

Above left: innovative for 1971, standard cabin fittings included inertia-reel seatbelts, remotely adjustable mirrors and multi-function column stalk.  
Above: S-class 3499cc V8 grew to 5547cc for the 500 SL of 1982-89



**T**

he Seventies – ‘the decade that taste forgot’ – is often condemned as an era best consigned to the dustbin of history along with your Bay City Rollers LP, your sister’s rollerboots and your mum’s Buttoneer.

But dig a little deeper and you’ll rediscover a concept of that decade that still gleams like a glitterball: the suave, easy-living, multi-cylinder GT. Open your

eyes to this phenomenon – as epitomised by the Mercedes-Benz 350 SL, Triumph Stag and Jaguar XJ-S – and even in today’s competitive market you won’t take long to find a classic with a desirable badge for less than the price of a new Ford Focus.

Forty years ago the R107 Mercedes SL drove in the tracks of its ancestor, the W121 190 SL, the first Sport Leicht built as a GT rather than a competition-bred sportster, and subsequent W113 ‘Pagoda’ SL. But instead of being an update, the R107 was a new design focused on both high-end luxury and – echoing the trend in the US – safety.

Developed under Rudolf Uhlenhaut and Hans Scherenberg, the Bruno Sacco-styled SL was powered by S-class engines. New US regulations on crash safety and engine emissions meant it was longer, wider and as much as 140kg heavier than its predecessor, though the R107’s handling was more predictable than the swing-axled Pagoda thanks to its new semi-trailing rear suspension.

The 200bhp 3.5-litre V8 350 SL was launched in mid-1971 priced at £5457 – the same as two Jaguar E-type V12s – and was much closer to

being a 2+2 than its predecessor. It also pointed the way ahead by including features such as inertia-reel seatbelts, remotely adjustable door mirrors and a multi-function steering column stalk.

‘The 350 SL is the ultimate in a two-seater luxury car,’ enthused *Road & Track* magazine at the time. ‘Its great weight, luxury equipment and mandatory automatic transmission keep it from being a sports car... but if one desires merely to drive fast in supreme comfort... there is no better choice than the 350 SL.’

This was just the beginning of the evolution of the SL, which would be listed until 1989. Larger V8s would be available in the 380 SL, 420 SL, 450 SL and 500 SL. Mercedes’ manual gearbox couldn’t cope with the torque of the V8s but was available in the six-cylinder 280 SL. The 500 SL of 1980 was the first ‘Benz to feature an alloy instead of iron cylinder block, and that year also saw a four-speed automatic gearbox replace the three-speed. The bonnet, boot-lid and bumpers were now made from aluminium to save weight and in 1985 the SL received a new deeper chin-spoiler and a simpler alloy wheel design.

The length of the SL’s production run – 18 years and 237,287 built (including SLCs) – makes it Mercedes’ most enduring car model and explains why it has taken a while for the R107 to gain classic status. Climb aboard and the SL is roomy, relaxing, stable and deserves an honorary doctorate in waftability. The V8’s exhaust note has great reserve and subtlety. There’s a slight jiggle of scuttle shake, the assisted steering is undergeared, light and a touch vague around the centre, and the three-speed autobox does cling to gears. But forget all that: set your frame of mind to GT rather than ASBO, enjoy the superb ride, well-governed roll and relaxing 211lb ft of torque, and this GT is a powerful antidote to 2011.

If the SL was aimed at captains of industry, minor royalty, Hollywood





Bruno Sacco-styled 350 SL offers a cossetting ride and ample space for two people plus their luggage and is the only full convertible here

glitterati and other individuals who could easily afford the sizeable price of an exquisitely engineered Mercedes GT, the Triumph Stag was aimed at less affluent but still successful middle-management types who would previously have bought a secondhand Pagoda SL.

The Stag can be attributed to Triumph engineering director Harry Webster who, at the request of Triumph's favoured stylist Giovanni Michelotti, had sent a well-used 2000 saloon to Turin in 1964 as the basis of a show car. Webster saw the result – a full convertible based on a shortened 2000 – during a visit and liked it so much that he secured the design there and then and the car returned to Canley in 1966.

