installed into the chassis as one assembly and, with the new radiator and hoses fitted, the new exhaust system fitted (final adjustments to come later), the chassis was completed and rolling on old wheels. It was time to return it to the body/paint shop and, with my help, do a final fit of the body using the previously mentioned alloy spacers and red fibre washers. The chassis-body marriage took place without any hassle, so then we were ready for the final painting process. With the chassis and all the mechanicals masked, the body exterior received its final paint preparation. Multiple coats of the traditional lacquer paint were applied, but





- Left: the gleaming engine bay. This particular unit retains its original block and cylinder head

then, wham, Covid lockdowns threw a spanner in the works. I had ordered the exterior topcoat paint and delivered it to the body/paint shop prior to lockdown. However, when the painted car was delivered back to our home there was a *big whoops* moment. The colour shade was wrong. So back it went for a full sand back and repaint in the correct shade of Pacific Blue.

A tip for all those contemplating a restoration of an old car. Back in the 1950s the paint colours were mixed up using tinters which are no longer available, and modern equivalents must be used. They are not the same. So be very careful when trying to match an old colour with modern paints – even with the old-style lacquer paint being used.

We were then about three years into the full restoration process. The car was delivered back home again on a vehicle transporter and this time we were happy with the paint colour. Once all the remaining assembly and interior work was done, the body got a final fine wet sand, a buff and polish.

The 2021 National Rally date was looming, and the car still had no interior trim or woodwork installed. There is a saying during restorations: when you think you are 90 percent done, you still have 90 percent to go. The devil is in the detail, as they say.

All new wiring looms were installed and the required connections made with great help from my brother Brian. But things aren't ever straightforward, are they? The new looms had been ordered from a company in Perth, Australia. I have a copy of the order the previous owner had made and it stated that he required an overdrive wiring loom for a car fitted with one relay. He received a loom made to suit a car with two overdrive relays, but of course he had never opened the package to study the detail. Then followed a huge amount of research, and I could find no evidence in the car where even one relay had been installed. Eventually it was established that, while some later cars fitted with overdrive did have two relays installed, others had only one. Then the kicker – some early cars

- Right: how it started and how it is now – the 140 pictured in its shipping container and at the completion of the rebuild just under four years later

# Jaguar XK140 DHC 1955

*Special Equipment (SE), with factory fitted "C" Type head, overdrive gearbox, chrome wire wheels and driving lights*



May 2017



March 2021

with overdrive were not fitted with any relays. This went against everything that I had read previously. It was all down to what serial number the car is and studying Jaguar Service Bulletin details of the time.

While all the above was going on, the chrome-plated items had been prepared and straightened as required, then sent off to another specialist in Geraldine, one of the few companies that still do the proper three-layer plating process – copper, nickel, chrome. This process gives the chrome finish that deep, lustrous look Jaguars were renowned for. Again, it took several months to complete but was worth waiting for.

At last, we could start the final assembly and have the new interior trim and hood fitted.

After some additional detail work was sorted, off the car went to the trim specialist. This is a very precise process to get the trim correct for the year of the car. It is an early car, therefore some of the trim details needed to be worked through. In the end a magnificent finish was achieved. We did not use the Biscuit colour trim kit as provided with the car but opted to go back to the original Red leather and trim details. Some of this material we had to import from the UK while the leather and carpets were sourced locally. All these trim items were crafted locally – ie, not using an imported trim kit. We'd had issues with trim kits in the past – not this time.

Another feature of XK drophead coupés is the hood chrome trim sections. They are solder-filled brass channel lengths with nails sticking out of the solder. These were sourced from the UK. However, they come as straight lengths and not chrome plated. Once the hood is installed these channels must be shaped to fit the car, then sent off for chrome-plating before the final fitting of them can be completed. Patience, Ron.

With the dashboard instrument panel gauge set assembled at home on the dining room table, at convenient times during the retrim process, I installed the beautiful interior woodwork. It was starting to look great and more like a finished car.

With the retrim completed, it was then early March 2021 and we were getting close to the end, and of course the National Rally in New Plymouth. New chrome wire wheels and tyres had arrived from the UK and, along with the final big bits of chrome having been installed, we were ready for final systems check,

and it was time to start and run the engine for the first time. Again, our specialist Jaguar engine builder did a final check out around the car, and we pushed the starter button. The engine leaped into life immediately – success at last.

The final step in the long process when you take on the restoration of a car that has never been registered in New Zealand is compliance. Seat belts are required, and the mountings for these had been engineered during the body rebuild process. Of course, this car had been delivered new to the USA so it was left-hand drive. We had worked our way through all the requirements during the rebuild, but the car still had to go to a specialist inspector to have the conversion from left-hand drive to right-hand drive and the seat belt installation certified. This certification information is sent to NZTA where – these days – a special electronic tag is produced and attached to the car. Then it was off for the final compliance inspection – the last time of many where the car was moved on a transporter.

With compliance inspections passed and a Warrant of Fitness and registration issued, I was able to drive the car home. Yeah!

Our end objective was the 2021 National Rally Concours event. With the car going really well, and after a few short trial runs around Christchurch, we set off for New Plymouth and the events of the Easter rally. Our daughter Laura flew north, arriving early on the Thursday morning before Easter. Thursday and Friday were spent by Jenny, Laura and me preparing the car for the concours on Saturday morning. Inside, outside, underneath, wheels off and cleaned separately, paint touch-ups, and a full polishing – the job was done.

Luckily the day of the Concours was sunny but not that warm. There was a great turn-out of old and new model Jaguars – superb. All this effort culminated at the Sunday night awards dinner when we were totally overwhelmed. Our XK 140 had won Best Sports Car, Best in Class, Most Outstanding Restoration, People's Choice, Judge's Choice and the pinnacle, Best in Show. We could not have been happier.

My thanks must go to my family, Jenny, Laura and my brother Brian for their outstanding effort and support during this restoration process – it would have not happened without them. 🏆