The new model, a British 'junior SL', was intended for a 1968 launch, but this was delayed. Instead 1968 saw Triumph's parent, Leyland Motor Corporation, take over the struggling giant British Motor Holdings. Changes were then made to the prototype's concealed headlamps because the electrically operated covers iced up in the cold and the motors burnt out. The Stag also adopted a T-shaped roll-over bar, partly in response to the US safety lobby but also to improve the prototype's lack of torsional rigidity.

Motive power was a bigger problem. In place of its long-in-the-tooth straight-six (developed from the Vanguard unit), Triumph opted to fit a new fuel-injected 2.5-litre V8. It sounds simple enough, but wasn't. Even after luminary Rover engineer Spen King replaced Webster and took over the reigns of the Stag to increase capacity to three litres and fit carburettors to improve torque – plus commission a stronger gearbox and rear axle, along with larger brakes and 14in wheels – the engine was still under-developed.

In 1970 *Motor* predicted: 'Without any doubt this is going to be a very successful car and perhaps the source from which even more successful variants spring.' And a year later *Autocar* declared: 'The moment the car

#### 1972 MERCEDES-BENZ 350 SL

**Engine** 3499cc, V8, sohc per bank, Bosch D-jetronic electronic fuel injection  
**Power and torque** 200bhp @ 5800rpm; 211lb ft @ 4000rpm **Transmission** Three-speed automatic, rear wheel drive **Steering** Recirculating ball, power-assisted  
**Suspension** Front: independent, coil springs, double wishbones, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar. Rear: independent, coil springs, semi-trailing arms, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **Brakes** Vented discs front, discs rear, servo-assisted **Weight** 1545kg (3403lb) **Performance** Top speed: 126mph; 0-60mph: 9.3sec **Fuel consumption** 19.5mpg **Cost new** £5457 **Price now** £15,000

#### SL BUYING TIPS

'The key issue is rust, rather than mechanical stuff,' says Sam Bailey from specialist The SL Shop. 'The front wing just in front of the door is a common place for rust, and so is the floor in early cars. The rear wheelarches can hold water and also suffer, as do the door bottoms on early cars – which also have steel rather than aluminium bonnets. Front wings go above the headlamps because there's a water-trap behind the chrome trim.'

'The cost of restoration depends on the calibre of repair you want. Backstreet welding can cost as little as a few hundred pounds, but if you want, say, a new wing from Mercedes it will cost just

short of £500. You can buy non-Mercedes wings for about £180, but they don't fit well and the metal's too thin, so you spend as much on labour getting them to fit and then end up with flappy wings that aren't the right grade of metal. A complete new door will cost £600 and you can get rear wheelarch repair sections for £70.

'Mechanically, they're bullet-proof and we've got customers' cars with 250k-260k miles on the clock that are still going strong as long as they're serviced regularly and looked after.'

'Early 350s and 450s have a slightly different injection system – it's electronic – that can be a bit more temperamental and is more thirsty (17-19mpg) than later cars' mid to high 20s mpg.'





Above: precise rack-and-pinion steering helps the Stag feel nimble.  
Right: adopt an upright driving position behind the veneer dash

### 1972 TRIUMPH STAG

**Engine** 2997cc, V8, sohc per bank, two Zenith-Stromberg 1.75DC carburettors **Power and torque** 145bhp @ 5500rpm; 170lb ft @ 3500rpm **Transmission** Three-speed automatic, rear-wheel drive **Steering** Rack-and-pinion, power-assisted **Suspension** Front: independent, coil springs, telescopic dampers, MacPherson struts, anti-roll bar. Rear: independent, coil springs, telescopic dampers, semi-trailing arms **Brakes** Discs front, drums rear **Weight** 1273kg (2806lb) **Performance** Top speed: 118mph; 0-60mph: 9.5sec **Fuel consumption** 22mpg **Cost new** £2399 **Value now** £10,000

#### STAG BUYING TIPS

'Stags can rot in all the usual places – wheelarch returns, sills and floors – but a good number are largely rot-free,' says

Simon Hebditch of Robsport International. 'Parts availability is good. They do tend to rust along the trailing edge of the boot-lid and these will shortly be available again; the last batch were priced at £510.'

Examine the hood because a replacement will set you back £420 plus the cost of fitting. When folded it hides the rear damper mounts, which are prone to cracking. Repair costs £100 plus painting.

'I start engines from cold and listen for any rumbling from the bottom end, which is unusual, and keep an eye out

for water leaks and cylinderhead gasket failure,' adds Hebditch. 'A lot of the engine's problems have been solved by fitting electronic ignition, electronic fans and larger radiators and flushing the cooling system.'

'Removing cylinderheads can be a problem because they tend to seize to the studs. We have to remove the inlet manifold to get to the internal water pump, so we also change the 'head gasket, skim the cylinderhead, change the timing chains and water pump, flush the water system, change the oil and set-up the engine all in one hit for £2000.'

Reconditioned engines cost around £3000 and exchange differentials are £414. Be sure to look underneath – plenty of shiny Stags are still on their original dampers and bushes.

arrived, demand shot well ahead of supply and stayed there.' But by 1977 *Autocar* had covered 24,000 miles in the car and its tone had changed: 'What a pity that British Leyland did their too familiar trick of introducing an attractive new model and then failing to produce them. Turning from the general to the particular and I have heard of a few Stags that have "blown up". Cylinderhead gaskets, bearings, pistons, even a broken rod have been mentioned as causes.'

Design and production faults – timing chain failure, feeble main bearings, overheating from water pump failure and warped cylinderhead castings – hurt Stag sales. Instead of the planned 12,000 cars per year, the model's entire 1970-77 production run resulted in only 25,877 cars, of which 6780 went overseas.

The little-altered MkII – recognised by its five-spoke alloy wheels – was introduced in 1973 but a promising fastback coupé was axed. A lack of markets (it had been withdrawn from the US) plus the fact that the Stag was powered by a unique and expensive-to-build V8 were enough to kill it.

The Damson bodywork of Andy Moss's MkI is a rare blend of Seventies subtlety and elegance. The narrow cabin has an endearing feel but forces you to adopt a curiously upright driving position. Fire up the V8 though and... Oh my giddy aunt! Accelerate and the idling 145bhp V8's tempo increases to that of a drum solo – for some reason, reminding me of the intro to Jimi Hendrix's *Gypsy Eyes*. Groovy and addictive, you soon realise you've been hypnotised by the engine's beat.

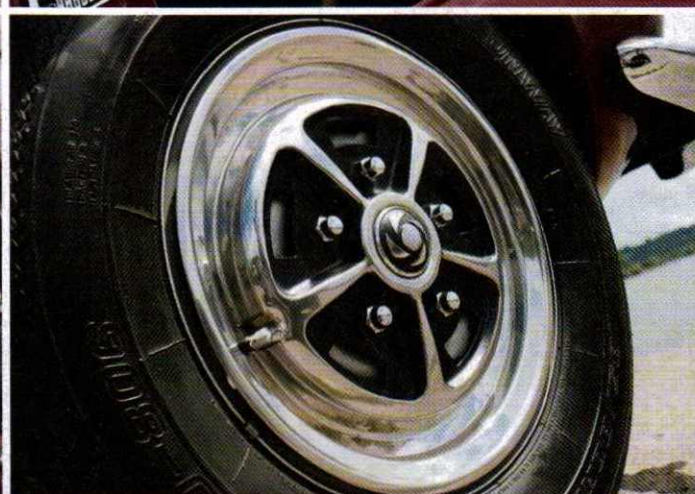
The Stag doesn't possess the bulk of the SL and it's far more direct, nimble and, yes, sporty. All of which explains why in period this Triumph had few, if any, direct competitors. It rides well, but without that floating-on-a-marshmallow-cloud sensation of the SL. The incredibly light power-assisted rack-and-pinion steering has a positivity and speed that



T-shaped roll-over bar robs the Stag of its pure convertible looks but aids rigidity



Unique Stag V8 provided plenty of woes in period but they should have been sorted by now



eludes the Mercedes' steering box. Traditionally the manual four-speed/overdrive is the Stag gearbox of choice, but I would venture that this three-speed automatic is far more suited to the Stag's GT calling.

OK, it doesn't have the stability of the SL or the XJ-S, and under roll the steering does go unnervingly light on initial acquaintance, but these are points of pedantry – unlike the big question prowling around my consciousness with growing frustration: how did Triumph and BL manage to mess up such a capable and charismatic GT?

Come the late Sixties and Jaguar's illustrious XK engine was reaching the end of its development life and the company's only alternative, the Walter Hassan/Harry Mundy V12, was not suited to a nimble sports car. An unsatisfactory stillborn V8, based on the V12, had been developed, but when that died so did the sports car project. Factor in the thoroughly independent spirit at Browns Lane and you can start to see why the idea of a stand-alone coupé would appeal to Jaguar's corporate ego.

The XJ-S was conceived by Malcolm Sayer in 1968 and to save money it was based on an XJ platform shortened by 150mm. With input from Jaguar boss William Lyons it was wider, lower, more aerodynamic, stiffer and more stable than the E-type S3 it replaced. It was aimed at successfully suave people – company board members and medium-sized business owners – whose lives had outgrown the constraints of a sports car. Unfortunately, Sayer died in 1970, leaving Doug Thorpe to complete the task.

*Motor* magazine's 1976 road test gave a mixed response: 'The only real criticism that could be levelled at the XJ-S is that it's dated in concept. Like Concorde, it is a superb technological achievement, with perhaps a questionable future... Having said that, we must emphasise just what a magnificent car the XJ-S is.'

Available with a three-speed automatic or short-lived four-speed manual (deleted in 1979), the 5.3-litre V12 XJ-S was launched in 1975. Jaguar had targeted the Mercedes SLC and invested a lot in the XJ-S's refinement. The company had hoped to sell around 3000 cars per year, but it wasn't to be – fuel crises, strikes, industrial woes and economic turmoil didn't suit an 18mpg car with styling that was far from universally popular.

Sales were so low that it looked as if the XJ-S was in severe danger of being axed. Salvation came in the shape of the 'Fireball' cylinderhead used in the V12 High Efficiency (HE) model in 1981. This, allied to

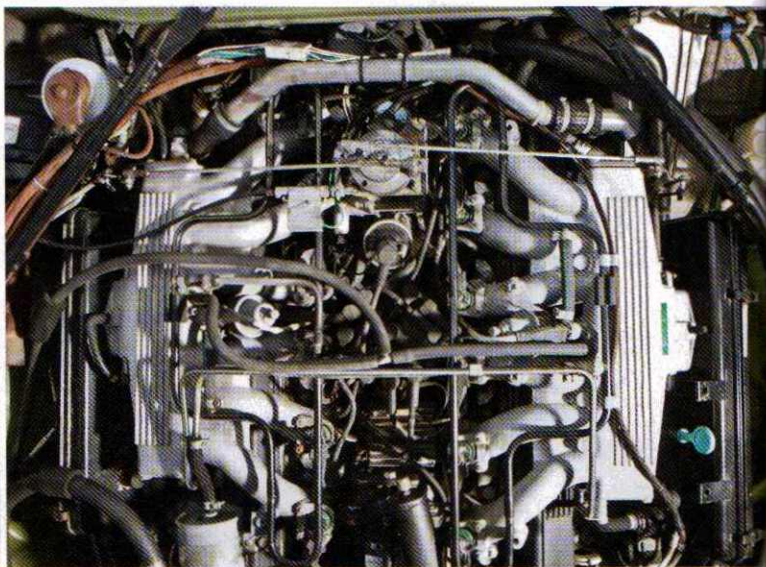
*'The Stag doesn't have the cast-iron solidity nor the space of the Mercedes, but it's a charmer and your ears will love you each time you fire it up'*

Jaguar's privatisation in 1984 and then the dynamic management of chairman John Egan, heralded a return to better times.

The 24-valve AJ6 six-cylinder XJ-S (available with a five-speed manual gearbox) joined the V12 HE in 1983, the year of the XJ-S Cabriolet's launch. This traditional cabriolet with an additional roll-over bar was replaced by the fully-open XJ-S Convertible in 1988. That year also saw Jaguar making the most of its Group C racing successes, when it launched the TWR-engineered JaguarSport XJR-S with body kit and uprated suspension.

Ford ownership brought a re-engineered body, four-litre engine and better transmissions as well as a name change to XJS. The V12 was





Above: pre-1981 plastic-strewn cabin is comfy and roomy for front occupants, less so in cramped rear seats. Above right: 5343cc V12 came from the E-type S3. Right: flying-buttress styling was aimed at aiding aerodynamics



stroked to six litres in 1993 and gained a new four-speed automatic gearbox and outboard rear disc brakes. The XJS ended production in 1996, but its DNA lived on in Jaguar's XK8 and the Aston Martin DB7.

Switching from the Stag, the low-slung, wood-free cabin of Jonathan Browne's Juniper Green V12 XJ-S is quite a contrast. The dashboard is a hesitant step toward ergonomic understanding with a recessed speedometer and tachometer plus vertical spinning drum auxiliary instruments that operate like a fruit machine.

Perceived wisdom says the XJ-S is not a pretty car, yet under today's sunshine I'm seeing things I've not noticed before. If cars widely

*'Driving the XJ-S is such a refined, pleasurable experience that the only way I can think of matching it would be lunch with David Niven'*

accepted as beautiful generate a degree of familiarity, criticism and eventual contempt via continued exposure, the unconventional and the challenging do the contrary. It must be something to do with the pre-HE's pure unadorned flanks and hip GKN alloys.

Dynamically, the XJ-S has the other two licked – apart from its brakes which, unlike the other two cars, are of the poke-and-pray variety. Its exquisite ride is as gentle as a summer breeze, yet it corners with minimal roll and maximum grip. The information gathered from the leather-trimmed steering wheel is more comprehensive than the Stag's and better weighted too. Then there's a 285bhp V12 engine so smooth it feels, sounds and pulls like a gas turbine running on buttermilk; open

the throttle and its delicate warble melts into a creamy whisper before rising to a scalp-fizzing cry. Driving the XJ-S is such a refined and pleasurable experience that the only way I can think of matching it would be to have lunch with David Niven.

Time for some market reality. According to Sam Bailey at The SL Shop, R107s fall into three categories: early tax-free models, plentiful 1975-85 cars and the last of the line.

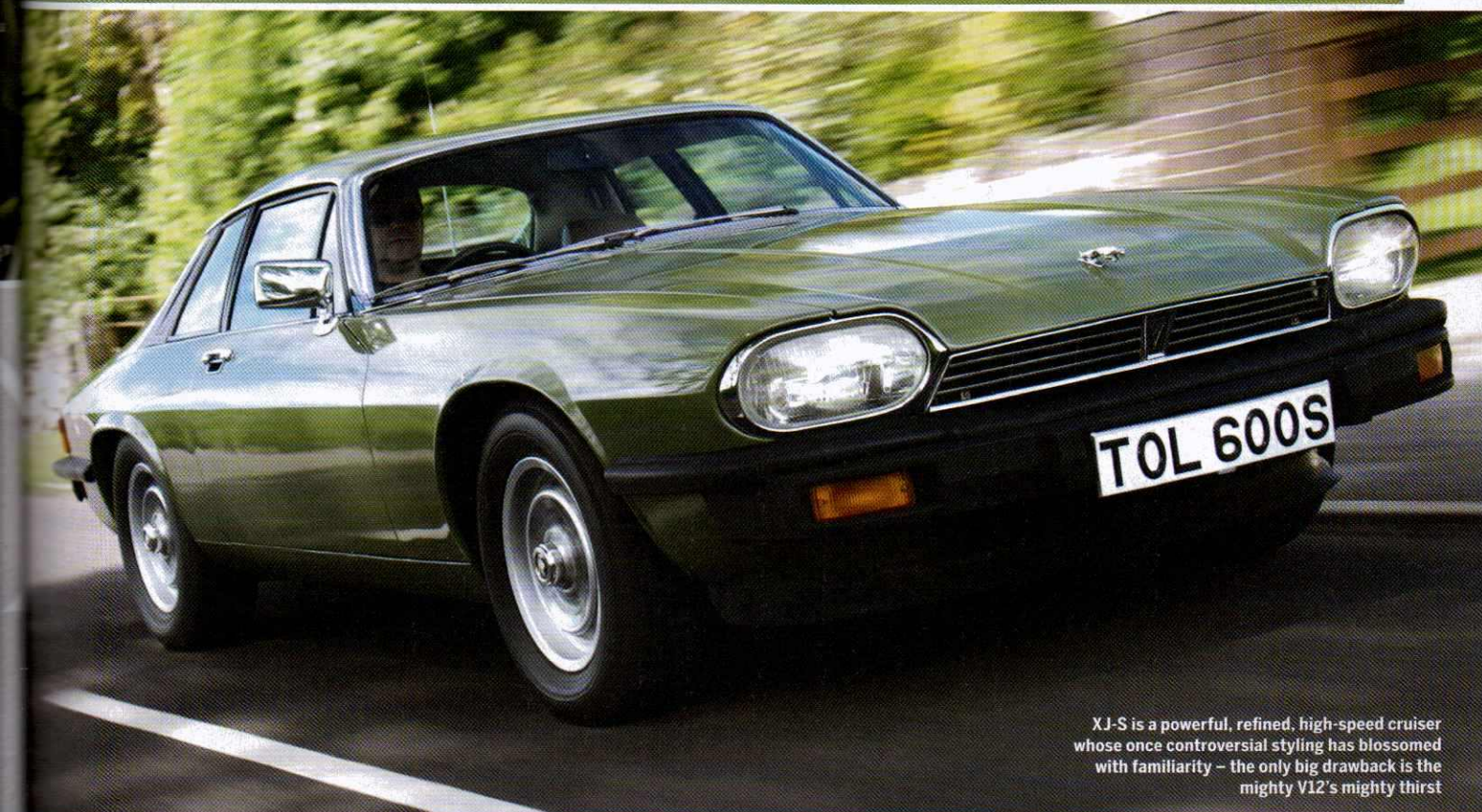
'The early tax-exempt cars are rare and it's hard to find one worth having, but good cars are available for £8k – rising to £15k for those in excellent condition,' says Bailey. Cars from 1975-85 start at £5k for a good example, rising to £12k for the best. 'The final, 1986-89, cars are the ones most people fall in love with. Average examples start at £10k, with a nice low-mileage, good-provenance car in excellent condition reaching £30k.'

Thanks to a band of enthusiastic owners and specialists the Triumph Stag isn't just more reliable now than it was in-period, it's also more appreciated. Simon Hebditch at Triumph specialist Robsport International says: 'You can pick up a Stag with MoT for £3k, but that would have struggled to get through. Good cars can be had for £7k-10k and nice cars are £15k-18k. Concours cars can go above £20k, but that's unusual.'

Turning to the last Sayer-Lyons Jaguar, Dan Clarke at Clarke's Jaguar XJS says: 'The XJ-S rule is: the later the better, and late convertibles (avoid the early cabriolets because of scuttle shake) are worth twice as much as a coupé. The later cars, six-litre and Celebration models are worth the most and models like the XJR-S are also desirable, unlike Eighties XJ-Ss, which are plentiful and don't have the charm of the pre-HEs.'

Clarke warns: 'There are many horrible cars out there. Rust-buckets





XJ-S is a powerful, refined, high-speed cruiser whose once controversial styling has blossomed with familiarity – the only big drawback is the mighty V12's mighty thirst

start at £1500-2000, but restoration will cost £15k-20k.' You can find automatic pre-HEs in average condition for as little as £3k, rising to £10k for really nice cars. Meanwhile, the rare and desirable manual pre-HE is worth nearer £15k in similarly top condition.

Picking a winner from this trio is like choosing your favourite type of massage: it depends on what mood you're in.

The SL is the most logical car here. It's a Mercedes, it's incredibly comfortable, it's the only full convertible and you won't be pestered by 'experts' regaling you with tales of overheating V8s or thirsty V12s. It's also surely just a matter of time before values of early R107s pick up, and knowing that this Blue Black example is for sale – well, it's tempting.

If you want something uncommon that offers more driver involvement, go for the pretty Triumph. It doesn't have the cast-iron solidity nor the space of the Mercedes, but it's a charmer and your ears will love you more each time you fire it up.

So where does that leave the XJ-S? Yes, I know filling a V12's fuel tank will seldom leave you with a dry eye and that you'll have to endure remarks about its styling. But the XJ-S oozes soul, it's a sublime piece of engineering, and it has looks which have come of age plus class-defining dynamics that weren't bettered until the Nineties.

Right – it's impossible to ignore the lure of the classifieds for a moment longer. **CC**

**Thanks to:** Andy Moss, Jonathan Browne; Sam Bailey at The SL Shop ([www.theslshop.com](http://www.theslshop.com)), where the SL featured here is for sale; Dan Clarke at Clarke's Jaguar XJS ([www.clarkesjaguar.co.uk](http://www.clarkesjaguar.co.uk)); Simon Hebditch at Robsport International ([www.robsport.co.uk](http://www.robsport.co.uk)); Tony O'Keeffe at Jaguar Heritage; Stag Owners'; Jaguar Drivers' and Mercedes-Benz clubs; Chew Valley Lake Sailing Club near Bristol ([www.chewvalleysailing.org.uk](http://www.chewvalleysailing.org.uk))

### 1977 JAGUAR XJ-S

**Engine** 5343cc, V12, sohc per bank, Lucas/Bosch electronic fuel injection **Power and torque** 285bhp @ 5500rpm; 294lb ft @ 3500rpm **Transmission** Three-speed automatic, rear-wheel drive **Steering** Rack-and-pinion, power-assisted **Suspension** Front: independent, coil springs, telescopic dampers, wishbones, anti-roll bar. Rear: independent, twin coil springs, telescopic dampers, lower wishbones, drive-shafts as upper-links, radius arms, anti-roll bar **Brakes** Discs front and rear **Weight** 1676kg (3696lb) **Performance** Top speed: 153mph; 0-60mph: 6.9sec **Fuel consumption** 14.4mpg **Cost new** £9527 **Value now** £10,000

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### XJ-S BUYING TIPS

Service history is important with any XJ-S because it's vital that these cars have been properly and regularly serviced.

'Engines are pretty bulletproof providing they've been maintained, but check that the radiator is in good condition and there's no sign of overheating,' advises Dan Clarke from Clarke's Jaguar XJS.

'It's getting hard to find pre-HE cars with service history. They weren't galvanised and tend to fall to pieces.'

Inspect floors (£55.80 for a toeboard panel) and wheelarches (£210 for a lower rear wing panel) for rot. It's crucial to check the front crossmember and

front subframe because repairs will cost £3000-3500, which can be more than the car is worth. The cost is so high because it can lead to other work – dampers, springs, discs, seals, bearings and bushes.

'Also check the condition of the rear subframe because when it's dropped it can lead to work on the in-board calipers, dampers and radius arm bushes and the total bill can be £1500-2500,' cautions Clarke.

Other items to look at on pre-HE cars include the bumpers (very hard to source replacements) and the headlining (£350 to fix if it's sagging). Also check the original Borg-Warner automatic gearbox – only 354 manuals were built – is working properly (£1000-1500 to repair).